

**The Emory Philosophy  
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## *Letter of Introduction*

Dear Reader,

The editors of the Emory Philosophy Review are happy to present the fourth annual issue of Emory's peer-reviewed, undergraduate journal of philosophy. The journal seeks to support excellent undergraduate research in the Humanities by offering students in philosophy and related, philosophical disciplines a way to gain experience with the formal editing process and publish their work.

Each of the papers published in this year's issue were also presented at this year's third annual Emory Undergraduate Philosophy Conference in February 2018, which was organized by the Emory Philosophy Review and Emory's chapter of the philosophy honors society Phi Sigma Tao. Through these efforts, we hope to contribute to a lasting, welcoming philosophical community at Emory.

Please enjoy the fourth issue of the Emory Philosophy Review.

Best wishes,  
Michael Demers  
Editor-in-Chief  
Emory Philosophy Review

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## **The Meditations and Infinity**

*Tahmeed Hossain*

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the particular notion of infinity used in René Descartes' argument for the existence of God in his Third Meditation. I place Descartes' thinking on infinity into a context in which it opposes Aristotle's treatment of the subject. The two positions differ on the question of the relationship between the finite with the infinite. As Descartes conceives of it, the infinite can be clearly understood and is logically prior to the finite. The Aristotelian position, however, begins with the finite; the infinite is logically posterior and can be understood only indirectly. The success or failure of the argument of the Third Meditation depends on the decision between these two positions. In this essay, I contend that either can be tenably held. To this end, I will defend the viability of each in turn. I will respond to two challenges that threaten to undermine the Aristotelian position, before demonstrating that the Cartesian position is afforded a consistent and robust logical basis by Georg Cantor's transfinite set theory.

### **I. The Meditations**

The project of the *Meditations* is to investigate and overcome the problem of skepticism to the greatest extent possible. To this end, Descartes denies everything that he is able to doubt, including the certainty of reason and the existence of the material world, the body, and God. At the beginning of the Third Meditation, Descartes has already established the *cogito*: he exists as a thinking thing. He denies the reality of the outside world and instead turns to an examination of his own ideas, including sensations, thoughts, and all other psychological phenomena. He cannot doubt that his ideas contain at least some semblance of reality. Descartes ponders the causes of

these ideas. He contends that many of them could conceivably have come from his own self: “I think that a stone is a substance... likewise I think that I too am a substance.”<sup>1</sup> The experience of the stone and all of its properties could perhaps be derived merely from some aspect of his own self, and thus the stone does not necessarily exist independent of the self.

There is one idea, however, which Descartes asserts cannot be derived from the self: the idea of God. He claims God is “a certain substance that is infinite, independent, supremely intelligent and supremely powerful.”<sup>2</sup> He finds himself unable to explain how such a concept could possibly have emerged from his own self. The self is finite, and, in accordance with the principle of *ex nihilo nihil fit*, it is impossible for an infinite idea to issue from a finite thing. The existence of an idea of an infinite thing, then, must imply an *actually existent* infinite thing that created it. This treatment of the infinite is the crux of Descartes’ argument in the *Meditations*. If it is accepted that the infinite idea of God cannot come from the finite self, then it follows that there must be an actually existing infinite being from which it did come.

Descartes’ treatment of infinity asserts the logical priority of the infinite over the finite. The infinite has the greater positive reality. The finite is logically posterior: it arises from the infinite through some modification or limitation. Descartes contends that infinity exists, actual and completed, in the being of God. He understands God as something of pure actuality, in which “there is nothing whatsoever that is potential.”<sup>3</sup> Thus, the finite is what is in the process of *becoming* this infinity, of what is *potentially* this actuality. The finite is defined, for Descartes, in relation to actual infinity. Indeed Descartes “clearly understands that there is more reality in an

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<sup>1</sup> Descartes, René. *Meditations, Objections, and Replies*. Translated and edited by Roger Ariew and Donald Cress, Hackett, 2006, page 44.

<sup>2</sup> Descartes, *Meditations*, page 45.

<sup>3</sup> Descartes, *Meditations*, page 47.

infinite substance than there is in a finite one. The perception of the infinite is somehow prior to the perception of the finite.”<sup>4</sup>

Thus, in the Cartesian conception of infinite being, one does not perceive it “only through a negation of the finite.”<sup>5</sup> To do so would assert that the infinite can be achieved and understood by a mere modification of the finite; it would be to assert the priority of the finite over the infinite. This is precisely the way in which infinity is understood by Aristotle, who defined the infinite as “not that of which nothing is outside, but that of which something is always outside.”<sup>6</sup> That is to say, the infinite is not a completed actuality, but is only a *potentiality*, something which infinitely grows but is always, at any particular point, finite. In the Aristotelian conception of infinity, the concept of actual infinity is chimerical; properly speaking, there is only potential infinity.

By “potential infinity” I refer to the concept that is understood through, in Descartes’ words, a “negation of the finite.” Descartes uses the term “indefinite” to refer to this concept, in contradistinction to his “actually infinite.”<sup>7</sup> In this essay I take “indefinite” to be synonymous with “potentially infinite,” and will use the two terms interchangeably. It is the finite that is primary and prior; infinity is a mere shadow cast by it. To demonstrate this, consider a sequence of finite integers. It can be described by certain properties, one of which is that it possesses an *end*, a final value. The mind is able, then, to ask the question of what would happen were this end to not exist. To ask this question is to negate the finite. The answer is potential infinity: the concept of an unending sequence, a sequence that is defined as having no completion. This

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<sup>4</sup> Descartes, *Meditations*, page 46.

<sup>5</sup> Descartes, *Meditations*, page 46.

<sup>6</sup> Aristotle. *Physics, or Natural Hearing*. Translated and edited by Glen Coughlin, St. Augustine’s Press, 2005, page 58.

<sup>7</sup> Descartes, *Meditations*, page 138.

infinity lacks the strength and primacy of the Cartesian actual infinity; it never *reaches* infinity, it can never be said to actually be infinite. At most, it is only *becoming* infinity, it is only indefinite, i.e., potentially infinite. The Aristotelian position asserts that this type of infinity is all that there is, and “actual infinity” does not exist.

## II. The Aristotelian Position

Descartes’ apparently clear and distinct perception of actual infinity is absent in the Aristotelian position, which holds that the infinite is coherent only insofar as it is potential. Descartes uses the existence of the idea of actual infinity to contend that the finite human mind is logically posterior to an infinite divine mind. The Aristotelian position, however, *begins* with the finite human mind. This asserts the priority of the finite over the infinite, denying the existence of an actual infinity.

From the relationship between the terms “actual” and “potential” we see that an actual infinity would be, presumably, that into which a potential infinity grows, that which a potential infinity is becoming. Potential infinity is understood through a negation of the finitude of any specific, finite sequence. A potential infinity is a sequence with no end; actual infinity refers to this very “end”. This sort of antinomy is endemic to discussions of actual infinity. One approach is to dismiss “actual” infinity as a mere contradiction in terms. This is precisely the strategy of the Aristotelian position.

However, certain arguments appear to undo this dismissal, and restore the actually infinite to something with positive reality. One such argument comes from the divisibility of space and time. If space or time can be divided indefinitely, then any completed extension represents a completed or actual infinity. There seems to be an infinity of divisions within any

extension; this infinity has no end, insofar as it can be divided indefinitely, but also has an end, insofar as the extension is completed in reality.

This antinomy finds its initial expression in Zeno's paradoxes. Zeno contends that a runner can never complete a race, because in order to do so, he must first complete 1/2 of the race, and then 1/4<sup>th</sup>, and then 1/8<sup>th</sup>, and so on indefinitely; if it is impossible to reach the end of a potentially infinite sequence, then motion is impossible. Since motion plainly *is* possible, Zeno's paradoxes imply that actual infinity is *not* an incoherent concept with no positive reality, but instead is useful and logically consistent, and moreover is necessary for the possibility of motion. If actual infinity somehow were to be accepted and well defined, Zeno's paradoxes would evaporate; we will return to this in the discussion of the Cartesian position. Meanwhile, the paradox seems to show that it is logically *inconsistent* to believe in the unreality of actual infinity, as the Aristotelian position does.

Aristotle presents a solution to the paradoxes that resolves them without resorting to an acceptance of actual infinity. He considers the nature of the activity of division. The mind considers an extension of space or time and makes a division and numbers the parts. But these divisions, for Aristotle, are merely *coincidentally* part of the line; the essence of the line itself is something other than whatever divisions the mind makes.<sup>8</sup> For Aristotle, lengths of extension exist in space and time no matter how they are referred to by the mind. Thus, in reality motion is not divided at all, but is a unity. For the runner, the path of the race exists as a singular whole. Only in the mind is it divided: to use a frequent Aristotelian turn of phrase, it is divisible in analysis, but not divided in being.

