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INTRODUCTION TO HUMANITAS

HUMANITAS was created in the upper balcony of the Isabel Bader Theatre in the spring term of 2010. An afternoon lecture on political theory was lost that day; instead, the discovery of coinciding interests between two eager philosophy students generated an ambitious project. This is the ironic story of how a new academic publication came to be – while the students should have been busy taking notes.

In those early months, Matteo Pirri and I drafted a schema for a new journal, initially on the basis that there didn’t seem to be any periodicals on campus featuring undergraduate work in philosophy. That assumption turned out to be false, but in construing philosophy so broadly we committed ourselves to a theme that would separate HUMANITAS from other journals. I realized early that my academic interests were divided among many different disciplines. What I meant abstractly by philosophy was already comfortably classified as humanities; not a lexicon of thinkers and traditions, but a kind of Socratic thinking, a penetrating approach to academic material that could be applied eclectically to any specialty. Wherever passion and perspective met critical reflections on humanness, our publication could claim their subject as its own. Since then, we’ve looked to acquire a collage of human experiences intensely apprehended by theoretical models. Our search has been as wide and diverse as the “Humanities” designation would allow.

There has not seemed to be any other student publication on campus committed to representing the expanse of this academic bracket. Neither has there been any student run journal at Victoria College which is both academic and interdisciplinary. Today, that is no longer the case. After Lakshi Sivagnanam became the third member to the would-be editorial team, we began work on the finer points of a proposal. Nearly half a year later, HUMANITAS was approved for club status by Vic’s student administrative council. A moment ago, you opened our inaugural issue.

It seems appropriate that the pilot of HUMANITAS should coincide with the celebrated 175th anniversary of Victoria University. Victoria has a rich history of traditions, and the prestige and longevity of those traditions are the most highly valued characters of this community. Students of the present have the luxury of standing in the foot holes carved by students of the past. Our predecessors gave us many tokens by which to define and authenticate the standards of our college. Gratefully and importantly, we participate in those standards – literary, artistic, athletic and theatrical.

But the one standard we share unanimously is the academic standard, and the recasting of that standard is a thing of today. After 175 years, Vic students are as unique as they ever were. Our insight is as fresh as it will ever be. Thousands of us rigorously immerse ourselves in scholarship on a daily basis, and every year at this college, thousands of papers are written for the development of philosophy, political science, psychology, art, literature, anthropology, sociology and various disciplines in language. Excellence in any of these fields is a creative contribution to the perceiving of a question or condition in human experience. A good paper nurtures the growth of a great intellectual landscape in which we realize similitude between different ideas. When two disciplines enter a dialogue, they leave traces in one another and conspire to tell the same stories. Eventually, the student of many disciplines encounters the same story so many times that she is capable of articulating it. At that moment, something comprehensive begins to take place. The student feels that she has accessed an emergent value at the centre of her studies. It passes into her intellectual life, into the reading and writing of scholarship, in the discussing of theory, thought and perspective. True to Vic’s academic motto, the liberal undergraduate experience passes into the character of all experience. Thereupon, it inevitably brushes up against something true.

That something marks a convergence between the many styles and contents of academic work that we’ve worked to present in this first issue. We have work relating Darwinian and Lamarckian evolution to our past in popular culture, work relating mythic monsters and theories of knowledge, work describing the rhetorical use of visual art in renaissance politics, exploring theories of the ‘good life’ in analytic philosophy, examining post-colonial identity in literature and reading into the text of Freudian psychoanalytic method. Each paper is a fluidly articulated and a uniquely wrought as a work of academic substance. Each is a new voice
in a scholastic tradition that will substantively change the form of that tradition. *HUMANITAS* celebrates these achievements because they are worth celebrating. They are the reason for our being students.

*HUMANITAS* and its editorial board have needed a few guiding hands to find ourselves over the last several months. The most significant pair has come from our academic advisor, Professor Josiah Blackmore, without whose gracious counsel and positive reinforcement, this journal could not boast any academic credentials. Professor Blackmore’s enthusiasm ignited the confidence *HUMANITAS* needed to be successful. Without you Professor, it may never have happened. We are much indebted to you.

The next resounding thank you is to the Victoria College Clubs Commissioner, Gabrielle Blais-Jones and the Victoria University Students’ Administrative Council, who saw fit to acknowledge *HUMANITAS* and give it club status. Those preliminary steps were the most daunting to take, and we are grateful for the support invested in us by our peers.

Also, to Camille Pylypczak, our Creative Director, who has worked intently to give *HUMANITAS* its visual identity and sophistication; to Professors Sheila Batacharya, David Gilmour and all other instructors within the Vic One Program and around campus who have encouraged this initiative and endorsed it to their students, we express heartfelt thanks.

Finally, to all those who submitted to our first issue: you are all members of a remarkable culture we are trying to celebrate. Thank you for sharing your ideas and passions. Please continue. We are all very busy making the most of our programs. We can come to see the value in being students of *HUMANITAS*, not for the papers we produce, but for the reasons we produce them: for relevance and resonance, for truthfully examining the narratives we live by. Consider this journal an argument that philosophy in its broadest construal begins with a dialogue between any two of these narratives. For now, I am confident that you will find a valuable share of that dialogue as you read on.

CHRISTOPHER MASTROPIETRO
Editor-In-Chief
Evolution” (shinka, 进化) is a term that forms the core of Pokémon and Digimon, two Japanese new media franchises that became massively popular worldwide. Yet their use of “evolution” is drastically different from the contemporary scientific understanding of the process; indeed, it is remarkably similar to conceptions of it from centuries or even millennia ago. Far from Darwinian, the “evolution” in these games and television shows is that of the hierarchical Great Chains of Being of Lamarck, Bonnet, and Aristotle. What are the implications of this, and how might Pokémon and Digimon have impacted popular (mis)conceptions of evolution today?

If I were to mention the word “evolution” to one of my younger cousins, one illustrious figure would certainly come to their minds immediately— it would not, however, be Charles Darwin. Most likely, it would be Pikachu: the instantly recognizable yellow mouse-like creature from the Japanese new media franchise, Pokémon. Both Pokémon (ポケットモンスター, Poketto Monsutā) and its rival franchise Digimon (デジタルモンスター, Dejitaru Monsutā) have long appropriated the term “evolution” in the videogames, television shows, mobile digital pets, toys and movies associated with them. Yet “evolution” in Pokémon and Digimon is far from anything Darwin may have envisioned, and indeed far from any scientific conception of evolution today: the “evolution” of creatures within these franchises runs the gamut from metamorphosis to Lamarckian transformation to simply aging. Furthermore, the organization of the process is remarkably similar to the Great Chains and Ladders of Being proposed by those such as Bonnet and Lamarck. To help judge the historical context of biological thought in these franchises and their possible impact on the popular conceptions of evolution today, especially among children, I thus propose to briefly examine two parallel narratives. The first is the development, refinement, disruption and reemergence of hierarchically ordered views of life, most commonly referred to as the Great Chain, Scale or Ladder of Being. The second is the spread of these Japanese new media franchises from the mid 1990s to the present and their attainment of immense popularity worldwide, as well as the development of the use of the term “evolution” within them over this time period. I will focus particularly on their consistent use of the previously discussed outdated conceptions of evolution and hierarchy from centuries past. Finally, I will consider the implications of having centuries-old conceptions of biology enshrined in these game series, and some possible and desirable future directions for these and similar new media and the teaching of biology to young students today.

Though there are certainly examples of ordered hierarchies of living things in Hindu and Buddhist texts, the origin of the idea of the Great Chain of Being in the Western scientific context can be traced back to Ancient Greece. In his seminal work, The Great Chain of Being, Arthur Lovejoy suggests that the most significant Greek progenitor of a “single graded scala naturae” was Aristotle, who first ranked animals according to their relative perfection at birth (with man at the top), and later according to “powers of soul,” with each higher order having all of the powers of the one before it in addition to new ones. This “principle of unilinear gradation” as a conception of the world and the relationship between its organisms was throughout the Middle Ages and until the late 18th century, with a few changes, accepted as unquestionable fact. In the Neoplatonic conception of the Chain (for example, in late Roman times), the organizing principle was Good; with the advent of Christianity in the Medieval period, “Good” became “God” and the chain became a kind of ladder of apotheosis, angels above man at the top and God infinitely above the angels. The idea continued to spread throughout the “Renaissance” of around the 17th century, and the Great Chain of Being as a conception

2 Ibid., 58–59.
3 Ibid., 59.
4 Ibid., 63, 84.
of the universe “attained [its] widest diffusion and acceptance” in the 18th century.  

One of the most well-known proponents of the idea at this time was Charles Bonnet, whose finely graded conception of the Great Chain of Being went from man at the top to other animals, plants, inanimate matter and finally ethereal substances at the bottom. Yet the “notion which pervaded the eighteenth century” of a uniform and understandable universe that drove him to order things in this way is also what inspired those such as Linnaeus and Cuvier to disrupt the chain through a branching view of the tree of life based on comparative anatomical study. The scala naturae was to return, however, in the works of Darwin’s contemporary, Jean-Baptiste Lamarck, who saw organisms as arranged from the least to the most complex, each generation moving up the chain by the cumulative inheritance of characteristics acquired by their parents during their lifetimes—indeed, the title of the sixth chapter of his Zoological Philosophy refers to this “Chain of Animal Life.” Only with the wide acceptance of the Darwinian view of evolution, and the accompanying intricately branched lineages that we know to exist today, was the Great Chain of Being eliminated from scientific thought once and for all. Even now, however, it has far from disappeared from popular thought, a tendency which I see exemplified in the massively widespread forms of Japanese new media centred around digital monsters.

The Japanese digital pets craze of the ’90s started with the Japanese and then worldwide release of portable handheld miniature Tamagotchi and Digimon computers in 1996, simple games in which the player responded to their monster pet’s needs. In the same year, the videogame series Pocket Monsters began in Japan and met with huge success; in these Nintendo Gameboy Games, the player must catch monsters and battle them with one another using their special abilities. Initially, the idea of releasing these games into North America was a hard sell to US companies—eventually, however, in September 1998, Pocket Monsters was rebranded Pokémon and after an intense media campaign the games and television show were released in America and then worldwide. Quite contrary to the initial fears, Pokémon quickly gained immense popularity, the gameboy game selling over a million copies in the US in the first month alone, a number it would later octuple. Digimon quickly capitalized on Pokémon’s success, with the first Digimon television series debuting in 1999, the first of five series that would last until 2007. Yet it never reached the heights of full-fledged “Pokémania”; 1998, for example, was also the release of the first Pokémon-themed jet on Nippon Airways with eight more to follow, 1999 saw Pikachu on the cover of Time Magazine, and 2001 as a balloon in the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day parade (where it remains to this day). Though the Pokémon craze has died down in the last decade, both the animated series and the videogames remain extremely popular today, the former currently having reached 674 episodes and 14 films, the latter having expanded to around 60 different games that consistently sell millions of copies and top sales charts upon their release.

The core of the Pokémon and Digimon universes, their “organizing trope,” is the concept of shinka (進化), which has been translated into English as “digivolution” in Digimon and simply “evolution” in Pokémon, though what this term means in these franchises is quite complex and bears little resemblance to the scientific concept of evolution. The central goal in these worlds is to have one’s monsters “evolve” into ever more powerful forms, usually by training them. In Pokémon, the monsters “evolve” when reaching certain criteria, such as a level of experience or happiness, proximity to a special object, or when a particular event (such as a trade between players) occurs: this process is irreversible. The “evolved” forms the monsters take are usually larger and more intimidating, but some mimic natural processes (e.g. a caterpillar-like Pokémon “evolves” into a pupa and then a butterfly; an egg like Pokémon “evolves” into a hatched form; a baby Pokémon “evolves” into an adult version) or folklore (e.g. a carp-like Pokémon “evolving” into a dragon). The most powerful Pokémon, however, almost invariably do not have “pre-evolved” or “evolved” forms.

