

# JOVE'S BODECA

Compendium of  
Philosophical Inquiry

2023



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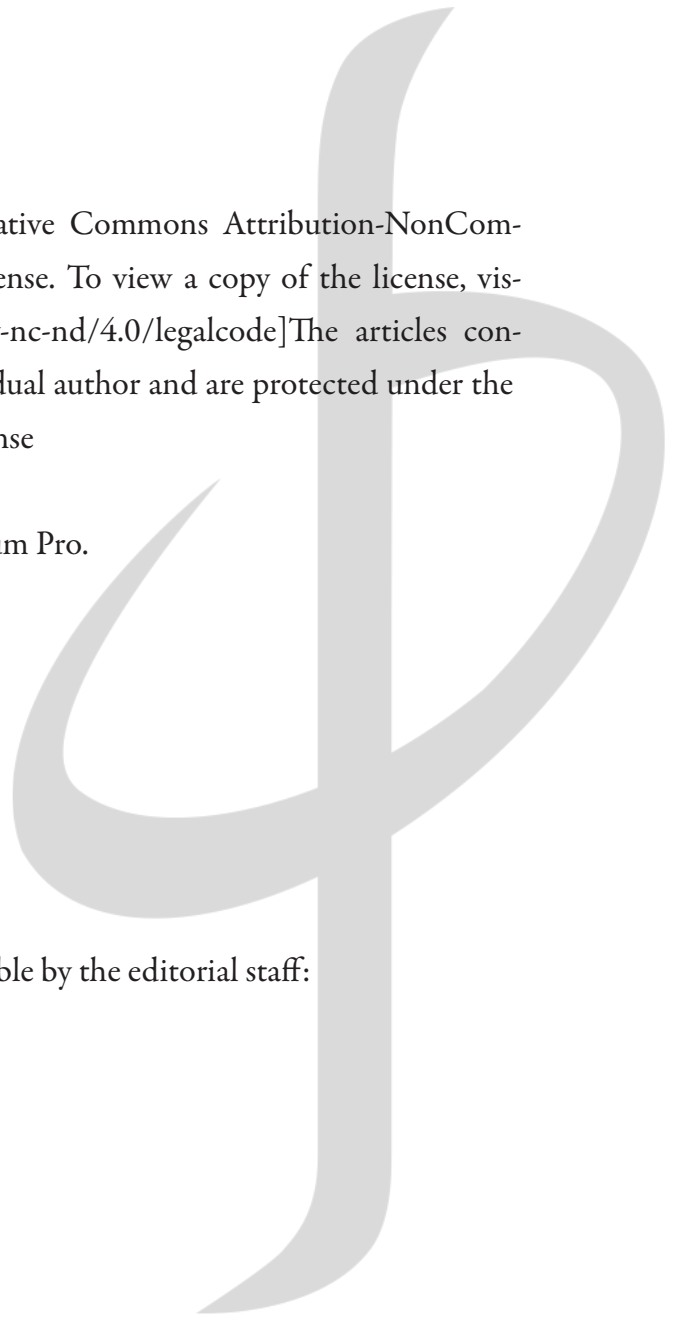
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# Structural Exploitation of Individual Vulnerabilities in the “Post-Truth Era”

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## Abstract

Many attempts have been made to understand the epistemic processes by which an individual is led to believe extreme and often dangerous conspiracy theories. The common view that conspiracy theorists simply lack information is demonstrably false, given the ease of access to information via the internet, so the issue lies in either the individuals themselves or the environment they find themselves in. However, upon reflection, it does not seem accurate to place the blame solely on either of these poles, as the epistemic practices of conspiracy theorists closely reflect those of non-believers, and clearly, not all individuals in a given environment end up with the same beliefs. In this paper, I consider two opposing diagnoses: Quassim Cassam’s argument for faulty individual thinking—namely, epistemic vices—as the root of conspiracy belief and Thi Nguyen’s case for the social-structural perspective—epistemic “luck”—as the catalyst for extreme beliefs. Ultimately, I reject both diagnoses and argue that the particular combination of individual “hero complexes” and for-profit media machines is to blame for the rise of extreme and corrosive conspiracy beliefs.

**Keywords:** Epistemic Bubbles, Echo Chambers, Conspiracy, Social Media



IT IS DIFFICULT TO UNDERSTAND why people believe strange things and even more difficult to understand why they continue to believe strange things despite compelling evidence against them. This seems to be the issue with modern-day conspiracy theorists. From Q-Anon to holocaust denial, the conspiracy theories of today are particularly corrosive to our society, and yet there is no clear solution to the problem of widespread misinformation and conspiracy beliefs. While we may want to initially point out the individual as the flawed epistemic agent, in context of their information environment, their thinking patterns aren't much different from everyone else's. So how do some people fall victim to conspiracies while the rest of us don't? In this paper I argue that the problem lies in the unique combination of vulnerable individuals within an exploitative social structure. To do so, I will first consider Quassim Cassam's argument for why the individual is at fault, contrast this with Thi Nguyen's view that the social structures are to blame, then present my own argument for why individual “hero complexes” and for-profit media machines are at the heart of the issue.

## 1. Who is to blame?

Quassim Cassam suggests proponents of conspiracy theories display certain epistemic vices;<sup>1</sup> character traits which impede their ability to analyze evidence and form conclusions properly. He argues the problem must be addressed at an individual level to “fix” their thinking. Thi Nguyen, on the other hand, believes that distinct social contexts—namely, *echo chambers*—structurally manipulate an individual's ability to process evidence rationally and turn generally good epistemic practices into unreliable ones.<sup>2</sup> Thus, he claims that the real issue is a social-structural one and people who fall victim to these traps are, in a sense, epistemically *unlucky*.

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1 Quassim Cassam, “Bad Thinkers,” *Aeon*, Retrieved March 13, 2023, from <https://www.quassimcassam.com/post/bad-thinkers>. (2015), para 9.

2 Thi Nguyen, “Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles,” *Episteme*, 17, no. 2, (2020), pg 156.

However, if this were true, we would be forced to conclude that people can develop extreme beliefs without taking an epistemic misstep somewhere.

It is clear the reason people believe conspiracy theories isn't due to a lack of access to evidence. Anyone can look up anything online, so the claim that conspiracy theorists are merely misinformed is obviously false. Instead, it must have something to do with how the conspiracy theorist is *interpreting* the evidence. This is something both Cassam and Nyguen agree on but for different reasons.

## 2. The Fault of the Individual

Cassam argues for an individualist perspective, claiming everyone has an “intellectual character” which influences the way they think. Intellectual character traits can either aid one’s ability to process information accurately—referred to as *epistemic virtues*—or they can impede their ability to do so—*epistemic vices*.<sup>3</sup> He suggests that epistemology can provide the norms for correct thinking and inform us what virtues to cultivate. For example, virtues like humility, caution, and impartiality positively impact our ability to interpret information and form beliefs in light of our evidence, while vices such as gullibility and dogmatism lead us away from correct conclusions.

Since access to information is not the issue, a conspiracy theorist—who Cassam names “Oliver”—clearly displays distinct epistemic vices. He is simultaneously extremely gullible and dogmatic,<sup>4</sup> failing to use caution when presented with questionable evidence and lacking impartiality. He trusts “his sources” (Q-Anon, for example) without a second thought while refusing to accept information provided by mainstream media or “the other side.” Thus, the reason Oliver ends up with these extreme beliefs is ultimately due to his flawed intellectual character; in other words, his

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<sup>3</sup> Quassim Cassam, para 9.

<sup>4</sup> Quassim Cassam, para 7.



flawed thinking. Since he is unable to interpret and respond to relevant information correctly, the only way to solve the problem is to help him cultivate epistemic virtues and “fix” his thinking.

Yet, it doesn’t seem obviously true that Oliver’s thinking is flawed when considered in context. He *believes* his evidence is good and his sources are trustworthy. While we can accuse him of being extremely gullible towards Q-Anon and extremely dogmatic towards traditional media, he could just as easily accuse us of being extremely gullible towards the government and dogmatic towards “independent, free-thinking” media outlets. We also can’t categorize all conspiracy theories as false beliefs since some turn out to be true, like in the case of Watergate or the American syphilis experiments. Therefore, if a hallmark of being a good epistemic agent is using caution and forming your beliefs in light of your evidence, Oliver doesn’t seem to be doing anything vastly different than the rest of us. Especially considering how infrequently most individuals—conspiracy theorists or not—double-check the information provided by their trusted sources. Cassam argues that despite the parallels, what Oliver is doing is still worse than what the general population is doing; his beliefs are not just “merely false, but perversely false.”<sup>5</sup> While the rest of us put our faith in the “true” authorities and, therefore, end up with true and justified beliefs—Oliver does not.

Even so, if it *is* true that the only difference (epistemically speaking) between Oliver and us is that he puts his faith in “false” authorities, it seems—according to Thi Nguyen—that the issue is less a matter of intellectual character and more a matter of epistemic *luck*. Hence, it follows that the problem cannot be solved by fixing the individual and is more likely a product of the information environment and social structures the individual finds themselves in.

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5 Andre Begby, Lecture 9: Cassam, 2023

### 3. The Fault of the Social Structure

Nyguen argues for the social-structural perspective, claiming our environments inevitably lead us to form some false beliefs through no fault of our own. He identifies two distinct problematic social structures that reinforce ideological separation and lead their members astray;<sup>6</sup> *epistemic bubbles* and *echo chambers*. Epistemic bubbles naturally form as we create social networks based on common interests and beliefs. Due to the similarity of members in an epistemic bubble, the group will have significant gaps in differing perspectives without realizing it, limiting their access to relevant evidence or an objective set of arguments. This is not done consciously since members of epistemic bubbles are usually different *enough* from each other to convince themselves of their diversity. Nonetheless, the structure is problematic especially when reflected in social media algorithms. If we are only shown things online that we tend to already agree with or “like,” we are led to *bootstrapped corroboration*:<sup>7</sup> the disproportionate confidence in our own beliefs caused by frequently encountering agreement. Fortunately, these bubbles are easily popped when relevant outsider information is made available, assuming that the members are well-meaning epistemic agents. This is what sets them apart from echo chambers.

