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UPJA

Founded in 2019, the *Undergraduate Philosophy Journal of Australasia* (UPJA) is the first undergraduate philosophy journal run by students from Australasia. We publish one volume and host two conferences annually and interview philosophers with a substantial connection to Australasia. We aim to be an inclusive and diverse journal and welcome submissions from undergraduates (and recent graduates) worldwide, on any philosophical topic, so long as the author attempts to make a substantive contribution to contemporary philosophy. Submissions from women and other members of underrepresented groups in philosophy, including those for whom English is not their first language, are particularly encouraged.

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Editors' Notes

UPJA went from strength to strength in 2025. Alongside a substantial increase in submissions, we saw an expansion of the reviewer pool for Volume 7, allowing for a rigorous and precise peer review process. This growth was matched by a sustained level of submission quality: the pieces received this year were consistently sophisticated, original, and sharply argued, reflecting the exceptional standard of undergraduate philosophy being produced across Australasia and beyond.

Midway through the year, we welcomed two new individuals to our editorial team. Ava Broinowski and Winny Li both joined the journal as Associate Editors, bringing fresh perspectives and a sense of intellectual discernment that has no doubt improved this volume. We look forward to the direction they take the journal as they take over as Editors-in-Chief. We would also like to express our sincere gratitude to Beau Kent and Grier Rollinson, the journal's previous Editors-in-Chief. The standards they set continue to shape UPJA, and we are deeply thankful for their guidance.

We are pleased to publish four excellent pieces of philosophy in this volume, including three original papers and one critical reply. The pieces are: "Is 'Nature' Out of the Woods? Defending the Relevance of 'Nature' in Our Ecological Crisis" by Ryan Jepson; "The Buddha and the Cartesian Self: Why Is the Buddha's Argument a Philosophical Failure?" by Ruiwen Guo; "A Critical Reply to Williamson's 'Fragility, Influence, and Intrinsicality'" by Zakhar Zolotarev; and "Diotima and Dante: A Ladder of Love Towards God" by Alex Anderson.

Two pieces in this volume deserve a special mention. Ryan Jepson's paper received the award for Best Paper, and Ruiwen Guo's paper received the award for Best Paper (Member of an Underrepresented Group in Philosophy). Both papers stood out for their exceptional philosophical ambition and argumentative clarity, and are models of philosophical excellence. Congratulations, Ryan and Ruiwen!

We would also like to thank all of our authors and reviewers for the care and seriousness with which they engaged in the editorial process. UPJA remains committed to providing a supportive but demanding forum for undergraduate philosophical work, and strong engagement from the philosophical community throughout the region is essential to realising this ambition. We hope that the pieces collected here will stimulate further discussion and inquiry, and we look forward to the continued growth of the journal in the years ahead.

Paul Kim and William Smith

Editors-in-Chief

January 2026

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* Winner of Best Paper

† Winner of Best Paper (Member of an Underrepresented Group in Philosophy)

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Is "Nature" Out of the Woods? Defending the Relevance of "Nature" in Our Ecological Crisis

Ryan Jepson[1]

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Abstract

This essay examines whether environmental philosophy should retain or abandon a commitment to "nature," in light of widespread human influence on the planet. Classic moral arguments in environmental ethics, like those of Taylor (1986) and Katz (1997), sought to improve our environmental practices by defending nature's intrinsic value. However, contrastive "postnaturalist" arguments, from McKibben (1989) and Vogel (2015), maintain that nature is already dead, and that accepting this reality is key to improving our environmental practices. In this essay, I evaluate Vogel's claim that environmental philosophy should move beyond the concept of "nature." Vogel's criticism of Taylor and Katz's arguments suggests we have good reason to abandon concern for "nature," since moral defences of nature imply problematic artifice-nature distinctions. However, drawing on Plumwood (2005), I argue that highlighting, rather than abandoning, the concept of "nature" is needed to combat anthropocentric "backgrounding" of nature's agency – the dominant thinking underlying our ecological crisis. I draw on Hailwood (2012) to reconceive a monist account of the "natural world," one that acknowledges humanity's continuity with nature and actively "reworks" anthropocentric narratives. The defended "natural world" account provides environmental philosophy with a more robust ethical framework than either classic moral arguments or "postnaturalist" abandonment of "nature."

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[1] *Ryan Jepson is undertaking a Doctor of Philosophy in Cognitive Neuroscience at University College London. He has a Master of Philosophy in Cognitive Neuroscience from the University of Cambridge, and a Bachelor of Science and Bachelor of Arts from the University of New South Wales. His philosophical interests include environmental philosophy, consciousness, the mind–body problem, and philosophy of language.*

§ 0. Introduction

We often think of nature positively. We enjoy practices such as "going bush" or "returning to nature." In these cases, we imagine nature as existing somewhere outside the human domain, beyond our towns and cities. But does thinking of nature in this way mask an unfortunate truth? Human activity has and continues to radically alter the planet. Approximately ninety-five per cent of Earth's landmass has been modified by human industry.[2] Our pollution is not only warming the atmosphere but raising ocean temperatures and altering weather patterns globally,[3] likely resulting in widespread transformation of ecosystems. In *The End of Nature* (1989), McKibben proposed: if "nature" is defined as that which is independent of human influence, but we have affected every patch of air, ocean and land through widespread anthropogenic climate change, then nature no longer exists.[4] We are living in an "ecological crisis."[5] And how we ought to protect nature, if it still exists, remains unclear.

In environmental philosophy, how we should conceptualise "nature" has been the subject of extensive discussion. Early environmental ethicists Leopold (1949) and Routley (1973) argued that we need to improve our moral "relations to the natural environment."[6] Taylor (1986) and Katz (1997) expanded these arguments, characterising the properties of natural entities that make them worthy of our moral consideration. "Nature," in environmental philosophy, has since come to mean the nonhuman sphere that is separate and in need of protection from the human sphere.[7] Importantly, the moral arguments from Taylor and Katz share a classic, conceptual approach: thinking about the *intrinsic value of nature* will encourage more thoughtful and ethical treatment of the planet. An alternative approach in environmental philosophy – also aimed at improving our treatment of the planet – has been to move beyond a concern for "nature." Expanding upon McKibben's argument, in *Thinking like a Mall* (2015) Vogel proposed that recognising the entire planet has become "non-natural" confronts us with the consequences of our actions, thereby holding us accountable for the ecological crisis. According to Vogel, *accepting that nature no longer exists* is the more compelling approach for improving our ethical treatment of the planet.

The contrastive approaches of Taylor and Katz, and McKibben and Vogel, pose an unresolved tension. Do we have good reason to uphold a commitment to "nature,"

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[2] Christina M. Kennedy et al., 'Managing the middle: A shift in conservation priorities based on the global human modification gradient', *Global Change Biology* 25, no. 3 (2019): 811–826.

[3] Karina von Schuckmann et al., 'Heat stored in the Earth system: where does the energy go?' *Earth Systems Science Data* 12, no. 3 (2020): 2013–2041.

[4] Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature*, London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1989, 60.

[5] Lynn White Jr., 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,' *Science* 155, no. 3767 (1967): 1203–1207.

[6] Routley, Richard, 'Is there a need for a new, an environmental ethic?' *Proceedings of the 15th World Congress of Philosophy*, Sophia: Sophia Press, 1973, 205.

[7] Val Plumwood, and Timothy Heyd eds. 'Toward a Progressive Naturalism,' *Recognizing the Autonomy of Nature*, (2005): 25.

and to continue defending the moral status of natural things? Or, has the concept of nature become "old hat,"[8] an outdated and problematic concept in our ecological crisis?

In this essay, I will evaluate Vogel's claim that environmental philosophy ought to abandon the concept of and commitment to "nature." To accomplish this, I will examine Vogel's critique of Taylor and Katz's moral defences of nature. Thereafter, I examine Vogel's "postnaturalist"[9] argument that, because we cannot adequately characterise and defend "nature," environmental philosophy ought to prioritise an alternative conceptual and ethical focus: a responsibility to fix our "environment." While I support Vogel's critique of Taylor and Katz's moral arguments, I present two objections to Vogel's postnaturalist argument. Firstly, I argue that Vogel's postnaturalist approach does not significantly shift or improve our ethical focus, since concern for the environment cannot come without some concept of "nature." Secondly, after drawing on Plumwood's (2005) call to reconceptualise problematic, dualist conceptions of "nature," I argue that abandoning the "nature" concept does more harm than good.

Ultimately, I defend the position that environmental philosophy has good reason to retain – but also to "rework"[10] – our concept of nature. After drawing on Hailwood's (2012) framework of alienations and natures, I defend a reconceived, monist concept of "natural world." Such an account drives strong ethical concern by reworking problematic "nature" conceptions, as per Plumwood, and acknowledging the ontological continuity of human artifice and nature, as per Vogel.

§ 1. Moral Considerability

A classic approach in environmental ethics has been to defend the intrinsic value of nature.[11] In this vein, Taylor and Katz argued that nature has intrinsic properties worthy of moral concern. I outline their "moral considerability"[12] arguments below before examining Vogel's critique thereof.

Taylor supposed that, in nature, all living things are "teleological centers": they possess their own set of internally derived goals, e.g. to survive, to reproduce.[13] Once we understand what is beneficial or harmful to an organism's internal goals, we can appreciate that the organism has a sense of its "own wellbeing" or its "own good,"

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[8] Donna Haraway, *Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium: FemaleMan_Meets_OncoMouse: Feminism and Technoscience*, London: Routledge, 1997, quoted in Plumwood, 'Toward a Progressive Naturalism,' 43.
[9] Steven Vogel, *Thinking like a Mall: Environmental Philosophy after the End of Nature*, Cambridge, MA; London: MIT Press, 2015, 164.
[10] Plumwood, 'Toward a Progressive Naturalism,' 48.
[11] Andrew Brennan, Norva Y. S. Lo, and Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman, eds. (2002) 'Environmental Ethics', *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.
[12] Vogel, Thinking like a Mall, 144.
[13] Paul Taylor, *Respect for Nature: A Theory of Environmental Ethics*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986, 119.

and we know how to act (morally) right by the organism.[14] Therefore, things in nature have some *intrinsic teleology* that make them morally considerable objects. Katz characterised "nature" somewhat differently. According to Katz, nature stands necessarily in opposition to human "artifacts," e.g. cars, skyscrapers, which are the product of human *intention*.[15] Unlike artifacts, *unintended* natural things have their own *autonomy*, and we act (morally) right when we preserve nature's autonomy.[16]

According to Vogel, these moral considerability arguments outline essentially "the difference between those items in the world to which we owe some sort of moral concern and those to which we don't."[17] For Katz, morally considerable natural objects are those things which are *unintended* and in possession of their *own autonomy*. For Taylor, morally considerable natural objects are those with an *intrinsic teleology* and a sense of their *own good*. While such moral considerability arguments helpfully establish why we should care about nature, they imply a sharp and problematic boundary between "natural" and "artificial" objects.

In the following sections, I summarise Vogel's three objections to Katz and Taylor's moral considerability arguments: (1) sharp moral and ontological boundaries separating "nature" from "artifice" inadequately characterise many critical examples, (2) *intention* is as much a property of nature as it is of artifacts, (3) *intrinsic teleology*, or a thing's *own good*, is as much a property of artifice as it is of nature.

1.1 Moral Considerability: Objection 1

Under Vogel's first objection, moral considerability arguments enforce sharp boundaries around nature, which fail, in practice, because referents of the term "nature" are difficult to determine.

Domesticated animals are one set of objects that eludes the natural–artificial dichotomisation. According to Katz, domesticated animals are artifacts with "no nature of their own" and have "no place in an environmental ethic since they are not natural entities."[18] However, as argued by Vogel, domesticated animals appear to qualify as "natural" by Taylor and Katz's own logic.[19] For example, humans sometimes keep dogs around for security purposes. In a threatening situation, like a home invasion, a dog might bark in such a way that serves its "own wellbeing," reflecting something of an *intrinsic teleology*, while simultaneously alerting its owner and carrying out the *extrinsic* goals its owner had intended for it. The same can be said for other domesticated animals; bees develop honey for their own hive, sheep grow wool for their own bodies, despite humans rearing these animals also for their

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[14] Taylor, *Respect for Nature*, 121-124.
[15] Eric Katz, *Nature As Subject: Human Obligation and Natural Community*, London: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., 1997, 122.
[16] Katz, *Nature As Subject*, xxv.
[17] Vogel, *Thinking like a Mall*, 144.
[18] Katz, *Nature As Subject*, 128-129.
[19] Vogel, *Thinking like a Mall*, 151.

extrinsic purpose.[20] By Taylor's logic, if domesticated animals can be said to possess an *intrinsic teleology*, what is stopping us from including domesticated animals in the group of morally considerable "natural" objects?

Not only can we understand domesticated animals as having their own *teleology*, as per Taylor, but they can also be said to possess *autonomy*, as per Katz. Consider the ancient breed of Herdwick sheep, endemic to England's Lake District. Herdwick shepherding requires the practice of "hefting," whereby farmers' pasture boundaries, or "heafs," are guided by the sheep, who inherit the knowledge of heaf boundaries generationally.[21] Don't the Herdwick sheep possess some degree of human-independent *autonomy*, something like a "nature of their own"? And don't the Herdwick sheep, like the pet dog, have some *intrinsic teleology*, and their *own wellbeing*, on par with wild "natural" animals?

The implications of Taylor and Katz's moral considerability arguments are unclear. Are we to include domesticated animals in the group of morally considerable "natural" objects, since they all share fundamental properties? Such an approach might be counterproductive for environmentalism, given that the pertinent ecological concern is the loss of un-domesticated life, i.e. species whose numbers are in decline, those that are not supported by human industry. The alternative is, as Katz argued, to redraw the boundary of "natural" to include only the moral patients of interest, e.g. *autonomous* wild animals, trees, ecosystems, while excluding exceptions, e.g. *autonomous* domesticated animals with "no place in an environmental ethic." However, as Vogel identified, this pursuit of a consistent moral-ontological boundary around "nature" follows an endless logic of deferral, whereby:

> … each attempt to define nature falls prey to counterexamples that lead the definer to complain "no that's not what I meant," and then to redefine the term yet again, in an ongoing dialectic that leaves one wondering at the end whether any clear sense can be made of the term at all.[22]

To illustrate Vogel's point, consider cases of urban adaptation, e.g. *Geospiza fortis*, or the Darwin finch. Urban populations of Darwin finches have developed distinct beak shapes, relative to their wilder non-urban cousins, an adaptation linked to their diet of fountain water and human food scraps.[23] *Geospiza fortis* is one of many species undergoing human-induced rapid evolutionary change.[24] Are we to call these urban-adapted organisms "natural"? It would be erroneous – and arguably deceitful – to call urban-adapted species "natural," since their evolutionary change is the direct product of human influence. And yet, if Darwin finch populations began to

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[20] Vogel, *Thinking like a Mall*, 151.

[21] Catherine Parry, 'Herdwick tales: breed and belonging in the English Lake District,' *Green Letters: Studies in Ecocriticism* 24, no. 4 (2020): 409.

[22] Vogel, *Thinking like a Mall*, 9.

[23] Menno Schilthuizen, *Darwin Comes to Town: How the Urban Jungle Drives Evolution*, New York: Picador, 2018, 177–178.

[24] Schilthuizen, *Darwin Comes to Town*, 178.

decline, it would be unreasonable to feel more concern for the "natural" wild finch above its urban cousin. They both possess an equivalent *intrinsic teleology*, an equivalent sense of their *own good* and *own autonomy*. So, what role does the concept "nature" play in determining how we would conserve such species? Consider an additional example: captive-breeding programs. Conservationists have been breeding Tasmanian Devils in captivity since 2005, precisely because there was concern for the species' dwindling numbers.[25] Generations of captive-born Tasmanian Devils cannot strictly be called "natural" – their existence is the sole product of "artificial" human intervention – and yet we feel strong moral concern for these Devils regardless.

The critical point made by Vogel is that, by following the morally considerability approach in practice, one runs into possibly countless edge cases. In these examples, one must redraw the moral-ontological "natural" boundary to include non-natural objects of concern, e.g. captive-bred or urban-adapted species, while excluding qualifying "natural" objects, e.g. Herdwick sheep. Following this approach to its end, one arrives at a list of morally considerable objects which defy a commonsense understanding of "natural." The concept of "nature" is therefore "too ambiguous, too confusing, too likely to issue in antimonies"[26] to define a consistent boundary around morally considerable objects.

1.2 Moral Considerability: Objection 2

Vogel's second objection to moral considerability arguments, namely Katz's, is that delineating artifacts as fundamentally distinct from nature, on the basis of human *intentions*, reinforces problematic, anthropocentric thinking.

