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“The majority of men...live and die under the impression that life is simply a matter of understanding more and more, and if it were granted to them to live longer, that life would continue to be one long continuous discovering that there comes a critical moment where everything is reversed, after which the point becomes to understand more and more that there is something which cannot be understood.”

*-Hon Journals and Paper vol. L-R entry 3567 Pap. X1 A 679*



### *Letter from the Editors*

*The Reed* is an academic and creative journal dedicated to publishing the written and artistic work of undergraduate students pertaining to existential themes. Based at St. Olaf College and currently in its 20th consecutive year, *The Reed* annually publishes work from across the country as well as internationally. Our editorial team for this issue is composed of eight undergraduates at St. Olaf College who share an interest in existential philosophy. This year's issue features four academic essays, one poem, and a series of five pieces of visual art.

Since the inception of the Howard & Edna Hong Memorial Essay Prize in 2014, *The Reed's* editorial team has recognized one academic essay from our publication that stands out as exceptional. The prize is given in memory of Howard & Edna Hong, founders of St Olaf College's Kierkegaard Library in 1976. The Kierkegaard Library has long served as a vibrant space on the St. Olaf campus which nurtures and enhances international academic scholarship. Howard & Edna Hong played an integral role in translating the works of Søren Kierkegaard into English, thus giving the Anglophone world a window into the mind of the great Danish existentialist. To celebrate the Hong's' legacy, we award this prize to an author whose work displays similar dedication to sharing insights from existentialism. The editors selected the winning essay for its insightful thesis, perceptive analysis, and clarity and finesse of writing.

We are pleased to announce that this year's Howard & Edna Hong Memorial Essay Prize is awarded to Matthew Erickson of St Olaf College for his essay entitled "The Problem of Extra-Rational Persuasion: Why We Must Analyze Both the Motivations We Consider Our Own, and the Ones We Do Not." Matthew explores the relationships between one's general motivations and one's 'own' motivations by considering two Compatibilist responses to the Problem of Extra-Rational Persuasion. Matthew argues for a free will that is far from ambiguous, and provides insights that seamlessly tie together work in Analytical Philosophy and Social Psychology. We congratulate Matthew on his achievement.

*Northfield, 2018*

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## **The Sea Eel**

**By Noah Forslund**

The sea eel slithers across the sea floor  
His world is the ocean, he cannot know more  
Belief and perception will soon synthesize  
Existence prescribed by his sea eel eyes

He lifts not the veil, yet thinks himself wise  
He thinks himself wise  
He is a sea eel.

## Homulus Sits In His Fancy Cup

By Thomas Hardy





# The Problem of Extra-Rational Persuasion: Why We Must Analyze Both the Motivations We Consider Our Own, and the Ones We Do Not

By Matthew Erickson

## Abstract

*Whether we are free or not should not be ambiguous: at any time we are either free or constrained. Compatibilists think a physics whose laws constrain our actions is compatible with human free will thanks to our conscious deliberative processes. To them, saying that physical laws determine our thoughts is like putting the cart before the horse. However, whether this deliberative process is responsible for our choices or not is ambiguous, as certain studies in Social and Cognitive Psychology will show. This ambiguity, I will argue, seriously undermines the appeal of arguments that our deliberative processes are sufficient to describe our free will. I will explore some responses to the PERP from the perspectives of both a classical Compatibilist and a Frankfurtian Compatibilist. My hope is that this work will encourage further, more nuanced analysis of the relationship between our motivations in general and the motivations we consider our own, as well as further integration of empirical work in Social Psychology with theoretical work in Analytical Philosophy.*

## I. Introduction

In response to Incompatibilists, who argue that physical laws seem to reveal that our choices are better described as things which happen to us than as things over which claim ownership, many Compatibilist philosophers, such as John Perry, appeal to our intuition that so long as we operate on motivations within ourselves, we operate on our own beliefs and desires, and are therefore as free as we could hope to be. Perry, a classical Compatibilist, says that therefore, so long as our actions are not coerced, we are free. However, I argue that the appeal of the Compatibilist story trades on an implicit identification between our *motivations* and the *beliefs and desires we consider our own*. I will discuss why many empirical studies seem to indicate that there are plenty of ways by which motivations that we do not consider *our own* can be influenced to override, undermine, or cast doubt on the motivations which we consider our own. In these three ways, the implicit identification between *motivation* and *the beliefs and desires we consider our own* seems flawed. I will argue that the Problem of Extra Rational Persuasion (PERP) appears to reveal that Perry's tools are inadequate in preserving the authenticity of our sense of freedom.

An Incompatibilist, Determinism threatens the authenticity of our freedom because physical laws seem to puppeteer our actions. In this same way, so too would motivations which we are neither aware of nor accepting of appear as strings that manipulate our choices. In response to this threat, we will further examine how Frankfurt offers a Compatibilist model that is better equipped to address the PERP. We will also discuss why Frankfurt's model is forced to address the difficult question of identifying which motivations belong to us and which do not. Certain empirical studies reveal how this question is complex enough to warrant much more analysis in the future, and that it does not yet seem clear how the PERP will be answered in a way which retains the

authenticity of our freedom.

## II. Perry's Compatibilist Option

Perry describes an intentional action as one which consists of two components, the first being that we can do it, or "all the basic abilities... tapped when one decides to do something that requires a certain ability" (Perry, 242). Whether I am able to lift a rock consists of whether I have the necessary muscle tissue, bone structure, and understanding to lift the rock. The second component required for an intentional action is that the action be caused by one's motivational complex, operating independently and without coercion. The motivational complex "includes beliefs (...fleeting perceptual beliefs, implicit beliefs, and so on) and desires (...wants, urges, whims, and so forth) that rationalize [performing a particular action]" (Perry, 243). Perry argues that the motivational complex will "cause volitions to perform actions," and that the only situations in which one, with both an ability and a motive to take an action, may not be considered free are situations in which we are constrained in certain ways (Perry, 244). For instance, "if there is an invisible shield between me and the glass [of water], or if the steward is a smart aleck who will move the tray when I get close to it... then I cannot get a drink of water" (Perry, 245). In other words, the only times we are not free are when our abilities are restrained in some fashion.

Perry's option acquires its plausibility through the assumption that when we make a choice for our own reasons, beliefs and motivations, we garner a sense of ownership over that choice from self-consciously pointing what we believe the reasons for that choice were. This ownership, this act of self-conscious pointing, is meant to be possible and potent even in a Deterministic universe. When a rational agent "does something intentionally, there are a bunch of beliefs perceptions, wants, desires, preferences, and the like" which will select a particular action if doing so "will promote the satisfaction of the desires... given the truth of the beliefs" (Perry, 243). Perry does not want to say that there are no unconscious processes involved in our decision-making, and he even affirms that we operate on "implicit desires" (Perry, 243).

Perry also implies that at some level we are aware of the reasons for our decisions. "If I intentionally order a vanilla ice-cream cone, the motivating complex might include the desire for a vanilla ice-cream cone; the perception of a counter; a belief that I can afford it; a belief that it won't do me any harm; and so on" (Perry, 243). These desires and beliefs, while not running through our mind at a significant level, all still seem to compose a rational mind that seeks to fulfill particular goals. The *very notion* of a belief *begs* to be read as something conscious, something we use while deliberating multiple options. When we make a choice with some moral weight, we might defend ourselves by saying that, at the time, I did what I believed was right. Actions which come from us seem, intuitively, to be our own.

## III. The PERP and Perry

A satisfactory Compatibilist option must be one that clearly describes when our actions are due to ourselves and when our actions are not due to ourselves. Perry

seems to achieve this, but we must recognize that when Perry describes our motivational complex as one which contains our beliefs and desires, there is an implicit assumption that these beliefs and desires are always our own. For a belief to be one's own, it must be the case that one has some awareness of and identification with that belief. One's relationship to the beliefs which motivate one's actions, if one also considers those beliefs to be untrue, would be a relationship of restraint in which one does not think that their choices are their own. Simultaneously, because the common understanding of a desire seems to be akin to a wish to achieve some purposeful goal, such as to enjoy some ice cream, if one began acting on desires which one did not understand, or worse found reprehensible, they would not describe the experience of acting on those desires as freedom.

As evidence that there are times when the motivations which we do not consider our own may be influenced to override the motivations which we do consider our own, without coercion, we will discuss the famous Milgram Authority Experiments. Milgram had one of his graduate students sit participants in front of a switch and ask them to shock someone the participant believed was another participant (though in reality they were a confederate). Participants were led to believe shocking the confederate was necessary to studying the effects of learning, and were told before entering the experiment, that they could leave at any time without the risk of consequences befalling them (Kite). In other words, participants were not coerced to obey, and in fact the very purpose of the Milgram experiments was to test when participants would *disobey*. Milgram conducted preliminary surveys: given the four prods, or arguments, a graduate student would be permitted to use as they pressed the participant to continue the study, both experts and lay-people overwhelmingly responded that any reasonable person would disobey well before the experiment concluded.

