

# THE VASSAR COLLEGE JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY

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## CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	iv
Letter from the Editors-In-Chief	v
<b>Epicurus: A Psychological Hedonist</b>	6
Paul Karcis	
<i>Concordia University</i>	
<b>Decaffeination and Meta-Choice:</b>	19
<b>Freedom and Action within the Terrorism/Anti-Terrorism Discourse</b>	
Daniel Godstone	
<i>University of Melbourne</i>	
<b>Yes Loitering: Destituting Surveillance in the Post-Orwellian Era</b>	31
Asprey Liu	
<i>Vassar College</i>	
<b>A Review of Martha C. Nussbaum, <i>Anger and Forgiveness: Resentment, Generosity, Justice</i></b>	40
Josephine Lovejoy	
<i>Vassar College</i>	
<b>Narratively Inclined: Ontologies of Self, Sexuality, and Violence.</b>	46
<b>An Interview with Adriana Cavarero</b>	
Asprey Liu, Sam Allen, and Giovanna Borradori	
<i>Vassar College</i>	
Call for Papers	61

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## LETTER FROM THE EDITORS-IN-CHIEF

*The Vassar College Journal of Philosophy* aims to provide an accessible platform for undergraduate thought and philosophical engagement with compelling themes of broad interest. Now in its fourth year, the *Journal* has continued what can now be called a trend by substantially broadening the geographical and thematic breadth of its submissions. This year's theme, "Action," engages the complexity of the present moment and discloses the relevance of philosophy to social and political concerns. For this volume, our editorial board reviewed papers from undergraduates at private and public institutions in six different countries, addressing the widest range of philosophical approaches and theoretical lineages to date.

Of the three essays in this issue, one provides a critical assessment of scholarship on Epicurean hedonism. The other two grapple with contemporary relations of power in a variety of discourses, including Australian law and surveilled spaces online and offline. The book review confronts the affective dimension of ethical responses and their implications for normative claims. Finally, we are honored to present this issue's interview, the record of a full morning in conversation with Professor Adriana Cavarero. Her theory of ontological violence and horrorism adds a unique line of reflection both to existing debates on what constitutes political action and to the compass of materials that we received and had the pleasure to read this year.

**Asprey Liu & Sam Allen**

## EPICURUS: A PSYCHOLOGICAL HEDONIST

Paul Karcis  
*Concordia University*

**Abstract.** This paper argues that Epicurus was a psychological hedonist: he thought that all human action is motivated by the pursuit of pleasure. I object to recent arguments that Epicurus believed that people should strive for pleasure, but have a choice as to whether to do so or not, because those contentions mislabel this famous Hellenistic philosopher as strictly an ethical hedonist. While Epicurus did consider pleasure to be the highest good, he also argued that all human actions necessarily strive toward it. Contrary to other scholars, I will argue this by focusing on primary rather than doxographical sources.

Epicurus was an active Greek philosopher who published hundreds of written works between the fourth and third century B.C. and founded the philosophical school that bears his namesake, the Epicureans. While Epicurus's works were profoundly influential to Hellenistic and Roman philosophy, few survive today, leaving scholars to debate his position on certain philosophical issues by analyzing his letters, Epicurean axioms attributed to him by his contemporary followers, and doxographical sources. One such debate concerns whether Epicurus thought that humans pursue pleasure in their actions (psychological hedonism), or that they *should* pursue pleasure as a rational and moral end to behavior, but have a choice as to whether to do so or not (ethical hedonism).

John Cooper has argued that Epicurus was an ethical hedonist, but not a psychological one, by relying heavily on secondary accounts found in Cicero's *De Finibus*.<sup>1</sup> Raphael Woolf responded to this article with a thorough critique, claiming that Cooper had not provided sufficient evidence to prove that Epicurus was not a psychological hedonist, but Woolf did not take a position himself.<sup>2</sup> Most recently, Larry Waggle has recognized the validity of a few of Woolf's critiques, but contends that Cooper was substantively correct in labelling Epicurus as an exclusively ethical hedonist.<sup>3</sup>

I will go further than Woolf, who suggested that it is merely *possible* that Epicurus was a psychological hedonist, and argue that

Epicurus *was*, in fact, a psychological hedonist. It is important to realize that ethical and psychological hedonism are not mutually exclusive; it is objectively true that Epicurus was an ethical hedonist—he expressed that pleasure was the highest good that people could and should strive for—but it is also true that Epicurus held that all human action is always naturally driven toward this highest good. I will expand upon Woolf’s critique of Cooper’s article, as well as respond to Waggle’s critique of Woolf.

One of Waggle’s insightful and principal objections to Woolf is that Woolf prioritizes doxographical accounts over Epicurus’s extant writings. I will begin by elucidating the psychological hedonist position found in Epicurus’s own work, primarily in his *Letter to Menoeceus*. Next, I will present several Epicurean axioms, explain why these sayings have been interpreted as ethical and not psychological hedonist propositions, and argue that there should be a psychological hedonist interpretation of these texts. Finally, I will supplement my argument with a reflection on the relevance of doxographical texts, primarily excerpts from Cicero’s *De Finibus*.

Before beginning, I want to justify my methodological approach, which prioritizes the sources closest to Epicurus. It is apparent that Epicurus’s own words are the best indicators of his philosophy. I will present Cicero’s account of Epicurean philosophy last because, as Waggle more thoroughly details,<sup>4</sup> Cicero was biased against the Epicureans, and doxographical accounts are self-evidently less reliable than primary sources. Further, I contend that an examination of Epicurus’s writings and Epicurean axioms provides sufficient and reliable evidence for a psychological hedonist reading of Epicureanism. I will nonetheless call attention to excerpts from *De Finibus* not only to be thorough in my account of the debate, but also to argue against Cooper and Waggle’s strictly ethical hedonist reading thereof. I will begin—in contrast to Woolf—with my analysis of primary sources from Epicurus because, as Waggle acknowledges, “as a methodological concern, we ought to use the primary materials as the starting point and basis for interpreting a philosopher, and then use the doxography or commentary to supplement the primary materials.”<sup>5</sup>

## The One and Only Epicurus: A Psychological Hedonist

One of the central debates between Cooper and Woolf is whether, in his *Letter to Menoeceus*, Epicurus uses the first person plural pronoun to refer to humans in general, or just to Epicurean disciples. For example, Epicurus writes, “the end of all our actions is to be free from pain and fear.”<sup>6</sup> Does he mean that the end of all Epicureans’ actions is to be free of pain and fear, which Cooper suggests is proof that Epicureans were setting an example for others to follow (ethical hedonism)? Or by “our actions,” does Epicurus mean all human action? This latter interpretation would imply a psychological hedonist position.

While Cooper claims that ‘we’ refers to ‘we Epicureans’ by reference to notation 131 of Diogenes’s *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*<sup>7</sup> (where the *Letter to Menoeceus* is found), there are many moments in Epicurus’s *Letter to Menoeceus* where ‘we’ refers to humans in general. Woolf points out several instances<sup>8</sup> in which the first-person plural pronoun clearly refers to humans in general, such as when Epicurus writes that “death...is nothing to us, seeing that, when we are, death is not come, and, when death is come, we are not.”<sup>9</sup> Because, as Woolf notes, death affects every person—not just followers of Epicurus—it is highly unlikely that the use of the first person plural here refers exclusively to Epicureans.<sup>10</sup> It is important to note, however, that both usages can be found throughout the letter.

Now that I have shown that Epicurus uses the first person plural to refer to all humans, and not only his followers, at least sometimes, it is important to inquire after the usage of ‘we’ isolated in the main passage in question (128-130), which I will quote from R.D. Hicks’s translation. This is one of the principal quotations that Cooper analyzes:

For the end of all our actions is to be free from pain and fear, and, when once we have attained all this, the tempest of the soul is laid; seeing that the *living creature has no need to go in search of something that is lacking, nor to look for anything else by which the good of the soul and of the body will be fulfilled* [emphasis added].<sup>11</sup>



Cooper argues that because it would be implausible to assume that all human actions are driven to be free of pain and fear, Epicurus was only referring to his followers,<sup>12</sup> for whom a simple absence of pain and fear was the highest form of pleasure.<sup>13</sup> However, both Woolf<sup>14</sup> and I find plausible the notion that all humans focus on being free of pain before pursuing sensual pleasures. Furthermore, as Woolf notes, the use of “living creature” in the next clause strongly suggests that this usage of ‘we’ refers to a larger population than just Epicureans.<sup>15</sup> Epicurus therefore means that the end of all human action is to be free of pain (which to Epicurus is synonymous with the highest form of pleasure). This is the position of a psychological hedonist.

Because the last sentence of the aforementioned quotation clarifies that the first person plural pronoun refers to all “living creature[s],” we can assume that this usage continues in the passage that immediately follows, including when Epicurus claims that

...pleasure is our first and kindred good. It is the starting point of every choice and of every aversion, and to it we come back, inasmuch as we make feeling the rule by which to judge of every good thing.<sup>16</sup>

Notice that Epicurus writes in the first clause that pleasure is “the starting point of every choice” without reference to a subject pronoun, so there is little reason to say that Epicurus means only Epicureans. Therefore, while at certain points in the *Letter to Menoecus* Epicurus uses ‘we’ to refer to ‘we Epicureans’, throughout the above section (128-130), Epicurus uses the first-person plural to refer to all humans (arguably all animals in general). This is strong evidence that Epicurus was a psychological hedonist.