While epistemic bubbles exclude certain perspectives by accident, echo chambers are designed to intentionally discredit outsider perspectives because they're outsiders. The key difference is in the treatment of new or contradicting evidence: Well-meaning epistemic bubbles update their beliefs when presented with new credible evidence they didn't have before. Echo chambers, on the other hand, are aware of the opposing evidence and respond by structurally discrediting non-members while artificially increasing their own credibility.

This is a process known as *evidential pre-emption*,<sup>8</sup> the manipulation of

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<sup>6</sup> Nguyen, *Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles*, p 141.

<sup>7</sup> Nguyen, p 144.

<sup>8</sup> Endre Begby, Lecture 10: Nguyen, 2023. (Nguyen, *Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles*, p 147).



how someone can rationally respond to new evidence by pre-emptively discrediting contradictory evidence and inspiring doubt in opposing sources of information. This is what's at play in the phrase, “the mainstream media will tell you x!” An echo chamber member—let's continue to call him Oliver—now has the opposite reaction to evidence that should otherwise reduce his credence in his original extreme belief. This is because the echo chamber is right; the mainstream media *did* tell Oliver x, and now he is predisposed to see this outsider evidence as untrustworthy. He will also increase his credence in the testimony of other echo chamber members, creating a further division of trust between him and people who aren't part of this social structure. This is why Nyguen agrees that conspiracy thinking can't be due to a lack of evidence since echo chambers actively seek out outsider evidence in order to pre-emptively discredit it. The existence of contradicting evidence actually fuels extreme beliefs because of the way the social structure is designed. That being said, can't we still place blame on Oliver for ending up in this kind of social structure to begin with? Nyguen says no and highlights once again that even within the echo chamber, Oliver's thinking is not much different from everyone else's.

In the “post-truth era”<sup>9</sup> we currently find ourselves, it is important to identify who is trying to mislead us and refuse their evidence, even when it seems compelling. This is referred to as an *antagonistic information environment*<sup>10</sup> and influences how everyone interacts with outside information. If we aren't skeptical of certain arguments and evidence, we will end up with significantly worse epistemic agents overall. Thus, by refusing the testimony of someone like Alex Jones for the sake of being Alex Jones, we display our own echo chamber allegiance. Our evidential pre-emption tells us that someone like Alex Jones is untrustworthy, so we disregard the evidence he presents instead of giving his perspective equal weight to our own (characteristic of an epistemic bubble). Importantly, Nyguen is not saying that it is wrong to do this, considering our environment. He is,

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9 Nguyen, *Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles*, p 150.

10 Begby, Lecture 10: Nguyen, 2023.

however, highlighting that non-believers are essentially doing exactly what Oliver is doing while believing that they are justified, and he is not.

#### 4. The Fault of the “Hero”

While I agree with Nguyen that echo chambers manipulate our ability to process evidence rationally, I am not convinced that someone can develop the type of extreme conspiracy thinking displayed by Q-Anon followers without taking an epistemic misstep somewhere. It appears that people tend to be indoctrinated into echo chambers slowly over time (assuming they aren't born into them). While they may initially seem like any other epistemic bubble of like-minded individuals, the new members are enticed with minor controversial “gate-way beliefs”<sup>11</sup> or uncomfortable “truths” referred to as *red pills* that, through bootstrapped corroboration, become acceptable within the group.

The leaders systematically exploit the trust and curiosity of the new members and lead them down a path of increasingly extreme and controversial beliefs under the guise of heroism. Instead of shying away from evidence or making their members passive, they make them pathologically *obsessed* with finding some nefarious “truth.” But blatantly irrational echo chambers don't form in a vacuum—it seems to me that they are a dangerous combination of power-hungry people exploiting our natural social structures (enabled by social media platforms), and vulnerable people falling for it. While someone's vulnerabilities might be used to excuse their behaviour and put the blame on the exploiters, I don't believe vulnerability is an epistemically innocent position.

Without careful self-reflection, individual vulnerabilities influence our ability to come to objective conclusions by making us more likely to take leaps of faith or lower our threshold for evidence when we *want* to believe something. The Q-Anon followers, for example, are convinced they

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<sup>11</sup> Begby, Lecture 10: Nguyen, 2023.



are participating in some sort of “revolution” that outsiders “aren’t brave enough to accept,” because they *want* to be part of something like that. This type of “main character syndrome” or “hero complex” seems to be consistent in these communities; the leaders justify their actions either through some narcissistic entitlement to money or fame (especially in cases where they don’t even believe the theories they advocate for) or because they believe themselves to be a “martyr of truth.” The followers justify their actions because they are convinced they’ve cracked the code, broken out of the matrix, and are special enough to have “figured it out.” It is this unique mindset that I believe reveals an important difference between the relatively normal, benign echo chambers that most people find themselves in and particularly corrosive ones like Q-Anon. While Oliver may accuse me of being equally gullible and dogmatic, he can’t accuse me of believing I am part of a “revolution.”

## **5. The Fault of the Machine**

All that being said, I am also unsatisfied with Cassam’s diagnosis of the problem. It clearly can’t just be an issue with the intellectual character of believers, since we know that social media platforms add fuel to the fire and allow echo chamber leaders to radicalize more people than otherwise possible. What’s worse, even mainstream news outlets are caught manipulating titles for attention as they compete with each other for viewership. We regularly see how news organizations from both sides of the political spectrum fixate on certain kinds of issues to the near or complete exclusion of others. Unsurprisingly, many news outlets—who often claim impartiality despite clear biases towards certain political views—publish a disproportionate number of articles on topics which directly relate to one party’s political success and the failures of their political opponents.

Even the choice to deliberately ostracize a group of people ends up working in their favour, as the marginalized groups tend to associate the polarizing media outlet with their political opponents. By extension, they

turn to that source to gain information on what the “other side” is thinking. By taking a side, the outlets not only gain the interest, clicks, and revenue of those who share the same political beliefs, but also the ones who are adamantly opposed.

This is no accident: more clicks equates to more revenue for these websites, and people interact with things that excite them—either out of curiosity or out of anger. For news outlets and social media companies, the quality of their publications often seems to come second to their clickability. Similarly, the race to “break a story” encourages shady research practices and rushed jobs, further contributing to the misinformation issue affecting all media outlets today. I doubt it would be difficult for anyone to recall a news story in recent years that had to be retracted due to the spread of misinformation.

If we want to be generous, we could argue that the media outlets are just doing what they must to survive in the competitive information environment. All businesses need money, and if a sensationalized title is what it takes to get the information to the public, then so be it; it's the public's fault for not wanting to read boring stories! While this olive branch might work when discussing individual journalists (although I'm sceptical I'd find it convincing in that scenario as well), it doesn't hold water when it comes to large corporations. News outlets like FOX, CNN, and CTV are private companies who have no inherent “right” to financial success. To take it to the extreme, we wouldn't give drug dealers a pass for selling harmful substances just because they need to “keep up with the competition.”

Similarly, a more generous person may excuse social media sites for their contribution to the antagonistic information environment on the basis that there are just too many people to regulate all the misinformation being posted daily. I find this incredibly unconvincing given the deliberate effort on the part of social media companies to show us content which prompts engagement—positive or negative. Am I supposed to believe that it would be too difficult to implement an algorithm to mediate the level

of misinformation being posted, when we all know that algorithms are capable of much more complicated tasks; uncannily relevant targeted advertisement, for example.

The steady erosion of trust in traditional news outlets has a significant impact on the ability for echo chambers to manipulate new members who feel confused, frustrated, or hopeless. The “hero” complex that broadly characterizes someone like Oliver is not a purely irrational response if someone genuinely believes the world is lying to them and everyone they love. That being said, not all people who interact with biased news outlets and corrupt social media platforms end up Holocaust deniers. Again, the issue cannot be purely structural or individual. The for-profit media machine which runs off of engagement and clicks demonstrates a structural exploitation of individual vulnerabilities, only possible within the “post-truth” era.

It appears that without addressing the antagonist information environment we find ourselves in, no amount of individual correction will actually have a lasting impact. Corporations will always find new ways of increasing division for their own financial benefit, and vulnerable people will become more radicalized as their trust in “reputable” media continues to wane and the confidence in their own martyrship grows.

In closing, it doesn’t seem correct to boil down the conspiracy theorist issue to just individual faulty thinking or unlucky placements in social structures. People who end up in these echo chambers share some blame, but it is crucial to acknowledge that social media networks and news outlets have something to gain from our division and radicalization. I suggest that the solution lies somewhere in addressing what makes individuals so vulnerable to these “main character” fantasies and removing the tools used by echo chamber leaders and corporations to exploit and profit off of these vulnerabilities.



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# A Problem of Perception: Direct Realism & Representationalism

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## Abstract

Despite its conceptual palpability, intuitiveness, and common presumption, the Direct Realist theory of perception is not fully consistent with the scientific literature. If external stimuli are sufficient to produce percepts, but unnecessary for their generation (as with dreams), then the veridicality of perception ought to be scrutinized as a valid scientific postulate. In this paper I shall defend a Representationalist account of perception consistent with scientific literature, highlighting its empirical basis and its philosophical feasibility.

**Keywords:** Perception, Representationalism, Direct Realism

PHILOSOPHERS AND THEIR problems seldom concern scientists, and the problems of perception are no exception. These problems are dismissed as armchair and non-scientific; nonetheless, it remains unclear whether we are entitled to claim the content of our perception has objective validity (i.e., perception is veridical). For instance, our prior knowledge and the context wherein an object of sense is provided both impact what we end up perceiving, as evident in optical illusions like Joseph's Hat, the rabbit–duck illusion, the checker shadow illusion, and the McGurk Effect. These instances exemplify a theory of mind called 'top-down processing,' in which "perception is guided by expectations based on previous experiences."<sup>1</sup> If it is true that we perceive things in conformity with our mental schema, i.e. 'seeing as' rather than 'seeing that,' then what justification do we have in assuming that our perceptions have objective import? Moreover, if we are capable of adequately perceiving objects without their external presence as though they were 'really' there, as is the case in dream states, how could we possibly avoid skepticism?

In this paper, I shall first examine the empirical evidence concerning the mediated nature of perception, concluding the Direct Realist account is less consistent with modern scientific literature than a Representationalist alternative. Then, I shall introduce the Fitness Beats Truth Theorem and the Interface Theory of Perception, to The Problem with Punishment satisfy the need for a compelling and empirically consistent account of perception within the Representationalist context. Finally, I will explore the philosophical implications of such an account of perception, arguing that despite the drawbacks of the two interpretations of Representationalism to be discussed, a pragmatic route remains available which fairs better to empirical scrutiny than its Realist counterparts.