As Vogel claimed, we make an arbitrary distinction when we declare the products of *intended* human action "artificial" or "non-natural."[27] Just as beavers create dams, dogs bury bones, and birds construct nests with some degree of intention, humans also act with intention. So, what distinguishes human "artifacts," in a way that is ontologically special, from animals' products? Under the moral considerability approach, separating artifacts from nature because they were humanly *intended* implies that artifacts are special only because of their affiliation with human "rational/mental/conscious capacities."[28]

There are two problems with this approach. Firstly, there is limited evidence to support an artifact-nature distinction on the grounds of a sharp human-nonhuman consciousness distinction. There is a growing consensus in the cognitive neuroscience community that nonhuman animals possess characteristics of

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[25] Tamara Keeley, Ritky Kiara, and Tracey Russell, 'A Retrospective Examination of Factors Associated With Breeding Success of Tasmanian Devils in Captivity (2006 to 2012),' *Journal of Zoo and Aquarium Research* 11, no. 1 (2023): 211.
[26] Vogel, *Thinking like a Mall*, 9.
[27] Vogel, *Thinking like a Mall*, 19.
[28] Vogel, *Thinking like a Mall*, 22–23.

consciousness.[2930] Rhesus monkeys, dolphins and rats exhibit behaviours consistent with "mental monitoring," or the metacognitive ability to consider the accuracy of their own thoughts;[31] corvids demonstrate behaviours consistent with mental monitoring and mental time travel.[3233] We have reason to suspect that the kind of conscious intentions guiding human behaviour also guides that of nonhuman animals. After all, human consciousness itself emerged from nature, and treating human artifacts as fundamentally non-natural mistakenly overlooks the natural origins of intentions.[3435] Animals' artifacts, e.g. a beaver's dam, therefore ought not to be assumed as unconsciously created – or *unintended* – in a way fundamentally distinct from our own consciously *intended* artifacts.

Secondly, Vogel identified that treating artifacts as ontologically special, or fundamentally nonnatural, simply because they were *intended* by humans, implies an anthropocentric bias. In environmental philosophy, there is a strong impetus to overcome chauvinistic, anthropocentric thinking. In a foundational essay, historian White (1967) attributed our present ecological crisis to a deep-rooted hegemonic conception of humanity's dualist separation from nature. According to White, several technological and ideological advancements throughout Western history have informed and perpetuated dominant thinking that humanity exists separate from and above nature.[36] Plumwood argued that, in the modern West, the hegemonic human-nature dualism fosters an "anthropocentric culture," where humanity's perceived "hyperseparation" from nature continues to justify and normalise our mistreatment of the natural world.[37] Katz's arbitrary separation of artifacts from nature is consistent with such "traditional triumphalist anthropocentrism."[38] According to Vogel, Katz's artifice-nature distinction implies that:

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[29] Phillip Low, and Jaak Pankseep et al., eds., 'The Cambridge Declaration on Consciousness,' *Proceedings of the Francis Crick Memorial Conference*, Cambridge University, 2012, 1–2.

[30] Jonathan Birch et al., 'How Should We Study Animal Consciousness Scientifically?' *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 29, no. 3-4 (2022): 8–28.

[31] Kristen Andrews, *The Animal Mind: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Animal Cognition*, London & New York: Routledge, 2020, 99.

[32] Andreas Nieder et al., 'A neural correlate of sensory consciousness in a corvid bird,' *Science* 369 (2020): 1626–1629.

[33] Nicola Clayton, Anthony Dickinson, 'Episodic-like memory during cache recovery by scrub jays,' *Nature* 395 (1998): 272–274.

[34] Vogel, *Thinking like a Mall*, 21.

[35] Max Velmans, 'The Evolution of Consciousness.' *Contemporary Social Science: Journal of the Academy of Social Sciences* 7, no. 2 (2012): 117–138.

[36] The advancements include: advent aggressive agricultural practices 7th century onwards; widespread uptake of anthropocentric Christian dogma in the second millennium – the "most anthropocentric religion the world has seen," justifying a "dualism of man and nature" – all of which has permeated across into modern scientific and technological practice 18th century onwards. See White Jr., 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,' 1203–1207.

[37] Plumwood, 'Toward a Progressive Naturalism,' 33.

[38] Vogel, *Thinking like a Mall*, 23.

> … humans are viewed as metaphysically distinctive, as uniquely capable of transforming the ontological status of those things with which we have to do, as constructing a world of "artifice" that is utterly unlike the world of "nature", as possessing extraordinary characteristics (in particular those associated with mind and conscious agency) that render us singular among all living creatures.[39]

Given how powerfully the human-nature dualism operates in the background, and how heavily implicated this hegemonic dualism is in our present ecological crisis, anthropocentric separations of humanity from nature ought to be avoided. Even subtle traces of anthropocentrism, such as Katz's implication that "rational/mental/conscious capacities" imbue objects with a unique ontological status, run the risk of supporting rather than disrupting the dominant human-nature dualism. Katz's characterisation of nature as *unintended*, in a way that is fundamentally distinct from humans' *intended* artifacts, therefore succumbs to an ill-justified and anthropocentric separation.

1.3 Moral Considerability: Objection 3

Vogel's third objection to Taylor and Katz's arguments is that properties of *intrinsic teleology*, or a thing's *own good*, cannot adequately delineate the set of natural objects. When Taylor argued that all living things have moral status because they have a "good of their own," he demonstrated that knowledge of an organism informs our understanding of its needs and its internal goals, or *intrinsic teleology*.[40] After understanding what harms and benefits an organism, we can take its "standpoint."[41] Even non-sentient organisms, e.g. butterflies, possess some internal goal to survive, some *intrinsic teleology* or something of their *own good*.[42] Compellingly, Vogel inverted Taylor's approach and demonstrated that, by the same logic, we can take the standpoint of artifacts. To illustrate this point, Vogel drew parallels between Taylor's butterfly and the City Center Mall in Columbus, Ohio:

> Like the butterfly, it [the Mall] developed through several stages: design, construction, the initial leasing of retail spaces, the transformation of the interior in preparation for the public opening, and then something like a "healthy adulthood" as it came into full operation. … Like the butterfly, that is, the mall grew and developed, and it responded to its environment.[43]

Vogel articulated further their comparable complexities. The Mall relied on a delicately interwoven web of innumerable agents and processes, including the fluctuating economy, businesses, business-owners, employees, customers, physical

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[39] Vogel, *Thinking like a Mall*, 23–24.
[40] Taylor, *Respect for Nature*, 118.
[41] Taylor, *Respect for Nature*, 67.
[42] Taylor, *Respect for Nature*, 67.
[43] Vogel, *Thinking like a Mall*, 154.

infrastructure, weather, and so forth.[44] By understanding the Mall's complexity, one can appreciate the Mall's own standpoint:

> Learning these sorts of things about a mall, it would seem, would just as in the case of the butterfly permit us to make better judgments about what is in the mall's interest or what is contrary to it, what promotes its welfare or is detrimental to it. Thus again it should be possible to take the mall's standpoint and … see what sorts of actions are good for the mall (the hundreds of thousands of customers who patronized it during the first heady years of its success, say) and what sort are bad for it (the smashing of it by a wrecking ball, say).[45]

As for the non-sentient butterfly, appreciating the complexity of the non-sentient Mall allows us to appreciate its standpoint and, in ways that are not unreasonable, appreciate its *own good*. For these reasons, Vogel concluded that, since the Mall could be said to suffer or benefit under certain conditions, it has some intrinsic goals, or some "teleological character."[46] One might object that the Mall's teleological character is different to the butterfly's, since the Mall was *intended,* whereas the butterfly possesses an *unintended, intrinsic teleology*. However, as Vogel argued, if being created by human intention privileges an object, or its teleological character, in any way that fundamentally separates it from nature, then we succumb to the same problem of anthropocentric bias and imbuing human artifacts with arbitrary significance,[47] that which was addressed under the previous objection.

1.4 Vogel's Objects: Summary

No matter how hard one tries, nature cannot be extricated – fundamentally, or in an ontologically significant way – from human artifice. By following the moral considerability approach, one must redraw the moral concern boundary around countless edge cases. Furthermore, characterising natural objects by their defining properties leads to two, major inconsistencies: *intention* cannot consistently separate artifacts from nature, since intentions themselves exist in nature and treating intended artifacts as special supports dualist anthropocentrism; *intrinsic teleology*, and the capacity for a thing's *own good*, can apply as much to artifacts as nature, since taking something's standpoint is merely a case of understanding enough about that thing.

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[44] To appreciate Vogel's argument, it is worth reading his full description of the City Center Mall's complexity; see Vogel, *Thinking like a Mall*, 129–137. Note that Vogel does not hope to inspire the same joy or care for the City Center Mall as one feels for the butterfly. He uses the Mall merely to refute the definitive ontological and moral boundaries argued by Taylor and Katz. Vogel specifically expressed that he does not like the Mall; see Vogel, *Thinking like a Mall*, 162.

[45] Vogel, *Thinking like a Mall*, 155.

[46] Vogel, *Thinking like a Mall*, 156.

[47] Vogel, *Thinking like a Mall*, 156–157.

The important sequitur to Vogel's argument is that, although there is strong overlap in the properties we attribute to natural and artificial objects, we shouldn't be concerned with artifacts as we are plants and animals. Even if the City Center Mall has its *own good*, just like the butterfly, it would be absurd to conserve or protect the Mall like we might the butterfly. Rather, by *modus tollens*, because such moral implications are untenable, we ought to reject the moral considerability approach altogether.[48]

For the reasons summarised above, I conclude, in line with Vogel, that moral considerability arguments are inadequate. In the following section, I examine Vogel's postnaturalist argument: environmental philosophy ought to prioritise concern for the "environment" over "nature."

§ 2. Vogel's Postnaturalism

According to Vogel: "No place is natural any longer, and so the entire environment has become in a certain sense a built environment."[49] By conceding that our recklessness has effectively ended nature, accepting nature's end impels a responsibility to improve our practices:

> The environment itself is an artifact that we make through our practices, and hence one for which we are responsible and about which we ought to care. If the artifacts that surround us … make life worse for us and for the other creatures that inhabit the world with us … this is (in part) our doing, and our fault. And so it is also our responsibility to fix.[50]

A responsibility to fix the environment has an unambiguous, practical force, which contrasts strongly with moral considerability attempts to characterise "natural" moral patients. However, I object to Vogel's postnaturalist approach on two accounts. Firstly, Vogel's commitment to improve the non-natural "environment" cannot be severed from a concern for and concept of "nature." Secondly, Vogel's abandonment of the "nature" concept altogether fails to problematise the anthropocentric human-nature dualism, which is a crucial project for environmental philosophy.

2.1 Vogel's Postnaturalism: Objection 1

Under my first objection, I argue that following Vogel's postnaturalist approach to its logical end reveals an implied commitment to "nature." According to Vogel, we ought to "fix" the environment. But to what end are we fixing it? Why are we fixing it? In Vogel's words, we ought to fix the environment that makes "life worse for us

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[48] Vogel, *Thinking like a Mall*, 162–163.
[49] Vogel, *Thinking like a Mall*, 2.
[50] Vogel, *Thinking like a Mall*, 164–165.

and for the other creatures."[51] And yet, asking what these "other creatures" are sounds exactly like asking how we ought to define our nonhuman moral patients. Whether we call them "other creatures" or "nonhuman plants and animals" or "nature," at their core, these terms refer to nonhuman entities that are owed some moral consideration. To clarify how we ought to fix the environment, we must ask how we are harming the nonhuman or human-independent parts of the world, such is the definition of "nature." Under Vogel's account, as under Taylor and Katz', we remain unsure about what parts of nonhuman nature we ought to care about.

A proponent of Vogel's postnaturalism might avoid the above objection, since they accept a strict, McKibben-ian definition of "nature": that which is *purely* humanly independent (and therefore no longer in existence today). So, although Vogel's morally considerable objects in the "non-natural" environment might, contradictorily, resonate with a commonsense understanding of "nature," there is no contradiction here for the postnaturalist. For the postnaturalist, the "nature" concept is redundant because nature is, assumedly, already dead. I argue that such postnaturalist thinking succumbs to a different problem, explored in the following section.

2.2 Vogel's Postnaturalism: Objection 2

Under my second objection, I argue that Vogel's postnaturalist abandonment of the "nature" concept, including his McKibben-ian definition of "nature" as dead, supports rather than addresses the hegemonic human-nature dualism.

According to Plumwood, a critical problem, stemming from the anthropocentric human-nature dualism, is the "forgetting and backgrounding"[52] of nature. By conceiving of hyperseparated nature as somewhere out there, outside the human sphere, outside our towns and cities, we remove nature from our immediate scope of concern. Especially for those of us living increasingly urbanised lives, highlighting the "concept and experience of nature" is needed to counter dominant narratives that human culture and civilisation are all there is, all that is agent, all that matters.[53] It is essential, therefore, to continue appreciating and highlighting the concept of "nature" rather than conceding its disappearance.

By acknowledging the whole world has become one "built environment," Vogel's approach risks "prioritizing culture over nature," what Plumwood might call a problematic "reductionist measure" for dissolving the human-nature dualism.[54] Such reductionist measures quietly support our self-immersion in an anthropocentric sphere, perpetuating dominant narratives that human proliferation is all that matters.[55] Vogel's motion to think of the world as entirely "nonnatural" and

[51] Vogel, *Thinking like a Mall*, 34.
[52] Plumwood, 'Toward a Progressive Naturalism,' 36.
[53] Plumwood, 'Toward a Progressive Naturalism,' 44.
[54] Plumwood, 'Toward a Progressive Naturalism,' 44.
[55] Plumwood, 'Toward a Progressive Naturalism,' 44.

humanised implies a subtle yet problematic anthropocentric privileging, like that of Katz's artifice-nature distinction. Vogel's postnaturalism therefore risks perpetuating rather than disrupting nature's backgrounding.

Even the postnaturalist's definition of "nature" as *purely* nonhuman is consistent with the problematic, hyperseparation of human from nature:

> In the hyperseparated picture, it appears that only "pure nature" is nature and that nature must be a realm totally separate from the human. The nature skeptic then objects that [it] is impossible to find (especially nowadays) forms of the nonhuman that do not carry some human influence …[56]

Plumwood instead argued that to be other, and to appreciate otherness, does not necessitate pure otherness: "… why should we have to abandon the claim that there is another that is nature just because it often carries some human influence?"[57] Appreciating that human industry has, as McKibben suggested, impacted every patch of the planet does not necessitate the eradication of nature. Rather, we ought to reject definitions of nature as purely independent or hyperseparated from humanity. We can – and should – accept that nature as a nonhuman, independent force or agent still exists if we are to disrupt the dominant human-nature dualism.

2.3 Vogel's Postnaturalism: Summary

At this point, we appear to be in a catch-22. We had good reason to explore alternatives to Taylor and Katz's moral considerability arguments, since the term "nature" is too ontologically slippery to determine "natural" moral patients. Although Vogel's postnaturalist approach appeared to resolve this issue by shifting the focus onto the human "environment," such an approach risks supporting rather than disrupting the dominant hyperseparation of humanity from nature.

Impelling ethical concern for nature appears difficult to reconcile with the term's ontological fuzziness. However, I argue that we can reimagine nature in such a way that drives ethical concern for nature without compromising on the "nature" concept's ontological complexity. Plumwood suggested two ways of reconceiving "nature": recognising the "hybridity and continuity" between humanity and nature,[58] and reconceptualising the nature pole in the human-nature dualism as the dominant, larger or inclusive term.[59] Consistent with Plumwood's suggestions, I propose one reconceptualisation of "nature" in the following section.

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[56] Plumwood, 'Toward a Progressive Naturalism,' 41.
[57] Plumwood, 'Toward a Progressive Naturalism,' 41.
[58] Plumwood, 'Toward a Progressive Naturalism,' 44
[59] Plumwood, 'Toward a Progressive Naturalism,' 46

§ 3. Natural World

To reconceptualise "nature," I draw on Hailwood's natural world framework. According to Hailwood, "nature" can be understood as three, loose, overlapping categories: the natural world, inclusive of human and nonhuman domains; the nonhuman domain; and the humanised domain, an implied sense given that both human and nonhuman domains constitute the broader natural world.[60]

Along the lines of Hailwood's framework, the natural world conception that I defend is "monist," as opposed to "pluralist," in the sense that appreciation of nature's fundamental metaphysical oneness (human and nonhuman) comes before other ontological, moral or ethical concerns.[61] This account of monist "natural world" has two strengths: firstly, the full spectrum of nature's ontological complexity, including the nature-artifice overlap, is accounted for; secondly, the account yields a nuanced dialectic for guiding ethical practices. I expand on these strengths below.

