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Undergraduate Journal of Existentialism

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“Every war, every revolution, demands the sacrifice of a generation, of a collectivity, by those who undertake it.”

— Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1948), p. 99

Letter from the Editors

In our twenty-seventh issue, we at *The Reed* aim to apply an intersectional existential and phenomenological lens, one that aids in our interpretation of the world and our existence in it. Following our tradition in recent years, we chose not to restrict this edition to one theme, but, rather, to showcase how our modern day benefits from various existential theories.

As we embark into a new age of unprecedented attacks on our civil and existential freedoms, we believe our writers will be at the frontlines of soothing existential anxiety. We were impressed by the commitment of our writers to puzzle through everyday struggles that plague us, from love to academics to labor. We were especially thankful to accept multiple pieces that work at the intersection of existentialism and feminism, aiming to challenge oppressive normative structures and constructions.

On that theme, I am pleased to announce our Howard and Edna Hong Memorial Essay Prize winner, Yula van Nederveen Meerkerk from Radboud University, who submitted an exceptional paper titled, "Submission Gone Viral: An Existential and Critical Phenomenological Analysis of the Tradwife Subculture." This essay adds a necessary experiential component to our journal, emphasizing how our theory thrives when we ground it in lived experience. In our digital age, this experience comes through our physical and digital environments, as the media we surround ourselves with shapes our world view and critically analyzing that media is a necessary step towards

self-awareness and social change. I was grateful to work on this piece, and I highly recommend reading it.

With themes from bad faith to dialectical ethics and philosophers from Simone Weil to Michel Foucault, this issue captures both the breadth of existentialism as a tradition and its multiplicitous applications to our current moment. We thank you for your continued support of *The Reed* and for reading this year's edition.

Best regards,

Kiara Fitzpatrick, *Editor-in-Chief*

Kaya Stark, *Vice Editor-in-Chief*

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**Blinded Through
the Viewfinder**

on 35mm film

Paavo Rundman

Cosmic One

Noah Stremmel

It snowed, the day you were born
So funny they call you Raine.
We once were celebrated. Someone
wrapped us in velvet and displayed us
to a waiting world. There's not much
waiting anymore. Even you, timeless and
glassy-eyed, reveal your impatience and
we bend; we burn, we rend and bleed
into winter and out its sopping end.
Cosmic One, I regret to inform you
just how cold the world is.

Yet perhaps—perhaps you came to thaw
Patiently, as rain weaves its lattice through the sky,
I await that day

Feminism, Foucault, and Flourishing: Can Women be Free Under Patriarchy?

Vanessa Chan

Liberal theories of feminism that emphasise choice as a normative transformer—the presence of choice transforms an unjust situation into a just one—have been criticised by social constructivist theories, which some take to imply the impossibility of free choice for women under patriarchy. While the social constructivist critique of liberal feminism provides useful insights into women's conditions under patriarchy, we do not need to accept the purported entailment of determinism. Still, we should follow their lead in rejecting the liberal focus on choice and instead direct our attention towards women as agents who have an evaluative perspective towards their own situations and preferences. Women have the capacity for human flourishing under patriarchy, and in this way, can be meaningfully free to aspire to a life well lived.

Marx's theory of alienation, that under capitalism the worker is alienated from the products of his labour, his own productive activity, and himself, has two core aspects: the worker is *fragmented*, with parts of him falling under the control of others, and the worker is *prohibited* from the complete exercise of typically human functions.¹ As Sandra Bartky and many other socialist-feminists note, this theory of alienation, especially the concept of fragmentation, can be applied to

1 Sandra Bartky, "Narcissism, Femininity and Alienation," *Social Theory and Practice* 8, no. 2 (1982): 128–129, <https://doi.org/10.5840/soctheorpract19828212>.

women *qua* women, as we “undergo a special sort of fragmentation and loss of being as women.”² For example, women experience sexual alienation, being estranged from their own sexualities, as norms of sexual passivity and submission deriving from the gender hierarchy infiltrate women’s experiences of sex. Another case of gendered fragmentation is sexual objectification, which renders a woman’s sexual parts or functions separate from her as a person, which her identity is then reduced to.³

Marx’s conception of the alienation of the worker is normative; alienation is a deeply unjust condition. However, the fact that women “embrace with enthusiasm what seem to be the most alienated aspects of feminine existence” casts doubt upon feminine alienation as unjust.⁴ Take, for example, beauty pageants, the historically coveted status of Playboy bunny or making the cover of *Sports Illustrated*, or even the average woman who spends an hour putting on makeup and getting ready to leave the house each time, even just to go to the grocery store. Quite clearly, then, it is the case that women generally derive satisfaction from the pursuit and attainment of femininity. Women objectify themselves. This is the paradigm case of what Bartky calls “feminine narcissism,” when a woman “[takes] toward her own person the attitude of the man” such that she feels erotic satisfaction in her physical self, “revelling in her body as a beautiful object to be gazed at and decorated.”⁵ If she takes pleasure in this narcissistic activity, then why is sexual objectification alienating?

The liberal response is to deny that sexual objectification is unjustly alienating, given that women have ‘freely’ (in the absence of external coercion) chosen to pursue these narcissistic pleasures. Liberal feminists claim that because women have certain desires to look beautiful and appear feminine, they should feel empowered to fulfil these desires. Women should be free to do whatever they want with their bodies; no man or other authority should tell them what to do. Take the case of an eighteen year old girl who has decided to

2 Ibid., 129.

3 Ibid., 130.

4 Ibid., 131.

5 Ibid., 132.

undergo surgery for breast implants, having finally reached the age required for the procedure. When justifying this choice to her sceptical parents, she makes it clear that no male figure has played a part in convincing her to get implants; she is doing it for herself and her confidence, since she has always been insecure about her chest. The liberal feminist sees no harm, no foul here. She chose freely, without the interference of another, to get breast implants. Under liberal theories, free choice, defined as a choice in the absence of conscious coercion by another, guarantees justice; choice is a “normative transformer.”⁶

However, liberals fail to interrogate the social context in which choices are made, and why women desire certain things. Just because a woman’s choice to get breast implants is not due to direct persuasion from a man, does not mean that her motivations behind the choice are immune to patriarchy or the sociocultural context. Consider the hypothetical case of a woman who grew up in a society where breasts carried the same meaning as our society currently attributes to elbows: we would find it extremely odd if she desired breast implants. That a woman wants to undergo surgery for breast implants only makes sense in a society where breasts are sexualised and objectified.

Simone de Beauvoir uses the existentialist notion of “situation” to explain feminine narcissism: “meanings derived from the total context in which she comes to maturity, disposes her to apprehend her body not as the instrument of her transcendence, but as ‘an object destined for another.’”⁷ Since girls are young, they experience objectification, which teaches them that their worth lies in their looks. This sexual objectification manifests in a double consciousness: the gaze of the Other is internalised, such that the Other “is subject for whom my bodily being is object,” and a woman becomes simultaneously “seer and seen, appraiser and the thing appraised.”⁸ In feminine double consciousness, the Other can take on various identities, but is often “an interiorised representative of... the fashion-beauty complex,” a system of corporations that manufacture products, services,

6 Clare Chambers, *Sex, Culture, and Justice: The Limits of Choice* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008), 21.

7 Bartky, “Narcissism, Femininity and Alienation,” 134.

8 Ibid., 134–135.

images, and ideologies, espousing a standard of beauty for women that exploits every inch of their bodies and behaviours.⁹ This industry both “seeks to glorify the female body and to provide opportunities for narcissistic indulgence” and covertly aims “to depreciate woman’s body and deal a blow to her narcissism.”¹⁰ The fashion-beauty complex manufactures desires, in the form of beauty standards, such that women internalise them and derive satisfaction from attaining them. We can make sense of feminine alienation when we understand these narcissistic satisfactions as *repressive* satisfactions, that “fasten us to the established order of domination” and provide us with false needs.¹¹ This casts doubt upon the liberal feminist belief that the fulfilment of these ‘needs’ contribute to women’s wellbeing simply by virtue of being chosen.

A Foucauldian analysis of power further undermines the liberal emphasis on choice. We have already seen through Beauvoir’s theory that the focus on choice disregards the context in which the choice was made and why those desires behind the choice existed in the first place. Political philosopher Clare Chambers recognises two other ways liberals fall short: choice, conceived under the liberal framework as the “absence of (state) constraint... ignores the creative elements of power,” and because choice is a mental process, focusing on it “marginalises the role of physical embodiment.”¹² Foucault’s conception of power understands it as having both the capacity to repress *and* create. Liberal theories conceive only of the former negative aspect of power, which occurs primarily through the state prohibiting certain behaviours, while ignoring that power creates by dictating individuals’ options, actions, preferences, and desires such that they adhere to socially constructed norms and then further reinforce those norms.¹³ For example, the power of female beauty ideals “manifests itself when women receive (and give) comments on their appearance, or when they observe others’ appearance and cast them as regulatory norms

9 Ibid., 135.

10 Ibid., 135.

11 Ibid., 138.

12 Chambers. *Sex, Culture, and Justice*, 21.

13 Ibid., 22.

for themselves.”¹⁴

Power is also *embodied* when conformity to social norms is unconscious and habitual at the level of the body; internal self-surveillance replaces external surveillance. Power runs so deep that it has creative force through the body, delineating what we think are normal ways of moving and unconsciously moulding the ways we do move our body. Thus, the human body and its behaviours are products of social forces and power. Applied to the notion of gender, we can say that a woman’s body is created. We attribute significance to certain parts not due to objective observation, but as a result of social norms, forces and processes that have the power to shape us physically. Women habitually cross their legs when sitting or suck in their stomachs; women also wear push-up bras and shapewear.

Foucault’s theory that power is everywhere implies that gender norms cannot be easily resisted as social construction runs deep and is imprinted onto our bodies. Mere consciousness raising and awareness of these norms cannot make us resist or alter these norms. Furthermore, inherent in the idea of contradicting social norms is that one will be socially punished for doing so. Many women are well aware of the fact that wearing makeup means meeting certain appearance standards, and they do so knowing that opting out may place them at a disadvantage. If social construction is everywhere and women cannot opt out, then does this imply that women’s desires, and the choices that follow from them, are pre-determined? How can women act autonomously or make free choices if everything is already dictated by patriarchy?

If freeing individuals from social construction is not possible, since social construction is all there is, then it does not make sense to think of a choice as being free or unfree. Choice is necessarily dictated by social norms, which shape the options, preferences, and desires of subjects. The liberal focus on choice is due to it being a normative transformer that supposedly secures a just or good outcome. But, as feminist philosopher Serene Khader acknowledges, “chosenness is not

the only morally relevant feature of people's preferences" or actions.¹⁵ Instead, we might think that we should evaluate preferences, actions, and outcomes against an objective account of the good or just. This shifts the focus from women's choices onto women as agents who, despite living in a socially constructed world, have the capacity to reflect on their decisions and behaviour, to become conscious of the fact that their bodies and minds are shaped by structures of power, and that their desires and actions only make sense in the world that has attributed certain meanings to things, and then pursue their own flourishing. In this sense, women can be free agents under patriarchy. What this necessitates, however, is an objective account of the good or flourishing, what it means to live a good life. This can draw the line between unjust and just social norms and hence the unjust and just social behaviours and institutions that follow from them. Women with adaptive preferences, "self-depriving desires [that] people form under unjust conditions," may not yet be able to pursue human flourishing, but they have the capacity to achieve this.¹⁶

Returning to the example of the young woman who wants breast implants, we can see that her preferences may be adaptive, growing up in a patriarchal society. Implants can cost thousands, require weeks of recovery, the surgical procedure has serious health risks, and there is the potential of breast implant illness symptoms for many years after. Given that she knows all these costs, and still desires to undergo the procedure, meaning that the benefits she anticipates (i.e. a boost in her self-esteem and being perceived as more attractive) outweigh those costs, we may say that her preferences are adaptive and a result of being formed under unjust conditions.

Her desire to get implants despite the overwhelming costs are a result of growing up in a society where the sexual objectification of women runs rampant and a woman's worth lies largely in her looks. If she had grown up in a society with conditions conducive to real flourishing, rather than one under the reign of patriarchy and the fashion-beauty complex, she would likely not possess the desire to

15 Serene J. Khader, *Adaptive Preferences and Women's Empowerment*. (Oxford University Press, 2011), 32.

16 Ibid., 4.

surgically alter her body.

Liberal feminist theories that consider choice as a normative transformer miss the mark in three ways; they fail to recognise social context, the creative capacity of power, and power at the level of the body. This explains their failure to understand feminine narcissism as alienating and why some women's preferences are adaptive. Although a cynical implication of the ubiquity of power and social construction may be that women's choices are unfree and predetermined by social norms, we do not have to accept this. We can shift the focus from choice as securing justice and goodness onto an objective account of the good, and in doing so, we can understand women as agents within a world of social construction. Women may not be free *from* the meanings society attributes to their bodies and behaviours, but they are free *to* pursue the good. Of course, it is helpful if society provides just conditions that encourage the attainment of the good. Crucially, this will require women's worth to no longer lie in their appearance, but elsewhere, perhaps in their character, actions, and achievements. This begins with the socialisation of young girls, in the home and at school, encouraging them to engage with the world in all their subjectivity. This practice must gradually ossify throughout society, crowding out sexist social norms and rendering the fashion-beauty complex obsolete. No longer will women be disciplined into passivity and mere ornamental objects. This is a difficult process, of course, but an essential one.

We have established that socially constructed ideas and meanings might be all there is. The question is exactly what sorts of ideas and meanings will be conducive to human flourishing. Much philosophical work has and continues to be done towards this end, with little agreement. What is certain, however, is that it requires a complete overhaul of the current conditions that guarantee the alienation of women.

Submission Gone Viral: An Existentialist and Critical Phenomenological Analysis of the Tradwife Subculture

Yula van Nederveen Meerkerk

In recent years, social media platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube have facilitated the transformation of personal narratives into global subcultures.¹ One such phenomenon is the rise of “tradwives” – a portmanteau of “traditional” and “wife.” Women in this subculture publicly embrace hyper-traditional gender roles, presenting themselves as happily subservient homemakers in defiance of feminist ideals. While often associated with conservative ideologies and misogyny, Tradwifery might be best understood through the words of famous tradwife Alena Kate Pettitt: tradwives are “[h]ome-makers of our generation who are happy to submit, keep house, and spoil their husbands like it’s 1959.”²

Although the subculture may appear to be harmless, this thesis argues the opposite. By adopting and promoting submissive lifestyles, tradwives propagate restrictive stereotypes about women, sustain systemic unfreedom, and influence their followers with their ideals. As such, this thesis asks the following: to what extent are tradwives responsible for being complicit in perpetuating women’s unfreedom, particularly through their online personas? Feminist philosopher

1 Apichai T. Suriyapong, “The Aesthetic and Narrative Strategies of Subcultures on TikTok: Analyzing the Presentation of Niche Identities,” *Studies in Social Science & Humanities* 3, no. 9 (2024): 42–47. <https://doi.org/10.56397/SSSH.2024.09.05>.

2 BBC Stories, dir., “Submitting to My Husband like It’s 1959’: Why I Became a Trad-Wife | BBC Stories (2020), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZwT-zYo4-OM>, 1:25.

Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*³ functions as a corners/tone of this thesis. Her analysis of existential freedom, and her claim that women can be complicit in maintaining systems that oppress them are particularly crucial to answering the research question. Furthermore, the ideas of critical phenomenologist Charlotte Knowles are used to illuminate how complicity arises not simply from external imposition, but also from women's active, though constrained, engagement with their circumstances.

This thesis comprises four chapters. The first chapter establishes the theoretical framework, combining Beauvoir's existentialist concept of freedom with the socio-historical sensitivity of critical phenomenology. With this philosophical framework, I will demonstrate in later chapters that tradwives' choices, while grounded in agency, represent a retreat from freedom – a failure to exploit the possibilities of liberation. The second chapter situates Tradwifery within the context of anti-feminist backlash and choice feminism, exposing the contradictions inherent in tradwives' self-professed autonomy. Subsequently, the chapter traces the myth of "tradition" that underpins tradwives' performances, revealing its basis in exclusionary, historically inaccurate narratives.