The vast majority of participants, when they began hearing recordings of the confederate begging not to be shocked or release, said that they too wanted to stop the experiment, so they might ensure the confederate's well-being. Milgram found that over 65% of participants were sufficiently influenced by an authority figure in a lab coat providing prods such as "the experiment must go on," to the extent that they did not disobey that authority figure (Kite). Many continued to behave in ways that appeared to reveal their sympathy for the confederate: they apologized to the confederate when they shocked them, saying they had no choice. Many during the post-experiment debriefing even expressed surprise that they were as influenced as they were. This was illustrated by the increased smoking of participants compared to their daily smoking rates.

To Perry, these participants would be described as free agents. They had a desire to conform to an authority figure which was stronger than their desire to not harm someone. Although participants could choose between continuing the experiment or quitting, those with a stronger desire to conform did so. Though the participant's actions may not have been as virtuous as they would have desired, these individuals were still free. There is an important disconnect between Perry's description of the participants' freedom and the participants' own

experience of freedom. Perry would surely think that someone under no illusion that any harm would come to themselves if they disobeyed, that seemed to believe that stopping the experiment was the right thing to do (because they continually asked for permission to stop) and that had every ability to disobey, if free, would do so. Yet many participants still did not disobey. Moreover, because many participants were highly distressed during the experiment, illustrated by their occasional apologies to the confederate during the test, it seems difficult to confidently state that the participants are truly acting freely. Participants instead seemed to relate to their decision to conform to an authority figure and to relate to their belief that the authority figure is more accurate than their own moral intuitions.

Perry might reply that people sometimes merely excuse their behavior, and that despite what they might have said, in reality they are simply not as morally driven as they would like others to believe. As participants are also told they will face no consequences for *continuing* with the experiment, they may simply weigh the consequences of what will happen to themselves against the beliefs that they are aiding in the scientific quest for knowledge. Additionally, many of the participants did not have sufficient knowledge on electrical shocks, which may have resulted in them deferring to the expert when told the shocks did not put the participant in harm's way. Finally, whether or not a participant feels distressed is not particularly relevant to whether or not one has freedom, because plenty of people are distressed even when making choices freely. Despite one's freedom, regret could reasonably lead someone to pretend that they had no choice.

In response, while it may be that people have a normal, strong desire to help the progress of science, and that they may decide that this desire is more important than a certain amount of pain, we must remember that most experts and lay-people surveyed seemed to think that when it became clear that the shocks were *against the confederate's wishes*, that most participants would go no further with the experiment. To obey a desire whose strength one understands is one matter, but surely it is another to follow a desire one rejects or completely underestimates. To respond to the point about not understanding the strengths of the shocks and thus deferring, we must remember that participants argued *while being prodded* that so long as the *confederate himself* wanted to leave the experiment, the expert's opinions were beside the point. It thus is odd to say that some sort of rational weighing of particular goals was truly the reason for the participants' decision.

Second, the PERP is defined as it is because free choice, by its very name, implies that we are aware of the desires and beliefs that make up our decision, and that we follow them somewhat rationally. However, following the commands of the graduate student to comply with the experiment may not seem particularly rational. The most potent argument in the graduate student's script of phrases is the final prod, prod number four, that "You have no other choice but to continue" (Kite). Additionally, compliance rates in both conditions dropped to approximately 20% when the graduate student either wore casual clothes

rather than a lab coat, or issued their commands over an intercom rather than in person. If participants were merely making choices they found displeasing, then one would not expect significantly more people to make a different choice due to factors which did not seem to change the substance of the decision itself. Certainly no person would say, would even believe, that the reason they chose to shock someone against that person's will was due to whether a graduate student was wearing a lab coat or not, but such subtle factors significantly impact how we make our decisions. If these auras are not related to the substance of our choices, of the beliefs and desires we would point to when explaining why the choice is our own, and yet these auras have significant implications on which choices we make, then surely the authenticity of the sense of ownership we feel over our choices may be called into doubt.

Finally, responding to the point that even free choices can be distressing, it is important to clarify that the problem being addressed is not whether one may not like the two bad choices presented before them, but rather that there is a particular kind of stress which is symptomatic of feeling that one has no ownership over their decisions. The PERP is derived from a concern with preserving this sense of ownership one has over their desires and beliefs. The Milgram experiments appear to give evidence that, just as chains or a gun held to our heads can feel foreign and restrictive, so too can a number of the beliefs and desires which make up our motivational complex.

#### **IV. Frankfurtian Response**

The Compatibilist should now be convinced that there are some situations where, despite the ability and desire to act in some way, some aspects of our motivational complex with which we do not identify may prevent us from fulfilling our will. If so, then the next logical move for the Compatibilist is to turn to Frankfurt.

Harry Frankfurt's *Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person* defines freedom both in the context of motives with which one identifies and with which one does not. Specifically, Frankfurt argues that if the beliefs and desires which motivate an action fall somewhere between being considered alien to oneself and repugnant to oneself, then those actions do not constitute the actions of a free agent. To Frankfurt, a free agent's desires and beliefs do not merely drive actions, but allow the agent to "Want to have (or not to have) certain desires and motives. They are capable of wanting to be different, in their preferences and purposes, from what they are" (Frankfurt, 7). If one acts on desires that are implicit or unconscious, despite conscious, intentional desires to not act in that way, then that agent is not truly free. If one is addicted to drugs despite not wanting to be, for instance, then the act of taking drugs is an act which seems to happen to oneself, and which seems restrictive.

What Frankfurt helps us to identify is that a description of our motivations must include both the motivations we consider our own and those which we don't, for if there is a discrepancy between these two then the freedom of the agent may be called into question. For instance, when a hungry person decides



that a delicious ice cream cone is worth purchasing due to their past experiences involving the consumption of ice cream, then that person is acting freely. But when a conflicted person decides that shocking a confederate is acceptable due to a belief they would find repugnant if they were made aware of it (such as a belief that whether one wears a lab coat or not is indicative of how much authority one has), then that person is not acting freely. Frankfurt offers a method to clarify between the instances where our freedom is or is not authentic.

The way I will modify the PERP to respond to a Frankfurtian Compatibilist will be by arguing that knowing which motives drive us, and whether we in fact identify with them, is a very difficult project. While it would be odd to say that many people hold the implicit belief that dressing in a lab coat lends someone enough authority to be trustworthy, there do appear to be unconscious processing systems crucial to the manner in which we make decisions. These systems do seem to take factors, such as a lab coat, into account without our knowledge or even our consent. If factors such as these were conscious, many of the participants in the group with someone dressed in more casual clothes would take note of the experimenter's attire, but instead they would identify their belief that one should not harm without consent. It proves difficult to preserve the authenticity of the sense of ownership one has when one's choices seem to depend not on the beliefs which one prefers, but instead on systems outside our conscious beliefs.

We will examine another example of individuals making choices for reasons they are unaware of, and who believe that an entirely different set of reasons were responsible for motivating them. Stanley Schachter and Jerome Singer had participants injected with adrenaline and placed next to a confederate who exhibited either outgoing, joyful behaviors or aggressive, irritated behaviors (Kite). Many of the participants behaved differently than a control group injected with a placebo, who acted normally. Whether the participants were next to the joyful or the aggressive confederate was predictive of whether that participant acted in a joyful or aggressive way. When researchers later asked why participants acted as they did, many blamed the drug, but few blamed the behavior of the confederate.

The Schachter-Singer experiments have widely been used to argue that *the way* we experience our emotions relies not only on factors like heart rate, sweat, and other physiological factors, but also heavily on subtle cues that systems beneath our conscious control assess. Our beliefs about how we should experience our emotions can often be subject to factors external to our control and awareness. What is essential to take away from the Schachter-Singer experiments is that even some of our most intimate intuitions about what motivates our behaviors may rely heavily on subtle priming effects. While these experiments may not show we are never free, they do cast doubt on the capacity of Frankfurt's model to determine when we are acting freely and when we are not. So long as there is ambiguity, the authenticity of our sense of freedom may be called into question, which is unsatisfactory for a theory whose very purpose is to preserve the authenticity of this particular intuition.

