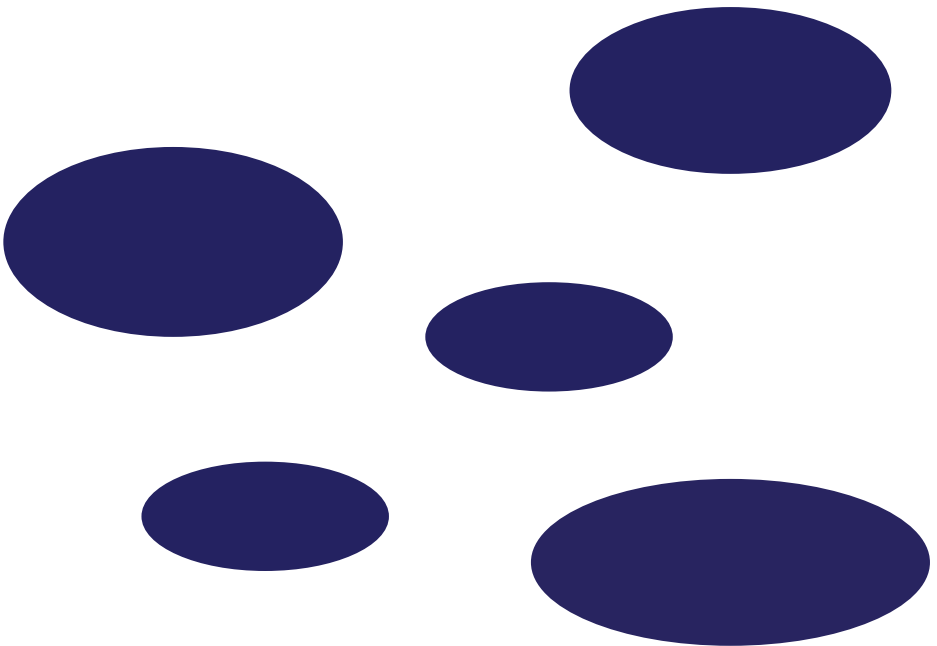


The Reed

An Undergraduate Journal of Existentialism



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The Reed Journal of Existentialism

Volume 18, Spring 2016

St. Olaf College

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

Hong Journals and Papers vol. L-R entry 3567 Pap. X1 A 679

Letter from the Editors

The Reed is an academic and creative journal dedicated to publishing student works pertaining to existential themes. Based at St. Olaf College and currently in its 18th year, *The Reed* annually publishes work from across the country as well as internationally. Our editorial staff for this issue consists of ten undergraduates at St. Olaf College who share an interest in existential philosophy. This year's edition of *The Reed* features two academic essays, two creative works, and two pieces of visual art.

Since the inception of the Howard & Edna Hong Memorial Essay Prize in 2014, *The Reed's* editorial staff recognizes one academic essay from our publication that stands out as exceptional. The prize is given in memory of Howard & Edna Hong, founders of St. Olaf College's Kierkegaard Library in 1976. These two scholars played an integral role in translating the works of Søren Kierkegaard to English, thus giving the Anglophone world a window into the mind of the genius. To celebrate the Hong's legacy, we award this prize to an author whose work displays similar dedication to sharing insights from existentialism. The editors selected the winning essay for its innovative ideas, perceptive analysis of existential themes in relation to the contemporary world, and overall writing style and finesse.

We are pleased to announce that this year's Howard & Edna Hong Memorial Essay Prize is awarded to sophomore Kevin Liu from George Washington University for his essay "Application of Existential Philosophy to Second-Generation Immigrants." Liu's work thoughtfully connects existential ideas with the marginalization and stereotyping that affect the lives of second-generation immigrants, positing new and powerful ways of understanding the challenges they face. We congratulate Kevin Liu on his achievement.

Northfield, 2016

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A Bug in the Mainframe

by MATTHEW ERICKSON

Author's note

Existentialism attempts to understand why we exist, who we are, and the nature of reality. It also wonders whether we have free will and, if so, how it can be so easily trapped in the absurd, or in paradox.

In my writing—something of a cross between *Brave New World*, *Boyhood*, and *The Giver*—words in [brackets] represent thoughts, words in <slanted brackets> represent near unconscious emotional thoughts, words without changes describe sounds or physical actions and words in italics represent my own narration. However, this writing style is used in the last three quarters of the story only, the first section is more typical first person narration. The latter section contains the phrase 'MemEntry' and a number between scenes: each of these represents a moment that's been translated into long-term memory. Additionally, the break between the first quarter and last three quarters represent two different people, in two different societies.

* * *

Amongst the endless, tightly packed shelves of grey cylinders I saw a flicker of light. Narrowing my eyes, I looked for the node my professor was pointing out, the palm-sized magnetic radio that'd snap into my first memory big enough that it needed to be copied in DNA. I saw it then, round and flat, aside from the rounded spikes sticking out of the faces. Suddenly there was a click, nearly indecipherable, and the node I was watching, thirty of the forearm sized cylinders away, swiveled 90 degrees. With a small *snap* it flew, spike first, into the entry port of its new cylinder, emitting a barely decipherable blue glow.

"And if you look over here—crap."

I turned to the screen our Professor was pointing to fast enough to see an image appear:

def Translate ():

Narrative1.Title("A Bug in the Mainframe") = MemEntry(4; 23; 59; 60;
61; 84; 129; 142; 176; 187; 189; 195; 202; 217; 246; 283; 284; 48,492).txt()

'Walk' = SensoryInputData.read()

""Talk"" = VerbalInputData.read()

['Thought'] = CerebralOutputData.oldest.read()

'<Emotions>' = LimbicOutputData.read()

'HindsightCommentary' = CerebralInputData.newest.read()

Translate ()

A line of static swept the monitor, and it froze. One of the technicians opened a panel below the monitor and stuck his head in. "Don't worry, kids, we were expecting this to happen eventually. We'd been able to run without a complete reboot in over a month, so we were due for a reboot anyways. Clean out the bugs, you know."

"Bugs?"

"Mistakes, errors, data that was never meant to mean anything but that got jammed into the codes' mainframe. I mean, we store everything on modified DNA back there, so of course the strands get caught in the recall every once in a while, you know, or re-assembled the wrong way." I heard a sound, *dwooo*, as the machines' whirs deactivated. Looking back at the node, I noticed its blue light had turned off. He pulled his head out and closed the panel. "Still, DNA has *way* more storage capacity than a computer, so as long as we keep copies around it works pretty well." He looked our Professor in the eye and said quietly, "you should send them up soon."

I left with the rest of my class, ascending a dozen floors before returning to my room.

I looked over my living room balcony into the skyscraper deep cylinder of a greenhouse, getting hit in the face by a thin breeze, both humid and moist. Totally underground, all its light came from the transparent dome of a roof which could've been the cylinders' cap. Looking at it was easy from my home, one of the top floors of Colony. I saw bellows of sand being whipped about like rain in the wind, smacking the glass in waves. Even through the sand, however, I could see night black clouds lit by the pure, luminescent red of dusk.

I looked down quickly, leaning on the railing, and noticed a few others were doing the same, looking at the thousands of white rooms barely visible through bottle green foliage and reflective towers of scaffolding. Through a few lower windows I could see scientists, cooks, and writers doing their jobs, exercising, or having a late dinner.

"Your Mom says she's really sorry she couldn't be here, but the Industrial Printer started spewing molten plastic all over the place, and she's gonna pull an all-nighter to fix it." I nodded. "How was the orientation though? Mind blowing?"

"Yeah, it was. I mean, we've shared memories before—like the time I heard what you thought as you beat me in checkers—and my friends and I have too, but I didn't realize we had that huge stockpile of hundred-year-old memories down there, or that it was even *possible* to let someone have that much info. Like *thousands* of *lives*. That's crazy!"

"Yeah, you just hold onto a few key pieces of info that're important and put the

rest in storage, kinda like the memory sorter they showed you.” He paused a moment, looking straight at me. “Also, it’s not as though it’s their *entire* life, you’re only getting one of the twelve or so ‘identity narratives,’ one at a time, that whoever the person is—you’re doing Daniel Michaels from America, right?—spent a lot of time remembering and retelling to themselves.” He kept staring at me as though something I was doing was worrying him. “That’s why you’ll hear this sorta ominous voice that doesn’t sound like it belongs, because they remember what they thought of their memories years later too.”

“That makes sense.” I waited a few moments, rubbing my left hand. Dad watched me, the muscles in his brow relaxing. He looked once at my rooms’ door, and I sighed as I crept in. Staring at my bed, a feeling came over me. The sheets seemed very dark, and my room had no window. Partially to distract myself from the thing about to be done to me, and partially because I’d never asked myself the question which suddenly leapt to mind, I turned and blurted, “How do I know *this* isn’t a memory, uh, that someone else is, ya know, *experiencing*?”

My Dad smiled. “Is not all that’s been done or seen, but a dream within a dream?”

“What?”

“Nothing, just that you’re gonna be fine. It’s actually a funny paradox, because even if this is real, someone’s going to live it *like* a memory eventually. That’s the point of life, you know, to make memories future generations can learn from.” I nodded, remembering what they’d told us about the “graduation” ceremony; how citizenship only went to those who agreed to have their brains scanned, their memories copied into DNA cylinders and put in storage. Dad looked at his watch. “You should start though. I’ll watch you as you go under.”

I nodded, ignoring my twitching eyelid as I pulled the sheets over my arms. My Dad pulled the small transmitter device out of his pocket. He scrolled and pressed a button.

I felt the implants in my brain react, spitting out Dopamine and Serotonin and electrical signals, images flashing before my ever-heavier eyes, and as I closed them I could’ve sworn I was falling.

* * *

MemEntry 4:

[Four and seven make...ten.] I clicked the button, and a color spasm went through my astronaut. [Eleven?] I clicked, and he blasted a monster, turning it to jelly. [Yes!] *I needed to save someone from a blob monster that was bringing chaos to the galaxy. It was a fun game, and at the time the school computer lab was the only place I could play it. I can’t remember how long I’d been playing before I heard the sound.*

I’m not sure why, but at some point I realized I could hear myself, and as a test I wondered if I could think the word ‘rabbit,’ if I could control the thoughts which came out of my mind. [RABBIT][Whoa, what was that?] I looked to either side of me, but only saw a string of six others on their computers, green lights illuminating them in the otherwise near pitch black lab. [RABBIT]<Oh no, this is bad... where is it...>[Wait, it’s just me.]<Oh wow! This is amazing! I think *inside* my head, like talking!>[Can I do it again?] I frowned, furrowing my brows. [RABBIT] I pulled my lips over my teeth in a wide grin. <Wow, this is great!>

“Daniel, your father’s here!” I saved my game and turned off the screen. *I hadn’t figured out yet that the screen and the computer aren’t the same thing.*

“Daddy, guess what! I can say words inside my head! Watch!” I furrowed my brows at the door, where white light poured in over his shoulders to the point where his face was masked in shadow. [RABBIT]<Yes!> I grinned up at him to see his reaction. *I can’t remember how he reacted, except that it wasn’t significant. I’m sure the light wasn’t **really** that bright or the room that dark, but the contrasts seem to grow more extreme as time goes by.*

MemEntry 23:

The edges of the clouds could’ve been gold tinfoil, the way the sun sparkled on them. The sky was a million miles high and twice as wide; it was baby blue, but like a child without enough watercolor paint, the blue had splotches of white-grey sprinkled about it. *I’d been playing in the fenced off yard outside the preschool, shaking my hands as imaginary starships dueled, when a small kid with red hair and glasses began playing beside me.* I looked near the entrance into the school and saw my Mom and another woman talking, smiling and looking at us.