There nonetheless remain a number of possible objections. Cooper,<sup>17</sup> and more recently Waggle,<sup>18</sup> maintain that the *Letter* was addressed to an Epicurean disciple lost in his ways, and thus the usage of ‘we’ must refer to ‘we Epicureans.’ Cyril Bailey<sup>19</sup> and Woolf, however,<sup>20</sup> regard the *Letter to Menoecus* as a work intended for an audience both within and beyond the Epicurean school. Even if the letter had been intended for one person, Epicurus would probably expect it to be circulated to others. Woolf also points out that even if

Epicurus imagined that only one set of eyes would read the letter, this would not preclude him from using the first-person plural pronoun to refer to all humans—after all, as Woolf quips, Epicureans are people too.<sup>21</sup>

Waggle has two additional major objections to the claim that Epicurus is a psychological hedonist. Drawing partly on Annas,<sup>22</sup> Woolf<sup>23</sup> argues that because Epicurus believed in free will, he could not have believed that pleasure motivates *all* human behavior. He cites Epicurus’s claim that “some things happen by necessity, others by chance, and others by our own agency...necessity is not answerable [to anyone]...[and] chance is unstable, while what occurs by our own agency is autonomous.”<sup>24</sup> But Waggle does not notice that this doctrine, which ascribes to humans free will within the limits of circumstance, is entirely compatible with psychological hedonism. To illustrate: “some things happen by necessity” could indicate that all human actions necessarily strive for pleasure, though we exercise “our own agency” when we choose how to go about attaining said pleasure. For example, person A and person B may both seek pleasure in all their actions by necessity. Person A may choose to take a risk and buy a lottery ticket with her two dollars in the hopes that she will get the pleasure of winning one million dollars in the future, while person B may choose to spend his two dollars on an iced coffee so that he has the guarantee of pleasure in the present. In this case, there is a necessity (seeking pleasure), a chance (maybe person A will win the lottery or maybe she wasted her money), and an autonomous choice (how to spend the two dollars). This passage is therefore compatible with psychological hedonism.

By a similar logic, Waggle argues that Epicurus’s belief that one should forgo a pleasure if it will cause pain in the future, and some pain should be endured for a greater payout of future pleasure, suggests that he is not a psychological hedonist.<sup>25</sup> Waggle contends that, if Epicurus were a psychological hedonist, he would not believe that humans were capable of such restraint, because they would be “programmed” to seek pleasure no matter what.<sup>26</sup> However, this is fallacious reasoning. Humans are intelligent enough to be able to plan for pleasure far into the future. In my previous example, person A did

not spend her two dollars on a present pleasure, but purchased her lottery ticket with the hope of attaining pleasure in the future.

As I hope to have shown from his *Letter To Menoeceus* and his doctrine of limited free will, Epicurus was a psychological hedonist as well as an ethical hedonist. Woolf and Waggle disagree because they read certain Epicurean axioms as suggesting otherwise. I will turn to these passages next.<sup>27</sup>

### **Epicurean Quotes and Axioms: Still Psychological Hedonism?**

Having concluded my discussion of Epicurus's *Letter to Menoeceus*, I can now turn to his *Principal Doctrine XXV*; in keeping with my methodological approach, I consider these one-sentence quotations, assembled by other Epicureans, less relevant than Epicurus's original work. They are nonetheless important to examine, not only because there is little complete extant primary source material to analyze, but also because a cursory reading of these quotations seems to suggest that Epicurus was simply an ethical hedonist. Firstly, Epicurus's *Principal Doctrine XXV* states:

If you do not, on every occasion, refer each of your actions to the goal of nature, but instead turn prematurely to some other [goal] in avoiding or pursuing [something], your actions will not be consistent with your principles (*logoi*).<sup>28</sup>

Cooper argues that this quotation is definitive proof of Epicurus's awareness that people can strive toward a goal contrary to nature (which for Epicurus would be the goal of attaining something unpleasurable).<sup>29</sup> It certainly seems this way at first glance, but Woolf demonstrates that this is not the correct interpretation. He translates *logoi* to mean "words" instead of "principles" so that the quotation reads "...your actions will not be consistent with your words." From there, he argues that the quotation refers to an Epicurean follower who *says* that they are committed to the ethics of another philosophical school (most likely the Aristotelian or Chrysippian tradition of seeking justice as the highest good), but nonetheless continues to strive in action for pleasure by necessity.<sup>30</sup> For Woolf *Principal Doctrine XXV*

supports the conclusion that Epicurus was a psychological hedonist because it argues that everyone acts towards pleasure, whether they are conscious of this goal or not.

Cooper, however, anticipates this interpretation and says that there is no evidence that Epicurus ever took the psychological position that people can be mistaken about the true goal of their actions.<sup>31</sup> Woolf does not address this claim.<sup>32</sup> There is still clear evidence that Epicurus did provide psychological accounts of human behavior, as found in Epicurean's Principal Doctrine VII:

Some men have sought to become famous and renowned, *thinking that thus they would make themselves secure against their fellow-men*. If, then, the life of such persons really was secure, they attained natural good; if, however, it was insecure, they have not attained the end *which by nature's own prompting they originally sought* [emphasis added].<sup>33</sup>

Here Epicurus tells us that all men who seek fame do so for security (which for him is synonymous with pleasure). If they do not attain it, the failure rests in the execution of their actions, but regardless they were motivated by "nature's own prompting." Therefore, Cooper is incorrect; Epicurus argued that everyone seeks pleasure in all their actions, even if they do not know it.<sup>34</sup>

Having shown that Epicurus argued that people always act in the pursuit of pleasure, regardless of what they think, I can now respond to Cooper's ethical hedonist reading of the two quotations that Woolf ignores. Cooper notes that Athenaeus quotes Epicurus as saying that "one must honour the noble, and the virtues and things like that, *if* they produce pleasure...[b]ut if they do not, one must bid them goodbye," and that "I [Epicurus] spit upon the noble and those who vainly admire it, whenever it causes no pleasure."<sup>35</sup> Cooper weakly argues here that these quotations imply that those who believe in justice as the highest good (most likely Stoics or followers of Aristotle, Plato, or Socrates) should change course and instead orientate their actions towards attaining pleasure as the highest good.<sup>36</sup> This may seem to suggest that Epicurus believed that people could act contrary to the pursuit of pleasure, marking him as an exclusively ethical hedonist. In

light of *Principal Doctrine* XXV, however, it seems to me that Epicurus means that the Aristotelians, Stoics, and other Hellenistic schools should change how they *speak* about what they are doing because their actions always pursue pleasure irrespective of their claims otherwise. Similar to Epicurus's claim in *Principal Doctrine* VII that those who seek fame do so for security without knowing it, he claims here that people who seek justice in all their actions do so for pleasure, even if they do not realize it. The problem for Epicurus is that he has an "aversion for 'empty words,'" and does not like when words contradict "the things that underlie them."<sup>37</sup> In other words, Epicurus dislikes when people say things that belie their actions.

My analysis of Epicurus's own writings has shown that he takes the psychological hedonist position that all human action is driven by pleasure, whether the agent knows it or not, making him a psychological hedonist. Again, I have focused on writings by Epicurus and his Epicurean contemporaries because they are more likely to reflect his beliefs accurately than a text written centuries later by a distant disciple or unassociated author. Regardless, I would like to address the doxographical accounts that Cooper and Woolf reference in their arguments. Therefore, I will turn to Cicero's *De Finibus* next.

### **Cicero, Torquatus, and Epicurean Hedonism**

Before analyzing Cicero's writing, I want to note some important contextual information provided by Waggle. He remarks that Cicero was opposed to Epicurean thinking and thus misrepresented much Epicurean thought, at times in a harshly biased and inaccurate way.<sup>38</sup> David Sedley also notes that Cicero irresponsibly cited Timocrates, a little known and disgruntled ex-Epicurean, to criticize Epicurus's conceptions of pleasure.<sup>39</sup> In addition, the sections in *De Finibus* that are of concern to this debate involve Cicero's questioning of the Epicurean follower Torquatus—an odd choice, Waggle remarks, considering that more predominant Epicurean philosophers like Philodemus and Lucretius were active when Cicero was writing.<sup>40</sup> Through careful analysis of Cicero and Torquatus's remarks as complements to the primary sources, we can still glean

some insights into Epicurean thought.

Of primary concern to Cooper and Woolf is Cicero's translation of Epicurus. For example, one such passage in which Cicero claims to quote Epicurus reads "*Ad haec [sc. voluptatem et dolorem] et quae sequamur et quae fugiamus [Epicurus] refert omnia,*"<sup>41</sup> which Rackham translates as "These [both pleasure and pain] Epicurus maintains lie at the root of every choice and avoidance."<sup>42</sup> Cooper, however, notes the use of the subjunctive and suggests that it should be read "to pleasure and pain Epicurus refers everything both that we ought to pursue and ought to flee."<sup>43</sup> In other words, we "ought" to seek pleasure and avoid pain, but we have the option not to—a translation that precludes psychological hedonism. Woolf<sup>44</sup> here agrees with Cooper<sup>45</sup> that the subjunctive could take on the indicative sense if Cicero intended to construct a "relative clause of characteristic."<sup>46</sup> Woolf provides only weak evidence that the context of the argument suggests an indicative treatment of the verb, but interestingly, and more substantially, he points out that "when Cicero in the *De Finibus* wants to express the idea that a thing ought to be done, he habitually uses either the gerundive or a verb meaning 'ought,' not the subjunctive."<sup>47</sup> I agree with Woolf that it is "more likely" that Rackham's translation is more accurate than Cooper's, but because this quotation is too unclear, I will not argue, as Woolf does, that it is "supportive of psychological hedonism."<sup>48</sup> In my view, this passage should no longer be considered in the debates about Epicurus because it is grammatically indeterminate and has the status of a secondary source (and a biased one at that). Scholars ought instead to apply the conclusions they draw from primary sources to the interpretation of such problematic excerpts. The texts that I have analyzed by Epicurus and his Epicurean contemporaries supply ample evidence for the psychological hedonist interpretation that Rackham's translation suggests.

More interestingly, Waggle brings up an excellent point regarding Cicero. He notes that *De Finibus* quotes Torquatus as saying:  
49

[Epicurus] holds pleasure to be the Chief Good, pain the Chief Evil. This he sets out to prove as follows: Every animal, as soon as it is born, seeks for pleasure, and delights in it as the Chief Good, while it recoils in pain as the Chief Evil, and so far as possible

avoids it. This it does as long as it remains unperverted, at the prompting of Nature's own unbiased and honest verdict.