In conclusion, a traditional Compatibilist, even one who successfully argues that Determinism does not undermine the authenticity of our sense of ownership over our actions, may still have more work to do before they can say that this ownership is as authentic as they would prefer. The cause of one's sense of ownership being undermined appears to be the complexity and opaqueness of our own motivations, some of which, because we are unaware of them or find them repugnant, are not ones we would point to self-reflectively when explaining why we made certain choices. Frankfurtian Compatibilists are better equipped to tackle the PERP than classical Compatibilists like Perry, but because our motives are often opaque, even to ourselves, the standards by which we may determine whether we made a choice for reasons we identify with or not must be better developed. As of yet, neither traditional Compatibilists like Perry nor more nuanced Compatibilists like Frankfurt appear to have generated such nuanced standards. Until they do so, the authenticity of our sense of freedom may be called into question by the PERP.

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## Homulus Reaches Into Neptune's Lonely Sandbox

By Thomas Hardy



# Vsevolod Garshin and the Madhouse: An Absurdist Reading of *The Scarlet Flower*

By Noah Valdez

## Abstract

This paper seeks to analyze the existentialist themes behind *The Scarlet Flower* (1883) by Vsevolod Garshin. Noted for his harrowing insight into 17th century insane asylums, Garshin's writings hold a uniquely absurdist outlook on the state of humanity and purpose in the post-romanticist era. In this spirit, Garshin predicts multiple themes to be found in the works of French absurdist Albert Camus, and forms a unity of conditions that produce insanity within absurdity. Where Camus offers suicide or recovery as the only two reactions to absurdism, Garshin offers the madness to be found in-between. It is this madness that Garshin pursues throughout the entirety of his writing, and effectively, in the creation of a new Russian existentialism. By analyzing current conceptions of Camusian absurdism in *The Scarlet Flower*, the aim of the paper is 1) to compare and contrast the two writers, and 2) to document the form of Garshin's previously unexamined philosophy. The canon has forgotten the stories of the late-1880s writer; it is the project of this paper to both memorialize and reflect upon Garshin's literary achievements with regards to existentialism.

*"His condition was a peculiar mixture of sane reasoning and nonsense."*<sup>1</sup>

## I. Introduction and Biography

Seldom does the name "Garshin" appear in contemporary criticism, yet, he wrote in a style as passionate as Fyodor Dostoevsky's and as resoundingly nihilistic as Ivan Turgenev's.<sup>2</sup> Born in 1853 as Vsevolod Mikhaylovich Garshin to a family of nobles, the suicide of his father and abandonment by his mother traumatized him early in his childhood.<sup>3</sup> Several years later, Garshin attended the Saint Petersburg Mining Institute to pursue engineering, but eventually gave this up in place of fighting in the Russo-Turkish War (1877).<sup>4</sup> The injuries he received while stationed in Bulgaria inspired his first short story, "Four Days" (1877), wherein a Russian soldier is wounded next to the man that he has just killed. Three years later, a psychiatric asylum committed Garshin for treatment, and, nine years later, Garshin would take his own life for reasons that had been developing since the age of eight.<sup>5</sup>

The story of Vsevolod Garshin is a particularly grim one, but through all of his struggles with depression, grief, and violence, he still managed to produce some of Russian literature's most poignant pieces of realism. Although noted for his

1 Vsevolod Garshin. *The Scarlet Flower*. Translated by Bernard Isaacs. (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1959), 87.

2 Ibid., p. 2. Ivan Turgenev was both a great friend and teacher to Garshin throughout his lifetime. *The Scarlet Flower*, which is itself a largely nihilistic work, is in fact dedicated to him. See also *Fathers and Sons* (1862).

3 Raymond Cavanaugh. "Vsevolod Mikhailovich Garshin -- fallen stars." *The British Journal of Psychiatry* 202, no. 2 (2013): 88.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

talent in simulating anthropomorphic dialogues,<sup>6</sup> the masterpieces of his short career are considered to be his works on insanity and meaningless. More specifically, his 1883 piece, *The Scarlet Flower*, depicts the story of a man ambiguously named ‘The Patient,’ who, as his name implies, is a recently admitted madhouse occupant. Convinced that all of the world’s evil resides within a single flower, The Patient spends his last life efforts killing the plant so that suffering might come to an end. *The Scarlet Flower* portrays a Post-Christian era in crisis, but beyond this, depicts an author haunted by the perversions of his mind and the dead from his past. And even though the writer lived well before the philosophical movement known as existentialism, his writings bear an uncanny resemblance to those of French absurdist Albert Camus. If absurdism is the birth of the “confrontation between the human need [for happiness and reason] and the unreasonable silence of the world,”<sup>7</sup> then it seems that all of Garshin’s writings pursue this singular point. For proof that the “one truly philosophical problem [...] is suicide,”<sup>8</sup> look no farther than Garshin, who took his own life after he found nothing but impermanency within himself. Thus, this paper intends to analyze the connection of *The Scarlet Flower* to the Camusian conception of absurdism. Admittedly, the position of the existentialist is a philosophical anachronism for Garshin, but his work is far too relevant to the genre to be read outside the canon of “great existentialist writers.”

## II. Enter the Madhouse

In the opening pages of “The Myth of Sisyphus” (1955), Camus writes that “[f]rom the moment absurdity is recognized, it becomes a passion the most harrowing of all.”<sup>9</sup> It seems then undoubtedly fitting that Garshin should situate his story within a 17th century madhouse, which manifests the most extreme of said passions. The narrative begins with a hospital clerk and two attendants processing The Patient into an insane asylum, declaring Tsar Peter the Great’s name at the outset of his registration. In other stories of Garshin’s, such as the “Reminiscences of Private Ivanov” (1882), they repeatedly characterize Peter I by the type of pretentiousness and extravagance expected of a Tsar such as him.<sup>10</sup> Yet, in *The Scarlet Flower*, the invocation of the monarch’s name achieves a subtly ironic effect—that is, the hypocrisy in honoring a man prone to bouts of madness while condemning another (e.g. The Patient) for the same psychological faults. Peter I was said to be “subject to short but frequent brain attacks, of a somewhat violent kind,”<sup>11</sup> which “threw him into such a distressing condition that he could not bear the sight of anyone.”<sup>12</sup> In this introductory gesture, Garshin makes it abundantly clear that madness—and the anxieties that provoke it—are beyond the classifications of wealth and power, driving peasants and kings alike to insanity.

Nonetheless, after the attendants admit The Patient to the madhouse, they

6 Ibid. For example: Attalea Prineps (1879), *The Tale of the Toad and the Rose* (1884) and *The Travelling Frog* (1887).

7 Albert Camus. *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*. Translated by Justin O’Brien. (New York: Vintage, 1991), 20.

8 Ibid., p. 3.

9 Ibid. p. 22.

10 Vsevolod Garshin. *The Scarlet Flower*. Translated by Bernard Isaacs. (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1959), 65.

11 Will Durant and Ariel Durant. *The Age of Louis XIV*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1980), 469.

12 Ibid.



forcibly strip him and throw him into a 'red-hot' iron bathtub seemingly filled with boiling water. Referring to the task of bathing as an unbearable ordeal, he invokes the name of St. George to save him from his oppressors, and then of God, to kill him so that he might not suffer anymore. Despite these wishes, neither St. George nor God answer him, and the attendants thereafter take The Patient to his cot where he falls asleep from both physical and mental exhaustion.

In this section, Camus and Garshin appear to share a remarkably similar view on divinity, or rather, of its disappearance and decreasing prevalence. Camus describes it well in *Helen's Exile* (1948):

It is Christianity that began substituting the tragedy of the soul for contemplation of the world. But, at least, Christianity referred to a spiritual nature and thereby a certain fixity. With God dead, there remains only history and power.<sup>13</sup>

Through The Patient's act of begging for salvation, or at the very least for execution, *The Scarlet Flower* predicts the Camusian frustration with the unknowability of divinity or any other kind of *a priori* system. The Patient not only fails to conceal himself *sub specie aeternitatis*,<sup>14</sup> or under the protection of 'heaven,' but also fails to preserve the illusion of a 'heaven' to even be pursued. By looking at the horrific events of the 20th century, from the World Wars to concentration camps and nuclear detonations, it is understandable that individuals like Camus would become so disillusioned with God. Theodicies of divine benevolence lost their legitimacy, for if God were truly benevolent, why would He have allowed for such events to occur in the first place? As a result, being told that his suffering, or the human condition, "cannot be helped"<sup>15</sup> drives The Patient deeper into madness. Meursault in *The Stranger* (1946) has a similar epiphany to The Patient's, albeit, with a vastly different reaction:

As if that blind rage had washed me clean, rid me of hope; for the first time... I opened myself to the gentle indifference of the world. Finding it so much like myself—so like a brother really—I felt that I had been happy and that I was happy again.<sup>16</sup>

While Meursault acts calmly and rather apathetically to the "Death of God," perhaps more correctly interpreted as the finitude of man, Garshin's protagonist acts with the anxiety and panic characteristic of one's violent confrontation with "the Absurd." Camus describes this phenomenon as the moment that the subject asks the question of "why" to the weariness of "mechanical life,"<sup>17</sup> and

<sup>13</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, 190.