5 Ibid., 183.
7 Jean-Baptiste Lamarck, Zoological Philosophy, http://records.viu.ca/~johnstoi/lamarck/toc.htm
8 Anne Allison, “‘Gotta Catch ‘Em All’: The Pokémonization of America (and the World),”
9 Ibid., 242
In Digimon the process of evolution/digivolution is even more complex; Digimon can digivolve into a variety of possible forms in seven stages, the first being egg-like and the last being rather godlike, and there are 26 distinct types of digivolution (e.g. Spirit, Mega, DNA, Bio Hybrid, Double Warp). This process happens naturally in Digimon in the wild as they age, but is greatly accelerated by the presence of a human trainer. Furthermore, it most often reverses itself, the highest forms depicted as difficult to maintain, and unlike Pokémon, several different Digimon can each evolve into the same higher form.

Suffice to say, “evolution” in these universes is far from the Darwinian idea of it. First, the term is often applied to distinct biological processes such as metamorphosis and aging. Second, there is a distinct Lamarckian bent to this kind of “evolution,” with change occurring during the life of one individual based on their circumstances, the next “form” always more complex and well-adapted (that is, to battle). Third, there is the indelible presence of a Great Chain of Being-esque hierarchy and teleology in these “evolutionary” schemata, all stages of the idea of the Chain’s development chronicled in these franchises. “Evolution” or “digivolution” always results in a distinctly “better” form, with a clear endpoint; the last form is thus “perfect,” often resembling angels or gods in Digimon (much like the medieval Chain with angels at the top), and in Pokémon, the most powerful/so-called “legendary” Pokémon tend have only one form that does not “evolve” and cannot be “evolved” into (quite similar to the static conception of the Chain popular up to the 18th century, and also the Aristotelian idea of judging creatures by their relative perfection at birth). In these ways, though “evolution” may be the central concept in these games, it is far from the modern understanding of it; indeed, in their appropriation of the word in the context of these imaginary creatures, they have enshrined conceptions of biology from the early 19th century and the millennia before it.

What, however, are the implications of this? Though it is difficult to judge the direct impact of new media franchises such as Pokémon and Digimon on children’s conceptions of their world and of science, it cannot be doubted that the impact is there. A 2002 letter to Science, for example, described a study of UK children in which it was established that children around the age of 8 could consistently name about 80% of randomly selected Pokémon but only 50% of local wildlife. Some have seen new media such as these as a new opportunity for teaching: the aforementioned study says that conservationists should use the techniques of Pokémon to instill a love and knowledge of real plants and animals in children. Rolfe Friedenberg Jr. and Martin Kelly say that using Pokémon is “both an interesting and educationally sound method to teach… tough biological concepts” such as phylogeny, dichotomy and classification. Martha Driessnack notes that “Children growing up with… Digimon… are exposed to complex genetic concepts,” while Vivian Vasquez and Karen Smith claim that “Pokémon texts are one example of the sort of highly complex literacies that children are now facing in this new millennium.”

Yet while all this may be true, anyone using new media such as these to aid in instruction in biology—whether Pokémon or Digimon or whatever will replace them in coming years—must also make students aware of the presence of the archaic pseudo-science within them, and thus help mitigate the effect these popular forms of entertainment might have on widely-held conceptions about things like evolution. New media franchises, furthermore, have their own responsibilities: though liberal use of “scientific” concepts in fiction have been around as long as science itself, any steps taken to distinguish fictive “science” from real science are steps in the right direction, particularly when dealing with such oft-misunderstood concepts as evolution. The translators of Digimon, for example, in an effort to distinguish it from Pokémon, chose to translate shinka not simply as “evolution” but as “digivolution,” which is a good way of rendering it discrete from the scientific concept: if Pokémon had chosen the term “Pokévolution” instead of “evolution,” perhaps my cousins would be better able to separate the latter from the former. As it stands, an awareness of the historical context of the scientific ideas within new media, on the part of both teachers and pop culture creators—especially when those media are as widely consumed as Pokémon and Digimon and even

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13 Ibid.


16 Vasquez and Smith, “Learning and Literacy,” 125.
considered as possible teaching aids—can only help in the promotion of scientific literacy to young and old alike.

Works Cited


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of subjectivity. It may be an epiphenomenon, but it is a phenomenon all the same, marked by a threatening corporeality that can never be fully apprehended by knowledge.

As a purely epistemic entity, the giant is a mongrel and a saboteur. Though it exists only in the collective imaginary, it serves as a monstrous sentry on the threshold between copacetic knowledge and transgressive incomprehensibility. As per the fifth of Jeffrey Jerome Cohen’s “Seven Theses”, “The Monster Polices the Borders of the Possible”18. The “cryptic” appearance of giants in the Book of Genesis – as the Nephilim, a monstrously large race of humanoids associated with human-divine miscegenation19 – establishes this creature as a semiotic slippage resistant to a homogeneous epistemology in which knowledge would be comfortably fixed. Literary depictions of the giant, according to Cohen, attempt to make corporeal, humanistic sense of this incorporeal, linguistic entity, meaning the giant is both real and unreal, an “intimate stranger . . . as frightening as it is familiar”20. The giant’s presence in consciousness is thus disruptive, as it marks the infiltration of something that does not exist into something that does, warning us against transgressions of the known lest we find nothing beyond its boundaries. In this way, I contend, the giant bores holes of negativity – the very absence of knowledge – into an otherwise comprehensible reality, disturbing our faith in knowledge itself.

Much of the giant’s duality between existence and nothingness is concentrated in a short episode in Genesis:

When people began to multiply on the face of the ground, and daughters were born to them, the sons of God saw that they were fair; and they took wives for themselves of all that they chose. Then the Lord said, “My spirit shall not abide in mortals forever, for they are flesh; their days shall be one hundred twenty years.” The Nephilim were on the earth in those days – and also afterward – when the sons of God went into the daughters of humans, who bore children to them. These were the heroes that were of old, warriors of renown.21

The identity of the “sons of God” is contested among scholars, but in each interpretation their copulation with the “daughters of men” is implicated in the moral status of the Nephilim. Dominant exegesis characterizes the sons

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17 Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome. “Monster Culture (Seven Theses),” Monster Theory: Reading Culture, 7
18 Ibid., 12
19 Ibid., 15
20 Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome. Of Giants: Sex, Monsters, and the Middle Ages, xiii
of God as “subordinate deities in the heavenly assembly” who reinforce God’s lordship as his supplicants; effectively they are “angels” used as a template for the spiritual and aesthetic sculpture of man. Alternatively, the “standard Christian” reading holds that the sons of God are Seth’s descendants, whereas the daughters of men are Cain’s. Regardless of their identities, their intercourse represents a human-divine miscegenation deemed unacceptable by God. Augustine interprets the Nephilim as a racial product of this interbreeding, what Cohen calls a “genus gigantum” identifiable by physical traits, most notably its enormous height and girth. The church father further hypothesizes that the “one hundred twenty years” allotted to humanity were the remaining years between the first human-divine union and the flood. Other scholars read the Nephilim as a distinct race existing prior to (and after) the miscegenation, but even under this interpretation the giants are the depraved, physically identifiable other to the “warriors of renown” born to the sons of God.

Corporeality is the determinant characteristic of giants. Inhuman size results from the unintended mixture of humanity with the divine, or is at least a monstrous racial portent, making giants into “corporeal signifiers of overbearing pride.” Moreover, the somatic distinction between “man” and “giant,” “sons of God” and “Nephilim,” or even Israelite and aboriginal Canaanite later in Genesis, is a delimiter of epistemic categories. But in delineating the binary between normal-sized human (the real) and gargantuan monster (the imaginary), the giant places a foot firmly in both camps. By definition, the giant can only be a linguistic entity residing in thought, but this episode of miscegenation in the Bible illustrates its concurrent presence in the extant verbum dei. Cohen’s Thesis III (“The Monster is the Harbinger of Category Crisis”) and Thesis V (“The Monster Polices the Borders of the Possible”) are evident here, the giant obstructing passage between realms of possible and impossible by straddling their shared border. The giant is not real, but who knows, it could be; its immensity is known only in language, but the language itself describes its physiognomy, the body as it would be perceived by the naked eye. This is the essence of “extimacy” (“extimacy”), a phenomenon that conjoins the intimacy of self-knowledge to a foundational alterity, an exorbitance as frightening as it is familiar, a deconstructive enfolding of the unknowable outside within the knowable inside. Monstrosity became a dual product of conceptual language and corporeal portent as soon as God marked Cain the original “monstrum”; no monster is seen, only thought and spoken of, yet its physiognomy is the foremost vector of its difference.

God, and thus the medieval reader (or a reader of any era that is engaged with monsters), deplores this duality as it appears in the Nephilim episode because it transgresses “smooth epistemological wholes.” “Now the earth was corrupt in God’s sight,” it is written, “and the earth was filled with violence. And God saw that the earth was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted its ways upon the earth.” The difference in grammatical subject renders both of these seemingly repetitious sentences necessary – the first suggests man’s culpability in corrupting the earth, the second God’s acknowledgement of it. It is noted that the sons of God incur no apparent reproach for copulating with the daughters of men, ergo mankind is responsible for birthing the giants and mandating God’s wrath. The ensuing flood is not so much a systematic destruction as a reversal of divine creation, an “un-creation” that will “blot out” any historical fact of humanity’s existence.

According to Stephens, giants in the Old Testament were extrinsic evils that menaced mankind. There is some truth to this – the Israelites fear the physical strength of the gigantic Anakim and Sirach praises God for punishing “ancient giants who revolted in their might” – but these examples further prove the giant’s residence between corporeality and pure episteme. Giants were born of an unholy admixture, an attempt to apprehend the raw corporeal with language. “Like a letter on the page, the monster signifies something other than itself,” but what if that “something” is in fact nothing? The price of gigantism, as God demonstrates with the flood, is negation.

The giants’ hubristic construction of the Tower of Babel in

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22 Ibid., 19, Gen.1.26n
23 Stephens, Walter, Giants in These Days: Folklore, Ancient History, and Nationalism, 79
24 Ibid., 76
25 Cohen, Giants, 19
26 The New Oxford Annotated Bible, Gen.6.1-4n
27 Cohen, Giants, 17
28 The New Oxford Annotated Bible, Num.13.33-34
29 Cohen, Theses 7, 12
30 Cohen, Giants, xiii
31 The New Oxford Annotated Bible, Gen.4.15
32 Cohen, Theses, 3
33 The New Oxford Annotated Bible, Gen.6.11-12
34 Ibid., Gen.6.1-4n
35 Ibid., Gen.6.5n; 6.7
36 Stephens, Folklore, 72
37 The New Oxford Annotated Bible, Num.13:33-34
38 Ibid., Sir.16.7
39 Cohen, Theses, 4
linguistic product of the imagination. Where else can the giant be studied in its natural habitat if not the space of denegation? Like de Man and Clark’s conception of language, which is both knowable and unknowable, the giant stands between epistemic possibilities. The episode of miscegenation in Genesis that motivates the great flood is ultimately an allegory for these possibilities’ demarcation. Just as the uncertainty between signifier and signified in language must be disavowed, so does God “blot out” his first version of humanity in preparation for a more starkly categorical and therefore more agreeable one.

The giant dwells in the nether-regions of the imaginary, where the corporeal and incorporeal are negotiated in search of epistemic wholeness. As Cohen poetically states,

> The giant is a foundational monster: from his body the earth is fashioned and the world comes into being. At the same time, the giant menaces any architecture of meaning that humans erect, including language. The giant is at once abjected from human signification and installed deep within the structure of subjectivity, as both its limit and its history in eternal return.