In response, Waggle poses the question: "...If our nature were corrupted so that we did not seek pleasure, but sought pain, then what becomes of the force of the psychological hedonist starting point?"<sup>50</sup> According to the ethical hedonist line of reasoning, Epicurus would think that those who remain "unperverted" would seek pleasure as they ought to, whereas those who have been "perverted" to seek pain would do wrong. In light of my earlier discussion of Epicurus's psychology, however, the quotation can be reinterpreted to mean that people perverted from the will of nature are those who merely think or say that pleasure is not the highest goal while still seeking pleasure in their actions. Waggle's objection, then, is in fact further evidence that Epicurus was a psychological hedonist.

Relying primarily on the works of Epicurus himself, I have argued that Epicurus was a psychological hedonist. In his primary works, he wrote that the end of all human action is pleasure, and if someone says otherwise, their words contradict their actions. Whereas Woolf suggests that Epicurus could have been a psychological hedonist by arguing from analyses of secondary sources, I have forcefully argued that Epicurus was a psychological hedonist by analyzing primary Epicurean sources, especially Epicurus's own writings. I hope that this essay will be the impetus for a renewed debate as to whether Epicurus was a psychological hedonist, and encourage a methodological shift toward more primary and readily interpretable sources. It is also my hope that this essay will spark a reconsideration of the wide-ranging impact of Epicurus's normative hedonist ideas, some of the most influential in the Hellenistic world, through the lens of psychological hedonism.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> John Cooper, "Pleasure and Desire in Epicurus," in *Reason and Emotion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), esp. 485-494.

- <sup>2</sup> Raphael Woolf, "What Kind of Hedonist was Epicurus?", *Phronesis* 49, no. 4 (2004): 303-322.
- <sup>3</sup> Larry Waggle, "Epicurus: Psychological or Ethical Hedonist?", *Revista de Filosofia* 57, no. 3 (2007): 73-88.
- <sup>4</sup> Larry Waggle, "Epicurus: Psychological or Ethical Hedonist?", *Revista de Filosofia* 57, no. 3 (2007): 76-78.
- <sup>5</sup> Larry Waggle, "Epicurus: Psychological or Ethical Hedonist?", *Revista de Filosofia* 57, no. 3 (2007): 78.
- <sup>6</sup> Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, trans. R.D. Hicks (London: Heinemann, 1925), 653.
- <sup>7</sup> John Cooper, "Pleasure and Desire in Epicurus," in *Reason and Emotion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 488.
- <sup>8</sup> Raphael Woolf, "What Kind of Hedonist was Epicurus?", *Phronesis* 49, no. 4 (2004): 314-15.
- <sup>9</sup> Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, trans. R.D. Hicks (London: Heinemann, 1925), 651.
- <sup>10</sup> Raphael Woolf, "What Kind of Hedonist was Epicurus?", *Phronesis* 49, no. 4 (2004): 315.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 653-655.
- <sup>12</sup> John Cooper, "Pleasure and Desire in Epicurus," in *Reason and Emotion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 487.
- <sup>13</sup> Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, trans. R.D. Hicks (London: Heinemann, 1925), 653.
- <sup>14</sup> Raphael Woolf, "What Kind of Hedonist was Epicurus?", *Phronesis* 49, no. 4 (2004): 315.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 315-316.
- <sup>16</sup> Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, trans. R.D. Hicks (London: Heinemann, 1925), 655.
- <sup>17</sup> John Cooper, "Pleasure and Desire in Epicurus," in *Reason and Emotion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 488-489.
- <sup>18</sup> Larry Waggle, "Epicurus: Psychological or Ethical Hedonist?", *Revista de Filosofia* 57, no. 3 (2007): 79-80.
- <sup>19</sup> Cyril Bailey, *Epicurus: The Extant Remains* (Oxford: Oxford Press, 1926), 327.
- <sup>20</sup> Raphael Woolf, "What Kind of Hedonist was Epicurus?", *Phronesis* 49, no. 4 (2004): 314.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>22</sup> Larry Waggle, "Epicurus: Psychological or Ethical Hedonist?", *Revista de Filosofia* 57, no. 3 (2007): 84-88.
- <sup>23</sup> Julia Annas, "Epicurus on Agency," in *Passions and Perceptions*, eds. Jacques Brunschwig and Martha Nussbaum (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 53-71.



- <sup>24</sup> Epicurus, "Letter to Menoeceus," in *The Epicurus Reader*, eds. Lloyd Gerson and Brad Inwood (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994), 133.
- <sup>25</sup> Larry Waggle, "Epicurus: Psychological or Ethical Hedonist?," *Revista de Filosofia* 57, no. 3 (2007): 84-88.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.
- <sup>27</sup> Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, trans. R.D. Hicks (London: Heinemann, 1925), 655.
- <sup>28</sup> Here I am using Cooper's translation found on p. 490 for sake of argument.
- <sup>29</sup> John Cooper, "Pleasure and Desire in Epicurus," in *Reason and Emotion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 490.
- <sup>30</sup> Raphael Woolf, "What Kind of Hedonist was Epicurus?," *Phronesis* 49, no. 4 (2004): 320-322.
- <sup>31</sup> John Cooper, "Pleasure and Desire in Epicurus," in *Reason and Emotion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 493-494.
- <sup>32</sup> When addressing this claim on pages 320-322 there was no evidence of a response.
- <sup>33</sup> Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, trans. R.D. Hicks (London: Heinemann, 1925), 665.
- <sup>34</sup> Woolf uses this quotation elsewhere (p. 315-316), but not to respond to this claim.
- <sup>35</sup> John Cooper, "Pleasure and Desire in Epicurus," in *Reason and Emotion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 491-492.
- <sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 492.
- <sup>37</sup> Woolf (p. 320) quotes here from Epicurus's *Letter to Herodotus* 37-38.
- <sup>38</sup> Larry Waggle, "Epicurus: Psychological or Ethical Hedonist?," *Revista de Filosofia* 57, no. 3 (2007): 77-78.
- <sup>39</sup> David Sedley, "Epicurus and His Professional Rivals," in *Cahiers de Philologie: Études sur l'épicurisme antique*, eds. Jean Bollack and Andre Lacks (Tourcoing: Publications de l'Université de Lille III, 1976), 131.
- <sup>40</sup> Larry Waggle, "Epicurus: Psychological or Ethical Hedonist?," *Revista de Filosofia* 57, no. 3 (2007): 78.
- <sup>41</sup> John Cooper, "Pleasure and Desire in Epicurus," in *Reason and Emotion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 488.
- <sup>42</sup> Cicero, *De Finibus*, trans. H. Rackham (London: Heinemann, 1931), 25.
- <sup>43</sup> John Cooper, "Pleasure and Desire in Epicurus," in *Reason and Emotion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 489.
- <sup>44</sup> Raphael Woolf, "What Kind of Hedonist was Epicurus?," *Phronesis* 49, no. 4 (2004): 304-306.
- <sup>45</sup> John Cooper, "Pleasure and Desire in Epicurus," in *Reason and Emotion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 489.
- <sup>46</sup> See *Allen and Greenough's New Latin Grammar*, paragraph 534.

<sup>47</sup> Raphael Woolf, "What Kind of Hedonist was Epicurus?" *Phronesis* 49, no. 4 (2004): 304-306.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 412

<sup>49</sup> Waggle (p. 81) quoting *De Finibus*, 1:20-30.

<sup>50</sup> Larry Waggle, "Epicurus: Psychological or Ethical Hedonist?" *Revista de Filosofia* 57, no. 3 (2007):

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**DECAFFEINATION AND META-CHOICE:  
FREEDOM AND ACTION WITHIN THE  
TERRORISM/ANTI-TERRORISM DISCOURSE**

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**Abstract.** The following paper interrogates the possibility of freedom and action within the discourse of terrorism/anti-terrorism in the Australian context. First, it examines Louis Althusser's concept of interpellation, in turn pairing it with Slavoj Žižek's notion of 'decaffeination' to challenge the liberal understanding of political agency constituted by personal freedom. It then utilizes this framework to analyze the Australian Anti-Terrorism Act 2005 and the treatment of Zaky Mullah, an Australian citizen and the first individual indicted as a terrorist under an earlier iteration of that law. Finally, it argues for recasting choice as 'meta-choice' in order to problematize freedom and action within the Western liberal democratic imaginary.

Popular understandings of subjectivity within the Western liberal democratic imaginary center around a subject constituted by personal freedom. While it is assumed that the Western liberal democratic subject can freely express herself through speech and action, this paper will argue that the scope of the subject's political participation is always circumscribed and not totally free. Following the work of Slavoj Žižek, this paper will argue that liberal democratic ideology functions through a logic of 'decaffeination'—the removal of radical alterity and the possibility of its expression—which ultimately precludes subversive political expression. Further, it will elucidate the insidious function of terrorism/anti-terrorism discourse in the construction of a decaffeinated political subject within Western liberal democratic discourse.

This paper understands discourse in the Foucauldian sense of the textual and linguistic representation of ideological power relations.<sup>1</sup> Thus the positioning of subjects—in this case within the discourse of terrorism/anti-terrorism—plays a powerful role in designating their alignment within other binary constructs, such as Australian/foreign, Australian/Muslim, and terrorist/subject. In this way, the dominant ideological power relations of a particular context function through the

subject's adoption of certain discursive identities. Later in the paper, the good faith/bad faith binary will be introduced as one such discursive marker in the contemporary Australian legal paradigm. Here too, the paper argues that the positioning of the subject as acting either in good faith or bad faith is a function of power relations acting upon the subject to condition the possibility of her action.

I will begin by examining Althusser's theory of interpellation and Žižek's concept of 'decaffeination' to articulate how a subject is formed through discourse. I will then analyze the Australian Anti-Terrorism Act 2005 as an example of one such process of discursive subject formation, illustrating how the law's good faith/bad faith distinction 'decaffeinate' subversive political actors. This paper then turns to the case of Australian citizen Zaky Mallah, the first individual indicted under the 2003 iteration of that law, to explicate how the reception of an individual political actor betrays the limits of the liberal democratic frame's ability to represent an alter subject. The paper ends with a discussion of how the recasting of freedom and choice as 'meta-choice' better reflects the subject's possibilities within the Western liberal democratic imaginary.