<sup>14</sup> That is, "under the form of eternity."

<sup>15</sup> Garshin, 85.

<sup>16</sup> Albert Camus, *The Stranger*. Translated by Matthew Ward. (New York: Vintage, 1989), 59.

<sup>17</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, 12-13. The meaning of "mechanical life" for Camus holds a rather ambiguous definition, but he attempts to describe it on pages 12-13 in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. "It happens that the stage sets collapse. Rising, streetcar, four hours in the office or the factory, meal, streetcar, four hours of work, meal, sleep, and Monday Tuesday Wednesday Thursday Friday and Saturday according to the same rhythm—this path is easily followed most of the time."

from that point, experiences an awakening of consciousness that inevitably leads to either two conclusions: “suicide or recovery.”<sup>18</sup> But instead of remaining entrapped by this narrow dichotomy of choice, Garshin opts for a third action—madness. Consequently, when *The Patient* is struck with the feeling of absurdity, he refuses its premise altogether, as he convinces himself that his asylum admittance was both deliberate and synchronized. He imagines that “his hospital mates had gathered here with him to fulfill a task which he vaguely envisaged as a gigantic enterprise aimed at destroying the evil of the world.”<sup>19</sup> Although *The Patient* is unclear on what shape this enterprise will take, he nevertheless remains convinced of the actuality of this interpretation for fear of what purposelessness would imply.

The more one analyzes Garshin and Camus’ philosophy, the more it seems to be an antithetical, bifurcating relationship. For example, Camus’ three antidotes to the absurdity of life are frankness and authenticity, freedom of communication, and a sense of justice or purpose.<sup>20</sup> By contrast, *The Patient* is defiantly delusional, restricts himself under the façade of divinity, and finally, believes in no purpose other than the one received from heaven. Garshin forms determinism and meanings to his characters in an almost comedic manner, to the point where *The Patient* is willing to believe in the evilness of a flower rather than his own sense of ephemerality. It seems, then, that most models of existentialism, especially that of Camus’, expect recognition of finitude to be met with self-autonomy and choice (even if that choice is delusional). Yet, with Garshin’s fiction, madness is itself an existential mood that becomes so caught up in its own indeterminacy and search for purpose that it refuses to choose. To contrast Garshin with Camus, Camus’ three antidotes to absurdity are inversely matched by Garshin’s three catalysts for madness: disbelief, restriction and inauthenticity. The Russian does not intend to spell out a frame of mind or philosophy as Camus does, but to demonstrate the full range of denial and existential anxiety. As previously mentioned, Garshin wrote the story while he was recovering from wounds received during the Russo-Turkish War, so it is not altogether implausible that he, like *The Patient*, struggled under the yoke of his own ideas. Yet, keeping this biographical note aside, these three catalysts eventually formulate a strategy for *The Patient* to carry out his ends against malevolence, albeit fictionalized.

### III. The Poisonous Poppy

In Part III, Garshin’s protagonist finds himself “attracted by an unusually vivid scarlet flower, a variety of poppy,”<sup>21</sup> which grows in the asylum’s garden. Being both allured and repulsed by this poppy, he conjectures that all of the world’s suffering stems from the flower, and that nothing short of its destruction is permissible. Before moving onto the way in which *The Patient* attempts to destroy the poppy, consider the significance of the flower as a symbolic object. First and foremost, the flower has an almost morbid semblance and relation to death—being known to spring in the wake of major battles or mass burial sites. Canadian

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>19</sup> Garshin, 87.

<sup>20</sup> Albert Camus. *Lyrical and Critical Essays*. Translated by Philip Thody. (New York: Vintage, 1970) 265.

<sup>21</sup> Garshin, 87.

poet John McCrae noticed a phenomenon<sup>22</sup> similar to what Garshin observed in the flower, stating in his poem, "In Flanders Field" (1915):

In Flanders fields the poppies blow  
Between the crosses, row on row  
That mark our place; and in the sky  
The larks, still bravely singing, fly  
Scarce heard amid the guns below  
[...]  
If ye break faith with us who die  
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow In Flanders Fields<sup>23</sup>

Given the outlying geography of the Poltava region, the poppies McCrae notices growing in Flanders Field might be one and the same with those growing in the asylum garden. Not only does this association with warfare grant The Patient a fantasized rationality essential for the demonization of these flowers, but a visceral image of the poppy which sustains and produces itself from spilt blood. In addition to all of these especially visceral, flesh-based qualities surrounding the flower, the selection of the poppy holds a conveniently unique medical significance. One of several essential ingredients in the creation of an opiate, poppies provide the chemical background for different iterations of morphine. Thus, when the doctor notices that The Patient "was losing weight, not sleeping, and walking all the time,"<sup>24</sup> he injects him with a dosage of morphine, the spawn of the plant. The Patient cannot rise from his bed in order to kill the last poppy, precisely because that same flower (via morphine) actively prevents him. The symbolism behind the morphine-induced The Patient is not a mere embellishment to an already climactic ending, but a statement on the role of passivity in the construction of evil. For Garshin, evil attains its power and mobilization not monolithically, but rather, socially and collectively. The Russo-Turkish War was not a product of inevitability, but rather, of Balkan interests in recovering Crimea, which were then proliferated by discourses of xenophobia and nationalism among the Caucasus.<sup>25</sup> Death and evil manifest in this spirit, where societies submit to tyranny or imperialism because such events have so normalized themselves that to think of their absence would be the irregularity. Camus agrees with Garshin on the origin of a passive violence, demonstrating in *The Stranger* that it can originate for profoundly absurd reasons:

My whole being tensed and I squeezed my hand around the revolver.  
The trigger gave; I felt the smooth underside of the butt; and there, in that noise, sharp and deafening at the same time, is where it all started.<sup>26</sup>

Meursault describes his act of murder as an external, almost objective tran-

<sup>22</sup> With regards to the growth of poppies

<sup>23</sup> John McCrae. *In Flanders Fields and Other Poems*, Edited by Michael Gnarowski. (Dundurn: Dundurn Press, 2015), 19.

<sup>24</sup> Garshin, 90.

<sup>25</sup> Durant and Durant, 510.

<sup>26</sup> Camus, *The Stranger*, 59.

scendence of events. His statement, "It all started," assuages him of any guilt in the act, denying his brutality in the scene to the point that the Arab's death resulted naturally from the conditions on that day. The gun assumes a sort of pseudo-sentence, as even though Meursault might have "squeezed [his] hand around the revolver," the bullet ultimately gave the man his fatal wound. Garshin and Camus demonstrate that demagoguery and violence can spawn locally, but in order for it to proliferate, there must be a societal failure in rebellions against fascism.

Moving to the final act of the story, The Patient successfully defeats the first poppy, but quickly finds himself undercut by the growth of another flower. Managing to escape out of his ward while still possessed by the after-effects of morphine, The Patient sneaks outside the asylum and crushes the poppy before he dies of starvation. While he died with a look of 'proud elation' on his face, one must notice that The Patient's plucking of this remaining poppy does not indicate an eradication of evil. Logic demands that the story must resolve the growth of different offshoots of poppies in place of this most recently uprooted plant. In other words, does the germination of another poppy indicate the rebirth of evil, and if so, who shall step in to vanquish it? Garshin's point here elucidates the entire spectrum of futility, insofar as each action is necessarily pointless since it is impermanent. Even assuming that another Patient-like character can recognize the insidiousness of the flower, act on his or her intuitions, and destroy more flowers, then does life exist in an infinite loop?

While this question immensely interests Camus, it also remains of undeniable importance to existentialism and its constituents. While Garshin never provided an explicit answer to the question, Camus attempts the feat in his allusion to the "Myth of Sisyphus." Once the King of Ephyra, Hades and Zeus punished Sisyphus for imprisoning Death, and thus, eternally sentenced him to push a boulder up and down a hill. Once the rock reaches the top of the hill, despite the efforts of Sisyphus to stop its motion, the boulder magically comes crashing down and forces the former king to push it back up again. Most individuals would consider this an inevitably tragic and meaningless existence, and Camus agrees, but qualifies that accordance by writing:

Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night-filled mountain, in itself forms a world. The struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.<sup>27</sup>

Perhaps the "Myth of Sisyphus" is so powerful for Camus and absurdism not because it functions as metaphor, but because of its lucid capacity for describing our own current state of affairs. The moral for Camus is not, '*What do we take away from Sisyphus?*', but, '*How are we not also Sisyphus?*' rolling boulders of our own making up and down the hill. Even if the growth of other poppies proves to be inevitable, or if evil should take on some other manifestation or physicality, we must imagine The Patient happily crushing poppies in perpetuity. It

27 Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, 123.

is an undeniably impermanent and losing resolution, but one which Garshin's protagonist takes pleasure in doing like any other activity.