Next, the third chapter turns to the issue of complicity. In this chapter, tradwives' complicity in reinforcing their own unfreedom is analysed by applying Knowles' phenomenological insights. Knowles' notion of "personal complicity" – a concept that bridges structural imposition and individual agency – proves particularly useful in understanding the tradwife paradox. This approach reveals that while tradwives' submission reflects broader societal pressures, they perform, and celebrate this submission, encouraging others to do the same. Finally, the fourth chapter addresses the ethical implications of tradwives' public personas. As influential social media figures, tradwives cannot simply relegate their decisions to personal choice. Their performances have far-reaching consequences, spreading regressive ideals under the guise of individual choice, and thus reinforcing patriarchal structures.

3 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde & Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (New York: Vintage Books, 2011).

Ultimately, this thesis argues that the Tradwife subculture exemplifies the persistent dangers of women's complicity in their unfreedom. By presenting submission as a lifestyle choice, tradwives obscure the structural forces at play, and evade responsibility for the harmful ideologies they propagate. Critical phenomenology and Beauvoir's existentialism allow us to move beyond tradwives' superficial notions of choice, and interrogate the socio-historical roots of tradwives' actions.

Chapter I: Beauvoir, Existential Freedom, and Critical Phenomenology

The notion of existential freedom is central to understanding this thesis's argument: as will be shown, existential freedom is at stake in tradwives' complicity in women's unfreedom. Existentialism is best understood as the philosophical belief that human existence precedes their essence,⁴ which entails that humans first physically manifest themselves in the world before defining themselves. As such, existential freedom refers to human's possibility of defining their own purpose and meaning. Beauvoir has dedicated many of her works to developing the philosophy of existentialism, including her book *The Ethics of Ambiguity*,⁵ on which the conceptualisation of existential freedom in this chapter will be based.

In what follows, the concept of existential freedom will be explained, as well as critical phenomenology, which introduces a nuanced perspective to the radical subjectivity of existentialism. Whereas existentialism will be necessary to reveal the paradoxical nature of voluntary submission in Tradwifery, critical phenomenology is essential to understanding the factors that make up tradwives' complicity. The latter method involves both tradwives' personal experiences and the social circumstances that underlie their decision to submit themselves.

4 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, trans. Carol Macomber (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 20.

5 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York, NY: Open Road Integrated Media, Inc, 2018).

The Responsibility in Freedom

Existentialists believe that humans seek to become purposeful through their actions and choices. However, we never seem to be completely able to define ourselves, and always remain striving for meaning, which conditions the human existence.⁶ Still, as no deity, human fate, or other determining factor defines our purpose, humans are radically free to do so themselves. Contrary to what one might expect, radical freedom does not entail that humans can act limitlessly. Instead, Beauvoir explains that the human “bears the responsibility for a world which is not the work of a strange power, but of himself, where his defeats are inscribed, and his victories as well.”⁷ If there is no pre-given nature, nor a deity who designed us, there are no reasons that can pardon our behaviour and impact on the world around us, whether positive or negative. Ultimately, the human being bears responsibility for any of their own decisions – is condemned to, even. The responsibility for every action you undertake, and the ones that you decide not to, is a heavy burden to carry. Some take flight from this terrifying reality of creating meaning for themselves by subordinating themselves to an authority of sorts, whether that be a person, a religion, or societal values.⁸ This evasion of subjectivity by losing oneself in something external, Beauvoir argues, is still an act done out of one’s inherent freedom.

Beauvoir acknowledges that people can be restricted in their freedom by factors outside of themselves, namely their social circumstances. When this is the case, she states that the individual’s “behavior is defined and can be judged only within this given situation, and it is possible that in this situation, limited like every human situation, they realize a perfect assertion of their freedom. But once there appears a possibility of liberation, it is resignation of freedom not to exploit the possibility, a resignation which implies dishonesty and which is a positive fault.”⁹ Simply put, someone must maintain

6 Ibid., 14.

7 Ibid., 11.

8 Ibid., 25.

9 Ibid., 22.

and express their freedom for as much as their circumstances allow, lest they be guilty of needlessly embracing subordination. In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir connects this guilt to women who make no attempt to escape their societal position as the inferior sex, but would rather adopt this gendered role instead. This paradoxical conduct is also found in tradwives, as will be further explored in the third chapter.

Methodologically following Beauvoir's existentialism, this thesis holds that every individual has existential freedom, regardless of their situation. This implies an extreme form of agency. At any time, one has the ability to take action, or choose what action to take. Yet, one is responsible for every act they do or do not decide to perform. Applying Beauvoir's critical ideas of responsibility in existential freedom, my interpretation of complicity in subordination is as follows: when a person uses their inherent existential freedom to submit themselves to someone else, therefore relinquishing said freedom. This freedom may have been limited from the start by external factors. However, when one does not resist these externally imposed limitations, but instead internalises or endorses their subordination (or even voluntarily chooses it), one becomes complicit and bears the full responsibility for this choice. As will be argued in the last two chapters, tradwives show this complicity in their own subordination to a very high degree, as they not only voluntarily choose it, but also actively promote a lifestyle of submission online.

Critical Phenomenology: A Theoretical Framework

This thesis will use the method of critical phenomenology to reveal the nature of tradwives' complicity. Critical phenomenology is a philosophical school of thought that is greatly inspired by, inter alia, Beauvoir's existentialist approach to explain the systemic oppression of women. Whereas classical phenomenology¹⁰ prioritises the study of subjectivity and experiences of the world in isolation (a priori), critical phenomenology argues that these are warped by interpersonal

10 Some philosophers that are considered classical phenomenologists are Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty; their ideas are used as the basis for critical phenomenological analyses.

experiences, the body, and social identity.¹¹ According to critical phenomenology, this context-dependent character of subjectivity cannot be bracketed, nor be treated as an afterthought. Critical phenomenology can thus be understood as having a dual character: on the one hand, it values first-person narratives of experience, and on the other, it recognises that these cannot be separated from intersubjectivity and the complexities of socio-historical structures.

Since the method emphasises both personal accounts and social context, critical phenomenology is most often used in intersectional works (examining how different forms of oppressions intersect). This thesis' analysis of tradwives benefits from the rich framework the method offers. Critical phenomenology engages with the women as subjects, and as participants of interpersonal and societal formations. The following chapters take a critical phenomenological approach to Tradwifery. I will do this by both situating the individual experiences of tradwives (in the form of testimonies) in anti-feminist narratives, and overarching structures that define the subculture – be it religion, political affiliation, history, or the patriarchy.

Chapter II: Disassembling Tradwives

While the precise reach of the Tradwife subculture remains unclear, it has been widely spread among the Western world through popular social media platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube.¹² The Tradwife movement is especially appealing to women because of its romantic idealisation of 1950s domesticity: a tranquil, simple life dedicated to cooking, cleaning, and family. This lifestyle is often visualised through the imagery of women in checkered vintage dresses surrounded by cheerful children in idyllic home settings.

The image of the so-called “Happy Housewife Heroine”¹³ is in high contrast to the increasingly demanding roles women in today's

11 Elisa Magri and Paddy McQueen, *Critical Phenomenology: An Introduction* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2023).

12 Devin Proctor, “The #Tradwife Persona and the Rise of Radicalized White Domesticity”, *Persona Studies* 8, no. 2 (2022): 7–26.

13 Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York, NY: Dell Publishing Co., Inc, 1977).

society experience.¹⁴ Not only are women expected to excel at a full-time career, but they are also forced to do housework when they return home, as an equal division in labour at home is oftentimes not achieved between heterosexual couples. This results in women carrying a double burden and having very little leisure time. The Tradwife subculture attracts women precisely because it offers a lifestyle that might appear unrewarding and repetitive to some, but opens up possibilities for women to have more free time of their own when their families are away from home for work or school.

In this chapter, I will show that the emergence of the Tradwife subculture is a response to feminist critiques of femininity – that is, feminists efforts to de-naturalise the ideal of the woman as a caring housewife. As such, Tradwifery must be understood as being part of a larger political scene of conservative discourses that uphold (internalised) misogynist beliefs. To show how Tradwifery is influenced by conservative ideology, this chapter will first situate the subculture in a dialogue with feminist backlash to homemaking. The analysis of this dialogue exposes the fact that the Tradwife community is inherently anti-feminist. This insight will allow me to clear up the myth of traditional housewifery in order to reveal the social structures tradwives are part of. Uncovering the origin of Tradwifery is crucial for understanding why the complicity in tradwives' own unfreedom is no simple matter of personal choice.

My Choice: Tradwives' Anti-feminist Rhetoric

Feminism has long scorned the social meaning and function of the housewife: warming the husband's bed, bearing children, being (socially, culturally, physically) isolated from the outside world, and the menial tasks that make up housework.¹⁵ Although modern technology assists with some of the aspects of being a housewife – like machinery to lessen the workload – she has no freedom. Housewives experience very little autonomy outside of the household, whether this be financial, emotional, intellectual, or existential. Instead of having

14 Sophia Sykes and Veronica Hopner, "Tradwives: Right-Wing Social Media Influencers", *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 53, no. 4 (2024): 454, 460.

15 Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 474.

the freedom to define herself, the housewife is constant subject to her husband's will and whims.¹⁶

From the perspective of existentialism, such a life seems entirely undesirable in a society where women can, instead, strive to live in freedom. This is why it may seem so puzzling why tradwives voluntarily choose to live in submission. Estee C. Williams, a prominent figure in the online Tradwife community, clarifies tradwives' reasoning. She explains that the choice to submit to their husbands did not emanate from a feeling of inferiority, but instead from a belief that women have inherently different roles to take up in society.¹⁷ I contend that, like many other tradwives, Williams embodies the notion of "the Eternal Feminine."

The Eternal Feminine is described by Beauvoir as a fabrication of femininity that shackles real life women to a position of subservience.¹⁸ Serving as an ideology, the idea of the Eternal Feminine puts women's subordination forward as an immutable fact. Allegedly, it is the nature of women that makes them fit for certain activities (cooking, cleaning, child-rearing), and unfit for others (politics, philosophy, making decisions for themselves). Although the Western philosophical tradition has long seen the Eternal Feminine as a display of women's inferiority, tradwives like Williams seem to have internalised it. According to them, being a homemaker is an equal and natural position for women to occupy.

Like Williams, Tradwife "herblessedhome" elucidates Tradwifery's stance on the Eternal Feminine in one of her TikTok videos: "women [...] ought to be judged by the criteria of femininity, for it is in their femininity that they participate in the human race".¹⁹ Tradwives like her often utilise slogans such as "feminine, not feminist" to advocate for a revival of conservative, religious, and heteronormative

16 Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 484, 521.

17 Esteecwilliams, "What it means to be a Tradwife", TikTok, accessed October 29th, 2024, <https://www.tiktok.com/@esteecwilliams/video/7141111247033912622>.

18 Debra Bergoffen, "The Eternal Feminine", in *50 Concepts for a Critical Phenomenology*, ed. Gail Weiss, Ann V. Murphy, and Gayle Salamon (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2020), 121.

19 Herblessedhome, "It's a naive sort of feminism", TikTok, accessed December 14th, 2024, <https://www.tiktok.com/@herblessedhome/video/7213442211919252779>.

gender norms.²⁰ These women reclaim terms such as “toxic femininity”²¹ to portray themselves as embracing an “authentic” womanhood. When claiming this “toxic femininity,” and stating that it is superior to feminism, tradwives concur with the notion that women have a set nature that flourishes only inside the private sphere.²² Feminism, in the tradwives’ view, is judgemental, oppressive, and untrue to the real female nature by rejecting it.

However, not all tradwives actively dismiss feminism on these grounds. Instead, some invoke the ideas of so-called “choice feminism.” Pettitt explained that her “view of feminism is about choices, and to say, on one hand, you can go into the working world and compete with men, yet you’re not allowed to stay home, that’s actually taking a choice away.”²³ Proponents of choice feminism insist that mainstream feminism unfairly scrutinises women’s choices, such as dressing to appeal to the male gaze, or deciding to become a stay-at-home mother.²⁴ Within this framework, any choice a woman makes is considered inherently feminist, as long as it stems from her own volition. Consequently, the choice feminist narrative allows tradwives to evade all feminist criticism by reducing their decision to individual choice – something that must be supported on the basis of women’s freedom of choice, and is equally feminist to having a career as a woman. Decisions become an entirely private matter, which cannot be criticised. Tradwives thus opt out of the dilemma altogether, bearing no responsibility and repercussions for the broader implications of their decisions.²⁵

20 Sykes and Hopner, 474.

21 The term is used in feminist discourse to refer to the gender expectations that keep women in submissive positions (see McCann, Hannah. “Is there anything “toxic” about femininity? The rigid femininities that keep us locked in.” *Psychology & Sexuality* 13, no. 1 (2022): 23–32).

22 Proctor, 15.

23 BBC Stories, dir., ‘Submitting to My Husband like It’s 1959’: Why I Became a Trad-Wife | BBC Stories, 5:18.

24 Michael L Ferguson, “Choice Feminism and the Fear of Politics”, *Perspectives on Politics* 8, no.1 (2010): 247.

25 Ibid., 250.

The Myth and Root of “Trad”

To accept, on the basis of the previous section, that Tradwifery arose only in opposition to feminist convictions of housewifery would be an oversimplified and incomplete account of the subculture’s origins. By accepting this account, one risks overlooking the socio-political roots of Tradwifery that are foundational to their ideologies. These facets of Tradwifery’s origin show that the way tradwives use the term “traditional” is, in fact, disconnected from historical reality. Despite the image tradwives have created for themselves as apolitical women with a special interest in 1950s housewifery and family values, a recent study²⁶ reveals that the “traditional” aspect of Tradwife culture is grounded in a problematic myth. Namely, this study shows that a selective historical snapshot has been misinterpreted as an authentic representation of traditional housewifery. In reality, the stay-at-home lifestyle was limited primarily to white, suburban women who had the privilege of not working outside the home.²⁷ Most women, on top of being wives and mothers, would have been unable to sustain their family if they did not perform work outside of the house, like working on fields, in stores, weaving baskets, and spinning wool.²⁸

It would be more accurate to say that the definition of the term “traditional” within “tradwife” is based on religious²⁹ and conservative ideologies: these ideologies uphold the ideal of a woman as subordinated being in an archetypically gendered relationship. As much as the participants of the Tradwife subculture try to deny it, underneath the bread-baking, and motherhood advice, Tradwifery is laden with politics.³⁰ The conservative and religious roots are not just apparent in their open endorsement of conservative values, but also, to name a few, nationalism, heterosexuality, and anti-abortion beliefs. Less

26 Proctor.

27 Ibid., 9.

28 Women these days encounter the same predicament: even if they would like to become fulltime housewives, their family’s financial situation may not allow them to.

29 Sykes and Hopner found that religious tradwives were followers of Pagan, Evangelical, Catholic, Alt-Catholic, Orthodox Christian, Mormon, or non-denominational Christian ideology (466).

30 Sykes and Hopner, 453.

overtly displayed, yet equally common notions found in Tradwife media are misogyny, racism, anti-LGBTQIA+ activism, and fascism. Evidently, these aspects are what truly makes up the hidden character of Tradwifery. Beneath the aesthetic homemaking performance lies what can only be described as a constellation of conservative ideologies – present in some particular tradwives more than others, yet an inextricable part of the subculture.

By scrutinising the origin of Tradwifery, this chapter has laid the groundwork for this thesis' argument. The next chapter will further expound on the tension between individual choice and social influence within the tradwife discourse. Using the theories of Beauvoir and Knowles, this analysis will critically examine how tradwives' subjective experiences reflect complex socio-historical forces that underpin their voluntary submission. The final chapter looks into the responsibility tradwives evade by using choice feminist and anti-feminist rhetoric, and what role their position of influencer plays in this.

Chapter III: Tradwives' Complicity in Unfreedom

Historically, culturally, and socially, submission has been understood as despicable behaviour.³¹ Following this trend, existentialists regard submission as a cowardly flight from one's freedom and responsibility, as shown in the first chapter. Despite society's disapprobation, tradwives appear to be actively subordinating themselves. Does this stem from an individual choice, as these women claim, or is there something deeper at play?