3.1 Natural World: Fuzzy Categories

An important conclusion drawn by Vogel, as outlined in section §1, was that there is a fundamental overlap between natural and artificial objects.[62] Aligning with this finding, Hailwood purported that the substituent human and nonhuman domains of the "natural world" framework should be understood as "intertwined and continuous."[63] I maintain that the proposed monist, natural world concept recognises a *continuum* of naturalness.

Domesticated animals, urban-adapted species, and endangered captive-bred animals are all restored ontological status as fundamentally "natural," albeit existing along a human-to-nonhuman continuum. As for the more "non-natural" examples, e.g. cars, skyscrapers, it might seem difficult to conceive of these as "natural." However, I argue that classifying all artifacts as fundamentally "natural" is the most consistent approach. We consider constructions of animals as natural; humans are also animals, so why aren't our products also, on a fundamental level, the same kind of natural? As Vogel claimed, viewing human technology and artifacts as an extension of natural, evolutionary processes, the same processes which led beavers to build dams and birds to build nests, is entirely reasonable.[64] A key strength of the monist natural world concept is that the hegemonic human-nature (artifice-nature) dualism is actively reworked in two ways: "nature" is championed as the dominant pole; the artifice-nature dualism is reimagined as a continuum, with "nature" and "artifice" separated in a *graded* rather than *hyper-separated* fashion.

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[60] Simon Hailwood, 'Alienations and natures,' *Environmental Politics* 21, no. 6 (2012): 885–886.
[61] Jonathan Schaffer, 'Monism: The Priority of the Whole,' *Philosophical Review* 119, no. 1 (2010): 31.
[62] Vogel, *Thinking like a Mall*, 2.
[63] Hailwood, 'Alienations and natures,' 889.
[64] Vogel, *Thinking like a Mall*, 17.

3.2 Natural World: Overcoming Alienation

The second strength of the monist natural world concept is the ethical concern it impels. If environmental philosophy is to reconceptualise "nature," we have the difficult task of both reimagining ourselves as within nature – to combat the hegemonic dualism – while recognising the agency, difference and separation – in a *graded*, non-hyperseparated fashion – of nonhuman nature. To a greater extent than Taylor, Katz or Vogel's arguments, Hailwood's framework captures this complex dialectic.

According to Hailwood, by reconceiving "nature" as both a nonhuman domain and an umbrella natural world concept, we can derive two ethical concerns: embracing some degree of alienation from the nonhuman domain, and overcoming alienation from the natural world.[65] Firstly, recognising our alienation from the non-human domain entails: "recognition of … our 'separation' from nature in the sense that non-human entities and processes do not embody human will and are not set up to serve human interests or ideals."[66] Maintaining some degree of separation between human and nonhuman is an important conceptual starting point, as it ensures that one does not subsume the other. However, simultaneously, we need to overcome alienation from the natural world by appreciating "humanity's embeddedness within wider ecological realities."[67] Importantly, such an ethical focus directly combats, rather than supports, our anthropocentric tendency to view humanity as above or outside nature.

More than any other account of nature discussed so far, I argue that this dialectic, derived from the monist natural world concept, and simultaneously embracing and overcoming alienation from nature, encourages the *most impactful ethical practice*. Under natural world monism, we can appreciate some human-nonhuman distinction while appreciating fundamental oneness. For example, under the "natural world" account, we can derive nuanced ethical concern for urban-adapted species; we can appreciate their independence and agency, while acknowledging their continuity with the human sphere. We can therefore conceive of our relationship with nonhuman species as *symbiotic* or *co-agent*, i.e. two distinct but equally agent parties. As a result, our practices are guided toward cross-species *mutually beneficial* outcomes.

§ 4. Conclusion

We might think about nature as somewhere out there, beyond our towns and cities. Or we might think that nature no longer exists. Such conceptions of nature, I argue,

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[65] Hailwood explores a third ethical concern, overcoming alienation from our own humanised domain. Although an important project, this concern falls beyond the scope of my essay. See Hailwood, 'Alienations and natures,' 884.

[66] Hailwood, 'Alienations and natures,' 897.

[67] Hailwood, 'Alienations and natures,' 897.

do more harm than good. By adopting a monist concept of nature, we keep the concept and experience of nature alive. The "natural world" account champions humanity's ontological inextricability from nature and sharpens our ethical focus around a *co-agent* human-nonhuman model, therefore driving stronger consideration for nature in our ecological crisis.

According to Evernden: "We call people environmentalists because what they are finally moved to defend is what we call environment. But, at bottom, their action is a defence of cosmos …"[68] This essay defends a monist concept of nature, i.e. the natural world, one that is consistent with the environmentalist's impulse to protect the natural whole.

[68] Evernden, *The Natural Alien*, 124.

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The Buddha and the Cartesian Self: Why Is the Buddha's Argument a Philosophical Failure?

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Abstract

The kind of self that Descartes intuits in his Meditations is one that exists independently of experience, yet possesses and actively participates in it. The Buddha's argument against the "Cartesian Self" – which should be distinguished from his argument against the identification of the self with the totality or any component of the five aggregates – is that the Cartesian Self is both cognitively meaningless and morally harmful. However, as I will argue in this essay, the Buddha's argument against the Cartesian Self is grounded in his epistemology and soteriology, for which he offers no independent argument, and which his opponents may reject because of their own deeper convictions. The Buddha's argument against the Cartesian Self is therefore philosophically unsuccessful in the sense that it cannot persuade a rational person who believes in the Cartesian Self to abandon this belief on the basis of the Buddha's argument; in fact, the argument would simply appear to such a person as a groundless assertion.

§ 0. Introduction: Descartes's Intuition of the Self

In his paper "Cartesian Intuitions, Humean Puzzles, and the Buddhist Conception of the Self," Alan Tomhave argues that the Buddhist conception of human personality resolves the Humean Puzzle and maintains the Cartesian Intuition.[2] Both Hume and the Buddha conceive the continuity of human personality as an ever-changing stream of mental and physical events. This conception poses a problem of personal identity for Hume because he regards those events as existing separately, without a

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[2] Alan Tomhave, "Cartesian Intuitions, Humean Puzzles, and the Buddhist Conception of the Self," *Philosophy East & West* 60, no. 4 (2010): 443–57.

recognisable principle that links them with each other and integrates them all into a whole. Thus, according to Tomhave, Hume's conception refuses him the epistemic right to identify from among the perceptions the existence of a perceiver. This, however, contradicts what Tomhave calls the Cartesian Intuition, the intuition that some particular action entails that there is an agent performing that action. The Buddhist conception of human personality, on the other hand, resolves the Humean Puzzle by assigning the role of integration to the will. According to Tomhave, the Buddhist analyses the human personality in terms of the "five aggregates" – form, feeling, perceptions, volitional formations, and consciousness[3] – which are the five categories that encapsulate the entire range of experienced reality. The aggregate of volitional formations, which includes the volitional state of craving, is the aspect of human experience that preserves a person's existence in the present form, and renews her existence in the next rebirth.[4] Tomhave holds that the Buddhist conception can accommodate the Cartesian Intuition, since it affirms that some particular action is caused by a person – one that is made up of the five aggregates integrated by the will. The will, nevertheless, should not be identified as an unchanging self. In the Nikāyas, the Buddha argues against such an identification by claiming that what is impermanent is suffering, and what is suffering is nonself.[5]

I think that Tomhave's definition of the Cartesian Intuition is both unnecessary because it simply expresses a tautology, and misleading because it misrepresents Descartes. First, I claim that it is tautological to state that some particular action requires an actor. Hume's problem does not seem to concern whether some particular action requires an actor, but the lack of a criterion to distinguish actions from subjectless events. G.C. Lichtenberg expresses the same misgivings when he comments on Descartes's *cogito*: "We know only the existence of our sensations, representations, and thoughts. *It thinks*, we should say, just as we say, *it lightnings*. To say *cogito* is already too much if we translate it as *I think*."[6] As the pronoun "it" in "it lightnings" is just a placeholder and does not refer, so too, Lichtenberg argues, and Hume would agree, when some particular conscious thought occurs, one is only epistemically justified to describe the thought as a subjectless event, without the epistemic right to attribute it to a single, first-person subject. Therefore, the real divergence of the Buddhist and the Humean conceptions of personality lies in how they respond to the question of whether an ostensible action is a subjectless event.

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[3] The translation Tomhave uses renders the five *khandhas* (Pāli) or *skandhas* (Sanskrit) as "matter, sensations, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness." In this essay, I follow Bhikkhu Bodhi's translation of the five aggregates.

[4] See Tomhave, "Cartesian Intuitions, Humean Puzzles, and the Buddhist Conception of the Self," 453. Cf. *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya* (*SN*, henceforth), trans. Bhikkhu Bodhi (Wisdom Publications, 2000), 12:15, 544. When citing *Saṃyutta Nikāya*, I will note both the page number in Bodhi's translation (e.g. page 544) and the specific sutta and Saṃyutta to which I refer (e.g. Saṃyutta 12, sutta 15).

[5] See *SN* 22:12–20, 868–71.

[6] See Lichtenberg, *Waste Book K 76*, cited in Steven Tester, "G.C. Lichtenberg on Self-Consciousness and Personal Identity," *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 95, no. 3 (2013): 336.

Second, the Cartesian Intuition, as Tomhave defines it, does not represent Descartes's reasoning behind *cogito ergo sum*. In his Fifth Replies, Descartes denies that the antecedent of *cogito ergo sum* (i.e. I think) can be replaced by any bodily action – such as "walking" – because in the First Meditation, he already discredits all sensory perceptions by the dream hypothesis.[7] Therefore, it is misleading to label the intuition that the occurrence of *any* action entails the existence of an actor as peculiarly Cartesian. For Descartes, only "thinking" is certain because, regardless of its propositional content, the mental phenomenon of a particular conscious thought definitely exists. Even if what is thought is made illusory by Descartes's demon, it cannot be false that there is some particular conscious thought.[8] Descartes attributes conscious thought to a single, first-person subject, and identifies this subject as a thinking thing to which various conscious thoughts can be uniformly ascribed.[9] Since Descartes seems to provide no argument for ascribing different thoughts to a single, first-person subject, I think it is appropriate to regard this claim as an intuition – one that is peculiarly Cartesian.

In this essay, I aim to show that the Buddha's argument against what can be called the "Cartesian Self" – a single, first-person subject conceived as a substantive thinker existing independently of experience – is philosophically unsuccessful, since it cannot convince a rational person who accepts the Cartesian Intuition, as we define it, to abandon it, and would instead appear as a groundless assertion. As an Indian monk who lived several centuries before the beginning of Christianity, the Buddha could not, of course, have directly dialogued with the seventeenth-century French philosopher René Descartes; nor did Descartes, to the best of my knowledge, ever address the Buddha's critique of the Cartesian Self. The aim of this essay, therefore, is

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[7] See Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes* (*PW*, henceforth), vol. 2, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge University Press, 1984), 13, 244.

[8] This, it seems to me, is the most accurate way to interpret Descartes's reasoning behind *cogito ergo sum*. See Descartes's Second Meditation, in *PW, vol. 2*, 16–17 and *Principles of Philosophy*, 1.7, in *PW, vol. 1*, 194–95. I acknowledge the complexity and diversity of interpretations concerning how Descartes himself understands the inference from "I think" to "I exist."

[9] In his second Meditation, Descartes makes two transitions without the support of arguments. First, he attributes the mere occurrence of some particular conscious thought to "I," a single, first-person subject: "In that case I too undoubtedly exist, if [a deceiver of supreme power and cunning] is deceiving me; and let him deceive me as much as he can, he will never bring it about that I am nothing so long as I think that I am something. [. . .] I must finally conclude that this proposition, I am, I exist, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind. See *PW, vol. 2*, 17. Second, he attributes various kinds and episodes of thought to "I," the single, first person subject he derives from the mere occurrence of some particular conscious thought: "Is it not one and the same 'I' who is now doubting almost everything, who nonetheless understands some things, who affirms that this one thing is true, denies everything else, desires to know more, is unwilling to be deceived, imagines many things even involuntarily, and is aware of many things which apparently come from the senses? Are not all these things just as true as the fact that I exist, even if I am asleep all the time, and even if he who created me is doing all he can to deceive me? Which of all these activities is distinct from my thinking? Which of them can be said to be separate from myself? The fact that it is I who am doubting and understanding and willing is so evident that I see no way of making it any clearer." See *PW, vol. 2*, 19.

to reconstruct the Buddha's argument against the Cartesian Self, and show that it is philosophically unsuccessful in the sense specified above. To this end, I will first clarify what the Buddha's argument against the Cartesian Self does *not* address. I will then reconstruct his argument and consider the grounds on which it may be accepted, noting that the Buddha's rejection of the Cartesian Self rests on his epistemology and soteriological concerns. I will argue that his argument ultimately fails philosophically in that it cannot convince a rational person who believes in the Cartesian Self to abandon that belief, since she may well reject his epistemology and soteriology.

§ 1. What the Buddha's Argument against the Cartesian Self Is Not About

To begin, let me clarify what the Buddha's argument against the Cartesian Self is *not*. First, it is not a rejection of the conventional sense of "self" as a practical referent. As Tomhave rightly observes, the Buddha affirms the convenience and usefulness of referring to others and ourselves as individual selves.[10] The notion of self that the Buddha seeks to refute is a metaphysical substance which exists independently of experience. As I will argue, the Buddha's refutation of this metaphysical self is unsuccessful, since it cannot convince a rational person who already adheres to such a view to abandon it, and would appear to such a person as a groundless assertion.

Second, the Buddha's argument against the Cartesian Self is not his often-made claim that what is impermanent is suffering, and what is suffering is nonself – one that cannot refute the Cartesian Intuition. To better distinguish this claim from his argument against the Cartesian Self, let us consider the grounds on which the Buddha makes this claim. The Buddha supports this claim in two ways, either (i) treating suffering and nonself as the consequences of impermanence, or (ii) treating impermanence and suffering as the evidence for nonself. According to the first line of argument, the doctrine of nonself follows from the doctrine of impermanence, since the five aggregates – which make up the totality of human experience – arise dependently, are subject to cessation, and are therefore distinct from an unchanging self.

To grasp the second line of argument (i.e. that not only impermanence but also *suffering* serves as evidence for non-self), it is necessary to understand why suffering is another consequence of impermanence. The Buddha argues that suffering results from appropriating impermanent things and from identifying them with the self.[11] Appropriation causes suffering because the pleasant experience pursued, like food, becomes a necessity on which one's life depends, but never brings lasting satisfaction due to its impermanence. The gratification of the lust for form, the physical body, for example, is always accompanied by the danger that such gratification is subject to change, as when the loveliness of a young woman, which

[10] Tomhave, "Cartesian Intuitions, Humean Puzzles, and the Buddhist Conception of the Self," 450–51. See *SN*, 1:25, 102; 5:10, 230.

[11] See Bhikkhu Bodhi's introduction to the *Khandhavagga*, or the Book of the Aggregates; in *SN*, 843.

gratifies the lust of the eyes, fades away as she ages.[12] Thus, as the Buddha says elsewhere, form is like a lump of foam, void, hollow, and insubstantial; to seek delight in it is to seek delight in suffering.[13]

Identification, on the other hand, causes suffering because a person identifies as her unchanging self some component of the five aggregates, which are impermanent and subject to change. When the experience identified as the self ceases, her consciousness, preoccupied with the change, becomes anxious and sorrowful as if her self has been lost.[14] Thus, a hedonist, for example, who identifies pleasant feelings as his true self, would find sorrow and distress in the come-and-go of his feelings, not only because the gratification of his lust for youth and beauty is only transitory, but also because with the change of feelings, he loses his self and authenticity.

Having seen the connections between impermanence and suffering, we can now grasp the Buddha's second line of argument in support of his claim that what is impermanent is suffering, and what is suffering is nonself. According to this argument, the inseparability of suffering from the impermanence of the five aggregates shows that the self cannot be found among the five aggregates, since if any component of the five aggregates were the self, a person must have been able to free herself from suffering.