#### IV. Conclusion

While all too easy to associate Camus and Garshin as contemporaries, it is imperative to recognize that seventy-one years separates the two thinkers. Thus, it is nothing short of a miracle that they should come to similar existential conclusions, given that Garshin wrote in reaction to romanticism, and Camus to naturalism. Even Russia's most repudiated proto-existentialist, Fyodor Dostoevsky, cannot offer an atheistic existentialism in the manner that Garshin does, instead deferring to conclusions shrouded in Christian overtones like those found in *Crime and Punishment* (1866). Not only does Garshin associate with existentialist and absurdist conclusions that have yet to be developed, but he also predicts a type of existentialism that will fundamentally alter the 20th century and postmodernism thereafter. In this way, Garshin was just as groundbreaking as Nietzsche or Kierkegaard. While each of their canons are specific to absurdity as a general human condition, Garshin solely assumes absurdity within the contexts of madness.

Although the focus of this paper's analysis was towards performing an absurdist reading of *The Scarlet Flower*, it could have just as easily been done on "Four Days" or "Attalea Princeps." Garshin's entire collection of short stories effectively demands recognition from modern existentialists working in philosophy of literature. They hold the key to understanding madness as a uniquely existential mood.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> I first learned of Vsevolod Garshin several years ago through an 1884 portrait of him done by Russian painter Ilya Repin. His frame hangs along the wall of Gallery 827 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Here is a link to the picture, which I believe captures the essence of the writer and my inspiration for writing the essay: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/437442>.



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# Homulus Laments The Relentless Flow Of Time

By Thomas Hardy



## Kierkegaard's Two Knights: The Role of God in the Faith of Abraham and the

Tax Collector

By David P. Gallagher

### Abstract

In Søren Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*, Johannes de Silentio tries to understand what it means to have faith. Much of this exploration centers around a study of two figures, Abraham and an unnamed tax collector. The two seem to have nothing in common, yet Silentio designates both as of "knights of faith." In this paper, I argue that Kierkegaard uses the two individuals to highlight different aspects of knighthood. The tax collector serves as an example for what a real knight of faith might be like, while the example of Abraham emphasizes the struggle of faith. Using the fuller picture of faith gathered from both individuals, I then argue that, while Kierkegaard views faith essentially as a disposition, a way of interacting with the world, God still must justify the knight's actions as correct, both to an outside observer and to the knight himself.

In the preface of *Fear and Trembling*, Johannes de Silentio, the pseudonym used by Søren Kierkegaard for this work,<sup>1</sup> presents the purpose of his literary work. He says that, in his day, "nobody will stop at faith."<sup>2</sup> Abraham, on the other hand, "felt no need to go further than faith."<sup>3</sup> He devotes much of the work to reflection on Abraham, the suffering he endured in order to sacrifice Isaac, and whether Abraham is anything more than a murderer, a fanatic who nearly killed his son because he heard voices in his head. Through this reflection, he attempts to understand faith, and what it means to act paradoxically as Abraham. One of the challenges de Silentio faces is determining what it means to be a knight of faith, and how one, as Abraham does, give up his son, that which is most important to him, and having Isaac returned to him by his absurd faith in God. To help approach an answer to this question, de Silentio provides us with another knight of faith, the tax collector. From an outsider's perspective, the two figures appear to be incredibly different, but, in fact, both help bring the reader to a better understanding of faith.

The tax collector exemplifies what a real knight of faith might represent.<sup>4</sup> He displays faith as a disposition, a way of living despite an awareness of the world's finitude and of his own mortality. If faith is just a disposition focused on the finite world, the question of whether God's existence is necessary for faith arises. Could the tax collector not go about his life interacting with the finite world without a belief in God? Abraham answers this question. The tax collector might provide an understanding of faith, but the former emphasizes the struggle of faith. And through Abraham's struggle, the necessity of God be-

1 The extent to which Kierkegaard expresses his own views through de Silentio, and to which de Silentio is a character are important questions, but beyond the scope of this paper. I will be focusing on the views of Silentio.

2 Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Alastair Hannay (London: Penguin Publishing, 1985), 42.

3 Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 44.

4 Ignoring for now that de Silentio repeatedly denies the ability of one who lacks faith to identify a knight of faith.

comes clear. Becoming a knight of faith is a painful process that requires hope for something that seems impossible. In this process, others will misunderstand the knight, and see their actions as more horrible than noble. Only God can provide respite, as only God can fulfill the absurd hope of the knight of faith and provide an objective definition of the self to justify the knight of faith. The knight needs God in order to regard the world as meaningful, and needs the objective definition God provides in order to know that the knight understands the world correctly.

### I. The Disposition of Faith

The appearance of the tax collector as a relatively uninteresting individual defines him superficially. Upon first analyzing this knight of faith, his most astounding trait is his banality. De Silentio writes, “One detects nothing of the strangeness and superiority that mark the knight of the infinite.”<sup>5</sup> Throughout his description, the only indication that he is special comes when he thinks about dinner. He expects an extravagant lamb and vegetable meal, one he would devour, “for his appetite is greater than Esau’s.”<sup>6</sup> In fact, he cannot afford such a dish, but regardless what he has for supper, “he is exactly the same.”<sup>7</sup> The reader imagines the tax collector, who expected a fine dinner, eating gruel as vigorously as if he ate lamb. Based on the certainty with which he expects his fine dinner, one might as well imagine him no different than Abraham, who was equally confident that he would not lose Isaac.

The description of the tax collector explains why he can confidently expect an impossible dinner and act as though he were entitled to it. Simply put, the tax collector has faith. His faith is present in the various ways in which he interacts with the world. Excepting the dinner, his interactions seem perfectly normal, yet still slightly different. The tax collector appears normal in that he resembles any other person going through the motions of life. Nevertheless, the behavior of the tax collector at dinner indicates something more.

Walking around Copenhagen, the tax collector “delights in everything he sees.”<sup>8</sup> Relaxing with his pipe in the evening, he is as “Carefree as a devil-may-care good-for-nothing, he hasn’t a worry in the world.”<sup>9</sup> This happy individual does not just wander about the day, blissfully unaware. Instead, “he purchases every moment that he lives, ‘redeeming the seasonable time’ at the dearest price.”<sup>10</sup> In the finite world, “he has this sense of being secure to take pleasure in it, as though it were the most certain thing of all.”<sup>11</sup> De Silentio paints a picture of an individual who appears to do little more than appreciate each moment of life. This explains why he can eat gruel as though were lamb; the disposition with which he goes about his every day is one in which he appreciates everything thoroughly. It is by means of this disposition that the tax collector becomes a

5 Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 68.

6 Ibid., 69.

7 Ibid., 68.

8 Ibid., 69.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid., 70.

knight of faith.

The tax collector's faith might appear sparse in comparison to Abraham's. While the latter has to suffer a trying ordeal, the former has to merely hope for a fictitious dinner. In Abraham's case, the ability to appreciate each moment may not give him strength to sacrifice Isaac. While the tax collector goes happily about his day, Abraham constantly struggles during his journey to Mount Moriah. De Silentio states that if Abraham had a moment of doubt, and observed that the ram would potentially replace Isaac, "he would have gone home...he would have kept Isaac."<sup>12</sup> Abraham, however, did not doubt for even a moment. He had faith that God would keep his promise. De Silentio writes, "his faith was... that he should find happiness here in this world."<sup>13</sup> De Silentio additionally imagines Abraham himself articulating this very idea as an expression of why he could go through with the sacrifice. Thinking about the order God has given him, Abraham says, "it won't happen, or if it does the Lord will give me a new Isaac."<sup>14</sup> Attention must be paid to this concept of a "new Isaac." De Silentio and Abraham not only acknowledge the possibility that Isaac will not be killed, but they even entertain hope in the event that he does die.

John Lippitt explains the meaning of a "new Isaac" as a "radical hope." He writes, "Abraham's faith in God enables him to believe that all will be for the good (whatever that would come to mean) and that he will get Isaac back in this life (whatever that would come to mean)."<sup>15</sup> The point he seeks to make is that, although it is unclear as to what a "new Isaac" indicates, Abraham's faith allows him to believe that he will eventually regain his son by the virtue of the absurd. The implication of this hope-faith dichotomy is further hinted at by John Davenport, who argues, "even if Abraham had died without Isaac yet being restored to earthly life, he could have continued to have faith into his dying moment."<sup>16</sup> If these two views of faith are taken together, then one must wonder what that means for Abraham in a situation where Isaac did die on Mount Moriah. How can Abraham hope to be happy if his faith in Isaac's return is never fulfilled?