MemEntry 59:

I used my palm to wipe the sweat off my forearm and looked at the last player on

the other team. He held the red rubber ball tightly enough that his fingernails were leaving a mark. We'd gathered the remaining balls on our side. [If he didn't have that ball, someone could take him down.] I looked at the dozen kids behind me. <Get back!>[You'll get hit]<And it'll hurt.>[Yeah, unless...] I walked forward, arms at my sides, and looked away from him. After a few moments I felt a sting on my arm: before I'd even gotten in the 'out' line their last player got nailed. I grinned, putting my arms on my hips as I glanced at him. The gym door opened.

"Alright, finish up if you want breakfast!" I turned and sprinted into the other room before the Gym leader even blew her whistle. As I did, I noticed the small lines on the gym floor. [One, two, three, four...seven. Eight, nine, ten...fourteen.] *I'd started counting as a road-trip game to keep from getting bored: letters, signs, cars, you name it. I counted by sevens some time later because I had trouble counting by sevens, and I thought it could help me. At that point, though, it was just a habit that came when I wasn't thinking.*

I opened a door and walked through. <Wow, that's a long line.> I walked to the back of it. *I'd liked the girl who walked up behind me, in the sense that she seemed nice. Blonde, short, she stared at everything without blinking.*

"Hey, Daniel?"

"Hi, Kris."

"Hey, so, listen. Mike said it's ok for me to tell you, because for some reason you're immune to them." <Hm?>[Who's Mike?][Immune?] "He said it's ok to tell you the truth. The entire world is controlled by these bugs, they crawl in your ear and take over your mind. They've gotten to almost everyone so far, but not you, at least yet." <Ew!>[Wait, get to *me*?][Oh no!]

A girl standing in front of me turned around. She had long, brown hair and would've looked as good as she already did if she were wearing glasses. "What? That's not true, I'm totally normal and can control how I think." She turned quickly to get a tray, then turned back around to face us. We were next in line, so we grabbed trays too. "That sounds really stupid."

Kris shook her blonde hair and bobbed her neck forward, so her eyes were in front of the other girls' face. "No it's not! You just don't *know* you've got them!" The other girl rolled her eyes and turned, so she could get French toast sticks and an apple.

MemEntry 60:

<Where is she?>[There!] "Hey, Kris?" I said, walking up to her. She turned away from the girl she was talking to and looked at me, frowning. "Hey, I was thinking about how—" [Wait, is she frowning because the other girl is one of them?]<Oh no!> "Oh, uh..." I leaned closer to her, whispering. "Oh, uh, is she *safe*?"

Her frown arched on one side, then shot up for a moment, and then returned to a frown. "Oh, uh, yeah, she's safe." *I realized something was wrong then, of course, but I never called it anything at the time. Now, though, I think the thing in the lunch line was either flirting or a weird bullying: it's hard to tell the difference between them when you're in elementary school. Anyways, we never talked together about that, or much of anything, well, ever.*

I stared at her for a few moments, before I heard my name. "Daniel, get in line please." I did. I glanced at the Before-School-Activities (*B.S.A.*) leader as I crossed my legs and sat. [She could be one of them too.] I narrowed my eyes. "Ok, everyone clap once." I did. "Everyone clap twice." I did. "Alright, you know the drill, whichever grade answers correctly gets to leave first." [I hope it's "what's the square root of 100!"]<I'd *know* that!> I bounced a bit on my butt. "How many yards are in a mile?" [What?]<That's not fair!> I frowned, crossed my arms and stared at a spot on the wall.

Someone in the line closest to the far wall raised their hand. She pointed to him, and he said, "5,280 feet, so... 1,760 yards!" "That's right, Fifth graders, you can leave." Everyone in the line on the far wall stood, chatting with each other as they grabbed bags and left.

MemEntry 61:

[13 and 7?]<How am I...>[10 and 7 makes 70, 3 and 7 makes 21, so 91.] I typed the two digits and hit enter just before my astronaut ran into a spiked ball, and he blasted it apart. He was still running, but he might as well have been in place because the path, like some brimstone red, demonic treadmill it didn't look like he was getting closer to the end. Aside from the gold "Math Blasters 3" logo and some purple or red obstacles the only thing ahead of the character was the Boss Brain atop a mountain in the distance, whose tentacles and bombs were still coming.

"Daniel, I told you to get ready for bed ten minutes ago!"

"I am ready, I just came back while I waited."

“Alright, well, time to go to sleep, ok?”

“Ok.” I closed the laptop until I heard the small hook in the screen click, before getting out of my chair and walking, then leaping, into bed. [Is she one of them?] [Maybe, maybe not.]

“Alright, let’s pray.”

“Ok. Come Lord Jesus, be our guest, let these gifts—”

“No, that’s for dinner. ‘Now I lay...’”

“Me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep...” *We prayed, and just before she left I realized I’d left my closet door open, and told her. I don’t think I was ever **really** afraid of something in my closet, but having it open let shapes appear, and those always scared me. She closed it and kissed me goodnight.* I rolled over, staring at a wall. I closed my eyes. *I realized the next morning the bugs were still out there, but also that I’d slept on my left side. From then on I always slept on my left side, so that even if they’d crawled in one ear they couldn’t get the other.*

MemEntry 84:

As I stepped forward a broken piece of concrete flicked up at my elbow, along with a puff of black dust. I shouted, “Brhvv, brhvv, skblowmm!” I shook my arms in front of my face. [Bam! Another one down!] Kyle almost walked into me, so intensely focused was he on destroying a squad of imaginary bombers. His red hair was fringed with sweat, and his glasses were near the bridge of his nose. *We’d spend all recess walking in circles sometimes, near a corner of the pavement far enough from the basketball hoops and four square diamonds that we wouldn’t walk into the players. I liked it when he played the Field Marshall and I played the General. I reasoned that they were about as important, but because the Field Marshall was number one, the General had less responsibility; because everyone tries to kill the Field Marshall, they never see the General coming, and if things go bad they let him get away.*

MemEntry 129:

“No, I *am* serious, there are these secret rules—ya know, on the Internet—that say my ‘Gemini twins’ actually have twice as much power. So, really *I* win. Also, my ‘Goblin horde’ card gets plus five attack points for every one of my enemies in the graveyard.” *He was lying, but I never tried to catch him, or minded. He bragged about how often he lied to me years later though, and I minded then. His Mom called us to dinner then, and*

we prayed. “God is great, God is good, let us thank him for this food, amen.” After, they invited me to the campfire out back and we told ghost stories.

“He saw the closet’s lights flicker, on and off. He opened the door and walked inside, but that’s when he realized the light-switch was on the *outside!*” <Wow, I’m pretty scary!> *No one at the fire seemed scared, and both his parents looked at each other with raised eyebrows.*

MemEntry 142:

I walked back and forth in my room. “Blizzka! Blizzkzat! Blum!” [The ships were scattering! One explodes! My Star Destroyer’s victorious!][Ha, “you Rebel scum.”] I heard a knock on my door. *My Dad came in and told me that it was ok to play like this at home, when no one’s watching, but to avoid making a bunch of noises and walking around in circles at school. I think he was right: if someone doesn’t understand what you’re doing they might think worse of you. Still, I didn’t think worse of myself, and I wasn’t bullied, so maybe he was wrong.*

MemEntry 176:

It was in B.S.A., around 8:30, when Kyle said something along the lines of “The only reason I hang out with you, Daniel, is because you’re the only one who’ll stay with me.” I can’t remember why, and I think he meant as a compliment or something, but I remember thinking he meant he didn’t like me or didn’t think I was worth much, and I ran into the reading corner and cried. I think he tried to comfort me, but the only thing I could think was that he must’ve been bugged. They must’ve gotten to him.

MemEntry 187:

“Daniel, I don’t want you to spend time with Kyle anymore.”

I put my fork down and looked across the beans and chicken casserole and glasses filled with milk at my Mom, whose blonde hair and black work-suit sharply contrasted with the red paint on the wall behind her. “What?”

“I was watching you today at lunch, at ‘bring your parent to school day,’ and what I saw...” She looked at the head of the table where my Dad sat, silent. “The way Kyle talks to you, he’s like a...” *I think she wanted to say ‘lichen,’ or ‘fungus.’* “I see other kids at the table try to talk to you, and you start to respond, but then he *always* interrupts, pulls you back to him, and he *never* lets you act or speak on your own. He’s a bad influence on you.” She kept staring at me, like I was doing something that

was worrying her. “If he calls you to invite you over, you can go. But you’re not going to invite him over, ok?” She had her neck turned and slightly bent down as she looked at me. I’d been rubbing my left hand, but after a few moments I picked up the fork.

MemEntry 189:

He called me, and I answered. I’d explained at B.S.A. already that I couldn’t call him anymore. He seemed confused, but when I didn’t explain he didn’t ask, and we just sat in the line next to the wall and looked at the leader. She asked us to name the Capital of Iowa.

MemEntry 195:

I played four square with Kyle and another kid I knew, Michael. <This is pretty fun!>

MemEntry 202:

Kyle called, the third weekend in a row. I didn’t open the voice message. <I’m too tired.>

MemEntry 217:

The three of us played four square, but a few other kids played too. <This is great!>

MemEntry 246:

Kyle’s Dad called, asking if I’d like to come to the cabin again with them. I didn’t respond or tell my parents he called. Kyle didn’t call after that. <It’s just... I don’t... sorry.>

MemEntry 283:

I played four square with five other kids. Kyle went back to the corner of the pavement, waving his arms in circles and making his noises, his soundtrack to the game only he could see.

MemEntry 284:

“Come on, honey, time to pray.”

“Come Lord Jesus—.”

“No, the other one.”