The previous chapter gave an analysis of how the Tradwife subculture is situated within broader social structures, thus showing the ways in which tradwives are simultaneously influenced and influencing. Building on the philosophical frameworks and definition of complicity provided in chapter I, and on the analysis of Tradwifery from chapter II, the next few sections will critically assess what motivates these women to voluntarily relinquish their freedom and submit themselves. In this chapter, it will be made clear how tradwives' com-

31 Manon Garcia, *We Are Not Born Submissive: How Patriarchy Shapes Women's Lives* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021).

plicity in their own subordination has been developed by both structural impositions and individual choice, instead of one or the other. This position will be made clear by comparing other feminist understandings of women's complicity to tradwives' choice feminism. I will be drawing on the works of phenomenologist Charlotte Knowles and Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* to give a critical interpretation of complicity derived from a standpoint of existential freedom. This definition will uncover the paradox hidden within tradwives' complicity in their unfreedom.

Structural Imposition versus Individual Choice

Many feminists have actively avoided the topic of women's complicity in their own subordination, as, at the first glance, there seem to be just two possible explanations. These speculations are both not favourable to the image of women: either women are submissive by nature, which implies that they are inherently inferior to men, or they voluntarily choose to remain passive victims in the face of their subordination and are guilty of failing to appreciate their freedom.³² Both images do not escape the sexism intrinsic to the Eternal Feminine. Two notable attempts of feminists to overcome this binary are Manon Garcia's "cost-benefit" and Martha Nussbaum's "adaptive preference" analyses. Both theories interpret complicity as women's resignation to their supposed "fate," since social structures leave women no better alternative. These accounts argue that complicity is a result of either women finding it more beneficial to accept their subordination, or women's psyche becoming distorted and adapting to a submissive role.

The feminist understandings of complicity in subordination are in stark contrast to how tradwives explain their motivations. As previously discussed, Tradwifery frequently makes use of so-called "choice feminist" arguments to explain why they submit themselves to men. Tradwives are in favour of women's voluntary subordination, and make the conscious decision to adhere to it themselves. As opposed to tradwives' focus on individual choice, the "cost-benefit" and

32 Garcia, *We Are Not Born Submissive*, 3–4.

“adaptive preference” analyses see complicity as a product of external powers inciting women to take on certain roles.

This thesis argues that both the tradwives’ choice feminist explanation and the feminist analyses are faulty. These accounts do not suffice as accepting choice feminism would not fully grasp the reason why so many women are inclined to turn away from material, emotional, and existential freedom to become tradwives. On the other hand, seeing complicity simply as a response to societal forms of female suppression takes women’s agency away, and does not adequately address tradwives’ role in reinforcing an oppressive system and perpetuating their own unfreedom. Alternatively, this thesis offers a third, critical phenomenological way of understanding complicity in subordination, that unites individual experience and structural imposition.

Tradwives and the Case of “Personal Complicity”

In her articles “Beauvoir on Women’s Complicity in Their Own Unfreedom” and “Beyond Adaptive Preferences: Rethinking Women’s Complicity in their own Subordination,” Charlotte Knowles proposes an alternative to earlier feminist explanations of women’s choice to submit themselves. Knowles puts forward a convincing understanding of complicity by simultaneously acknowledging women’s agency and their social circumstances. Her proposition draws on Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*. Beauvoir considers women’s unfreedom a case of complicity – a term that implies existential freedom and agency (see Chapter I) – since one is not “complicit” in an act when they have no possibilities of avoiding it.³³ This does not mean that women’s path to existential freedom is unhindered: society restricts women’s opportunities, and tries to keep them stuck in a cycle of immanence – repetition of menial chores and expectations.³⁴

Even though society applies limitations to women, Beauvoir explains that “[woman] makes herself object; at the moment she makes herself being, she is exercising a free activity; this is her original trea-

33 Charlotte Knowles, “Beauvoir on Women’s Complicity in Their Own Unfreedom,” *Hypatia* 34, no. 2 (2019): 246.

34 Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 638.

son; the most docile, the most passive woman is still consciousness.”³⁵ In this quote, Beauvoir argues that women actively choose to submit and objectify themselves. This agency does not take away that women have been guided by societal expectations in order to accept the role of the “inferior” in the first place. Yet, when women choose not to resist these expectations, they consciously start reproducing their own unfreedom. Beauvoir believes that women’s resignation to socially expected roles is a conscious choice, in which women voluntarily embrace subordination.

As these women contribute to their own, “personal” unfreedom, Knowles³⁶ dubs it a case of “personal complicity” (rather than “legalistic”³⁷ and “structural”³⁸ complicity). Crucial to this concept is the relation between its internal (active) and external (passive) components. Beauvoir and Knowles acknowledge that the external circumstances women find themselves in are oppressive. After all, women find that society imposes limitations on them from the very start – for instance, by having less job opportunities income than men. Yet, when women become aware of it, many do not choose to undo themselves of their shackles. Rather, these women consciously respond to their externally imposed unfreedom by reinforcing it, which “firms up [their] complicity.”³⁹

The case of personal complicity is particularly evident when one considers the Tradwife subculture. Tradwives have either been raised in conservative and/or religious households themselves, or have encountered and internalised such ideologies through social media.⁴⁰ In this sense, tradwives are the passive recipient of an oppressive system,

35 Ibid., 653.

36 Charlotte Knowles, “Responsibility in Cases of Structural and Personal Complicity: A Phenomenological Analysis”, *The Monist* 104 (2021): 224–237.

37 ‘Contributing to another person’s wrongdoing’ (Knowles 2021, 224), when someone partakes in a legal offence not by committing the illegal act, but by aiding the people who do.

38 One’s involvement in structural injustice by, for instance, not reprimanding someone for making a discriminating joke, and thereby contributing to the continuance of oppressive structures (Knowles, “Responsibility in Cases of Structural and Personal Complicity,” 227).

39 Knowles, “Responsibility in Cases of Structural and Personal Complicity,” 231.

40 Sykes and Hopner.

and their complicity seem only natural regarding their circumstances. These impositions are not the full explanation, however. After becoming subjected to the external influences and becoming aware of these, tradwives not only accept their own unfreedom, but wholeheartedly support it. Tradwives celebrate their lifestyle, as becomes apparent from their narratives: tradwife Sarah tells her followers that “[t]o me it’s not just cooking, cleaning, laundry, chores... It’s serving my family.”⁴¹ Tradwife Mrs. Aria Lewis states that her marriage choice was based on being “completely confident in submitting to him as the leader of [their] home.”⁴² Likewise, tradwife Jasmine Dinis asserts that “[m]en don’t want boss babes. They want homemakers.”⁴³ In the end, tradwives posts all seem boil down to the same argument: ‘as women, we ought to subordinate ourselves to men.’

Understanding Tradwifery through a critical phenomenological framework as a display of personal complicity reveals its layered nature, bridging the gap between structural determinism and individual agency. Furthermore, it paints a less distressing picture of women’s complicity than deeming it a mere natural course of affairs: in spite of limiting social, historical, political, and religious structures, these are not inevitable, and tradwives have a chance at existential freedom.⁴⁴ However, this freedom implies a responsibility. Tradwives may not be blamed for being exposed to the oppressive system in the first place, and complicity in such a situation is very likely, but these women are nonetheless accountable for not pulling away from it. The following chapter will discuss this in greater detail, going into what tradwives’ complicity means for themselves, their followers, and the structures they support.

41 Sarahwildmothering, “To me it’s not just cooking, cleaning, laundry, chores...” TikTok, accessed December 15th, 2024, <https://www.tiktok.com/@sarahwildmothering/video/7274343940709420290>.

42 Mrs. Aria Lewis, “How I Knew He Was THE ONE | Answering YOUR Questions About Our Marriage”, YouTube, accessed December 15th, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qjoqqj27rfM>.

43 Jasminediniiss, “Men don’t want boss babes”, TikTok, accessed December 15th, 2024, <https://www.tiktok.com/@jasminediniiss/video/732872535538304258>.

44 Charlotte Knowles, “Beyond Adaptive Preferences: Rethinking Women’s Complicity in their own Subordination”, *European Journal of Philosophy* 30 (2022): 1329.

Chapter IV: Responsibility and the Public Persona

Drawing on existentialism and critical phenomenology, this thesis has studied how the Tradwife subculture emerged from anti-feminist critique and conservative ideals for women. Based on these factors, it has argued that tradwives' complicity in their own subordination is a product of external and internal aspects. The final chapter will use Beauvoir's ideas on the ethics of existential freedom, and Knowles' article "Responsibility in Cases of Structural and Personal Complicity: A Phenomenological Analysis," to show that although tradwives may be vicariously responsible for their complicity in the first place, they bear full responsibility for actively reproducing and influencing their followers into doing the same.

Responsibility

Beauvoir does not deny that people are sometimes limited in their existential freedom – the freedom to determine one's own purpose. On the contrary, Beauvoir sees all too clearly that women's societal position obstructs from reaching independence and existential freedom. Knowles⁴⁵ adds to this that women's situation and certain moral orientations (like religious and conservative ideologies) make it highly likely that women become complicit in their unfreedom. In the first place, complicity may not have resulted out of a conscious act at all, but might have originated from learnt and internalised behaviour instead. These factors make personal complicity ambiguous: if the person cannot help being thrown into a state of complicity in the first place, how can they be responsible for it?

However, following Knowles, it seems that "although agents may only be vicariously responsible for becoming complicit, they can be held more directly responsible for entrenching their complicity. The complicit agent is responsible for their complicity to the extent that they fail to take responsibility for it."⁴⁶ In other words, the state of complicity is not inescapable. A person is partially responsible for not resisting the subordination from the start. Hereafter, they be-

45 Knowles, "Responsibility in Cases of Structural and Personal Complicity."

46 Ibid., 224.

come fully responsible if they begin to ingrain and reproduce this unfreedom. Knowles' view is, thus, in line with Beauvoir's existential approach to responsibility, which states that someone may not be completely free, but can become guilty of not attempting to break free from it when there is possibility to. Furthermore, contrary to its namesake, "personal" complicity does not only affect the person themselves. As much as the individual is impacted by interpersonal relations and societal structures so does the individual have impact on others – the internal and external structures are intertwined. Knowles states that the individual actively reinforces systems of oppression, harm, injustice, and the unfreedom of others by being complicit in their own unfreedom.⁴⁷

The ambiguous nature of complicity is seen in the Tradwife culture as well. Tradwives may have a social background that limits them to the role as housewife, but these women chose not to resist or question it. On top of this, tradwives even became influencers and began promoting the Tradwife lifestyle. The fact tradwives are so vocal about their submission online makes the subculture an especially complex case study, as opposed to the common stay-at-home mother. Tradwives' online behaviour can be described as "[w]oman's faults [that] are amplified all the more to the extent that she will not try to combat [repressive structures] but, on the contrary, make an ornament of them."⁴⁸ Instead of resisting oppression and thus (re)gaining existential freedom, tradwives flaunt their chosen subordination for all to see on the online web, encouraging other women to follow suit. This statement can be taken as saying that woman betrays both herself and women in general by staying complicit: she perpetuates a stereotype that affects all women. What makes the Tradwife subculture particularly harmful is not necessarily the individual aspect of personal complicity, but the public one, as will be further explored in the next section.

47 Ibid., 228.

48 Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 654.

Public Persona

At first glance, it may seem curious that tradwives openly promote a lifestyle of voluntary submission. However, this becomes clearer when considering the factors discussed in this thesis. Tradwives often reject the idea that their complicity perpetuates harm, either to themselves or others. Tradwives like Williams⁴⁹ argue that Tradwifery is not about endorsing harmful gender stereotypes, as feminism claims, but about celebrating a chosen lifestyle. This sentiment is common among followers of the subculture, who deny both the impact of external structures on their choices and their influence on others.⁵⁰ By framing their complicity as an individual choice, these women reinforce traditionalist ideals rooted in conservative backgrounds and notions of “the Eternal Feminine,” which present homemaking as a natural role for women.

Through aesthetically curated narratives, tradwives subtly weave radical ideologies into appealing lifestyle content, expanding their influence and introducing female-centric stories into traditionally male-dominated right-wing spaces.⁵¹⁵² This has concrete consequences: by normalising and romanticising traditional gender roles, tradwives perpetuate regressive stereotypes that restrict women’s freedom (whether existential, financial, emotional, etc). Tradwives’ reach on social media allows these ideas to spread fast, influencing not only their immediate followers but also wider audiences who encounter their content through algorithms. This normalisation restricts women’s autonomy by framing homemaking and submission as both a natural role and a morally superior lifestyle, discouraging alternatives that challenge traditional gendered hierarchies. Moreover, their online influence creates fertile ground for patriarchal ideologies to thrive, as these platforms enable the subtle blending of personal choice rhetoric with broader right-wing agendas aimed at curbing women’s rights and reinforcing male dominance.

49 Esteecwilliams, “What it means to be a Tradwife.”

50 Proctor, 9.

51 Ibid., 8.

52 Sykes and Hopner, 454, 479.

Although tradwives may represent the source of the rapidly circulating ideologies, these women are not the only ones who bear responsibility. Their followers play a significant role in sustaining and amplifying the subculture. By engaging with tradwife content – through likes, comments, shares, and even emulation – followers validate and encourage the promotion of traditional gender roles. This reciprocal dynamic reinforces the appeal of the tradwife lifestyle, creating an echo chamber where conservative ideals are celebrated. In doing so, followers contribute to the cycle of influence, helping to legitimise and spread narratives that undermine gender equality and further entrench patriarchal norms in both online and offline spaces. As the instigators, tradwives bear a much greater responsibility, yet their followers are ultimately responsible for keeping the Tradwife subculture alive.

Conclusion

In brief, this thesis has argued that the tradwives' presentation of their decision to submit as an individual choice does not reveal the full picture. Through the lens of Beauvoir's existentialism and critical phenomenology, it was made clear that women's complicity in their subordination results from both individual choice, as tradwives claim, as well as the structural imposition of societal norms and values for women. This stance makes the question of responsibility ambiguous: how can a person be responsible for something they did not completely cause themselves?

An analysis of *The Second Sex* and Knowles' works clarified this point. Although women are limited in their opportunities by societal expectations from the very start, their circumstances do not excuse their choice not to resist these restrictions. Both structural impositions and individual choice must be taken into account when considering a multifaceted case study like Tradwifery. These two aspects are combined in the concept of 'personal complicity': tradwives are simultaneously passive subjects and active agents of their own unfreedom. The complexities personal complicity pose cannot simply be dismissed as naive submission, mere adaptation to patriarchal forces, or an entirely private matter.

Through a philosophical and socio-historical analysis of the Tradwife subculture, this thesis has answered to which extent tradwives bear responsibility for perpetuating harmful, gendered stereotypes on online platforms, particularly by being complicit in women's unfreedom. As has been shown, tradwives are entirely responsible for not only internalising their submission, but even broadcasting it online. The latter shows the full extent to which tradwives are responsible for their complicity in women's subordination. Not only do these women choose to submit themselves, relinquishing their existential freedom, but tradwives use their online platforms to encourage other women to adopt the "Trad" lifestyle as well. As such, tradwives are responsible for both their own choice to submit, as well as the massive impact they have on their followers. Ultimately, the Tradwife subculture reveals that submission is not just personal, but a public act with systemic effects.



#2

Freya Brandvik

The Great American Memoir

Carson Buckli

The truth is, I never thought I'd live a very long life. Life is a tremendous gift, but the line between fantasy and reality is a harsh one. All that's left is to live my fantasy, because sooner or later reality will swoop in with its wings and lift me from the ground.