Ultimately, I argue that the subject of Western liberal democratic discourse does not have the freedom of action that she is imagined to have. Rather, the violent logic through which the subject is created precludes the possibility of freedom and action for the radically othered subject. The rethinking of freedom and choice as 'meta-choice' opens a new intellectual space for political critique and action.

Althusser's theory of Ideology and interpellation presents a Marxist narrative of the constitution of the political subject that helps us understand how the tension between good faith and bad faith functions according to a logic of 'decaffeination' within Western liberal democratic discourse. Althusser shows how the individual undergoes a process of subject formation that identifies her with her specific ideological configuration, thereby constructing the individual as a subject.<sup>2</sup> 'Ideological configuration' refers here to the dominant material and socio-symbolic conditions in which the subject is embedded. Because she is situated within an ideological configuration, the individual is constituted as subject in relation to the

configuration—for example, as a subject of the law, of the state, and of normative morality. Through this process, Ideology emerges as the psychic relationship between the subject and what Althusser terms the Other Subject—the apparatus of the dominant mode of production.<sup>3</sup> For Althusser, Ideology is a repressive state mechanism that serves to fix subjects within a certain ideological formation in order to perpetuate and reproduce the current means of production.<sup>4</sup> In his theory, the Other Subject exerts its ideological power on the subjectivated subject through the Ideological State Apparatus. The subject is thus constituted as a “mirror-structure”<sup>5</sup> to the Other Subject; in other words, the subject internalizes the power of the Other Subject, materially reproducing it by recognizing herself as having a place within the Other Subject’s ideological structure.<sup>6</sup> Through the process of recognition and subjectivation, the subject comes to constitute the dominant Ideology “all by themselves,”<sup>7</sup> pre-consciously. Indeed, the subject does not consciously choose the ideological configurations it comes to internalize and reproduce. Within this theoretical formation, subjectivity is structured around the Other Subject, and it is interpellated by the ideology of Western liberal democracy through its instantiations within law and politics.

Building on Althusser’s theory and focusing on the ideological configuration of Western liberal democracy, Žižek terms ‘decaffeination’ the notion that “today’s tolerant liberal multiculturalism [is] an experience of Other [sic] deprived of its Otherness.”<sup>8</sup> Žižek asserts that the liberal democratic imaginary constructs alterity as ‘decaffeinated’ by removing the subversive or dangerous element of Otherness—its “caffeine.”<sup>9</sup> In Althusser’s terms, decaffeination operates through interpellation to reshape dangerous Otherness or alterity into the acceptable, normative subjectivity of the Other Subject. In order to become a subject one must first renounce conflict with the ideological mandate of the Other Subject, thereby divesting oneself of ‘caffeine.’ In this sense, the logic of interpellation within the Western liberal democratic imaginary requires the violent rejection of alterity.

In light of Žižek and Althusser, this paper will now examine one ideological configuration in which subjects are constituted within

the contemporary Australian legal paradigm. The Australian Anti-Terrorism Act 2005 is the law that contains the definition of ‘terrorism’ operative in juridical discourse.<sup>10</sup> The Act aims to provide the Australian government with a legal mechanism to dissuade, manage, or prosecute both citizens and foreign nationals who engage in terrorist acts in Australia and overseas. Thus the act serves the dual function of determining the concept of terrorism and designating the legal culpability of its perpetrators. The Act includes provisions for the criminalization of sedition and the supply of funds to terror organizations. In this way, the Act circumscribes terrorist acts as outside the scope of the subject’s possibility of action.

Most of the Act has been uncontroversial, and many countries have enacted similar measures and legislation. However, what concerns our current question is the exception for acts made in ‘good faith’—clause 80.3.<sup>11</sup> This section of the Act supposedly provides the option for someone found in breach of sections 80.1 and 80.2 to defend her actions on the basis of “good faith.”<sup>12</sup> Here, the incomplete and ambiguous designation ‘good faith’ provides an insight into the discursive movement through which the subject is constituted. Both 80.1 and 80.2 relate to sedition—conduct or speech inciting people to rebel against the state. The act reads:

“Sections 80.1 and 80.2 do not apply to a person who:

- (a) tries in good faith to show that any of the following persons are mistaken in any of his or her counsels, policies or actions:
  - (i) the Sovereign;
  - (ii) the Governor-General;
  - (iii) the Governor of a State;
  - (iv) the Administrator of a Territory;
  - (v) an adviser of any of the above;
  - (vi) a person responsible for the government of another country; or
- (b) points out in good faith errors or defects in the following, with a view to reforming those errors or defects:
  - (i) the Government of the Commonwealth, a State or a Territory;
  - (ii) the Constitution;
  - (iii) legislation of the Commonwealth, a State, a

- Territory or another country;
- (iv) the administration of justice of or in the Commonwealth, a State, a Territory or another country; or
  - (c) urges in good faith another person to attempt to lawfully procure a change to any matter established by law, policy or practice in the Commonwealth, a State, a Territory or another country; or
  - (d) points out in good faith any matters that are producing, or have a tendency to produce, feelings of ill-will or hostility between different groups, in order to bring about the removal of those matters; or
  - (e) does anything in good faith in connection with an industrial dispute or an industrial matter; or
  - (f) publishes in good faith a report or commentary about a matter of public interest.<sup>13</sup>

While ‘good faith’ promises that a well-intentioned subject may challenge the discourse of terrorism/anti-terrorism with immunity, this is not the case. Rather, in order to claim good faith in the first place, the subject must accept the mandates of her interpellation. In this sense, rejecting the terms of the Ideological Other’s interpellation constitutes the subject as already in ‘bad faith.’ Caffeine, the dangerous part of alterity that threatens the norm, always already positions the unruly subject outside to the norm. The caffeinated subject’s inability to obey the demands of interpellation challenges to the socio-symbolic hegemony of the Other. In this way, a subject who resists interpellation threatens Ideology’s ability to perpetuate the conditions of its possibility. To avoid this danger, the decaffeinated subject is posited as a condition of the legality of an action. In this way, the subject is always already prevented by virtue of her ‘bad faith’ from legally articulating her position. Here, the stipulation for ‘good faith’ betrays its *raison d’être* as a restraint on the possibility of action for the subject.

By including within ‘good faith’ only those already decaffeinated, terrorism/anti-terrorism discourse effectively denies protection to a caffeinated or dangerous subject. Furthermore, the basis on which one is constituted as a subject stipulate that one may

only speak the language of the norm. Paradoxically, the subject becomes decaffeinated insofar as her supposed freedom allows her to articulate only her embeddedness as subject, in turn foreclosing the possibility of subversive action. The legal provisions that supposedly allow for an articulation of alterity demand as a precondition of legibility that the subject be always already decaffeinated. By this logic, anybody who seeks to justify an alternative ideological position would be branded a terrorist—and thus predetermined as dangerous and unintelligible. As such, terrorism/anti-terrorism discourse as instantiated in contemporary legal language demarcates the limits of legibility of political subjects, and in this way paradoxically uses the freedom it provides to prevent alterity's expression and action.

We can find the logic of anti-terrorist laws in other political discourses. In an interview, prominent, self-proclaimed 'grassroots' Australian politician Jacqui Lambie pronounces:

“Well you know it's either one [Sharia Law] or the other [Australian Law]. You're either an allegiance [sic] to...Australian law and show your allegiance to our Constitution...but you can't have 50-50.”<sup>14</sup>

Lambie's claims disclose the paradox of terrorism/anti-terrorism discourse within the Australian context. As a signatory to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), Australia has affirmed Article 18—also known as the freedom of religion clause.<sup>15</sup> As such, subjects under Australian law are supposedly afforded the freedom to practice their own religion. However, as Lambie's comments show, this freedom can only be expressed insofar as the subject maintains her loyalty to the modalities of its interpellation. If the subject aligns with the mandates of the Ideological Other, here instituted as the Australian Constitution, then the caffeine of her subjectivity already conflicts with the norm. In this case, we can see the relegation of Sharia Law outside of the normative schema. For this reason, the subject's possible “allegiance” to Sharia Law is always already perceived as a challenge to the socio-symbolic order—a challenge to the hegemonic authority of the Other Subject as sovereign. This notion is mirrored in Yassir Morsi's discussion of



confession in relation to Muslim alterity in Australia. He notes “the act of requiring us [Australian Muslims] to confess our loyalty...only reaffirms the anatomy of the racial Other who is imagined much like...the benign multicultural ethnic who is concealing a violent streak.”<sup>16</sup> Here, we see the strict demands of entry into an Australian identity: one must renounce the differences that appear to be in conflict with the Ideological Other. In this sense, freedom and the possibility of action is again paradoxically unfreedom—only extended to those who are already designated as decaffeinated subjects.

We can expand our discussion by examining how decaffeination describes the concrete reality of the subject in Australian political discourse. In particular, the media representations of Zaky Mallah demonstrate the logic of decaffeinated interpellation—how radically altern subjects are not afforded even the basic freedom to engage and act in political discourse.

As an Australian citizen and the first individual indicted as a terrorist for threatening violence against Commonwealth officials.<sup>17</sup> Mallah was ultimately acquitted of terrorism charges in 2005 but convicted of criminal charges for threats of violence. In 2011, Mallah travelled to Syria, where he followed the Arab Spring, filling non-combat roles in support of the Free Syrian Army. Afterward, he prepared a report that sought to instruct potential recruits willing to travel to conflict-ridden regions in how to do so without violating Australian law. The report became controversial and was widely reported on in the media. For example, on the Australian political talk show *Q&A* in 2015, Mallah asked a pre-approved question about anti-terrorism policy to a government official, Stephen Ciobo. Mallah asked Ciobo, “What would have happened if my [terrorism] case had been decided by the Minister and not the courts?”<sup>18</sup> Ciobo responded that he thought that Mallah had only been acquitted on a technicality; he would have happily removed Mallah from the country had it been up to him. Mallah’s much maligned response is emblem of caffeination: “The Liberals now have just justified to many Australian Muslims in the community tonight to leave and go to Syria and join ISIS because of ministers like him.”<sup>19</sup> Mallah’s position—that the discourse of terrorism/anti-terrorism feeds into the creation of domestic

terrorism—is an obvious challenge to the Other Subject’s sovereignty over the normative boundaries of political opinion.