> Bhikkhus, form is nonself. For if, Bhikkhus, form were self, this form would not lead to affliction, and it would be possible to have it of form: "Let my form be thus; let my form not be thus." But because form is nonself, form leads to affliction, and it is not possible to have it of form: "Let my form be thus; let my form not be thus."[15]

Therefore, none of the five aggregates should be identified as the self, since (i) all aspects of experience are impermanent and (ii) a person lacks the self-controlling power to prevent suffering. Both arguments, however, *cannot* falsify the Cartesian Intuition, since the self that Descartes intuits is neither identical with nor reducible to any component or the totality of the five aggregates. It is rather a substantive subject conceived as a single, first-person thinker existing independently from yet possessing and actively participating in the experience of thinking. Just as the eyes are neither identical with nor reducible to the experience of seeing, yet possessing and actively participating in it, so too, the Cartesian Self is neither identical with nor reducible to the experience of thinking or any component of the five aggregates. The Buddha's claim that what is impermanent is suffering, and what is suffering is

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[12] See the *Mahādukkhakkhandha Sutta*, in *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya* (*MN*, henceforth), trans. Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli (Wisdom Publications, 1995), 123–27.

[13] See *SN*, 22:29, 95; 875–76, 951.

[14] See *SN*, 22:7, 865–66.

[15] The Buddha subsequently applies the same argument to the views that respectively identify feeling, perception, volitional formations, and consciousness as the self. See *SN*, 22:59, 901–03.

nonself does not apply to the Cartesian Self, which exists independently from experience, yet possesses and actively participates in it.

§ 2. The Buddha's Rejection of the Cartesian Self

Does the Buddha address the Cartesian Self in the Nikāyas, rejecting it as he does the identification of the five aggregates as the self? In the *Mahānidāna Sutta*, the Buddha criticises three conceptions of the self that associate the self with feeling: (i) "feeling is my self," (ii) "feeling is not my self, my self is impercipient," and (iii) "feeling is not my self, but my self is not impercipient, it is of a nature to feel."[16] We can generalise the Buddha's criticisms so that they challenge not only conceptions of the self associated with feeling, but also those that associate the self with other aspects of experience, such as form, perception, volitional formations, and consciousness. Thus, three conceptions of the self are subject to the Buddha's criticisms: (i) some component of the five aggregates is the self, (ii) the self is not identical with any component of the five aggregates, and remains inactive while experience occurs, and (iii) the self is not identical with any component of the five aggregates, but actively participates in experience. The Cartesian Self – which regards the self as a thinking thing "that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, is willing, is unwilling, and also imagines and has sensory perceptions"[17] – most closely resembles the third conception of the self that the Buddha critiques: namely, the kind conceived as independent of but actively participating in experience. Just as the sense organs are distinct from and irreducible to feelings, so too, the Cartesian Self, which perceives the information received through the sense organs, is distinct from and irreducible to mental perception.

The Buddha argues that the first conception of the self is wrong because, as we have seen, the five aggregates – which make up the totality of human experience – are constantly changing, dependently arisen, and subject to cessation. The evanescence of feeling reveals the falseness of the views that identify feeling as the self:

> Pleasant feeling is impermanent, conditioned, dependently-arisen, bound to decay, to vanish, to fade away, to cease – and so too are painful feeling and neutral feeling. So anyone who, on experiencing a pleasant feeling, thinks: "This is my self," must, at the cessation of that pleasant feeling, think: "My self has gone!" and the same with painful and neutral feelings. Thus whoever thinks: "Feeling is my self" is contemplating something in this present life that is impermanent, a mixture of happiness and unhappiness, subject to arising and passing away. Therefore it is not fitting to maintain: "Feeling is my self."[18]

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[16] See the *Mahānidāna Sutta*, in *The Long Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Dīgha Nikāya* (*DN*, henceforth), trans. Maurice Walshe (Wisdom Publications, 1995), 226–27.

[17] See Descartes's Second Meditation; in *PW, vol. 2*, 19.

[18] *DN*, 227.

While the second and third conceptions of the self disagree with whether the self participates in experience, the Buddha rejects them on the same grounds that it is *unfitting* to posit a self existing independently of experience, regardless of its relations to experience.

> "If, friend, no feelings at all were to be experienced, would there be the thought: 'I am'?" [to which he would have to reply:] "No, Lord." Therefore it is not fitting to maintain: "Feeling is not my self, my self is impercipient."
>
> "Well, friend, if all feelings absolutely and totally ceased, could there be the thought: 'I am this?'" [to which he would have to reply:] "No, Lord." Therefore it is not fitting to maintain: "Feeling is not my self, but myself is not impercipient, my self is of a nature to feel."[19]

In both passages, the Buddha appears to suggest that the self ceases to exist when experience ceases. However, when we consider what immediately follows his discussion of the nature of the self, it becomes evident that the Buddha rejects the second and third conceptions of the self on epistemological and moral, rather than ontological, grounds.

After rejecting the three conceptions of the self as unfitting, the Buddha goes on to claim that it is equally unfitting to assert either that the Tathāgata exists after death, or the Tathāgata does not exist after death, or the Tathāgata both exists and does not exist after death, or the Tathāgata neither exists nor does not exist after death.[20] The term *Tathāgata* – literally, "one who has thus gone" – refers to a Buddha who has attained *nibbāna* – literally, "blowing out" – that is, liberation from the cycle of rebirth, by following the four noble truths, which teach that craving leads to renewed existence, and the cessation of craving leads to the cessation of renewed existence.[21] The Buddha explicitly rejects the view that a person who remains within the cycle of rebirth – that is, who has not brought an end to craving – is annihilated after death, since renewed existence arises dependently on the craving of previous existence.[22] In contrast, he is silent on the question of whether the Tathāgata exists after death, since the answer is both unintelligible to those who remain within the cycle of rebirth and unconducive to attaining liberation from the cycle of rebirth.[23] Just as knowing the Tathāgata's post-mortem existence is cognitively meaningless and morally harmful for attaining nibbāna, so it is cognitively meaningless and morally harmful to speculate about the nature of the self. In the next two sections, I will consider the grounds on which the Buddha rejects the speculations about the Tathāgata's existence after death and about the nature of the self, and argue that his

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[19] *DN*, 227.
[20] *DN*, 228.
[21] *SN* 12:15, 544; 56:11, 1844–45.
[22] See *SN* 12:15, 544.
[23] The Buddha insists that the Tathāgatas themselves – who have attained nibbāna – possess "super-knowledge" about the Tathāgata's existence after death, yet such knowledge is unintelligible to those who remain within the cycle of rebirth. See *DN*, 228.

argument not only cannot persuade a rational person who believes in the Cartesian Self to abandon that belief, but would simply appear as a groundless assertion.

§ 3. The Buddha's Epistemology

The Buddhist scholar David J. Kalupahana argues that from the perspective of early Buddhism, all speculative views about any "metaphysical" question – such as whether the Buddha exists after death and whether the Cartesian Self exists – are cognitively meaningless, since they cannot be judged intellectually to be true or false.[24] Following his teacher K.N. Jayatilleke, Kalupahana interprets the Buddha's epistemology as grounded in an empiricist principle that, in contrast with Hinduism and the later Mahāyāna Buddhism, limits the scope of knowledge to human experience.

> What, monks, is "everything?" Eye and material form, ear and sound, nose and odour, tongue and taste, body and tangibles, mind and concepts. These are called "everything." Monks, he who would say, "I will reject this everything and proclaim another everything," he may certainly have a theory (of his own). But when questioned, he would not be able to answer and would, moreover, be subject to vexation. Why? Because it would not be within the range of experience.[25]

The metaphysical questions, which transcend the six spheres of experience (eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind), are unknowable by all the valid epistemic tools we have and therefore subject to endless disputations.

As we have seen, the Buddha claims that it is unfitting to assert either that the Tathāgata exists after death, or the Tathāgata does not exist after death, or the Tathāgata both exists and does not exist after death, or the Tathāgata neither exists nor does not exist after death.[26] In another sutta, the Buddha likens the Tathāgata, who has attained liberation from the cycle of rebirth, to the ocean, deep, immeasurable, and hard to fathom.[27] While the Tathāgata is said to have terminated the cycle of rebirth, it is wrong to apply "does not reappear" to the dead Tathāgata, as it is nonsensical to describe the fire as having gone to the east, the south, the west, or the north when the fire extinguishes. This is because the Tathāgata's post-mortem existence transcends human experience and cannot be understood through concepts derived from it, such as appearance and disappearance.

Kalupahana argues that the Buddha's epistemology aligns with logical empiricism, except that the Buddha includes the mind among the sensory faculties and

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[24] See David J. Kalupahana, *Buddhist Philosophy: A Historical Analysis* (The University Press of Hawaii, 1976), 153–62.

[25] Cited in David J. Kalupahana, "A Buddhist Tract on Empiricism," *Philosophy East & West* 19 (1969): 66.

[26] *DN*, 228.

[27] See the *Aggivacchagotta Sutta*, in *MN*, 390–93.

recognises extrasensory perceptions – such as the retrocognition of one's past lives in the cycle of rebirth – as valid perceptions of the mind.[28] Logical empiricism, as A.J. Ayer explains in his influential book *Language, Truth, and Logic*, rests on the verifiability criterion of meaning (henceforth, "verificationism"), the criterion that a factual statement is cognitively meaningless if it is not in principle verifiable by sense-contents.[29] According to Kalupahana, since both the normal perceptions of what we ordinarily call the "five senses" and the supernormal perceptions of the mind are unable to detect the presence of a self which exists apart from experience, the self must not be an element of "everything" to which factual statements can meaningfully refer. I think that a criticism of verificationism would shed light on the inadequacies of the Buddha's epistemology, even if we do not accept Kalupahana's identification of it with logical empiricism.[30] I hope to show, therefore, through Ayer's failure of making a persuasive argument for accepting verificationism, that the Buddha's critique of the Cartesian Self based on his epistemology is insufficient for converting the Cartesian philosopher to the Buddhist conception of human personality.

Let us consider why Ayer's *Language, Truth, and Logic* can hardly convince the opponents of verificationism. Ayer argues that there are only two kinds of meaningful statements: (i) synthetic statements which are in principle verifiable by sense-contents, and (ii) analytic statements which are necessarily true and await concrete applications in which their truths are proven by sense-contents. The truth or falsehood of any meaningful synthetic statement must, at least in principle, be able to be determined *a posteriori* by sense-contents. Since statements about a transcendent ego – such as the Cartesian Self – are synthetic statements unverifiable by sense-contents, such "metaphysical" statements are neither true nor false, but literally meaningless. But Ayer's *Language, Truth, and Logic* is not so much an argument for verificationism and against what we may call the "transcendental metaphysics," as a clarification of some of the implications of verificationism concerning knowledge, ethics, and theology. Thus, the proponents of transcendental metaphysics would ask why they should accept those implications, given that they do *not* accept verificationism in the first place. To understand why Ayer cannot convince the proponents of transcendental metaphysics to accept verificationism, it is necessary to consider what some of its implications specifically are.

The first implication concerns the existence of other minds.[31] To avoid the undesirable conclusion that any statement about the existence of other minds is literally meaningless because they are inaccessible to observation, Ayer maintains that the truth or falsehood of such statements can be decided by a conceivably

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[28] See Kalupahana, *Buddhist Philosophy: A Historical Analysis*, 16–24, 158–60.

[29] See A.J. Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic* (Penguin Books, 2001).

[30] Some have argued against the identification of Buddhist epistemology with empiricism in general, and logical empiricism in particular. See, for example, Frank J. Hoffman, "The Buddhist Empiricism Thesis," *Religious Studies* 18, no. 2 (1982): 151-58; and David Montalvo, "The Buddhist Empiricism Thesis: An Extensive Critique," *Asian Philosophy* 9, no. 1 (1999): 51–70.

[31] See chapter 7 of *Language, Truth, and Logic*, especially 139–40.

accessible empirical criterion – namely, whether the object, which may either be an automaton or a conscious human being, behave in ways that a conscious human being would in fact behave. Since Ayer, who is himself a conscious human being, knows a lot about how a conscious human being would in fact behave, it is certainly conceivable that one can know all of the ways a conscious human being would in fact behave, and test the behaviours of an object – which may either be an automaton or a conscious human being – against the ways that a conscious human being would in fact behave. It is rational to reject such behaviourism, however, when one rejects verificationism from which it derives, and when there are no strong independent reasons for thinking that such behaviourism is true. It is very likely that there are no strong independent reasons for thinking that such behaviourism is true, since it only infers the antecedent from the consequent, and appears even more incredible when artificial intelligence unprecedentedly obscures the boundary between a machine and a conscious human being, by reducing their differences in outer behaviours and appearances.

The second implication concerns the nature of ethical statements.[32] Ayer argues that statements about moral facts must be literally meaningless because such facts cannot be proven true or false by observation. Thus, the statement that "it is wrong that you steal that money" is equivalent in meaning with the statement that "you steal that money," their only difference being that the former is uttered within certain emotions such as horror or disgust. However, since Ayer's verificationism is the foundation for his moral non-cognitivism, one who judges verificationism false would also reject non-cognitivism when no significant external reasons are available for thinking that non-cognitivism is true. But one may well consider non-cognitivism implausible, on the grounds that moral intuitions strongly indicate that ethical statements express not just emotions but moral beliefs which are capable of being true or false in accordance with the moral facts they purport to describe.

Another implication of Ayer's verificationism is that there is no meaningful statement about the spiritual realm – the realm of God, angels and demons, and Platonic ideas – because all such statements lack verifiability.[33] But one who judges verificationism false would not subscribe to the view that all religious statements, which cannot be verified by observation, are meaningless, unless there are strong reasons independent of verificationism for thinking that they are indeed meaningless. It is very likely, however, that one does not have strong external reasons to regard all religious statements as literally meaningless. For example, following Paul Tillich, one may argue that the meaning of a certain religious statement derives from the ways that it seeks to express one's ultimate concern.[34] The truth or falsehood of such a statement will not be decided by whether it can be verified by observation, but whether the ultimacy that it seeks to express is the true ultimacy rather than some finite idol which will eventually abandon its followers in

[32] See chapters 1 and 6 of *Language, Truth, and Logic*, especially 107–18.
[33] See chapters 1 and 6 of *Language, Truth, and Logic*, especially 119–26.
[34] See Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (Harper Torchbooks, 1958).

existential disappointment. Therefore, one who rejects verificationism may simply ignore the implications of verificationism, while adopting some other standard to determine whether a certain religious statement is meaningful or not.

What I have tried to show above is that the implications of verificationism lose their foundations when verificationism itself is rejected, and that it is rational to reject or simply ignore those implications when there are no significant reasons independent of verificationism itself for thinking that they are indeed true. In fact, one may appropriate the Moorean argument against the scepticism about material objects, and argue that those implications are false just because they have such-and-such contents.[35] For example, the moral realist who believes in moral facts and their relevance to our ordinary moral discourse may argue that non-cognitivism is false simply because it denies the relevance of moral facts to our ordinary moral discourse. In the *Mahānidāna Sutta*, the Buddha denounces the Cartesian Self as unfitting because his epistemology requires that "everything" does not include the existence of such selves. However, the Cartesian philosopher who rejects the Buddha's epistemology may well believe that it is *not* unfitting to conceive the self as existing independently of experience, unless there are strong external reasons for thinking either that such a conception is indeed unfitting or that the Buddha's epistemology is plausible and ought to be accepted. But it is very likely that for those who accept the Cartesian Intuition, there is no sufficiently strong reason for thinking that such a conception of the self is unfitting. They may reasonably accept the Cartesian Intuition on the grounds of its phenomenological plausibility, as they regard moral intuitions as the primary source of moral knowledge.[36] Without sufficiently strong independent reasons for accepting the Buddha's epistemology and rejecting the Cartesian Intuition, the Cartesian philosopher may simply regard the Buddha's argument against the Cartesian Self as a groundless assertion.[37]

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[35] See G.E. Moore, *Some Main Problems of Philosophy* (Taylor & Francis Group, 2004), chapters 5 and 6. Moore's argument, simplistically put, is that if the scepticism about material objects is correct, then I do not know that this pencil – a material object – exists; but since I *do* know that this pencil exists, the scepticism about material objects must be false.

[36] Tomhave – who prefers the Buddha's explanation of human personality over Descartes's – concedes that Descartes's explanation appears to be intuitively correct. It is beyond my ability and the scope of this essay to define what "reasonableness" consists in and determine what counts as a good reason for accepting the Cartesian Intuition. My point is simply that the Buddha's argument against the Cartesian Self based on his epistemology makes no sense to those who reject his epistemology.

[37] Later Buddhist philosophers do develop arguments – which are independent of the Buddha's epistemology – against the self existing apart from experience and somehow possessing it. Candrakīrti, for example, argues that introspection merely reveals constantly changing psychophysical processes rather than a self existing independently of experience and possessing it. His argument seems unconvincing to me, as he only rejects the Cartesian Intuition on the grounds of his own intuition that introspection does not indicate the existence of a Cartesian self. For a discussion of Candrakīrti's argument and its similarities with Hume's argument against the Cartesian Self, see Jay L. Garfield, *Losing Ourselves: Learning to Live without a Self* (Princeton University Press, 2022), 13-28.