Hence, giants are lacunae, imaginable from the fragments of body or garb they leave behind but impossible to see entirely except by projecting beyond a “human paradigm” (Cohen, *Giants*, xiii). They are sentries at the borders of the knowable. They refuse, like all monsters, to settle on one side, instilling in humanity a thronging sense of unease that knowledge may not be knowledge at all.

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40 Clark, David L. “Monstrosity, Illegibility, and Denegation: De Man, bp Nichol, and the Resistance to Postmodernism.” *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, 41
41 Ibid., 45
42 Ibid., 46-47 (my italics)
43 Cohen, *Giants*, xvii
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PATRICK KELLY

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primary means of communicating common ideas and goals.” With this in mind, Medici art—defined in this paper as art commissioned by the Medici family—provides a framework for examining the complex interplay between Medici cultural patronage and political activities. As such, the themes and imagery of Medici art not only reflected the political context the Medici existed in, but in turn influenced politics as well by playing a role in manufacturing popular consent to Medici authority through the shaping of Florentine popular culture.

The Medici first rose to prominence in the fifteenth century when Cosimo de’ Medici—later known as Cosimo il Vecchio (the elder)—became the de facto ruler of Florence. Financial acumen and nimble political manipulation allowed Cosimo to dominate not only the political but also the cultural landscape of Florence with his lavish commissions. Indeed, the cultural history of Florence during the Renaissance is intimately intertwined with that of the Medici family. A cursory perusal of artistic luminaries associated with the Medici reveals an impressive number that contributed to the flowering of arts in Florence, including Donatello, Leon Battista Alberti, and Filippo Brunelleschi.

After his death in 1474, Cosimo was succeeded by his son Piero ‘the Gouty,’ and then his grandson Lorenzo il Magnifico (the Magnificent) in 1469, who also came to be renowned for his statesmanship and munificent support of the arts. The dynamics of this relationship between politics and art, so adroitly cultivated by the aforementioned members of the Medici family, forms the central focus of this paper. In this regard, it is crucial to recognize that the cultural endeavours of the Medici were inseparable from their political initiatives. The Medici’s cultural patronage was no mere pastime of the idle rich; instead, it was a chief instrument of Medici policy at a time when the family lacked a legal title of authority.

The subject of Medici cultural patronage and its link to Florentine politics has not escaped the scrutiny of historians. Traditionally, the study of the patronage has been applied to delve into early modern sociopolitical relations. For instance, within this historiographical paradigm, historians have used patronage to develop an understanding of early modern Mediterranean cultures characterized by close social interdependence with roots in economic reciprocation. As such, Daniel Arasse has noted that historians have

Art is much more than mere decorative objects; instead, it is a fundamental medium of self-expression and communication. The Medici family in fifteenth-century Florence came to embrace this concept thoroughly, taking advantage of the opportunities afforded to them by cultural patronage to consolidate their power over the city. As such, this paper will argue that the themes and imagery of Medici art not only reflected the political context the Medici existed in, but in turn influenced politics as well by playing a role in manufacturing popular consent to Medici authority through the shaping of Florentine popular culture.

Three kings decorate the wall of the Medici chapel: the Magi Caspar, Balthasar and Melchior. (See Appendix A) They journey towards Bethlehem, each bearing gifts and accompanied by an anachronistic procession of Medici family members and allies. Obviously such frescoes do not illustrate the typical experiences of fifteenth-century Florentine life, even as they impart insight on appearances and fashions of the period. These frescoes are instead much better observed through their verisimilitude. Real people are depicted in an imagined space and time, while sacred and secular imagery also mingle together. Such careful juxtaposition not only indicates that these Medici-commissioned frescoes reflected the relationships and hierarchies that made up the sociopolitical order of the time but also suggest a prescriptive element as well. As Dale Kent notes, art, more in the Renaissance than now, was functional, “a

conventionally tended to use works of art to illustrate the dynamics of power— that is, art is understood as a reflection of the historical record or a particular political ideology. However, recent works by historians such as Adrian Randolph have favoured a different approach to examining the link between the political and the artistic by seeking to understand how art endows political power with a ‘luster’ by “granting power a glittering, changeable, and seductive visual surface.” By arguing that the art of the Medici not only reflected the political context of the time but also played a role in shaping Florentine politics, this paper draws upon both aforementioned approaches when examining Medici cultural patronage and its associated political elements.

As mentioned previously, one particular facet of the relationship between Medici art and politics is how Medici art reflected the political situation at the time. Prior to the fifteenth century, Florentine politics had developed along a republican trajectory. The rise of an influential mercantile class and republican ideology paved the way for the 1293 Ordinances of Justice, legislation that laid the groundwork for a republican framework of government for centuries. When Cosimo returned to Florence from exile in 1434, it was this nominally democratic republican government that he encountered in his rise to the pinnacle of Florentine politics. His successors Piero and Lorenzo too operated under the trappings of republican government even as the Medici had become potentates in all but name. In this particular stage of their dominance from 1434-1494, the Medici carefully cultivated a republican facade while controlling politics from behind the scenes by rigging ballots, maintaining an extensive patron-client network and engaging in measured acts of cultural display. Cosimo, for instance, did not jettison the social mores of his time and present himself in a manner consistent with his actual power. Instead, Cosimo sought to achieve a delicate balance that allowed him to project an image of authority appropriate to his social honour, but tempered with a modesty that was in line with Florence’s egalitarian principles.

Such a delicate balance between modesty and might forms an underlying theme prevalent in Medici art. This can be seen in the rather laconic and circumspect way in which the Medici framed their power in their artwork. As Ernst Gombrich’s essay on the patronage proclivities of the Medici shows, Cosimo, Piero and Lorenzo had somewhat differing patronage styles, but they all shared a common concern: art was to directly glorify the church or state but only indirectly enhance Medici authority. Benozzo Gozzoli’s aforementioned frescoes in the Medici chapel provide an example of the cloaked manner in which Medici art supported the family. (See Appendix A) As Christopher Fulton shows, the Magi were an attractive model for rulers throughout history to identify with. In this case, the Magi are almost certainly emblematic of the three generations of Medici rulers: the frescoes portray a trio of elderly, middle-aged and youthful Magi that are likely to represent Cosimo, Piero and Lorenzo respectively. The denizens of Florence would no doubt be aware of such an analogy between the Medici and the Magi, especially given the family’s involvement and support of the Compagnia dei Magi, a confraternity that rose to prominence during the quattrocento. Despite this rather transparent symbolism, the Medici were not painted as the Magi; instead, Cosimo, Piero and Lorenzo are clearly represented as other minor characters within the fresco. However, the analogy is clear: the Magi profess their devotion by bringing precious gifts to Christ, which parallels the Medici’s own demonstrations of faith and charity in their extensive donations to the state, church and community in the form of cultural patronage. Like the Medici palace itself, the religious imagery of the Medici often perfectly exemplified the oblique manner of Medici rule: similar to how the Medici came to dominate Florentine politics by appropriating existing institutions, the Medici used existing religious imagery to indirectly proclaim Medici presence and power.

As noted previously, the political context of fifteenth-century Florence was characterized by the tension between republican constitutional forms co-existing with the growth of lordly authority under the Medici. The Medici sought to clothe their authority within the guise of constitutional legitimacy in a variety of ways, most notably in the realm of cultural patronage. However, just as the art patronized by the Medici was influenced by the political context of the time, the themes and imagery of the family’s art also sought to shape the political sphere as well. The tensions inherent in the Medici dominance of Florence were extremely productive in the realm of its imagery and art, which were used to try to

Florence, 77.
51 Randolph, Engaging Symbols, 78.
52 Ibid., 3
53 Gombrich, Norm and Form, 51.
54 Fulton, An Earthly Paradise, 183.
55 Ibid.
56 Gombrich, Norm and Form, 49.
remedy or strengthen desired orders and relationships. This is especially pertinent if one keeps in mind the historian Adrian Randolph’s studies on fifteenth-century Florentine politics. In his analysis, Randolph argues that “politics became less a place for the staging of authoritarian monologues, and more the site for persuasion and the generation of consensus.” 57 What Randolph calls most attention to is how politics became increasingly rhetorical under the Medici as power shifted from the electoral system towards power characterized by charisma and persuasion, which entailed engaging with public opinion. As such, art—a prominent means of symbolically engaging Florentine public opinion—came to shape political life by playing an important role in manufacturing popular consent.

The necessity of cultivating popular consent to Medici authority in the period spanning from Cosimo to Lorenzo should not be underestimated. Through the lens of retrospect—as well as Medici ducal propaganda of the sixteenth century—it is easy to regard Medici dominance as inevitable and irrefragable from the beginning. In reality, however, the early Medici were in a delicate position as they were bereft of a constitutionally legitimate claim to rule. Even in Lorenzo’s time—as events such as the Pazzi Plot of 1478 show—the Medici did not have Florence single-handedly under their proverbial thumb; some measure of public consent was still needed to control the city. 58 How the Medici were able to use their artistic patronage to sway public opinion is hinted at in Niccolo Machiavelli’s The History of Florence. Machiavelli suggests that Cosimo was able to become a “most powerful citizen” by “having his power from the open roads of public and private life.” 59 Machiavelli emphasizes Cosimo’s use of private and public means to amass power, an observation which has been supported by later historians. For instance, Patricia Lee Rubin details how the Medici were able to secure their public position through private means, particularly marriage, citing Lorenzo’s marriage to Clarice Orsini as an example. 60 Though private means such as marriage, the Medici were able to consolidate an extensive network of partisans on whose support they could depend on in public matters. This blending of public and private interests was also noted by contemporaries such as Francesco Guicciardini, who observed that “as [the Medici] had neither any position nor Signoria abroad, their interest was generally one with that of the commonwealth, whose glory and fame were likewise theirs.” 61

The Medici’s mingling of private and public interests also found expression in their art. In essence, the Medici carefully used certain types of imagery in their art to cultivate popular consent to their authority by creating a visibly close relation between their personal concerns and those of the Florentine public at large. One way in which this manifested was how the public image of Cosimo’s rule was shaped into what Patricia Lee Rubin calls “paternalism on the model of the Divine.” 62 As noted before, the Medici found it necessary to shore up their authority and legitimacy. In Cosimo’s lifetime and after it, for instance, he was especially accused of the clearly veritable charge of seeking to become a prince by subverting Florence’s republican traditions. 63 For example, the popular poet Burchiello warned in 1434 that “…this perfidious tyrant, wicked man, harshly with force of veiled deceit/ tramples upon our sovereignty/…he is a dove, but later with full gizzard.” 64 Such perceptions of patriarchal oppression, however, came to be nearly drowned out by images of Cosimo as a father figure, his special position as first citizen justified by his charitable acts and his ability to intercede to the pope and God himself on behalf of all Florentines. The paternal metaphor is important here; as Rubin argues, “the patriarchal was the most powerful [of all metaphors], providing a means of reconciling the often conflicting claims of family, city and the Lord by associating the authority of fathers, patrons and the Almighty.” 65 As such, the potency of the paternal metaphor, as well as its appeal to both sacred and civic traditions, helped legitimize analogies between worldly and divine authority.