The Oasis

An oasis

Calm

From the roaring of civilization

Birds chirp and squirrels squirm

Packs of deer make their rounds

I listen to the sound

Of the trees swaying in the wind

A sense of delight flows within

And I'm relieved

I'm free

Overshadowed

A deer

Limited only

By the flow of the rivers

And the extent of its knowledge

THE REED

Its spirit
Reflected in the woods
That harbor the necessity
Of life

The warm summer sun
Stands high above the world
The woods below
A safe haven
As a deer wanders
In its natural environment

The sky darkens
The clouds turn black
The woods turn to darkness
At the edge of the woods
A tree falls

One by one
The trees fall flat
A deer runs deeper
Seeking shelter

The sky darkens
The clouds turn red
The woods turn to blood
At the center of the woods
A tree falls

One by one
The deer fall flat
A deer runs deeper
Seeking protection

Now in the last section
Of untouched forest

A deer clings on
 To the last of its home
 In its sights
 Tall dark figures
 Silhouettes looming over
 All-consuming
 And soon there is nothing
 A tragic ending
 To a once peaceful place

*The forest is no more. Taking its place is the tide of human civilization,
 whose artistic expression leads them back to times past.*

Your Shade Of Blue

A blank canvas
 My paint splatters
 A blob of yellow
 An isolated metropolis
 In a sea of white
 It sits alone

Violet hits the canvas
 It flows
 Sliding out of reach
 Away from my yellow
 Out of sight forever

Pink hits the canvas
 It flows slowly
 Just sliding out of reach
 Of my yellow
 Out of sight forever

Light blue hits the canvas
 A blob

THE REED

Close to my yellow
It stays
Yet just out of reach

A drop of light blue
Flows down off the canvas
Then another drop
And another
It slips away
From right beside my yellow

Soon it's just my yellow
An isolated metropolis
In a sea of paint stains
The remnants
Of missed potential
On a canvas

Light blue again hits the canvas
Closer to my yellow
So near
Yet still too far to mix
Another drop of light blue flows off the canvas
And another
Until once again my yellow is alone
An isolated metropolis

Time passes
My yellow grows used to its canvas
Until again light blue appears
Still so close
Yet not enough to mix
Soon a drop of light blue flows down
And another

A violent onslaught of red stains the canvas

It consumes our colors
 There are no remnants of us
 Red fills the space
 All-consuming

Inside a church
 Beautiful stained glass windows
 Reflect a light blue tone
 That shine on my body
 As I lay in the middle
 Of the holy structure

A pastor stands above me
 Reciting the holy verses
 As I lay blind
 From the light of the windows

He speaks of God
 For I have sinned
 He speaks of envy
 For I have committed
 He speaks of lust
 For I have yearned

His words flow onto me
 Like the holy waterfall
 Though his answers fall short
 Of what I want
 Of what I desire

Oh father please tell me
 Why must it be
 Why must the rivers flow south
 Why must this pity be aroused
 Is it true that we think
 Just to be in delusion

THE REED

Oh father please tell me

Oh son

Why must you be in this state

Why must you be so weak

This state of agony consumes you

Follow the river's flow

Only then will you learn

That it is not about direction

But the movement itself

It isn't what I want

It's what I need

My heart has grown so restless

Yet all I can do is hold on

See where the river takes me

Away from my torment

The canvas falls into the water

It floats down the stream

Its colors washing off

On its long journey forward

As it flows

It passes through a forest of green

A desert of baege

A town of yellow

A field of white

A mountain of grey

All under a dominating sky of blue

Finally the river empties

Into a never ending ocean

Decorated by a pink sunset

Even if the canvas is blank

Your blue will always be with it

As it floats away
 Into the expanse
 An isolated metropolis
 Together again

*As I meandered in my village, a blank canvas floated across the river. I
 picked it up, a sign of the vast potential that lay ahead of me.*

Over The Clouds And Under The Sea

A great many years ago
 I was exiled from my home village
 Strife with resentment
 I set forth on a noble quest
 That transcended time and essence

My path led me
 Down the depths of a tremendous valley
 Situated in a barren wasteland
 Desolate of humanity's treasures
 Though I was nye alone
 For a sickly man lay in front of me
 Whom I laid my words upon

Who art thou
 Who lay in this wasteland
 Withering away in the sands of time
 Bound to be buried
 Forgotten in all graces
 Except that of God's

Child of the road
 I am seasoned
 In the summers old and winters passed
 Let me ask
 What is it that brings you forth before me

THE REED

In this wasteland
Barren of youth and experience

I come in search of an answer
I come in search of a purpose
There is meaning I crave
And bliss shall prevail

Your eagerness shines
In the darkest corners of our existence
But it is this light
That reveals the monsters
Child
I have but one desire

What is dost thou desire
So much as to disclose to me
A wandering wayfarer

What I wish for
Exceeds time and essence
Yet thou will come to realize
That thou craves the same
Heed these words
As you continue on your journey

My journey next brought me
To the shore of a great sea
Tainted red

I obtained a boat
From a local merchant
And I set forth
Into the ocean of red
Above which clouds of gray loomed

As my boat traversed
 A seagull descended next to me
 I waved my arms
 To scare it back into flight
 But the bird was not phased
 And when I had finished
 Spoke thus

A great man you are
 But you face an insurmountable journey
 From your travels
 You will find your answers
 In your genesis
 And you will yearn
 And you will beg
 To close your eyes
 For the blind are the gleeful
 Ignorant to the suffering of the world

A pesky thing you are
 Who art thou to speak to me
 When you do not follow the natural law
 For God has spoken to me
 And he has sent me thus
 To find my salvation

Your illusions have convinced you
 That I am not thus
 You are doomed to suffer
 Doomed to be a slave
 Not to your humanity
 But to your senses

The bird betook flight
 Soon reaching far
 Out of sight

THE REED

I had not much time to think however
For a storm now held the sea in its grasp
It tossed around my boat
Battering it in the bloody sea
Until it capsized
And my vessel was no more

I woke up
Alone on a beach
On an island
In the middle of this bloody sea
I looked around
For any signs of life
That didn't come to me

I was alone and afraid
With no answers in sight
My rage overtook me
And I proceeded into a fight
With the sky above

Is this how you treat me
My glorious God
You subject me to this pain and this misery
You subject me to this quest
What a caring father you are
Letting his son walk alone
In the dark of the night
You cruel beast
I pity your creations
For what you've forced them to
Be gone from me

As I spoke thus
The clouds turned to red
And rained down blood

Onto the earth below
 Spreading my arms out wide
 I embraced the bloodied remnants of God's tears
 For now I had nothing else to lose
 I had lost humanity's greatest treasure

It was a great deal later
 That I was rescued by ship
 And brought back to the mainland
 Though by then I had grown worn and ill

I traced my steps back
 Back to the genesis
 I made it to a valley
 In a barren wasteland
 But it was there I collapsed
 My exhaustion overpowering
 Every fiber of my being
 I laid there
 Alone and withering
 Bound to be forgotten
 In all graces except that of God's

Before I transcended my mortality
 A youthful traveller came across me on the path
 I told him my story
 And he went along his merry way
 I pitied him
 For I knew what the path ahead brought
 Yet my frugal and sickly effort
 Could bear no survivors

In my youthful years
 I embraced my exile
 A chance to transcend spirituality
 Now I have found my answers

THE REED

But I'm too sick for joy
 Alone I am
 Bound to be forgotten
 In all graces except God's
 As the sands of time
 Bury my body

Though the body lives on, the soul has deceased. In this search for meaning, we find what is trivial and what is not.

Damned Be The Unfaithful

Forgive them father
 For those that do not love
 Cannot be just
 In the eyes of the cross

It is I they say
 That burns the cross
 For harboring my forest
 With the wrong fauna
 Planting my trees
 With the wrong water

It is natural law
 That the deer cannot poach with the deer
 The deer must poach the squirrel
 For at least that is what they say

Why must my deer
 Be limited
 When they desire
 Something greater
 Something smoother
 Something lovelier
 And yet they hunt my game

Trample my forest

These woods are now protected
 Your fires cannot spread
 Your weapons cannot hunt
 And if you do somehow find a way
 Father will be waiting
 With tears in his eyes
 For when his sons and daughters
 Thought they were fighting for him
 They were fighting against him

I love you
 And I hope you love me
 Because he loves us all
 And love shall prevail
 When all else fails

The Dreamer's Ballad

Humanity has turned the world
 From green to gray
 Natural to industrial
 Lively to sickly

I cling to the last of the greenery
 Longing for a return
 To times past
 When adventurers and explorers
 Reigned supreme

I snap my fingers
 And a giant bird lands beside me

Hop on
 Do not hesitate

THE REED

Child of this great world
Let me show you
What it provideth
As a reward
For keeping your eyes open

I hop on
And we soar
High above
In the sunny summer sky
Flying free from civilization
And out towards freedom

An ocean of blue
Fields of green
Forests of yonder
And hills up high
All soak the sights
Of this splendid Earth
That we get to call home

Down in the woods below
The bird drops me off
And I start down the path
Skipping merrily along the way

I cross a bridge over a pond
And witness a cottage
Smoking from the top
I enter
Inside is a fox
Cooking stew
For her children

They invite me to the table
And I eat the stew

Situated in vintage china
 That captivates my eyes
 A cuckoo clock
 Indicates that I go
 So I continue
 On my grand adventure

I encounter another pond
 This time a frog jumps out

Greetings sir
 You look like quite the explorer
 Would you like to explore my pond
 I assure you it's quite the experience
 Unlike any other

I nod my head
 And I plunge into the pond
 I swim down
 The bottom being many feet down
 Schools of tiny fish
 Swim merrily along
 As the frog shows me his abode
 A doll sized cottage
 At the pond floor

He introduces his wife
 And his daughter
 Who doesn't go to school
 But plays all day and night
 I drink tea with them
 And discuss the weather
 We conclude
 And I say my goodbyes
 Continuing on my journey

THE REED

I next come across a buck
Who greets me with a smile
And asks if I would like to race
I humbly oblige
And we start our warmup

Soon it feels as if
The whole forest is watching
The birds perched up in the branches
The frogs emerge from their ponds
The foxes and deer line the path

Two trees indicate the start
And two trees further down the path
Indicate the finish
A squirrel starts us
My heart beats out my chest
In anticipation
The squirrel squirms
And we're off

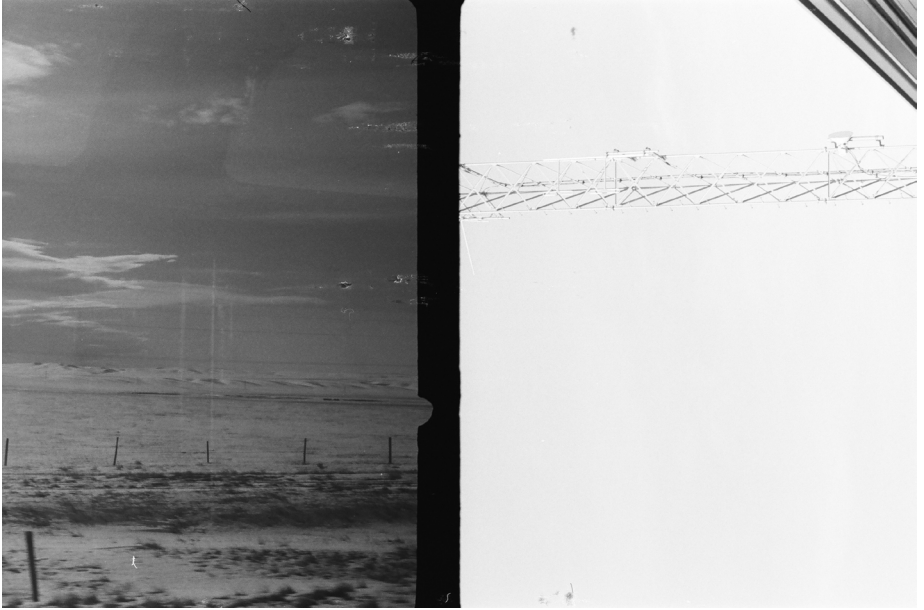
The race is neck and neck
The buck pounds on the trail
While I glide gracefully
The buck surges
I try to make a surge back
But it fails
The buck beats me to the line
Though the smile cannot be removed from my face
I laugh
And we share the joy
With the rest of the forest

It is evening now
The sun sets
The path bleeds into a grass field

I stand
Facing the sun above the ocean
Waiting for my time to come
For a wise man once said
It is better to be splattered green
Than to be stained gray

I stand
In the blissful company of my beautiful home
Awaiting salvation
Take me away
Take me home
Take me

My life is one interconnected poem, each day serving to enhance the
page and each new experience enhancing the world.



Observation Carriage
digital scan of 35mm film

Paavo Rundman

Humble Attention and the Emotional Life in Simone Weil

Ryan Moore

Simone Weil was a French activist, philosopher, and religious writer. Her writings often appropriate Christian, especially Catholic, concepts to explain the human condition. In this paper, I give a reading of the first half of Simone Weil's discourse "Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God" where Weil posits that attention and humility are sufficient for engaging in the proper love of God through school studies. I claim that Weil posits faith as necessary for attention by examining her discussion of experimental certainties. Further, I claim that Weil considers attention as necessary for developing humility, which I show through an analysis of the process she suggests for reaching the goal of humility. Finally, I take issue with Weil's explanation of this process, arguing that she fails to consider how experiencing this process can cause a level of emotional turmoil that makes the attention necessary for becoming humble nearly impossible. I then suggest that Weil implicitly provides the solution to this emotional turmoil through her discussion of faith.

The purpose of Simone Weil's discourse is to instruct on how to properly love God. In the context of school studies, this means one ought to develop humility and come to recognize that the goal of studies is to increase the power of attention. Weil claims that, "if these two conditions are perfectly carried out there is no doubt that school

studies are quite as good a road to sanctity as any other.”¹ Outside of the traditional dogmatism of the Church, Weil considers something as commonplace as schoolwork sufficient for developing the proper love of God. This love of God is done through prayer. Prayer itself, however, “consists of attention.”² Therefore, to love God one must develop one’s faculty of attention. In this context, attention is defined by Stuart Jesson as “A simultaneously ethical and intellectual capacity... the capacity and willingness to contemplate the world without lying to oneself or deliberately looking away from unwelcome facts.”³ As will be seen, this is a task easier said than done, but one way Weil believes we can develop attention is through school studies. In fact, with regards to loving God, “the development of the faculty of attention forms the real object and almost the sole interest of studies.”⁴ When loving God is the goal, studies are useful because they develop the attention necessary for proper prayer. However, while all attention directs itself towards God, only the highest part finds Him: “The highest part of the attention only makes contact with God, when prayer is intense and pure enough for such a contact to be established; but the whole attention is turned toward God.”⁵ This means that even when all my attention is directed toward God, I am not guaranteed to find Him. Without an intense and pure form of prayer, He will remain elusive. Yet, because all attention is oriented towards God, even the lesser form of attention developed through school studies provides practice for the higher kind of attention that makes contact with God. Thus, school studies prove valuable because they are “extremely effective in increasing the power of attention.”⁶ All studies, provided that they are done while properly oriented toward God, are an opportunity for the development of attention, which forms the

1 Simone Weil, “Reflections on the Right use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God,” in *Waiting for God*, (First Harper Perennial Modern Classics edition. New York, NY. Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2009,) 60.

2 Ibid., 57.

3 Stuart Jesson, “Simone Weil: Suffering, Attention and Compassionate Thought,” in *Studies in Christian Ethics* 27, no. 2, (London, England: SAGE Publications), 185–201.

4 Weil, 57.

5 Ibid., 57.

6 Ibid., 57.

ground of prayer.

Weil's conception of studies differs from everyday conceptions which focus on the accumulation of knowledge and how to apply this knowledge, most often in practical ways. I do not attend a class on engineering in order to learn how to pay attention; I attend for the purpose of understanding the material, often in order to get a good grade, sometimes because I have an interest in the class. Weil considers this the "intrinsic interest" of a subject which, while real, is secondary to the development of attention because it does not help in prayer.⁷ Because prayer is the most important, students ought to value the development of attention more than any individual subject they have an interest in. They should, "learn to like all these subjects, because all of them develop that faculty of attention which, directed toward God, is the very substance of prayer."⁸ Weil considers these subjects not for the knowledge they provide but for their usefulness in developing attention.

Weil uses the example of geometry to explain how all studies, even those that seemingly end in failure, help to develop attention. She claims that "If we have no aptitude or natural taste for Geometry, this does not mean that our faculty for attention will not be developed by wrestling with a problem or studying a theorem. On the contrary it is almost an advantage."⁹ Despite failing to find the answer to a problem, my attention has grown. Failure helps me in prayer by developing my attention. This assumes I struggle with the problem; a half-hearted attempt and easy submission will not help my prayer. While it may end in failure, "never in any case whatever is a genuine effort of the attention wasted."¹⁰ The important thing for developing attention is the effort involved. The outcome itself is negligible, as this, "apparently barren effort has brought more light into the soul."¹¹ Effort does not guarantee success in any problem we approach: I still fail the geometry problem. Weil is certain, however, that this effort

7 Ibid., 57.

8 Ibid., 58.

9 Ibid., 58.

10 Ibid., 58.

11 Ibid., 58.

will “bear its fruit in prayer.”¹² No matter the subject, problem, or outcome, as long as I put in the effort, I will have developed my attention for better prayer.