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<sup>8</sup> Aristotle, *Physics*, page 182.

The division of extension as a process of the mind, if carried out a finite number of times, presents no issue and no paradox. It cannot be divided actually infinitely, but only potentially so. That is, at any point, the mind can make only a finite number of divisions. By negating this finitude, then, it can arrive at the idea of indefinite divisions – a merely potential infinity. When division of extension is considered as a process in the mind, rather than in reality, it is not necessary for there to be a “completion of the infinite sequence.” By relegating the action of division of extension to the sphere of the mental, Aristotle resolves Zeno’s paradoxes while leaving actual infinity firmly in the realm of unreality.

Actual infinity appears to manifest in the mathematical infinite series. Consider the “infinite” sum  $\{1+\frac{1}{2}+\frac{1}{4}+\dots\}$ . This sequence is only potentially infinite, insofar as it is defined as having no end. It is created from a modification of the finite idea of multiplying and adding successive terms. Following the logic of the Aristotelian position, this sum could only ever be known to a finite degree of accuracy; one may add a great many terms, but one can never add *all* the terms. And yet, something can be said about the sum of all the terms: it converges to 2.

It seems to be the case that 2, if it is the sum of this infinite sequence, is the end of an unending sequence; it is an actual infinity.  $\{1+\frac{1}{2}+\frac{1}{4}+\dots\}$  is indefinite, and yet it apparently has a definite sum; thus it seems to imply the necessity of actual infinity. Again, just as in the treatment of Zeno’s paradoxes, if the actual infinity *were* accepted and utilized, then there is no problem, and 2 is indeed the sum of an actually infinite sequence – this mirrors the Cartesian position. But this would be anathema for the Aristotelian, for whom there is no actual infinity, not in space and time, and not in mathematics.

In the original formation of the calculus by Newton and Leibniz, mathematicians utilized actual infinities in the guise of infinitesimals: an actual infinity of divisibility. This is the familiar

$dy$  and  $dx$  of the differential calculus: these values were taken to be freely usable infinitesimals. But mathematicians soon moved beyond this initial basis and instead developed the epsilon-delta limit process.

A key to understanding the consequences of the limit process is its peculiar language. The sum  $\{1+\frac{1}{2}+\frac{1}{4}+\dots\}$  is not *equal* to 2; rather, it *converges* to 2. To say that an expression converges to 2 is to say that the expression, as terms are added, moves forever closer to 2. Or, more precisely: if one posits a non-zero value, no matter how small, a finite number of terms could be added such that the difference between the expression and 2 would be smaller than that value. The epsilon-delta process does not say, “there actually is an infinitely small number” (an actual infinity of divisibility), but rather, “there *could* be an *arbitrarily* small number.” It works wholly within the realm of potential infinity: to say that  $\{1+\frac{1}{2}+\frac{1}{4}+\dots\}$  converges to 2 is to say that the expression is *potentially* equal to 2. Epsilon-delta does not say that there really *is* a completion to the infinite sequence or that it really does resolve to 2, but rather that it could be closer to 2 than any other number could be. This formulation relates two potential infinities: the indefinite sum itself, and the indefinite ‘could be’ of the previous sentence. There is no actual infinity, there is no actual equality: there is only convergence – there is only potential infinity.

By comparison of the two indefinites, the epsilon-delta formulation gives ‘convergence’ enough rigor to stand next to ‘equality’ as a consistent and useful mathematical concept. The modern formulation of the calculus operates entirely based on the language of convergence, in which there is no mention of infinitesimals or actual infinity. What happens, then, when the limit process runs directly up against the specter of actual infinity? In other words, what is the limit of  $1/x$ , as  $x$  approaches 0? The limit process answers this in the same way as the Aristotelian position: the actual infinity is “undefined.” Epsilon-delta is in no way a treatment of actual

infinity; rather, it is a method by which to avoid it. The mathematician Carl Gauss, in an 1831 letter, expressed the commonly-accepted position among mathematicians on the nature of infinity: “I protest above all against the use of an infinite quantity as a *completed* one, which in mathematics is never allowed. The infinite is only a figure of speech, in which one properly speaks of limits.”<sup>9</sup>

Mathematics based on the ideas of convergence and the limit process aligns with the Aristotelian position on infinity. Infinity is only used in the sense of indefinite or potential infinity. There is no mention whatsoever of actual infinity. This assumes that actual infinity is an incoherent concept, and so, using formulations like epsilon-delta, it manages to avoid it. The same is true of Aristotle’s response to Zeno’s paradoxes. To allow the reality of divisions of extension would be to allow the positive reality of actual infinity. Aristotle responds with the theory that the essence of extension is fundamentally disconnected from the activity of the mind; this is motivated entirely by the desire to avoid actual infinity.

### **III. The Cartesian Position**

Were actual infinity somehow to be accepted, were a sound, coherent logical basis for it somehow to be found, these paradoxes would disappear. It would not be a problem for there to be an actual infinity of divisions in a unit of extension, or for an actually infinite sequence of terms to have a definite sum, *if only* the notion of actual infinity were well-defined. This project of defining actually infinite numbers, and thus giving the concept of actual infinity a measure of positive reality, was undertaken in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by Georg Cantor.

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<sup>9</sup> Dauben, Joseph Warren. *Georg Cantor*. Harvard University Press, 1979, page 120.

It is quite natural to reject actual infinity: to call it, as Gauss did, a mere “figure of speech.” This is to contend that it arises from a logical contradiction: it is the end of an unending sequence. If an infinite number *did* exist, it seemingly would exhibit strange, contradictory behavior, as demonstrated by the curious fact that, if  $x$  is taken to be infinite, then  $1+x=x$ . The nature of an infinite number, if one were to exist, appears to contradict the nature of number itself. Cantor argues, however, that the problem here lies not with the nature of infinity, but with the faulty assumption that infinite numbers must follow precisely the same rules as the finite numbers do. Instead, as Cantor says in an 1886 letter, one should consider the actually infinite as “an entirely new kind of number, whose nature is entirely dependent upon the nature of things and is an object of research, but not of our arbitrariness or prejudices.”<sup>10</sup> The reality of infinite numbers, for Cantor, should be judged based on their usefulness and consistency, and should not be dismissed only because their definitions and logic do not necessarily align with those of the finite numbers.

Cantor’s doctrine that the infinite is qualitatively different from the finite is antithetical to the Aristotelian position, in which only the indefinite, a mere abstraction from the finite, exists. Actual infinite numbers are fundamentally different from the finite numbers, and should be thought of as such. Descartes anticipates this doctrine with his conception of infinity. As he says in a response to a set of objections against his *Meditations*, “that the idea [of infinity] could be formed from a prior inspection of corporeal things seems no more likely to me than if you were to declare that we have no faculty of hearing but that our awareness of sounds derives solely from seeing colors. For I can imagine a greater analogy or parity between colors and sounds than

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<sup>10</sup> Dauben, *Georg Cantor*, page 125.

between corporeal things and God.”<sup>11</sup> The analogy of the contrast between sight and sound with that between the corporeal and God (between the finite and the infinite) is apt. In the Cartesian framework, the nature of the infinite is fundamentally different from that of the finite. The infinite does not depend on the finite.

The actually infinite numbers, if they were to exist, would not be predicated on the same rules as those upon which the finite numbers are. Cantor enumerated these rules in his theory of transfinite cardinals, in which the generation and arithmetic of infinite numbers is precisely defined and formulated. Transfinite cardinal numbers refer to the sizes of infinite sets, just as finite cardinal numbers refer to the sizes of finite sets. Thus, 3 is the cardinal number of the set  $\{1,2,3\}$ , and, in Cantor’s theory,  $\aleph_0$  is the cardinal number of the set of natural numbers. The natural numbers form an indefinite sequence; the measure of the size of the set containing them, then, refers to the completion of this sequence.  $\aleph_0$  is an *actually infinite* number. The question is whether this “ $\aleph_0$ ” is consistent and useful, or if it is, as the Aristotelian position would hold, incoherent and useless.

In order to begin to appreciate Cantor’s theory, let us consider the meaning of cardinality. Two sets have different cardinal numbers if their members cannot be placed into a one-to-one correspondence, and they have the same if they can. Thus  $\{1,2,3\}$  and  $\{4,5,6\}$  have the same cardinality, but  $\{1,2,3\}$  and  $\{1,2\}$  do not. This same principle can be applied to infinite sets, with the somewhat surprising result that the set of all integers is of the same cardinality as, for example, the set of perfect squares: 1 corresponds to 1, 2 to 4, 3 to 9, and so on. Though it initially seems that there must be more integers than squares, this is not the case: for every

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<sup>11</sup> Descartes, *Meditations*, page 137.

integer there is a square. Both sets have a cardinality of  $\aleph_0$ . This concept is counterintuitive, because it is contrary to the logic of finite numbers, but it is mathematically consistent.