§ 4. The Buddha's Soteriology

When the Buddha describes the speculative views about the existence or non-existence of the Tathāgata after death as unfitting, he suggests not only that those views are cognitively meaningless because they transcend the realm of the senses, but also that they are morally pointless because they are not conducive to attaining nibbāna. The *Cūḷamāluṅkya Sutta* relates the story of a monk who insisted that he would abandon his discipleship under the Buddha if the Buddha refused to answer such "metaphysical" questions as whether the Tathāgata exists after death and whether the world is infinite and eternal. The Buddha likened this monk to a person who, wounded by an arrow thickly smeared with poison, said to the surgeon,

> I will not let the surgeon pull out this arrow until I know whether the man who wounded me was a khattiya, a brahmin, a merchant, or a worker […] whether the man who wounded me was tall, short, or of middle height […] whether the bow that wounded me was a long bow or a crossbow […] whether the bowstring that wounded was finer, reed, sinew, hemp, or bark […].[38]

Just as knowing the characteristics of the weapon and of the person who causes the wound will not save the wounded person's life, so answering the metaphysical questions is useless for terminating suffering and achieving nibbāna. The reason why the Buddha judges the Cartesian Self to be unfitting, as he does the speculative views about the post-mortem existence of the Tathāgata, is twofold: such a conception of the self is not only cognitively meaningless but also irrelevant to achieving the goal of Buddhist discipleship.

The goal of Buddhist discipleship is nibbāna, liberation from the cycle of rebirth, and the necessary condition for achieving this is the cessation of craving and clinging, which are the ultimate causes of renewed existence and the suffering inherent in it. As the Buddha pronounces in his first sermon, the correct understanding of human personality that is beneficial to attaining nibbāna is to regard the person as "five aggregates subject to clinging."[39] One may cling to form, feeling, perception, volitional formations, or consciousness either by appropriation or by identification.[40] Such clinging is caused by craving, which seeks pleasure in the five aggregates but never seizes lasting fulfilment, since pleasure is only transient and always accompanied by suffering. To attain nibbāna is to eradicate craving and the concomitant pleasure and suffering altogether. Thus, the state of being liberated from the cycle of rebirth should aptly be described as a state of tranquility rather than a state of beatitude, since the Buddhist solution to unfulfilled desires, the root of suffering, is neither pursuing their lasting fulfilment – which the Buddhist deems as an impossibility – nor minimising the suffering which accompanies pleasure and

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[38] See *MN*, 352–54.

[39] See *SN*, 56:11, 1843–47.

[40] See my discussion of the relationship between impermanence and suffering in section §1, "What the Buddha's Argument against the Cartesian Self Is Not About."

happiness, but eliminating the desires themselves. With the cessation of desires, however, suffering ceases while many transient pleasures are lost. It is no longer possible to learn, to use a line from the film *Shadowlands*, that "the pain then is part of the happiness now."

Just as the Buddha's argument against the Cartesian Self based on his epistemology appears groundless to those who reject his epistemology, so too, his argument for the moral harmfulness of the Cartesian Self cannot convince those who already adhere to an alternative soteriology, but would instead appear as a groundless assertion. For example, Thomas Chalmers, a nineteenth-century Scottish theologian, argued that it is not only unlikely but also inconsistent with human nature to seek the elimination of desire. Since we cannot and should not eradicate our desires, Chalmers maintained that wholehearted love for God does not arise from merely demonstrating the evanescence of worldly pleasures, for such a demonstration is always ineffectual unless our desires are given a new and more attractive object. Rather, love for God arises from shifting the object of our desires from worldly pleasures to the God of love.

> [If] the way to disengage the heart from the positive love of one great and ascendant object is to fasten it in positive love to another, then it is not by exposing the worthlessness of the former but by addressing to the mental eye the worth and excellence of the latter that all old things are to be done away and all things are to become new. […] We know of no other way by which to keep the love of the world out of our hearts than to keep in our hearts the love of God […].[41]

Chalmers might find the Buddha's soteriology unrealistic and misguided, since Chalmers attributes salvation to redirecting our desires to the proper object rather than eradicating them completely. For Chalmers and others who reject the Buddha's soteriology, the nature of the self may well be irrelevant to attaining salvation; it may well be compatible to adhere to the Cartesian Self while still achieving the goal of their own soteriology.

To strengthen our claim that the Buddha's argument against the Cartesian Self based on his soteriology cannot convince those who hold different soteriological views, let us also compare the Buddha's soteriology with that of the Christian philosopher John Hick, who aligns himself with the "Irenaean" or "soul-making" tradition of Christian theodicy.[42] In his interpretation of Genesis 3, Hick construes the creation of humans not as a given fact but as a teleological movement which involves two stages. The first stage is the creation of the biological life of humans who are produced out of the long process of evolution and placed in a "religiously ambiguous universe," in which suffering abounds and God's presence and activities are not transparent.[43] The second stage of the creation, on the other hand, points to

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[41] Thomas Chalmers, *The Expulsive Power of a New Affection* (Crossway, 2020), 47–48, 68.

[42] See John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (Macmillan, 1966).

[43] See Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 318.

the fulfilment of human existence, as manifested in a Christ-like virtuous life which contains a perfected personal relationship with God. Whereas the Buddhist seeks to terminate the cycle of rebirth and thereby avoid suffering by eliminating the underlying desires, Hick understands suffering as an indispensable part of God's universe which is designed to be a suitable environment for cultivating moral virtues and developing relationships of love with our Maker and with fellow human beings.

Hick leaves unanswered whether the soul that strives to overcome difficulties and attain eternal bliss resembles the Cartesian Self which exists apart from experience yet possesses and actively participates in it. However, those who accept Hick's theodicy may well believe that the soul is indeed a substance which exists independently of experience yet possesses and actively participates in it. They may adhere to this belief because it helps them make sense of their place in God's universe and explain their personal connection with God. From their perspective, it is beneficial for their salvation to conceive the self as a substance existing independently of experience yet possessing and actively participating in it, and the Buddha's argument against the Cartesian Self based on *his* soteriology is simply groundless or even detrimental for their salvation.

§ 5. Conclusion

I have tried to argue that the Buddha's argument against the Cartesian Self is *not* sufficient to convince a rational person who adheres to the Cartesian Intuition to believe that it is unfitting to conceive the self as existing apart from experience while possessing and actively participating in it. The Buddha's argument, which should be distinguished from his argument that the self is not identical to the totality or any component of the five aggregates, is grounded in his epistemology and soteriology. For those who accept the Cartesian Intuition and reject the Buddha's epistemology and soteriology, the Buddha's suggestion that it is unfitting to conceive the self as existing independently of experience yet possessing and actively participating in it would simply appear to be groundless. Therefore, the Buddha's argument against the Cartesian Self – which is grounded in the Buddha's own epistemology and soteriology – is philosophically unsuccessful, since it cannot convince a rational person who rejects his epistemology and soteriology to abandon her belief in the Cartesian Self, and would appear to such a person as a baseless assertion.

It may be objected that it is inappropriate, perhaps uncharitable, to characterise the Buddha's argument against the Cartesian Self as a philosophical failure. After all, one might argue, many good philosophical arguments fail to persuade a fully rational person who holds opposing views on the basis of the argument alone. However, even if a lack of persuasive force is not sufficient grounds for deeming an argument philosophical unsuccessful, the reconstruction of the Buddha's argument against an intuition of the Cartesian Self remains an unsuccessful one. This is because his argument is grounded in epistemological and soteriological convictions

for which he offers no independent argument, and which interlocutors may reasonably reject.

It may also be objected that the success of a philosophical argument should not be defined in terms of its ability to convince a rational person who adheres to the opposing view that the argument in question is sound: such a criterion of philosophical success is too demanding. Philosophical success, according to this objection, is the success of persuading the members of an ideally rational agnostic audience that the argument in question is sound, after patient, meticulous disputations with an ideally rational person who is committed to the opposing view.[44] However, to attract the agnostic audience, the Buddha would need to provide positive, independent arguments for preferring his own epistemology and soteriology to their alternatives, *without begging the question* – a standard mark of a flawed philosophical argument.[45] Without such arguments, the Buddhist and her opponent can only talk past each other, whether an ideally rational agnostic audience is present or not.[46]

[44] For these two conceptions of philosophical success, see chapter 3 of Peter van Inwagen's *The Problem of Evil* (Oxford University Press, 2008).

[45] I am not aware of any such *philosophical* arguments in the Nikāyas. I do not deny that there might be *religious* reasons for preferring the Buddha's epistemology and soteriology to their alternatives.

[46] I am grateful to Professor Bronwyn Finnigan, UPJA Associate Editor Ava Broinowski, and two anonymous referees for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this essay.

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A Critical Reply to Williamson's "Fragility, Influence, and Intrinsicality"

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Abstract

In response to David Lewis' original counterfactual account of causation's inability to deal with late preemption cases, Patrick Williamson suggests that we could adopt extreme standards of fragility. I outline the implications of this solution and defend Lewis' view that spurious causes pose a greater challenge to extreme fragility than they do to the original counterfactual account. I then argue that adopting extreme standards of fragility ultimately fails to adequately address late preemption. Williamson advocates that, in order to allow for the intrinsicality of causal processes, we should adopt the original counterfactual account as quasi-dependence. He indicates that proponents of quasi-dependence must make some metaphysical concessions, namely that all trumping cases involve cutting and that absences not only do not exist, but that propositions describing absences are really describing contrastive positive claims. I address each concession in turn and draw out its implications, showing that not only do they not provide a satisfying solution to the problems they aim to solve, but that they likely generate further problems.

§ 0. Introduction

Traditionally, causation has been thought of as a real and fundamental relation.[2] Proponents of this traditional view typically hold that causes bring about their

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[2] Loux, Michael J and Thomas M Crisp (2017) "Causation," in Paul K Moser, ed, *Metaphysics: A Contemporary Introduction, Fourth Edition*, 182.

effects in virtue of their exercising some power or disposition, and that the exercising of that power/disposition necessitates the effect.[3]

David Hume famously challenged this notion of causal powers and necessary connections between causes and effects, arguing that we have no direct empirical experience of them (and thus, according to Hume, we are not justified in asserting their existence).[4] Many philosophers who share Hume's rejection of traditional approaches to causation have since developed alternative accounts.

One notable example is David Lewis' original counterfactual account of causation.[5] Counterfactuals are just subjunctive conditional statements (statements of the form *if A then would have B*). The truth of counterfactuals is assessed by employing the notion of *possible worlds* (a possible world is just a causally closed, maximal description of the way things could have been):[6] *if A then would have B* is true at some world just in case the closest world at which *A* is true, *B* is also true.[7] Lewis then uses this method of assessing counterfactuals to define the notion of *causal dependence*: some event *e* causally depends on some event *c* if and only if *e* counterfactually depends on *c* (or in other words, the counterfactuals *if c then would have e* and *had not c, not e* are both true).[8] Causation is then defined as the ancestor of causal dependence, that is, *c* is a cause of *e* if and only if there is a stepwise-chain of causal dependencies leading from *c* to *e* (even if *e* is not causally dependent on *c*).[9]

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[3] Loux, "Causation," 182. Additionally, causal powers/dispositions are generally considered to be primitive and irreducible.

[4] Hume, David (1739/1896) "Of the idea of necessary connexion," in LA Selby-Bigge, ed, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Clarendon Press, 85–86. He points out that whenever we observe a supposed instance of causation, all we actually observe is a succession of events. For example, for every instance of a person lighting a match by striking it, all we ever observe is the event of a person striking a match followed by the event of a match lighting; according to Hume, we never observe any extra necessitating causal power.

[5] Lewis, David (1973) "Causation," *The Journal of Philosophy* 70, 556–567.

[6] Williamson, Patrick (2019) "Fragility, influence, and intrinsicality," *The Undergraduate Philosophy Journal of Australasia* 1, 1–2. For simplicity's sake, I employ Williamson's definition of possible worlds. Additionally, there is a non-empty set of all possible worlds (of which our world is a member), the members of which stand in relations of overall comparative similarity (assessed via similarity in both particular matters of spatiotemporal fact and laws of nature; e.g. if w_2 is *closer* to w_1 than w_3 is, w_2 is more similar to w_1 than w_3 is).

[7] *If A then would have B* would also be vacuously true if *A* was false at every world. Additionally, on Lewis' actual view, there would not necessarily be a single closest world at which *A* is true, but rather, a non-empty set of equally close worlds in which there is at least one world at which *A* is true; *If A then would have B* would then be true if and only if *B* was true at every world at which *A* was true within that set: Lewis, "Causation," 560.

[8] Lewis, "Causation," 561–562. Additionally, *e* counterfactually depends on *c* if and only if *O(e)* counterfactually depends on *O(c)*, where *O(x)* is an event-tracking proposition which is true at all and only those worlds where event *x* occurs. Also, as outlined by Lewis and reiterated by Williamson, only events which are distinct and non-overlapping can enter into relations of causal dependence: Lewis "Postscripts to causation," 212; Williamson, "Fragility, influence, and intrinsicality," 2.

[9] Lewis, "Causation," 563. This allows causation to be transitive even though causal dependence is not. In other words, if *e* is causally dependent on *c*, then *c* is also a cause of *e*. However, if *e* is causally

§ 1. Fragility

Prima facie, Lewis' original counterfactual account of causation cannot deal with late preemption cases.[10] Late preemption cases are characterised by the following form: we have an actual cause (c_1) and a potential cause (c_2), both of which are sufficient to result in some effect (e). However, c_1 produces e before c_2 can, which is why we want to say that c_1 is the cause of e, rather than c_2. But because both c_1 and c_2 are sufficient to produce e, the relevant counterfactuals (*had not* c_1, *not* e; *had not* c_2, *not* e) turn out to be false, and consequently, neither c_1 nor c_2 are causes of e under the original counterfactual analysis.[11]

The following example, Example 1, is commonly used to illustrate late preemption: Suzy and Billy each throw a rock at a glass bottle. Suzy throws her rock slightly faster, resulting in it reaching and smashing the glass bottle first, leaving Billy's rock to pass through the space where the bottle had just been standing.[12] We want to say that Suzy's throw (c_1) is the cause of the bottle breaking (e); however, the counterfactual *had Suzy not thrown, the bottle would not have broken* is false because if Suzy's throw had not broken the bottle, Billy's (c_2) would have.

Patrick Williamson suggests that adopting extreme standards of fragility would enable us to deal with late preemption cases.[13] What Williamson means by *extreme fragility* is that any event e would have been a numerically different event altogether if there had been some minuscule variation in spatiotemporal fact.[14] Late preemption seemingly poses no problem now: it will not be the case that *had not* c_1, *not* e and *had not* c_2, *not* e are false, since c_1 and c_2, being independent causes which differ in spatiotemporal fact, will bring about events which differ in spatiotemporal fact (e_1 and e_2 respectively). Applying this principle to Example 1, we can argue that Suzy's throw (c_1) is indeed the cause of the bottle breaking (or more precisely, the bottle breaking in the time/manner which corresponds to c_1; that is, e_1), as the counterfactual that *had not* c_1, *not* e_1 is true. Likewise, c_2 is not a cause of e_1, as *if* c_2 *then would have* e_1 is false.

Williamson responds to one of Lewis' primary objections to adopting extreme standards of fragility, namely that it allows too many spurious causes, by maintaining that the original counterfactual account is just as susceptible to this issue.[15] I argue that Lewis is correct in suggesting that spurious causation poses a greater problem for extreme fragility than it does for the original counterfactual account. Secondly, I point out that the potential ambiguity concerning the degree of

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dependent on d, and d is causally dependent on c, c will be a cause of e, even if e is not causally dependent on c.

[10] Lewis, David (1986) "Postscripts to causation," in *Philosophical Papers*, vol. 2, Oxford University Press, 193.

[11] Lewis, "Postscripts to causation," 193.

[12] Lewis, David (2000) "Causation as influence," *The Journal of Philosophy* 97, 82.

[13] Williamson, "Fragility, influence, and intrinsicality," 3.

[14] Williamson, "Fragility, influence, and intrinsicality," 3.

[15] Williamson, "Fragility, influence, and intrinsicality," 5.

fragility to be applied will require us to adopt standards of fragility that will ultimately result in a failure to properly deal with late preemption.