Prime Minister Tony Abbott responded to this incident by asking the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), which hosts *Q&A*, “whose side are you on?”<sup>20</sup> further commenting that “heads should roll” for allowing Mallah to even ask the question.<sup>21</sup> Here, the delimitation of the caffeinated subject’s ability to act is clear: Mallah, a caffeinated subject, should not be allowed to engage in political debate. Ciobo and Abbot incarnate the Other Subject in their violent repudiation of Mallah’s position. Although Mallah had been formally acquitted of terrorist charges, his interpellation as a terrorist within terrorism/anti-terrorism discourse immanently precluded him from asking a question in ‘good faith.’ Rather, Mallah is always already in ‘bad faith.’

What possibilities remain, then, for the affirmation of authentic alterity and caffeinated action? While the workings of Ideology effectively eliminate the subject’s freedom of choice within terrorism/anti-terrorism discourse, Žižek’s notion of “meta-choice” may recuperate the possibility of dissenting critique and action.<sup>22</sup> ‘Meta-choice’ rethinks the conventional understanding of choice to acknowledge the role of discourse in shaping the parameters within which subject must act. In this way, meta-choice creates a new avenue for choice that does not reconstitute the dominant ideological configuration.

Žižek makes plain how Ideology conditions action in the Western liberal democratic context. The compulsion implicit in the logic of interpellation means that while the political subject is “given a free choice, the conditions in which [we] must make it render the choice unfree.”<sup>23</sup> Thus, the notion of free choice is better reimagined as meta-choice; that is, the choice within the bounds of interpellation is not a choice in the usual sense but rather “a choice of the modality of the choice itself.”<sup>24</sup> In this way, we are only able to performatively choose our subjection with regards to terrorism/anti-terrorism discourse, the substance of the choice already predetermined by interpellation and its consequent decaffeination. Nevertheless, by relocating the mechanism of choice through the Žižekian notion of

meta-choice, the subject may come to reject the pre-formulated categories of choice implicit within interpellation.

In his debate with Noam Chomsky, Michel Foucault argued that “the real political task in our contemporary society is to criticize the workings of institutions that appear to be both neutral and independent, to criticize and attack them in such a manner that the political violence that has always exercised itself obscurely through them will be unmasked, so that one can fight against them.”<sup>25</sup> Following Foucault, this paper argues that an understanding of the Western liberal democratic subject as conditioned by ‘meta-choice’ provides a deeper understanding of the opaque power relations that pervade the legal and political institutions in which discourse is instantiated. Through an understanding of how structures function to limit freedom, and thereby the possibility of action, it hopes to open a space to challenge normative, interpellative categories and augment the possibility of political action for the subject.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Part One* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 1-15.

<sup>2</sup> Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses”, in *Lenin and Philosophy and other Essays*, ed. Louis Althusser (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971). 127-193.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 180.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 182.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

<sup>8</sup> Slavoj Žižek, “A Cup of Decaf Reality,” accessed June 13, 2016, <http://www.lacan.com/zizekdecaf.htm>.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Government of Australia, “Anti-Terrorism Act (No. 2) 2005,” 2005, accessed June 14, 2016, <https://www.legislation.gov.au/Details/C2006C00754>.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> New Matilda, “The Transcript: Jacqui Lambie Declares War on ‘Shari’s Law’, and the Queen’s English,” Australian Politics, September 21, 2014, accessed June 13,

2016, <https://newmatilda.com/2014/09/21/transcript-jacqui-lambie-declares-war-sharis-law-and-queens-english/>.

<sup>15</sup> United Nations, "International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights," 1996, accessed June 14, 2016,

<http://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/ccpr.aspx>.

<sup>16</sup> Yassir Morsi, "Coercing Confessions: Islamophobia and the Demand for Muslim Loyalty," October 1, 2014, accessed June 14, 2016,

<http://www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2014/10/01/4098178.htm>.

<sup>17</sup> Koziol, M, "Who is Zaky Mallah? Questions asked following controversial television appearance" 2015, accessed April 12, 2017,

<http://www.smh.com.au/national/who-is-zaky-mallah-questions-asked-following-controversial-tv-appearance-20150623-ghvbps.html>

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Massola, James. "Whose Side Are You On? Tony Abbott Lashes ABC Program." The Sydney Morning Herald, June 23, 2015. Accessed April 12,

2017. <http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/whose-side-are-you-on-tony-abbott-lashes-abcs-qa-program-20150623-ghvd0l.html>

<sup>21</sup> Bourke & Knott, "Q&A: Tony Abbott says 'heads should roll' over Zaky Mallah episode, orders inquiry" 2015, accessed April 12, 2017,

<http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/qa-tony-abbott-says-heads-should-roll-over-zaky-mallah-episode-orders-inquiry-20150625-ghxeti.html>

<sup>22</sup> Slavoj Žižek, "Against Human Rights," *New Left Review* 34 (2005), 118.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid

<sup>25</sup> Foucault, M "Justice vs Power" 1971, accessed April 12, 2017,

<http://www.desrealitat.org/2013/05/foucault-chomsky-full-version-transcript.html>

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**YES LOITERING:  
DESTITUTING SURVEILLANCE IN THE POST-  
ORWELLIAN ERA**

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**Abstract.** If George Orwell’s classic vision of society under surveillance is to be believed, the proliferation of technologies from CCTV cameras to data-tracking programs poses an existential threat to political life as such. But what if, as Giovanna Borradori argues, the Orwellian model fails to grasp the specific dynamics of contemporary surveillance, in which subjects record themselves and each other as much as they are recorded by institutional actors? This paper draws on Giorgio Agamben’s “What is a Destituent Power?” to read the ways in which individuals, including artists and social media users, take surveillance into their own hands to “deactivate” its regulative authority.

In an article entitled, “Hacktivist (Pre)Occupations: Self-Surveillance, Participation, and Public Space,” Carolyn Guertin details the technologies of surveillance that have proliferated in physical and virtual spaces since the 1990s.<sup>1</sup> From CCTV systems to data-tracking viruses to software like ECHELON, which can listen in on any message transmitted through public digital channels, “we are now almost constantly photographed, tracked, monitored, recorded, and stored.”<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, we are largely aware of surveillance—the fact of it, if not always the extent—yet its methods are so unobtrusive and its sites so unavoidable that we accept it without complaint. “George Orwell would shudder at what we submit to,” Guertin speculates.<sup>3</sup>

It was Orwell, after all, who popularized a certain vision of the surveilled life as a nightmare of authoritarianism. In *1984*, surveillance cameras, posters, and unexplained disappearances make it well known that all activity in dystopian Oceania is subjected to the constant gaze of the obscure, even occult authority, Big Brother. Under his watchful, sovereign eye, civilians have no choice but to conform their actions to a model of good behavior predetermined by the state, foreclosing any possibility of originality, spontaneity, or dissent—modes of being and acting that Hannah Arendt named as conditions for politics and the

authentic, human life.<sup>4</sup> In Orwell’s world of ubiquitous government surveillance, the freedom to act ‘as oneself’ without fear of punishment comes if one can escape visibility—opening a space for privacy outside the scope of the gaze—or not at all.

As the surveillance apparatus metastasizes throughout spaces both online and offline, public and private, Orwell’s trembling specter portends a bleak future—but does his prediction reflect the reality of our present? According to Giovanna Borradori, contemporary surveillance operates through fundamentally different dynamics than those at play in *1984*.<sup>5</sup> Borradori notes that Big Brother’s monopoly on watching has been broken: we are all captured, analyzed, and indexed not only by private companies and the state, but by ordinary others as well, as we glimpse ourselves and each other on CCTV monitors and social media. This multiplication of lines of sight is significant, Borradori suggests, because surveillance functions by cultivating a kind of self-consciousness: “to be the object of monitoring,” she writes, is not just to be monitored but “to *know* that one’s every action is observed, recorded, and evaluated...”<sup>6</sup> We are seen by surveillance, but we also see *through* it; in our efforts to conform with the state’s norms of behavior, we imaginatively assume Big Brother’s visual perspective and judge what we see accordingly. An expansion of the “parameters of visibility,”<sup>7</sup> then, subverts the sovereign claim to objectivity,

...transforming surveillance from a dynamic of the microscope to one where knowledge and images of unexpected intensity and assorted distortions cascade from viewer to viewer and across institutions, emerging in unpredictable configurations and combinations, while undermining the distinction between watcher and watched.<sup>8</sup>

This paper explores the explosion of gazes and self-conscious subjectivities that proliferate as increasing numbers of diverse individuals participate in both surveillance and self-exposure, or self-surveillance. As not only social media users, but also artists appropriate surveillance technologies for aesthetic and documentary purposes, they re-signify the traces of information that security agencies and data



brokers collect. In so doing, they disrupt Big Brother's privileged claim to knowledge and empty surveillance of its regulatory authority through a force that Giorgio Agamben terms "destituent power."<sup>9</sup>

In his essay "What is a Destituent Power?" Agamben expands on his earlier ontology of politics and life, which distinguishes between *form-of-life*, the distinctly human life that emerges only within a social and political context, and *bare life*, the sheer fact of biological life, separated out from its form and constitutively excluded from the realm of politics.<sup>10</sup> To be sovereign is to have the power to effect this division, designating the borders of the *polis* and relegating the sub- and non-human to the outside, where they are exposed to extrajudicial violence. Agamben argues that the revolutionary politics of the leftist and democratic traditions, which predicate their power on the seizure or reconstitution of sovereignty, can only reproduce this structure, perpetuating "the incessant, inevitable dialectic between constituent power and constituted power, violence which makes the law and violence that preserves it."<sup>11</sup> In contrast with this "constituent power," Agamben elaborates the possibility of a "destituent power...which, in deposing the law once and for all," institutes a nonviolent politics that need not form itself on the basis of exclusion.<sup>12</sup>