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1 J.N. De Boer, et al. "Auditory hallucinations, top-down processing and language perception: a general population study." *Psychological Medicine*, 49(16), (January 2019): 2772–2780.



## Perception is Mediated

The predominant theories of perception in the past assumed that the brain works as a stimulus-capturing device. It receives sensory input from the external world, processes it, and outputs a percept veridical with its external source. This framework for understanding perception essentially assumes the visual-auditory modules of the brain function like a camera and audio recorder, undermining the extent external stimuli undergo processing. For instance, in cases where the blind undergo a sight-restoration procedure, they consistently fail to match what they see with what they feel.<sup>2</sup> Although they have been equipped with sight, they cannot understand what they see, and in other cases, cannot discriminate between individual visual percepts.<sup>3</sup> In Alva Noë's seminal text "Action in Perception,"<sup>4</sup> the author uses the following example from Gregory and Wallace (1963: 366):

"S.B.'s first visual experience, when the bandages were removed, was of the surgeon's face. He described the experience as follows: He heard a voice coming from in front of him and to one side: he turned to the source of the sound and saw a "blur." He realized that this must be a face. Upon careful questioning, he seemed to think that he would not have known that this was a face if he had not previously heard the voice and known that voices came from faces" (Noë, 2006, p.5).

A further oddity for believers in a 'snapshot' view of perception involves people who are not blind despite lacking the ability to see. In Christof

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2 Richard Held, et al, "The Newly Sighted Fail to Match Seen with Felt," *Nature Neuroscience*, 14(5), (2011): 551–553.

3 Rhitu Chatterjee, "Giving Blind People Sight Illuminates the Brain's Secrets," *Science.org*, <https://www.science.org/content/article/feature-giving-blind-people-sight-illuminates-brain-s-secrets>. (Accessed 2023).

4 Alva Noë, *Action in Perception*, 1st ed, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006).

Koch's "The Quest for Consciousness,"<sup>5</sup> he describes the phenomenon of "spatial hemi-neglect." Those afflicted with this condition are unable to notice objects to their left, nor can they "explore the left side of space" (Koch, 2004, p.181). They are unable to see despite lacking any deficit in their primary visual cortex or motor system. In one case, a "68-year-old man with right inferior parietal damage and profound left-side extinction," was shown, " pictures of faces and houses while lying in a magnetic scanner." Although the man exhibited visual recognition when the images were presented individually, he was unable to see the left image when the two pictures were presented simultaneously despite the fMRI detecting visual activity in the primary visual cortex (Koch, 2004, p.183). I shall next refer to auditory and visual illusions as evidence in favour of the mediated nature of perception.

Returning to Alva Noë's text, the author provides an example similar to an optical illusion. The perception of a given stimulus depends upon the context of the perceiver. For instance, were you to hear the word "Nein", your understanding of its meaning depends (if the context is right) on whether you are a German speaker or an English speaker without any background knowledge of German (Noë, 2006, p.32). An even better example, one that specifically demonstrates the McGurk Effect,<sup>6</sup> involves a video of a two second looping audio clip alongside nine different sentences shown on the screen to the viewer. Depending on which specific sentence you attend to, the audio will appear to change and conform to it since each sentence equally corresponds to the audio.<sup>7</sup> Although there may exist some explanatory framework that could make sense of this while being consistent with some form of unmediated perception, such a route is less parsimonious.

Visual illusions only further exacerbate the difficulties of a Direct Realist

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5 Christof Koch, *The Quest for Consciousness: A Neurobiological Approach*, (USA: Roberts and Company, 2004).

6 Kaisa Tiippana, "What Is the McGurk Effect?," *Frontiers in Psychology* 5 (July 10, 2014).

7 Viral TikTok, "Audio Illusion Leaves People Split Over What Crowd Are Actually Saying," *YouTube*, June 9, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8FXQ38-ZQK0>. (Accessed 2023).

account of perception. Consider Joseph's Hat illusion, an example used by Donald Hoffman in "The Case Against Reality",<sup>8</sup> the very famous rabbit–duck illusion,<sup>9</sup> and the checker shadow illusion.<sup>10</sup> If colour and object recognition do not suffice to strengthen the mediated account of perception, one should also consider the fact that visual illusions can cause us to inaccurately perceive an object's size, shape, and depth, as apparent in The Ponzo illusion,<sup>11</sup> The Müller-Lyer illusion,<sup>12</sup> and The Ames room illusion.<sup>13</sup> The existence of illusions is difficult to reconcile with theories that affirm a minimal role in the brain's processing of sense data because the generated percepts are not derived from the original object of sense. Since priming has such a substantial role in the perceptual process and given the power of expectation in the production of percepts,<sup>14</sup> it is undoubtedly trivial to deny that perception is mediated. Additionally, the proponent of Direct Realism must reconcile with our innate ability to produce perceptions of things in the absence of external stimuli. As Christof Koch put it:

“You, too, hallucinate every night in the privacy of your head. During sleep, you have vivid, sometimes emotionally wrenching, phenomenal experiences, even if you don't recall most of them. Your eyes are closed, yet the dreaming brain constructs its own reality. Except

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8 Donald Hoffman, *The Case Against Reality: Why Evolution Hid the Truth from Our Eyes*, (W. W. Norton & Company, 2019), 130.

9 Wikipedia contributors, "Rabbit–Duck Illusion," *Wikipedia*, November 16, 2022, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rabbit%E2%80%93duck\\_illusion](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rabbit%E2%80%93duck_illusion). (Accessed 2023).

10 Wikipedia contributors, "Checker Shadow Illusion," *Wikipedia*, June 14, 2022, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Checker\\_shadow\\_illusion](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Checker_shadow_illusion). (Accessed 2023).

11 Wikipedia contributors, "Ponzo Illusion," *Wikipedia*, May 25, 2022, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ponzo\\_illusion](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ponzo_illusion). (Accessed 2023).

12 Wikipedia contributors, "Müller-Lyer Illusion," *Wikipedia*, February 28, 2023, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/M%C3%BCller-Lyer\\_illusion](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/M%C3%BCller-Lyer_illusion). (Accessed 2023).

13 Wikipedia contributors, "Ames Room," *Wikipedia*, June 14, 2022, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ames\\_room](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ames_room). (Accessed 2023).

14 Ya'ir Pinto, et al., "Expectations Accelerate Entry of Visual Stimuli into Awareness," *Journal of Vision* 15, no. 8 (June 26, 2015): 13.

for rare “lucid” dreams, you can’t tell the difference between dreaming and waking consciousness. Dreams are real while they last. Can you say more of life?” (Koch, 2012, p.44).<sup>15</sup>

This is problematic for the following reason: external stimuli are sufficient to produce perceptions of things, but unnecessary. Although it could be argued in the case of dreams, visual hallucinations are possible only under the condition of prior visual experience, thereby making external stimuli necessary, the flaw in such reasoning is the temporal disjunct and qualitative difference between the two; if I can close my eyes and behold a sight seen long ago without the external presence of the original percept, then this disjunct must be explicable. Regardless of which account we choose, it must align with the consensus of contemporary research over memory recall, as the above experience is a subjective reconstruction of a past event, being no mere copy of the experience to which it refers. In fact, there is reason to believe that in every instance of recollection there is a significant deviation from the original experience.<sup>16,17</sup> Thus, under the Direct Realist account, in which perception is direct and objective, sober subjective representation must nonetheless be possible.

The Representationalist account best coheres with our modern understanding of memory, for regular perception and recollection need not differ. If every act of recollection is interpretative (being inherently reconstructive instead of passive), then recollection as an active process is representational. Additionally, if regular perception is understood similarly for all the reasons given throughout this section, then no explanatory

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15 Christof Koch, *Consciousness: Confessions of a Romantic Reductionist*. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2012), 44.

16 Peggy L. St Jacques and Daniel L. Schacter, “Modifying Memory,” *Psychological Science* 24, no. 4 (February 13, 2013): 537–43.

17 Lawrence Patihis et al., “False Memories in Highly Superior Autobiographical Memory Individuals,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 110, no. 52 (November 18, 2013): 20947–52.



gap between the two modes of perception remains. Having clarified this objection, it is demonstrably clear that external stimuli are unnecessary to produce percepts, thereby calling Direct Realism into question, as it contradicts the empirical research in its claim that perception is passive.

If Direct Realism is empirically unsubstantiated, then the Realist belief in the objectivity of reality based on perceptions being seemingly externally produced would be utterly groundless. As it stands, Direct Realists are begging the question in their assumption of the existence of such an objective reality that is passively received through the sensory faculties. If the proposition “No seeing without seeing as” holds true (Block, 2014, p.562),<sup>18</sup> given the previous points regarding perceptual illusions, dreams, and memory, then what entitles us to suppose that perception is objective? This is a legitimate problem within the philosophy of science if the nature of our perception is emphasized. In light of the inconsistencies of the Direct Realist account of perception, what other theories are available to us?

## **Fitness Beats Truth**

Having shown the inconsistency of realist views, given the mediated nature of perception, an alternative account is required. One such account popularized by Bernardo Kastrup and Donald Hoffman, posits that perception is representational, being fitness-based rather than truth-based. The theory is “that evolution emphasizes perceptual qualities conducive to fitness, not to truth” (Kastrup, 2019, p.59).<sup>19</sup> Published in the paper “Fitness Beats Truth in the Evolution of Perception,”<sup>20</sup> the FBT theorem

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18 Ned Block, “Seeing-As in the Light of Vision Science,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 89, no. 3 (August 25, 2014): 560–72.

19 Bernardo Kastrup, *The Idea of the World: A Multi-Disciplinary Argument for the Mental Nature of Reality*. (John Hunt Publishing, 2019a), 59.

20 Chetan Prakash et al., “Fitness Beats Truth in the Evolution of Perception,” *Acta Biotheoretica* 69, no. 3 (November 24, 2020): 319–41.

was subsequently confirmed by various simulations,<sup>21</sup> concluding that:

“...attempting to estimate the “true” state of the objective world corresponding to a given sensory input confers no evolutionary benefit whatsoever. Specifically: If one assumes that perception involves inference to states of the objective world, then the FBT Theorem shows that a strategy that simply seeks to maximize expected-fitness payoff, with no attempt to estimate the “true” world state, does consistently better” (Prakash et al., 2020c, p.337).