1.1 Spurious causes

The main issue is this: if any small deviation of spatiotemporal fact would have rendered some event a numerically different event, it would seem that anything that influenced the spatiotemporal facts of an event is itself a cause of that event (that is, *had not x, not e* would be true, where *x* is some influencing factor and *e* is some fragile event).[16] With regard to Example 1, factors such as rock type, air pressure, and temperature would all qualify as causes of the bottle breaking, all of which seem spurious.[17] Williamson concedes that this is a genuine problem for extreme fragility; however, he argues that the original counterfactual account is just as susceptible to spurious causation; he points out that because causation is transitive, there will be an endless supply of spurious causes because any member of a chain of stepwise causal dependencies will be a cause of any posterior member.[18]

However, it is crucial that we distinguish causes from causal dependencies. Lewis specifically argues that the issue with adopting extreme standards of fragility is its propensity to generate spurious causal dependencies, not causes *per se*.[19] In fact, as long as each case of causal dependency within a stepwise chain is not spurious, it is not clear that distant events qualifying as causes of recent events challenge our intuitions about causation. For example, the event of someone bouncing on a trampoline may be connected to the event of that person getting married by a stepwise chain of causal dependencies: maybe bouncing on the trampoline resulted in that person breaking their leg, which resulted in that person going to the hospital, which resulted in that person meeting their future partner, and so on. Even though that person getting married is likely not causally dependent on their bouncing on a trampoline, their bouncing on a trampoline would nevertheless be a cause of them getting married. Although this might appear spurious at first glance, upon inspecting each case of non-spurious causal dependence connecting the trampoline to the marriage, it is not clear that the impression of spuriousness would remain. The reason we diagnose a supposed instance of causal dependency as spurious is that we think it fails to capture a genuine causal connection at all. In the case of a distant event being connected to a more recent event by a stepwise-chain of causal dependencies, the reason we may initially think that the distant event being a cause of the recent event would be spurious is that, due to the length of the causal chain connecting them (and our ignorance about each *link* of the chain), we may suspect that at least one of the links fails to capture a genuine causal connection (or, in other words, the chain contains at least one spurious causal dependency). Therefore, if we knew that a causal chain did not in fact contain any spurious causal dependencies,

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[16] Lewis, "Postscripts to causation," 198.
[17] Williamson, "Fragility, influence, and intrinsicality," 4.
[18] Williamson, "Fragility, influence, and intrinsicality," 5.
[19] Lewis, "Postscripts to causation," 198.

we would have no reason to think it spurious that any prior member of that chain would be a cause of any posterior member.[20]

Thus, when comparing the degree to which the two accounts of causation are susceptible to spurious causes, we must do so in relation to causal dependency.[21] Adopting extreme standards of fragility would mean that every event will causally depend on a virtually infinite number of spurious factors.[22] Contrastingly, the same is not true of the original counterfactual account. Williamson argues that under the original counterfactual account, a person getting lung cancer would causally depend on them having lungs (that is, their lungs would have caused their lung cancer), as the counterfactual *had I not had lungs I would not have had lung cancer* would be true.[23] However, I think that it is important to point out that only distinct events can stand in relations of causal dependence.[24] In order for two events to be distinct, they cannot be identical, one cannot be a proper part of the other, and they cannot share any part in common.[25] If we allowed non-distinct events to be the *relata* of causal dependence relations, events like *you having a nose* would causally depend on *you existing*, and *having lungs* would causally depend on *having lungs*.[26] In order for the counterfactual *had I not had lungs, I would not have had lung cancer* to be true, the proposition *had I not had lungs* must be the negation of the event of *having lungs* at approximately the time of having the lung cancer.[27] Additionally, the event of *having lung cancer* seems to also include the event of *having lungs* (otherwise it would not be 'lung' cancer). Hence, *having lungs* appears to be a proper part of *having lung cancer*, or at the very least, both events share some common part, meaning that they are not distinct events, and consequently, one cannot causally depend on the other (despite the fact that the right counterfactuals are true).[28] Even more clearly, the event of *having lung cancer* implies the event of *having lungs*. Lewis points out that, as a general principle, when we have

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[20] In fact, this implies that as causation supervenes on chains of causal dependencies, a cause is spurious if and only if the causal chain it supervenes on contains a spurious causal dependency. This further supports the fact that the propensity to generate spurious causal dependencies is the fundamental issue.

[21] Even if we thought that causation *per se* was also relevant, both the original counterfactual account and extreme fragility would be equally susceptible to spurious causes *per se*, as causation is transitive on both views. Thus, any comparisons based on spurious causes would turn on each of the view's susceptibility to spurious causal dependencies anyway.

[22] Williamson, "Fragility, influence, and intrinsicality," 5.

[23] Menzies, Peter (2004) "Difference making in context," in J Collins, N Hall & LA Paul, eds, *Causation and Counterfactuals*, MIT Press, 143.

[24] Lewis, "Postscripts to causation," 212.

[25] Lewis, "Postscripts to causation," 212.

[26] Lewis, "Postscripts to causation," 256.

[27] It seems that having lung cancer only requires that you have lungs when the lung cancer is occurring; having lung cancer does not necessarily entail that you had lungs prior, that is, *if I had lungs then I would have had lung cancer* requires that *having lungs* and *having lung cancer* temporally coincide in order to be true.

[28] Lewis, "Postscripts to causation," 212.

one event that implies another event, we should take it that they are not distinct events, and that any counterfactual dependence between them is non-causal.[29]

It would appear that many of the potential cases of spurious causal dependency allowed by the original counterfactual account either involve events that are not distinct or involve cases where the effect implies the cause, and thus any counterfactual dependence is either trivial at best or non-causal at worst. It should be conceded, however, that there still are non-trivial examples. For example, it is plausible that a fire started by someone with a match is also causally dependent on the presence of oxygen in the air (as the counterfactual *if there had not been oxygen in the air, then a fire would not have started* would be true), however, it would seem spurious to say that the presence of oxygen in the air caused the fire to start.[30] So, although the range of spurious causal dependencies allowed by adopting extreme standards of fragility is far more expansive, the original counterfactual account is still susceptible to a lesser degree.

1.2 Failure to deal with late preemption

I will now turn to another issue: exactly what standard of fragility is to be adopted? It seems that we have various candidates for what we should consider as *events*; some are more fine-grained (more fragile), and some are more coarse-grained (less fragile).[31] Both the original counterfactual account and the extreme standards of fragility account agree that differences in spatiotemporal fact are what distinguish numerically distinct events; however, they disagree on the extent to which there can be spatiotemporal differences before an actual event would have been a numerically distinct event in some counterfactual scenario.[32] I suspect that if we are to avoid the same criticisms of imprecision and context-dependency levelled by Williamson[33] against Lewis' influence account,[34] advocates of extreme standards of fragility must apply those standards consistently. That is, if a certain degree of spatiotemporal difference is sufficient to numerically distinguish two events in one case, then that degree of spatiotemporal difference will be sufficient to numerically distinguish two events in all cases.

If the motivation for adopting extreme standards of fragility is to identify the correct cause in late preemption cases, then the degree of fragility that is adopted must be sufficient to deal with all plausible examples of late preemption. Given that we could construct late preemption cases that involve entities like neurons and subatomic particles, it must be that virtually any difference in spatiotemporal fact is sufficient to numerically distinguish events. Williamson does appear to advocate for these standards, given that he rules out troublesome late preemption cases *a priori*, and

[29] Lewis, "Postscripts to causation," 256.
[30] Menzies, "Difference making in context," 143.
[31] Lewis, "Postscripts to causation," 196.
[32] Lewis, "Postscripts to causation," 195.
[33] Williamson, "Fragility, influence, and intrinsicality," 6.
[34] Lewis, "Causation as influence," 91.

asserts that two events cannot independently bring about a numerically identical event (at least in our world).[35]

However, we do not only want to say that the preempting event is the actual cause in late preemption cases, but we also want to say that the preempted event is not the cause. In other words, we want to say both that *Suzy's throw* is the cause of *Suzy's break*[36] and that *Billy's throw* is not the cause of *Suzy's break*. But if we adopt extreme standards of fragility, *Suzy's break* will also causally depend on *Billy's throw*, as although Billy's rock did not smash into the bottle, the rock sailing through the air will still have had some influence on the time and manner of *Suzy's break* (for example, wind fluctuations, gravitational effect, and so on).[37] Consequently, the counterfactual *had Billy not thrown, Suzy's break would not have happened* would be true, and *Suzy's break* will causally depend on *Billy's throw* just as much as it does on *Suzy's throw*. So, although the original counterfactual account fails to deal with late preemption as neither the preempting nor the preempted event turns out to be the cause, adopting extreme standards of fragility also fails to properly deal with late preemption by diagnosing both the preempting and preempted event as causes.[38]

§ 2. Quasi-dependence

In order to properly account for the intrinsicality of causation, Williamson proposes that we adopt Lewis' quasi-dependence account of causation (QD).[39] On this account, *c* causes *e* if and only if there is either a stepwise chain of causal dependence or *quasi-dependence*[40] from *c* to *e*. *e* quasi-depends on *c* if and only if *e* counterfactually depends on *c*, not in the actual world, but in some possible world in which both (1) the same intrinsic series of spatiotemporal events connects *c* to *e*, but (2) the extrinsic background details (which include preemptors) of the causal scenario vary.[41]

Williamson raises Lewis' main criticisms of QD, namely that it cannot handle trumping or double prevention cases, and concedes that proponents of QD must

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[35] Williamson, "Fragility, influence, and intrinsicality," 3.

[36] *Suzy's break* in this case refers to the event of the bottle breaking in the time and manner in which it actually did, i.e. e_1.

[37] Lewis, "Postscripts to causation," 205.

[38] We could perhaps also argue that this is a category of spurious causes allowed by extreme fragility but not by the original counterfactual account, i.e. preempted events in late preemption cases.

[39] Williamson, "Fragility, influence, and intrinsicality," 9. Williamson also notes that the quasi-dependence account allows us to remain agnostic about whether or not to adopt extreme standards of fragility.

[40] There could also be a mixed chain, i.e. some members of the chain are connected via causal dependence and some via quasi-dependence.

[41] Williamson, "Fragility, influence, and intrinsicality," 9. I have used Williamson's rendition of the quasi-dependence view; however, I will assume that the intrinsic series of spatiotemporal events occurs under the same laws in the possible worlds we are looking at as it did in the case we are analysing. It should also be noted that Lewis allowed for comparison to a similar scenario in the actual world: Lewis, "Causation as influence," 184.

make certain concessions: he argues that firstly, they must maintain that all trumping cases are in fact cutting cases, and secondly, they must deny that absences exist.[42]

I suggest that considering all trumping cases as cutting cases is unjustified, and that denying absences may create more problems than it solves.

2.1 Trumping cases

Trumping cases generally involve two events, c_1 and c_2, each of which is sufficient to produce an effect e, but the laws render c_1 as the exclusive factor in the entailment of e.[43]

A commonly used example, Example 2, is as follows. A major (c_1) and a sergeant (c_2) simultaneously shout 'Advance!' to a group of soldiers, who subsequently advance (e). Either of the shouts would have been sufficient by itself to result in the soldiers marching; however, if the major and the sergeant had simultaneously shouted contradictory orders, the soldiers would have followed the orders of the outranking officer (the major, that is, c_1). Thus, we want to say that the major, and not the sergeant, is the cause of the soldiers advancing (as the major's orders 'trump' the sergeant's).[44]

The reason why trumping cases pose a problem for QD is that ostensibly both c_1 and c_2 are connected to e via an intrinsic series of spatiotemporal events and would therefore both be diagnosed as causes of e.[45] Williamson's solution is to assert that all trumping cases are cutting cases, that is, they involve only one completed intrinsic series of spatiotemporal events.[46] For example, the major's shout and resulting neural signals in the soldier's brains prevent the neural signals produced by the sergeant from running to completion.[47]

One important thing to note is that Williamson does concede that there may be *alien* (that is, non-actual, non-nomologically accessible, or non-nomologically approximate) worlds in which genuine non-cutting trumping cases occur. However, he argues that the adequacy of a causal theory should first be assessed in the actual world, and in those worlds which are nomologically accessible and approximate, as it is in those worlds where our causal reasoning and intuitions are most applicable.[48] In light of this, Williamson's claim that all trumping cases are cutting cases is to be understood as the claim that all trumping cases in non-alien worlds are cutting cases.

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[42] Williamson, "Fragility, influence, and intrinsicality," 9–10.
[43] Schaffer, Jonathan (2000) "Trumping preemption," *The Journal of Philosophy* 97, 174–175.
[44] Schaffer, "Trumping preemption," 175.
[45] Lewis, "Causation as influence," 184.
[46] Williamson, "Fragility, influence, and intrinsicality," 9.
[47] Lewis, "Causation as influence," 183.
[48] Williamson, "Fragility, influence, and intrinsicality," 10.

This is equivalent to saying that given the actual laws of nature (or approximately similar laws), trumping cases are necessarily cutting cases.[49]

Firstly, we might say something about Williamson's insistence that a failure to deal with cases of causation in alien worlds is not a detriment to a theory of causation. Although it may not be a reason to favour some rival theory,[50] it still gives us reason to think that a theory is incorrect. If we are to think of causation as a relation that holds between events in possible-world space, then a correct theory of causation must make correct predictions across all possible worlds. Therefore, although QD might correctly describe causal relations in the actual world, it would not be a theory of *causation*.

Secondly, the assertion that all trumping cases are cutting cases seems *ad hoc*. Williamson offers no independent reasons for why we should think that trumping cases in non-alien worlds must involve cutting, aside from the fact that it eliminates a counterexample to QD. Additionally, maintaining that trumping cases are necessarily cutting cases given the actual laws of nature (or approximately similar laws) is not merely to assert that the spatiotemporal facts of the actual world are such that every potential case of trumping would contingently turn out to involve cutting. Rather, it asserts that it is a *lawlike* regularity that trumping cases involve cutting. Given that genuine non-cutting trumping cases seem, at the very least, epistemically possible under our current understanding of the actual laws (excluding the identification of trumping cases as cutting cases), there is no reason to think that trumping cases turning out to be cutting cases is lawlike.[51] On the contrary, as causal structure is subsumed under nomic structure on most views (including Lewis'),[52] increasing the complexity of our theory of the world's nomic structure to save our theory of the world's causal structure misplaces the explanatory priority.

Additionally, Jonathan Schaffer offers us an empirically plausible example, Example 3, of a trumping case which leaves no room for cutting.[53] In this example, there is a world (with otherwise similar physical laws to ours) in which there exist three types of fields, namely *black*, *grey*, and *white* (and these fields do not superpose). Whenever some particle is subjected to only one of these fields, it will accelerate along a curved trajectory in a specific direction due to the field's pull. However, if subjected to more than one field, it will accelerate in the direction it would have had it been subjected to only the darkest field. For example, if a particle were subjected to both a *black* and

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[49] However, if there are alien worlds with non-cutting trumping cases, that all trumping cases are cutting cases will be a metaphysically contingent fact.

[50] As pointed out by Williamson, unless a rival theory of causation maps actual, nomologically accessible, and nomologically approximate worlds in addition to alien worlds, the fact that our preferred theory does not map alien worlds gives us no reason to discard it in favour of the rival theory: Williamson, "Fragility, influence, and intrinsicality," 10.

[51] This is aside from eliminating trumping cases as a counterexample to QD.

[52] Schaffer, "Trumping preemption," 166.

[53] Schaffer, "Trumping preemption," 175.

a *white* field, the particle would accelerate along a curved trajectory in the manner it would have had it only been subjected to the black field. Thus, a physical law of this world would be some sort of colour-field law. Now, if a particle were simultaneously subjected to a *black* and a *white* field, which both pulled in the same direction and with the same magnitude, it would only be the *black* field that caused the particle to accelerate in such a way.[54]

Note that Example 3 has the form of trumping preemption: we have two events, the *black field* (c_1) and the *white field* (c_2), each of which is sufficient to cause the particle to accelerate in the manner that it did (e), but the laws render c_1 as the exclusive factor in the entailment of e. Schaffer points out that although the world in Example 3 is not nomologically accessible to the actual world[55] (at least according to our current understanding of the actual physical laws), it is more than plausible that physicists in the actual world could discover new types of fields, conduct similar experiments, and consequently update our understanding of the physical laws in accordance with the possibility of similar trumping cases. This provides us with a positive reason for rejecting Williamson's claim that all trumping cases necessarily involve cutting.