For Agamben, destituent power cannot be thought without a reorientation of political thought around the idea of *use*, a mode of action whose conceptual lineage reveals its hidden ontological significance. In attempting to recuperate the original connotation of the term as a "fundamental concept...of politics," Agamben diverges from typical leftist thought, which centers "production and praxis" as its core categories.<sup>13</sup> Agamben's writing suggests that these latter notions of political action implicate a conception of use, but subsume it into a larger process: one uses something only *in order* to produce or effect a change. This is consistent with the "strong 'utilitarian' connotation...that modernity has invested" in the terms "'use' and 'to use'...transforming their original sense."<sup>14</sup> The retooling, as it were, of "to use" as the verb of instrumentality—of a transitive process in which a subject acts on an object not for its own sake, but in reference to an external end—belies its semantic roots in the ancient Greek word *chresthai*. *Chresthai*'s unusual grammatical status as a verb of the "middle

voice,” which is “neither active nor passive, but the two together,” posits a complicated ontological relationship between its subject and object.<sup>15</sup> Unlike other verbs, which construct the subject as a discrete entity that takes a passive object, *chresthai* suggests that the subject relates to the object as “both agent and site” of a “process” that is mutually transformative.<sup>16</sup> As the mediated mode through which the subject engages the world, use brings the subject into inextricable relation with an outside, constituting the Arendtian realm of politics as that in which “the subject that testifies of the affection received insofar as it is in relation with another body... (or with one’s own body as other).”<sup>17</sup>

The ontological and political implications of *chresthai* raise the question of the mode of use in which the human form-of-life is constituted as such—what Aristotle termed the *ergon*, or “proper work,” of man.<sup>18</sup> At stake in the *ergon* is “the possibility of assigning [man] a proper nature and essence...[and] of defining his happiness and politics”—of deciding, in other words, the criteria of inclusion in form-of-life.<sup>19</sup> The establishment in law of a determinate *ergon* for the human is therefore essential to the constitution of sovereignty, which finds itself in delineating a domain of bare life outside that of form-of-life.

Agamben draws on Averroes and Dante to assert, *pace* Aristotle, that human life has no proper use, or *ergon*, but is rather “*argos*, without work, *inoperative*...which is to say without a specific vocation...”<sup>20</sup> In the inoperative mode, one makes use of objects in a sensuous manner that exceeds any end or justification, acting as a “being of pure potentiality...that no identity and no work could exhaust.”<sup>21</sup> This is a new ontological model of the human, one that centers not on the *ergon* but rather on the human’s unique ability to act in a way that renders any conception of its ultimate purpose or meaning null, “opening...[human works and productions] to a new possible use.”<sup>22</sup> The human’s inoperativity thus forms the foundation of a new destituent politics, which enacts form-of-life without the sovereign constitution of an *ergon*.

Destituent power eschews the destructive and violent strategies of revolutionary politics, working instead to *make use* of the existing government apparatus so as to “render it inoperative.”<sup>23</sup> Without

necessarily contradicting the demands of sovereign law, the human “simply use[s] them” as media through which it enacts its inoperative form-of-life.<sup>24</sup> In doing so, the human transforms its relationship to itself and the world, “deposing” the authority of the ruling regime and voiding the exclusion of bare life.<sup>25</sup> To destitute the governing power is not merely to resist its control but to “immediately inaugurate...a new reality” in which the subject is immanently ungovernable.<sup>26</sup>

In light of Agamben’s work, the laws of acceptable conduct that surveillance enforces can be read as a kind of *ergon*, an operative conception of the human that decides inclusion in the political body. As the subject calibrates its performance to this notion of the “being-in-act proper to man,” the range of its possibilities for free speech and action constricts, and its activity is reduced from the medium through which the human expresses its “pure potentiality” to a tactical performance aimed at appeasing its observers.<sup>27</sup> The surveillance apparatus exerts control by instrumentalizing and rationalizing life: it demands that all activity be justified by a reason—a reference to the *ergon*—that identifies it as a means towards a larger purpose. Even if the presence of the gaze inspires no change in a subject’s conduct, it nonetheless affects the subject’s self-understanding and ontological relation to their own actions—in other words, its mode of use, which is rendered operative.

As the dialectic of surveillance and self-consciousness refracts across a multiplicity of scopic sites, such as CCTV and social media, a new politics of the gaze emerges. Unlike the Orwellian model of resistance, which requires the destruction or at least avoidance of surveillance to recuperate an autonomous subjectivity, contemporary artists and social media users appropriate, repurpose, and retool the gaze towards an inoperative mode of use. This is an exercise of destituent power that works within the context of surveillance to “deactivate”<sup>28</sup> its regulative authority, re-signifying the experience of being watched rather than eliminating it. When the surveillance apparatus loses control of the meaning of the images or data that it captures, it can no longer fix the object of its gaze within a legible, knowable framework. Rather, a number of aesthetic and narrative interpretations of surveilled intelligence become possible, affecting

these documents such that their use exceeds the instrumental *ergon* prescribed by the powers-that-be. By making inoperative use of surveillance technology, these actors liberate public space from rationalist logic, reopening the possibility of loitering, or conducting oneself in public space for no reason.

In 2007, filmmaker Manu Luksch completed *FACELESS*, a feature-length film composed entirely of footage Luksch directed with actors in front of CCTV cameras in the city with the highest density of these recording systems, London.<sup>29</sup> Privacy legislation in the United Kingdom “gives individuals the right to access personal data in computer filing systems”; the law also stipulates that the faces of third parties captured in the footage be obscured before its release.<sup>30</sup> Luksch makes of this restriction an aesthetic and narrative conceit: in a dystopian society in which the adoption of a “Real-Time Calendar” has eliminated the concepts of past and present and people have no faces, a woman suddenly wakes up with a face.<sup>31</sup> The inversion cuts both ways: as the functional locations and viewpoints of the surveillance apparatus produce Luksch’s cinematic images, her aesthetic re-signification of the CCTV image “transforms oppressively familiar views of the city into locations of a fateful scenario.”<sup>32</sup> Seen through the gaze of Luksch’s cameras, surveilled space no longer appears as a rationally regulated domain, but as a world full of creative possibility: “Why bring in additional cameras, when much private and public urban space is already covered from numerous angles?”<sup>33</sup> This re-thematization of rationalized public space attests to the power of art-making as an inoperative mode of using surveillance technology, destituting its interpellative authority and “opening [it] to a new possible use” and meaning.<sup>34</sup>

The aesthetic exercise of destituent power can inspire further strategies for undermining the sovereign use of surveillance. Years before *FACELESS*, a performance troupe known as the Surveillance Camera Players set out to challenge two intertwined “tools of social control”: the ubiquitous disciplinary gaze of CCTV systems and the hegemony of “consumer culture” over mainstream entertainment.<sup>35</sup> From 1996 to 2006, the group staged theatrical productions, including Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, in front of security cameras in tongue-in-

cheek sympathy for bored guards, as “these cameras...had lowered crime rates so profoundly that...they left...guards without anything to watch.”<sup>36</sup> Similarly to Luksch, the Players’ method made inoperative use of surveillance cameras, treating them as both medium and audience. In addition, however, the Players’ work provided the condition of possibility for further destitutive action: the Institute for Applied Autonomy, a hacktivist group, repurposed the troupe’s “map of all of the CCTV locations in public space in New York City...and created...a web-based app called iSee that helps individuals plan a route that avoids detection...a ‘path of least surveillance.’”<sup>37</sup> This resource turns some control over the surveillance image over to the subject, who can decide to come into view or not, engaging surveillance on their own terms.

The sovereign power of security and intelligence organizations has long rested on their capacity to hoard traces of our form-of-life in obscure databanks that give them privileged knowledge of our activity and personhood. By recasting the surveillance apparatus as an artistic or documentary instrument, Luksch and others disrupt the interpretive authority of these contemporary incarnations of Big Brother. They also provoke a transformation in the political significance of privacy, or the freedom to keep secrets, which Orwell understood as the *sine qua non* of subjective agency. In *1984*, it is the classified nature of the state’s policing practices—the occult process through which reconnaissance begets criminalization and annihilation—that enables their surveillance operation to exercise its repressive power; the novel’s dissident protagonists necessarily plot in secrecy as well. Borradori identifies in Orwell’s dialectical ambivalence towards secrecy “an *instrumental conception of the secret*”: in the constituent political paradigm, the “occultation of a...truth” is a means for pursuing sovereign ends.<sup>38</sup> The same logic forms the theoretical background of the eerily Orwellian anti-privacy dictum, “If you’ve got nothing to hide, you’ve got nothing to fear.” I hope to have made plain the falseness of this promise: surveillance, put to operative use, exercises subtle but profound ontological control over the surveilled subject. I also hope to have shown, however, that ordinary individuals have the power to destitute the governmental authority of the surveillance apparatus,

retooling—or de-tooling—both the gaze and the secret in an inoperative mode of use. This is the reopening of an alternative signification of anonymity as what Borradori calls “the right not to answer and not to belong”<sup>39</sup>—but merely to exist, privately, for no reason in particular.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Carolyn Guertin, "Hacktivist (Pre)Occupations: Self-Surveillance, Participation, and Public Space," in *The Digital Nexus: Identity, Agency, and Political Engagement*, ed. Rafael Foshay (Edmonton, AB: Athabasca University, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), accessed June 6, 2017, [http://sduk.us/afterwork/arendt\\_the\\_human\\_condition.pdf](http://sduk.us/afterwork/arendt_the_human_condition.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> Giovanna Borradori, "Between Transparency and Surveillance: Politics of the Secret," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 42, nos. 4-5 (2016): 456-464.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 457, emphasis added.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Kevin Haggarty, quoted in Borradori, "Between Transparency," 457.

<sup>9</sup> Giorgio Agamben, "What is a Destituent Power?" Translated by Stephanie Wakefield. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 32 (2014): 65-74.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*,

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, emphasis added.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Guertin, "Hactivist (Pre)Occupations," 116.

<sup>30</sup> Manu Luksch and Mukul Patel, "FACELESS the Film," ambientTV, accessed June 6, 2017, <http://www.ambienttv.net/content/?q=facelessthemovie>.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Guertin, "Hactivist (Pre)Occupations," 117.