The sacred element in the perception of Cosimo as a paternal figure resulted in much of the pertinent imagery being represented in the religious art of the Medici. The theme of intercession proved to be particularly prominent, as shown by Fra Angelico’s altarpiece commissioned by Cosimo for the church of San Marco. (See Appendix B) Though God and Jesus in this instance are replaced by the Medici patron saints Cosmas and Damian, the patron saints still clearly link Cosimo to God in the chain of intercession. Consequently, the Medici can be perceived as possessing an authority that is God-ordained: perhaps

57 Randolph, Engaging Symbols, 2.
58 F.W. Kent, Lorenzo de’ Medici and the Art of Magnificence, 79.
60 Patricia Lee Rubin, Images and Identity in Fifteenth-Century Florence, 249.
61 Francesco Guicciardini, Del reggimento di Firenze, cited in Randolph, Engaging Symbols, 82.
62 Rubin, Images and Identity, 121
63 Tim Parks, Medici Money: Banking, Metaphysics and Art in Fifteenth-Century Florence, 106.
64 Rubin, Images and Identity, 118.
65 Ibid., 135.
unjust, but inevitable—like that of one’s earthly and Heavenly father. In many ways, this paternal imagery cultivated by the Medici is ingenious. Some Florentines may chafe under the Medici’s unparalleled power, but what embodies the image of stern benevolence and unavoidable authority more than a father? A father, after all, ultimately has the child’s interests at heart, much like how the Medici’s private interests were portrayed as synonymous with the public interests of the Florentine people.

Another common theme in Medici art that blended together the public and the private to manufacture popular consent to their rule is the portrayal of the Medici as doctors curing the civic ills of Florence. This identification with doctors in not terribly surprising; it is after all a play upon the name Medici—the Latin word for doctor, medicus, is a homonym for the Medici name.66 As such, the ‘public health,’ or Salus Publica, became a familiar trope in Medici art, representing how the Medici brought prosperity to Florence by acting as doctors bringing health to their patients. Obviously, the underlying message was that the Medici were devoted to the public good, again invoking the close links between the private and public interests of the Medici. The concept of the Medici as doctors and the Salus Publica is most notably used in medallic portraits. In Niccolo Spinelli’s portrait of Lorenzo, one side shows the female personification of Florence, or Florentia, sitting beneath a laurel tree. (See Appendix C) In the classical usage, Salus Publica refers to a deified virtue, usually portrayed as a female figure and said to embody the health and welfare of the state.67 In this way, Florentia can be seen as also representing the classical conception of Salus Publica. As the word ‘laurel’ was a homonym for Lorenzo, Florence is clearly made to reside under Lorenzo’s dominant shadow, with the further association of Florence’s public well-being as also beneath Lorenzo’s leadership.68 The theme of Salus Publica is even more explicitly referenced in Bertoldo di Giovanni’s Pazzi Conspiracy Medal, commissioned after the attempted coup. (See Appendix D) On one side, Lorenzo is depicted as escaping his attackers underneath a large portrait of himself labeled with the words ‘Salus Publica.’ The underlying message of this imagery cannot be more explicit: Lorenzo’s survival is equated with Florence’s health and security, which implies that the attack was not only against the Medici, but the entire city as well. Similar to his grandfather’s careful cultivation of a paternal image with a touch of the divine, Lorenzo fostered legitimacy and popular consent by proliferating the image of himself as the embodiment of the city’s health.

Though there is an abundance of literature on the study of Medici art, the very nature of any cultural history makes it difficult to conclusively ‘prove’ something. This becomes especially apparent when one seeks to ascertain the intended audience’s—that is, fifteenth-century Florentines’—likely readings and reception of Medici art. Then there are the myriad problems associated with interpreting the art of centuries ago—works of art can be valuable sources of historical evidence, but it is undeniable that artwork is less likely to yield clear evidence than readable texts. A critical reader, then, may take issue with all the analysis discussed above. After all, historians today must painstakingly put together the repertoire of symbols that would have been instantly recognizable to a fifteenth-century audience—as such, surely it would be likely to overstate the inherent complexity of representation in Medici art? To assure these concerns, one must delve into the wider realm of Florentine popular culture. An analysis of the imagery present in the writings of the time, for instance, provides useful clues to how Medici authority might have been seen. The trope of Cosimo as a father figure, for one, was common in poetry. For example, the poet Feo Belcari praised Cosimo as the charitable father of the people: “Father of your country, gracious and worthy/ conserver of temples and holy place;/ the singular refuge of all those/ who live under the standard of poverty…”69 The image of the Medici as doctors was also present in the popular consciousness—a petition by the Palla di Palla Strozzi requested the Medici to support a petition “which is the medicine to cure these failings.”70 From these examples, along with many others, it appears that the visual rhetoric promoted by the Medici in their art had ultimately proved persuasive over time.

Art is much more than mere decorative objects; instead, it is a fundamental medium of self-expression and communication. In the politically tumultuous of the fifteenth century, it is not, therefore, surprising that visual arts came to not only reflect, but also contributed to the politics of the time. The Medici were in a perfect position to take advantage of the opportunities afforded to them by cultural patronage, and did so spectacularly, resulting in the consolidation of their regime. Though the early Medici were eventually banished from Florence despite their cultural efforts, the influence of Medici art can still be seen as an remarkable

66 Fulton, An Earthly Paradise, 152.
67 Ibid.
68 Ibid., 184.
69 Rubin, Images and Identity, 118
70 Ibid., 119.
success. After all, their art has a weight and substance of their own that endures even to this day. Medici art still exists, and more importantly, still matters to us—which speaks to the Medici’s remarkable talents as patrons: their art not only enriches our understanding of fifteenth-century Florence, but also transcend their original time, audience and location.

Works Cited


Appendix A
Benozzo Gozzoli,
The Journey of the Magi

Appendix B
Fra Angelico, "Annalena" altarpiece

Appendix C
Niccolo Spinelli,
Florentina Under a Laurel Tree
(reverse of bronze medal)

Appendix D
Bertoldo di Giovannii,
Pazzi Conspiracy Medal

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that the good life is the life that an individual would have reason to pursue his fundamental desires. Goodness as rationality is a theory of informed preference-satisfaction, which states that the good life for an individual consists in the satisfaction of his rationally informed preferences. By rationally informed preferences, Rawls means those certain states of affairs or courses of action which fulfill our desires and would be chosen after engaging in a process of deliberation and critical reflection. According to Rawls, the good life involves setting up specific goals that we feel are important and pursuing them by creating a plan of life for ourselves, which helps us organize and structure our activities in such a way to help us realize our most desired ends. For example, if my goal in life is to become a doctor, then a plan of life will factor in all the necessary steps required to become a doctor. This would include studying biology and chemistry in university, scoring well on my MCAT exam, and doing well in medical school. Although we are to prepare for the future by establishing some kind of desired end that we consider worthwhile for ourselves to pursue, Rawls argues that we must not think of a plan of life as “a detailed blueprint for action stretching over the whole course of life.” Instead, since we are focused on a particular goal and must factor in all things necessary to achieve it, we should view a plan of life as “a hierarchy of plans, [with] the more specific subplans being filled in at the appropriate time” and when taken as a whole would represent the fulfillment of the good life for an individual.

Given that the plan of life that would be rational for an individual to adopt will vary from person to person “depending upon their endowments and circumstances,” Rawls explains that there is no single conception of the good life because “different individuals find their happiness in doing different things” (Rawls 359). Since it takes into account that we all have different interests and goals, goodness as rationality can be seen as a pluralistic conception of the good life; not only in the sense that it varies from one person to the next, but also because individuals can have several different conceptions of what a good life would be for them. Just because I believe that the good life for me involves becoming a doctor and saving lives does not mean that it is the only conception of what the good life for me would be; perhaps I feel that I can live an equally good life if I decide to become a teacher or a community activist.

71 Rawls, John, A Theory of Justice, 360
72 Ibid.
73 Ibid.
worker. The point is that goodness as rationality allows for several different notions of what a good life consists in and does not restrict our choices.

For Rawls, “[t]he rational plan for a person determines his good” because it provides him with a sense of purpose or meaning to his life, and if this plan is a rational one, then we can conclude that that individual’s conception of his good is also rational. The motivation behind this principle is that we are better off if we are able to satisfy as many preferences as we can without excluding any others in order to satisfy those desires. Rawls refers to this reflective procedure as the process of deliberative rationality.

The first principle of rational choice is the principle of effective means. Provided that we have an idea of some goal that we wish to fulfill, Rawls explains that if there are several ways of achieving this end then we are “to adopt that alternative which realizes the end in the best way” and to its fullest possible extent. For example, let us say that my goal is to celebrate New Year’s Eve at Nathan Phillips Square. In order to make it downtown in time to watch the final countdown, I can take the subway, drive my car or ride my bike. Although all three alternatives will eventually lead me to my destination, some options are simply more practical than others; it may be impractical to ride my bike at night in the snow and there may be delays in traffic if I decided to drive. But if I know that the subways are running on perfect schedule, then the principle of effective means would say that riding the subway would be the most rational decision to make since it is the most effective way of realizing my end.

The second principle is the principle of inclusiveness. Rawls explains that if we are faced with the choice between two (or more) possible plans of life that realize similar ends, then one is to be preferred over the other if, through its execution, “[w]e would achieve all of the desired aims of the other plan and one or more further aims in addition.” The motivation behind this principle is that we are better off if we are able to satisfy as many preferences as we can without excluding any others in our decisions. For example, let us say I have a desire to become a painter and I have been offered full-tuition scholarships to art schools in both Toronto and Paris, and I must choose between them. If I decided to stay in Toronto, I would fulfill my desire to become a painter, but I would miss out on the opportunity of travelling to Europe. But if I choose to study in Paris, I would still fulfill my primary desires but I would gain a greater exposure to a new culture and see artwork that could inspire me even more. Rawls would say this would be the more inclusive option because I would be fulfilling all of my current desires, plus additional ones, without sacrificing or compromising anything through my decision.

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The principles of rational choice are useful because they guide
us towards the best course of action that helps fulfill our desired ends. However, they are insufficient for helping us choose one rational plan over another. In order to help us decide, Rawls explains that the second condition necessary for a rational plan of life is that it would be chosen “with full deliberative rationality, that is, with full awareness of the relevant facts and after a careful consideration of the consequences” 80. Deliberative rationality is a formal principle that tells us to choose the plan that is most likely to help us realize our most fundamental desires 81. This is achieved through a process of critical reflection, in which an individual reviews “in the light of all the relevant facts, what it would be like to carry out these plans and thereby ascertained the course of action that would best realize his more fundamental desires” 82. Rawls explains that an objectively rational plan of life comes from having a full and complete knowledge of all the relevant facts about one’s life and knowing the consequences from choosing to pursue one plan over another 83. With full deliberative rationality, Rawls assumes that an individual has made no errors or miscalculations in his reasoning, that he is under no misconceptions of what it is he truly desires, and that he will not second-guess whether his decision was the right one for him 84. Under these ideal circumstances, the process of deliberative rationality is promising because it produces the best possible conception of the good life for us because we would be able to foresee the outcome of our actions and be able to determine which plan of life satisfies our fundamental desires 85.

But as Rawls admits, it is often the case that we simply do not know what the best rational plan is for us because the knowledge of our circumstances is limited and incomplete. We would only know whether something is truly good for us in hindsight, and at best, all we have are reasonable beliefs about what the good life for us would be 86. To overcome this shortcoming, Rawls explains that if we do the best that a rational person would do given the limited information available to us, then the plans we choose to follow would be subjectively rational plans 87. Although someone may be unhappy with his decision when chosen under this incomplete knowledge, Rawls maintains that it is because that person’s beliefs about the facts of the world “are understandably mistaken or his knowledge insufficient, and not because he drew hasty and fallacious inferences or was confused as to what he really wanted” 88. He explains that there would be no regrets if someone is displeased with the choice of their particular plan of life because even with this imperfect knowledge at present hand, he does what seems best at the time “and if his beliefs later prove he be mistaken with untoward results, it is through no fault of his own. There is no cause for self-reproach. There was no way of knowing which was the best or even a better plan” 89. As long as we consult with the principles of rational choice and critically reflect on the sources of our desires, goodness as rationality provides the best possible life available for us. It is promising as a theory of the good because it requires us to carefully think about what it is we truly wish to get out of our lives and to formulate a plan to help us achieve those goals. But how does Rawls’s goodness as rationality stand up against other conceptions of the good life?