Suppose we attempt to put the set of real numbers into a one-to-one correspondence with the integers. For the sake of simplicity, let us consider only the real numbers between 0 and 1. Thus, 1 would correspond with a real number  $R_1$ , 2 with  $R_2$ , and so on. Each  $R_i$ , since it is between 0 and 1, can be written as  $0.x_1x_2x_3\dots$  where each  $x_i$  represents a digit of its decimal representation. Now, if a real number  $S$  is taken for which its first digit (in the tenths place) is different from the first digit of  $R_1$ , its second digit is different from the second digit of  $R_2$ , the third from the third of  $R_3$ , and so on, this number  $S$  would be different from any  $R_i$ . Thus, the real numbers have a fundamentally greater cardinality than  $\aleph_0$ , the cardinality of the integers. Cantor calls this cardinal number  $\aleph_1$ .<sup>12</sup>

Once it is understood that there are different sizes of actually infinite numbers, Cantor's mathematical world of the transfinite numbers begins to unfold. He theorizes the actually infinite numbers, with their relations and differences, and modes of enumeration and manipulation. The transfinite numbers use a different arithmetic than that the finite numbers do, but it is nevertheless a coherent, robust, and rich system. I have given here only a brief introduction to transfinite set theory; my goal is only to establish that it provides a logical basis for thinking about the arithmetic of the actually infinite. It allows mathematicians to engage with actual infinity, instead of avoiding and ignoring it, as the Aristotelian, finitistic position requires.

Cantor's transfinite set theory is based on the opposite understanding of the relationship between infinite and finite to that of the Aristotelian position. Cantor's transfinite numbers are a structure with which to understand and work with the actually infinite: their source is the infinite,

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<sup>12</sup> My treatment of Cantor's theory of transfinities is based on Dauben, *Georg Cantor*, pages 165-166 & Rucker, Rudy, *Infinity and the Mind*, Birkhäuser, 1982, pages 73-78.

not the finite. Cantor understands the infinite as prior to finite things: finite numbers, in a sense, manifest themselves out of the infinite, as a subsection or path of the grand, actually existent infinite domain of all numbers. Cantor elaborates this with the following metaphor:

“I say that a solid ground and base as well as a smooth path are absolutely necessary for secure traveling or wandering, a path which never breaks off, but one which must be and remain passable wherever the journey leads.... Thus every potential infinity (the wandering limit) leads to a *Transfinitum* (the sure path for wandering), and cannot be thought of without the latter.”<sup>13</sup>

The *Transfinitum* is a kind of fundamental infinite domain from which all finite sets draw their reality. The finite, in this conception, could not exist if not for an actual infinity within which it lives.

Cantor’s conception of infinity aligns closely with Descartes’. The central argument of the Third Meditation is based on the postulate that the actually infinite is of a fundamentally different kind from the finite, so that the idea of the actually infinite could not issue from something finite but only from an existent actual infinity: “the whole force of the argument rests on the fact that it is impossible for the faculty of forming this idea [of actual infinity] to be in me, unless I were created by God.”<sup>14</sup> If actual infinity is *not* incoherent, if there exists a framework with which to understand it and which absolves it of contradiction, then actual infinity – *coherent* actual infinity – is more perfect, more real, and thus logically prior to the finite.

To say that the idea of actual infinity cannot arise from the finite is to say that it cannot be based on the same rules and utilize the same logical framework as the finite: it is not merely different in degree, but different in kind. The rules of actual infinity are entirely different and completely independent from those of the finite numbers. The Aristotelian position depends on the proposition that these rules are impossible to find, that the actual infinity is an empty,

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<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Dauben, *Georg Cantor*, page 127.

<sup>14</sup> Descartes, *Meditations*, page 138.

incoherent concept. Yet these rules are developed by Cantor with his transfinite arithmetic. If the Cantorian theory is accepted, then actual infinity has acquired a firm logical basis – one which is *independent* of the finite numbers.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

This essay has presented two opposing perspectives on the question of actual infinity. The Aristotelian position asserts the primacy of the finite; the infinite exists only insofar as it is a negative relation to the finite. The Cartesian position holds that the actually infinite has its own positive reality, which is independent of that of the finite. The choice between the two positions is ultimately a profound decision, which has appeared in different guises throughout the history of philosophy. I have attempted to illuminate a few questions of mathematics and metaphysics in which the decision presents itself, and to present arguments for each position.

The Aristotelian position is perhaps the more immediately intuitive of the two, for it begins with the finite human mind. It erases reference to the abstract metaphysical term of the “actually infinite”, and instead strives to explain the world in terms of the finite. As I have shown, it is possible to satisfactorily answer questions such as Zeno’s paradoxes within the Aristotelian framework, and it is possible to treat the mathematics of calculus with a wholly finitistic basis. To hold the Aristotelian position is to hold that the finite explanation of all things is possible. All ideas could perhaps issue directly from the finite self: “actual infinity” is wholly disconnected from the inescapable finitude of our condition.

While the Aristotelian position appeals to the apparent finitude of the mind and reality, the Cartesian appeals to the mind’s inescapable tendency to think about infinity. It is undeniable that the idea of an infinite being is central to the archetype of the human mind: the importance of religion and spirituality to human history and society is evidence enough of that. The Cartesian

position strives to explain the finite world *in relation to* the infinite being. The actual, completed infinity of this being is of a qualitatively different kind than the finitude of the self. Cantor, with his transfinite set theory, showed that a robust mathematical and logical structure could apply for the understanding of actual infinity – few mathematicians since would accuse infinity of logical incoherence. Just as Cantor’s *Transfinitum* is prior to numbers, Descartes’ infinite being is prior to finite beings. To hold the Cartesian position is to hold that there is a positive concept of actual infinity, and moreover that it is logically prior to the finite.

But this positive concept may not necessarily be sufficiently convincing. Even Descartes admits that his perception of the infinite being is incomplete. “Were we to turn our eyes toward the sea, even though we neither grasp the whole thing in our sight nor traverse its great vastness, nevertheless we are said to “see” it. And were we to view the sea from a distance, so as to take it in all at once, as it were, with our eyes, we see it only in a confused fashion.”<sup>15</sup> We fail to grasp the entire sea; all we really know is our own ship and the finite route we traverse. The Aristotelian is concerned solely with this route. He may watch his ship’s wake unfold behind him, but it soon disappears – he has only finite knowledge. There is nothing beyond the horizon. But for the Cartesian, the sea extends past the horizon, and past the limits of the finite mind. The ship could not exist without the entire sea; the finite could not exist without the infinite. The decision is whether to begin from the ship, or from the sea.

The decision between the two positions is one of central importance in philosophy. It would not be inaccurate to characterize it as a reformulation of Heraclitus and Parmenides. The argument of the Third Meditation is predicated on it. If one is to follow Descartes, one must make the same decision as he does, and accept the Cartesian position and reject the Aristotelian.

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<sup>15</sup> Descartes, *Meditations*, page 114.

But, as I have attempted to show in this essay, either position may be tenably held. Ultimately, there may not be a final answer to the question. The human mind is finite and limited: perhaps its contemplation of the infinite is an impossible task.

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## Reflections on Empathy & Community

Madeline Long

This world is home to more than seven billion unique and valuable people. Each person has their own set of experiences and beliefs that come from their age, culture, and socioeconomic status, among other factors. Ultimately, we have more in common with others than differences, but those differences are meaningful. We can relate to others through empathy, a topic that's been explored by several contemporary philosophers. With emotions being the common element, empathy, the personal approximation of another's mental state, represents the bridge across time and culture, creating community.

Regardless of culture or upbringing, emotions represent a striking commonality across all people. Even the ways emotions are expressed are nearly identical in all cultures. Emotions and their expression are innate. Even congenitally blind people have the same facial expressions in response to emotions despite never having seen someone make those faces. In the 2004 Paralympic Games, psychologists recorded the expressions of the congenitally blind athletes and found that regardless of nationality, they all displayed their pride from winning and shame from defeat in identical ways as athletes with sight<sup>1</sup>. Emotions and their expressions are common to all people everywhere, given that the key brain areas are present and functioning.

This scientific evidence counters Sara Ahmed's stance in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*<sup>2</sup>, in which she argues that emotions are cultural practices instead of psychological states, while calling the evolutionary perspective the "dumb" view. Emotions transcend culture.