To engage in the effort that develops attention, one must have faith. Weil asserts that, “Certainties of this kind are experimental. But if we do not believe in them before experiencing them, if at least we do not behave as though we believed in them, we shall never have the experience that leads to such certainties.”¹³ To become certain that my effort will bear its fruit in prayer, I must engage in the effort. The engagement is what leads to certainty, as well as the fruit. But certainty does not come immediately. Faith in the eventual certainty is necessary. Weil continues, “There is a kind of contradiction here. Above a given level this is the case with all useful knowledge concerning spiritual progress. If we do not regulate our conduct by it before having proved it, if we do not hold on to it for a long time by faith alone, a faith at first stormy and without light, we shall never transform it into certainty.”¹⁴ Useful spiritual knowledge, knowledge that develops attention and orients us toward God, must be acted out before it can become certain. Only by clinging to and enacting useful yet uncertain knowledge can certainty come into being. This is the contradiction Weil sees: how can certainty come from uncertainty? It can only do so by experiencing what happens when I take the uncertain knowledge as fact, which can only be done through faith. I know at first only through faith, which simply means that I have trust, and then I know through the experience that this faith allows me to have. The first kind of knowledge that comes from faith cannot be considered certain. Only experience can bring real certainty about. Yet, this experience can only be had when one first has faith. Experiential knowledge has the same object as faith; they “believe” the same thing. But, through experience, spiritual knowledge becomes certain. Thus, because the certainty that effort will have its effect in prayer requires faith, and this effort is necessary for the development of attention,

12 Ibid., 58.

13 Ibid., 58.

14 Ibid., 58.

attention necessitates faith.

Weil also holds that one should study without desire for good marks or success. Students should undertake any studies “with the idea that each one will help to form in them the habit of that attention which is the substance of prayer.”¹⁵ This is not to say that students should not try to do their best—as this would undermine the effort that is necessary for the development of attention—but rather that the ultimate goal of studies must be to “aim solely at increasing the power of attention with a view to prayer.”¹⁶ Studies ought to be an orientation toward God through prayer, as opposed to an orientation towards success. On the physical level, there may not be a discernable difference in this. Two people may do the same work, put in the same effort, and look the same while one concerns oneself with a good mark and the other with the development of attention. Spiritually, however, the difference will become clear when it is time to pray, as, “even if our efforts of attention seem for years to be producing no result, one day a light that is in exact proportion to them will flood the soul.”¹⁷ When studies are done with a view toward prayer, this produces a kind of stockpile, lying in wait for the student who has faithfully and effortfully applied himself. The years of practice have honed the student’s attention, and they are rewarded with “a treasure no power on earth can take away.”¹⁸ This will not be the case with the student who is concerned with good marks and success. Years of effort may have passed, but without this effort being directed toward the development of attention, they have gone through no practice in prayer. When it is time to pray, this student will be unable to attend to the highest; their attention will be deficient. Thus, above all, it is imperative that students realize the real purpose of studies is practice for increasing the power of attention: “To make this the sole and exclusive purpose of our studies is the first condition to be observed if we are to put them to the right use.”¹⁹

15 Ibid., 59.

16 Ibid., 59.

17 Ibid., 59.

18 Ibid., 59.

19 Ibid., 59.

The second condition for the right use of studies after recognizing their purpose of developing attention is to develop humility. We become humble by concentrating attention on academic failures and critiques, attempting to understand them. Weil describes this process as taking, “great pains to examine squarely and to contemplate attentively and slowly each school task in which we have failed, seeing how unpleasing and second rate it is, without seeking any excuse or overlooking any mistake or any of our tutor’s corrections, trying to get down to the origin of each fault.”²⁰ By taking time to look deeply into the work we are disappointed with, we may be able to understand how our faults came to be. Only a thorough interrogation of our mistakes will reveal their actual origin. This must be done slowly, with attention, to ensure that we are not distracted. Attention is thus necessary for developing humility, because without paying close attention to our mistakes we will never recognize how “second rate” our work is, and it is through this recognition that “we can acquire the virtue of humility.”²¹

Weil recognizes that her position on attending to our mistakes is contrary to what normally occurs, which is to “give a sideways glance at the corrected exercise if it is bad and to hide it forthwith.”²² We are disappointed with ourselves and attempt to get rid of this disappointment by getting rid of its apparent cause, the exercise. As humans, we do this “nearly always.”²³ However, this response necessarily leads to more disappointment, because, “we work without making much progress when we refuse to give attention to the faults we have made and our tutor’s corrections.”²⁴ This cannot be otherwise. If we fail to look at our mistakes, we are bound to make them again. Even knowing that our mistakes exist, we find no path toward rectifying them without a thorough examination of the specific failure in question. When this examination does not occur, we are left only with a feeling of general failure. My vague sense of failure does not

20 Ibid., 60.

21 Ibid., 60.

22 Ibid., 60.

23 Ibid., 60.

24 Ibid., 60.

help me correct my work, as I must have a specific object of failure in mind that I intend to fix. I want to fix my geometry problem, but to do so I have to know at which point I went wrong and attend to that specific point. My tutor's corrections show me where this point is. Therefore, we must "withstand this temptation"²⁵ to hide our specific failures, instead facing them squarely with a goal of understanding. This specificity gives us a way forward.

Weil wrote her essay with spiritual development in mind, to teach the love of God. However, she overemphasizes the spiritual and intelligible levels of existence, failing to account for the emotional effect her suggested method of spiritual development will have on an individual. In reference to the genuine effort of attention, Weil claims that "It always has its effect on the spiritual plane and in consequence on the lower one of the intelligence, for all spiritual light lightens the mind."²⁶ Weil explains what kind of effect attention will have on spiritual development along with the "mind," which is equated to the intelligence. Through effortful attention we gain practice in prayer and our mind is lightened. However, Weil gives no account of how this attention affects someone on an emotional level. This lack is evident throughout the essay. When talking about giving attention to a problem in geometry that subsequently ends in failure, Weil claims that, "this apparently barren effort has brought more light into the soul." Additionally, this same effort "may very likely be felt in some department of the intelligence."²⁷ Nowhere is there any discussion of what kind of feeling someone might have after working for an hour on a geometry problem with no progress being made. Instead, she solely emphasizes the spiritual and intelligent development made by engaging in this problem. This lack of reference to the emotional life weakens Weil's argument for attempting to develop humility, as the emotions that naturally arise from failing to make progress in studies undermine the attention necessary to attend to faults and become humble.

25 Ibid., 60.

26 Ibid., 58, emphasis added.

27 Ibid., 58.

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While Weil recognizes the necessity of developing humility, she is too optimistic about the ease with which people can accomplish it. To accomplish this development, she posits that “it is enough to wish to do so.”²⁸ The only condition necessary for developing humility is an innate desire to take the steps required. Further, while Weil recognizes the “sense of our mediocrity” that occurs when we attempt to take these steps, she claims this emotional state is a good thing: “No knowledge is more to be desired.”²⁹ Weil fails to recognize the power of the emotional state she describes, understating how disruptive it can be for the person experiencing it. In fact, Weil offers no description of this affective state outside of her reference to mediocrity. This blind spot stems from Weil’s overemphasis on the spiritual level of experience, and, to a lesser extent, the intellectual level. It may be the case that the soul desires to develop humility, but this development relies upon focusing attention on faults and mistakes. The problem with this is that attention is nearly impossible while experiencing the inner emotional turmoil that happens when we focus our attention on faults and mistakes. For brief moments in time, it may be possible to focus attention on my mediocrity, but when done continuously this attention undermines itself.

To understand what kind of emotional effect an academic failure has on a person, consider the situation of writing a paper. First, I sit down to write and am greeted by a blank screen that reminds me how many words I have yet to write and how soon my paper is due. At this point, anxiety over the deadline has already disrupted my attention to some extent, but if all goes well, I discover the attention Weil describes and come up with an argument and outline. This process repeats itself over the course of multiple days—I sit down, am overcome by anxiety, then eventually begin to write. Finally, I bring it to my professor for feedback to begin my revisions. At the meeting, the full force of my mediocrity is laid out and displayed before me. I write down the professor’s feedback, take notes, and try to pay attention despite the growing anxiety that constantly distracts me from what

28 Ibid., 60

29 Ibid., 60.

they are saying. Finally, the meeting ends, and I am sent to correct myself.

As Weil says, I am now tempted to give my draft a “sideways glance...and to hide it forthwith.”³⁰ However, even if I face my mistakes head-on, something that Weil fails to describe happens. As I consider my draft, I also question my past and future writing. With evidence of my inadequacy right in front of me, all of the mistakes and corrections I’ve received in the past flood back into my mind, and anxiety about failing this paper in the same way heightens. Then, my mind reaches out toward the future, and I anxiously consider the possibility of my inadequacy persisting for all papers I write after the current one. I try to focus, to make an “effort of attention,”³¹ but my mind continually slips between my current disappointment and all the others that have or will happen in my life. The more I manage to focus attention on my current mediocrity, the more I begin to remember past instances, and the easier it is to consider what I will inevitably be mediocre at in the future. Isolating and correcting what I failed at this time serves to strengthen my anxiety about all other times. The attention that I am supposed to direct towards my mediocrity is undermined by the emotional effect that the attention produces, making any kind of sustained attention, no matter how much I wish for it, impossible.

Together, developing one’s attention and one’s humility are sufficient for engaging in the proper love of God. However, despite what Weil says, it is not possible to develop humility in the way she suggests simply by wishing to do so. The problem in this suggestion is its implicit reliance on faith. Weil assumes a spirit of trust will be present in all attention and humility developing activities, but this kind of attitude is not a given in our world today. Especially now, when so many things completely beyond my control are happening every day, it becomes harder and harder to trust that in the end, it will all be okay. To undergo the humbling process Weil argues for, faith must not be implicit: it must be brought to the foreground. Consid-

30 Ibid., 60.

31 Ibid., 59.

ering the process of writing again, if I look squarely at my mediocrity and mistakes without faith, I drown in doubt and anxiety. But faith guarantees that, “if we ask our Father for bread, he does not give us a stone.”³² Only with this attitude of trust can I confront my mediocrity in a way that properly develops humility. Faith allows me to believe that the paper I am writing now, all I have written before, and any I write in the future all grant me a more intimate love of the divine. Faith justifies the pain and anxiety that writing and all academic work causes, because faith tells me that “He cannot refuse to come to those who implore him long, often, and ardently.”³³ Weil recognizes how essential faith is for attention, but it is just as essential for developing humility. As she rightly claims, “Faith is the indispensable condition,”³⁴ but this is true both for attention and for humility.

32 Ibid., 58–59.

33 Ibid., 61.

34 Ibid., 58.

The Burden on Love

Jonah Rosario

*What makes you think love will end?
When you know that my whole life depends
On you (on you)*

- *The Association*

Romantic love is under stress. While the colloquially understood experience of love is a generally universal one, the kind we seek in romantic and amorous relationships is often harder to grasp, marked by a sense of transience and intensity when compared with its other shapes. Due to the strikingly idiosyncratic and personal nature of how romantic love is felt, a word that attempts to qualify its conditions maintains a level of definitional inadequacy. Despite this, and due to our over-generalized collective understanding of what it means to be “in” love, a set of near-mythical expectations for the romantic experience has been cultivated that not only informs how we operate within relationships, but structures the way we seek them. These expectations are grounded in a desire for a mediated system of meaning-based continuity that operates in defiant ignorance of the unmeaningful and illogical aspects of the human experience. In a word, it is a space that refuses to acknowledge an essential aspect of what Albert Camus refers to as the absurdity of existence. For our purposes, a deft explanation of this concept can be derived from his 1942 essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*. This mental process is often initiated on first contact with a potential partner and understood as the feeling of hope, hope for a love that will dismantle meaninglessness. This hope is bound to a specific temporality: the perceived transcendent space of romantic love requires a framework that operates outside the reality of our nothingness, and is therefore

situated in terms of an unknowable future. This paradox is described well by the aphoristic expressions of Simone Weil, specifically those contained in *Gravity and Grace*. In order for two individuals to orient themselves in terms of the acquisition of this false futurity, the sense that such space could exist must first be cultivated. How exactly we allow ourselves to reject the meaninglessness that defines existence prior to the actualization of the mediated illusion that protects us from it requires a fair amount of self-trickery. It encourages us to employ what Jean-Paul Sartre refers to in *Being and Nothingness* as bad faith, a process bolstered by the intersubjective nature of relationships. In placing these writers in conversation, I hope to deconstruct the process of hope-centered romantic “attainment” in exchange for one that acknowledges the absurdity of such an act, and by extension, relieves the burden on love.

In order to contrast hope for love with the absurd, it is essential to first qualify what is meant by absurdity. Camus defines it in broadest terms when describing the individual who is forced to make a decision: “At this point of his effort man stands face to face with the irrational. He feels within him his longing for happiness and for reason. The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world.”¹ In this sense, the absurd could be understood as a conflict between the desire to inhabit a space of continuity, constructed by “meaningful” environments, and the fact of existence as foreign to meaning; uncaptured by logical mediations; irrational. In terms of the everyday, this irrationality is reflected in our proclivity towards instinct (as opposed to the consideration of mediatable structures of logic) when making decisions. Despite this proclivity, a general consensus toward rationality, codified by meaning, persists. It is through these structures of meaning that we construct non-actions; thoughts and interpretations. When we hope for love, as opposed to acting on a feeling of love that is already present, we are only engaging one aspect of the absurd, that being the desire for continuity. This is often reflected in the chronolog-

1 Albert Camus, “The Myth of Sisyphus,” in *Basic Writings of Existentialism*, ed. Gordon Marino (Westminster: Random House Publishing group, 2007), 460.

ical rhetoric we use when describing “falling in love;” one thing will lead to another, and, if you are loving correctly, the first glance will culminate in beautiful matrimony. However, in refusing the second aspect of the absurd, one also disallows themselves from acknowledging the conflict between the desire for continuity and irrationality, and by extension the absurd itself. As a result, large swaths of human experience become untenable, as they are never fully contextualized.

While this is most poignant in the experience of love built on the hope for continuity, there exists a space of pre-construction in which the self constructs the possibility of actualizing this kind of relationship. This space can be chronologically identified in the time between meeting a potential romantic partner and the act of qualifying the relationship as such, and can also take hold during the relationship itself. The capacity for this to occur is contingent on a temporality that is not based on present feeling or experience, but instead the concept of future ones. Weil uses the following words to describe this process and its outcome: “When we are disappointed by a pleasure which we have been expecting which comes, the disappointment is because we were expecting the future, and as soon as it is there it is present. We want the future to be there without ceasing to be the future. This is an absurdity which eternity alone is the cure.”² Hope for love allows us to construct a future space of continuity wherein our personal needs are immediately accommodated by the apparently logical structure of a given relationship. This structure is reflected in both the personal dynamics specific to that relationship and the nature of commitment in general. Expressed colloquially, we feel the other will “complete us” or “balance us out.” This sense of unification into a space of constant meaning is systematized in the expressive structures and rituals of love, translating into things like vows. Vows, in this context, are essentially a promise to maintain the illusion of meaning in complete devotion to a rejection of the meaninglessness that constitutes the absurd.