According to subjectivist theories of the good, the value of a life is depended upon “the feelings, or aims, or preferences...of the person whose life it is” and that an individual’s life is good if she “[is] satisfying her authentic aims or aspirations—in short, the extent to which she is happy” 90. The reason why subjective views are attractive is because they incorporate the individual’s point of view into its account of the good and “[are] capable of acknowledging the status of human agents as determiners of the priorities for their own lives” 91. Unlike objective theories—such as perfectionism—subjectivist accounts maintain a degree of agent-sovereignty that allows for individual choice in deciding which aims to pursue within a general conception of what the good life consists of. One common subjective theory of the good life is hedonism, which states that certain things are good only if they satisfy our desires and give us pleasure. The good life for a hedonist is the life that gives us the most enjoyment, so, if I derive a lot of pleasure from reading great literature and listening to classical music, then according to hedonism the best possible life for me is the life that allows me to read as many books as I want and have access to the Toronto Symphony Orchestra.

On the surface, hedonism is attractive because it takes into consideration our unique preferences, much like the way goodness as

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80 Ibid., 358-359
81 Ibid., 365
82 Ibid., 366
83 Ibid., 370
84 Ibid., 366
85 Ibid.
86 Ibid.
87 Ibid.
88 Ibid.
89 Ibid., 370
90 Sumner, L.W. “Two Theories of the Good,” Social Philosophy & Policy 9.2, 5
91 Ibid., 10-11
rationality does. But because it is only concerned with experiencing as much pleasure as possible, the problem with hedonism is that its scope is far too broad and inclusive to be a suitable theory of the good life. Although it is committed to say that a good life involves satisfying our pleasurable desires, hedonism makes no claim about which types of things are better for us to pursue. All it does is tell us to choose the activities that maximize our experiences of pleasure and to avoid activities that cause experiences of pain. Because it does not really provide any kind of method for evaluating which kinds of activities are more worthwhile to pursue over others, the implication of hedonism is that it can lead to unfavourable conceptions of what constitutes the good life for individuals. One common objection to hedonism is the argument from worthless pleasures, whose motivation is that not all pleasurable experiences are necessarily good, nor do they improve the quality of our lives. For example, we can imagine someone who takes immense pleasure by engaging in bestiality with dolphins (let us call him Snorky). Although our intuitive response is to think that his behaviour is not good at all, a hedonist would be committed to say that the best possible life for Snorky involves plugging the blowholes of as many dolphins as possible because that is what gives him the most pleasure. Furthermore, since subjective theories maintain high levels of agent-sovereignty in determining what the good is, we are not permitted to morally judge or condemn his conception of the good life and tell him that he is wrong. It is not for us to decide which things are good or bad for others and this seems counterintuitive for a successful theory of the good. How would Rawls respond to this objection of worthless pleasures and does goodness as rationality face the same problem of being too inclusive as well?

As mentioned earlier, goodness as rationality maintains a pluralistic conception of the good life since it does not specify which plans or activities are to be preferred over others. In doing so, it maintains a level of agent-sovereignty in deciding which plan of life to pursue. But since the overall aim for all of us is to carry out well-informed and rational plans of life, Rawls explains that we are permitted to criticize and condemn the decisions of others either by showing that “it violates the principles of rational choice, or that it is not the plan that he would pursue were he to assess his prospects with care in the light of a full knowledge of his situation”93. Although we are free to pursue any kind of life we want, goodness as rationality does not face the problem of worthless pleasures because it requires us to reflect on the sources of our desires in order to determine whether or not they serve as proper foundation for a rational plan of life. As Rawls explains, deliberative rationality requires us to “investigate the circumstances under which we have acquired our desires” and if they are discovered to be irrational, we may conclude “that some of our aims are in various respects out of line” and irrational as well94. While people like Snorky may feel that they are living the best life possible, Rawls would say that their lives are not good because their desires are founded upon incorrect beliefs about the true circumstances of their lives. He would say that they are not being critical enough when reflecting upon their fundamental desires because if they were, then perhaps they would realize that they truly want something else95. Perhaps Snorky would get just as much or even more pleasure if he were to choose another activity that was not founded upon irrational beliefs or desires.

I think the reason why Rawls would argue that Snorky’s plan of life is wrong and misguided is because he is not fully aware of the other possibilities of life available to him. Even if we allow that it is simply in Snorky’s nature to want to interact with dolphins because he loves them so much, he could equally satisfy his desires if he were to choose a plan of life that involves interacting with dolphins in different ways. Perhaps he can become a marine biologist and study the behavior of dolphins and other marine mammals, or he could become a dolphin trainer and help preserve and care for the dolphin populations around the world. The point is that if his fundamental desire is to be around dolphins, then both of these alternatives would allow him to satisfy at least some of his preferences and would be consistent under goodness as rationality. Although these alternatives may not be Snorky’s optimal choice, they would still provide him with an adequate conception of the good because he is able to satisfy some of his preferences. But if it is the case that he only desires to have sex with dolphins, without even considering any other options available to him, then Rawls would say it is fair to dismiss Snorky’s conception of the good life because he is being unreasonable.

Goodness as rationality maintains the same level of agent sovereignty found in subjective theories of the good life because it

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92 An example modified from Fred Feldman’s “Pleasure and the Good Life Concerning the Nature, Varieties, and Plausibility of Hedonism.”

93 Rawls, Justice, 359
94 Ibid., 368
95 Ibid.
individuals to choose a plan of life that best suits their needs and preferences. But because it makes no claim about which states of affairs are better than others (a plan just has to be one that someone would have reason to pursue), Rawls explains that goodness as rationality could allow for unusual conceptions of the good life. To illustrate this point, he asks us to imagine the case of an extremely intelligent and highly skilled mathematician, who is able to earn a living by solving complex mathematical problems with ease, but whose only source of pleasure comes from the desire “to count blades of grass in various geometrically shaped areas such as park squares and well-trimmed lawns”96. Under goodness as rationality, Rawls explains that the definition of the good forces us to admit that the good life for the grass-counter involves counting blades of grass, and that his good “is determined by a plan that gives an especially prominent place to this activity”97. Similar to Snorky, if we allow that it is in the grass-counter’s nature to enjoy only the activity of counting grass blades and nothing else, and if there is no way that we can convince him to change his mind or persuade him into thinking that his views are irrational, then this plan of life would be the most rational plan of life for him because “[i]t will be for him the end that regulates the schedule of his actions, and this establishes what is good for him”98.

At first glance, it would appear that the grass-counter is in the same position as Snorky because he is pursuing a plan of life that seems counterintuitive of what we would normally consider to be a good life. If so, then goodness as rationality is faced with the same criticism that plagued hedonism, namely, the argument from worthless pleasures. But I believe Rawls is able to overcome these objections because I feel that the grass-counter example differs from the case of Snorky in a few key ways. As Rawls notes, perhaps the reason why he only has a desire to count grass is because he is peculiarly neurotic or is averse to interpersonal relationships, a particular feature about his life he has developed since early childhood99. If this is the case, and if these factors are the source of his desires to pursue this activity, then the life consisting in counting blades of grass would be the best for him because he is following a plan that is informed by the circumstances of his life. Unlike Snorky, who ignores any other alternative plan of life available to him because he is only concerned with maximizing his pleasurable experiences, I think that the difference with the grass-counter is that he is aware of the alternative plans of life available to him. He is aware that he has a gift of solving complex mathematical problems that no one else can solve, and that he could use his abilities to pursue a life that allows him to use his skills and satisfy his desires. But because of the nature of his personality and the circumstances of his life, including his aversion to human interaction (a circumstance which Rawls would say must be taken into account when deciding which rational plan of life to pursue), then it is easy to see why counting blades of grass is the best possible life for him. It is the most rational plan of life for him to pursue because it allows him to engage in activities that satisfy his desires which involve mathematics, but without having to subject himself to the anxiety caused by being around others. As long as he is reflecting critically on the nature of his desires and the implications of choosing one plan of life over another, Rawls would have no problem with accepting the grass-counter’s conception of the good life, no matter how counterintuitive we may judge it to be. Goodness as rationality still allows for agent sovereignty and individual choice in deciding what a good life consists in pursuing. But because we have to carefully reflect upon the circumstances of our lives when reaching a decision on which plan would be reasonable to pursue, goodness as rationality would be able to overcome the limitations of hedonism and avoid the argument from worthless pleasure.

While subjective theories claim that certain states are good based on our attitudes and desires towards them, objective theories of the good life claim that there are certain states of affairs which are intrinsically good in themselves, independently of whether or not individuals have favorable attitudes toward them or even consider them valuable100. Unlike subjective views—such as hedonism—objective theories provide a more focused and collective notion of what a good life consists of. One of the most common objective theories is perfectionism, which states that the good or intrinsically desirable life is one that develops “to the maximal possible extent the properties that constitute human nature”101. Some of the properties that perfectionists claim are intrinsically good include the development of our intellectual and physical capacities by engaging in activities such as academics or athletics. Because it maintains the belief that the good life is the life in which an individual “develops the

96 Ibid., 379
97 Ibid.
98 Ibid., 380
99 Ibid., 379-380
101 Ibid., 119-120
excellences of [his] species to a high degree” perfectionism could be understood as a moral theory “that sets a goal that determines how we ought to conduct our own lives and help others to live, or it might be understood as a specification of prudential value, of what makes someone’s life go best". In contrast to goodness as rationality—which grants us the authority to determine which ends and goals we want to set for ourselves—perfectionism sets a standard or a model of excellence that we should all pursue in order to have the best life possible. For example, excelling at athletics or expanding human knowledge through scientific endeavors would be good projects to pursue even if no one has a desire to pursue them because these types of goals are good in themselves. But if no one has the desire to pursue these types of projects, or if I take no pleasure in these types of things at all, then how could they be fundamental features of a good life? Furthermore, if my own life is not any better having pursued these activities, then it seems counterintuitive to view them as necessary components of a good life.

Since these intrinsically good states of affairs and values do not require our endorsement or acceptance of them, the negative implication of objectivist theories like perfectionism is that “personal concerns should play no role in determining why something (anything) counts as a good for an individual, or why one thing counts as a greater good than another.” As a result, the values that are deemed important for a good life become seem distanced and alienated from us because “they emanate from a standpoint which is external to us as individuals.” Although the values it holds to be important are worthy and intuitively plausible for a conception of a good life, the problem with perfectionism is that its scope is extremely narrow and limited. It is unsuccessful as a candidate for a theory of the good because it leaves no room for individual choice or preference to choose a life that appeals to the things we feel are important, and it is paternalistic because it tells us which things are worthwhile to pursue without allow us to make that decision for ourselves. By being paternalistic, I simply mean that perfectionism limits the types of goals or activities that we should set up for ourselves in order to live a good life. It is paternalistic in the sense that it decides which states of affairs are intrinsically and the best for us to pursue, and by determining which states of affairs are best for us without our approval and constitutes them as the good, perfectionism violates the level of autonomous choice and agent sovereignty that is found in subjective theories of the good. Rawls is able to address these limitations of perfectionism by appealing to the Aristotelian Principle.

The Aristotelian Principle helps us account for the things we consider valuable in an intrinsically good life. It states that, other things being equal, human beings take pleasure in “the exercise of their realized capacities (their innate or trained abilities) and that this enjoyment increase the more the capacity is realized, or the greater its complexity.” This principle does not affirm that any particular kind of activity will be preferred over another (the way perfectionism would) but only states that we prefer pursuing activities “that depend upon a larger repertoire of realized capacities and that are more complex.” To use an example from Rawls, imagine that I equally enjoy playing chess as I do playing checkers. Although I am skilled and derive pleasure from both, the Aristotelian Principle would say that playing chess is preferable because it involves more strategy and is simply more fulfilling than checkers. The Aristotelian Principle is effective because there is an intuitive truth behind it: as our capacities and skills increase over time, we move from simplistic to more challenging things in order to seek a greater reward and feeling of achievement. We do feel a level of accomplishment and gratification whenever we push ourselves to our limits, and consequently, the Aristotelian Principle is able to explain why we would choose to pursue things that perfectionists claim we must, such as having a greater knowledge of the world or maximizing the physical capacities of our bodies through athletics.