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<sup>1</sup> Matsuomo, David, and Bob Willingham. "Spontaneous facial expressions of emotion of congenitally and noncongenitally blind individuals." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Volume 96, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Ahmed, Sarah. *The Cultural Politics of Emotions*. Routledge, 2014.

Moreover, Ahmed references the James-Lange Theory of emotion<sup>3</sup>, which is more than a hundred years out of date, having been replaced by a number of different theories, though now Joseph LeDoux's theory has become widely accepted. The James-Lange theory describes emotions in terms of an initial physiological change in response to a threat, which precipitates a cognitive response, and then rapidly forms an emotion. This has been soundly rejected since it was proposed in 1884.<sup>4</sup> According to LeDoux, there are two pathways of emotion that he refers to as the high and low roads. The low road is the fast, instinctual response, and the high road is the slower cognitive response<sup>5</sup>. This theory, being supported by a tremendous body of evidence, confirms that emotions are psychological states or events, rather than cultural impressions.

This adoption of the James-Lange theory undergirds Ahmed's arguments in this book. Her stated mission in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* is to "track how emotions circulate between bodies, examining how they 'stick' as well as move."<sup>6</sup> Using the effects on the body as a starting point for emotions is extremely dated, but this forms the basis for Ahmed's views. Her understanding of empathy follows from viewing emotions as forming surfaces<sup>7</sup>, a notion that hinges on this theory of emotions as arising from feeling a physiological response. A more modern, scientific understanding of emotions grounded in neuroscience yields a vastly different picture of empathy.

Several brain areas are implicated in emotional processing, mainly the amygdala, but also the insula and parts of the prefrontal cortex. Damage to the amygdala results in reduced fear

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<sup>3</sup> Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, page 3.

<sup>4</sup> Cannon, Walter B. "The James-Lange Theory of Emotions: A Critical Examination and an Alternative Theory." *The American Journal of Psychology*, Volume 39, 1927.

<sup>5</sup> LeDoux, Joseph. "Emotional Circuits in the Brain." *Annual Review of Neuroscience*, Volume 23, 2000.

<sup>6</sup> Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, page 4.

<sup>7</sup> Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, page 10.

responses, yet still has no impact of emotional recognition. Even lacking the ability to feel emotions, people with no functioning amygdala can recognize emotions in other people. Emotions are rooted so deeply and are so indelible that the ability to feel does not affect the ability to recognize.

Furthermore, the cognitive-affective dichotomy is unraveled by modern psychology and neuroscience. First, the protective, instinctual response is separate from the emotion itself. Jumping from a loud noise occurs before fear is felt. This suggests that dividing the mind into cognitive and affective states is overly simplistic since the ‘animalistic’ response is detached from emotion. In fact, reflexes do not even occur in the brain as emotions do; these neural events travel only to and from the spinal cord.

Secondly, emotion and cognition reciprocally influence and modify each other in the brain. This is evidenced by a 2007 study by Kristy A. Nielson and Mark Powless<sup>8</sup> in which they showed that memory is enhanced by emotional activation by either positive or negative stimuli. In fact, they found that the Saturday Night Live skit, *Jingleheimer Junction* to be the empirically funniest video, though watching dental surgery was slightly more effective in enhancing memory.

In addition, previously formed opinions modulate emotional responses. Guns present an especially salient example. The sight of a gun will evoke vastly different emotions in people based on differing opinions and experiences regarding them. While guns may make one person feel more safe and secure, others will feel terror or anger. Emotions can affect how information is remembered, and opinions can affect what and how emotions are felt.

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<sup>8</sup> Nielson, Kristy A., and Mark Powless. “Positive and negative sources of emotional arousal enhance long-term word-list retention when induced as long as 30 min after learning.” *Neurobiology of Learning and Memory*, Volume 88, 2007.

Thus, the cognitive-affective dichotomy falls to a more nuanced view of emotion and cognition as reciprocal, though different, processes in the brain. This shift is vital to a new conception of empathy. By elucidating this relation of emotion and cognition, empathy is able to be more deeply analyzed in practical terms. For instance, political tribalism can be explained in terms of empathy. Second Amendment conservatives have an emotional and cognitive commonality with each other regarding guns, which builds bridges between individuals. This does not speak to the correctness of the opinion, but rather it explains the bonds between people that are formed.

Emotions are as real as anything else we experience. They are as real as the taste of chocolate chip cookies, our memories of summers at the lake, and the smell of freshly cut grass. All perceptions are in the brain, and emotions are no different. Whether or not an emotion is rational does not impact its metaphysical reality as a material, neural process. Because of this, the delineation between mind and body breaks down, with the qualities typically attributed to a mind being rooted in the physical brain. Emotions must be discussed in these terms, since it is the reality of experience.

This fundamental experience is common to all members of the human species, and even transcends it due to an evolutionary history. Emotions predate humanity itself. Even nonhuman primates display similar facial expressions as humans. When a chimpanzee, our closest evolutionary relative, makes a rasping noise that sounds eerily similar to a human laugh, it would be ridiculous to dismiss it and say that emotions are human cultural practices.

Koko, the silverback gorilla, is famous for being one of the few nonhuman primates that has learned sign language. She knows about 1,500 signs and can communicate easily with them. Although she does not use functional words like ‘but’ and ‘to’, her linguistic capabilities allow

humans unique insight into the mind of a gorilla.<sup>9</sup> Koko was taught to read by her caretaker, and her favorite books were about cats. For Christmas in 1983, she asked for a cat of her own, and when her caretakers gave her a toy cat, for days, she signed, “Sad,” repeatedly and refused to play with her toy.

In July of the following year, Koko’s owners brought her a kitten, which she named All Ball, since the kitten had round patches and Koko likes rhyming. Koko took care of All Ball as if he were her own child. She handled him tenderly, played with him, and was patient as he was teething. A few months later, All Ball wandered out of the home and was hit by a car. When Koko heard the news, she signed “Bad, sad, bad. Frown, cry, frown, sad,” and spent all night crying and wailing<sup>10</sup>. Koko is the only nonhuman animal known to have kept pets as humans do, and the clear display of sadness at his loss reinforces the understanding of emotions as mental states that transcend humanity.

The bond between pets and humans is surprisingly deep. The loss of a pet is not dissimilar to the loss of a relative. This relationship is due, in part, to the anthropomorphizing of domesticated animals, but it is often seen as a uniquely human phenomenon resulting from the overwhelming ability to love. Koko, a silverback gorilla, has defied this assumption. As a species more evolutionarily distant from humans than chimpanzees and bonobos, this gorilla kept pet kittens with all the love and attention of any human owner. Emotions like love and affection directed between species, neither of which are human, counters the idea that emotions are specifically human cultural and psychological projections.

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<sup>9</sup> Wolff, Phillip. “PSYC 309: Brain & Language Lecture 23.” Emory University, 2017. Lecture.

<sup>10</sup> Koko adopted two more kittens in 1985, Lipstick and Smoky, who lived long and happy lives. In 2015, Koko adopted Miss Grey and Miss Black. Despite the tragic loss of All Ball, the internet has plenty of cute photos and videos of the other four kittens with Koko.

Ahmed views emotions as producing boundaries. Despite being cultural phenomena that impress themselves upon us, emotions are outward projections that form boundaries between people by our ‘ownership’ of the feelings. Emotions, in her view, create the illusion of individuality. However, the idea of owning emotions or emotions “being in the room”<sup>11</sup> is misguided, because emotions are not things, per se, like pens and potatoes are things. Emotions are mental events in the same way that our perception of taste is a mental event or an idea is a mental event. These are mental events because they have both physical and temporal representations in the brain, as well as the body as a whole, such as blushing while embarrassed. While emotions are not owned, they are something specific in the individual, and others experience nearly identical instances of an emotion.

It can be easy to dismiss emotions as just feelings or chemical reactions. Yes, love is a chemical, biological response. That makes it truly, profoundly, materially real. There are real molecules in real brains that drive real behavior and define human existence. Understanding emotions in this way make them impossible to dismiss. By this process of reductionism, the experience is not reduced at all, but made wholly more dynamic and profound.

Having established what emotions are, it is now possible to proceed to a discussion of empathy. The profound commonality of emotions as evolved mental events provides empathy with a strong foundation. When we empathize, we are relating to people on an emotional level that transcends culture, time, and even species. It can unify groups that have few superficial commonalities. That is one of the great charms of Disney films. They’ve been translated into all major languages, and have an appeal to the children and parents alike. There’s a universality to

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<sup>11</sup> Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, page 10.

emotions and their expression that is deeper than human culture since they precede humanity as a whole.