“Oh. Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed by thy name...” *After that, she left and closed the door.* I tossed my sheets off me, then pulled them back on. [Lay on your right side.][No, remember, it’s your left!] I turned over, but my arm was sore. I lay facing upwards. [Count backward from 100, and you’ll fall asleep.] *I got all the way to negative 100, and I was still awake.* <What’s happening, why can’t I...><What is that!> I’d heard a noise, like a squeak, as I’d moved, and it came from my ear. <Oh my... is it?> I pushed a finger into my right ear and could feel something. <What is, that’s not supposed...> I dug deeper, pushing past a flap, and could hear scratching. [It feels like bone, but ears are all cartilage, they don’t have bone!]<Oh no, oh no...> I lay staring at the rungs and mattress of the bunk bed above me. *I don’t know how long I sat there, listening to the ringing in my ears and the pumping in my heart, but I do know this: I cried. I cried for a long time. It had as much to do with Kyle as anything, I think. I think now, at least. Eventually I started thinking again, and discovered a paradox. I can’t remember realizing it, but I think it went something like this: If I tossed in bed all the time, and if it was true the only thing stopping “them” was my sleeping strategy, then I was screwed. They’d get me, and there was nothing I could do to stop them. And if that was true, and if they were so powerful that people couldn’t even tell they had them in their ears, then it didn’t make sense for me to try to stop them because the only thing I was willing to do couldn’t possibly work. I wasn’t gonna wear ear-plugs or fight anyone or join the resistance; I was a kid! That night, still crying, I lay on my right side, knowing exactly what I was doing, what I was choosing. I don’t remember falling asleep, but I do remember how I felt just before I did: like I was falling; like I was free.*

MemEntry 48,942

[Where can I park, where can I...]<Yes!> I twisted the heavy leather and iron wheel quickly while pushing gently with my left foot. Soon I pushed as hard as I could with my left foot and shifted to Park. [Focus, this AP Euro project is huge!][I’ve still got this reading on Pascal and his ‘leap of faith,’ and Descartes’ ‘I think therefore I am,’ and Martin Luther’s trial manuscript...] I pulled out the keys and popped open my door. I breathed, deeply, and looked at the sky. [Wow, baby blue, a million miles high and twice as wide. Nice.] I walked around the back and opened the trunk, pulling out a blue swim bag. [Michael’s kinda shorting himself playing Martin Luther. It’s the lawyers who’ll actually get to argue with each other.][Please, you’re the debater, not him.][Debate isn’t Mock Trial.][Yeah, it involves way more thinking and it’s way more fun.] I pulled my already wide grin enough to spread over my teeth, and noticed a small, red-brown rabbit run quickly behind some bushes, so fast I nearly didn’t see it.

I can’t remember why, it might’ve had something to do with the beautiful spring day, but I chose to walk outside for a bit before going to the gym. [God, it’s only February, why’s the snow

melting?][Global warming.]<Shit.>[I know, it's just, I don't know, I wish it wasn't happening, but it's not like I'm gonna start a nonprofit or *bike* ten miles to the gym, ya know? I'm just a kid like the rest of us.][Ya.] As I walked bits of gravel and dust flew up at my elbows.

[You know, you've got that AP Lang Personal Narrative to do, about something 'you learned,' whatever that means.][What about the mission trip to Jersey after hurricane Sandy?][Yeah, when Brandon and Brenna got into that big fight, and I got to be the nice one in the middle: got to be reasonable and sort them out until they could be friends again. Also that nice lady's garden we cleaned was really fun, and she was really nice, so I could write about that.][Yeah, but everyone writes about mission trips.] I looked up and realized I was on a flat, brown-red sidewalk that went straight to the top of a nearby hill. [Brandon and Brenna, how long have I known them?][You beat Brandon out for class president the same year you met Brenna, and that was... Elementary school!]<Wow, I'm old!>[Seventeen. Sounds weird.][You wanna write about that?][About what?][Elementary school, like... What about the hours you spent in the reading corner, cleaning out all the library's Greek mythology books.]<Yeah!>[Coloring books, the picture books, Percy Jackson, *classic!*][Not much of a story though.] I looked up from my feet. [Am I even moving?][Yeah, I must be. Slowly though.]<You should turn back, it's getting late.> I kept walking.

[Maybe not reading, but something from B.S.A., that was fun: Legos, Yu-Gi-Oh, Stratego, dodgeball.][If my life was interesting, I could *actually* write about something.]<That'd be nice.> I rolled my neck, letting small cracks echo in my ear. [Yeah, I spent all my time with Kyle, and—][Oh yeah, Kyle. I haven't seen him in years.][Except a month or so ago, when Claire came over to talk to you about the swim team while you were waiting for someone, then his girlfriend Kris came over to talk with Claire, and he came over.][Didn't say anything to him. He didn't seem mad like I'd always assumed, but more like he didn't remember me. Seemed nice, smiling a little. Waiting for Kris to stop talking...] <Turn around already! Go swim!> I turned around, only halfway up but coming down fast, gravity tugging on my feet with each step.

[And there was Kris and when she told me about...] *As though from a forgotten dream I remember Them.* [Yeah, no, I'm not going to write about that. *Tricked* is more what she did, really, but I don't want Mr. Meier to think I'm... that I can't... that I believe...] I chewed the inside of my cheek, furrowed my eyebrows, and then looked at the clouds. [1, 2, 3...7...14.]

I felt, a bit later, like I was an archaeologist who'd stumbled upon a lost civilization: like there were these mysterious ruins of a lost people, and I could only guess at how they thought and what their intentions were because, once they leave, their machines, their arts, they all start to crumble. Of course, by "they" I mean me: the versions of me I once was, am still, and might become again.

Spirit and Destiny

Restoring Ethical Sanity in the Twenty-First Century

by OCEAN GIBSON

*The time is coming when all men will see, that the gift of God to the soul
is not a vaunting, overpowering, excluding sanctity, but a sweet, natural
goodness, a goodness like thine and mine, and that so invites thine and mine
to be and to grow.*

Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Divinity School Address"

What Is Called Spirit?

What is called Spirit?—This question falls awkwardly on our ears. Yet for precisely this reason its vacuity invites attention. That, in asking this question, the possibility of deeper life does not well up like a hope in heart and mind alike, is the surest sign that a sickness of the soul is underway.

By posing this question, I should like to venture the beginning of its reclamation.

It is becoming increasingly obvious in the silent spaces of our shared life that something is terribly wrong with the state of our collective interior. A hollowness of disposition has for quite a long time been seeping into its manners, thoughts, and beliefs. Identifying examples of this condition is, however, quite difficult; for by the design of some ineffable subtlety, some craft of invisible inculcation, this disposition has covered over its own conspicuousness. Obscuring the matter is the cloud of an incessant proclivity to locate our issues exclusively in political causes and ethical debates—a proclivity we shall from here on out call “ethical insanity.” While it would be easier and perhaps more “practical” to locate our focus in concrete arenas and “real-world” issues (i.e., those challenges that most immediately inspire the imaginations of our culture), to do so would be to overlook entirely the field within which our question of Spirit can be adequately posed.

This hypothesis of epidemic ethical insanity concerns a combination of two malaises: the neurosis of a repressed will to destiny and the spell of a pathological nihilism. Counterintuitively, the persistence of this condition is due not to the force of its verity or the seductiveness of its appeal, but to its covertness. Unable to properly face the condition resolutely and think it through, we compound our confusion through an inadvertent obscuration which nullifies the very possibility of its appearing strange. Ours is an era of amnesia. Our nihilism is the disintegration of the possibility of Spirit itself.

Most now equate Spirit with little more than a state of excitement and shared enthusiasm. Others might use it indistinctly to refer to the “spirit of a time,” or a general mood (as when one says, “in the spirit of”). Yet these definitions are but tributary derivatives. It was thought for many centuries to be much more: a constitutive feature of human nature grounding our very understanding of being. When the Christian worldview was the dominant mythos of common life, Spirit was that which transcended the realm of the temporal and the thread of connectivity uniting humankind with the divine. With Spirit, man could abide with a sense of trans-temporal equanimity and dwell in a shared communion among created beings. Spirit was a matter of life and death.

By the nineteenth century, much of what Nietzsche called “European nihilism” was already well underway. Atheism, compounded by a growing belief in science’s unbridled prospects, worked to disenchant the Christian worldview and to usurp its place as the central locus of knowledge and meaning. Many threw out what were considered to be old, empirically-untenable myths, including the belief in God

that had reigned for nearly two millennia. *Nihilism*, by which Nietzsche meant the devaluation of all values hitherto, followed in the wake of this metaphysical schism and sowed the seeds of a treacherous cynicism. In creating a distrust in the verity of the world as a whole, nihilism dispelled our capacity for genuine seriousness in life; and even where nihilism lacks the pronouncement of a conscious attitude, its shadow still leaves many awkward at the art of real, passionate belief. Even worse, the notion of a shared destiny or even of a shared mythos has become suspicious and untenable—unsuited as they are to the relativistic and resigned sensibilities of a culture that forfeits its claim to the vistas of the grand, sublime, and mysterious.

Even before Nietzsche, and within a Christian context, Kierkegaard was aware that the religious character of the age was in a process of major disintegration. His attempt to crystallize Christianity’s psychological insights were meant in part to demonstrate the degree to which faith had become vacuous. Yet Kierkegaard attempted to rectify this trivialization of faith by providing a possible way of grounding what he considered the Christian challenge to selfhood: namely, the challenge to take upon oneself the task of becoming an authentic *individual*, with all of its dread, uncertainty, and responsibility.¹ Within the sphere of individual life, marked as it is by the vicissitudes of change and the affectivities of finite human life, he sublimated Christianity’s theological metaphysics into an account of concrete human selfhood and managed in the process to salvage Spirit in a transmuted form. Spirit *became* the highest potential of a human being to attain true authentic selfhood as an individual, and the office of the religious condition became the reformation of the individual from within. In acknowledging one’s essential nature as Spirit, an individual could take up the task of actualizing their true potential as a complete human being, that is, a being whose own self is a question for itself, and therefore a task of a lifetime.²

Specifics aside, the upshot is that Kierkegaard’s crystallization of Spirit in the locus of human life *revitalized* the spiritual condition. Christianity’s mythological overtones could be washed away³ without sacrificing its religious commitment to the deepening of human life. More correctly, this religious *energy* was taken back and transformed for a new historical era. The locus of the religious-spiritual question

1 Christian heroism “is to venture wholly to be oneself, as an individual man, this definite individual man, alone before the face of God, alone in this tremendous exertion and responsibility.” See Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling and The Sickness Unto Death*, trans. Walter Lowrie (1941; repr., Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 256.

2 Kierkegaard describes the self as a relation that “relates itself to its own self.” As such, the self must navigate its contradictory nature as a “synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity.” Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 269.