In his discussion of the FBT Theorem, Hoffman provides an incredibly clear example to demonstrate the quantitative relevance of the FBT Theorem:

“Consider an eye with ten photoreceptors, each having two states. The FBT Theorem says the chance that this eye sees reality is at most two in a thousand. For twenty photoreceptors, the chance is two in a million; for forty photoreceptors, one in ten billion; for eighty, one in a hundred sextillion. The human eye has one hundred and thirty million photoreceptors. The chance is effectively zero” (Hoffman, 2019, p.54).

Although it is possible that objective or veridical perception takes place, the likelihood is low enough to warrant dismissal on an empirical basis. Despite the significant pushback one might have towards this conclusion on the grounds of its un-intuitiveness, Bernardo Kastrup's “The Idea of

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21 The references supporting this assertion can be found in the 19th footnote of Chapter 4 in “The Case Against Reality” by Donald Hoffman (Hoffman 2019, 54).

the World,” adds further quantitative evidence by referring to the work of Friston, Sengupta, and Auletta (2014).<sup>22,23</sup> The takeaway from the work cited by Kastrup is that “a hypothetical organism with perfect perception... would not have an upper bound on its own internal entropy, which would then increase indefinitely,” and consequently, “such an organism would dissolve into an entropic soup.” (Kastrup, 2019, p.60) Such consequences lead Kastrup and Hoffman to endorse an ‘Interface Theory of Perception’ (ITP), in which:

“organisms...use their internal states to actively represent relevant states of the outside world in a compressed, coded form, so to know as much as possible about their environment while remaining within entropic constraints compatible with maintaining their structural and dynamical integrity” (Kastrup, 2019, p.60).

Hoffman uses the analogy of the graphical interface on a desktop computer to illustrate his point. When one interacts with an icon, like Microsoft Edge, and drags it into the icon that represents the Recycle Bin, the user input is a simplification of the process of file deletion. The code that achieves this task is only indirectly accessed by the user by means of the user interface. Put differently, the interface is an optimized simplification of complex computation, consisting only of what is necessary to accomplish user tasks as smoothly as possible. In like manner, the “screen of perception is much more akin to a dashboard than a window into the environment. It conveys relevant information about the environment in an

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22 B. Kastrup, *The Idea of the World: A Multi-Disciplinary Argument for the Mental Nature of Reality*, 59.

23 Karl J. Friston, Biswa Sengupta, and Gennaro Auletta, “Cognitive Dynamics: From Attractors to Active Inference,” *Proceedings of the IEEE* 102, no. 4 (April 1, 2014): 427–45.

indirect, encoded manner that helps us survive” (Kastrup, 2019b).<sup>24</sup> For Kastrup and Hoffman, we ought not to mistake the “dashboard of dials” for the objective reality outside of us. In the same manner one ought not to mistake the actions performed on a graphical interface for the actual underlying processes that make such actions possible. But exactly what kind of metaphysical scheme follows from this?

## **Philosophical Consequences of Representationalism**

The Interface Theory of Perception is a Representationalist theory since it distinguishes between things as they are independent of mind and things as they are perceived. In its basic formulation, the theory can be interpreted in one of two ways. The first falls under Indirect Realism, where the percept is a partial representation of the perceived object. The Indirect Realist interpretation can be further interpreted through Phenomenalism, in which the existence of the world is dependent upon its perception (for otherwise it could not be given to us); as well as Bundle Theory, in which objects are nothing but bundles of sensory qualities and attributes. The second interpretation is classified under the metaphysical theory of Objective Idealism, albeit a Representationalist variety wherein everything is the experience of a single dissociated mind. Under this view, the icons of our perception are representations of the contents of Cosmic Consciousness.

The former philosophical interpretation can preserve Physicalist intuitions, meaning no radical revision of the mainstream scientific ontology is required. However, the drawback is skepticism concerning the objectivity of the ‘external world,’ which would be nothing but bundles of sensations, or permanent possibilities of experience, whose objective reality could never be known to us. Beyond the collection of sensible properties

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<sup>24</sup> Bernardo Kastrup, "The Universe as Cosmic Dashboard.," Scientific American Blog Network, May 24, 2019b, <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/observations/the-universe-as-cosmic-dashboard/>. (Accessed 2023).



and ideas, nothing further can be known about an object, especially since perception consists of fitness-based representations. Thus, the existence of an object is contingent upon its perception, or as George Berkeley put it, “to be is to be perceived.” Apart from the problem of external world skepticism, the parsimony of Indirect Realism is threatened by the resultant mereology: if percepts are inferential, Mereological Realism concerning objects is untenable. The Anti-Realist or Mereological Nihilist view follows from the rejection of Natural Kinds, being mind-independent categorical distinctions wherein conceptual identities are understood to be immutable and impermeable. On the surface, this seems consistent with Indirect Realism given the unattainability of mind-independent knowledge. No categorical distinctions besides that between the subject and object are immediately known through and derived from experience, thereby leading to the denial of all other categorical distinctions besides the substance within which all apparent distinctions must be contained. However, one could appeal to the distinction between primary and secondary qualities to evade falling into this view. Although it is impossible to discern whether my experience of secondary qualities, like colour, can truly mirror that of another person, appealing to primary qualities may suffice to preserve objectivity (relative to other perceivers). Beyond my immediate experience of an external object, the thing to which the percept corresponds appears to maintain its existence and extensional properties. But since both primary and secondary qualities are grounded in sense experience, the distinction collapses and Berkeleyan Idealism becomes inescapable within the framework of Indirect Realism. Thus, the problem of external world skepticism remains given the inability of subjectively derived percepts to be objective (or isomorphic with the external objects our percepts are hypothetically derived). If true to the consequences following from the Indirect Realist interpretation of Hoffman’s theory, then given the impossibility of obtaining knowledge over things as they are in themselves or how something exists unperceived, the things that our percepts correspond to would forever elude us, entailing an impenetrable epistemic

boundary. After all, one cannot perceive an unperceived object in the same way one cannot know something unknown, per Church and Fitch's paradox of knowability; if an unknown cannot be known, for it would no longer be unknown, then an unperceived object cannot be perceived, for it would no longer be unperceived.<sup>25</sup>

The alternative Idealistic view by Kastrup, a defender of Objective Idealism, is the metaphysical view where no mind-independent or extra-mental reality is postulated.<sup>26</sup> Since the task of proving the existence of a mind-independent world is impossible, being the concept of something outside the bounds of possible experience whose basis is an inductive inference made within the perceived world, Idealists like Kastrup bite the bullet and equate our perceived reality with 'reality as it is in itself.' Put simply, for the Idealist there is nothing beyond mental experience, meaning perceptions cannot be unreal in the Indirect Realist sense. Although objectivity is preserved within this framework, it comes at the expense of common philosophical intuitions, namely Physicalist ontology. Despite the seeming implausibility of Idealism, it is more parsimonious than the Indirect Realist view because it does not posit an inherently unverifiable mind-independent world; what exists is the perceptual world and nothing beyond that. Moreover, the Idealist worldview does not come into conflict with scientific progress. The subatomic features of our reality are 'pixels' in the interface of perception, analogous to how a person in a video call is not a mere set of pixels, for that is just the way they are represented to us. Likewise, when watching a TV show, we know not to mistake the characters depicted within the screen for properties of the screen itself, being the means by which the characters are given to us (and whose representation

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25 Stephen Kearns, "The Bishop's Church: Berkeley's Master Argument and the Paradox of Knowability," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 51, no. 3 (April 1, 2021): 175–90.

26 Kastrup's specific Ontology is that there exists a universal subject, lacking self-awareness, with Dissociative Identity Disorder (of which we are its alters). Each alter's percepts are icons of the mental contents of this subject, thereby making the theory a Representationalist form of Idealism.

far exceeds dynamic pixelated colour arrays).<sup>27</sup> Though this view appears plausible due to its explanatory power, it is empirically unfalsifiable. If novel predictions cannot be generated by this theoretical framework, or if its predictions are no different than those of its counterparts, then there is no true advantage in holding to this interpretation of Hoffman's ITP besides internal consistency. However, there is nothing internally inconsistent about Physicalism, as its Reductionist defenders within academia deny the hard-problem of consciousness, effectively guaranteeing coherence. Moreover, Idealism only conflicts with Physicalism insofar as it re-contextualizes scientific discoveries into its own language without significant divergence. Since Representationalism is the theoretical virtue of Idealism, and its theoretical vice lies in its unverifiable speculation, perhaps a different route ought to be taken.

## Representationalism Without Speculation

Having explored the strengths and weaknesses of Indirect Realist and Idealist interpretations of the consequences of Hoffman's Representationalism, it seems that the best route is to accept the merits of Representationalism over Realism without further theorizing into the nature of reality. Although the philosophical consequences of Representationalism are not exhaustive, those outlined here capture the spirit of intellectual thought on the topic. Since neither Idealism nor Indirect Realism are fully satisfactory, this makes alternatives to Representationalism more compelling. For this reason, I shall argue in favour of a more pragmatic route, such that the merits of Representationalism over Realism can be accepted without philosophical complication.

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<sup>27</sup> Should this analogy provoke confusion as to how Idealism differs from Indirect Realism, Kastrup's Idealism conceives all external objects as being the extrinsic appearance of the mental or the workings of the mind of cosmic consciousness as seen from a third-person perspective (though this third-person perspective exists as the dissociative alter of the same cosmic consciousness, existing within it).

The Representationalist model of reality is more consistent than its Realist counterpart due to its seamless integration of the empirical evidence over the literature of perception. For instance, in the checker shadow illusion, a colour percept is generated that does not correspond to the actual colour of the image and the conscious recognition of the illusion does not cease its occurrence. For the Representationalist, the resulting percept need not reflect the state of external objects. Thus, the occurrence of a perceptual illusion is wholly unproblematic and even expected. Furthermore, in dreams, the Representationalist has no need to explain away multimodal sensory experience in the absence of external stimuli, something that also takes place in hallucinations (like those resulting from decreased brain activity, leading to enhanced perception whose percepts without reference to an external stimulus).<sup>28</sup> However, these observations are problematic for the Realist, for whom perception is veridical. For this reason, the Representationalist model of perception is far more parsimonious than the two Realist theories discussed here. As stated earlier, the supposition that the perceptual process is veridical stems from an inductive inference regarding the correlation between percepts and their corresponding external source. However, percepts are not necessarily reflective of their source of origin, nor do they necessarily derive from some external stimulus. The pragmatic variety of Representationalism operates under fewer non-empirical assumptions, compared to Idealism and Indirect Realism, while also allowing for a higher degree of open-mindedness among its adherents, a virtue of great importance within the scientific context.