I am wired with the same neural circuitry that everyone else is. I have the areas in my brain and the pathways between them that allow me to feel emotion. I can even recognize emotions in others because they are wired nearly the same way. In fact, experiments have been done in which a participant in a brain scanner views a video of another person experiencing pain. The areas in the brain that activate in response to pain were activated in the participant, a person who felt no pain. We empathize in this way, by approximating another person's feeling.

To be sure, empathy is not an exact replication of another person's emotional state. Individuality comes from differing life experience. Horror movies illustrate this well. Although I have never personally been chased by a deranged killer, I still feel terror in watching these movies because I have experienced some terror in my life. I draw from my bank of life experiences to approximate the terror felt in the movie. In this way, empathy is better characterized as the personal approximation of another person's feelings rather than an appropriation, as Ahmed claims. Appropriation implies that there is no relevant commonality, which is simply not the case.

In the *Empathy Exams*<sup>12</sup>, Leslie Jamison recounts her experiences at a Morgellons disease conference. Having a disease that is not recognized by doctors is incredibly isolating. The people at the conference who claim to be suffering from Morgellons would press Jamison, asking if she believed them. She consistently affirmed their beliefs; she did believe that they were suffering. The caveat was that she did not believe in the disease. She validated their experiences and feelings as something that is real and demands treatment. That doesn't mean that she believed

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<sup>12</sup> Jamison, Leslie. *The Empathy Exams: Essays*. Graywolf, 2014.

that they were correct in their assessments. The absence of agreement doesn't take away from the realness of the empathy. Perhaps it is more powerful since she shared their pain in spite of not agreeing with the assessment of the cause.

Throughout the essay, she likened Morgellons, a disease characterized by itching and finding foreign fibers in the skin, to her own experience in having a worm imbedded in her ankle. She couldn't see the worm, but she felt it. The doctors didn't believe her for a while, but in time, it was verified and the worm removed. She takes that experience to approximate the pain of those with Morgellons in herself. She asks, "Is it wrong to call it empathy when you trust the fact of suffering, but not the source?" It's not wrong because she feels an approximation of what they feel. Empathy doesn't require the full verification, just the common emotional ground and the compassion to feel it.

Jamison recalls her experiences as a medical actor to show how empathy bridges power discrepancies. As a medical actor, she plays the role of a patient so that medical school students may practice diagnosing patients, as well as talking to and relating to them. Her first case is Stephanie Phillips, who has conversion disorder, which involves having seizures as a physical manifestation of the grief she hasn't processed from her brother's drowning. It is the aspiring doctor's responsibility to reach out with empathy to her in her suffering. This is part of the checklist in medical training, checklist item 31. Though few, if any, of the aspiring doctors have experienced this level of pain and trauma, they must be able to empathize with Stephanie in order to understand what she is going through and to be able to treat her. They have to recognize how they would feel and contextualize it to how she feels. Empathy gives them the tools to heal others.

Empathy reaches out across time. My grandparents' generation has little in common with my own. They predate cell phones and computers. My grandfather remembers working in factories before they were automated. He paid a whopping sixty dollars a semester to attend the University of Georgia, and he even had to take a semester off because of the cost. Today's world is vastly different from that of his young adult memories, yet we have no trouble talking for hours. The differences in the ways we think and view the world are always present in the conversation, yet we are able to give validity to our differences through the love and respect we have for each other. Like Jamison at the Morgellons conference, I may understand that his concerns and opinions are real and justified for him and his life, even if I do not share them. In this way, empathy spans the boundaries of time.

The power of empathy is not always a force for good. The Washington Post recently reported on the top five countries that get the most clicks on ISIS propaganda<sup>13</sup>. Violent extremist propaganda works because it unites people through an emotional connection. It says, 'I know the anger you feel at all the injustice,' and people gravitate towards that. Isolation is a horrible feeling, and having someone reach out and claim to understand is tremendously powerful.

This same sense of unity fueled Trump's presidential campaign. He spoke to the people who felt forgotten and said that he hadn't forgotten them. He spoke to the people who feel disenfranchised by increasing globalism and changing demographics. Trump targeted their insecurities, both real and imagined, and capitalized on them. People rally behind that, regardless of whether or not it is good. The emotional bridge is there.

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<sup>13</sup> Booth, William. "The 5 countries where people click most on ISIS propaganda (and the U.S. is No. 2)." Washington Post, 2017.

Empathy in and of itself is neither good nor bad. However, it is a powerful tool. It is a means of bridging gaps, of building community. The bridge runs two ways, meaning that empathy involves some level of vulnerability. By humbly approximating the emotions of others, we can meet others where they are and be there to help. This is only possible because of the hundreds of millions of years of evolutionary history that has given us all the same set of emotions, a common ground where we can meet one another if we are willing. The differences between people are real, but they don't have to be boundaries.

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## **The Erasure of Femme Desire: A Critical Analysis of the Effacement of Alternative Masculinities, Lesbian Desire(s) and the Colonial Continuum**

*Iman Williams*

I am interested in the way in which the ideological and institutional domination of patriarchal heterosexuality reduces various modes of desire and gender to heterosexual normativity; however, I am also interested in thinking through the way in which biopolitical and necropolitical technologies are weaponized by feminist and queer theorists as a means by which to efface Black queer subjectivities. Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* is primarily concerned with the performativity of gender, the radical instability of the masculine and feminine and the destabilization of the binarism of the interiority and exteriority of the body. Placing Butler's *Gender Trouble* in conversation with Hortense Spillers' "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," which draws our attention to the interstitial subject-position of the figure of the Black feminine as well as her ungendered flesh, may help us work through alternative masculinities, their travels beyond the scope of the straight male, and the colonial continuum in which gender is always imbricated.

The terms "butch" and "lesbian" have been conflated such that lesbian femininity has been effaced in privileged discursive spaces and lesbian desire has been presumed as imitative of masculine heterosexuality which, as Butler argues in *Gender Trouble*, legitimizes a naturalized "original" identity after which lesbian desire presumably fashions itself. As such, the conflation between the terms butch and lesbian suggests that there are only two contingent dimensions of significant corporeality, the anatomical sex and gender identity, and that lesbian desire is a failed

embodiment of an original essential sex. In considering the ways in which lesbians inhabit masculinities and how we theorize these modes of gender performativity, Jack Halberstam's "Between Butches" reinstates the complexities of lesbian genders reminding us that "we barely know enough about female masculinity to locate its specific relationship to lesbianism." Halberstam notes that during her panel discussions her audience often asks her about the over-exposure of lesbian masculinity and the comparative under-exposure of lesbian femininity. Questions like this gesture towards the historical formation of butch-femme binary, which continues to limit performative possibilities for proliferating gender configurations.

Before troubling the universalizing category of woman, Judith Butler offers a critique of feminism that suggests feminism cannot disassemble the heterosexual apparatus insofar as it reifies the oppositional binary between sex and gender and consolidates reproductive constraints onto the sexed body. *Gender Trouble* interrogates the presumed dualism between the flesh, as constituted by Butler, or, rather, the body as a physiological unit and its attending disembodied consciousness. Butler is critical of feminism because of its propensity to orient the feminine or the category of the woman as a universalizing and unifying figure that is oppositional to sex. In other words, feminism has forestalled a more critical reading of sexed bodies that thinks about these bodies as irreducible to an oppositional binary and beyond the frame of an essentialist reproductive domain. This formulation, Butler argues, ignores the power relations, discourse, and contingencies through which sex and gender are constituted.

The theoretical architecture of sexuality and desire, discreet gender, and true sex that Butler offers is framed by a few rejoinders that she asks in the beginning of the final chapter of *Gender Trouble*. Butler asks, "Is there a political shape to 'women', as it were, that precedes and prefigures the political elaboration of their interests and epistemic point of view? How is that

identity shaped, and is it a political shaping that takes the very morphology and boundary of the sexed body as the ground surface, or site of cultural inscription?”<sup>1</sup> These are the questions that foreground Butler’s critique of the essentialism and naturalization that underlies the classically gendered binary which threatens to overpower queer subjectivities and foreclose the possibility of disarticulating the masculine from the straight male. Not only does Butler argue that there is no political shape to “women” but she also contests the very category of woman itself. I find it curious that Butler, in the afterword she writes for *Butch/femme: Inside Lesbian Gender*, praises Judith Roof who seems to suggest that there is, in fact, a political shape to “women” that exists prior to cultural inscription and its entry into the social sphere. Judith Roof’s “1970’s Lesbian Feminism Meets 1990s Butch-Femme” which appears in “Butch/femme: Inside Lesbian Gender” homogenizes and attempts to profess solidarity with Black women by prescribing the possibility of cross-racial alliances. Roof writes, “If the primary mode of oppression for all women is patriarchy and if lesbians are like blacks, then the mode of oppression for all women is patriarchy, regardless of race, is patriarchal heterosexuality. Lesbian women of colour, therefore, owed their first allegiance to the worst oppression.”<sup>2</sup> This universalizing grammar and performance of proximity to Black women forestalls a more critical historical reading that takes into account the irreducibility of the contingencies that constitute anti-Black violence. Similarly, Jack Halberstam supports a claim that Bidy Martin makes wherein Martin suggests that the cinematic racial representations of butch-femme desire work to secure butch-femme roles by aligning the femme with whiteness and the butch with blackness<sup>3</sup>. There are, in fact, very few

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<sup>1</sup> Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, 2015, pages 128-129.