3 Indeed, Christianity could become an existential problem of this degree *only after* its mythopoetic metaphysics was called into question by scientific rationalism.

shifted from the sphere of otherworldly pontification to the living individual who must concretize his or her existence through life choices. Spirit was no longer a metaphysical designation in the traditional sense, but rather a description of humankind's essential, existential character—no longer a speculative assurance of rebirth in a new life, but the condition for the possibility of attaining true selfhood in this life. We might even hypothesize that it was the onset of a scientific age, with its disenchanting and de-mythologized conception of the world, that necessitated this transformation of the nature of religious commitment and even Spirit itself. It became necessary to *internalize* the locus of Spirit within the space of becoming selfhood, and to learn, within the dread of freedom, to reconcile the finitude inherent in human being with its capacity for self-transcendence.⁴

While Kierkegaard had a particularly Christian conception of what true selfhood would look like, there is something in his gesture that is altogether more universal and perennial in scope. The power of his analyses and the force with which they unearth the latent wisdom and psychological insights of Christianity make apparent both the historical ubiquity and interpretive contingency that constitute mankind's essentially religious character. That is, his analyses bring to the fore the degree to which religious insights are capable of rearticulation, the capacity that such insights retain for creative application to the needs of new historical eras, and the perennial relevance that said insights have to the challenges that historical experiences pose, disparate though these episodes might be from one another. There seems to be something enduring in the religiosity of *homo sapiens* which proceeds out of a historically ubiquitous idiosyncrasy and which continually calls for rearticulation amidst the flux of changing historical experience. At the potential risk of running fast and loose with over two millennia of religious history, we could hypothesize that this religious idiosyncrasy essentially concerns the fundamental character of our being and the world whence we come; and that Spirit, tentatively defined, designates the capacity for this transcendent mode of being.⁵ Insofar as humankind is religious, it ponders its own being and the nature of the world as a whole, and insofar as this pondering is constitutive of its historical experience, humankind partakes of Spirit.

⁴ For this reason, existentialism has understandably been viewed as radically individualistic in temperament—concerned as it is with the subjectivities that attend individually lived experience. Yet as will be suggested, its gesture need not end in nihilistic isolation, but rather sets the stage for deeper and broader interconnectivity.

⁵ Elucidating this point thoroughly would require much more exploration than this provisional hypothesis. For now, suffice it to say that what we are maintaining is the possibility of ontological attunements that provide the basis for a perennial religious disposition. The parallels with Heidegger's analytic of Dasein are apparent, but require their own essay for proper elucidation.

Returning to the condition of Spirit today, and taking our initial hint from Kierkegaard, it would seem that Spirit for us has taken on *an existential form* as the ground of selfhood. If Spirit today does indeed constitute the possibility of consummate selfhood, and we add to the mix the testimony of Nietzsche, then the disintegration of meaning at the ground of ourselves and the world as a whole simply *is* the disintegration of Spirit. With this identification, however, the core of the matter is revealed, and with startling consequences. For if nihilism has disrupted the possibility of individual selfhood to the point that it has become fused with the oncoming of a shared nihilistic destiny that one confronts together with others—that is, if the possibility of authentic selfhood has been disrupted down to the very ground upon which both Self and We subsist *in concert*—then in Spirit we now see the occasion for the true expansion of the existential condition, beyond the scope of the isolated individual, *into the sphere of the world itself*. The liberation of Spirit within the field of self-becoming leads to its overflowing into the sphere of *our* becoming because (as any social ethic from the Aristotelian and Confucian to the utilitarian and communitarian would insist) the scope of Spirit's reach (i.e. the breadth of human interest) cannot long be confined to the individual. Put differently, the disruption of the ground of our selfhood that this alleged nihilism produces is so destructive that the individual's destiny and the world's destiny both become nihilated by the same question mark.⁶ This is the latent shift that existentialism has prepared for us, and one that has not yet been pursued in earnest.

Since Spirit manifests itself in the horizon of life that is *lived out*, its disintegration cannot be mended from an outside point of view. To think objectively about our future is one thing; to live out that question as an actual trial of self-becoming is another. Furthermore, if the expansion of the ground of selfhood through existential nihilism is tenable, then the light of possibility illuminating the horizon of the individual is one and the same with the dawn of our shared destiny. It is not until the question of Spirit has become a lived, existential issue in which *our* very being is put at stake that its absence can appear strange to us.⁷ Until we recognize that the condition of Spirit is inseparable from the very possibility of our selfhood, the very meaning of our nihilistic amnesia will remain obscure, and the call of our highest nature will be left unanswered. *This is what it means to ask the question of Spirit today.*

The happening of this amnesia is in many ways congruent with Heidegger's ac-

⁶ The use of "nihilation" and the "question mark" as terms for dealing with nihilism is inspired by Keiji Nishitani, as he generally uses them.

⁷ I am here indebted to the structure of Nishitani's account of the question of nihilism. See Keiji Nishitani, *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*, trans. Graham Parkes (Albany: State University of New York, 1990), 4-7.

count of the concealment of Being.⁸ If all metaphysics hitherto has taken the fact *that* things are for granted, and bypassed the strangeness of this occurrence in favor of elucidations of beings themselves, then, equally, our attempts at reconciling our existential uprootedness conceal the essential character of this uprootedness by constructing new ethical edifices that are not sufficiently self-reflective. In response to our estrangement from ourselves, from each other, and from a meaningful world in which we can locate our destiny, we are haphazardly filling the void with ethical causes that conceal the vacuity of Spirit beneath them. The issue is that these causes do not reach deeply enough into our existential condition to recognize their dependence on our pre-ethical sensibilities. Calls for American exceptionalism, the end of American empire, or the downfall of capitalism, while worthy of collective deliberation, must be recognized as fundamentally moot in the spiritual sense so long as they leave the question of our fundamental being unthought. They are causes that redirect our overflowing need for unity and solidarity, but causes that occlude, though by no means mutually exclude, the real task of cultivating an enduring Spirit that can actually sustain a healthy ethical impulse.⁹

As we shall see, this limitation is not trivial. In order to cultivate the space within which any flourishing ethics might persist at all, what we need to do is rethink the essential meaning of the collective that we take as evident and given. It is not enough for humans to be directed by new ethical responsibilities when those responsibilities do not proceed from a shared Spirit. However, just what this Spirit might be is up for grabs. While history provides the provisions for new possibilities, we ourselves are the sites on which these potentialities must be worked out.

At bottom, Spirit concerns the We: what We are in our richest essentiality. As such, it is the principle of *unity in identity*. To venture its reclamation is not to revive a previously existing condition, but rather begins with a reawakening from within oneself of a more fundamental incredulity at the miracle that any semblance of We is at all possible. Only in recalling the mystery of Spirit can it be drawn forth and cast in new light.

8 See especially: Martin Heidegger, "What Is Metaphysics," in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell, rev. ed. (London: Routledge, 1993); Heidegger, "The Age of the World Picture," in *The Question Concerning Technology, and Other Essays* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977).

9 My intention is not to belittle these issues, but rather to point out their structural limitations.

The Ethical Structure and Its Limitations

It is often thought that ethics is the foremost sphere wherein questions about the life of the community can take form and receive positive elucidation. This is true, *ex post facto*, if one is concerned only with the questions themselves, and not the grounds of their appearing.¹⁰ Congruent with our interest in the latter, we are compelled to maintain that ethics, far from being the deepest foundation of community, is a derivative of Spirit, and is possible only presupposing the existential expanse of the We. When ethics finds itself lacking in the primal lifeblood that naturally attends its spontaneous expression, (i.e. when an ethic lacks catalytic fire and fails to play upon the deepest strings of the heart), no new ethical contrivances, no matter how ingenious, will succeed in mending the interior of ethical life, as that interior depends upon the grounds of a field prior to ethics. Ethics must rather have recourse back to its roots, to the condition constituting the ground *behind* and *beneath* it, if it is to become truly sane and noble.

This limitation is built into the structure of ethics itself, and with good reason. As an edifice constructed to govern and direct relations with others, ethics must presuppose a framework in which individuals act together in some sort of community, and for the sake of that community, proceed without problematizing its own ontological foundations. Ethics takes tacitly supposed conceptions of Self and We to their logical and practical conclusions, and reifies them in the form of an externalized code.¹¹ But in doing so, it can often happen that ethics either lags behind the latent sensibilities of the people¹² or presupposes too much on their part.¹³ This is why ethics is often taken to be an assemblage of imperatives imposing responsibilities *from the outside*—responsibilities that, in the former case, seem trivial and stultifying, and in the latter case, seem naive, recalcitrant, or confusing.

In effect, the entire sphere of the ethical is concerned with the management of a social framework that has already been manifested and given positive elucidation. Usually this is not a problem, as most issues can be resolved within the parameters of the given social matrix. But when the very sense of We itself has diminished

10 The distinction here is essential, and only possible in the wake of Heidegger's explication of the transcendental conditions of Dasein's being-in-the-world. What I maintain here is that Spirit is in some sense the ontological precondition for the persistence of any sort of meaningful ethical space—just as transcendental freedom constitutes the possibility of Dasein's meaningful disclosure of the being of beings. See Martin Heidegger, "On the Essence of Ground" in *Pathmarks*, ed. William McNeill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

11 The "code" may of course express itself implicitly and outside the parameters of explicit legality.

12 E.g. when traditional customs and practice attain the character of a banality and appear limiting.

13 E.g. when progressives advocate for practices that *they take* to be fuller expressions of a *tacit* moral intuition.

beyond palpable recognition, as our hypothesis of unconscious nihilistic moral insanity suggests, then the ossified residuum of an ethical edifice will have little healing effect. The imperatives of new ethical expansions will do little to sway people so long as they do not find them to be *natural, livable* reflections of themselves. As Jane Addams put it, “the notion of a larger obligation can only come through the response to an enlarged interest in life and in the social movements around us.”¹⁴

The Causes of Ethical Insanity

Today we stand caught in a great contradiction, a contradiction of extremes. On the one hand, ideals of unprecedented scope and ambition have now become prevalent elements of common discourse. People now call for better and broader access to education, halts on America’s military involvement in other nations’ affairs, a more just prison system, and curbs on environmentally egregious practices, to name only a few powder kegs. Many of these causes got their start in just the intervening years of the past half-century, and indicate an incredible expansion of the ethical intuition in the direction of greater world-centricity. This is the progressive stream of planetization and part of the future imagined by some of our boldest cosmopolitan predecessors, including Jane Addams and Randolph Bourne. Indeed, much of this cosmopolitan legacy we now inherit.

On the other hand, our accelerating descent into wider expanses of ethical responsibility threatens to spin out of control. If human being is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of possibility and necessity,¹⁵ then what the current ethical condition evinces is what Kierkegaard would call the despair of possibility. We have, in other words, pushed so far into the realm of possible ethical futurities that we have lost ourselves in a maze of new ethical obligations which do not yet coalesce into livable potentialities. These obligations are so multi(nef)arious that one begins to feel overwhelmed and exhausted in their mere contemplation, let alone their dutiful acceptance.¹⁶ By pushing to the logical limits of its ethical edifice, the postmodern “sensitive self” has attempted to fill every conceivable gap of the ethical space by deducing and mapping out the contours of innumerable new responsibilities. What it lacks is a mythos that can properly synthesize and integrate these new contours into livable horizons that people can traverse without losing their minds.