Returning to the tax collector and the idea that faith is a disposition provides an answer to this question. While the tax collector appears less troubled than Abraham, his state should not be regarded as one of unreflective bliss. De Silentio holds that despite the way in which this common man interacts with the world, he "drains in infinite resignation the deep sorrow of existence...he resigned everything infinitely."<sup>17</sup> Sharon Krishek describes the tax collector's loss as one not dissimilar to Abraham's own. She describes Abraham's loss as an "actual loss," and the tax collector's as an "essential loss."<sup>18</sup> She explains, "M's

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 55-6.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>15</sup> John Lippitt, "Learning to Hope: The Role of Hope in Fear and Trembling," in Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling: a Critical Guide*, ed. Daniel Conway (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 137.

<sup>16</sup> John Davenport, "Eschatological Faith and Repetition: Kierkegaard's Abraham and Job," in Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling: a Critical Guide*, ed. Daniel Conway (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 103.

<sup>17</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 69-70.

<sup>18</sup> Shannon Krishek, "The Existential Dimension of Faith," in Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling: a Critical Guide*, ed.

[the tax collector's] resignation is a response to the limits of existing in time, the limits of his finitude...everything in time is thus doomed to change and, ultimately, annihilation."<sup>19</sup> In theory, the tax collector should experience an existential crisis, resigning himself to a world finite and without meaning. De Silentio, however, does present a person in crisis. If anything, his ability to find meaning in every little aspect of the world defines the tax collector. The metaphor of the tax collector is best comprehended side by side with the metaphor of Abraham. Both are faced with great loss, whether literal or existential, yet both manage to find happiness and meaning in their existences. They find contentment due to their disposition that imbues meaning into a world in which meaning had previously been lost.

## II. Faith and God

Understanding faith as a disposition leaves room for the potential of removing God from the matter altogether. The object of faith in this case becomes a bit murky—life? happiness? the world itself? Regardless, it does not seem implausible to reimagine the tax collector, and even Abraham, but without God's active role.<sup>20</sup> With the risk of reading Kierkegaard as the author of a proto-self-help book, one might imagine the tax collector adopting the mantra: "live every second like it's your last." In such a case, Abraham could be seen as a metaphor for a parent who has managed to move on and rediscover joy after the untimely death of a child.<sup>21</sup> However, Kierkegaard's disposition of faith does not allow for the possibility of a godless faith. Rather, he sees God as central to faith, and without God, neither Abraham nor the tax collector could exist.

The story of Abraham makes the necessity of God for the realization of faith especially apparent. Here, if God does not exist, then Abraham is obviously a lunatic. He highlights the significance of this point in *Fear and Trembling*. As he writes toward the end of "Problemata II", "either there is an absolute duty to God...or Abraham is done for."<sup>22</sup> The considerations of "Problemata II" presuppose God's existence, something de Silentio never explicitly questions.<sup>23</sup> De Silentio focuses on whether obedience to God justifies disobedience towards the ethical. If there were no absolute duty to God, then disobedience would be unacceptable.

The need to question if there is an absolute duty to God can be found in de Silentio's claim that "the knight of faith has no higher expression whatever of the universal (as the ethical) which can save him."<sup>24</sup> He cannot justify the sacrifice of Isaac. By ethical standards, Abraham is a monster. On the other hand, if a duty to God supersedes the demands of the ethical, then fulfilling that duty saves Abraham. Yet without God, then of course no absolute duty to God could permit one to defy the code of ethics. Ultimately, God must justify Abraham's

Daniel Conway (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 115.

<sup>19</sup> Krishek, "The Existential Dimension of Faith," 115.

<sup>20</sup> For that matter, I have already described the tax collector's faithful disposition without any references to God.

<sup>21</sup> Hopefully under less extreme circumstances than Kierkegaard describes.

<sup>22</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 108.

<sup>23</sup> It is beyond the scope of this paper, but I suspect an implicit questioning of God's existence is central to de Silentio's not being a knight of faith.

<sup>24</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 102.

actions, or else he has no hope of salvation.

The story of Abraham contains a second element of the necessity of God. To simply say that the will of the Divine justifies Abraham is an incomplete understanding of the story. Abraham is more than a dutiful follower of God: he is a *faithful* one. He can sacrifice Isaac while remaining confident that, should Isaac die on Mount Moriah, God will give Isaac back in some form. Therefore, God must both set the story in motion and justify Abraham. Additionally, God allows Abraham to still hope for happiness in the wake of the consequences of the sacrifice. This happiness manifests itself as a gift from God.

The tax collector depicts more realistically what a knight of faith might resemble. While the dual role God plays in faith appears clearly in Abraham, God also appeals in the tax collector's faith; the significance of having faith in God can be better understood through the lens of the tax collector's implicit relationship to God. De Silentio never explicitly mentions God when describing the tax collector, but one can apply Abraham's model of faith to the tax collector's life.

Focusing on the notion of the gifts of faith that come from God, recall Krishek's claim that the infinite resignation that the tax collector goes through results from the realization of the finitude of existence: in time, everything will be lost. While he only alludes to this loss when writing about the tax collector, de Silentio makes a more explicit reference to this concern earlier in the work. He begins the "Speech in Praise of Abraham" by proposing, "If there were no eternal consciousness in man, if at the bottom of everything there were only a wild ferment...if an eternal oblivion always lurked hungrily for its prey and there were no power strong enough to wrest it from its clutches—how empty and devoid of comfort life would be!"<sup>25</sup> Aware of the finitude and convinced of the "eternal oblivion," his life would be empty and meaningless, but this is not who the tax collector is. He has faith, and thus can find meaning in the world. He does not have to fear the void; he can escape this fear because he understands that something eternal exists, which is God.

In the article, "Kierkegaard and Existentialism," Brian Söderquist presents the idea of God as a "regulative principle."<sup>26</sup> This principle refers to how the self relates to God. This idea also applies to how both God and the individual relate to the finite world. Söderquist presents God as a "divine standard" by which one can evaluate oneself.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, the individual can measure both the self and the world by using God as divine standard. The resignation of the tax collector is the realization of finitude, which leads to a second realization: there is more than nothingness at "the bottom of everything."<sup>28</sup> God can be found there as well; the tax collector has resigned himself "...yet to him finitude tastes

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25 Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 49.

26 K. Brian Söderquist, "Kierkegaard and Existentialism: From Anxiety to Autonomy," In *A Companion to Kierkegaard*, 1st ed., ed. Jon Stewart (Hoboken: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2015), 92.

27 Ibid.

28 Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 49.



as good as to one who had never known anything higher..."<sup>29</sup> He realized that God has created, and thereby imbued meaning in everything. He can "[remain] in the finite," while "being secure to take pleasure in it, as if it were the most certain thing of all."<sup>30</sup> For this reason, he can enjoy gruel as though it were lamb because he knows that both are a gift from God.

### III. Selfhood, Intelligibility, and the Challenge of Faith

Yet another problem with the possibility of a godless faith arises in the development of Abraham's need for God. Without God to justify his actions, Abraham is a murderer. How this relates the tax collector, and, by extension, any knight of faith, is not clear considering the low stakes of his situation. He is not faced with the challenge of sacrificing his son. Nobody would accuse him of being a monster for enjoying a subpar dinner. The connection between the two knights makes more sense if, however, we consider why de Silentio sees a duty to God as necessary to justify Abraham. Clearly, Abraham's faith is a struggle: he must fight against the temptation to refuse God's command. Obviously, following God's instruction would have been unimaginably difficult. In addition, though, by sacrificing Isaac, Abraham is alone.

In "Problemata III," de Silentio makes one of many comparisons between the trial of Abraham and that of Agamemnon, a tragic hero. One difference between the two cases is that Agamemnon, forced to sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia on the order of Artemis, "has the comfort of being able to weep and wail."

<sup>31</sup> For him, after this sorrowful act, Iphigenia will be gone with no hope for her return. He has no absurd hope to turn towards. Moreover, Agamemnon's pain is understandable as the suffering of one who had to kill his own daughter for a greater cause. De Silentio explains, "The tragic hero stays within the ethical. He lets an expression of the ethical have its telos in a higher expression of the ethical."<sup>32</sup> If Agamemnon had not sacrificed Iphigenia, then the Greeks could not sail to Troy. The ethics of his decision can be questioned, but at the very least Agamemnon's action fulfills his duty to the greater good. Thus, not only is Agamemnon's pain comprehensible, but his actions might be justified.