Because it encourages us to pursue more rewarding and complex activities, the Aristotelian Principle can be seen as a principle of motivation. Rawls explains that whenever we observe displays of excellences in others, the reason why we take enjoyment in them is because they “arouse a desire [within us] that we should be able to do the same things ourselves. We want to be like those persons who can exercise the abilities that we find latent in our nature.” For example, whenever we see displays of athletic excellence at the Olympics, we begin to think that

102 Ibid., 120
103 Ibid., 120
104 Sumner, “Two Theories,” 10-11
105 Ibid., 10
106 Arneson, “Human Flourishing,” 120
107 Rawls, Justice, 374
108 Ibid., 377
109 Ibid., 374
110 Ibid., 375
111 Ibid., 375-376
we, too, can achieve those feats of skill if we push ourselves. Perhaps we decide that we will take up a sport in response or train even harder in the activities we are currently involved in because we admire athletes who are able to demonstrate their talents in front of the entire world. The point is we do not need to be told which states of affairs are worthwhile to pursue the way an objective theory of the good does. The concern with any theory promoting objectively determined values as the fundamental good is that it “will infringe [our] autonomy or individuality” and theories like perfectionism “will be committed in principle to overriding the autonomous choices of individuals concerning their own lives and imposing on them what they themselves may value less”112. Perfectionism may force us into things that we do not necessarily want or even consider to be good for us and we have no alternative because those things are more important than any of our preferences. But goodness as rationality does not face this problem and is not paternalistic because it does not restrict or limit our choices by telling us what a good life should consist in pursuing. I think that Rawls would still endorse the kinds of values perfectionists think are valuable. But instead of saying that we must pursue these types of goals because they are good, I think Rawls would say that we simply would pursue these types of goals because they are consistent with a rational plan of life.

As a theory of the good life, Rawls’s goodness as rationality is successful because it combines the best aspects of both subjective and objective theories. By allowing for a plurality of goods, it maintains a high degree of agent-sovereignty and individual choice found in subjective theories because we are able to pursue the things which satisfy our unique desires and preferences. But it is not too inclusive because we have to ground our desires and aims within reason and critical reflection. And by appealing to the Aristotelian Principle, goodness as rationality preserves the attractiveness of objective theories by allowing us to maximize our capacities and realize our full potentials by pursuing things that are intrinsically valuable, but not in a way that is paternalistic or restrictive of our choices.

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112 Sumner, “Two Theories,” 10-11
proclaiming itself, as this essay has done from the start – and must take into account the sheer diversity of African literature and the differences in content, form and style that emerge, for example, from South Africa as against Sudan – from the work of J.M. Coetzee and Ivan Vladislavic as against that of Tayeb Salih. However, it does not follow from this multiplicity that a general theory of African literature is therefore an exercise in futility – as Jameson writes, the general theory is “provisional and intended [...] to suggest specific perspectives” for subsequent research\textsuperscript{114}. It is in that capacity that this paper will argue that the writers of African literature cannot be dissociated from their particular historical and political contexts. Ultimately, then, we know to expect from African literature a foregrounding of not pure aesthetic but rather of the political, of praxis.

A discussion of this kind cannot help but touch on and return to Jameson’s seminal essay. The thrust of the essay is that Third World literary texts – “even those which are seemingly private and invested with a properly libidinal dynamic”\textsuperscript{115} – signify a second, allegorical narrative which corresponds to the nation and nationality of the author in question. Although that argument of allegory will not be reproduced in this essay, Jameson’s case for the function of the Third World intellectual is critical to the present discussion on African literature. The Third World intellectual, Jameson posits, is always, at some level, a political intellectual – Jameson recounts a visit to a Cuban college-preparatory school where the role of the intellectual is studied “as such: the cultural intellectual who is also a political militant, the intellectual who produces both poetry and praxis”\textsuperscript{116}.

It is in this capacity that the author of the African literary text must be understood. The emergence of especially Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka – perhaps the two intellectuals most commonly associated with the creation of the body of literatures we call “African”\textsuperscript{117} – in the second half of the twentieth century marked a riposte of sorts to the school of New Criticism. The enterprise of the New Critics was to consider works in the

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\textsuperscript{114} Jameson, Frederic, “Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism,” The Jameson Reader, 68

\textsuperscript{115} Ibid., 69

\textsuperscript{116} Ibid., 75

\textsuperscript{117} It is worth pausing again to ask what meaning this essay assigns to the term “African”. I have given the reader a preliminary sense of the times, places, and figures of the “African” in this essay. However, the term must also be left open-ended; the task of demarcating and defining exceeds this essay at a point. It is more appropriate for the reader to consider this essay as arguing in accordance with its preliminary definition, as opposed to arguing from that definition. In response to a number of obligations (not least a moral obligation) the general theory and definition of the “African” that this essay posits must remain open-ended and therefore descriptive, rather than prescriptive.
light of their ‘intrinsic’ aesthetic significance and self-sufficiency, while
discarding questions concerning the context of a literary work (historical,
political, etc.) and especially questions of authorial intention and influence
over a literary work. Conversely, the tradition of Achebe and others – call
it African-nationalist, postcolonial, and so on – reacting personally and
directly to the spectre European colonialism, foregrounded the figure of
the author and authorial intention. The delimited message of the African
author’s text allotted a capacity to redefine the self and the nation, and
to contest the fictional and historical narratives European colonialism
had left in its wake (this idea will be taken in more detail in a subsequent
argument). The effect of the disambiguation of meaning in the work of art
was of course an aesthetic sacrifice; it ensured that the author’s intended
meaning was conveyed, while annihilating the potentialities of the text –
the multiple and diverse interpretations and further hermeneutic enterprises
the text might have offered. To a certain extent such a sacrifice was a non-
issue in the African context – there was more was at stake than artfulness
in this new literature. Indeed, in his short essay “The Novelist as Teacher”
Achebe writes: “Perhaps what I write is applied art as distinct from pure.
But who cares? Art is important, but so is education of the kind I have in
mind”118.
The essay “The Novelist as Teacher” is a concise articulation of the African
author’s capacity to (re)educate and redefine his or her nation, and it is
itself essential to an understanding of African literature as it is considered
in this essay. By contrast, of the European author or artist, Achebe writes:

He lives on the fringe of society – wearing a beard and a peculiar
dress and generally behaving in a strange, unpredictable way. He is in
revolt against society, which in turn looks on him with suspicion if not
hostility. The last thing society would dream of doing is to put him in
charge of anything.119

The African author, Achebe argues, is not afforded the same leisure;
s/he cannot escape to the periphery but rather must face the context of
his/her society and engage fully in its spatiality and temporality. Indeed
the author or artist has a real, tangible duty to work within that context
and “cannot expect to be excused from the task of re-education and

regeneration that must be done [in the wake of colonial trauma]. In fact
he [or she] should march right in front”120. Jameson’s view, then, of the
Third World intellectual-militant, who produces both “poetry and praxis” is
therefore conspicuously echoed in Achebe’s essay on the African novelist.

This paper has so far addressed the quality of “applied art” and
political-contextual relations with particular reference to the individual
African intellectual. We will now move to a discussion of the way in which
those same ideas figure in a broader context of African literature – that
is, how the enterprise of African literature as a whole might be seen as
“applied art”. That question will be considered with reference to the project
of “writing back”121: the authors of formerly colonial nations revising
the histories and bodies of literature of the West in which they had been
(mis)represented and objectified and producing new, definitive fictional
and non-fictional counter-texts122. This project, while responsible for an
immense aesthetic production, is at its heart a necessary and pragmatic
riposte to the spectre of colonialism. ‘Writing back’ can be understood as
an attempt, in some form, to reclaim the subjectivity and historical space
of the African nation (as Achebe does in Things Fall Apart and Arrow of
God); equally, it can be understood on an individual and psychological
level. In the first chapter of his book, Black Skin, White Masks, Frantz
Fanon discusses the ontology of the “black man” as “being-for-others”123 in
terms of language: at the colonial school the “young Martinican is taught to
treat [Creole] with contempt” and to speak “The French from France| The
Frenchman’s French! French French”124. Ostensibly, Fanon is referring to a
different colonial context, but the same is true of the institutions of British
colonialism in many of its former colonies, such as Nigeria (as Achebe
addresses in TFA and Arrow of God), and Zambia and Zimbabwe (as Tsitsi
Dangarembga addresses in her novel, Nervous Conditions). ‘Writing back’
figures in many ways as a rigorous effort to revitalize the psychological
space of the colonized African, which remained cluttered with the vestiges
of the colonial and hegemonic discourse that Fanon describes. The Kenyan
author and critic Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong’o drove that effort to its logical end
in his official renunciation of the English language in favour of Gikuyu;
to continue to write in English after decolonization is, for Thiong’o

118 Achebe, Chinua, “The Novelist as a Teacher,” Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays, 105 (my
italics)
119 Ibid., 103
120 Ibid., 105
121 Ashcroft, Bill, Griffiths, Gareth, and Helen Tiffin. The Empire Writes Back, 32
and Caribbean Literature, 384
123 Fanon, Frantz, Black Skin, White Masks, 1
124 Ibid., 4
(paraphrased by Achebe) “not only an absurdity but also part of the scheme of Western imperialism to hold Africa in perpetual bondage”\textsuperscript{125}. Finally, then, the project of ‘writing back’ may also be seen as an attempt to fill the vacuum created by decolonization – a gesture of staking out or (re)claiming an identity for the African nation and consolidating notions of the self around a body of literature essentially African.

It is exactly this reclaiming of subjectivity – i.e., the status of the African as subject – that is at work when Achebe ‘writes back’ to Joseph Conrad’s \textit{Heart of Darkness}, particularly in \textit{Things Fall Apart} and \textit{Arrow of God} (perhaps less so with his subsequent novels, which concern themselves with later trajectories of Nigerian history). He writes, “I would be quite satisfied if my novels […] did no more than teach my readers that their past – with all its imperfections – was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God’s behalf delivered them”\textsuperscript{126}.

The great attention to detail in Achebe (particularly in \textit{Things Fall Apart}, but the same also true of \textit{Arrow of God}) is then not so much an aesthetic factor, nor is it designed as a textual indicator of thematic content as is the expectation in other literatures (generally in the course of our reading, we pay attention to the details and patterns of a text which yield – we assume – the text’s ‘meaning’). In Achebe’s fiction, though, the excessive detail of the descriptions of life in the communal village – of planting, harvesting, of the preparation of food, of feasts, rituals, (marital, judicial, and so on), of trade, titles, class – is an attempt to take an inventory of the way of life of the Igbo, to provide an index of civilization, of sorts, in order to dissociate the Igbo past from a “long night of savagery”. Achebe’s attention to detail, like the project of ‘writing back’ as a whole, is therefore responsible for an incredible aesthetic outpour, but is in essence not poetry, but praxis.

Considering the work of the Sudanese author Tayeb Salih this essay will now briefly address an altered form of the project of ‘writing back’. In his novel \textit{Season of Migration to the North} Salih ‘writes back’ in a sense to Shakespeare’s \textit{Othello}. Salih’s Mustafa Sa’eed woos and titillates the women of London with his creation of an exotic selfhood. Indulging in their tacit prejudices, Sa’eed dispenses Orientalist clichés to lure European women to his bed; he says, “I related to her fabricated stories about deserts of golden sands and jungles where non-existent animals called out to one another”\textsuperscript{127}. The self-imposed fictions of Mustafa Sa’eed (he himself coming almost under their spell) find their parallel in Othello’s stories of “distressful stroke” that he has told to Desdemona, and to which she has listened “with a greedy ear”\textsuperscript{128}. By the end of the novel, though, the result of Salih’s comparison is intoned in the voice of Sa’eed: “I am no Othello. Othello was a \textit{lie}”\textsuperscript{129}. Quite conspicuously, then, Salih draws on Shakespeare’s work to criticize the Western penchant for Orientalism (to borrow a term from Edward Said).