<sup>2</sup> Roof, Judith, Sally Munt, and Cherry Smyth. “1970’s Lesbian Feminism Meets 1990s Butch-Femme”. *Butch/femme: Inside Lesbian Gender*. Cassell, 1998, page 37.

<sup>3</sup> Halberstam, Jack, Sally Munt, and Cherry Smyth. “Between Butches”. *Butch/femme: Inside*

films in the 21<sup>st</sup> century that provide a cinematic representation of Black lesbian desire, so Martin's claim is a misrepresentation of the registration of Black lesbian desire in cinema. Further, it ignores the way in which the classically gendered binary has been weaponized and used as an apparatus of white sovereignty and colonial power.

After Butler's rejoinder which gestures towards the artifice of discrete gender, she interrogates the notion of the body as an impenetrable physiological surface that is disentangled from its interiority. Butler argues that what constitutes and generates the boundaries of the body as well as the sexed body is an amalgamation of cultural inscriptions that are figured as external. That is to say that the body is irreducible to a passive physiological unit that exists prior to discourse. Butler wants to resist the notion that "the body," as it were, is a corporeal transfiguration of inert matter signifying nothing or, rather, signifying a profane void. The reason why Butler wants to destabilize this formulation is because it is presupposed by a Christian and Cartesian episteme. While there is much to be gained from this critique, which is written with intensive verve, Butler's *Gender Trouble* does not seem to engage with Black studies scholarship and the text fails to provide any meaningful registration of Black queer subjectivities.

Butler's description of the vicissitudes of history, wherein she claims that the pre-discursive multiplicity of bodily forces ruptures the surface and disrupts the boundaries that determine what it is to be a body, gestures towards a claim that Hortense Spillers makes during her roundtable discussion with Farrah Jasmine Griffith 20 years following the publishing of her essay, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book". Spillers contends that Black women "fall between everyone who has a name, a category, a sponsor, an agenda,

spokespersons, people looking out for them-but [we] don't have anybody."<sup>4</sup> The interstitiality of the Black feminine that Spillers describes is what animates her "arrival." The multiplicity of the ruptures of the flesh is precisely what Spillers brings to our attention when she closes the roundtable conversation by pronouncing to academic theory and the world at large, "I am here now, 'Watcha gonna do?'"<sup>5</sup> The arrival of the Black feminine is not taken up by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble*, which represents the way in which Black queer subjectivities have been deliberately effaced by feminist scholarship and queer theory.

Hortense Spillers' "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" augurs a shift in strategic thought about the situation of the Black subject because, unlike *Gender Trouble*, it brings to our attention the regime of racial slavery and the way in which it reduced the Black body to a "zero degree of social conceptualization"<sup>6</sup> rendering it flesh through racial capitalist logics of commodification. The ungendered flesh, which is constituted precisely through the violent enactment of colonial discourse, generates an alternative figuration of culture and a body that obscures the classically gendered binary by exceeding it. Butler's *Gender Trouble* is an important text inasmuch as it resists the disambiguation of various oppositional binaries but Spillers, perhaps unknowingly, takes Butler's theory one step further by destabilizing binarisms and throwing colonial power into relief at once.

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<sup>4</sup> Spillers, Hortense. "'Whatcha Gonna do?': Revisiting 'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book': A Conversation with Hortense Spillers, Saidiya Hartman, Farah Jasmine Griffine, Shelly Eversley, & Jennifer L. Morgan." *Women's Studies Quarterly*, Volume 35, 2007, pages 299-309.

<sup>5</sup> Spillers, "'Whatcha Gonna do?': Revisiting 'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe,'" page 308.

<sup>6</sup> Spillers, Hortense. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." *Diacritics*, Volume 17, 1987, page 67.

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## **The Knight and the Hero: Kierkegaard on Abraham and Agamemnon**

*Camila Reed-Guevara*

"On the wild trees the flowers are fragrant, on cultivated trees, the fruits"

—Soren Kierkegaard, *Repetition*<sup>1</sup>

Soren Kierkegaard published *Fear and Trembling* in 1843. It is an analysis of Abraham, the biblical figure, and the binding of his son Isaac. Kierkegaard repeats different versions of the story, and makes a comparison between the Biblical Abraham and the classical Greek character of Agamemnon. These comparisons highlight the differences between the pagan and the Christian traditions. The above quote articulates this: the wild trees with flowers represent the pagan world, while the Christian world cultivates trees to result in fruit. This difference is necessary to understand the figures that Kierkegaard called the Knight of Faith, Abraham, and the Tragic Hero, Agamemnon. The clearest similarity between Abraham and Agamemnon is that they are fathers, and leaders of their communities, who are asked to sacrifice their children. Kierkegaard, however, contends that the Knight of Faith and the Tragic Hero are two incompatible categories. When analyzing Abraham and Agamemnon, the question is not simply, who is a hero and who is not, but more specifically what sets them apart in light of their likeness. Kierkegaard concludes that Agamemnon is “intelligible” and Abraham is not. Agamemnon can

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<sup>1</sup> Kierkegaard, Soren. *Fear and Trembling // Repetition*. Edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton University Press, 1983, page 127.

use the language of ethics to explain why he decided to sacrifice his child while Abraham can never explain or justify himself, and will always remain alone in his decision.

Abraham prepares to sacrifice his son in total silence. He is unable to explain, lament or ask for advice. Kierkegaard gives us four different versions of Abraham's preparation originally articulated in Genesis 22. There are three days during which Abraham journeys to Mount Moriah where the sacrifice is to take place, which is the duration Kierkegaard most wants to explore. In Kierkegaard's first story of the three-day journey, Abraham rises in the morning and takes Isaac away without a word to Sarah who watches from the window. When Abraham is preparing to sacrifice Isaac, Abraham's face "epitomiz[es] fatherliness...But Isaac could not understand him, his soul could not be uplifted; he clasped Abraham's knees, he pleaded at his feet, he begged for his young life."<sup>2</sup> While Abraham intends, and tries, to appear kind and loving, he instead is totally unreadable. Isaac is fearful and cries and while Abraham tries to comfort him, "Isaac did not understand him."<sup>3</sup> Instead of explaining that he is following God's command, he says, "Do you think it is God's command? No. It is my desire."<sup>4</sup> Abraham hides his true motive because he does not want Isaac to hate God and his command. In Kierkegaard's analysis of another version of events, when Abraham is making his way to Mount Moriah, he "stared continuously and fixedly at the ground until the fourth day."<sup>5</sup> He was literally unable to communicate verbally to anyone. When he is preparing to carry out the sacrifice he "arranged the firewood and bound Isaac silently he drew the knife."<sup>6</sup> Even during the act itself, he could not speak or articulate the motive for his actions. In the third story, Kierkegaard only writes that Abraham drew the knife

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<sup>2</sup> Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, page 10.

<sup>3</sup> Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, page 10.

<sup>4</sup> Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, page 10.

<sup>5</sup> Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, page 12.

<sup>6</sup> Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, page 12.

but no other details are provided to the reader. In the last version, Abraham's hand was shaking and his body shuddered and yet he still drew his knife without questioning God, without protesting, or explaining his actions to Isaac. The movements, the shaking of the hand, can be read as a slippage of communication, but it is not intentional. Kierkegaard explains that "Isaac had lost the faith. Not a word is ever said of this in the world."<sup>7</sup> The world that Abraham lives in is quite literally unintelligible. When people spoke of Abraham and praised him, they also said, "Who is able to understand him?"<sup>8</sup> The implication is that unless you are also a knight of faith, he is totally incomprehensible.