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28 Specific examples used by Bernardo Kastrup in “Why Materialism Is Baloney” include the NDE-like experience that occurs to pilots undergoing “G-force induced Loss Of Consciousness,” Psychedelics and their role in the production of enhanced/transpersonal states of consciousness resulting from a decrease in brain activity and cerebral blood-flow, noting an inverse relationship between the latter two and the intensity of the psychedelic experience, and finally the fact that “Transcranial Magnetic Stimulation,” which can inhibit “areas of the brain” from functioning, can induce “Out of Body Experiences” (Kastrup 2014, 47-48).<sup>26</sup>



## Conclusion

Empirical research strongly supports the mediated account of perception, and this conflicts with Direct Realism insofar as it purports that the brain is no mere passive stimulus-capturing device. To support this claim, I have drawn on studies concerning the perception of the newly-sighted, as well as those that are capable of sight despite lacking the ability to perceive. I also made use of auditory and visual illusions to further reinforce Representationalism, demonstrating how these phenomena complicate the tenability of Direct Realism. The scientific evidence demands a new theory of perception given the failure of the Realist account since the presence of an external object is unnecessary to produce a percept, as with dreams and hallucinations. I introduced the Interface Theory of Perception (ITP) as a scientifically valid Representationalist theory capable of resolving the problem resulting from the conceptual inconsistency of Realism over perception. I also detailed the two philosophical interpretations of the ITP, as well as the general consequences that arise from such interpretations, both positive and negative. Finally, I argued that one need not speculate over the metaphysical consequences of ITP to accept Representationalism, which is undoubtedly better than the alternative in terms of scientific credibility and conceptual consistency.

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# The Role of Dreams in Moral Development

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## Abstract

Dreams can be perceived as a range of possible experiences—from imaginative scenarios revealing nothing but the abstract nature of the human mind to almost life-like experiences that mimic considerations we undertake daily. Dreams have long been a topic of interest in various fields - much of the discourse in philosophy historically centers on questioning if agency exists within dreaming states and how this may impact the application of notions of morality to dream scenarios. The status of dreams as experiences may even aid in developing a person's moral character, cultivating possible benefits for personal growth and revealing specific characteristics inaccessible through the restricted reality of the waking world. Furthermore, the different states of dreaming raise an increasingly complex state of being; lucid dreaming can significantly impact considerations for the agency in moral decision-making in simulated worlds. This article aims to examine two aspects of morality within dreams: firstly, assessing the state of agency within dreams, and secondly, exploring the capacity of dreams to act as an avenue to advance the exploration of personal moral character for moral development.

**Keywords:** Ethics, Dreams, Moral Agency, Lucid Dreaming



**D**REAMS CAN BE perceived as a range of possible experiences—from imaginative scenarios revealing nothing but the abstract nature of the human mind to almost life-like experiences that mimic our daily lives. Dreams have long been a topic of interest in various fields and much of the discourse in philosophy historically centers on questioning if agency exists within dreaming states and how this may impact the application of notions of morality to dream scenarios. The status of dreams as experiences may even aid in developing a person's moral character, cultivating possible benefits of personal growth and revealing certain characteristics that are inaccessible through the restricted reality of the waking world. Furthermore, the different states of dreaming raise an increasingly complex state of being; lucid dreaming can greatly impact considerations for the agency in moral decision-making in simulated worlds.

In this paper, I posit that dreams feature a certain state of agency that allows for assessing their status as a critical avenue for moral development. Due to their ability to link the subconscious mind to the moral self in the waking world, I suggest dreams provide access to a key ability of reflection and unconstrained experience that can play a relevant role in moral development. I argue that the unverifiability and limited recollection of dreams pose minimal concern to their ability to promote moral development because it is the aftereffects of the dream-experience that truly matters. I further consider the role of lucid dreams to explore personal moral character, and how giving dreams the capacity to expand how we experience and influence our moral selves can be harnessed beyond the limitations of regular dreamscapes.

## **An Overview of Dream Morality Perspectives**

Historically, dreams have been a concern for many who wished to live a morally perfect life. The nature of dreams is complex and often uncontrollable scenarios create a subconscious arena where the imagination can rarely be constrained. Therein lies worries if actions carried out in dreams

can reflect immorality within our waking lives. The conception of these concerns is believed to originate from devoted religious contexts, often attributed to Saint Augustine who was troubled by the impermissible nature of his dreams and his inability to control them to meet his waking ideals (Driver, 2007; Springett, n.d.). Rhetorically, he asks “[a]m I not myself during [sleep]?” This question has guided much discourse regarding agency within dreams and the ability to truly be moral within such simulations where there is no material existence.

Subsequently, consequentialists began to assess the actions within dreams in terms of their consequences in the waking world. The central question is if dreams have external or behavioural consequences for others. If they do not affect any aspect of waking life where we interact and impact real people, then it would not be wrong to commit immoral acts in dreams, even on other people, as no true harm created (Springett, n.d.). However, dreams often have a waking impact—they often feature individuals we encounter in daily life rather than faceless figures. When we wake from a particular dream that induces anger towards someone we know, it can impact our behaviour towards them as emotions enacted from the dream linger in our minds.

Alternatively, many deontologist perspectives on dream morality center around the real people that we recreate within our dreams. Through this regeneration of individuals in the dreamscape, we are treating individuals not as a mere ends-in-themselves but rather as a means for our entertainment, or other pursuits that fit our needs (Springett, n.d.). Furthermore, carrying out immoral acts within dreams “depersonalizes” our individual identity and generates a dream persona that is merely a means to reconsider our morality (Springett, n.d.). The basis for these perspectives relies upon if there is true agency in dreams and if that ability to make choices constitutes any moral motivation and behaviour in the waking world.

## **Dream Consciousness and Agency**

Psychologically, dreams are often considered another form of hallucination that occurs while asleep:

The offline world simulation engages the same brain mechanisms as perceptual consciousness and seems real to us because we are unaware that it is nothing but a hallucination. (Valli & Revonsuo, 2009, p.19)

This description of dreaming denotes dream experiences as mental experiences that simply occur while asleep; we can perform any actions that we could in the waking world and experience some sameness in mental states (Springett, n.d.).

We may have real emotions, feel real pain, or even replicate realistic scenarios within our dreams (Zadra et al., 1998; Springett, n.d.). The intensity of these experiences, and the ability to feel certain aspects of these dreams, set them apart from mere fantasy experiences and into the realm of waking consciousness (Springett, n.d.). Though no actions are taken due to the paralysis of sleep, the reactions are reflected in the minuscule changes within the body language of the sleeping individual, such as bodily twitches or eye movements that phantom mimic the real-life actions and intentions (Arnulf, 2019). The experience is similar to a perceptual-like state of consciousness, with the primary difference being that the actors and environments exist as conjures of the mind (Windt, 2010).

### **State of Agency Within Dreams**

The state of agency within dreaming is irregular, with “dream [state of agency]...equivalent or even increased compared to waking” (Rosen, 2021, p. 713). Rosen (2021) describes a state of agency as the feeling of,

“achieving our intended movements and actions,” and “feeling in control rather than [out of it]” (p. 695). A sense of agency is further described by Bayne (2011) as, “the experience of a particular movement or mental event as realizing one’s own agency.” A combined understanding of a state of agency built upon these descriptions lends itself to a baseline to further examine agency within dreams. This consideration of agency is critical to personal identity, guiding what makes up an individual’s sense of self (Morsella et al., 2011).

It is important to consider how the impact of lack of clarity in dreams can misrepresent crucial details that aid in analyzing agency. Furthermore, we may have a limited understanding or awareness of when we are experiencing a state of agency. We tend to only notice when our intended actions are not completed, often dismissing agency in mundane actions that follow pre-established expectations (Rosen, 2021; Frith, 2005). Given the lack of control within dreams, we simply may not be acknowledging that we have a level of agency within the experience. This may be particularly applicable for mundane dreams where intentions are inconsequential to the outcome.

Ordinary dreams are often considered insignificant, rarely involving choices but rather act as experiences that happen to us. However, the mundane nature of a dream does not diminish the possibility for agency. They merely disguise it as an expected mental route. Consider the following example from a dream report:

I am heading home alone. I have two choices: I can go through the woods or I can take a winding road. Because I have a wheel barrel, I decided going through the woods would be difficult to manage. So, I end up taking the winding road. This is a good choice [...].  
(Rosen, 2021, p. 697)

This case appears like a mundane dream. Without further expansion of the dream world, it cannot be known if there was any true consequence or purpose of this scenario. However, the features presented within this report are akin to the agency witnessed in the waking world—they “contemplate their options, assess which is preferable, decide based on reasons, [and] carr[y] out intentions” (Rosen, 2021, p. 697).

Altered states of dreaming complicate this experience, changing the core nature of the dream with the addition of another factor. Lucid dreaming reintroduces agency to our dream experiences, creating an almost virtual reality where actions are a critical part of the result. Increased control over dream agency can occur in lucid dreaming through “lucid control” or “non-lucid control” (Rosen, 2021, p. 703). This increased control is most often witnessed within lucid control where dreamers can morph or direct dreams to meet their intended goals. The following example is from a dream report of someone enacting lucid control:

I recall a waking intent for the next lucid dream—to call a particular type of cat to me [...] I call ‘Here kitty,’ hoping to call the particular cat I was imagining to me. Soon I am surrounded by 7 or 8 cats[...]. I see a tortie cat that is close but not exactly like my ideal. (Kahan & LaBerge, 1994)

The “waking intent” in this recount is crucial for guiding the reality of this new simulated world – the individual has some level of agency over their actions within their dream and even the ability to direct the creation of the elements that make up their world.

However, judgements of agency within dreams are not always accurate. Our considerations are reflective as they are applied after the dream experience occurs (Rosen, 2021, p. 696). This leaves room for our assessment of our agency to be manipulated by waking perceptions; we may be more likely to feel in control if the action taken aligned with our intentions—we



believe we would have undertaken them if the event was to occur at the moment (Aarts et al., 2005; Rosen, 2021; Martin & Pacherie, 2013). Due to the unstable nature of recalling dreams, this influence is an important factor to consider.