On another level, though, Salih ‘writes back’ in the sense of appropriating the literary texts and tropes from the Western canon – Salih adopts not only \textit{Othello} but Joseph Conrad’s \textit{Heart of Darkness} (among many parallels, Sa’eed’s quest to the heart of England mirrors Marlow’s quest to the heart of the Congo). In his play \textit{The Island} the South African author Athol Fugard makes a similar gesture in identifying the struggle of the individual against the state in the context of Apartheid very explicitly with the struggle in Sophocles’ \textit{Antigone}, between Antigone and Creon (the characters in Fugard’s play put on a production of \textit{Antigone} at Robben Island, where they are political prisoners). In one capacity this ‘writing back’ (in the case of Salih’s novel, at least) may be understood in terms of a literary rebuttal, as has been argued above. However, the appropriations of the African author operate on another level of signification that exceeds any gesture of rebuttal. At this level those appropriations are an embodiment of the author’s effort to lay claim to an identity not essentially South African, Sudanese or broadly African, but rather a world-historical consciousness, attuned to the Western canon and the Greek Classics.\textsuperscript{130} This is also a gesture towards parity between African and European literatures; to draw from the same sources and traditions is one way to ensure equal footing in terms of literary merit and integrity. In the literatures of other formerly colonial nations there are authors who engage in the same gesture – in the Caribbean context there is, to name a few, Jean Rhys, V.S. Naipaul and Derek Walcott, who is exemplar. Even the title of the novel that has come to occupy such a central position in the canon of African and postcolonial literature, Achebe’s \textit{Things Fall Apart}, is lifted from the poem “The Second Coming” by William Butler Yeats (“Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;” etc.). In the analysis of African literature, then, intertextuality


\textsuperscript{126} Achebe, \textit{Novelist}, 105

\textsuperscript{127} Salih, Tayeb, \textit{Season of Migration to the North}, xi-xii

\textsuperscript{128} Ibid., xi

\textsuperscript{129} Ibid., 79 (my italics)

\textsuperscript{130} This position may seem antithetical to that of Thiong’o’s. It is not, exactly; Thiong’o’s position is more complex than a retreat from the world.
must be regarded at some level as separate from the aesthetic (poetry) and as fulfilling a further function of identity-building (praxis) – the identity of a national literature, of a broader African literature, in context and conversation with a global literary community and tradition.

Having expressed the general expectation of African literature as foregrounding not poetry but praxis, I will now propose, by way of conclusion, a counter-text of sorts to Jameson’s essay and so, too, at some level, to my own. The text is an essay by Thomas Palakeel, entitled (quite deliberately) “Third World Short Story as National Allegory?” Evoking this text now may seem counter-productive, if not detrimental to the overall effect of this paper. However, refutations of all-encompassing theories are a foregone fact and are already present in the mind of the reader regardless of the author’s evocation or omission of them. What is detrimental to our thinking about African literature, rather, is to imagine that the general theory this paper has presented is without flaw and exception, or that valid criticism can be ignored or willed away. I introduce Palakeel’s essay therefore to contextualize the claims that I have made throughout my essay regarding African literature and to reinforce Jameson’s statement regarding the place of a general theory, with which I strongly concur: that it is above all “provisional and intended [...] to suggest specific perspectives” for subsequent study. That much having been established, I will conclude with a thought from Palakeel’s essay: it is a fascinating piece in its own right, but what I would like in particular to draw to the reader’s attention is Palakeel’s argument that the reading of Jameson’s national allegory (and, by extension, my reading of praxis and politics) is ultimately a “reader-response problem.” Palakeel writes:

For an outsider looking at a text with the help of limited linguistic and cultural resources, whatever world the text belongs to, it offers only certain minor pleasures, certain side glances, certain deceptive giggles, because an awareness of the nationality of the text is the most rudimentary reading tool many of us can take along when we encounter a literary production of the other.

This essay has intended to demonstrate, by way of particular analysis and sweeping generalization alike, the extent to which African literature cannot surpass its contextual relations. The textual, I have argued, is implicitly or explicitly laden with the contextual; the fiction is imbued with the weight of political praxis. If we do not find this in our African literary text in the forms I have discussed – in ‘writing back’, and so on – then it is our expectation that, at the very least, there will be some engagement with familiar ideas firmly rooted in context and politics: perhaps colonialism, imperialism, or the building of the nation. However, I have written of the need for self-consciousness in such a theory; it is possible, as Palakeel argues, that we have misread – that we have been reading to satisfy our own expectations. I have argued that there is truth in the general theory of African literature as praxis, but of equal importance is the possibility that “[i]t is the close reading that scratches off the allegorical and political and reveals the literary.”

131 Jameson, Third World Literature, 68
132 Palakeel, Thomas, “Third World Short Story as National Allegory?” Journal of Modern Literature, XX, 1, 100
133 Ibid., 102
134 Ibid., 100
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EVAN SNYDER

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This paper pursues a rhetorical analysis of the concept of ‘contact’ in the work of Freud. Locating the concept of contact in Freud’s explanation of taboo and magic in Totem and Taboo, the analysis seeks to uncover ‘contact’ as an interface through which tensions between intra-psychical dynamics and cultural forms can be symbolically articulated. Through recourse to the correspondences Freud creates between individual neuroses, primitive psychology, and childhood developmental dynamics, the concept of contact is illuminated on multiple dimensions, but in functionally very similar ways. The concept of contact facilitates the integration of the seemingly irreconcilable (e.g. ambivalences) into condensed symbolic structures (e.g. the Oedipus complex) which in turn serve as constellating points upon which Freud builds explanatory frameworks.

There persists an indeterminable divide between individual psychology and cultural institutions in Freud’s work. This divide is in fact figurative and its perceived elusiveness is a product of its overdetermination. The divide is overdetermined by ‘principles of association’ operative between psychical and material realities as they innervate the relationships between clinical and sociological data. The principles of association- similarity and contiguity- in Freud’s work represent an attempt to locate the individual along dynamic developmental trajectories that branch off from and root in cultural forms. This divide is thus a place of exchange. It is a symbolic point of contact between otherwise irreconcilable tendencies (e.g. emotional ambivalences). Such contact is enacted at the most general level between desire and conflict and is rendered accessible through analogies or what Freud calls, ‘correspondences’.135

This paper pursues an investigation of Freud’s use of the concept of ‘contact’.136 It will be argued that Freud evokes ‘contact’ as a symbolic means of representing multiple interfaces between individual psychology and cultural institutions. These interfaces are multi-dimensional, extending from the meta realm of hermeneutics and intra-psychical dynamics to the domain of mass psychology (i.e. the relationship between a mass and its leader). Moreover the concept of contact communicates a poetic function in Freud’s work, disguised behind his scientific motivations to explain the nature of phenomena.137 Focusing on Totem & Taboo, it is maintained that Freud pursues an explanation of the nature of totem and taboo through analogies drawn with neurosis and child developmental dynamics. Such analogies hinge on a retroactive interpretation of the primal horde theory as an origin point, through which psychical and historical realities intercede. However, such points of origin are in fact points of contact, locating symbolic models (e.g. the Oedipus complex) in and as reality and thus situating ‘deep-rooted correspondences’ between neurosis, ethnography, and infant development as perennial interfaces of symbolization.138

The concept of contact first appears in Totem & Taboo. There, in reviewing and interpreting the ethnographic data concerning the nature of taboo and the prohibitions set up against contact with it, Freud emphasizes that “certain persons and objects possessed a dangerous power transmitted by contact with the object so charged, almost like a contagion”.139 The contagious aspect of this power is later explicated to be a quality of the taboo itself and seems to represent the “aptitude to lead into temptation, to incite imitation”.140 Thus contact is explicitly related to temptation through its quality of contagion.

Moreover the contact to which Freud refers includes both

137 The ‘poetic function’ as it is formulated by Roman Jakobson, captures key features of the concept of ‘contact’, as it has come to signify a symbolic and dynamic interface between otherwise irreconcilable tendencies and phenomena. According to Jakobson: “words and things, sign and referent do not coincide… Without contradiction there is no mobility of concepts, no mobility of signs, and the relationship between concept and sign becomes automatized. Activity comes to a halt, and the awareness of reality dies out.” Lechte, John, Fifty Key Contemporary Thinkers: From structuralism to post-humanism, 98.
138 Ibid., 74.
139 Ibid., 26.
140 Ibid., 39.
physical and mental forms. This inclusiveness of the concept of contact introduces it into the realm of psychoanalytic explanation, equipping it with its explanatory force by way of association to both material and psychological realities. In fact with regards to taboo prohibitions, ‘to come into contact with…’ becomes the imperative of psychical conflict. ‘Fear of contact’ is the most characteristic feature of a taboo due to the provocatively ambivalent status with which it is comprehended by the clan.

Contact operates on an explicitly but not exclusively hermeneutic level, as a principle of association between similarity and contiguity. Particularly in Freud’s discussion of magic in Totem & Taboo, he posits similarity as “a contact with reality in a figurative sense” and contiguity as a “contact with reality in a direct sense”. The former is representative of metaphor- the replacement of one word by another. Likewise similarity is the principle of association characterizing imitative magic. Moreover the association between metaphor and the psychological mechanism of condensation is one exploited by Lacan, who applied aspects of Roman Jakobson’s linguistic theory to his own reading of Freud. Correspondingly, contiguity is representative of the metonym and functions primarily in contagious magic through the mechanism of displacement. The idea that similarity is a figurative contact with reality stresses the value of metaphor in accessing the psychical reality (especially of neurotics) to which correspondences with taboo prohibitions and totem ceremonials are based.

Alternatively contiguity, as a ‘direct’ contact with reality, provocatively implies a more than merely metaphorical resemblance between compared features of individual psychology and cultural forms. Condensation- the functional correlate of contiguity- permits that multiple correspondences may actually share a common etiology (thus providing these correspondences with a substantial identity in material/historical reality). In fact it will be demonstrated that Freud utilizes the concept of contact as a form of synthesis between the principles of association, locating significant symbolic constructs (e.g. the Oedipus complex) as an emergent phenomenon of the interaction of both.

Particularly in Totem & Taboo, both direct and figurative meanings are contributing to the correspondences Freud draws between neurotic symptom formation and taboo formations in ‘primitive’ peoples. Contact with anything associated with the taboo transmits the taboo to the active agent. Indeed the transferability so characteristic of taboo is explicated through the mechanism of displacement and cited by Freud as characteristic of contagion. According to Lacan, displacement is equivalent to the function of the metonym (a word-to-word connection), communicating an association of contiguity. Freud describes that the latter is the principle of association operative in contagious magic, where the association is based on proximity in space. Importantly, Freud qualifies his account of contiguity in contagious magic by asserting that the contiguity can be an imagined one, based on a reconstructive memory of proximity between things. The reconstructive role of memory becomes a key issue in contextualizing Freud’s speculations, especially in later works like Moses and Monotheism where the issue of cultural memory becomes imperative. Within Totem & Taboo, the role of memory becomes the orienting function for any social organization. Indeed order emerges from the consequential organization of society in the face of something that is not physically existent- the memory of the father.

Thus taboo contamination is not reduced merely to a token of ‘savage’ belief, but is also elaborated as being representative of unconscious mechanisms related to direct (physical) and figurative (mental) contact with reality. This reality is itself constituted in the analogical interaction between neurosis, infantile development, and ‘primitive’ anthropology.