Abraham, on the contrary, does not have access to either the understanding or the justification available to Agamemnon. While the Greek king must suffer for killing his daughter in service of higher ethical demands, the "the tragic hero knows nothing of the terrible responsibility of solitude."<sup>33</sup> De Silentio says that Abraham "cannot speak...cannot make [himself] understood."<sup>34</sup> Agamemnon can say, "Woe is me! I have killed my daughter! But, I did it for Greece."<sup>35</sup> Abraham's explanation of his own situation: "God has told me to kill my son, the one who is to guarantee my lineage, and I will do it, but neither my son nor my potential lineage will be lost," makes decidedly less sense. Thus, only the

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid. 70.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 138.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>33</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 138.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 137.

<sup>35</sup> The observer would also hopefully permit Agamemnon a bit of melodrama in light of the circumstances.

virtue of God's will can rectify Abraham's actions. Whether such an action is permissible because God will restore Isaac, or because God's orders supersede the ethical demand to not kill one's child, any explanation falls apart without God, because the actions of a knight of faith do not make sense ethically.

De Silentio plays the role of an outside observer in *Fear and Trembling*, acting as a representative for both the reader and society at large. He as judge will try to understand and justify Abraham. To some extent, Abraham fails to pass judgment. De Silentio writes, "when I have to think about Abraham I am virtually annihilated. I am all the time aware of that monstrous paradox that is the content of Abraham's life, I am constantly repulsed."<sup>36</sup> Abraham walks a fine line; his action "contains the expression of extreme egoism (doing the dreadful deed for its own sake) and on the other the expression of the most absolute devotion (doing it for God's sake)."<sup>37</sup> As de Silentio's repulsion indicates, he cannot overcome looking at Abraham from a finite perspective, one that regards the act as "extreme egoism." He can only justify Abraham through God.

In addition to God and the outside observer, there is a third judge: the knight of faith himself. While de Silentio is not a knight of faith, he can partially represent this judge. In Abraham's defence, Jonathan Malesic writes, "The universal agent of the ethical will always know if his or her actions are justified," whereas Abraham "cannot make any appeal to any source outside his own experience to determine the rightness of his actions."<sup>38</sup> The tragic hero has an apparent outside standard in the finite world that evaluates their actions. This allows the hero to see themselves in the right. The knight of faith has no access to such a worldly standard.

Brian Söderquist demonstrates the significance of this lack of a standard in his article. He makes a comparison between Kierkegaard's concept of the self and that of Sartre. According to Söderquist, Sartre sees the definition of the self as influenced by other people's opinions. One who is seen by another "feels the vulnerability of being exposed, judged, and reduced."<sup>39</sup> The outside observer forms an image of the individual based upon what they can see, and "cannot, in the strictest sense, make the argument that I have been misjudged because I do not know who I am better than the other does."<sup>40</sup> Sartre only presents one true solution to this question of self definition: "Only a divine eye...could rescue me from the confusion of multiple judgments,"<sup>41</sup> For him there is no divine eye, and, as a consequence, the individual is left to wonder. This is not the case for Kierkegaard whose "strategy is to replace a reductive look of the other with the divine look; or, more specifically, to replace the human standard of judgment with a divine standard."<sup>42</sup> The implication here for the knight of faith is clear.

36 Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 62.

37 Ibid., 99.

38 Jonathan Malesic, "A Secret Both Sinister and Salvific: Secrecy and Normativity in Light of Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 74, no. 2 (2006): pp. 446-468, accessed 2 Dec., 2017, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/198751>, 458.

39 Söderquist, "Kierkegaard and Existentialism," 91.

40 Ibid., 92.

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid.

The human observer can never understand Abraham, and will only see his action as “extreme egoism.”<sup>43</sup> Abraham might wonder if perhaps that is why he behaved in the way that he did. He might also begin to worry that he is a monster. In spite of this, Abraham considers himself a hero, not a murderer.

There remains the question of how this applies to the tax collector. He has done nothing that appears ethically wrong. God makes no onerous demand of him. However, the role of God in justifying one’s definition of oneself still plays a central role in the tax collector’s knighthood. Initially, the tax collector seems like a rather uninteresting civilian. Were the outside observer to learn that the tax collector can love every moment as a gift from God, they might still regard him as a fool. The tax collector, especially as one who fully aware of the finitude of existence, might take note of the mockery and begin to worry that perhaps the others are right. On the surface, he appears as just a dolt, wandering through life with a childish disposition, ignorant of the hardships of reality. So long as he has faith, he knows he is justified in the eyes of God for properly appreciating the gift of the world that God has given him. Aware that God justifies his behavior, he knows that he is no more a simpleton than Abraham is a monster.

In conclusion, it is best to examine these two knights of faith individually in order to fathom their significance. The severity of Abraham’s circumstance serves to better highlight the importance of faith in the face of loss, and the need for God to make that faith possible. Through God, Abraham can receive Isaac and be justified. Only the judgment of God can allow Abraham to see himself as a hero. The average bystander, judging him by the standards of the finite world, sees the monstrosity of his action. The second knight demonstrates that a knight of faith has a disposition by which even a finite world is meaningful. Through Abraham we can see why God is indispensable for a knight, even if his faith is just a way of understanding the world. Without God, the tax collector cannot find any source of meaning in the finitude, for God, creator of the finite world, gives it meaning. By virtue of God’s will, the tax collector can affirm that he is right in seeing every moment as meaningful, as opposed to feeling like a dolt, unable to appreciate a good dinner.

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43 Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 99.

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## Homulus Finally Satisfies His Nagging Discontent

By Thomas Hardy



# Intersubjectivity and the Origin of the Ego

By MaryGrace King

## Abstract

In this essay, I address the origin of the ego and intersubjectivity within the realm of phenomenology. How does the “I” come into existence? How can multiple egos (i.e. first-person perspectives) exist if phenomenology dictates that there can only be experience of one subjectivity? If multiple subjectivities can coexist, how does one Subject recognize another Subject, and under what conditions? I explore these questions by examining reflective and unreflective consciousness and Subject-Object relationships. I argue that the ego arises as a result of the gaze of the Other; I also argue that intersubjectivity arises when a Subject recognizes itself as both a Subject and as an Object for the Other, and that the Other presents itself as a Subject-Object as well. I will also look at the implications of asserting this position and supplement my argument with real-life examples.

## Essay

The other day, I tripped in the empty stairwell leading up to my dorm. I did not think too much about it, I just picked myself back up and kept going. This inconsequential event was much different from the time I tripped on the library stairs with many people around, including people I knew; that time, I felt a flush of embarrassment, and the thought flashed across my mind that I must look ridiculous. These scenarios were the same in every respect except for the witnesses in the second situation. What is it about the presence of other people that caused me to feel embarrassed, and how can that dynamic be explained phenomenologically? Do “I” actually exist in either scenario? In this paper, I will use both examples of tripping to assert that the ego comes into existence by means of another Subject. In other words, a subjective self-awareness comes into existence as a result of other consciousnesses acknowledging the first consciousness as another Subject; the Other’s gaze forces the unreflective consciousness to look at itself and become reflective, and in this reflective consciousness, the “I,” or ego, becomes attached to the action of being conscious.

I will start by breaking this scenario down phenomenologically, beginning with foundational concepts. In the most general of phenomenological terms, reality consists of the intersection of consciousness and the world. Robert Sokolowski, a professor at the Catholic University of America and esteemed author on the subject of phenomenology, describes the world not as the sum total of things, but rather as the whole that holds all things: “The world is more like a context, a setting, a background, or a horizon for all the things there are, all the things that can be intended and given to us.”<sup>1</sup> The action of perceiving the world is the act of “intending” the world and objects within the world, or in other words, being “conscious of” the world.<sup>2</sup> Phenomenologists assert that both the world and the

<sup>1</sup> Robert Sokolowski, *Introduction to Phenomenology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000): 44.

<sup>2</sup> The noun form “consciousness” can be misleading because it gives the impression that “consciousness” itself is a

action of intending the world arise simultaneously and inseparably, since neither the world nor consciousness of the world can exist without the other.

The concepts of world and consciousness set the scenes for both examples of tripping. The world, or “setting,” contains everything present within the scenes I described: in the first scenario, there were stairs, walls, windows, air, light, dust, and a tripping human body, as well as all the other components of that immediate area. There were also absences, which are just as phenomenologically important as present objects. The empty stairwell’s most notable absence was the absence of other people. In this example, the world, in all its presences and absences, was intended by unreflective consciousness, which is consciousness that simply intends and does not reflect upon itself as it intends. In retrospect I am able to attach an “I” to this unreflective consciousness, but in the present moment of tripping in the stairwell, the “I” does not exist at all. This assertion may seem radical and hard to accept: how can the “I” pass in and out of existence, and doesn’t my identity remain constant? It seems that there should be a unifying thread of identity that makes up the “I” (i.e. “me,” and all that I am, along with the ways I normally act, talk, and think within this world), whether or not I am actually thinking about myself in the moment. Saying that “I” do not exist all the time would shake my very conception of reality.