This devotion to the defiance of the reality of meaninglessness

2 Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, trans. Emma Crawford and Mario Von der Ruhr (New York: Routledge, 2002), 20.

dooms its participants to a kind of anti-sisyphean, cyclical suffering: the process itself is a means toward the end of destroying the irrational, as opposed to an end in itself. This process is interpolated by Weil through metaphor:

A rock in our path. To hurl ourselves upon this rock as though after a certain intensity of desire had been reached it cannot exist anymore. Or else to retreat as we ourselves did not exist. Desire contains something of the absolute and if it fails (once its energy has been used up) the absolute is transferred to the obstacle. This produces the state of mind of the defeated, the oppressed.³

Contained in the experience of a love founded on hope is the sense that its reality has been actualized, that one has discovered a meaningful space that is mediated by the inner world that they and their partner have constructed. However, this mediated world inevitably comes into contact with the malaise and suffering of meaninglessness which the curated illusion of “meaningful” stability is incapable of accommodating. The curated mediations that justify and confirm every action are no longer successful, and an overwhelming feeling of dissatisfaction begins to take hold. In this formulation of love, the idea of attainment is more important than its object, and in effect, we strive towards nothing. If the same hope for love, that is, the same striving for a transcendent state of “meaning” in relationships is maintained, the elimination of the present in exchange for another, future-centered illusion becomes necessary. The cycle repeats itself.

This kind of relationship requires that its subjects perpetually move towards an unachievable state of being-with, a state founded on the presupposition that its actualization will allow the individual to transcend meaninglessness. This requires a unique kind of cognitive dissonance, as the everydayness of irrational experience is incompatible with a way of being that rejects it outright. Thus, in warping one’s reality to accommodate a future without the irrational and absurd, the individual must necessarily perceive their existence strictly in the context of an unactualized future. The core means by which the individual facilitates this process is via the constant practice of what

3 Ibid., 8.

Sartre refers to as bad faith. Sartre defines the nature of this term in contrast to an individual who is simply lying: “The liar intends to deceive and he does not seek to hide this intention from himself nor to disguise the translucency of consciousness; on the contrary, he has recourse to it when there is a question of deciding secondary behavior”.⁴ In the case of the liar, the purpose for the lie can exist in relation to desire in a very direct sense; one discovers some object they would like to obtain, and consciously employs falsehood in order to obtain it. Due to the fracturing nature of a lie, in which we cognizantly separate ourselves from reality in order to present as containing some alternate one, the practice is more or less inadequate as a means of achieving a fully actualized relationship. This is due to the fact that, in a lie, we are fully cognisant of our inauthenticity, as the implementation of the lie itself requires an acknowledgment of our removal from a space of truth. For most individuals, existing in constant, conscious inauthenticity is unsustainable because it greatly restricts the capacity for authentic action, something that is innately desired by the individual. Authenticity is required for interaction with those who can only relate to the liar in the pre-inauthentic context, those who knew them prior to the lie.

In order to achieve a state of love that operates in avoidance of meaninglessness, the path towards its actualization must consist of two kinds of lies. One of these is a directly interpersonal lie, in which the interlocutors agree that their union will culminate in the destruction of their own hardships, hardships which are often results of the illogical and instinctual nature of existence. While this may not be explicitly stated by either interlocutor, the lie exists as a kind of unspoken agreement to defy the absurd. Colloquially expressed, this sentiment takes the form of the proclamation that one’s partner “gives their life meaning.” In order for this interpersonal lie to feel genuine, so too must the framework for its existence, and thus a directly outward lie—like that described above—falls short, as it is definitionally unbelievable by the liar. In order for this interper-

4 Jean-Paul Sartre, “Being and Nothingness,” in *Basic Writings of Existentialism*, ed. Gordon Marino (Westminster: Random House Publishing group, 2007), 371.

sonal lie to be officiated during the length of the relationship proper, an initial lie must be formulated by the self. Namely, that any other individual has the capacity to impart this kind of meaning, a meaning which rids the self of any need to acknowledge life's irrationality. Both of these lies require bad faith for their sustainment, as they necessitate the individual to not just lie, but project a lie which they have told themselves. This is what Sartre describes as bad faith:

Bad faith then has in appearance the structure of falsehood. Only what changes everything is the fact that in bad faith it is from myself that I am hiding the truth. Thus the duality of the deceiver and the deceived does not exist here. Bad faith on the contrary implies in essence the unity of a single consciousness.⁵

When we lie to ourselves, we simultaneously allow ourselves to operate outside reality and within a perceived authenticity. This accommodates the setback of a typical falsehood, as when we externalize a perceived truth that was actually constructed in bad faith, we feel that it is genuine. In this sense, the action in bad faith is a more poignant refusal of existence, as it separates the self from the reality that what is being uttered is a falsehood to begin with. The externalization of this lie is illuminated in the interpersonal proclamations of internal completeness which are reciprocated by one's partner. These are contingent on the initial formulation of the lie to the self, justified by the seemingly harmless *veniere* of hope.

In terms of relationship dynamics, the process of accommodating love as anti-meaninglessness is itself cyclical, as the reaffirmation of the lie between partners appeals to the intersubjective nature of human existence, which Sartre describes as follows: "... all of the sudden I am conscious of myself as escaping myself, not in that I am the foundation of my own nothingness but in that I have my foundation outside myself. I am myself only as I am a pure reference to the Other."⁶ While bad faith is a process that is initiated internally, it is manufactured on behalf of the Other, in as much as our own perception of self is contingent on its gaze. In this sense, when we externalize an

⁵ Ibid., 327

⁶ Ibid., 403.

idea that has been constructed out of bad faith, we also codify it in the gaze of the other, and it is allowed to become apparently authentic. This dynamic is further solidified in the case of a relationship built on mutual bad faith, wherein both interlocutors have an outlet for the constant reiteration and solidification of the false authenticity of their environment.

Due to the perceived authenticity of this experience, one can begin to develop feelings that are founded on inauthenticity. In this sense, inauthentic relationships contain the same warmth and passions that can define authentic relationality. However, the former is built on the shaky grounds of unattainable expectations, and is therefore susceptible to disillusionment. Bad faith is unique in the amount of time we can spend in it: "It can even be the normal aspect of life for a very great number of people. A person can live in bad faith, which does not mean that he does not have abrupt awakenings to cynicism or good faith, but which implies a particular style of life."⁷ For our purposes, this particular style of life is one in love with the construct of meaning, using a romantic partner to reciprocally manufacture a reality that contains only this.

Despite this, and as stated by Sartre, one can still suddenly escape the haze of bad faith, and, in the context of romantic relationships, in quite an explosive manner. This awakening can culminate in separation, but if the core pursuit of a given individual remains an infatuation with the construction of an anti-irrational, pro-meaning utopia(n), that individual is still appealing to the same bad faith that informed the interest in their previous partner. In this sense, they still live in bad faith, as they have not addressed the lie that they have told themselves, only the partner who disallowed them from continuing to pursue it.

The only way to disrupt this process is to address the initial lie that we tell ourselves in bad faith, and reject hope in exchange for an acknowledgment and subsequent direct engagement with the state of absurdity. Camus offers a similar sentiment in the following lines:

7 Ibid., 373.

...I must admit that that struggle implies a total absence of hope (which has nothing to do with despair), a continual rejection (which must not be confused with renunciation), and a conscious dissatisfaction (which must not be compared to immature unrest). Everything that destroys...these requirements...ruins the absurd and devaluates the attitude that may then be proposed. The absurd has meaning only insofar as it is not agreed to.⁸

In essence, hope for love is a form of pre-construction that conjures up a future in which all is logical and knowable. In this sense, hope is an absurd notion which is unaware of its absurdity. Because it has not been contextualized by the absurd, it goes unacknowledged by the individual who possesses it. The means out of this process is a refusal of the future as something knowable. Through this means we can also understand it as something absurd, as it exists in the context of our constant striving towards knowledge. This can only occur in a space that is removed from bad faith. Sartre informs us that these spaces do occur in even the most persistent and hopeful, but must be acted on accordingly. In the deft words of Simone Weil, "The past and the future hinder the wholesome effect of affliction by providing an unlimited field for imaginary elevation.

That is why the renunciation of past and future is the first of all renunciations."⁹ Only when one renounces expectations of a life not yet lived can they begin to see their beloved as a beautiful unentirety.

8 Camus, 485.

9 Weil, 19.



#3

Freya Brandvik

When I thought of you, again, this time that I am in Lucknow for Diwali

Aniket Sharma

[I]

Just in case, you may want to be,
I negotiated a form for myself.

Just in case, you may want to hear me,
I invented motion and, then, began moving.
Just in case, you may want to see me,
I stopped moving and, then, stood still.
Just in case, you may want to breathe me,
I bathed myself with air and acquired a scent.
Just in case, you may want to nudge me,
I raised a body and taught it how to blush.

So that you will recognize me
I held on to all that and more
Through space and time.
And
I borrowed an I
From you
For me
To hold it all together.

[II]

Yet, an absurdity does ensue—
Of me having to live outside of you,
While you happen to live inside of me.

That makes one of me,
And two of you!

There is one you that *is* outside of me.
I live outside her, too.
The other you—that *lives* inside of me.
I live outside her, too!

Thus, the absurdity does continue
Of me living *doubly* outside of you!

[III]

In response to this absurdity,
I invented talking—
In the hopes of entering you.

So that I may enter you
Unencumbered
By my bone, flesh, skin, cloth, air—and then,
By your air, cloth, skin, flesh, bone
And the separation between them.

May I enter you?

Not you—who lives inside of me,
I cannot enter you.
For I won't talk to myself,
Who lives outside of you.

But you—who lives outside of me.
I must enter you.
For I must know—
Is there a me inside of you?

[IV]

If I find a me there,
Then is he just there or is he alive?
If he lives, then do the three of us—
The two of you and one of me—
Do we like him?
Does he like us?

If I don't find a me there,

Then either

I must leave a me inside you,
That is outside of me.

Or

I must decide what to do with you,
That lives inside of me.

[V]

Someday
I hope

Either

One of me lives, while one of you lives.
Where I live outside of you,
While you live outside of me.

Or

Two of me live, while two of you live.
Where both of us live
Doubly outside
Of each other.

Anything else is non-living
Anything else is unnatural and uncalled for.

Date: November 3, 2024¹

1 There are two people without whom this poem could not have come about. I am indebted to Professor Arindam Chakrabarti for his repeated meditations on 'You' and 'I.' I have felt these meditations to be as subtle and intimate as those of the *Sufis* on some days, while on others, they seem as complex and abstract to me as those codified in formal semantic and syntactic expositions of indexicality. As suggested in the title, I make this pilgrimage down memory lane annually, punctually and helplessly. However, I am grateful to Shreshthha Kapoor for sharing her racing thoughts with me in the early hours of November 3, 2024, the pace of which possessed me during the said pilgrimage and made me write it down. Owing to her, there is freshly made space in Diwali to feature new pains, new questions, and new pilgrimages – and I look forward to them.



Last Call in Shelby, MT
on 35mm film

Paavo Rundman

The Old Man's Retirement Fund

Virginia Williams

When interiority
is made external,
the old man
will shrivel
and writhe
against cries,
in times of
Hopelessness.

The ground beneath
made dust by
Man's hand.
Lust has
taken its prisoners.

When the snow
coats the tropics,
The old man
will die.
In the wake
of a time
of destitution.

Choke the child
and drown her
in oil and fire.
Bile and vile words
you spit into
the land that
our Maker has given.

And when the blue light,
our new Christ,
takes hold
the soaked child
will remember how
her future was sold
for the old man's
Retirement Fund.

For a gun
to kill the innocent.
And then you will ask
why this child does mourn,
no scorn,
enough to shame you.

“Yes Father, I Shall Become Bruce Wayne”: Sartre on Bad Faith and Batman

Jack Ragan

In *Batman: Year One*, Bruce Wayne decides that he shall “become a bat.”¹ A question that arises consistently in Batman literature is whether this course of action is permissible.² That is, should Bruce Wayne become Batman? In order to answer this question, I will draw upon Jean Paul Sartre’s existential philosophy, to assess whether Bruce Wayne is living in bad faith by becoming Batman.³ If Bruce Wayne is living in bad faith by becoming Batman, then it suggests that the decision to become Batman is impermissible, and that Bruce should attempt to escape this pattern of bad faith, by considering alternative courses of action. For Sartre, an individual is living in bad faith when they deny either their facticity, which is the limits to their freedom, or their transcendence, which is their ability to be free.⁴ In this paper I argue that by becoming Batman, Bruce

1 Frank Miller and David Mazzucchelli, *Batman: Year One* (New York: DC Comics, 1988), 22.

2 Tom King and Lee Weeks, *Batman* (California: DC Comics, 2020).

3 Mahesh Ananth and Ben Dixon, “Should Bruce Wayne Have Become Batman?” In *Batman and Philosophy: The Dark Knight of the Soul*, ed. William Irwin, Mark White and Robert Arp (Hoboken: Wiley, 2008), 103-105. Typically when philosophers attempt to answer the question of whether Bruce Wayne should become Batman, they do so by drawing on utilitarian theories. However, utilitarian theories often fail to produce a clear answer to this question. As such I believe that a Sartrean analysis offers a novel perspective on this issue.

4 Jean-Paul Sartre, “Being and Nothingness,” trans. Hazel E. Barnes, in *Existentialism: Basic Writings*, 2nd ed., ed. Charles Guignon and Derk Pereboom (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2001), 333.

Wayne is living in a pattern of bad faith which is characterized by: (i) a denial of facticity, when Bruce fails to recognize the limits of his body, mortality, and ability to stop crime; (ii) a denial of transcendence, when Batman fails to leave behind his relationships and become more than a man; (iii) an orientation towards being-in-itself and objectifying himself as Batman. In order to escape this pattern of bad faith, Bruce Wayne should stop acting as Batman and should instead recognize his freedom as Bruce Wayne.

I begin this paper by providing an overview of Sartre's notions of bad faith, transcendence, and facticity. Next, I draw on various examples from comic books to argue that by becoming Batman, Bruce Wayne is living in a pattern of bad faith by selectively oscillating between a denial of facticity and transcendence. Finally I consider how Bruce Wayne can escape this pattern of bad faith, arguing that Bruce Wayne ought to simply become himself by acknowledging both his facticity and transcendence.

Jean-Paul Sartre's Existential Philosophy and Bad Faith

In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre describes humans as inherently contradictory beings, subject to a "double property":⁵ transcendence (extreme freedom) and facticity (constraints on our freedom). Sartre explains that this contradictory nature of being often creates internal tension and a sense of dread within humans, which can cause us to engage in an attitude of self-deception or bad faith about the reality of our freedom.⁶ This attitude of bad faith or denial of freedom results from: (1) a failure to recognize our transcendence or ability to be free; (2) a failure to recognize our facticity or the limits to our freedoms; (3) a selective oscillation between a denial of facticity and transcendence.⁷ Importantly, bad faith is not a permanent state, instead, bad faith is what Sartre calls an "original intention and project."⁸ By this, Sartre means that bad faith is a persistent attitude which is "du-

5 Ibid., 333.

6 Ibid., 330.

7 Ibid., 333.

8 Ibid., 331.

rable"⁹ yet susceptible to temporary interruptions. For instance, Sartre asserts that a person can engage in a pattern of bad faith while still having "abrupt awakenings,"¹⁰ from their attitude of bad faith. As such, I will use the term pattern of bad faith to refer to the "particular style of life,"¹¹ which consists of engaging in a denial of freedom by denying facticity and/or transcendence.

I will now discuss in greater detail Sartre's description of how a denial of transcendence and facticity occurs. However, before discussing how these denials of freedom occur, it is important to understand how Sartre defines freedom. In *Existentialism is a Humanism*, Sartre asserts that humans are unlike other objects whose essence precedes their existence.¹² Consider a coffee cup. Prior to creating the cup, its essence or purpose and role has been predetermined by its creator. That is, the cup's essence precedes its existence or creation. Human beings, for Sartre, are unique because he assumes that we have no creator, and as a result our essence is not predetermined.¹³ Thus, human beings have the freedom to determine our own essence.¹⁴ As Sartre says, the human being is "nothing else but what he makes of himself,"¹⁵ and we are free to determine our essence through our actions. For example, if I wish to become heroic, then I can do so by engaging in heroic actions. The term transcendence refers to this freedom that human beings have to transcend our existence by defining our essence through action.¹⁶

A failure to recognize this freedom to transcend is, according to

9 Ibid., 331.

10 Ibid., 331.

11 Ibid., 331. Here I've chosen to use the term pattern of bad faith, rather than Sartre's formulation of original intention and project to reflect the fact that Bruce's original goal of becoming Batman is a form of recognizing his freedom rather than denying it. However, as Bruce's project of becoming Batman progresses, a pattern of bad faith begins to emerge.