¹⁴ Jane Addams, *Democracy and Social Ethics* (New York: Macmillan, 1902), 81-82.

¹⁵ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 269, 295.

¹⁶ See note 6.

The fervor with which this ethical expansion continues to unfold is not surprising given that what we hypothesize to be its fueling fire is an unfulfilled “will to destiny” caught in the grip of nihilistic disenchantment. In optimal situations, a vibrant will to destiny is what fuels the creation of new ideals and provides the generative energy required to sustain a healthy and exuberant sense of Self and We. But when, as we hypothesize, the roots of the will to destiny become suspended in a vacuum of nihilistic disenchantment, and the content of this destiny becomes obscured by a shadow of cynicism and the disintegration of a compelling field of meaning, this will is compelled to vent its energy into causes and ethical constructions which do not productively reflect the collective Spirit. The convergence of these issues best comes to the fore in the frustrations of young intellectuals and activists. As Daniel Bell notes, what the “young intellectual” temperamentally wants is the “all-or-none affair” of *ideology*: an “intellectually devitalized” possibility that can no longer overtly and unapologetically provide a public outlet for one’s “emotional energies.” Social reform “does not have any unifying appeal, nor does it give a younger generation the outlet for “self-expression” and “self-definition” that it wants.” Moreover, there is a reluctance to radically rethink a “vision of man” around which one could chart a compelling future that stirs the soul and refreshes the taste for life.¹⁷ This has plagued the general culture with an unrelenting anxiety that craves the catharsis of a shared destiny, but that unwittingly precludes this option for itself.

The frenzied despair of possibility which has compelled the incessant deduction of new ethical responsibilities is itself undergirded by a flattened conception of human interiority. While many of our religious forebears and contemporaries have taken seriously the prospect of true inner transformation, there is a proclivity today to inherit from hedonist utilitarianism and classical liberalism a conception of individuals as nodes in the community that are really only externally related to one another¹⁸, and whose behaviors can only be expected to reflect the social edifice. This has led to a system-centric cultural ethos that disproportionately, though by no means exclusively, emphasizes the role of objective systems¹⁹ in the degradation of human freedom and social justice.

While tenable within a framework that contents itself with objective, empirical systems, and understandable given the ubiquity of the epiphenomenal view of

¹⁷ Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1960), 404-405.

¹⁸ I follow John Dewey in his contrasting German “organic idealism,” with its relational constitution “of nature, of mind and of society,” with the atomistic, individualistic empiricism of early laissez faire liberalism. See John Dewey, *Liberalism and Social Action* (New York: G.P. Putnam, 1935), 10-25.

¹⁹ E.g., modes of economic production and consumption; covert hegemonic structures; or institutionalized forms of oppression, to name the most common.

consciousness, this outlook fails to account for those aspects of life that proceed out of Spirit, that is, those pertaining to one's lived existential horizon, task of self-hood, and self-reflection. Thus, it discounts the tireless human proclivity to reach for higher disclosures of freedom and vitality, and flees from its own cynicism into the busyness of policy making, social protesting, and technical innovation. What most characteristically reflects this psychological flatland is the fact it is *easier* to galvanize sympathy for one's alleged marginalization by some oppressive power or institution than it is to point out the limitations of someone's values and conceptions of self. I may proceed to explain how I feel oppressed by nearly anything capable of irritating people's egalitarian sensibilities *completely unchallenged*—very few will hold those around them to their higher capacities as self-relating, self-reflective beings capable of inner development. Few now have the magnanimity to point out those aspects of my self-conception that are life-negating, parochial, or limiting, because at bottom what is lost in Spirit's disintegration is the belief in the possibility of "greater, broader, and fuller life."²⁰ This is the mediocrity of ethical insanity: that it sells short the nobility of those that it tries to include in its protective web.

Nevertheless, imagination "is the possibility of all reflection, and the intensity of this medium is the possibility of the intensity of the self."²¹ Insane though it may be, the current blossoming of ethical conscientiousness foretells the possibility of deeper disclosures of self and wider expanses of communion. What it needs is the vitalizing cultivation of a more fundamental form of questioning that can draw forth the existential We that it requires. Our imagination must redirect its gaze to its own foundations, and permit the ethical condition to come under the scrutiny of life itself.

Restoring Ethical Sanity

Thus far six hypotheses have suggested themselves:

- 1) That the collective interior is now caught in the grip of a nihilism that is the product of our Spirit's disintegration (i.e. the disintegration of a sense of unity in identity within a shared destiny).
- 2) That this nihilism is amnesic in its forgetting of the question of Spirit.

²⁰ W.E.B. Du Bois, *Last Message to the World*, 1957.

²¹ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 298.

3) That, in the wake of Spirit's transmutation after the decline of mytho-poetic Christianity, we must take as our starting point existential human life in order to reclaim it.

4) That by taking the existential standpoint as our locus of Spirit, we fuse Self and We into a unified question mark, and recognize both to be part of the same horizon.

5) That in virtue of its very structure, the ethical edifice overlooks the question of Spirit and must be suspended for the sake of a deeper, pre-ethical revelation.

6) That febrile moral insanity is the primary manifestation of this nihilism, and is best understood as an attempt to vent the despair of Spirit's absence.

Yet it remains to be shown just how one might take up the task of recultivating ethical sanity. This task can now only be sketched in a preliminary way, with the aim of just hinting at a terrain of possible exploration.

Spirit as it coalesces in the expanse of the We is the locus that unites the many into shared identity. But since this expanse retains, in virtue of its existential character, a temporal aspect: It harnesses this unity in the form of a Destiny. To say that Spirit manifests is to attest to the unificatory revelation of my intrinsic unity with others in the very fact of our shared temporality, which is the revelation of Destiny itself.²² Spirit attains its entryway into life through the open and all-encompassing real(/actual)ization²³ of *ourselves as Destiny*.

While it is indeed possible that such a real(/actual)ization could inspire the formation of a political vision, what concerns us here is its revelatory character. In asking the question of how any semblance of a viable, thriving We can be cultivated, it

²² That time can now become our principle of unity in identity is the consummatory achievement of our initial existentialization of the historical age—that experience which has most pervasively characterized modernity since the advent of absolute idealism. By bringing this experience to existential consummation, we usher in the possibility of further existentializations that, in time, will provide the Spiritual foundations for our ascent into futurities hitherto uncontainable. Spirit and Destiny are but the initial movements.

²³ By this I mean a realization that constitutes the actualization of what it realizes. While a full explanation of what this constitutes cannot be elucidated here, it is worth mentioning that what I have in mind is something akin to the Buddhist notion of appropriation (*tainin*), as employed by Nishitani uses the term to refer to an "incarnate," existential understanding or obtaining of something, in contrast to a merely notional, conceptual grasp of something. See Keiji Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 5-7, 24-25, 44, 80-82, 293.

has become necessary to come face to face with the bare fact of its miracle. But a bare fact in this case is not neutral: it draws attention to the embodied and transient character of human aspiration. One might call this an internalization of the fact *that* mankind's aspiring transcendence takes place in the flow of history, which is but the course of life in self-reflection.

This real(/actual)ization that we are hinting at is not a replacement for ethical discourse; rather, it is the attainment of a reality already subsisting beneath any such discourse. It is the sobering coming to consciousness of both the provisional character of human aspiration and its absolute necessity for the ongoing, open-ended task of building the world anew. With this understanding, it becomes possible to get a handle of one's commitments and passions with genuine ethical sanity—a condition that we shall now interpret as the capacity to harness both great love and unshakable equanimity throughout one's engagements with the vicissitudes of life. Without the abode of Destiny to abide in, our aspirations for ourselves and for each other will remain limited to the sparse vigor that the isolated, disenchant-ed individual alone can muster. They require, rather, the full lifeblood of Spirit to sustain them.

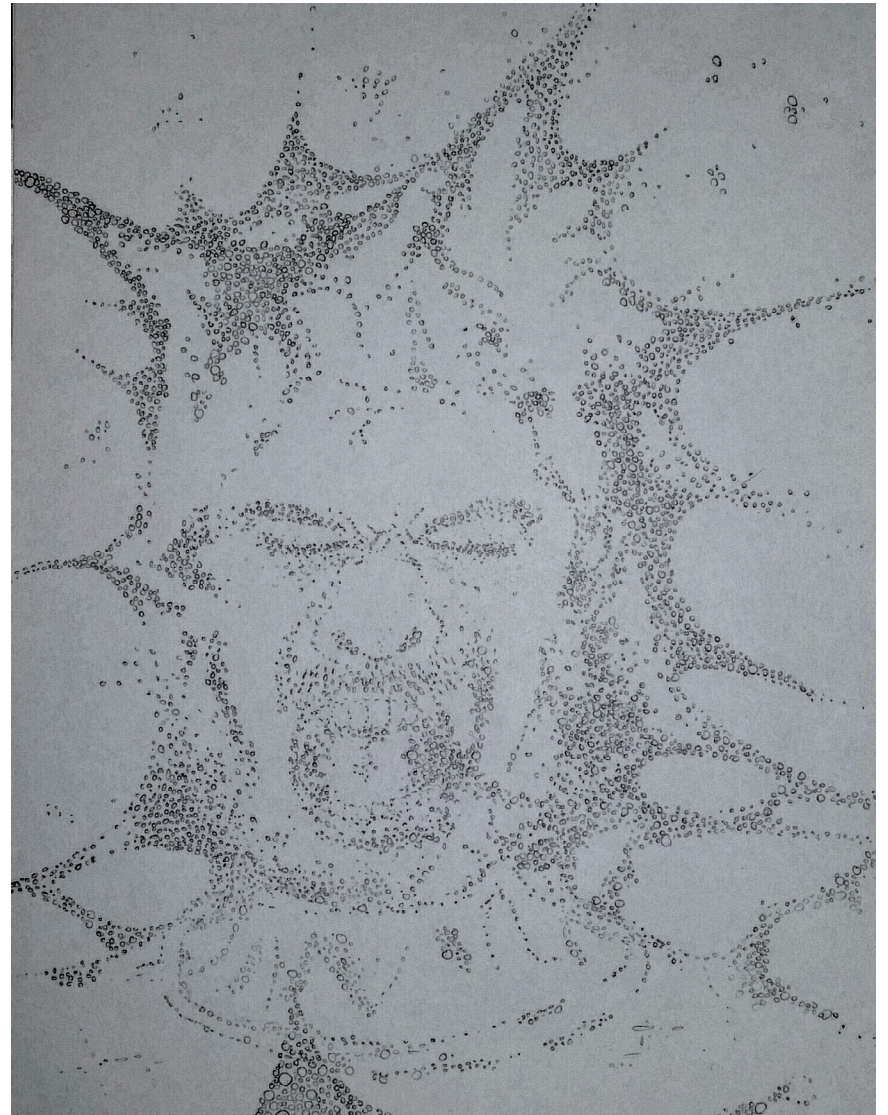
Hope, that silent affirmation of the gift of Destiny, the mystery of the We, and the miracle of Spirit, is the enabling condition of Truth. Truth is a passageway, the force of realignment with the flow of historical exigency. To isolate its wellspring from the concreteness of historical becoming is to mistake it as a contrivance, and to fail to acknowledge its essential character as *a vessel and a promise*. As a happening of self-revelation, the condition of Truth draws from the communion of Spirit the light of Destiny itself. *Truth is Destiny, and time is its redemption.*

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Absurd

by Michelle Stage



Paper and pen (2016)

a Incipit tragœdia

The weather is ill
Blankly I stare.
I see nothing
Icy nothing
Which cerchio dell’Inferno is this?