As disconcerting as it may seem, the “I” *does* pass in and out of existence, according to the purely descriptive lens of phenomenology. If phenomenal existence consists of the factual world intended by consciousness at a particular moment in time, and consciousness is not narrating its own intending or “watching” itself being conscious of the world, then there is no place in existence for the ego at that moment. The ego comes into existence in reflective consciousness, which occurs when the consciousness does intend itself as it is perceiving the world. A person does not think “I” all the time. Rather, he performs activities or thinks thoughts unreflectively, without watching over his own shoulder, so to speak. However, if someone asks him what he is doing, he instantaneously and automatically reflects upon his activities and answers using “I” as his subject. “I am walking,” “I am tripping,” and “I think...” are all products of reflective consciousness. Professor John Panteleimon Manoussakis, a professor of Philosophy at the College of the Holy Cross, illustrates in his article “Seeing the Invisible” how one looks back upon himself in the reflective state: “...I see that which I see, but also... I see. In other words, I don’t only see what I see (the object of my perception) but, in and by the act of seeing, I also see *myself* as seeing.”<sup>3</sup> Reflective consciousness allows the ego to notice itself as it moves throughout the world. Sokolowski elaborates on the idea that the reflective state makes us “...no longer simply participants in the world;” instead, “we contemplate what it is to be a participant in the world and in manifestations.”<sup>4</sup> Unreflective consciousness perceives objects. Reflective consciousness, on the other hand, positions the ego as the *subject* that perceives objects, with one of these objects being itself.

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subject; on the contrary, “consciousness” denotes the action of being conscious of something. Therefore it is more appropriate to conceptualize “consciousness” in its verb form (either “being conscious of,” “having consciousness of,” or simply “intending”) rather than as a noun.

3 Fr. John Panteleimon Manoussakis, “The Vision of the Invisible,” *Seeing the Invisible*, 2016, 16.

4 Sokolowski, 48.



The empty stairwell example illustrates unreflective consciousness. In this scenario, I was not drawn into reflective consciousness. I was in the unreflective state, and I did not think about myself tripping or imagine what I must have looked like. The absence of the reflective consciousness indicates that no ego was present. There was merely impersonal consciousness of tripping on stairs and the world of the stairwell arising simultaneously. Phenomenologically, “I” was not a part of the scenario until afterwards, when reflective consciousness inserted “me” into the memory of the event. The embarrassment surrounding the library stairs example illustrates an event of present reflective consciousness in my painful awareness of my own clumsiness. These two scenarios prove that the ego is absent in moments of unreflective consciousness and present in moments of reflective consciousness. However, more questions remain: *how* did I enter the reflective consciousness on the library steps? The ego appears to be such an ingrained aspect of the human experience that some might think reflective consciousness happens by itself. Yet humans are not born with a sense of self-awareness, so what bridges the gap between the unreflective and reflective states? Is it possible for a person to access the concept of “I” independently, or is an external force of some sort necessary to prompt reflection?

Before I explore these questions using my second example, I will explain more about the ego and expand upon the Subject-Object relationship to illustrate how consciousness enters the reflective state. As an ego brought about by reflective consciousness, I am aware of myself as the Subject, or the first-person perspective, to whom all things in the world present themselves as Objects. Yet I also know I exist *within* the world as a thing, too. Sokolowski explores the nuanced concept of dwelling in the world as both a first-person perspective and an Object: “I is the center around which this widest whole, with all the things in it, is arranged. Paradoxically, the I is a thing in the world, but it is a thing like no other; it is a thing in the world that also cognitively *has* the world, the thing to whom the world as a whole, with all the things in it, manifests itself.”<sup>5</sup> I am the Subject of existence as far as my consciousness is concerned, and everything else seems to be Objects that I intend.

The complicating piece is that I am also aware that other humans possess the same power of first-person perspective as I do, which would make each person a Subject in their own right while also being an Object in relation to me. I perceive other humans as objects because they are outside of *my* subjectivity. At the same time I also recognize how they have their own subjectivities, which means that I am an Object from their perspectives. In this relationship, intersubjectivity occurs as both Subjects recognize each other as Subject-Objects: “I cease to be only a subject and I recognize myself as an object for the Other, that is, I recognize the Other as a subject. This recognition is the result of the Other’s gaze.”<sup>6</sup> Subject-Object recognition helps reconcile my own sense of subjectivity with the knowledge that other humans experience unique subjectivities that are inaccessible to me although somehow similar to my experience.

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<sup>5</sup> Sokolowski, 44.

<sup>6</sup> Manoussakis, 17.

All of this recognizing occurs only after I have entered reflective consciousness. In order for an intersubjective relationship to occur, my unreflective consciousness must be drawn into the reflective state by the Other looking upon me as a Subject, which makes me view myself the way the Other must see me. I require the Other if I am to enter the reflective state. Manoussakis addresses this point, writing, "It is the Other's gaze that affects me by forcing me to look at and see myself. It is the Other's gaze that makes me visible to myself."<sup>7</sup> I become objectified when I perceive the Other acknowledging *me*, and my ensuing state of reflective consciousness allows me to conceptualize myself as an ego. Therefore, the ego is brought about by the gaze of the Other. Without the Other, only impersonal unreflective consciousness would exist, devoid of the "I."

Of course, human experience tells me that the Other is not required every time I enter the reflective consciousness. I can reflect upon how I am sitting here, alone in my room, with no Other immediately present to me. However, the Other's gaze is necessary for me to be drawn into reflective consciousness for the first time, which occurred in the early stages of my childhood development, an experience that the majority of humans share. As a young child, I experienced only unreflective consciousness until, after much exposure to other humans acknowledging me as another Subject, my consciousness could mimic their objectification of me and come to comprehend that "I" exist. As my body and brain continued to develop, my self-awareness also strengthened until I could access the reflective state easily, without the immediate prompting of the Other. After being drawn into the reflective consciousness for the first time, I was able to use the memory of that experience and all other instances of objectification to learn how to form my concept of "I" without the Other present. Had I never encountered another Subject in my lifetime, I would have no sense of self, since "such self-knowledge is impossible in the absence of that which is not myself, be it the external world or the Other, so much so as to engender otherness within myself."<sup>8</sup> With no Other to objectify my unreflective consciousness, there would be no way for me to know myself. Since I *did* experience and interact with the Other in many instances within my memory, however, I am able to reflect on myself as an "I" even when I am physically alone.

Even though it is possible for me to access the reflective state on my own because of my past encounters with other Subjects, being around Subjects can still draw me into self-reflection whether I choose it or not. The Other's gaze is what called my ego into existence in the tripping-in-a-public-place example. Due to the presence of many other Subjects, an "I" suddenly arose as impersonal, unreflective consciousness realized that other consciousnesses were gazing at the body from which the unreflected consciousness originated. Other Subjects objectified the tripping body into *my* body housing *my* consciousness by making me look at myself as I might have appeared to the other consciousnesses, and I was suddenly jarred by the Other's gaze into the reflective state. Through the action of tripping in front of other people, I became self-aware. Thus, the emotion of embarrassment arose with my reflective consciousness, since embarrassment

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<sup>7</sup> Manoussakis, 18.

<sup>8</sup> Manoussakis, 16.

is the state of feeling self-consciously foolish in front of others. The phenomenological understanding of the ego arising as a result of the Other has some humbling implications. I must accept that I am not my own author. Instead, the Other is the one that allowed me to be an “I,” which is my most personal and private concept of self-identity. It seems contradictory that I owe the existence of my whole sense of self to the Other and yet the Other can never access my first-person perspective. The Other draws into existence a reflective consciousness that is completely separate from himself, which makes him a creator who can never experience what he created. This concept seems both intrusive and isolating at the same time. Does it mean that I am not my own and yet I am utterly alone? Intersubjectivity, then, helps to soothe this panic of existence. The dizzying gap between the Other and “me” may be bridged as we recognize each other as Subject-Objects. It might be a comfort to know that although “I” am an isolated Subject brought into existence not by my own choice, all Subjects are in the same position. Objectification is recognition, and recognition is therefore a form of respect. By mutually acknowledging each other’s subjectivity, phenomenologically, the Other and “I” become simultaneous creators of each other’s egos. This intersubjective relationship is manifested every time either of us enters into reflective consciousness.

**Homulus Consorts With Flowers While Across The Way A Fire**

**Rages**

By Thomas Hardy