However, as Driver (2007) states it:

... [T]ypically, our dream experiences do not allow for us to exercise choice, or make intentions, or exhibit various motivational structures. All that is needed is the observation that such is quite possible, and does happen [at least once]. (p. 9-10)

Therefore, only the possibility that such agency occurs within dreams is necessary to constitute a deeper consideration of what role dreams can play in moral development of our character.

## **Dreams as an Avenue for Moral Development**

For the existence of some level of agency in dreams, it follows we must explore the possibility of their role in development of a person's moral understanding and character in a variety of ways. In comparison to consequentialist and deontological perspectives that limit dreams to their means or ends in relation to moral action, applying aspects of virtue ethics can lend themselves to greater consideration of how dreams can be an avenue for moral development. In this paper, moral development broadly refers to developing an understanding of right and wrong through an exploration of one's own moral character. While moral development is complex and multifaceted, guided heavily by personal experiences and up-bringsings, dreams can also play a role in expanding how we perceive our actions or mental states. Moving beyond if right and wrong can apply to dreams, the broader question concerns what dreams further provide to

the components of one's virtue or moral standing (Springett, n.d.).

Dreams create a link to our subconscious mind—one that guides every aspect of our lives through its influence, yet often remains inaccessible for direct analysis. Dreaming can act as an avenue to indirectly inform us about our deep-rooted paradigms and guiding motives. Taking the time to examine our unconscious dreams can be advantageous—they “reveal our inner motivations and hopes, help us face our fears, encourage growing awareness, and even be a source of creativity and insight” (Blackmore, 2004, p. 338). This clarity can be beneficial for analyzing self-thought and encouraging a deeper reflection of one's actions in daily life.

Furthermore, dreaming can make the internal moral character increasingly accessible to those with little concern for philosophy and the morality of actions. Johnson (2009) states:

[I]t is in the world of dreaming that the unconscious is working out its powerful dynamics. It is there that the great forces do battle or combine to produce the attitudes, ideals, beliefs, and compulsions that motivate most of our behavior. Once we become sensitive to dreams, we discover that every dynamic in a dream is manifesting itself in some way in our practical lives—in our actions, relationships, decisions, automatic routines, urges, and feelings. (p. 19)

An individual who has rarely considered the moral status of their ideals and beliefs may encounter a dream whereby their actions take on harsh consequences in their dream world. Upon waking, they may take a closer look at their paradigm and choose to pursue an improvement of character when faced with the reality of the wrongness of their action in their dream. For example, if a person has been dishonest in their waking life, their dreams may reflect this guilt and prompt a heightened sense of moral awareness or desire to make amends. This could, in essence, allow dreams

to create real-world impacts for virtue within a person's daily life, altering how they consider and answer moral scenarios.

Dreams can also play a functional role in developing emotional processes. They provide the ability to create simulations of reality, where encountering new scenarios, and experiences can build upon emotional processes (Scarpelli et al., 2019). This development can be critical, with certain emotions motivating moral behaviour and the development of character (Eisenberg, 2000; Hoffmann, 1998). Negative emotions, such as guilt and shame, are associated with influencing moral behaviour (Eisenberg, 2000). This may further apply to emotions felt within a dream experience and extend to moral behaviour in waking life. A broader understanding of emotionality can be significant when exploring one's own character, particularly within dreamscapes due to their unstable recollection. Evaluating emotional processes when a dream's specific contexts are vague can allow for a greater sense of guidance for the morality of the situation—even only the outline of a situation and an association with higher-order negative emotion can provide a greater understanding of the situation at hand.

However, as Malcolm (1959) notes, there are no criteria to evaluate dreams, leaving them unverifiable and lacking in the coherence to communicate as an experience of value. In relation, other problems arise because there is often little recollection of dream components (Johnson, 1979). If one is unable to recount the experience in the waking world, there will be no impact on their moral self. This raises issues for dream experiences acting as an avenue for moral development in a consistent and significant way. Taking dream reports at face value without accounting for these limitations would be insufficient in understanding what role they truly play in moral development.

I believe that limited recollection and verifiability of dreams poses minimal concern to their ability to act as an avenue for moral development. It's important to consider that a limited recollection does not mean no recollection. While it may not occur in every sleep cycle, the possibility to have impactful experiences remains. It's not unreasonable to say that

once awakened from a particularly harrowing or reflective dream, the individual will often contemplate and reflect on its contents. While many features of perceptual states can be reduced or are absent within dreaming, evidence suggests that lucid dreaming or even mundane dreams in certain contexts, can present complex relations that duplicate cognitive responses in the waking state (Rosen, 2021; Hartmann, 2000; Schrendel & Hofmann, 2003). Evidence suggests that the “neurophysiological mechanisms underlying the encoding and recall of episodic memories may remain the same across different states of consciousness” (Marzano et al., 2011), linking the recall of dreams on similar scales to recollections of other memories. One can also work to improve one’s memory and ability to recall dreams over time (Reed, 1973), creating an opportunity for dreams to pose as similar situations to real experiences in the past.

Furthermore, while dream reports are often volatile and vary in their coherence to the waking world, it is not required that the dreams be recalled in true accuracy for moral development to occur. In essence, true recall of the experience may not matter—a distorted, unverifiable version could still spark the examination of oneself if the individual believes to have experienced it. It is the aftereffects of believing in a dream experience and considering its broader role that truly matters. It allows individuals to discover and explore ideals and virtues through thoughtful reflection on what the individual has the potential to accomplish within dreams.

A limited recollection and emotional associations in the waking world may be enough to encourage an individual to use their perceived experiences, whether real or not, to influence moral development. Additional considerations for the role of lucid dreams, where subjects are aware and influence of their state of consciousness, can offer an alternative to regular dreaming states that do not face the same issues.

## Lucid Dreams

Lucid dreams posit an experience that can surpass the limitations placed upon the role of regular dreams. They have a greater chance of being recalled and are better remembered than normal dreams (LaBerge & Rheingold, 1990). Lucid dreaming is a learnable skill, and while techniques to induce lucid dreams are inconsistent (Stumbrys et al., 2012), pursuing lucid dreams may be an opportunity to further explore and cultivate one's moral character with greater accuracy. With nearly 11% of our mental experiences occurring through dreams (Love, 2013), there lies a crucial time frame where such development may take place beyond the bounds of the waking world. There is freedom to explore personal traits, beliefs, and relationships with others that goes beyond social constructs, uncovering the subconscious context that often evades us while awake.

Lucid dreams may then help to play a role in developing traits that people otherwise would not develop, and act as an outlet for encouraging the “thick moral concepts” of oneself – courage, bravery, wisdom, and so forth” through an “expansion of agency (Springett, n.d.)

This freedom to explore oneself through intentional dreams can be crucial to further exploring one's moral character through different scenarios that are inaccessible to the waking world. The nature of these scenarios as being moral or immoral is not the concern of this paper, rather the focus remains that such an ability to explore one's psyche could be impactful to an individual's moral development.

If an individual can lucidly dream, they may be able to explore moral dilemmas in ways that create no external harm. This presents an opportunity to treat dream experiences as case-like scenarios. An individual could recreate moral dilemmas to encourage philosophical thinking in a virtual



realm and play them out as though experiencing them. Therefore, it follows that if merely thinking about scenarios of personal action is an important exercise to reveal moral character, engaging with them in a dream world could be increasingly impactful due to its ability to interact with the scenario on a greater scale.

The role of lucid dreaming as unconstrained moral imagination may also play a role in transforming social constructs that one adheres to. Babbitt (2018) describes the role of moral imagination to be “the capacity to envision alternative social arrangements” (p. 7), the ability to imagine “what ought to be possible” (p. 8). In a world of institutionalized injustice, dreams may pose as a crucial avenue to explore, realize, and shift our place within these structures. The combination of freedom from real-world consequences and agency that lucid dreaming provides could be a crucial part of the moral imagination necessary to construct a more human and just social vision (Babbitt, S., 2018).

Dreams, mundane or lucid, allow for a holistic interpretation of one's own moral character, deepening the ability for development of moral attributes. They provide spaces to reflect on internal values and actions; providing a safe arena beyond external judgement where one's beliefs can be questioned, and provides a nuanced understanding of virtue and morality. This capability of reflection makes them an important feature of moral development—even if a regular dream remains unverifiable, its aftereffects do not. The development of moral character relies upon such exploration and free thinking that dreams inspire. Within dreams we have access to scenarios and decisions we may never encounter, generating new avenues to illuminate our personal beliefs.

In conclusion, dreams contain the ability to play an integral role in moral development—they provide individuals with the space to explore and reflect on their values, beliefs, and moral principles. The limited recollection or unverifiability of dream content can impact its effectiveness, but nonetheless allow for some level of development through its aftereffects of reflecting upon dream experiences in the scope of moral development.

They can enhance emotional processing and assist in forming moral considerations. Lucid dreams further open avenues for intention-based exploration of one's moral character without the restrictions of the waking world—beyond the limitations that regular dreaming imparts on us. While their influence is unlikely to be the only or most significant factor within an individual's moral development, dreams should be considered as an important component of this complex process.

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# “Neither One Nor Two”: Aligning De Beauvoir and Irigaray’s Use of Ambiguity

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## Abstract

Despite their differences, Simone de Beauvoir’s existentialist critique of the gender binary and Luce Irigaray’s model of sexual difference run parallel in their resistance to absolute, gendered notions of activity and passivity. Both streams of thought—while ontologically distinct—are interested in presenting “relative” alternatives to the negated feminine subject. With attention to De Beauvoir’s vision of ambiguity, this paper will argue that Irigaray’s “vulvic” and “phallic” subjects are compatible with existentialism’s beings “for-itself” and “in-itself”. Further, by embracing the potential for both sexes hold “finitude and transcendence,” Irigaray’s strategic essentialism may be read as radically continuous with (as opposed to departing from) *The Second Sex*.