Überscharfen Leser,
says my guide
Do you see?
Liquid is the mechanism above:
Succeed, fail, repeat better:
Exhaust yourself
Leap into the liquidity, into
the stream

From down below,
From an unseen cerchio,
Four postmortems:
Dostoyevsky and Kierkegaard,
Weep and despair:
Nietzsche and Cioran,
Lambast and dismantle.
Incessantly.
Who notices?

Another one:
That poor young man
whose sorrows are well known
to Lotte and us;
Un santo suicidato. L'unico.
(Who deserves to kiss *his* hand?)

6 Rememberment

My guide does not stop.
Alors, c'est quoi la *grande* mort?
Eternal death che ci guarisce
della schiavitù
of having to breathe.

How else, tell me
would you get people to suffer,
if not to wind their clocks up
to different tempos?
Love at different speeds:
misses and collisions abound.
Perpetual dissatisfaction
Liquid dissatisfaction.
D'ailleurs, rien n'importe.

B Labour

Penser, c'est être *en retrait*.
Emptiness: The void.
Empties: Devoid.
Jaw loose, temporary death
Eyes ablaze, little death.
Calmly sleep. Recuperate.
Love of repetition.

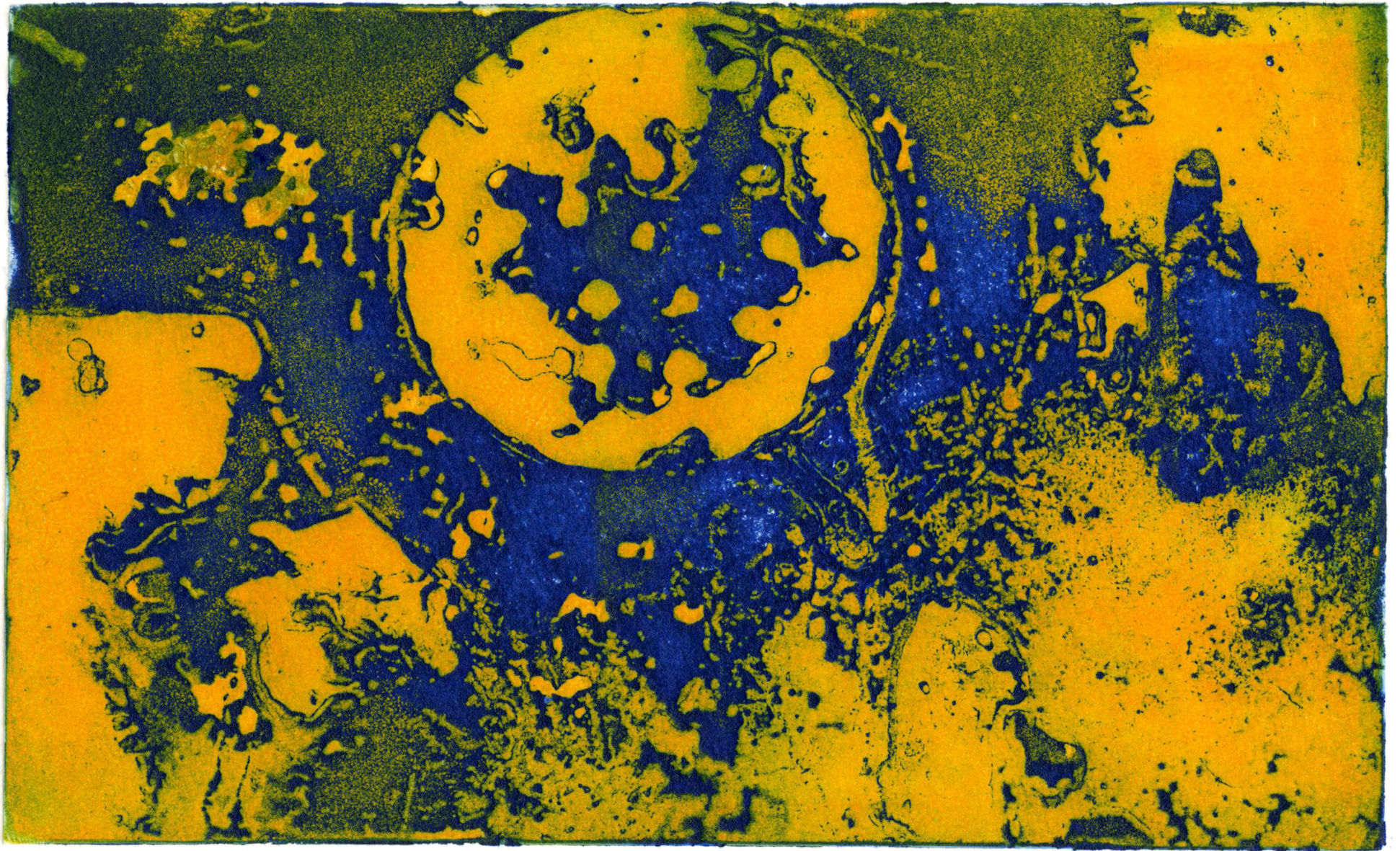
Some labour is alienating,
Say some. Some say,
All labour is alienating:
To what do I attribute my calm?
Lovelessness. Labourlessness.

r Cyclologic

My soul gone dim,
Whatever the Gods may say,
Nothing worthy, mere longevity;
None of them are noticing that

Water

by Jack Williams



Solar plate panel (2015)

Application of Existential Philosophy to Second-Generation Immigrants

by Kevin Liu

Abstract

Existentialism has been praised as a philosophy ripe with insight into the human condition revolving around the ideas of authenticity, freedom, and responsibility. Lending itself to a diverse range of applications, existentialist philosophy and its principles have been used by many writers and thinkers to examine the situation that blacks face in struggling against negative stereotypes. In this paper, I argue that just as writers of the black existentialism movement have applied traditional existentialist ideas to the plight of blacks, the same can be done for examining the challenges of another marginalized group: immigrants, specifically second-generation immigrants. Immigrant marginalization and struggle against negative stereotypes can also be interpreted through an existentialist lens to shed light on the unique challenges to their

authenticity and freedom. I then go on to examine how these factors can make it very difficult for second-generation immigrants to avoid living in bad faith, which consequently leads to a form of cognitive dissonance. I conclude by discussing how, in trying to counter this dissonance, second-generation immigrants put themselves at risk of other negative consequences.

Introduction

The fields of sociology and multicultural psychology have recently begun to make intriguing discoveries about many issues facing second-generation immigrants such as the language barrier or socioeconomic disadvantages, however little work has been done into the lived experience of this growing population. In this paper, I first argue that the concepts of black existentialism, as discussed by writers such as Frantz Fanon and Cornel West, and the situation that African Americans face can be used to shed light on the unique situation of second-generation immigrants in the United States. Just as African Americans are at a loss as to what characterizes a typical or a genuine African American, many second-generation immigrants strive to be genuine ethnic Americans when no model of a genuine ethnic American exists. I then discuss how, in attempting to identify with both the dominant culture and their ethnic cultures, second-generation immigrants face the absurdity of feeling inauthentic regardless of which cultural identity they choose, compounded by the fact that the middle road, assimilation of the two, is often met by rejection from both mainstream society and the coethnic community. This makes it difficult for them to avoid bad faith; as a result, they often fall victim to a form of cognitive dissonance arising from the conflict between facticity and freedom. Finally, I discuss how, second-generation immigrants may attempt to avoid this dissonance by adopting maladaptive behaviors and thought patterns or fall victim to other negative consequences.

Black Existentialism

Before discussing its link to second-generation immigrants, it would be prudent to first examine black existentialism and its roots. The movement's beginnings can be traced back to 1897 in W. E. B. Du Bois' idea of double consciousness. This was the idea that American society had forced African Americans to constantly view themselves through the eyes of others or as he described it, "measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity."¹ Du Bois concluded that the solution to double consciousness was for the African American

1 W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* (Greenwich, CT: Fawcett Publications, 1961), 2.

to relinquish neither the black self nor the self grounded in the look of white America but to incorporate them and be true to both selves.² Then, as postcolonial thought and philosophy began to take form, in 1952 Frantz Fanon discussed the plight of blacks, claiming, "For the black man there is only one destiny. And it is white."³ Fanon noted that there was no concept of how a typical black adult should think, feel, and act; any black person who was not actively striving for a white existence must be mentally ill.⁴ More recently, Cornel West wrote about the nihilism encountered by African Americans, referring to "the lived experience of coping with a life of horrifying meaningless, hopelessness, and (most important) lovelessness"⁵ caused by the capitalist commodification of African Americans. West argued that without overcoming this nihilism, the loss of hope would eliminate the possibility of a future, and the lack of meaning would prevent struggle.⁶ Though academia has yet to thoroughly explore the implications of black existentialism, increasing attention is being paid to these writers in understanding the current state of race relations in America.

Linking these authors together are feelings of alienation and angst which pervade the lived experience of blacks. They feel alienated by their rejection at the hands of dominant white society, yet the negative images of blackness feel incompatible with their quest to be respected human beings. Angst arises from the lack of a healthy black image to serve as their guide in creating an authentic identity. These same feelings have long been the subject of existentialist thinking about the meaninglessness, absurdity, and at the same time, absolute freedom that define the human condition. Furthermore, the traditional reactions to not only the inherent freedom but also the inevitable burden of responsibility that existentialists envision have been explored in the context of the unique black existential situation. At one extreme is Nella Larsen's depiction of Clare Kendry's severe bad faith, passing as a white woman and denying her black heritage entirely, eventually leading to tragic consequences.⁷ On the other is Ralph Ellison's "invisible man" who struggles to forge his own existence based on others' expectations but finally recognizes the need to stay true to himself.⁸

Interestingly, black existentialist writers have themselves recognized the influence of the French existentialists on their ideas. Likewise, French existentialists have

2 Ibid.

3 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (London: Pluto Press, 1986), 10.