Corresponding to contact, touching becomes the example by which Freud elucidates the psychical mechanism of obsessive neurosis and by extension the magical nature of taboo contagion. According to Freud, “we should not be surprised to discover that contact [emphasis mine] plays a similar role in the taboo prohibition as it does in delire de toucher”.

Critically, the issue of the touching phobia is explicated in terms of early associations between compared features of individual psychology and cultural forms. Condensation- the functional correlate of contiguity- permits that multiple correspondences may actually share a common etiology (thus providing these correspondences with a substantial identity in material/historical reality). In fact it will be demonstrated that Freud utilizes the concept of contact as a form of synthesis between the principles of association, locating significant symbolic constructs (e.g. the Oedipus complex) as an emergent phenomenon of the interaction of both.

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Critically, the issue of the touching phobia is explicated in terms of early
childhood developmental dynamics. Accordingly, a child’s strong desire to touch encounters a prohibition from without (embodied most often by a parental imago). The prohibition is then upheld by strong internal forces (most notably identification). The desire to touch in the forbidden manner is then repressed into the unconscious, continuing a dynamic existence there. This peculiar situation represents what Freud termed, an “unresolvable situation, a psychical fixation, and henceforth everything else emanates from the continuing conflict between prohibition and drive”. It is being stressed that such ‘unresolvable situations’ are constituted by the concept of contact which represents interfaces in which development can be, often traumatically, facilitated.

The case of the touching phobia is foundational to the current argument because it deals with contact in a direct, literal sense yet it also expresses a figurative contact based in meta-psychology, but extended through analogy to taboo prohibitions. Corresponding to a meta-psychological level of explanation, the articulation of a conflictual interaction between drive and prohibition is precisely the ongoing formative dynamic of both individual development and enculturation. Accordingly Freud insists that “prohibition owes its strength to the repressed, unhindered desire… its unconscious opponent”. Thus the intensity of drive renunciation enforced represents an interface of antagonistic contact between the drives and prohibitions. Indeed as the drive force to touch arises continuously it is simultaneously the object of disdain. Freud observes that, “the opposition between the two currents cannot be balanced out, because their location within the psyche means that they cannot collide”. Locality is precisely what the concept of contact permits. Through principles of association, antagonistic mechanisms can co-exist, through their symbolic portrayal in Oedipal dynamics. Here lies the foundational material from which contact achieves its symbolic status as interface- as that by which an otherwise incomprehensible and impossible psychic situation is articulated. Freud’s choice of a touching phobia is not coincidental but in fact coincides coherently with the contagious quality of taboo.

Therefore contact is the higher identity of the principles of association. In Totem & Taboo Freud stresses that, “the two principles of association-similarity and contiguity- meet in the higher unity of contact”. Contact, as a higher unity between principles of association distinguishes it as a hermeneutical tool of identification. The concept of contact allows Freud to articulate and identify otherwise ineffable psychical phenomenon in a dynamical fashion. The dynamism of identification becomes critical in consolidating a descriptive account of extant similarities between phenomena, and qualifying that account as explanatory.

Explanatory models account for interactions and changes by way of integrating qualitative and quantitative descriptions of phenomena. Thus what is crucial is a ‘dynamic factor’ to compliment and complete the principles of association. Whereas association allows for the relationships between systems to be discerned, contact allows for the integration of those relationships into a multi-dimensional, open system of explanation. Correspondingly, in stipulating the criteria for his explanation of the nature of magic in Totem & Taboo, Freud remarks:

The associative theory of magic merely illuminates the paths that magic travels, but not its actual nature, nor, in fact, the misunderstanding that leads it to put psychological laws in the place of natural laws. Here what we clearly need is a dynamic factor.

Correspondingly, after drawing out the principles of similarity and contiguity and tracing their correspondences with imitative and contagious magic, respectively, Freud identifies his ‘dynamic factor’. He states:

Another identity within the psychical process which has not yet been grasped is probably confirmed by the use of the same word for both kinds of association. It is the same range of the concept of ‘contact’ that we found in the analysis of taboo.

Thus the dynamic factor of explanation corresponds to the concept of ‘contact’, as a ‘higher unity’ of identification between lower-order (i.e. hermeneutical) principles of association. This system is dialectical with lower order principles of association interacting through analogy (to neurosis), giving form to a synthetic point of contact (e.g. the Father complex). The form of this contact is symbolic. And as a symbol it serves...
as an analogue between psychical and material realities. Notice also that Freud refers to a ‘range’ in articulating ‘contact’. What is being advanced is not a categorical model but in fact, a multi-dimensional one. This latter characteristic depicts the overdetermined status of the domain of interaction which the concept ‘contact’ represents.

Applying these theoretical assessments of Freud’s methodology into context, we discover that the point of contact is a densely populated interface of symbolic, not purely literal, contents. The principles of association- similarity and contiguity- permit the description of relationships between phenomena, as was stated above. But the next level, characterized by ‘contact’, necessitates the integration of these relationships into a condensed symbol which can serve as a constellating point- an axis mundi- upon which Freud can assume a firm etiology that is not linear but dynamically concentric. Such a notorious symbol system is the Oedipus complex and particularly the Father. Indeed, according to James DiCenso, “In a psychoanalytic approach to individual development the crucial points of contact [emphasis mine] between subjectivity, interpersonal relations, and acculturation are condensed into the framework of Oedipal dynamics”. Specifically, the Oedipus complex allows for the mobilization of the concept of ambivalence, dynamically animating it and granting it the explanatory momentum to weld individual development to the mediating role of cultural ideals. Indeed DiCenso advances the latent significance of the Oedipus complex, as a ‘symbolic condensation’ of interrelationships between individual psycho-sexual development and interactions with cultural representatives.

Analogous to the symbolic and explanatory role granted to the Father, Freud embodies the impetus of his own methodology (i.e. as a point of contact). Hermeneutics is as much a diagnosis of the author as it is of his/her text. Freud is a hypothesizer, whose scientific method relies on the explanatory force of the stylistic device. Indeed analogy becomes the ‘binding medium’ between disparate domains of ‘fact’, ranging from clinical studies to ethnographic data. Explanation emerges in the margins of these associations. In fact analogy creates the space in which higher-order interactions between individual psychology and cultural forms can be located as co-emergent. It is here argued that a hypothesis is an emergent feature of such points of contact in Freud’s work. Hypotheses become the scientist’s creative license, as poet! For instance, in the preface to Totem & Taboo Freud, in proposing a close connection between totem and taboo, forewarns, “if that hypothesis in the end appears to be highly unlikely, that still does not exclude the possibility that it might bring us more or less close to a reality that is difficult to reconstruct”.

Such a symbolic point of contact that has become the thematic example implemented in this essay is the Oedipus complex. The symbolic structure of the latter is emphasized as its literal position in history is de-emphasized. Indeed Freud almost confesses it as a work of fiction in Moses and Monotheism. There he admits, “History is narrated in magnificent poetry, as if things took place on a single occasion that in reality extended over millennia”. It is as though Freud was qualifying his Oedipus complex as a sort of condensed rendition of plausible yet protracted history- a fiction. Indeed both Totem and Taboo and Moses and Monotheism are more speculative in their historical accounts than literal. Historicity becomes a function of the psychical dynamics of human interrelations in Freud’s thinking. This is to say ‘origins’ in Freud’s investigations are reformulated as symbolically condensed events whereby constitutively human relationships arise. Indeed in tracing out the etiology of

165 Among such ‘historically pre-occupied’ works are ‘Totem and Taboo’ and ‘Moses and Monotheism’. Moreover, what is intended by ‘inaccessible facts’ are historically verifiable dates/events of origin for various postulations (e.g. the primal horde theory, or the first patricide).

161 DiCenso, The Other Freud, 21.
162 Ibid., 20-22.
163 This ‘binding medium’ to which I refer is the term Freud utilized to describe the emotional ties persisting between members of a mass in “Mass Psychology and Analysis of the ‘I’”, See Lechte, Mass Psychology and Other Writings (42-43). Here I utilize the term in a figurative way to communicate the intimate ties that Freud pursues in his analogies/compareisons/correspondences between neurotic psychopathology, historical/anthropological data, and infant development. The strength of his hypotheses is always co-dependent on the concentric relationships he can establish through these ‘correspondences’.

164 Freud, “Moses and Monotheism,” 244.
of ambivalence in Totem & Taboo, Freud confesses that “we know nothing of its origin… But... humanity acquired it from the father complex”. Acquisition implies a form of contact between individuals and in relation to the primal Father. By associating the concept of contact to that of the father complex, mechanisms operative in the latter are categorical under the schema of the former. What is being here advanced is a reconsideration of displacement, projection, and identification as modalities of contact with the primal father, in whichever substitute formation He assumes.

However Freud is scientific in his discretions. As though he senses the speculative creativity inherent in his explanations, he continuously forewarns his readers about the danger of ‘mistaking an ideal connection for a real connection’. This is to say, Freud equips all his arguments formatted by the principles of association (i.e. correspondences) with disclaimers against assuming the analogy as an absolute identity. For instance, in Totem & Taboo, after drawing a provocative resemblance between taboo and obsessive neurosis he warns, “The resemblance… may be purely external, applying only to the appearance of both without extending any further into their essence. Nature likes to use the same forms in the most divergent biological contexts”. Here is a clear example of the internal tension plaguing Freud’s yearning for scientific rigor and the inadmissible acknowledgment of analogical forms as constitutive of the observed phenomena. Notice his appeal to Nature. It is as though Freud attempts to reduce the striking similarity between neurosis and taboo to a superficial quality, characteristic of the mechanics of Nature. Thus the poet in Freud connects diverse data in creative and productive ways while the scientist in Freud seems to be capable of a suspicion and restraint. Freud personifies the tension so characteristic of the concept of contact.

Furthermore, later on in the same text, as Freud attributes the acquisition of emotional ambivalence to the father-complex, he advises, “Before reaching my conclusion, I must observe that the high level of convergence, pointing towards a single comprehensive nexus, cannot blind us to the uncertainties of our assumptions and the difficulties of our results”. Hence in the very character of Freud the dynamic between freedom and restraint, desire and prohibition, seem to achieve maximal expression. In this sense, Freud is at once the ruler of a clan, subject to privileged freedoms and effectual power, yet he is also the clan, constantly suspicious and vigilant, ensuring the ruler is performing his duties adequately. Logos and Eros are united in Freud’s work, but as feuding spouses.

Locating the concept of contact in Freud’s explanation of taboo and magic in Totem & Taboo, a deeper analysis has uncovered ‘contact’ as a symbolic interface through which individual psychology cooperates with cultural forms in creative and productive ways. Specifically, the Oedipus complex has served as a prime example in demonstrating how Freud integrates the laws of association into dynamic and symbolic points of contact through which conflicting tendencies can be articulated. Lastly hermeneutical considerations in the beginning of this paper were corroborated with an assessment of Freud himself, as a personification of this explanatory concept of contact. Ultimately a divide between individual psychology and cultural forms is itself an illusion, concealing points of contact whose forms may be scientifically motivated, but whose functions are provocatively poetic.

**Works Cited**


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168 The ‘contact’ articulating the bond between individuals and their relationship to the primal father are explicitly investigated by Freud in ‘Mass Psychology and the Analysis of the ‘I’’. There the relationship between group members is cited as an emotional contagion and yet the relationship to the primal Father, in the substitute formation of the leader, is consolidated through suggestibility and prestige which serve as contagions in their own right (with the qualification that contagions are re-interpreted in that text as libidinal ties). The connection between these forms of emotional attachments in mass psychology and the contagion associated with taboo in ‘Totem and Taboo’ provide for an intriguing investigation into the symbolic role of contact in the former text. See Sigmund Freud, “Moses the Man and Monotheistic Religion,” *Mass Psychology and Other Writings*


170 Ibid., 154.
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