**Keywords:** Existentialism, Strategic Essentialism, Feminist Ontology, Ambiguity.

DESPITE BEING FREQUENTLY positioned at opposite poles of French feminist philosophy, Luce Irigaray writes effusively of Simone de Beauvoir that "to respect Simone de Beauvoir is to follow the theoretical and practical work of social justice that she carried out in her own way; it is to maintain the liberating horizons which she opened up for many women, and men."<sup>1</sup> This compliment of course precedes critiques; Irigaray's use of psychoanalysis and strategic essentialism puts her in conflict with De Beauvoir's feminism of equality. Distinct from existentialist notions of "existence preced[ing] essence"<sup>2</sup> Irigaray's project of sexuation seems inextricably tied to anatomical difference. Her psychoanalytic schema is based on phallic and arguably vulvic models of subjectivity, abstracted versions of the bodily 'penis' and 'vulva' which appear to resist Beauvoirian notions of the female body as a 'factic situation.'<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, this paper will seek to position Irigaray and De Beauvoir side by side in their mutual resistance to absolute, gendered notions of activity and passivity. First, I will introduce the problem of the negated feminine subject using Marilyn Frye's **A/not-A** formula. I will then interpret De Beauvoir's existentialist critique of this gender binary and Irigaray's model of sexuate difference to locate the intersection of their projects. Finally, I will argue that Irigaray's 'vulvic' and 'phallic' subjects are compatible with a Beauvoirian vision of ambiguity in which both sexes embrace "finitude and transcendence."<sup>4</sup>

Published thirty years apart, even the titles of *The Second Sex* and *This Sex Which is Not One* converse in response to the same question. Posed most famously by De Beauvoir, the problem of "what is a woman?" unifies her with Irigaray by locating their mutual target.<sup>5</sup> In a social ontology dictated by patriarchy, men become the reference point for existence. To be

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1 Luce Irigaray, "Je, Tu, Nous: Toward a Culture of Difference" (New York:Routledge, 1993), 13.

2 Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism," *Basic Writings of Existentialism* (New York: Modern Library Press, 2004) 344.

3 Simone De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, (Knopf, 1953) 673..

4 De Beauvoir, *tSS*, 684..

5 De Beauvoir, *tSS*, 13..

male in the words of feminist philosopher Marilyn Frye is to be “the A side of a universal exclusive dichotomy: **A/not-A**,” automatically a positively defined subject, the ‘default’ human.<sup>6</sup> Occupying the other half of this formulation (**not-A**) are women relegated to the negative status of non-male.

To begin in De Beauvoir’s terms, this non-male ‘Other’ is defined only by what she lacks in relation to man’s essential position.<sup>7</sup> While men *and* women are biologically and linguistically sexed, man is afforded “both the positive and the neutral,” meaning he gets to embody the universally human and the specifically masculine.<sup>8</sup> In other words, he is everything while she is nothing. Both Beauvoir and Irigaray refer to this privileged masculine subject as ‘*the one*.’<sup>9</sup> While De Beauvoir uses this label to denote man’s status as the only positive subject, Irigaray is interested in how it figures into a Lacanian phallogentrism she endeavours to critique.<sup>10</sup> The symbol of the phallus, like the **A** in Frye’s formula, dominates a traditional symbolic order of sexes “narrowly focused on sameness.”<sup>11</sup> It represents a masculinized subjectivity which is active, unitary, and dependent on a passive object to fulfil its desires.

Irigaray writes that “in order to touch himself, man needs an instrument: his hand, a woman’s body, language...And this self-caressing requires at least a minimum of activity.”<sup>12</sup> Because of his reliance on an object to instrumentalize, the phallic subject creates a ‘phallic economy’ founded on an active/passive dualism. Everything centres around the active penis; one either has a penis, or one lacks a penis. Female genitalia is only understood as a passive lesser or reversed penis within the phallic economy, exactly like De Beauvoir’s negated ‘Other.’ This centralization of the male subject,

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6 Marilyn Frye, *The Necessity of Differences: Constructing a Positive Category of Women*, (University of Chicago Press, 1996), 994.

7 De Beauvoir, *tSS*, 15.

8 De Beauvoir, *tSS*, 15.

9 Luce Irigaray, “Chapter Two: This Sex Which is Not One,” *This Sex Which is Not One*, (Cornell University Press, 1985), 26.

10 Emily Zakin, “Psychoanalytic Feminism,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, May 16, 2011.

11 Irigaray, *TSWiNO*, 28.

12 Irigaray, *TSWiNO*, 24.

or in Irigaray's terms 'phallocratism,'<sup>13</sup> is reflected in all spheres of patriarchal societies. Some examples include disparities in medical research on women's health, unequal representation in political bodies, and continued pressure for women to occupy a passive domestic sphere.<sup>14</sup>

When combating this oppressive model within an existentialist frame, there is an important distinction made between the 'absolute' and the 'relative' Other. De Beauvoir emphasizes that the masculine subject finds "in consciousness itself a fundamental hostility towards every other consciousness; the subject can be posed only in being opposed, he sets himself up as the essential, as opposed to the other, the inessential, the object."<sup>15</sup> The existential subject *must* engage in a struggle to define themselves in contrast to an object. When two male subjects ('ones') encounter each other, for example, they participate in what Sartre describes as 'the Look' in which they both become objects relative to the other's gaze. There is a reciprocal exchange while each tries to "set himself up as the essential," and simultaneously recognizes his status as the objectified Other in the eyes of an opposing subject.<sup>16</sup> This is 'relative' Otherness: not a fundamental category, but a temporary state in a struggle for centralization and power, equivalent to the 'life-and-death' stakes of Hegel's Master-Slave dialectic.<sup>17</sup>

The stakes of this battle are high. Beauvoir uses existentialist language of immanence and transcendence to denote the radical difference between subject and object. To become an object is to lose the free subject's capacity to transcend circumstance and instead fall "back into immanence,

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13 Irigaray, *TSWiNO*, 33.

14 UN Women—Headquarters, "Facts & Figures," n.d. (2011) <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/commission-on-the-status-of-women-2012/facts-and-figures#:~:text=Gender%20inequality%20is%20a%20major>.

15 De Beauvoir, *tSS*, 17.

16 Sartre, "Self Negation," *Being and Nothingness* from *Basic Writings of Existentialism*, (New York: Modern Library Press, 2004) 392.

17 J.D. Feilmeier, "Hegel's Master-Slave Dialectic" *Central College*, <https://central.edu/writing-anthology/2019/07/08/hegels-master-slave-dialectic-the-search-for-self-consciousness/#:~:text=Hegel%27s%20Master%2DSlave%20dialectic%20tells,as%20a%20threat%20to%20itself>.

stagnation...the brutish life of subjection to given conditions.”<sup>18</sup> For example, a person who is told he has been born to pursue a certain occupation transcends his circumstances by asserting agency and choosing his own career. An object, on the other hand, fulfils its predetermined function. It is ‘immanent’ because, like a leaf being pushed by a river’s current, its inability to exert agency leaves it totally vulnerable to circumstance. This ‘brutish life’ is exactly the fate of the feminine ‘absolute’ Other, distinct from the ‘relative’ in that she is “an object which will not oppose him, which does not require a reciprocal relation.”<sup>19</sup> Only by robbing women of their potential agency can men secure fixed positions as subjects within existential gender relations and eschew the risks of objectification. Having pre-emptively lost the battle for power, to be a woman is to surrender to immanence.

This problematic condition is likewise elucidated in Irigaray’s schema. Where De Beauvoir probes the negative existential status of those ‘*not men*,’ Irigaray centres the body, questioning the symbolic status of the vulva as a ‘non-sex.’<sup>20</sup> In the same way that the ‘absolute’ subject requires its ‘absolute’ object, the phallic economy requires that the vulvic become “the negative, the underside, the reverse of the only visible and morphologically designatable organ.” In order to fulfil phallic standards of pleasure, the vagina is reduced to the passive vessel for his penetration (the active clitoris a ‘little penis’ far inferior to its male counterpart).<sup>21</sup> Translated into Beauvoirian terms, the vulvic becomes the immanent object over which the phallic subject transcends. His status as the only ‘designatable organ’<sup>22</sup> depends on the absolute negation of the feminine; any complication of this binary would undermine the monopolization of subjectivity which defines him. In other words, the **A** is contingent upon the **not-A**. Further, within the gender binary these positions are necessarily fixed.

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18 De Beauvoir, *tSS*, 27.

19 Frye, *tNoD*, 993

20 De Beauvoir, *tSS*, 14.; Irigaray, *TSWiNO*, 23.

21 Irigaray, *TSWiNO*, 26.

22 Irigaray, *TSWiNO*, 23.



Crucially, De Beauvoir's analysis of women's status under patriarchy is fundamentally opposed to notions of fixity. While she acknowledges sexual difference at a biological level, she warns against attaching innate qualities of passivity or subordination to sex itself. Instead, she argues that:

When an individual (or a group of individuals) is kept in a situation of inferiority, the fact is that he is inferior. But the significance of the verb to be must be rightly understood here; it is in bad faith to give it a static value when it really has the dynamic Hegelian sense of 'to have become.' Yes, women on the whole are today inferior to men; that is, their situation affords them fewer possibilities. The question is: should that state of affairs continue?<sup>23</sup>

This is De Beauvoir's answer to the **not-A**; women's position as the 'absolute' Other is not essential but sociohistorically instituted.<sup>24</sup> There is nothing about her biology or nature that condemns a woman to immanence, instead, she has been compelled to relinquish her capacity for transcendence in the patriarchy's battle for subjectivity. The **not-A** is a myth, a seductive lie to which both sexes contribute that conceals the fact that all humans share the same existential condition. Despite different factic situations and lived experiences, all sexes have access to transcendent self-making *and* risk being limited to the realm of immanence.<sup>25</sup> Neither is an 'absolute' active subject or passive object, both are 'relative.' What links their shared humanity is the tension between two polarized states, and it is exactly this quality of ambiguity that intersects with Irigaray's philosophy of sexuate difference.

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23 De Beauvoir, *tSS*, 23.

24 Debra Bergoffen, and Megan Burke, "Simone de Beauvoir", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2023 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.) Aug 17, 2004.

25 De Beauvoir, *tSS*, 686.

However, before aligning their respective philosophies it is important to further emphasize their central conflict. The two arguments necessarily run parallel, but on separate planes; Beauvoir seeks to overcome difference while Irigaray uses it to construct a positive metaphysics of the feminine. Because she ties certain essential qualities to embodied experience, it would be absurd for Irigaray's psychoanalytic method to adopt a Beauvoirian appeal to an existential sameness. Nevertheless, Irigaray too dismisses the negative definition of female subjectivity (**not-A**) as an outright myth. In its place, she designs an alternative to phallogentrism which further complicates sexed notions of active transcendence and passive immanence. Her response to the **A/not-A** formulation is a new schema: **A/B**, in which negation is overcome by qualifying women beyond masculine terms. This complication of the phallogentric model begins with a critique of the masculine phallic subject.