12 Jean-Paul Sartre, "The Humanism of Existentialism," trans. Bernard Frechtman, in *Existentialism: Basic Writings*, 2nd ed, ed. Charles Guignon and Derk Pereboom (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2001), 292.

13 Ibid., 292-293.

14 Ibid., 293.

15 Sartre, "The Humanism of Existentialism," 293.

16 Sartre, "Being and Nothingness," 337.

Sartre, one of the ways in which we manifest a pattern of bad faith.¹⁷ To illustrate this, consider Sartre's example of the waiter working in a cafe. Sartre describes this waiter as "a little too precise, a little too rapid,"¹⁸ his actions seem to suggest that he is "playing at being a waiter in a cafe."¹⁹ The waiter, according to Sartre, fails to recognize his transcendence and freedom to define his own essence beyond his social role as a waiter.²⁰ Instead, the waiter is engaging in an exclusive affirmation of facticity by failing to recognize that he has the freedom to define his own essence beyond the essence that is dictated by his material conditions. The waiter's failure to recognize his freedom to transcend is one of the ways in which a pattern of bad faith arises.²¹ Patterns of bad faith can also arise when we fail to recognize that there are limits to our freedom or our facticity.

Of course, Sartre asserts that although human beings do possess the freedom to transcend, our freedoms are factual and are limited by our immediate material and physical conditions.²² Returning to the example of the waiter, Sartre asserts that although the waiter is engaged in a denial of transcendence, he could just as easily engage in a denial of facticity if, for example, he chooses to "call himself a diplomat or a reporter."²³ Of course, the waiter is not either of these things, and his facticity dictates that he must recognize he is "in a sense a waiter."²⁴

To further illustrate this point, consider Sartre's example of the gay man, who knows he is gay but refuses to accept this fact. Sartre explains that the gay man engages in a "constant escape,"²⁵ and attempting to transcend his identity, "refusing with all strength to consider himself,"²⁶ gay. According to Sartre, the gay man engages

17 Ibid., 333.

18 Ibid., 336.

19 Ibid., 336.

20 Ibid., 336-337.

21 Ibid., 336-337.

22 Ibid., 332-333.

23 Ibid., 337.

24 Ibid., 337.

25 Ibid., 341.

26 Ibid., 340.

in a pattern of bad faith, by failing to recognize that his freedom is limited by facticity.²⁷ The gay man, in this sense, is not free to choose whether to be gay or straight, and he will experience the desires that a gay man does regardless of whether he wants to or not. Thus in order for the gay man to avoid engaging in a pattern of bad faith, he ought to acknowledge his facticity, that his freedom to not be gay is limited.²⁸ Ultimately, Sartre asserts that facticity and transcendence “ought to be capable of a valid coordination,”²⁹ but that by engaging in bad faith we do not preserve this coordination, as was made evident in the cases of the waiter and the gay man.

Bruce Wayne, Batman, and Bad Faith

In *Batman: Year One*, Bruce Wayne decides to become the superhero Batman in order to avenge the death of his parents by fighting crime as a masked vigilante.³⁰ I argue that this choice forces Bruce to engage in a denial of freedom and a pattern of bad faith. Firstly, Bruce’s choice to become Batman causes him to engage in a denial of facticity. It is evident that Bruce is a man and factual being, whose freedom to prevent crime is limited in a number of ways by his relationships, emotions, and mortality. However, Bruce often believes that Batman is not subject to facticity and is a completely free being. The most prominent example of Bruce’s denial of facticity is that Bruce will push himself far beyond his limits, both mentally and physically, which often results in Bruce failing to accomplish his goals as Batman. For example, Bruce almost never sleeps, eats, or rests, and fails to recognize that his freedom to prevent crime as Batman is limited by his physical health and abilities.³¹

Furthermore, Bruce often fails to acknowledge that his freedom to prevent crime is limited by the fact that he cannot be everywhere

27 Ibid., 340-342.

28 Ibid., 340-342.

29 Ibid., 333.

30 Miller and Mazzucchelli, *Batman: Year One*.

31 Snyder, Scott and Sean Murphy, “Twenty-Seven,” In *Batman: Detective Comics* Volume 5 Gothtopia, ed. Rachel Pinnelas and Bob Harras (California: DC Comics, 2015). In this story the reader discovers that Bruce’s body becomes crippled after twenty seven years of active duty as Batman.

at once, and if two crimes are occurring at the same time, Bruce is not free to prevent both. Additionally, Bruce can only act as Batman in a reactionary capacity, that is, his freedom as Batman to prevent crime is constrained by the freedom that others have to engage in criminal behaviour. A more subtle example of Bruce denying his facticity occurs when Bruce denies that Batman experiences emotions and that these emotions impose factual limits on Batman's freedom to prevent crime. Towards the end of one story Bruce temporarily realizes that "[Batman]'s a damn person,"³² and that he often denies this fact, thus engaging in a pattern of bad faith.

Of course, a denial of facticity is not the only way in which Bruce engages in a pattern of bad faith. Bruce's pattern of bad faith is also the result of a denial of transcendence. Here, it is important to understand that Bruce and Batman often have competing goals and desires. Bruce is deeply emotional and cares about his relationships with others. Bruce also has a strict moral code and refuses to kill criminals.³³ Batman, conversely, does not seem to care for these relationships or rules.³⁴ In *Batman: Failsafe*, for example, Bruce creates an alternate personality that is embodied within himself, Batman of Zur-En-Arrh.³⁵ This alternate personality is Batman in his purest form, and does not have any of Bruce Wayne's personality traits. Batman of Zur-En-Arrh eventually takes control of Bruce's body and as a result, crime begins to slow, primarily because Batman of Zur-En-Arrh is willing to cross lines that Bruce will not, embracing his freedom to kill criminals and neglect his personal relationships.³⁶ This story emphasizes the fact that Batman has much more freedom to stop crime than he typically acknowledges. Bruce, it seems, often fails to acknowledge his transcendence by failing to embrace this freedom to become a more effective crime fighter. Instead, Bruce chooses to deny

32 King and Weeks, *Batman*.

33 Sartre, "Being and Nothingness," 331.

34 King and Weeks, *Batman*.

35 Grant Morrison, *Supergods What Masked Vigilantes, Miraculous Mutants, and a Sun God from Smallville Can Teach Us About Being Human* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2011), 26.

36 Chip Zdarsky and Jorge Jimenez, *Batman Volume 1: Failsafe* (California: DC Comics, 2024).

this freedom to transcend, often saving criminals from deadly situations, and spending time with family and friends, rather than fully committing to a life as a brutal yet effective crime fighter.³⁷ This denial of transcendence is the other way in which Bruce acts in bad faith.

In short, I've argued that Bruce regularly denies his facticity in order to better accomplish his goals as Batman, but also regularly denies his transcendence in order to maintain his relationships and adhere to his moral code. As such, Bruce's pattern of bad faith is not the result of engaging in an exclusive denial of facticity or transcendence: it is instead the result of engaging in a selective oscillation between a denial of facticity and transcendence depending on the role which is currently occupying.

How Bruce Wayne Can Escape Bad Faith

I now consider two options that are available to Bruce if he wants to escape his pattern of bad faith. Firstly, Bruce can acknowledge his freedom to transcend by abandoning his Bruce Wayne persona and truly becoming Batman. The most prominent example of this scenario is in *Batman: Arkham Knight*, where Bruce fakes his death in order to live out the remainder of his life as The Batman.³⁸ Initially it may seem that this option forces Bruce to engage in a pattern of bad faith, since choosing to live exclusively as Batman may force Bruce to deny his facticity as a man and only acknowledge his transcendence. Here, it's important to clarify that there may be an extreme definition of transcendence that applies when discussing fictional characters. In this scenario, Bruce literally does become more than a man, becoming The Batman, a type of mythical God-like being, who is no longer facticital, existing without limits to his freedom.³⁹ While this option is not available to real life human beings, it seems in fiction that if Batman achieves a certain level of transcendence there may be no limits to his freedom.⁴⁰ If Bruce chooses to transcend and perma-

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.

39 Morrison, *Supergods*, 74-75.

40 *Batman: Arkham Knight*, Rocksteady Studios, WB Games, 2015. Here I use the term 'The Batman' to emphasize that Bruce attains a symbolic status as a God-like being.

nently become The Batman, he could become more than a man, and as a result, he would not have any facticity to acknowledge. In short, if Bruce wants to escape his pattern of bad faith, he could do so by acknowledging his transcendence and freedom to permanently become The Batman, a being who no longer has to acknowledge his facticity.

While this option seems to allow Bruce to escape his pattern of bad faith, it is important to consider the problem of objectification in response to this line of reasoning. In order to do so, I will return to Sartre's example of the waiter. Sartre asserts that occupying a social role does not necessarily force us to engage in a pattern of bad faith.⁴¹ However, as demonstrated in the example with the waiter, bad faith arises when we identify too closely with these social roles. Orienting ourselves towards this type of being-in-itself, in which we become an object to another, is a denial of transcendence.⁴² Therefore, if Bruce decides to permanently become Batman, then Bruce chooses to identify with a social role in a way that leads to his objectification and a denial of his status as a transcendent being-for-itself, who is free to determine its own essence.⁴³ This problem of identifying too closely with the role of Batman and becoming objectified by those around him is demonstrated in *Batman: Whatever Happened to the Caped Crusader*. At Batman's funeral, several supervillains take turns delivering a speech describing Batman's death, but none of the speeches tell the same story.⁴⁴ This suggests that Batman has become an object or character within the lives of each individual supervillain. Ultimately, Bruce's option to escape bad faith by transcending and permanently becoming The Batman seems to force Bruce to paradoxically engage in a denial of transcendence, which does not allow Bruce to escape his pattern of bad faith.

Bruce may also escape his pattern of bad faith by acknowledging his facticity and limits as a human being, while still acknowledging

41 Ibid.

42 Zdzarsky and Jimenez, *Batman Volume 1: Failsafe*. Perhaps the most recent of this trope is Batman surviving a fall from the moon, of course there exist numerous examples in Batman comic books of Batman engaging in activities that are far beyond the capabilities of a human being.

43 Sartre, "Being and Nothingness," 337-339.

44 Ibid.

his transcendence and freedom to prevent crime as Bruce Wayne. Acting as Batman is only one of the many options available to Bruce if he wants to try to prevent crime in Gotham City. Another option would be for him to invest his money and resources into programs and policies that will reduce crime in Gotham City instead of into equipment for Batman. For example, in *Batman: Curse of The White Knight*, Bruce Wayne funds social and economic programs in Gotham City, eventually reducing crime rates without engaging in any violent action as Batman.⁴⁵ With this approach, Bruce has the ability to transcend by recognizing his freedom to create positive social change which will result in a reduction of crime. Importantly, if Bruce chooses to acknowledge his transcendence in this way, he must recognize his facticity at the same time.

Bruce Wayne's freedom is limited in a number of ways, with Bruce often suppressing his facticity in order to act as Batman. However, if Bruce chooses to engage in crime prevention as Bruce Wayne, he would acknowledge his facticity in ways that he cannot when acting as Batman. An acknowledgment of facticity is possible if Bruce chooses to engage in transcendence through funding social programs. However, there are elements of Bruce's facticity that he must learn to accept if he wants to escape his pattern of bad faith, regardless of whether or not he continues to act as Batman. Most notably, Bruce would have to recognize that the goal of turning Gotham into a crime-free utopia is not within the limits of his freedom as a factual being.⁴⁶ Ultimately, if Bruce wants to escape his pattern of bad faith, he must engage in what Sartre describes as a valid coordination of facticity and transcendence.⁴⁷ Bruce should become Bruce Wayne by recognizing the freedom he has to transcend and create positive change with the knowledge that his freedom to create change is, in many ways, limited by facticity and his physical and material conditions.

45 Ibid.

46 Neil Gaiman and Andy Kubert, *Batman: Whatever Happened to the Caped Crusader* (New York: DC Comics, 2009).

47 Sean Murphy, *Batman: Curse of the White Knight* (California: DC Comics, 2021).

Conclusion

Ultimately, it seems that becoming the Batman does not allow Bruce to acknowledge his facticity and transcendence in the way which Sartre describes that we ought to. As such, Bruce should not have become the Batman, nor should he continue to be the Batman. An analysis of Bruce Wayne through a Sartrean lens demonstrates that Sartre's notion of bad faith can be applied to fictional cases, and that these fictional cases help us to better understand and analyze Sartre's philosophy. This paper has shown the merit of analyzing comic books and characters through an existential lens, and further research to clarify the limits of transcendence will be particularly beneficial for this purpose.



#4

Freya Brandvik

Ontology of the Other in Creating an Ethics of Responsibility

Amelia Orr

In the uncertain, irrational, and shifting world of the 20th century, philosophy was confronted with the limitations of its epistemological and ethical systems, requiring a fundamental upheaval and restructuring of possible approaches to the questions about morality, action, human relationships, and religion that this new world presented. The texts *I and Thou* and the *Ethics of Ambiguity* arose from the ethical uncertainty that came with the failures of systematic ethical systems. Martin Buber and Simone de Beauvoir, the respective authors of these texts, were both deeply concerned with human relationships and the meaning of human actions. In a series of essays titled "Dialogue," which were written by Martin Buber in 1929 as a follow-up of and expansion upon his seminal text *I and Thou*, Buber links necessarily the roles of responsibility and response to the other, stating, "Genuine responsibility exists only where there is real responding."¹ Similarly, in *The Blood of Others*, published in 1945 just two years before her groundbreaking *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, de Beauvoir prefaces with a quote from Fyodor Dostoyevsky: "Everyone is really responsible to all men for all men and for everything."² Throughout both authors' bodies of writing, there is a con-

1 Martin Buber, "Dialogue" in *Between Man and Man*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (Macmillan Publishing Co., 1975), 16.

2 Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Constance Garnett (The Modern Library, 1929), 344.

tinual preoccupation with how to designate and assign ethical value in the self-other relationship. Based on their conceptions of the human being as always defined in this relation to the other, Buber and de Beauvoir ultimately center the notion of absolute, reciprocal responsibility in their ethical systems as a marker of moral value and as a fundamental imperative.

To understand the two authors' ethical systems, it is first necessary to contextualize them within their underlying ontological claims. Both Buber's *I and Thou* and de Beauvoir's *The Ethics of Ambiguity* begin with a focus on defining human ontology, i.e., the person's existence and reality. For Buber, humans are situated in the world always in relation via dialogue. This dialogical ontology defines the human being as "being-with,"³ situating the person at all times in a conversational relationship with the world around them. A human is foremost a speaking participant at one pole in a relationship, with the world in its otherness at the other. As the person orients themselves towards the world in speech, their relationship to it takes on one of two orientations or basic word pairs, which are "I-You" or "I-It."⁴ These words represent the two fundamental relationships the "I" subject has with that which is separate from it, and human life necessitates that the person continually oscillates between the two. The "I-It" orientation treats the world and everything within it as functional and transactional—as merely the objects for the subject. In the "I-You" relationship, the world becomes an actual living other which the subject engages with. This "You" can be a rock, an animal, a human, or even God. Most necessarily this is an orientation defined by dialogue and by real action. For Buber, man's "basic words do not state something that might exist outside of them; by being spoken they establish a mode of existence,"⁵ clarifying that these word pairs themselves constitute existence, and as such the act of speech is synonymous with an act of creation in Buber's dialogical ontology. Being is thus created in the relation between the individual and that which

3 Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (Touchstone, 1970), 113.

4 Buber, *I and Thou*, 53.

5 Ibid.

it is not, for, “beings live around you, and no matter which one you approach you also approach Being.⁶ Being is no individualized state of the pure subject but exists solely in the relation between beings.