<sup>34</sup> Agamben, "What is a Destituent," 69.

<sup>35</sup> Guertin, "Hactivist (Pre)Occupations," 114.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>38</sup> Borradori, "Between Transparency," 457.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 458.

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**A REVIEW OF MARTHA C. NUSSBAUM,  
*ANGER AND FORGIVENESS:  
 RESENTMENT, GENEROSITY, JUSTICE***

Josephine Lovejoy  
*Vassar College*

For most humans, anger is an emotion that is present in our daily lives. We are angered by the family member who persistently criticizes our chosen career path, by the supermarket bagger who piles our canned goods on top of fresh berries, and, perhaps more consequentially, by the decisions that our government officials make on our behalf. Anger is thought to be beneficial in many circumstances—it is a sign that we are in tune with, and will not stand for, injustice. But does anger genuinely serve a useful purpose? Martha Nussbaum, professor of law and ethics at the University of Chicago, argues that anger is not a productive method for approaching injustice in life and can actually impede our progress in doing so.

Nussbaum begins her analysis by examining what anger really entails. Loosely drawing from Aristotle, she explains that anger involves a perceived wrongful injury, but also the desire on the part of the victim for retribution for something that was taken. Why, then, is this desire problematic? Nussbaum presents two main reasons. When people are angered, they can travel down one of two roads. The first is the *road of status*, in which the victim views the insult or injury as a personal attack. This road “converts all injuries into problems of relative position, thus making the world revolve around the desire of vulnerable selves for domination and control” (29). The injured can also take the *road of payback*, in which he or she seeks to make the wrongdoer suffer as payback for the original harm. According to Nussbaum, neither of these approaches is reasonable, for in the first, victims focus too much on their relative positions on some hierarchical ladder and too little on resolving the issue at hand, and in the second, victims fail to realize that making the wrongdoer suffer cannot recover what was lost. This dwelling on the past only impedes progress in preventing future wrongs.

If anger forces the victim into a regressive mindset, is it necessarily bad? For Nussbaum, it doesn't have to be, as long as it quickly evolves into something else: a *transition*. Transition occurs when the angry person registers the futility of his or her anger and begins to think about how the situation can be resolved to promote the welfare of those involved. We then have no reason to believe that anger is inherently bad: it can be used to make others aware of an issue and the need to take action, and it can also serve as a deterrent for undesirable behavior. As a consequence, anger must never be the final step in redressing wrongs—it must always, and quickly, evolve into a transition.

What form might this transition out of anger take? Nussbaum introduces forgiveness as an obvious candidate, but soon finds that forgiveness is a flawed concept that does little to help those angered to move forward. Upon exploring the roots of forgiveness in the Judeo-Christian tradition, Nussbaum arrives at a type of forgiveness called *transactional forgiveness* that describes how the concept is commonly appropriated in modernity. The mindset that we associate with modernity tends to place the emphasis on the wrongdoer, who must realize and admit that he or she did wrong in order to receive forgiveness. Unfortunately, this brand of forgiveness does nothing to resolve status or payback errors. In order to receive forgiveness, wrongdoers must present themselves as undeserving and flawed (an idea that modern society has integrated from religious traditions), thereby committing a status error, stepping down a rung on the hierarchical ladder. Similarly, the wrongdoer's embarrassing self-degradation does nothing to recover what was originally taken, resulting in a payback error.

Still on the quest to give an account of how the injured should transition away from anger, Nussbaum examines incidences of anger in the realm of intimate relationships (i.e. spouses and family). One of the most common occurrences of anger in this realm is parental anger towards children, particularly adult children. Nussbaum illustrates this case by reference to Philip Roth's novel, *American Pastoral*, in which Swede Levov's daughter Merry, a Vietnam War protestor, places a bomb in a post office. Swede, as one might expect, is tortured with

immeasurable anger, and feels helpless in the face of his daughter's downward spiral into violence. Yet, once Swede acknowledges his helplessness and grief, unconditional love starts to replace anger. Nussbaum's conclusion is that rituals of anger and forgiveness rest on the unfruitful ground of status. Instead, forward-looking unconditional love (even if difficult) should embody some form of transition in the personal realm.

Similarly, Nussbaum explains that anger should not be the endpoint in children's anger towards parents. She explains psychologist Harriet Lerner's idea "that anger is often a way of not solving the real problem, of cycling it round and round" (109), therefore increasing mutual resentment. If both parent and child are angry, neither is able to rationally agree on the best way to resolve an issue. The same goes for disagreements between partners. Hence what she calls transition should involve overcoming the cycle of anger, realizing the mutual desire to resolve the situation, and putting an end to blaming the other.

Nussbaum then turns to anger in "the middle realm," or situations involving coworkers, employees, and acquaintances. Many of Nussbaum's positions in this chapter parallel those of the stoic ancient Roman philosopher Seneca, who reasoned that much of the anger of this kind is the result of narcissism or at least a bloated opinion of one's own status. Certainly, we may be justified in our anger or outrage, and in fact it is sometimes better to express anger than to repress it. There are situations, Nussbaum explains, in which anger is socially expected – for its absence would make social interaction bizarre, or even inhuman. But crucially, we must rise above this outrage and move to the transition.

An objection that readers may have at this point, Nussbaum imagines, is that we owe it to our self-respect to get angry. That is, we think it is only natural that we express outrage at improper behavior. In responding to this objection, Nussbaum transforms into her witty, independent and outspoken alter ego Louise, lamenting about the irksome circumstances Louise finds herself in at the airport, at work, and elsewhere. Louise has to deal with an abnormally chatty colleague who overpowers conversations and a visiting speaker to her university who demands only the best accommodations, if he is to attend her

conference. Louise could be angry in these instances, but concludes that there is no use in trying to change the personalities of given individuals. Instead, she finds that non-anger is the best coping mechanism. Certainly, Louise would appreciate an apology from her obnoxious visiting colleague, but only if it is voluntary. Extracting an apology would only lead her to commit a status error, in which she would see this colleague's actions as personal insults. The best route for Louise is to acknowledge that her colleague is imperfect and then do her best to see things from his perspective so that she may move forward. As illustrated in Seneca's works, perhaps the most self-respecting person is the one who transcends humiliation and pardons flaw rather than bursting with rage at every minor insult.

At this point, the reader might further object that not all injuries are as trivial as those previously discussed. Nussbaum explains that, in more severe circumstances, the situation must be handed over to the law. Rape victims, for example, have the right to be angry, but the transition in such circumstances should be shaped into a project of rape awareness and prevention, while letting the law handle individual cases. Again, she claims that political justice must emphasize forward-looking welfare over backward-looking anger and desire for the wrongdoer to suffer. While tragic stories of loss on the part of victims are useful in raising social awareness, anger rarely is.

Nussbaum lastly discusses anger in the political realm, where she seeks to investigate how anger in society, along with racism and fear, may explain the increasing demand for punishment and incarceration. We are angry that lawbreakers pose threats to society's well being, and decide that they should be punished as a form of payback (thus society takes the road of payback). This serves as a particularly convincing reason for society's urge to punish perpetrators of victimless crimes (e.g. drug offenses). If anger, as Nussbaum has shown, is never positive as an end in itself, perhaps our justification for punishment is not as stable as we would like to assume. Nussbaum forces the reader to ask, does punishment really lead to reform? While Nussbaum doesn't give a conclusive alternative to punishment, she insists that we must seek alternative methods of dealing with offenders that take poverty and inequality into consideration.

Social welfare and justice, for Nussbaum, reaches far beyond punishment and incarceration. She requires that a government satisfy three conditions to justify coercion. First, it must not seek to denigrate perpetrators of crimes. We should not assume that criminals are inherently bad, and should separate the bad act from the person who committed it, committing to a fundamental optimism that the wrongdoer will do better in the future. Second, the perpetrator must acknowledge wrongdoing. Lastly, we must agree that coercion is only justified if it promotes the overarching goal of social welfare.

Nussbaum applies this line of thinking to revolutionary justice, asking what role anger plays in collective action. In discussing champions of non-violent mobilizations, Nussbaum refers to the Mahatma Gandhi's protests against the British raj, Nelson Mandela's fight against the apartheid in South Africa, and Martin Luther King's involvement in the U.S. Civil Rights Movement. Nussbaum explains that for Gandhi, non-anger necessarily entailed nonviolence. But Nussbaum doesn't find Gandhi's argument to be convincing, and sides with Mandela and King, who believed that violence was acceptable for limited purposes (self-defense for King and for Mandela, as a last resort when negotiation and nonviolence fail). Thus, if anger and aggression are not the keys to political and social change, cooperation and friendship are. A revolutionary group, fervently pursuing its goal of justice, should not regard its opponents with disdain and hatred, but should view them as potential partners for change. King, for example, realized that his goals would only be fulfilled if everyone felt included and well served by the cause. Nussbaum's ideal revolutionary, therefore, is one who is unwavering in his or her beliefs, yet generous and loving at the same time. This figure of the revolutionary comes to terms with the fact that punishing the opponent will not be an effective means of securing justice.

Are Nussbaum's pillars of generosity and love too good to be true? Don't humans have a natural tendency towards anger and selfishness, which renders them unable, in most instances, to take the common good into account? While most readers would answer these questions affirmatively, Nussbaum does not in the least suggest that anger is easy to overcome. As she helpfully points out, we laboriously

set other goals in our personal lives even if achieving them will be difficult, and when we fail, we don't simply blame failure on our natural instincts: we try again! The same goes for anger: it may be difficult to control, but doing so is not impossible.

The reader may find many of Nussbaum's claims overly optimistic. Yet, given Nussbaum's relentless willingness to respond to nearly every objection imaginable, with clarity and profundity, perhaps, if we let her, she will revolutionize the way we confront disagreements, both small and large.

## **ANGER AND FORGIVENESS**

### **Resentment, Generosity, Justice**

By Martha C. Nussbaum

315 pp.