She describes the phallic desire for the self-same as seeking "a non-sex, or a masculine organ turned back upon itself, self-embracing" (the vagina).<sup>26</sup> This language cannot help but reference the Existentialist term: 'being *in-itself*.'<sup>27</sup> In the *Second Sex*, Beauvoir refers to a distinction between the being 'in-itself' (she who is condemned to the 'brutish life' of determinism as described above) and the being '*for-itself*,' self-aware and projecting her consciousness beyond the factic determinants of her given circumstances.<sup>28</sup> De Beauvoir's use of these terms is linked to an existentialist tradition which prioritizes the activity of transcendence as a liberating force.<sup>29</sup> This human ability to move beyond a factic level is attached in phallogentrism to the active, masculine sphere. What's exciting about its use in Irigaray's work is the way she links the 'in-itself' to the phallic subject instead of a vulvic feminine. Because the **Not-A** is figured as a "hole-envelope...the masculine organ turned back upon itself" when the

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26 Irigaray, *TSWiNO*, 23.

27 De Beauvoir, *tSS*, 27.

28 Jack Reynolds and Pierre-Jean Renaudie, "Jean-Paul Sartre", The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2022 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.) May 16, 2011.

29 Reynolds and Renaudie, "Jean-Paul Sartre."

phallic encounters the vulvic, he is literally 'in-himself.'<sup>30</sup> In this way, Irigaray cleverly subverts phallogocentric dualism which would split the sexuate into a clean binary of masculine transcendence and feminine immanence. While he engages in "the desire to force entry, to penetrate, to appropriate" these acts of aggression and possession do not map easily onto notions of transcendence.<sup>31</sup> Instead, the quality of 'oneness' which would seem to align him with the *active* side of 'absolute' subjectivity is instead exactly what condemns him to a degree of immanence.

In the words of De Beauvoir's intellectual counterpart Jean-Paul Sartre, transcendence is described as the freedom of an 'arrachement à soi'- a 'self-detachment.'<sup>32</sup> Because he is unitary and his interactions with the Other are merely 'self-embracing,' the phallic subject lacks the ability to distance his consciousness from his facticity. In the context of the struggle between subject and object status central to Existentialism, he risks immanence despite his aggressive nature.

Following this subversion of 'the One,' Irigaray introduces her groundbreaking concept of 'at least two.'<sup>33</sup> This is the **B** side of her sexuate; what I call the 'vulvic,' positive reimagining of a feminine subjectivity. While the phallic symbolizes the penis, the vulvic indicates an abstracted female genitalia: particularly the labia ('lips'), the vagina and the clitoris. Taken together:

The geography of her pleasure is far more diversified, more multiple in its differences, more complex, more subtle, than is commonly imagined in an imaginary rather too narrowly focused on sameness.<sup>34</sup>

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30 Irigaray, *TSWiNO*, 23.

31 Irigaray, *TSWiNO*, 25.

32 Sartre, "Chapter One: The Origin of Negation," *Being and Nothingness* (Abingdon, Oxon: Taylor & Francis Group, 1969), Accessed August 14, 2023. ProQuest Ebook Central, 25.

33 Irigaray, *TSWiNO*, 26.

34 Irigaray, *TSWiNO*, 28.

The vulvic is neither unitary like the phallic, nor dually split between active and passive components. Instead, Irigaray introduces a radically *plural* model, subversive on multiple levels. The first is most obvious: a positive figuration based on female genitalia disrupts a phallogocentric dismissal of the feminine as merely ‘non-phallic.’ This disruption is reinforced by Irigaray’s provocative writing style, which never shies from intentionally graphic descriptors. She hinges her argument on “that contact of *at least two* (lips),” whose perpetual touching is the basis of a female autoerotism; a feminine pleasure requiring no external Other to satisfy itself.<sup>35</sup>

The vulvic’s passivity is activity; her plurality comprising both herself *and* the “other in herself.”<sup>36</sup> Where the phallic tries to assimilate the Other in his desire for the self-same and unitary, the vulvic is in a constant state of *nearness* to the object of her pleasure.<sup>37</sup> The ‘phallic economy’ of active and passive property is thus undermined, for neither state can be clearly delineated from the positionality of close contact.

This ambiguous zone is crucial and means that the vulvic and phallic subjects are not reducible to absolute, sexed versions of the ‘for-itself’ and ‘in-itself.’ While true that certain phallic qualities may be associated with ‘immanence’ and vulvic plurality with ‘transcendence,’ Irigaray’s vulvic upsets the Sartrean notion of a transcendence contingent on self-detachment. This is in part due to her essentialist view of embodied sex as transcendental as opposed to factic. It is also integral to a specific passage in which Irigaray describes the vulvic version of a being ‘for-itself.’ She writes of “the process of weaving itself, of embracing itself with words, but also of getting rid of words in order not to become fixed, congealed in them.”<sup>38</sup> This quotation illustrates a form of transcendence distinct to the vulvic subject. Her expression of freedom is not a linear venture towards a single goal, but a “*diffuse touch*” in which she is in contact with her “body-sex”

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35 Irigaray, *TSWiNO*, 26.

36 Irigaray, *TSWiNO*, 28.

37 Irigaray, *TSWiNO*, 31.

38 Irigaray, *TSWiNO*, 29.

without being determined by its facticity ("fixed, congealed").<sup>39</sup>

Irigaray's lyrical prose is clarified when contrasted with phallic activity, which considers itself the centralized subject distanced from an objectified Other upon which his "transcendence thrusts itself."<sup>40</sup> He operates within the either/or structure of dualism; in the struggle for subjectivity he must either transcend or be transcended. The vulvic, however, makes up for his disjunctive limitations by refusing the terms of dual subjectivity. She can hold the tension between activity and passivity because her transcendence is based on nearness, touch, and plurality. This reconception is highly relevant to De Beauvoir's philosophy of ambiguity.

Like Sartre, Beauvoir warns against the trap of the unitary being in-itself, but she is also careful to situate immanence as the necessary counterpart to transcendence within ambiguity. She concludes the *Second Sex* with her belief that:

If man and woman were equal in concrete matters; the contradictions that put the flesh in opposition to the spirit, the instant to time, the swoon of immanence to the challenge of transcendence, the absolute of pleasure to the nothingness of forgetting, will never be resolved; in sexuality will always be materialized the tension, the anguish, the joy, the frustration, and the triumph of existence.<sup>41</sup>

Beauvoir is not advocating for the primacy of an absolute being for-itself. Instead, she centralizes ambiguity: the vacillating relationship between immanence and transcendence as the most desirable (and most human) outcome of gender equality.

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<sup>39</sup> Irigaray, *TSWiNO*, 29.

<sup>40</sup> Simone De Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, (Newburyport: Open Road Integrated Media, Inc., 2018) Accessed August 14, 2023. ProQuest Ebook Central, 10.

<sup>41</sup> De Beauvoir, *tSS*, 686.

This subversion is exactly what is accomplished by Irigaray. The vulvic's plurality undermines phallogocentric dualism by introducing activity and passivity as overlapping co-constituents of an ambiguous subject. Because she is "two not divisible into one(s)" the vulvic need not, in Beauvoir's words "put the flesh in opposition to the spirit...the swoon of immanence [in opposition] to the challenge of transcendence."<sup>42</sup> Far from the flaw phallogocentrism would make it out to be, she who is non-self-identical is inherently resistant to object-status. Her "incompleteness of form," (compared to his 'oneness') is what allows her to contain the paradoxes necessary for existence. In the *Ethics of Ambiguity*, Beauvoir emphasizes how the existential subject must accept their ambiguity by remaining joined with and distant from themselves.<sup>43</sup> One ought to be neither an absolutely transcendent God nor an immanent object, but *near* to and *in touch with* both states. It is clear then that the vulvic subject fits certain criterion highly relevant to Beauvoirian Existentialism. Likewise, in the case of the phallic, or 'absolute subject,' he is disempowered if he fails to affirm his ambiguity by finding within himself *both* the capacity for immanence and transcendence.

Nevertheless, when placing this vulvic model into an Existentialist conversation, there are certain mistakes to be avoided. To accept an A/B equation would contradict Beauvoir's assertion of a universal existential condition. While true that she affirms differences between sexes, Beauvoir would not concede their elevation to the transcendental level of symbols. She even goes so far as describing a feminism of difference as "equalitarian segregation ...result[ing] only in the most extreme discrimination."<sup>44</sup>

Further, Luce Irigaray is not an Existentialist, and her psychoanalytic work should not be diluted to serve an opposing philosophical agenda. Still, it would be an equal disservice to isolate her contribution to feminism on the basis of gender essentialism. Her language of desire and sexual

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<sup>42</sup> Irigaray, *TSWiNO*, 24.; De Beauvoir, *tSS*, 686.

<sup>43</sup> De Beauvoir, *EoA*, 10.

<sup>44</sup> De Beauvoir, *tSS*, 22.



pleasure is both radical and traditional: it recalls Sartre's statement that freedom rests on the condition of "a desideratum," it speaks to immanence, to transcendence, and to Beauvoirian ambiguity.<sup>45</sup> It precedes the words of poet Anne Carson who wrote that "all human desire is poised on an axis of paradox;" a tension central to both De Beauvoir and Irigaray.<sup>46</sup> In response to a patriarchal frame obsessed with absolutes and a false divide between activity and passivity, these philosophers expand gender to fit both terms at once. The inherent capacity for transcendence and immanence is what makes us ambiguous beings. Where De Beauvoir encourages women to overcome the idea that their bodies condemn them to immanence, Irigaray proposes a distinctly feminine transcendence already essential to their embodied condition. Not only that, but her vulvic subject may be even *more* inclined towards the freedom of being 'for-itself' than the unitary phallus. While they disagree in their methods, Beauvoir and Irigaray cannot be entirely polarized. Their respective philosophies are near to one another, inseparable and always touching.

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45 Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (Abingdon, Oxon: Taylor & Francis Group, 1969) Accessed August 14, 2023. ProQuest Ebook Central, 433.

46 Anne Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet: An Essay* (Princeton University Press, 1986), 10.

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