2.2 Absences

Williamson notes that cases which seem to posit absences as causes (for example, having an embolism → absence of blood to the brain → absence of oxygen in the brain → having a stroke) present problems for QD, as absences are non-spatiotemporally located and thus there would appear to be no completed intrinsic series of spatiotemporal events connecting the cause to the effect.[56] He suggests that we not only deny the existence of absences,[57] but that we might restate absences as *contrastive positive claims*[58] in order for QD to account for cases of causation which seem to involve absences.[59]

Before I offer my analysis of Williamson's proposals, there are some preliminary matters to sort out. It was not immediately clear to me whether or not the QD account merely extended the original counterfactual account or revised it. In other words, would any two events, which under the original counterfactual account would stand in a relation of causal dependence, also do so under the QD account (even if there was no spatiotemporal series connecting them)? Or does the QD account also require that causal dependence requires a completed spatiotemporal series? On my reading of Lewis, it seems to me that his primary intuition for adopting QD is that he thinks any two intrinsically identical spatiotemporal processes will either both be causal or non-causal, not that all causal relationships

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[54] Schaffer, "Trumping preemption," 173–174.
[55] Although, it could perhaps be argued to be nomologically approximate.
[56] Williamson, "Fragility, influence, and intrinsicality," 10.
[57] More specifically, that we should not add them to our ontology.
[58] ~c will instead read: *x exists*. For example, *not eating cereal* could instead read: *eating toast*.
[59] Williamson, "Fragility, influence, and intrinsicality," 10.

must involve an intrinsic series of spatiotemporal events.[60] Thus, it appears that Lewis merely sought to extend his original counterfactual account in order to patch up perceived gaps (primarily late preemption cases).

Williamson does not appear to explicitly restrict relations of causal dependence to only holding between spatiotemporally connected events in his interpretation of the QD account, and therefore, I think he likely follows Lewis in merely extending the original counterfactual account.[61] However, it also seems that his intuitions about the inherent intrinsicality of causation are broader than Lewis',[62] and hence, it is possible that Williamson does intend for all causal relationships to require a completed intrinsic series of spatiotemporal events. Consequently, I will consider the implications of denying absences under both of these possible interpretations.

Firstly, I do not think that denying the existence of absences necessarily means that we must also deny that they can enter into relations of counterfactual dependence (and consequently relations of causal dependence). Lewis seems to adopt a view that, because negative existential propositions that refer to absences can be true despite those absences not existing,[63] absences can enter into relations of causal dependence via such propositions (as the relevant counterfactuals can still be true).[64] If we accept this, we could maintain that absences do not exist, yet can enter into causal dependence relations, as long as we interpret QD as an extension of the original counterfactual account.[65]

Although adopting Lewis' approach will allow absences to stand in relations of causal dependence, they will not be able to stand in relations of quasi-dependence (because there will be no completed intrinsic series of spatiotemporal events). Consequently, we will have cases where the presence of a potential cause (like in the case of late preemption) will result in an otherwise identical causal chain being non-causal (due to it containing absences). This will undermine one of the primary advantages of the QD account, namely its ability to deal with late preemption cases. It would seem that the only way to rectify this would be to only allow for absences in

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[60] Lewis, "Postscripts to causation," 206.

[61] Williamson, "Fragility, influence, and intrinsicality," 9.

[62] Williamson, "Fragility, influence, and intrinsicality," 8. For example, he states that the correct account will adjudicate causation based on the intrinsic series of spatiotemporal events which connect causes to effects.

[63] At least on most metaphysical accounts of truth, including deflationary theories, truth supervenes on being, atomic truthmaker theory. This may not be the case for certain versions of truthmaker maximalism, however.

[64] Lewis, "Causation as influence," 196. This does raise some questions about whether causal relations on Lewis' view are fundamentally between events or counterfactual truths. Although Lewis posits events as the *relata* of causal relations, he also states that causal dependence between events just is counterfactual dependence between the relevant propositions: Lewis, "Causation," 562–563.

[65] Similarly, denying absences would not undermine the counterfactual account as a whole i.e. analysing *c* caused *e* via the counterfactual *had not c, not e* is not problematic, as *~c* and *~e* can be true without having to admit absences into our ontology.

cases of causal dependency while using contrastive positive claims in cases of quasi-dependence, which seems inconsistent.

Thus, it appears that Williamson is right in asserting that proponents of QD must not only deny that absences exist, but also must maintain that propositions describing absences are really just describing contrastive positive claims.[66] It is not clear to me, however, that counterfactuals describing absences can be smoothly converted into counterfactuals with contrastive positive claims.

Consider the following scenario: a student has an assignment due at 4:30 pm. They complete it to a high standard, but, exhausted, they end up taking a nap from 4:00 pm until 5:00 pm. Consequently, they do not submit their assignment and immediately receive an unsatisfactory grade. It would seem intuitive to say that the student not submitting their assignment caused them to receive an unsatisfactory grade (as the counterfactual *had they not failed to submit their assignment, then they would not have received an unsatisfactory grade* would be true). However, *not submitting their assignment* is an absence, and therefore, we must replace it with some contrastive positive claim. The obvious candidate is *taking a nap from 4:00 pm until 5:00 pm*. However, *taking a nap from 4:00 pm until 5:00 pm* is only *accidentally*, and not *essentially*, equivalent to *not submitting their assignment*; the student could have submitted their assignment before 4:00 pm, or, even if the student had not taken a nap, they might have nevertheless still failed to submit their assignment due to some other reason. In other words, *had they not taken a nap from 4:00 pm until 5:00 pm, then they would not have received an unsatisfactory grade* will not be true in every world in which *had they not failed to submit their assignment, then they would not have received an unsatisfactory grade* is true.

It would seem that most, if not all, contrastive positive claims are only accidentally equivalent to the absences which they intend to replace. As Lewis points out, this would require us to adopt special counterfactuals:[67] in a normal case not involving absences (for example, c_1 causes e), the relevant counterfactual only requires us to suppose away the event *simpliciter* (*had not* c_1, *then not* e); in the case of absences (for example, $\sim c$ causes e), first we must replace $\sim c$ with a contrastive positive claim (for example, x), and then see if the relevant counterfactual is true (*had not* x, *not* e). However, in order for *had not* x, *not* e to be essentially equivalent to *had not* $\sim c$, *not* e, we cannot just suppose away x *simpliciter*. We must instead suppose away x *qua* omission; in other words, we cannot just suppose that x did not occur, we must suppose that x did not occur and that no other event occurred that would have resulted in $\sim c$.[68]

[66] This position will also have to be taken if we interpret the QD account as revising the original counterfactual account.

[67] Lewis, "Postscripts to causation," 193.

[68] Lewis, "Postscripts to causation," 192–193.

Similarly, if we were to accept Williamson's concern that interpreting absences as contrastive positive claims threatens to undermine counterfactual accounts entirely,[69] we would be required to adopt another kind of special counterfactual. For example, in order to analyse a case of ~*c* causes *e*, we have to restate it as *x* causes *e*. However, the counterfactual *had not x, not e* (where ~*x* is ~*x qua* omission) would now also have to be restated as *had y, not e* (where *y* is a contrastive positive claim equivalent to ~*x*). In order for *y* to be essentially equivalent to ~*x*, *y* must refer to some event kind with the accidental specification that it entails *c*.

In my view, adopting special counterfactuals would detrimentally inflate the QD account.

§ 3. Conclusion

I began by examining Williamson's defence of adopting extreme standards of fragility as a viable solution to late preemption cases, arguing that Lewis was correct to raise objections based on spurious causes. Additionally, I suggest that adopting extreme standards of fragility in fact fails to properly deal with late preemption, as it diagnoses not just the preempting event as a cause, but the preempted event as one too. Ultimately, Williamson wants to adopt the quasi-dependence account of causation and concedes that proponents will likely be required to maintain that all trumping cases are cutting cases, and that absences do not exist (and that propositions describing absences are really describing contrastive positive claims). I argue that neither of these concessions convincingly addresses the problems they seek to fix, and that they, in fact, create more problems.

[69] Williamson, "Fragility, influence, and intrinsicality," 11. Williamson points out that as *c* being a cause of *e* depends on the counterfactual *had not c, not e*, and ~*c* and ~*e* are absences, ~*c* and ~*e* may also need to be converted to contrastive positive claims.

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Diotima and Dante: A Ladder of Love Towards God

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Abstract

Dante's portrayal of Beatrice has long confounded readers, but in mapping a Platonic "ladder of love" in Dante's writing, we invite a new perspective on the problematic of her character. This essay attempts to do this by a comparison of Diotima's account of love in Plato's *Symposium* with Dante's musings on Beatrice in *La Vita Nuova* and the *Divine Comedy*. These accounts are bridged by the influence of Aquinas' *Fourth Way for Proving the Existence of God* on Dante – a work which is inherently Platonic in nature. In drawing this comparison, we find that, in Plato, love is more like a means to the end of contemplating the abstract ideal of beauty, but in Dante, love is instead the resonance of God's own love, a divine power which not only enables ascension but is evidence of ascension's telos – the attraction that all beings have towards their creator. This discussion of Plato and Dante produces new ideas about the character of Beatrice and the extent to which she is cast in either a passive or active light, whether she is an object or a subject. In fact, the answer is the latter in both cases as our perspective shifts from a focus on Dante's love for Beatrice to Beatrice's love for Dante.

§ 0. Introduction

In canonical literature, there remains a predominant theme of love's association with divinity, an idea for which there have been similarities in its representation and accompanying frameworks. This essay will centre on these explicit and implicit frameworks found in the works of Plato and Dante on love's divinity, with reference to their respective works: the *Symposium* (c. 385–370 BC), *La Vita Nuova* (1294), and the *Divine Comedy* (1321). In Plato, this structure exists in Diotima's "ladder of love," in which, by the ascension of each rung, one comes to embody virtue and knowledge

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in the quest to attain a higher form of immortality. In Dante, this conception of love is found in his musings on Beatrice, and by a comparative study with Plato – specifically, through the superimposition of Diotima's "ladder of love" onto Dante's verse – we invite a new perspective on Dante's portrayal of Beatrice. In this perspective, she is found to be a mirror for God's perfection, but also actively engaged in and interested in Dante's salvation. And so, while modern critics are in contention on the portrayal of Beatrice, with some finding it inherently problematic[2] and misogynistic,[3] and others remaining less deterred by the manipulation of her character,[4] our discussion finds that Beatrice is inescapably active within Dante's ladder and, contra Plato, not simply the object of love which is cast off. But like with reading Beatrice's love for Dante as key to his salvation, Dante is also interested in the salvation of us, his readers. In this way, the ladder of love is posited at an extra-textual level. Thereby, this ladder proves helpful, also illustrating Dante's love for us.

§ 1. Diotima's Ladder of Love

Before discussing Dante, it will be instructive to first reproduce Diotima's ladder of love in the *Symposium*.[5] The nature of love as understood through Diotima proves to be a continual striving for the possession of goodness, allowing us to gain immortality at the least in procreation, but most significantly, by way of contemplating absolute beauty. But in understanding Diotima's ladder, we must first clarify her idea of birth and given this, the possibility of the notion of "spiritual pregnancy." Diotima first establishes the metaphor of birth when, answering her question to Socrates, she finds love's purpose to be "physical and mental procreation in an attractive medium."[6] In developing the notion of "spiritual pregnancy," Elizabeth Pender is quick to note that to be "pregnant" in Plato's use means arousal and precedes intercourse. Pregnancy and birth are male-centric, evidenced by Diotima's configuring male attraction, the "desire to give birth, but we find it possible only in an attractive medium, not a repulsive one."[7] Diotima continues by distinguishing between the pregnant in body, whose offspring are children, and the pregnant in mind, whose offspring are virtue and wisdom.[8] Diotima then turns to the pederastic relationship in which intimacy and the transfer of knowledge are

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[2] Robin Kirkpatrick, "Dante's Beatrice and the Politics of Singularity." *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 32, no. 1 (1990): 101–119.

[3] Brooke L. Carey, "Le Donne di Dante: An Historical Study of Female Characters in The Divine Comedy", Syracuse University Honors Program Capstone Projects (2007).

[4] Richard Pearce, "The Eyes of Beatrice." *New Blackfriars* 54, no. 640 (1973), 407–416; Martha C. Nussbaum, "Beatrice's 'Dante': Loving the Individual?" *Apeiron: A Journal for Ancient Philosophy and Science* 26, no. 3/4 (1993), 161–178; Jorge Luis Borges, "Beatrice's Last Smile", trans. Virginia Múzquiz. *Dispositio* 18, no. 45 (1993), 23–25.

[5] Plato, *Symposium*, trans. R. Waterfield (Oxford University Press, 2019).

[6] Plato, *Symposium*, 206 b.

[7] Plato, *Symposium*, 206 c.

[8] Plato, *Symposium*, 209 a.

conflated: in the act of birth, the spiritually pregnant man adopts the knowledge and intellect of his beloved.[9] Pender notes this conflation in her interpretation of "sex" taking place in the presence of the beloved – discussion – and alone – reflecting on discussion.[10] As reproduction is the way that the mortal gains immortality for Diotima,[11] the conflation that is "spiritual pregnancy" must equally grant immortality, but she goes further, observing that "offspring of this relationship are particularly attractive and are closer to immortality than ordinary children", and as she points out, Homer's offspring have certainly outlasted a generation.[12] Diotima then constructs her ladder: first, one should focus on the beauty of the body and beget "beautiful reasoning"[13] – our metaphor is still intact. Then, they will find that the beauty of all bodies is the same, realising that a love of only one body is "ridiculous and petty."[14] Later, they will come to value the beauty of the mind and will be led to see the attractiveness of institutions and morality. Finally, upon facing "the vast sea of beauty … love of knowledge becomes the medium in which he gives birth to plenty of beautiful, expansive reasoning and thinking," from which they may catch a glimpse of absolute beauty.[15] The lover will have ascended from the admiration of earthly things to see true beauty in its divinity and constancy, and by contemplating it, can beget a truer, more beautiful goodness.[16] One way that Pender notes that these children give the father greater capacity for immortality is that, in seeing the true nature of things, he understands true virtue. If we then apply the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*, through this understanding he will be able to free his soul and "escape from the realm of becoming to the eternal realm of being."[17] It is through the metaphor of "spiritual pregnancy" that Plato posits his hierarchy and ladder of love, which will be the basis for a comparative interpretation of Dante.

§ 2. Aquinas' Fourth Way and *The Divine Comedy*

In linking Dante with Plato, it is Dante's Thomistic influence that invites comparison with the Platonic model. Though Aquinas himself was an Aristotelian,[18] his Fourth Way for Proving the Existence of God, in the *Summa Theologiae*, is Platonic in nature. This is a key consideration that we will keep in mind in our following reproduction of it. From the "gradation" of things, Aquinas cites that some things are more or less "good, true, noble," and these things are measured in relation to a "maximum." He gives the example of the "hotter" being measured to the thing which is "hottest,"

[9] Plato, *Symposium*, 209 c.
[10] Pender, *Spiritual Pregnancy*, 78.
[11] Plato, *Symposium*, 208 e.
[12] Plato, *Symposium*, 209 c–d.
[13] Plato, *Symposium*, 210 a.
[14] Plato, *Symposium*, 210 b.
[15] Plato, *Symposium*, 210 d.
[16] Plato, *Symposium*, 212 a.
[17] Pender, *Spiritual Pregnancy*, 85.
[18] Robert Pasnau, "Thomas Aquinas," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, May 18, 2023, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aquinas/.

such that there is something "truest" and "noblest." He reasons that the thing which is hottest must be the cause of all other things which are varying degrees of hot, concluding that there must be something which is the cause of all different perfections, which is perfect in infinite degrees, and which he calls God.[19] The influence of this idea on Dante is unmistakably obvious since, in *The Divine Comedy*, we are continually locating ourselves relative to the maximum level of ascension. In Canto XXVIII (Primum Mobile), he sees a singular point of light which is the brightest, and surrounding this point, which is (or is the closest to) God, are nine rings of flame which move more slowly the further away their orbit is from the centre.[20] The ring closest to the point "[possesses] the clearest flame of all / from which the purest spark stood least far off."[21] This circle spins with such rotation, moving "so fast impelled on burning love."[22] Concepts such as purity and velocity approach a perfect level as they are closer to God. Similarly, Beatrice becomes more beautiful and radiant as they approach the Empyrean;[23] her gaze, "that fire from vision,"[24] burns brighter. So too does the light source become more focused and pure, culminating in its all-encompassing essence; not only in the physical, "From that one point / depends both Heaven and all of Nature's world.", but the conceptual too, "For good – the only object of our will – / is gathered up entirely in that one light."[25] In this way, Dante even adopts Aquinas' example of flame and temperature to mark the ascension.