4 Ibid.

5 Cornel West, *Race Matters* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 14.

6 Ibid.

7 Nella Larsen, *Passing* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997).

8 Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Vintage International, 1995).

also attempted to interpret the unique situation of blacks, for example, Jean-Paul Sartre's essay *Black Orpheus* (*Orphée Noir*)⁹ or the preface to Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*.¹⁰ However, it has been noted that black existentialism departs from traditional existentialist thought in that black existentialism is predicated on the liberation of all black people instead of mainly focusing on the individual.¹¹ Setting aside these differences, black existentialism seems to be a logical extension of existentialist thought into the black condition.

Connection to Second-Generation Immigrants

As in the case of black existentialism, academia had paid little attention to second-generation immigrants, those who were born in the US as well as those who spent a significant amount but not all of their childhood in a different country, until recently. Fortunately, a growing collection of narratives and memoirs written by second-generation immigrants is rich with the discussion of issues that plague those who are forced to live in two cultures simultaneously. Many of these writers speak of their difficulties in reconciling their parents' culture with the dominant American culture in terms of values, practices, and views. Two examples are Richard Rodriguez's *Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez* and Luis Rodriguez's *Always Running: La Vida Loca, Gang Days in L.A.*^{12,13} It can be imagined that the lack of a clear cultural image may lead to problems in establishing a person's identity. This is compounded by the fact that the two cultures may have conflicting values, such as collectivistic cultures clashing with the American individualistic culture. Consequently, second-generation immigrants may feel alienated from both their ethnic culture and American culture even while seeking to be part of both.

The connection I attempt to demonstrate is tied to the shared feelings of alienation and existential angst that pose challenges to identity formation for both African Americans and second-generation immigrants. For example, the two groups are both at risk of being inauthentic if they choose to follow the dominant culture. Fanon wrote, "Society refuses to consider [educated blacks] genuine

Negroes. The Negro is a savage, whereas the student is civilized."¹⁴ Similarly, psychologist Ying-yi Hong's 2008 study found that Asian Americans who were judged by their respective coethnic groups as "whitewashed" or "fake" were often marginalized or excluded.¹⁵ Conversely, blackness has long been linked to criminality, and acting "black" often leads to racial profiling and discrimination by law enforcement authorities.¹⁶ Likewise, people are likely to be labeled with negative racial stereotypes if they are perceived as acting too "ethnic."¹⁷ Simply stated, just as Fanon wrote that there was no model for a typical black adult, for second-generation immigrants there may be a model for being genuinely ethnic and a model for being genuinely American. However, no model exists for a genuine ethnic American who is both American as well as a member of their coethnic community.

Next, given the similarities between the existential situations of African Americans and second-generation immigrants noted above, I analyze the situation of second-generation immigrant Americans across several themes, in a manner similar to how black existentialism examined the lived experience of African Americans. These themes are common to existentialist thought and include absurdity, facticity, the look, freedom, responsibility, and authenticity. Additionally, I note how these themes are similarities and differences in some aspects for both African Americans and second-generation immigrant Americans

The first theme is absurdity, referring to the realization that the world is often unfair or illogical despite humanity's hope for coherent meaning and what Albert Camus called "the desire for unity."¹⁸ Second-generation immigrants face a difficult dilemma in determining their individual cultural identities. If they adopt their ethnic culture, they face discrimination by mainstream society; if they adopt the dominant culture, they can be excluded or marginalized by their own ethnic group. This hopeless dilemma is unfair and thus arouses the feeling of absurdity. African Americans face this same predicament by being perceived as either "too white" by black society or "too black" by mainstream society. However, an important difference between African Americans and second-generation immigrants is that these groups face diverse degrees of discrimination. Blackness being linked

9 Jean Paul Sartre, *Black Orpheus*, trans. Samuel Allen (Paris: Presence Africaine, 1960).

10 Frantz Fanon, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Constance Farrington, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1965).

11 M. O. Bassey, "What Is Africana Critical Theory or Black Existential Philosophy?" *Journal of Black Studies* 37, no. 6 (2007): 914–35.

12 Richard Rodriguez, *Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez: An Autobiography* (Boston, MA: D. R. Godine, 1982).

13 Luis J. Rodriguez, *Always Running: La Vida Loca, Gang Days in L.A.* (Willimantic, CT: Curbstone Press, 1993).

14 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 69.

15 Ying-yi Hong, "Denial of Cultural Authenticity: Asian Americans' Negotiation of Bicultural Identities" (PhD diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2008), 4.

16 R. C. Hetey and J. L. Eberhardt, "Racial Disparities in Incarceration Increase Acceptance of Punitive Policies," *Psychological Science* 25, no. 10 (2014): 1949–54.

17 Joy Hoffman and Edlyn Vallejo Peña, "Too Korean to be White and too White to be Korean: Ethnic Identity Development among Transracial Korean American Adoptees," *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice* 50, no. 2 (2013): 152–70.

18 Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus, and Other Essays* (New York: Vintage Books, 1955).

to criminality is a severe condemnation of the black race and has resulted in African Americans being disproportionately incarcerated compared to other ethnic groups.¹⁹ Immigrant Americans face different degrees of negative stereotyping, depending on their ethnicity, ranging from being greedy for Jewish Americans to being socially inept for Asian Americans.²⁰ These varying degrees of discrimination might lead to different types of absurdity.

The theme of facticity refers to the static facts of one's life that limit one's freedom. For both African Americans and second-generation immigrant Americans, physical appearance and the results of their distinct cultural upbringing, such as accents, mannerisms, or other parts of their facticity, preclude their freedom to present themselves as belonging to an ethnicity other than their own. In the absence of any other differences, the outwardly noticeable physical differences continue to exist. Consequently, as long as negative stereotypes persist, immigrant Americans will inevitably fall victim to them regardless of how diligently they attempt to assimilate into mainstream American society. The same is true for black Americans; often, their skin color, not their character, condemns them as subjects of discrimination. For example, in the novel *Passing*, although Clare initially succeeds at hiding her blackness and gaining acceptance by white society. However, once it becomes known that she is half black, all previous knowledge of her good character is instantly replaced by the stereotypes that plague black Americans.²¹ However, it is important to mention that immigrants from the Anglosphere, already proficient in English and physically resembling the general white American population, often have little trouble passing as members of the dominant culture.

The look, a part of a person's facticity, is the fact that while someone can view the world entirely through one's own subjective lens, the presence of the "Other" renders the individual an object in their eyes. The look plays a significant role in making identity formation such a difficult process for African Americans and immigrant Americans. Du Bois' aforementioned idea of double consciousness, in which African Americans cannot help but perceive themselves through the eyes of the dominant white society, is a manifestation of the look.²² Another such manifestation is the white gaze, in which African Americans are constantly aware of the negative stereotypes that white society sees in them.²³ Similarly, second-generation immigrants are conscious of labels, such as "beaner" or "chink," and

often compare themselves to their associated stereotypes.²⁴ At the same time, both African Americans and second-generation immigrants are wary of their ethnic community labeling them the converse, with terms such as "Oreo" or "banana."²⁵ This constant comparison of the self to the standards of not only the dominant white culture, but also one's ethnic culture, may lead to normlessness, ambiguity, and identity confusion as noted by both Park in 1928 and Stonequist in 1935.^{26, 27}

The facticity of second-generation immigrants—their distinct appearance, upbringing, and twofold cultural standards—raises a question: in the presence of such imposing limitations to freedom, how can someone be expected to exercise freedom? Key tenets of existentialist thinking are a person's freedom to choose and the inherent responsibility for each and every choice made. With this idea comes the realization that the immigrant American need not conform to either culture's standards; neither should there be an absolute right or wrong response to which cultural practices and values to adopt. Instead, the answer is entirely contingent on what the individual decides. Nonetheless, the person struggles with such decisions because people are ultimately responsible for their choices. If an immigrant American is questioned why he or she holds certain attitudes or values, replying that these have been culturally instilled is no defense. After all, the immigrant American selects which aspects of the two cultures to adopt or reject, thereby bearing full responsibility for these choices.

This burdensome responsibility makes it difficult for the second-generation immigrant to make his or her own choices and live authentically. The thought of entirely embracing one culture while outrightly rejecting the other and claiming to be a victim of cultural essentialism is enticing. However, a person would be denying a part of her facticity, rejecting freedom, and sacrificing authenticity in favor of shrugging off responsibility.

Psychological Impacts and Relevance

Following the discussion about the negative aspects of the existential situation that second-generation immigrants face, the question is how this issue can affect them psychologically. For ethnic Americans, bad faith, ignoring either one's facticity or

19 Hetey and Eberhardt, "Racial Disparities in Incarceration."

20 Hong, "Denial of Cultural Authenticity."

21 Larsen, *Passing*.

22 Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*.

23 George Yancy, "Walking While Black in the 'White Gaze,'" *The New York Times*, 2013.

24 Christia Spears Brown et al., "Ethnicity and Gender in Late Childhood and Early Adolescence: Group Identity and Awareness of Bias," *Developmental Psychology* 47, no. 2 (2011): 463.

25 Teresa LaFromboise, Hardin L. Coleman, and Jennifer Gerton, "Psychological Impact of Biculturalism: Evidence and Theory," *Psychological Bulletin* 114, no. 3 (1993): 395–412.

26 Robert E. Park, "Human Migration and the Marginal Man," *American Journal of Sociology* 33, no. 6 (1928): 881–93.

27 Everett V. Stonequist, "The Problem of the Marginal Man," *American Journal of Sociology* 41, no. 1 (1935): 1–12.

freedom, is almost impossible to avoid due to the conflicts between their facticity, especially their cultural background, and the dominant culture, preventing them from achieving their desire to transcend their cultural and racial backgrounds because of the others' preconceived notions of how ethnic Americans should act. As Bahnmitter pointed out, while cognitive dissonance does not always involve bad faith, bad faith in all cases results in cognitive dissonance.²⁸ This is because of the inherent dissonance between the reality that a person is limited by one's facticity and yet should also strive to transcend it. With the connection between bad faith and cognitive dissonance established, the second-generation immigrants' nearly inescapable bad faith would lead them to a state of constant cognitive dissonance. As Festinger, the theorist who proposed cognitive dissonance, first noted in 1957 and subsequent psychological research has shown, cognitive dissonance is psychologically uncomfortable. People experiencing it often attempt to reduce it by striving to rationalize their behavior or cognition, as well as ignoring the facts that caused the dissonance in the first place.^{29,30} Next, I examine how both of these methods of reducing cognitive dissonance play out in the real world, citing studies of second-generation immigrant behaviors and how these may explain some of the trends in maladaptive behaviors observed among ethnic Americans.