Comparatively, de Beauvoir is working from a framework that she refers to as an “existentialist ontology,”⁷ referencing Søren Kierkegaard, Martin Heidegger, and Jean-Paul Sartre among others. For her, existentialism is itself “a philosophy of ambiguity,”⁸ and from this, she defines the human ontologically as ambiguous. De Beauvoir adapts Sartre’s definition of the human being from *Being and Nothingness* for her ethical work, defining the person as “a being who makes himself a lack of being in order that there might be being,”⁹ which she admits is also an ambiguous definition. The “lack” is the desire of the human to project beyond themselves, to be transcendent, to achieve perfect “being-in-itself.” This condition of the human being is inherently rooted in choice; they are naturally free and conscious of this freedom. This is what de Beauvoir means by: “the nothingness which is at the heart of man is also the consciousness that he has of himself.”¹⁰ It is within this nothingness that constitutes the person that one can desire to act, “mak[ing] himself a lack” in this attempt to transcend oneself. The human has “natural freedom,” but the recognition of it and choice to act upon it defines one’s “ethical freedom”, which, by this action of their will, “merges with the very movement of this ambiguous reality which is called existence...”¹¹ One’s choice of freedom is their existence, making their action inseparable from their living.

With choice comes failure, which is a central component in understanding the human, because, “in the very condition of man there enters the possibility of not fulfilling this condition.”¹² The human wishes to transcend the limitation of this world, but everywhere they

6 Buber, *I and Thou*, 67.

7 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (Open Road Integrated Media, 2018), 10.

8 De Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 8.

9 Ibid., 10.

10 Ibid., 47.

11 Ibid., 24.

12 Ibid., 35.

turn, there is a reminder that they are inescapably a part of it. Thus, one must choose to create their existence in this failure. Thus, man's "attempt to be God," is what "makes himself exist as man."¹³ This failure requires the human to engage with the world and create meaning within it, which is the "disclosure of being."¹⁴ One cannot escape their ambiguity, as it belongs to the person ontologically, as "that subjectivity which realizes itself only as a presence in the world, that engaged freedom, that surging of the for-oneself which is immediately given for others."¹⁵ Further, this world which the person cannot peel themselves from is other to them, and yet they exist as entirely dependent on it. They are left to confront and act in a world populated with other beings from whom they can never separate themselves. For Buber and de Beauvoir, humans must act to define themselves within the bounds of the world through their relationships with others.

The way in which the two authors relate the self to the other is determined by their ontology. Both Buber and de Beauvoir outright reject dissolving the boundary between the self and the other, representing them as a unified oneness. Instead, they agree that: "In lived actuality there is no unity of being. Actuality is to be found only in effective activity..."¹⁶ Their ontologies require distance to separate the self from the other to allow the potential for action. For Buber, without distance, there are no longer speaking participants but only silence. The "I" exists exclusively in relation to that which he is not, be it to "You" or "It," as he says, "there is no I as such but only the I of the basic word I-You and the I of the basic word I-It."¹⁷ Neither can the singular subject ever exist solitarily since the human subject always requires the other to create true life: "I require a You to become; becoming I, I say You."¹⁸ The distance between the self and the other in relation is where true life exists and the world is affirmed—where

13 Ibid., 11.

14 Ibid., 11.

15 Ibid., 8.

16 Buber, *I and Thou*, 137.

17 Ibid., 54.

18 Ibid., 62.

“man becomes an I through a You.”¹⁹ The subject truly lives not within itself as a subject but “in the currents of universal reciprocity.”²⁰ The other in the I-You relation is thus no object and instead consists of two beings encountering one another without either becoming an object for the other. The I-You relationship precedes “the crucial barrier between subject and object,”²¹ which is the I-It. Buber states, “In the beginning is the relation—as the category of being...the a priori of relation, the innate you.”²² As necessarily arising in relation, man’s sense of being requires a You as its other. In the dual I-You relationship, the human is “subjectivity (without any dependent genitive),” as opposed to its existence as “a subject (of experiencing and using)”²³ in the subject-object relationship. The relation of possession and subordination is insufficient for the confirmation of one’s being. Only in the reciprocal recognition and interaction of two actual subjects does the human come to be.

The distance between the self and the other for de Beauvoir is where being can be revealed and communicated. As she emphasizes, the otherness of the world is necessary for being to be, as the human “succeeds in disclosing it only through the resistance which the world opposes to him.”²⁴ Like Buber, she describes this disclosure, this “making being be”, as “[communication] with others by means of being.”²⁵ The role of dialogue between the self and that which they are not is central to defining one’s existence. De Beauvoir also sets apart the self-other and subject-object relationship, saying “I concern others and they concern me. There we have an irreducible truth. The me-others relationship is as indissoluble as the subject-object relationship.”²⁶ This differentiation is possible because of her division of being into “being-in-itself” and “being-for-itself”. The being-in-itself

19 Ibid., 80.

20 Ibid., 67.

21 Ibid., 74-75.

22 Ibid., 78.

23 Ibid., 112.

24 De Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 28.

25 Ibid., 76.

26 Ibid., 78.

is the being of the non-decisive world, without the possession of freedom or consciousness to willingly act. There is no felt lack in its being, as its being is always an immediate whole. Desire, as requiring a gap between the subject and the realization of its ends, is not present in being-in-itself. This desire is the lack in the human, impelling them to distance themselves from the world in hopes of transcending it. The being-for-itself, then, is being which lacks this completeness, and is both part of the world and separate from it in the consciousness of its freedom. Humans act for themselves and create their existence for themselves instead of being originally complete. For de Beauvoir, existence, unlike being, means one is in constant motion and always acting to become. Thus, the person relates at a distance to the non-human world as a subject to its object but relates to other subjectivities as a freedom to other freedoms. Of this, de Beauvoir states:

It is not necessary for the subject to seek to be, but it must desire that there be being. To will oneself free and to will that there be being are one and the same choice, the choice that man makes of himself as a presence in the world. We can neither say that the free man wants freedom in order to desire being; nor that he wants the disclosure of being by freedom. These are two aspects of a single reality. And whichever be the one under consideration, they both imply the bond of each man with all others.²⁷

Here, the person in their actions does not seek to become a non-acting being but instead seeks to disclose being by acting within the bounds of the world. This extension of individual freedom into a world of other humans links them to each other, and one must affirm freedom through acting upon the other. Thus, the subject exists ambiguously as both fundamentally separate and connected, since “the individual is defined only by his relationship to the world and to other individuals; he exists only by transcending himself, and his freedom can be achieved only through the freedom of others.”²⁸

Notably, de Beauvoir’s self-other relationship is based on a Hegelian-inspired notion of mutual recognition, where individual minds develop self-consciousness only through reciprocity with another

27 Ibid., 75.

28 Ibid., 169.

mind. So it is “by means of the presence of this world that the other reveals he meets himself as a presence in the world.”²⁹ The person only recognizes themselves as an acting entity within the struggle between subjects in a world defined by humanity. One’s actions only have the meaning humans give them. Two subjects can either struggle towards the same end, in support of each other, or struggle against one another. Either way, struggle is immanent. This being-for or being-against is in contrast with Buber’s being-with. This reflects a difference in their ontological assumptions, as Buber conceives of the human foremost existing in relation to the world as a whole, within “the universal relation into which all rivers pour,”³⁰ i.e., one’s existence is primarily in connection and never isolated. For de Beauvoir, the person first exists as a “pure internality”³¹ who is unable to transcend beyond the world, finding the ability to exercise freedom only within the human world that one is connected to in their failure. One’s actions thus connect them to all others, but this is the second part of their two-part movement. First, the person is “that surging of the for-oneself,” and then one “is immediately given for others.”³² The person ambiguously is both for-itself and for-others, but this only comes about through the failure inherent in the human condition.

Based entirely on the ways the two define the self-other relationships, de Beauvoir and Buber both create systems of ethics defined by otherness and action. Arguably, the central principle of both ethical systems is that of responsibility. Professor Manfred Vogel of Northwestern University argued that Buber’s emphasis on responsibility is inseparable from his idea of “being-in-relation.”³³ Responsibility implies a “for what?” and a “to whom?” which, “by their very formulation already imply and necessitate the relational structure.”³⁴ Thus, Buber seeks justification for his central ethical principle in his for-

29 Ibid., 60.

30 Buber, *I and Thou*, 155.

31 De Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 5.

32 Ibid., 8.

33 Manfred Vogel, “The Concept of Responsibility in the Thought of Martin Buber,” *The Harvard Theological Review* 63, no. 2 (1970): 159, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1509023>.

34 Ibid., 165.

mation of a dialogical "I-You" relationship, where the I is responsible for its engagement in this dialogue with the other, "thus grounding his ethics in his ontology of relation."³⁵ He argues further that this ontological framework is centered necessarily on Buber's conception of religion, with all "I-You" relationships modeled after and contained within the relationship of the self to God. Buber's ethical system is not then derived from a dialogical ontology merely of the world itself: it is derived from and contained in the "ontological-religious domain."³⁶ Moral action exists through this divine relationship, and it is what makes the responsibility of the I to the You ethically necessary. To act morally within the world requires this loving acceptance of responsibility for all creation, as he says of one who encounters God and chooses to love the world through God:

He is not rid of responsibility: for the pains of the finite version that explores effects he has exchanged the momentum of the infinite kind, the power of loving responsibility for the whole unexplorable course of the world, the deep inclusion in the world before the countenance of God...decisions he must continue to make in the depths of spontaneity unto death- calmly deciding ever again in favor of right action. Thus action is not null.³⁷

The presence of God does not free the person of responsibility to the world but requires it of them. Man, ontologically, is in dialogue with the other, and through this conception, Buber inseparably links response and responsibility. For this I to speak a You to the other is choosing the relationship that binds the two, in which "[g]enuine responsibility exists only where there is real responding."³⁸ Accepting the responsibility that is inseparable from the relation that defines humanity is the only way to act ethically.

Through the lack of a God in de Beauvoir's philosophy, she too arrives at an ethics of responsibility. Instead of being responsible to the other because one exists only in reciprocal relation to the other, thus mirroring the love of God for creation, humanity is responsible

35 Ibid., 165.

36 Ibid., 182.

37 Buber, *I and Thou*, 157.

38 Buber, "Dialogue," 16.

to all others precisely because they are abandoned by God. She explains,

However, far from God's absence authorizing all license, the contrary is the case, because man is abandoned on the earth, because his acts are definitive, absolute engagements. He bears the responsibility for a world which is not the work of a strange power, but of himself..³⁹

Humanity has no deterministic God to give their actions meaning within the world. Instead, they are left entirely alone and entirely responsible for the world their actions give life to. Beyond responsibility for one's actions, one is responsible entirely within the human world where human actions take shape. Though one may be free and separate from the other, which constitutes this first movement of their freedom, one's freedom exists only within the context of the shared world they are responsible for forming. This mutual responsibility between the self and the other determines the method for ethical actions de Beauvoir provides: "...the more seriously I accept my responsibilities, the more justified [an action] is. That is why love authorizes severities which are not granted to indifference."⁴⁰ Our actions are ethical insofar as we take responsibility for them; we must be personally invested in providing them with a meaning that matters in our world. Even in their separate construction of the person in the relationship to their other, Buber and de Beauvoir agree that any meaningful ethical system must be one based not on any transcendent, predetermined idea of divinely-ordained rights, but on human responsibility. Ultimately, humanity is left to learn to live among itself, creating its world entirely in relation to one another, and assuming responsibility for what it determines itself to be.

39 De Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 15.

40 Ibid., 148.

As We Descend the Mountain

Noah Stremmel

Over the peak it is black.
Not the sudden bullet-through-head darkness
like the putting out of a flame
But the triumphantly slow, sinking, stinging darkness
as if the sky was drowning
to the pulse of its tide

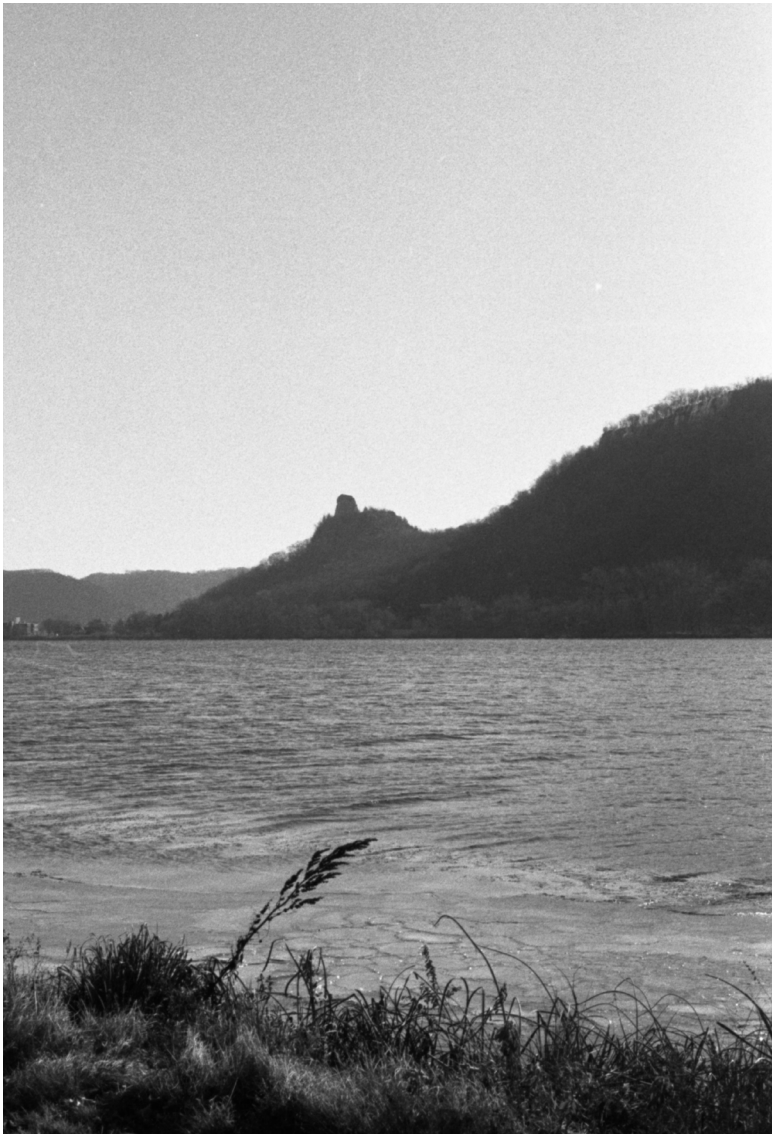
On the peak it is euphoric
All that is beautiful coalesced at the same summit
Shouting in supernova
bending the senses
time ever shortening

Vertigo
A yearning for that which is behind us and
a fear of the apodosis
—the descent hanging
Measured in worlds

And easy as it may seem
to jump
and land
at the bottom, without pain
The mending comes in the going down

Letting the wound close
Properly
and without deceit

At the base there is someone
waiting, patiently
to hug us when we reach them descend
When we reach them we
as
Let us journey down the mountain — Climbing



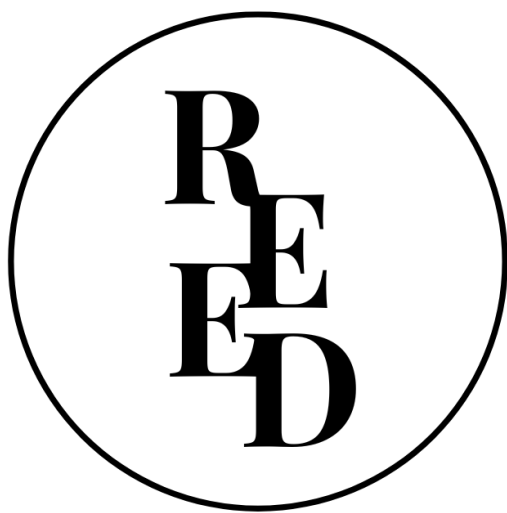
#5

Freya Brandvik

Restless Periphery

Molly Dillon

I am of no religion
My family scattered
Along the emerald isle
Moons away of course
Such distances have left me bearing nothing
Not a mustard seed of belief
I feel I've been misplaced
Out of step
Out of place
No amount of meditation or prayer
Could hold me in my haze
I am a blank
It's good to know though
There are beliefs
Not my beliefs
But theirs
Daughters of daughters
On either side of my eyes
Just out of view
Tellings of knowledge are buried deep
In each nucleus
To the cold clay under my feet
What will it take for me to do this digging
Or to dissect each atom
If that's even the answer



It is not in space that I must seek my human dignity, but in the ordering of my thought. It will do me no good to own land. Through space the universe grasps me and swallows me up like a speck; through thought I grasp it.

—Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, 348