The silence and impenetrability, or rather the lack of a biblical description of both the command of the binding of Isaac and the journey to Mount Moriah, have historically been a topic of theological debate. In the *Midrash Rabbah*, which was likely written between 300-500 CE, the section on Genesis explores the original command. It imagines a discussion in which Abraham asks God which son he should sacrifice, and specifically questions the command to sacrifice Isaac. The authors of this work are clearly concerned with the lack of articulation present in the original biblical text. Next they explore the phrase "And Abraham rose early in the morning, and saddled his ass."<sup>9</sup> The question being asked is why does Abraham do this alone? With his many slaves, and his wife present, why does he act singularly, and why does he tell no one what he is doing? The rabbis' remark that there is very little description concerning this anxious journey, suddenly it is simply "the third day"<sup>10</sup> and Abraham and Isaac arrive. In investigating the actual sacrifice, Abraham tells his son "God will provide himself the lamb, O

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<sup>7</sup> Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, page 14.

<sup>8</sup> Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, page 14.

<sup>9</sup> *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis*. Translated by Harry Freedman and Maurice Simon, Soncino Press, 1983, page 488.

<sup>10</sup> *Midrash Rabbah*, page 491.

my son; and if not, though art for a burnt-offering, my son. So they went both of them together—one to the slaughter and the other to be slaughtered.”<sup>11</sup> This last phrase implies that Isaac willingly accompanies his father. Abraham’s explanation to Isaac is not totally transparent. It appears as if God will provide the burnt offering, which could be Isaac since he is also referred to as a lamb. However, what is significant is that Abraham tells Isaac that in the absence of a command from God, he will select him to be the sacrificial victim, and that Isaac willingly goes to his own sacrifice.

There is also the question of whether God is incomprehensible as well to the Knight of Faith. It is worth noting that even when God sends the message to halt the sacrifice, Abraham persisted in believing that he must sacrifice Isaac, and, offers to kill his son by a different method. God had to explicitly tell Abraham not to kill his son by any means. This command presented a new problem for Abraham because it essentially meant that God had tricked him. When the rabbis imagine the ways in which God and Abraham could have talked about this, they posit that God could have said, “Did I tell thee, Slaughter him? No! but ‘*take him up.*’”<sup>12</sup> God explained that he does not lie; instead, he carefully chose his words in order to trick Abraham into revealing whether he was truly willing to sacrifice his son. Yet, the concerns regarding Abraham’s own silence, his inability to understand God and to explain to Isaac why he had to be sacrificed remain unexplained.

The myth of Agamemnon must be investigated before one can truly understand Kierkegaard’s interpretation of him. Agamemnon first becomes a literary figure through Homer’s *Iliad*. Agamemnon’s concern for the perception of others is the catalyst for the entire plot of the epic. When he demands that the hero Achilles give him the treasure that he

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<sup>11</sup> *Midrash Rabbah*, page 494.

<sup>12</sup> *Midrash Rabbah*, page 498.

uncovered, Achilles protested Agamemnon's rule by refusing to fight with the Greek city-states in the war against Troy. This led to a series of disasters for the Greeks that are not resolved until the end of the epic. Elsewhere, Agamemnon's return to Greece is detailed in various tragedies.

One myth about Agamemnon centers on his perceived necessity to sacrifice one of his daughters to achieve good fortune in the Trojan War. Agamemnon had previously offended Artemis, the virgin goddess of hunting. As punishment she commanded him to sacrifice his daughter, Iphigenia, and in return she would produce crucial winds for him to sail to Troy with his army. Iphigenia, Ἰφιγένεια, means something along the lines of "born to strength" in ancient Greek. In the myth she very rarely speaks, or makes any action to resist. Agamemnon reportedly refuses at first to sacrifice his daughter, but ultimately chooses the good of the state over the good of his family. Neither Iphigenia, nor her mother, Clytemnestra, are informed that they are on their way to a sacrifice. In some versions, the two think they are travelling to Iphigenia's wedding to Achilles. And yet in other versions, Iphigenia is never verbally told that she will die, which is an interesting parallel between Isaac and Iphigenia. Unlike Abraham, Agamemnon will answer amongst mortals for his actions. When he returns from war, he and his slave concubine are killed by his wife. Clytemnestra cites revenge for her daughter as the motive for murdering her husband. This is in contrast to Sarah, who is never actually told about the possible sacrifice of her son, and is never given an opportunity to react.

Lucius Anneaus Seneca's tragedy *Agamemnon* sheds light on classical interpretations of Agamemnon and his actions. In the beginning of the play, as his wife Clytemnestra and the household staff prepare for Agamemnon's return from war, Clytemnestra shares her plans to avenge her daughter with her nurse. When the nurse objects, and mentions the holy vows that Clytemnestra had taken as a wife, she responds: "I remember he was the father to Iphigenia, // to

whom he showed a scanty tenderness.”<sup>13</sup> This is the first time that Iphigenia is mentioned and it is in relation to her father who Clytemnestra says showed her insufficient kindness. There is no mention of the alleged necessity for the sacrifice. The nurse responds, “The fleet was becalmed. He did, in terrible sorrow, // only what the cruel god demanded.”<sup>14</sup> This is significant because while Clytemnestra disagrees, it demonstrates the intelligibility of Agamemnon’s act. It was widely believed that he killed his daughter in order to attain the necessary winds for his fleet to sail to Troy. In the case of Abraham, he could not sacrifice Isaac on his own initiative, but instead depended upon God’s will to do so. Ezekiel, the equivalent slave or servant in Abraham’s home, would not be able to justify Isaac’s sacrifice to Sarah because if God did not will his death then it would be murder. Still, Clytemnestra laments, “cannot blot from my mind the hideous picture // of a young girl in a wedding dress!..Crime is heaped upon crime, and the innocent girl // dies for a deal with the winds to enable a war // and murder.”<sup>15</sup> Iphigenia was dressed for the sacrifice as if for a wedding. This citation alludes to the version of the myth in which the daughter was promised a marriage to the hero Achilles, she, like Isaac, has no knowledge of her impending death until the last moment.

Clytemnestra receives conflicting advice as she continues to plot against her husband. The nurse tells her to “Think // how Agamemnon comes in glory and triumph, // Europe’s hero.”<sup>16</sup> In this context, Agamemnon is heroic, for having survived the war. However, the irony is that he survives not because of his bravery or strength, but because others were more heroic and sacrificed more to the cause. Ultimately, Agamemnon’s “heroism” does not matter to the

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13 Seneca, Lucius Annaeus. *The Tragedies I*. Edited and translated by David R. Slavitt. The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992, page 176.

<sup>14</sup> Seneca, *The Tragedies I*, page 179.

<sup>15</sup> Seneca, *The Tragedies I*, page 179.

<sup>16</sup> Seneca, *The Tragedies I*, page 180.

grieving mother. Aegisthus, Agamemnon's brother and Clytemnestra's lover, tells her that "His [Agamemnon's] debt must be paid // for that blood he owes you. Think of your daughter, think // of yourself and your heart's grief and rage. Be brave."<sup>17</sup> This quote invokes a common trait in Ancient tragedy: if an individual kills a family member, that individual (and their ongoing family line) is cursed. Agamemnon makes a universal ethical decision, to kill a member of his family in order to defend his country's honor, and because this decision operates in the universal, and at an intelligible level, he can be both justified in doing it and punished for doing it. Ultimately, he is murdered by his wife and he pays a very human, intelligible price for his decisions.

The famous tragedian Aeschylus' set of tragedies collectively titled *The Oresteia* details the return of Agamemnon and how his wife receives him. While Clytemnestra initially seems excited with her husband's safe return, she demonstrates her true emotions when she converses with the chorus: "[he had] no care for the death of a lamb. // He sacrificed his own daughter, // dearest pain of my womb, // to charm the contrariness of Thracian winds."<sup>18</sup> Iphigenia is described as a lamb, which represents the innocence of a sacrificial subject. Clytemnestra describes her maternal pain and rejects Agamemnon's possible justifications including his desire to protect the nation and his concern over the wrath of the gods. Clytemnestra reads this as his attempt to "charm" the winds. Agamemnon also endangered his entire family line: "Did *he* not also lay upon the house // a treacherous destruction? // The victim, my daughter, raised from his loins, // Iphigenia, whom I mourn for. // What he did is what he suffered for."<sup>19</sup> His actions initiated the familial curse which, in classical literature, results in certain necessary consequences. He suffers a mortal punishment precisely because his sacrifice is intelligible. As

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<sup>17</sup> Seneca, *The Tragedies I*, page 181.

<sup>18</sup> Aeschylus. *The Oresteia*. Translated by David Grene and Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, University of Chicago Press, 1989, page 84.