The first way in which a person experiencing cognitive dissonance resulting from bad faith can attempt to minimize dissonance is to rationalize his own behavior by denying the importance of either his own facticity or transcendence. In the case of second-generation immigrants, negating the importance of their facticity would equate to denying the significance of the conflict between their ethnic culture and the dominant one. In some situations, this issue could have very little effect when a person's ethnic culture is not significantly different from the dominant one, meaning that the conflict would be relatively minimal. However, this could be a problem when the difference, and thus the conflict, between the two cultures is substantial. The reason is that it is vital for an individual living between two cultures to develop bicultural competence to avoid psychological distress, which necessitates recognizing the similarities and more importantly, the differences between the cultures, as Laframboise et al. asserted in their discussion on the psychological impact of biculturalism.³¹ Without recognizing the importance of their facticity

and the conflict between the cultures, individuals can fail to develop bicultural competence. This situation can put them at a disadvantage, as shown in Schiller's 1987 study, where overall academic performance was lower among non-biculturally competent American Indian students compared to those who were biculturally competent.³² Therefore, though those who negate the importance of their facticity may be able to mitigate their psychological discomfort with cognitive dissonance, this issue can also lead to their failure to develop bicultural competence, which ultimately can be a disadvantage.

In addition to denying the importance of their facticity, second-generation immigrants can also choose to reject or ignore the significance of rising above the conflict. In other words, they choose to reject transcendence, which is the attitude of focusing on what can be instead of just what already is. Therefore, they may force themselves to think that transcending the often negative stereotypes that the dominant culture imposes on their culture is unimportant in order to lessen their cognitive dissonance. As Orozco noted in *Children of Immigration*, children of immigrants can sometimes develop adversarial attitudes toward the dominant culture when they give up hope in resolving the conflict between "acting too white" and behaving according to society's negative stereotypes about them.³³ Therefore, since society already has negative views of them, they set out to show exactly how "bad" they can be by joining ethnic gangs that engage in drug abuse and other forms of juvenile delinquency. An example is shown in Luis J. Rodriguez's semi-autobiographical novel, which describes how the main character, feeling stripped of power at the hands of society with its negative stereotyping, joins a gang to obtain power and authority over society.³⁴ Although many of such individuals eventually leave these gangs and integrate into mainstream society, their time spent with these gangs often leaves them with criminal records and other lasting effects that become major setbacks later in life. Thus, in rationalizing their own behavior by denying the importance of either facticity or transcendence, some second-generation immigrants are likely to be subject to adverse consequences or engage in destructive behaviors even though their denial may lessen the effects of cognitive dissonance.

The second way in which people may choose to avoid dissonance is to ignore the facts that are causing the conflict. In the case of the second-generation immigrant, this could be the choice to ignore the part of the self that is grounded in either

28 Hannah Bahnmitter, "The Intersections between Self-Deception and Inconsistency: An Examination of Bad Faith and Cognitive Dissonance," *Stance* 8 (April 2015): 71–80.

29 Albert Pepitone and Leon Festinger, "A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance," *The American Journal of Psychology* 72, no. 1 (1959): 153.

30 E. Harmon-Jones, "Cognitive Dissonance and Experienced Negative Affect: Evidence that Dissonance Increases Experienced Negative Affect even in the Absence of Aversive Consequences," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 26, no. 12 (2000): 1490–501.

31 Laframboise et al., "Psychological Impact of Biculturalism."

32 Phyllis M. Schiller, "Biculturalism and Psychosocial Adjustment among Native American University Students" (PhD diss., University of Utah, ProQuest Information & Learning, 1987).

33 Carola Suárez-Orozco and Marcelo M. Suárez-Orozco, *Children of Immigration* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 105.

34 Rodriguez, *Always Running: La Vida Loca, Gang Days in L.A.*

the dominant or the ethnic culture. First, focusing on the choice to ignore oneself as part of the dominant culture would seem rather difficult because as soon as one steps out one's door, one is usually confronted with countless aspects of the dominant culture. Still, communities exist within the US where one can live with minimal contact with the dominant culture and high concentrations of coethnic members exist, such as the many Chinatowns or other ethnic enclaves spread in the US and across the world. Consequently, individuals have little incentive and, if they rarely leave these communities, little chance to acculturate to the dominant culture even if they desire to do so. Therefore, they will experience great difficulty in developing enough competence in the dominant culture to excel in mainstream society, whether this be in terms of socioeconomic class or in the workplace. An example is Silvia who immigrated to California at an early age.³⁵ Working at a janitorial service, she observed that most of the lower-level workers were monolingual who rarely came into contact with those of the dominant American culture; in contrast, the managerial positions were given to the employees who were bilingual and able to interact with people of both ethnic and American cultures with equal competence. While language was undeniably a factor, her observations also pointed to the tendency to look down on individuals who lacked competence in the dominant culture and were regarded as uncultured or undesirable. People tend to be more comfortable with others who are similar to them. Therefore, those who ignore that they at least partially belong to the dominant culture decrease their opportunity for upward mobility because they have in effect alienated themselves from mainstream society. This case can also be observed in the rapid growth of the so-called ethnic underclass in the United States. Thus, while second-generation immigrants can avoid cognitive dissonance by ignoring that they are part of the dominant culture, this attitude becomes highly detrimental to any effort to achieve success in mainstream society.

On the other hand, a second-generation immigrant can also deny her ethnic self and identify entirely with the dominant culture. This kind of behavior has been termed ethnic flight; although those who adopt it often gain privileged positions in the mainstream culture, this often comes at a price.³⁶ Identification with the mainstream culture can often lead to an inability to identify or connect with members of the same ethnic group, including one's own family. Feelings of alienation and ethnic betrayal develop within individuals who exhibit ethnic flight, which often even lead to being insulted with such terms as "banana" or "Oreo," meaning that although one is yellow or black on the outside, they are white on

35 Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco, *Children of Immigration*, 113.

36 Ibid., 103.

the inside.³⁷ Just as Fanon noted that doing well academically was regarded as a betrayal of someone's blackness,³⁸ an immigrant, without even being conscious of it, can alienate himself from his ethnic peers by succeeding in school. In his autobiography, Richard Rodriguez provides a firsthand account of this experience.³⁹ Rodriguez's parents raised him to speak only English in public and adopt the ways of the dominant American culture so that he would be ready for the public world of school and work. Although this preparation enabled him to excel in mainstream society after graduating from the universities of Stanford, Columbia, and Berkeley, he lost the sense of belonging to his ethnic community and his family. Consequently, he felt inauthentic regarding his own ethnic identity, leading him to feel profoundly alone. Though this method of avoiding cognitive dissonance by ignoring ethnic identity allows one to succeed in mainstream society, this still does not conquer the problem of bad faith because one is left with feelings of alienation, profound loneliness, and self-betrayal.

After examining the four possible ways to avoid the cognitive dissonance resulting from the near inescapability of bad faith in the second-generation immigrant's situation, I have shown that they all have potential debilitating consequences. Denying the importance of a person's own facticity, especially the fact that one lives in the middle of two different cultures, can lead to the inability to develop bicultural competence, which is crucial in avoiding psychological distress and in succeeding academically and professionally. Rejecting the significance of transcendence can result in an attitude where—instead of focusing on rising above society's often negative stereotypes of ethnicities—a person embraces these stereotypes, which can lead to membership in an ethnic gang or other maladaptive behaviors. Ignoring the aspect of oneself that is part of the dominant culture alienates a person from this culture and is highly detrimental to upward mobility and success in mainstream society. However, ignoring the ethnic self, while allowing for success in mainstream society and culture, can alienate a person from the coethnic group. This leads to the loss of intimacy and familiarity with his or her ethnic community, including family, as well as feelings of ethnic betrayal, profound loneliness, and inauthenticity. This situation can prove to be quite a dilemma. It is challenging to avoid bad faith as a second-generation immigrant for the reasons discussed earlier. In turn, this bad faith results in cognitive dissonance, which, besides having negative effects in itself, is difficult to reduce without risking even more adverse consequences.

37 Ibid., 104.

38 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 69.

39 Rodriguez, *Hunger for Memory*.

Conclusion

Initially exploring black existentialism and its links to the traditional existentialist movement and then connecting both to the second-generation immigrants' dilemma of living in the midst of two cultures with differing expectations, norms, and values, I have attempted to demonstrate how existential philosophy and its insights into the human condition can shed light on the case of second-generation immigrants. Just as earlier writers, including Fanon and Du Bois, employed the ideas of existentialism, such as alienation and the conflict between facticity and freedom, to analyze the situation of blacks, I believe that applying these concepts to the situation of second-generation immigrants may provide deeper insights into the problems they face, as well as potential solutions. While this may introduce new and controversial ideas to the discussion on immigrants, such notions also find their basis in past works and research. For example, while it has been argued that immigrants face cognitive dissonance, which may cause psychological stress, I have pointed out bad faith as one of the reasons for this dissonance, from which immigrants find it difficult to escape when trying to remain authentic and simultaneously embracing two possibly conflicting cultures. Furthermore, I have discussed how second-generation immigrants may choose to lessen this dissonance caused by bad faith, as well as how these decisions may have problematic consequences. This perspective finds its basis in the thoughts and feelings of alienation, inauthenticity, hopelessness, and loneliness, expressed by an array of memoirs and autobiographies written by the children of immigrants, in addition to empirical research on the subject. I believe that existentialist philosophy has at least some potential to help us better understand some of these issues.

Finally, having hopefully made the case for the link between existentialism and the situation of second-generation immigrants, the question remains regarding possible future work on applying existentialist thinking to the issues of immigrants. In my mind, the first priority should be to gain a better understanding of how existentialist philosophy connects to second-generation immigrants. The second task is to answer the question that I have up to now avoided in this paper: how second-generation immigrants can live authentically and avoid bad faith despite the many challenges I have enumerated. The Orozcos have claimed that those who adopt transcultural identities achieve bicultural and bilingual competencies and incorporate these into their sense of self by fusing their parental traditions with the new culture.⁴⁰ However, as Navarrette reveals, forcing oneself to be biculturally competent can lead to feelings of inauthenticity and bad faith as well, which

does not solve the problem.⁴¹ The third would be to broaden the scope of this connection. Throughout this paper, I have mostly limited my discussion to second-generation immigrants in the United States, but perhaps existentialist thought could be applied to a broader group. For example, existentialism might provide valuable insights into the situations of first-generation immigrants or children of immigrant families from several generations ago. Alternatively, this philosophy might be useful in examining the cases of other ethnic minorities in the United States, such as Native Americans. Existentialist ideas could also be applied to the challenges encountered by immigrants living in countries other than the United States, such as the issues in defining one's cultural identity, as written about by Amin Maalouf, a Lebanese immigrant to France.⁴² Observing how existentialism has been immensely helpful in discussing the plight of African Americans inspires hope that a similar approach can be used in exploring challenges facing other marginalized groups.

40 Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco, *Children of Immigration*, 113.

41 Ruben Navarrette, *A Darker Shade of Crimson: Odyssey of a Harvard Chicano* (New York: Bantam Books, 1993).

42 Amin Maalouf, *In the Name of Identity: Violence and the Need to Belong* (New York: Arcade, 2001).

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