But it is not only this heat imagery that invites comparison; we also find metaphors of mirrors that illustrate this movement of transcendence towards the divine. Colloquially, the mirror is itself often a paraphrase for explaining Aquinas' Fourth Way,[26] and equally throughout the *Summa Theologiae*, there are references to mirrors as the act of perceiving God.[27] As distinct from the purely material objects in the thought of Aristotle, Aquinas is working within the tradition of Plato's theory of Forms in the sense that objects are representations of an unintelligible perfection (indeed, to discuss mirrors and representations brings to mind passages such as Republic 596). Specifically, the Fourth Way consists in seeing the traces of a greater perfection through reflection, but not seeing this greater perfection (God). In the same way, the prisoners in the cave only understand the shadows cast by the fire, but the object itself eludes them.[28] In the *Divine Comedy*, then, Dante's is a quest to ascend closer to God, for he is not content with the shadow cast by fire, nor the

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[19] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, (Benziger Bros., 1947), 16.
[20] Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy: Paradiso*, trans. Robin Kirkpatrick (Penguin, 2007), Canto XXVIII, 13–36.
[21] Alighieri, *Paradiso*, Canto XXVVIII, 37–38.
[22] Alighieri, *Paradiso*, Canto XXVIII, 45.
[23] Borges, *Last Smile*, 23; Alighieri, *Paradiso*, Canto XXI, 7–12.
[24] Alighieri, *Paradiso*, Canto XIV, 41.
[25] Alighieri, *Paradiso*, Canto XXXIII, 103–104.
[26] Michael Egnor, "Aquinas' Fourth Way: Light in a Mirror," *Evolution News*, May 18, 2023.
[27] Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 374–375.
[28] Plato, *Republic*, trans. Robin Waterfield, (Oxford University Press, Oxford Scholarly Editions Online, 2019), doi:10.1093/actrade/9780199535767, 514 a–520 a.

reflection in the mirror; he rather seeks to look on and contemplate the greater perfection that is God.

By tracing Dante's theme of the mirror, as borrowed from Aquinas, we can make sense of the journey to divine contemplation as an ascent akin to Diotima's ladder. For Dante, the mirror is an intermediary; he writes, "Fix your mind firm behind those eyes of yours, / and make them both a mirror for that form / that in *this* mirror will appear to you."[29] Dante has here ascended with Beatrice to the seventh heaven (Saturn), and she instructs him thus whilst configuring herself as the mirror for the form of greater perfection. Later, he again illustrates her reflective power when she leaves him in the Empyrean, and he looks above to find her "mirroring eternal rays."[30] Let us note in passing that Beatrice's is an active stance; she is acting as the mirror – this is a thought which we will return to. Finally, having ascended above Beatrice, he looks at God Himself, appearing "like mirrored brilliancy."[31] It is interesting for poet Dante to describe this appearance as "mirrored brilliancy," as it suggests that Dante has still only managed to access a degree of greater perfection, but not God Himself.

If, as we have established, Beatrice is foremost a mirror to God's perfection for Dante, it follows then that this requires that she must be closer to God's perfection, as is certainly made evident throughout. When she meets him in the *Purgatorio*, she says, "'In your desire for me,' she said, / 'which was then leading you to love the Good beyond which we cannot aspire to reach."[32] Ultimately, then, Dante's is a spiritual attraction to Beatrice because she is so close to God's perfection (in a Thomistic sense), and so he seeks to ascend higher through his admiration of her. As Beatrice is so perfect,[33] she has the purity to see and reflect a closer image of God. I would argue that at the time of *La Vita Nuova* Dante is not aware of Beatrice's spiritual significance, but is rather making attempts to capture her beauty, though he is ultimately at a loss for words: "My use of language at this time would not suffice to deal with the material [Beatrice's death] as it should be dealt with."[34] Similarly, "The image of her when she starts to smile / Dissolves within the mind and melts away, / A miracle too rich and strange to hold."[35] After some time, in the *Divine Comedy*, Dante has indeed managed to comprehend and commit to verse Beatrice's

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[29] Alighieri, *Paradiso*, Canto XXI, 16–18.
[30] Alighieri, *Paradiso*, Canto XXI, 71.
[31] Alighieri, *Paradiso*, Canto XXXIII, 128.
[32] Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy: Purgatorio*, trans. Robin Kirkpatrick (Penguin, 2007) Canto XXXI, 22–24.
[33] In the canzone of chapter XIX "*Ladies, refined and sensitive*" of *La Vita Nuova*, he describes her as "flesh drawn from clay", that "She is the highest nature can achieve / And by her mold all beauty tests itself", and "whoever speaks with her shall speak with Him" (Alighieri, *La Vita Nuova*, Canzone, Chapter XXI).
[34] Dante Alighieri, *La Vita Nuova*, trans. Mark Musa, (Indiana University Press, 1973), 60 (Chapter XXVIII).
[35] Alighieri, *La Vita Nuova*, 38–39 (Chapter XXI).

purity and perfection, and may progress up his ladder, but having climbed higher, in a similar vein, he now fails to comprehend God.

But there is another, albeit interrelated, metaphor for us to contend with, that of the "wings of sight."[36] This metaphor is tied to the metaphor of mirrors since eyes are often described as mirrors also. In Canto XXX, we have an example of this when Beatrice urges Dante to drink from a gem-laden river in the Empyrean. As he does – apparently drinking through his eyelids – he finds that "counterfeited semblance [is] thrown aside", and his view above of heaven is expanded.[37] The most significant use of this metaphor comes at the climax of the *Paradiso*. When Dante sees God in the Empyrean, his only intermediary is the mirror of his eyes.[38] He sees three circling spheres aflame,[39] and "deep in itself, it seemed - as painted now, / in those same hues - to show our human form."[40] We might question how something can become visible when painted in the same hues, as Dante does and strains himself to uncover the mystery of his sight. But alas, he laments that his mortal gaze "were wings that could not rise to that."[41] And like in *La Vita Nuova*, when he asked God to grant him time to capture Beatrice's perfection, he asks now that God sustain him until "[his] soul ascend to behold the glory of its lady."[42] As he writes, he must wait until he can look at the sun without weak eyes.[43] To be close to God must involve tolerating His overwhelming light, and so preparing the gaze and the wings of sight.

But how then is the gaze prepared according to Dante? His personal answer is Beatrice's gaze. At first, in their meeting in the *Purgatorio*, Beatrice reprimands Dante for taking delight merely in "those limbs / in which [she] was enclosed."[44] But she is not only active in her words, indeed even her gaze is rendered a moral crucible, challenging whoever she looks upon, "forcing down his gaze; / He sighs as all his defects flash in mind."[45] This theme of the transformative power of her gaze is continued in the *Paradiso*, as Dante attests, "Held in her look, I, inwardly, was made / what Glaucus, tasting grass, was made to be, / consorting with the other ocean Gods."[46] Her gaze is compared with the mythical power of Glaucus' transformation into a sea God. This is the natural progression of the mirror of one's eyes metaphor, by which I mean to suggest that the gaze of an individual of greater perfection (Beatrice) reflects their greater vision of God onto the person who meets their gaze and is then transformed in this encounter. However, this metaphor of sight and transformation has an even greater potency. I contend that Dante's own gaze is his

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[36] Alighieri, *Paradiso*, Canto XXXI, 97.
[37] Alighieri, *Paradiso*, Canto XXX.
[38] Alighieri, *Paradiso*, Canto XXI, 16–18.
[39] Alighieri, *Paradiso*, Canto XXXIII, 115–120.
[40] Alighieri, *Paradiso*, Canto XXXIII, 130–131.
[41] Alighieri, *Paradiso*, Canto XXXIII, 139.
[42] Alighieri, *La Vita Nuova*, 86 (Chapter XLII).
[43] Alighieri, *La Vita Nuova*, 84 (Chapter XLI).
[44] Alighieri, *Purgatorio*, Canto XXXI, 50-51.
[45] Alighieri, *La Vita Nuova*, 38 (Chapter XXI).
[46] Alighieri, *Paradiso*, Canto I, 67–69.

verse, and just as Dante is held in the gaze of Beatrice, we, the reader, are held in the gaze of his poetry. He has made our moral and spiritual ascension his task.

§ 3. Dante's Ladder of Love

In Dante's writing, we find the construction of a spiritual ladder in which the reader is involved. As we saw, with ascension, one's sight of God becomes less obscured by layers of reflection, and they gain the sight to see God more clearly. In this way, we already understand the telos of the ladder to be coming closest to God. Dante wishes to help us progress as far as is possible for us, and his poetry is his means of doing so. A clear connection can be drawn between Diotima's ladder and *La Vita Nuova*, where Dante thinks of his "song" as his offspring, "Love's true child,"[47] echoing the notion of "spiritual pregnancy." In his poetry, Dante can be said to have "begotten" a semblance of true goodness, but it is goodness that is reflected by the mirror of verse. The mirror of Dante's eyes is his poetry. This extra-textual rung of his ladder finds us removed from God on multiple levels. I will attempt to concretise the ladder in comparison with Diotima's.

As I understand it, Diotima's ladder has four levels:

1. Appreciating the beauty of an individual body.
2. Appreciating the beauty of all bodies.
3. Valuing the beauty of the mind and begetting ideas. (As discussed, Plato's example is that Homer's poetry is his offspring – the irony about the status of poetry is all too apparent.)
4. Love of absolute beauty and knowledge

A representation of Dante's ladder at first glance, and as analogous to Plato, may look like:

1. Contemplation of only the physical beauty of Beatrice in Dante's poetry.
2. Contemplation of God as mediated through Beatrice. Dante comes to see Beatrice as an intermediary for God's perfection, not simply as a beautiful individual.
3. Seeing and contemplating God for oneself.
4. If we take seriously the metaphor of the eyes as mirrors, then this further rung indicates the seeing and contemplating God without the mirror of one's eyes.

Putting the two side by side, we have:

Stage of the Ladder	**Diotima's (Plato's) Ladder of Love**	**Dante's Ladder of Love**
Love of the body	1. Appreciating the	1. Contemplation of only

[47] Alighieri, *La Vita Nuova*, 33 (Chapter XIX).

(concrete/physical)	beauty of an individual body	the physical beauty of Beatrice in Dante's poetry
	2. Appreciating the beauty of all bodies	
Love of ideas/God through an intermediary (approaching the abstract)	3. Valuing the beauty of the mind and begetting ideas. (As discussed, Plato's example is that Homer's poetry is his offspring – the irony about the status of poetry is all too apparent.)	2. Contemplation of God as mediated through Beatrice. Dante comes to see Beatrice as an intermediary for God's perfection, not simply as a beautiful individual.
Love of absolute beauty/God (abstract)	4. Love of absolute beauty and knowledge	3. Seeing and contemplating God
		4. If we take seriously the eyes as mirrors metaphor, then this further rung indicates the seeing and contemplating God without the mirror of one's eyes

Table 1: *A comparative view of the structure of Diotima's and Dante's ladders of love.*

But we must still account for the mirror of Dante's verse, in which case we are one rung even further removed. By way of example, if Dante is on rung two of his ladder when contemplating God through the mirror of Beatrice, we as readers are even further removed because the text is itself a further mirror of God's perfection. Our distance from the *telos* of God would look like:

God → Beatrice → Dante → Dante's verse → us as readers

The lower we are on the ladder, the more layers of mirrors and representations we are engaged with, and therefore the further we are from God, and the more obscured our vision of Him is. We should note in passing, however, that in the construction of Dante's ladder there is a caveat of faith. After all, ascension depends on faith and Virgil, as a pagan, must remain in purgatory.

Importantly, Dante is here interested in our salvation just as Beatrice is interested in his. His writing is firmly on the divine, and it retains some degree of the divine in it which we can access. But what then should we make of Beatrice, and what does the construction of the ladder and discussion with Plato have to bear on contemporary debates about the status of Beatrice?

§ 4. The Question of Beatrice

In the construction of Dante's ladder, Beatrice is herself a mirror towards seeing and knowing God, but is she merely an object of Dante's affection, to be surpassed when Dante can view God without her as a mediator? In Plato, it seems this way, for love is an inherently self-interested pursuit. Indeed, the individual must be rejected in favour of beauty as an abstract and fluid ideal. Beatrice, however, does not exist in this way, for she is herself an abstraction of God's divine beauty, and remains a fluid being as we rise with her into the Primum Mobile. Still, there is a theme amongst those scholars who are critical of Beatrice's portrayal: that in her design, Dante has lost sight of the real Florentine woman, the individual, and projected his own desires onto her figure. This is a position held by Robin Kirkpatrick.[48] Kirkpatrick argues that Beatrice's portrayal is inherently problematic, as the "historical woman becomes a cipher on which the patriarchal will of the writer – be he courtly poet or God – can exert itself."[49] Interestingly, he thinks of Beatrice as a mirror also, but one which Dante uses by projecting his sense of morality and virtue onto, to see reflected back his own flaws and goodness. This reading coheres with Martha Nussbaum's invocation of Gregory Vlastos' criticism of love in the *Symposium*, in which he thinks of the lover's projection as a kind of "spiritual egocentrism" which abstracts versions of people into only their best qualities.[50] But where Vlastos disapproves of Plato, Nussbaum's reading of Dante is more encouraging when we consider the love of Beatrice for Dante.[51]

As God's love sets the universe in motion, so Beatrice's love for Dante is the catalyst for his salvation. As Nussbaum posits, Beatrice's love for Dante shows in her concern for his salvation, and thus she is the one who sends for Virgil to lead him through the *Inferno*, because it is only after the spiritual crucible that is the *Inferno*, that Dante's will is made "healthy, upright, free and whole."[52] We can think of Beatrice as instigating movement based on love, this instigation being predicated upon a higher order of movement that Dante grasps at the end of the *Commedia*, "But now my will and my desire were turned, / as wheels that move in equilibrium, / by love that moves the sun and other stars."[53] Like the arrangement of gears in a watch, divine love sets in progress a trickling of motion which reaches down to Dante through Beatrice. In Kirkpatrick's reading, we understand love only as the indulgent love of Dante for Beatrice, but we do not consider the love of Beatrice for Dante, and more importantly, the divine power that resides in the lover's gaze. The same gaze would force Dante to view his own defects in the *Inferno* and the *Purgatorio*, as previously discussed. If there was a question about how one empowers their wings of sight, the answer must be that it is the gaze of the lover which prepares them for that blinding light and for salvation. In terms of the ladder, Beatrice's is an unselfish

[48] Kirkpatrick, *Politics of Singularity*, 101–119.
[49] Kirkpatrick, *Politics of Singularity*, 101.
[50] Nussbaum, *Loving the Individual*, 166.
[51] Nussbaum, *Loving the Individual*, 168–176.
[52] Alighieri, *Purgatorio*, Canto XXVII, 140; Nussbaum, *Loving the Individual*, 168–169.
[53] Alighieri, *Paradiso*, Canto XXXIII, 143–145.

love for Dante that is not concerned for her own ascension but understands its necessity for his, leveraging her higher position to help him climb. Not only can we consider Beatrice a rung or a mirror to God's greater perfection, but if she is this, then she is also a hand reaching down to help Dante climb. It is fitting then that her love for Dante is routinely described as the love of a mother for her child, and like a mother, her love does not abate when Dante can see with his own wings, so she joins in prayer for him to view God.[54]

§ 5. Conclusion

By way of summary, Dante's own extra-textual "ladder of love" consists in his writing to us and contemplation of increasing gradations of perfection until the ultimate telos of attempting to view God Himself. This analysis relies heavily on Dante's adoption of Aquinas' Fourth Way, which is inherently Platonic in its structure. Importantly, compared with Plato, the ladder I have posited in Dante is an extra-textual one. Dante makes possible our contemplation of God as reflected through his verse. Against the thinking of Diotima, the individual for Dante is not an inactive object who is projected upon, and there is no possibility that we can consider love to be like the self-interested, perhaps even callous, picture that we find in Plato. This is true when one considers Beatrice's love for Dante, which is replicated in Dante's love for us. I have argued further that the import of this discussion has garnered a new perspective of Beatrice, who is not merely a rung on the ladder, but rather an active agent in his salvation. This becomes especially salient through the interconnected metaphors of sight, mirrors, ascension and light.

There is one telling moment in the text that seems to capture perfectly the differences between Diotima's conception of love and Dante's. In his ascension in the *Paradiso*, the sun becomes more brilliant and he recounts, "I set my love so wholly on that Sun / that He, in oblivion, eclipsed even Beatrice. / This did not trouble her. She smiled at it."[55] In Plato, this eclipse of the individual by greater beauty is welcomed. But in Dante, when Beatrice is surpassed in the ascent, she smiles out of her love for him, and Dante, as attested to by any passage of his writing, never does lose sight of her in the blinding light.

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[54] Alighieri, *Paradiso*, Canto XXXIII, 38–39.

[55] Alighieri, *Paradiso*, Canto X, 59–61.

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