<sup>19</sup> Aeschylus. *The Oresteia*, page 87.

he operates within the universal ethical, he is able to explain and publicize his decisions, which allows others to react. This is something that Abraham could not do. Sarah, unlike Clytemnestra, is not told why her son needs to be sacrificed and she is unable to react. Clytemnestra is not only able to articulate her daughter's death, but is able to describe Agamemnon's death and his afterlife: "We shall bury him with no cries of mourning from this house. // But his daughter Iphigenia, as is right, // will welcome her father by the swift-flowing passage // over the River of Sorrows // and throw her arms around him and kiss him."<sup>20</sup> There is a sense in these lines that his death is proper punishment, but there is also redemption or at least some comfort in the knowledge that he will have the opportunity to reunite with his daughter, and his daughter with him. Still, in this life, he will not experience the proper burial that is traditionally given to a heroic character.

Iphigenia is largely a silent character. Like Isaac, little is known about her reactions to her impending sacrifice. Because she never plays a role or character in any of the ancient epic poems or tragedies, much of what modern historians can understand about Iphigenia is from art. The first image that I am discussing (Figure 1 below) is an ancient "fresco" or wall painting from an uncovered villa in Pompeii. The pale woman in the center of the painting is Iphigenia, being carried by slaves. She places her hands up, facing heaven, and she does not resist but instead seems to be giving herself up to the Gods, to fate, to the power of the patriarch. Agamemnon is depicted standing in front of her, leading her to the sacrifice. His expression betrays him as if he is unsure of the actions he is taking while he looks back at his wife. The figure to the far left is Clytemnestra, who has shrouded herself in mourning veils, unable to bear the sacrifice of her daughter. These themes are continued for a millennium. Figure 2 is François Perrier's

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<sup>20</sup> Aeschylus. *The Oresteia*, page 88.

seventeenth century painting of Iphigenia's sacrifice. Again, the pale, angelic figure of Iphigenia is portrayed as a blindfolded and helpless girl. However, her image is at the center and up close so as to emphasize her importance. Her mother is kneeling and praying to the Gods and Agamemnon looks back at her with the sacrificial knife in his hand.<sup>21</sup> Figure 3 is a nineteenth century painting that portrays the version of the myth where an innocent Iphigenia, who is clearly wearing a wedding dress, believed that she was walking to her wedding. Achilles, the man dressed in a helmet, attempts to strike King Agamemnon in his rage that his promised bride is to be sacrificed. Clytemnestra looks mournfully and powerlessly on as Agamemnon maintains his composure and appears unwavering in his decision to sacrifice his daughter. In these visual representations, Iphigenia is largely portrayed as a sacrificial victim without agency who was tricked into her role.

Returning to Kierkegaard, his comparison between the two figures asserts a stark difference between Agamemnon (a tragic hero) and Abraham (a Knight of Faith). Kierkegaard explains that: "Agamemnon... [had] overcome the agony, heroically have the lost the beloved, and have only to complete the task externally, there will never be a noble soul in the world without tears of compassion for their agony."<sup>22</sup> This is significant because it is clear both from the epic poems and tragedies cited, that this sort of category is not always given to Agamemnon. In fact, many literary critiques question the heroism of his actions. Agamemnon's heroic character is questionable because the reasons for his actions are often interpreted as selfish, not

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<sup>21</sup> In both Figure 1 and 2, a deer is visible in the arms of a goddess who is descending from Mount Olympus. This is an artistic reference to a version of the myth that explains how Artemis saves the girl at the last moment, replacing her with a stag. This clearly demonstrates a parallel with Abraham, who is given a ram at the last moment and ordered to stop his sacrifice. This version of the myth does not appear in any major epics or tragedies. And, even if Iphigenia is saved, that action does nothing to handle the issue of intelligibility.

<sup>22</sup> Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, page 58.

selfless. Therefore, it is possible that Kierkegaard neglects much of the literature surrounding this classical figure. Kierkegaard explains that there is a necessity for new categories when Christianity arrives because “Paganism does not know such a relationship to the divine. The tragic hero does not enter into any private relationship to the divine.”<sup>23</sup> This brings to mind the opening quote for *Repetition*, demonstrating that there are differing issues between the pagan and the Christian. Kierkegaard, however, asserts that Agamemnon’s relationship to the divine was categorically different from Abraham’s, and therefore the two sacrifices operate on different ethical planes.

Kierkegaard also ignored the cultural and literary history of Agamemnon in the discussion of Iphigenia’s knowledge of her fate. He writes that “[t]he tragic hero demonstrates his ethical courage in that he himself, not prey to any esthetic illusion, announces Iphigenia’s fate to her.”<sup>24</sup> As explained above, in many versions of the myth, Iphigenia does not know that she is being sacrificed, and often times, she believes she is going to her own wedding. However, Kierkegaard is correct in explaining that Agamemnon can mourn his decision: “He has the consolation that he can weep and lament with Clytemnestra and Iphigenia – and tears and cries are relieving.”<sup>25</sup> There is a cathartic cleansing of the mind when the individual can explain their decision, good or bad, to affected individuals. Of course, it also allows other individuals to express agency, as is the case with Clytemnestra’s choice to murder her husband. Kierkegaard explains that “Agamemnon gives up Iphigenia and thereby finds rest in the universal, and now he proceeds to sacrifice her.”<sup>26</sup> Even though Agamemnon has to sacrifice his daughter, according to Kierkegaard, he can still find peace in the fact that he made a decision within the universal

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<sup>23</sup> Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, page 60.

<sup>24</sup> Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, page 87.

<sup>25</sup> Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, page 114.

<sup>26</sup> Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, page 79.

ethical. This is a peace that Abraham can never have, because he cannot articulate his decision within any ethical structure. Ultimately, “Abraham remains silent—but he *cannot* speak.”<sup>27</sup> He is not only silent, but is literally prevented from speaking to others about his thoughts.

Ultimately, Kierkegaard does ignore many of the classical myths concerning Agamemnon and the sacrifice of his daughter. He might be too quick to call Agamemnon a Tragic Hero, but he does effectively use the example of Iphigenia’s sacrifice to reinforce his interpretation of Abraham. Abraham is not a hero; he cannot be a hero because he cannot operate in the universal ethical. Instead, he is a Knight of Faith, who remains completely unintelligible. He is unable to explain or demonstrate his decisions. Silence is thus central to his role as a biblical figure.

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<sup>27</sup> Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, page 113.

## Appendix

Figure 1: Wall painting, Pompeii, 1<sup>st</sup> C. AD

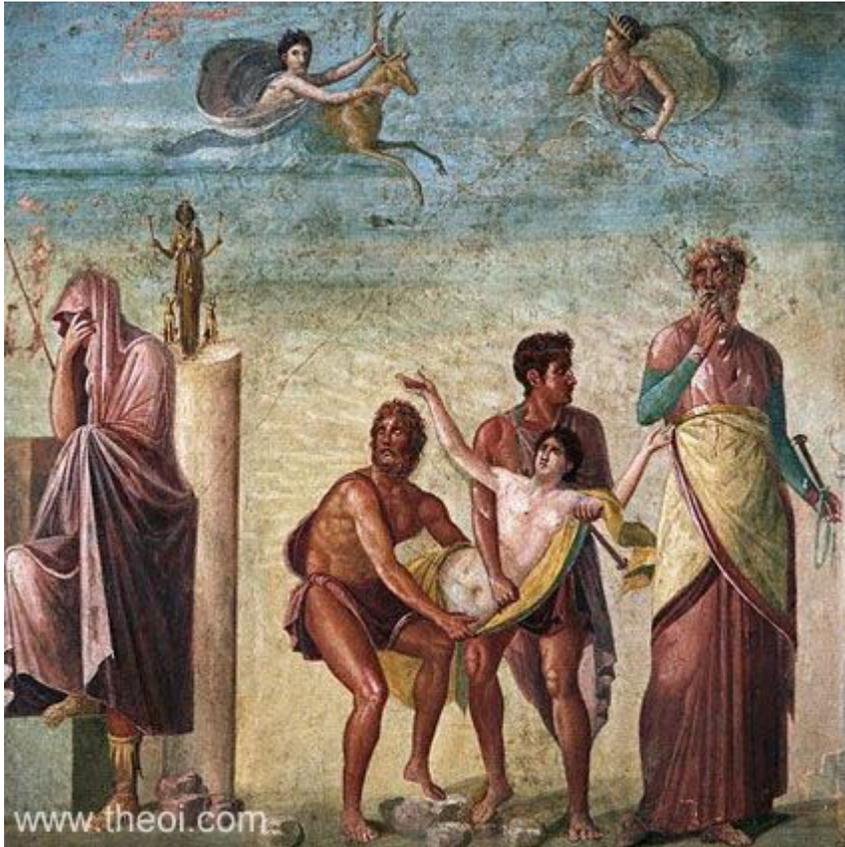


Figure 2: *The Sacrifice of Iphigeneia*, François Perrier, 1632.



Figure 3: *The Anger of Achilles*, Jacques-Louis David, 1819.



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