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**NARATIVELY INCLINED:  
ONTOLOGIES OF SELF, SEXUALITY, AND VIOLENCE  
AN INTERVIEW WITH ADRIANA CAVARERO**

Asprey Liu, Sam Allen, and Giovanna Borradori  
*Vassar College*

Adriana Cavarero is Professor of Political Philosophy at the University of Verona, Italy. She is a renowned public intellectual and her work brings a deconstructive feminist perspective to bear on a range of ancient and contemporary philosophical formations, from Greek mythology to post-9/11 discourses on violence.

Cavarero holds academic degrees from the University of Padua, where she began her teaching career. Since 1983, she has been Professor of Political Philosophy at the University of Verona. Through the years, she has also held visiting appointments at the University of California at Berkeley and at Santa Barbara, at New York University, and at Harvard University. Beyond her scholarly accomplishments, Cavarero has played a major role in the Italian left and the women's movement. She served on the executive committees of the former Communist Party (PCI) and of the Democratic Party of the Left (PDS). At Verona, she co-founded *Diotima*, the distinguished feminist philosophical collective and journal. Cavarero is a member of a number of prestigious research groups, including the Expert Group on the Humanities, endowed by the European Commission, and serves on the Editorial Board of journals such as *Filosofia Politica*, *Text Theory Critique*, and *The Finnish Yearbook for Political Thought*.

Cavarero's books have exerted a wide-ranging influence in Continental philosophy, political theory, women and gender studies, and Greek and Roman studies. Some of her works in English include: *In Spite of Plato* (Routledge, 1995), *Stately Bodies* (Michigan University Press, 2002), *Relating Narratives*, (Routledge, 2002), *For More than One Voice*, (Stanford University Press, 2005), *Horrorism* (Columbia University Press, 2008), and most recently *Inclinations* (Stanford University Press, 2016). In addition to her books, she is the author of

many essays, which have appeared in both scholarly journals and leftist publications.

Cavarero's research spans a number of disciplines and time periods, but her long-standing commitment to emancipatory politics motivates and threads together her work. Cavarero's theory of ontological violence inspired us to reach out to her as we reflected on the political dimensions of "Action," the theme of this year's *Journal*. On April 21st, 2017, we had the unique opportunity to spend a whole morning with her as she hosted us in her office for the *Journal's* first interview to be conducted via international video call. Unlike previous years, the *Journal's* faculty advisor, Professor Giovanna Borradori, accompanied us in this conversation across languages, generations, and continents.

The start of our conversation took up the topic of political action, approached through the lens of Cavarero's recasting of



Figure 1: Adriana Cavarero, in her office in Verona, Italy, joins Asprey Liu, Sam Allen, and Giovanna Borradori in conversation on April 21st, 2017. Photo by Giovanna Borradori.

terrorism as 'horrorism,' a neologism she coined to capture the universal scope of violence against the totally defenseless. From there, we turned to another of Cavarero's contributions to the philosophy of the modern condition: the constitutive role of narration in the formation of selfhood. In particular, her notion of the "narratable self" brought us to elaborate on

her deconstructive engagement with stereotypes as well as her deflationary approach to the problem of essentialism in philosophy. We concluded by following Cavarero's reflections on myths, and self-making, and the postural ethics she expounded in her most recent book, *Inclinations*.



**Giovanna Borradori:** In its arch, your work seeks to problematize the theoretical framework of political action. Can we start from the concept of horrorism, as expounded in your book *Horrorism: Naming Contemporary Violence*, and can you explain how it differs from terrorism?

**Adriana Cavarero:** Terrorism has a long history of meanings. What I propose to call *horrorism* responds to our need to name and conceptualize a distinctly contemporary form of violence that unilaterally targets the totally defenseless. You see, there is always a strategy in act of violence: one may say that the violence unleashed on September 11, 2001 was an attack on the West in its most spectacular symbols. But this emphasis on strategy in fact masks the constitutive element in this kind of violence: the targeting of the absolutely vulnerable and defenseless, the randomness of the *casualties*. It could be me, or you; it just doesn't matter. The fact that it doesn't matter is the point here. It is a violence pushed to its own excess, a violence projected beyond what is comprehensible. It is difficult to conceptualize this phenomenon, but we need to do it. If we use the obsolete vocabulary of terrorism, war, or even hyper-terrorism or international terrorism, we do not catch the distinctiveness of the phenomenon, and thus risk legitimizing, intensifying, and multiplying it. The job of the philosopher is to clarify concepts but also to tease out their internal complexity.

**Borradori:** You emphasized the randomness of casualties. Is that connected to its Latin etymology, leading back to *casus*, literally meaning luck?

**Cavarero:** Yes, that's right. The accidentality implied by the etymology of "casualty" flags that we are all perfect victims. We are interchangeable and could be struck at random: our uniqueness, in other words, doesn't count at all. *Who* you are is not important, your identity doesn't matter. Therefore, horrorism entails a kind of pre-dehumanization; horrorism does not simply kills its victims, it disintegrates them. Its *modus operandi* is not murder, but what I call

ontological injury, in the Latin sense of *vulnus*.

**Asprey Liu:** You are suggesting that ontological injury exploits a primary vulnerability that we all share. The figure that embodies this primary vulnerability is the child, who is also the figure of innocence. How important is innocence to your conceptualization of ontological violence—to the ontological foundation that this violence exploits? And can ontological violence be perpetrated against the guilty and powerful?

**Cavarero:** The issue of innocence and guilt is not really what is at stake here. Among others, Hannah Arendt noticed that, when the victims of the Holocaust went through the process of extermination, there was no difference between the guilty and the innocent. Ontological injury is against the human; this is why I call it ontological, because it deals with the human condition. Of the lagers, Arendt wrote that the victims had already been stripped of their juridical and ethical identities before they were admitted. This operation of dehumanization is beyond the ethical, beyond the question of guilt and innocence.

**Borradori:** The process of previous dehumanization that the inmates of the lagers went through previously to being admitted to the camps juridically entailed denationalization, didn't it? Dehumanization entails the stripping of citizenship.

**Cavarero:** That was definitely the first step, yes. In the Nazi regime, those counted as criminals were judged and sentenced by the juridical system, by trials and tribunals. The Jews were not imprisoned as criminals: what was considered unacceptable was just the fact that they were Jews. This is beyond any possible juridical-ethical framework. When you send children to the gas chamber, innocence or guilt is not the point.

**Liu:** Perhaps this is then another way to illuminate the difference between terrorism and horrorism: the discourse of terrorism assumes juridical, ethical, and legal subjects. It doesn't highlight the status of

bare life, which is the condition that ontological injury targets and the foundation of its universal scope.

**Cavarero:** I feel uncomfortable with the category of bare life, at least as Giorgio Agamben uses it. I like his texts, but I think that there are many historical circumstances in which the category of bare life doesn't apply, and to assume it as a universal point of departure is very disputable, if not dangerous. The victims of horrorist acts do not represent bare life. You or I could have been in the Twin Towers carrying out our daily responsibilities, not reduced to bare life, and then destroyed in that very flourishing and singular life, in that unique story, even a love story, that each one of us carries with them. To use bare life as a kind of *passé partout* for reading what happens in contemporary Europe, as Agamben does, is not only dangerous, but wrong.

**Liu:** You say that horrorism targets victims flourishing in their singular life—in the middle of their story, as it were. Your book *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood* explores this formulation in depth. Could you elaborate on how stories function as a structuring force of the human and the self?

**Cavarero:** In my opinion, the importance of having a story to being human is demonstrated by the media's reaction to horrorist destruction, in which the victims are remembered not only as pure names, but through the narrative that tells their stories in words and photographs. The media tries to reconstruct these stories, to make them tangible and knowable, as a way of giving back the victims their own humanity. To tell a love story in response to injury to the human condition is to reconstitute the victim's own humanity. I follow Arendt in this respect. What I call the *narratable self* is a constitutive element of the human condition. By this I mean not only that every human being is narratable, but also that every human being manifests the desire to have his or her story told. This is a desire for unity—unified meaning, that is. The unitary meaning of our stories is not, however, factually constructed. It is the symptom of a desire that is part of the history of

Western narrative.

**Liu:** In the chapter of *Relating Narratives* entitled “The Paradox of Ulysses,” you argue that the task of making meaning out of our stories, and thus conferring selfhood and identity onto us, rests finally with the Other, who alone has the power to tell us who we are. You suggest that the Other’s capacity to do this is conditioned by their being absent from the scene of the action that generated the story. The stories that carry ontological weight for our identities are thus necessarily retrospective and second-hand. I am wondering: what does it mean to be a witness in this formation? What does it mean to spectate and participate in the action at the same time?

**Cavarero:** Witnesses can spectate with or without participating; in both cases they become co-protagonists of the story. I want to reiterate another Arendtian point here: namely, that Homer, the first narrator, storyteller, and historian, is supposed to be blind. This blindness is a symbol, sign, or symptom of the posthumous gaze. If there can be unitary meaning, it must come at the *end* of the story. In this respect, the perfect narrative, which is the biographical narrative, has to begin when the protagonist is already dead. I emphasize this posthumous element as the ontological structure of relationships in order to highlight the significance of the ordinary pleasure of exchanging life stories with loved ones while we are still alive. We manifest a desire for our lives to have meaning and we consign this desire to our friend, lover, mother, daughter or son, or even strangers. This is perhaps a feminine perception of the narrative experience, for women tend to be—or are represented *as* being—more intensely “narrative” animals than men. This is a stereotype, of course, but I cannot but work with stereotypes. I am not outside language or the symbolic order. I try to embrace stereotypes from the beginning: *pace* Plato, I work with stereotypes to re-signify or recast them. This is not an operation that one can do once and for all: meanings are fluid, slippery, and can be multiply configured. But they are also the way in which we share the world with one another. We share stereotypes not only as reified objects of language; which means that we are not only the victims of

stereotypes. We are also *zoon logon echon*, to use Aristotle's term—human beings capable of language and symbolic production. Our common language of stereotypes is a space within which we have relative freedom to rethink and reconfigure those stereotypes.

**Liu:** A stereotype around which you base your ontology is that of the mother, which has been excluded from the imaginary of the human in the Western political and legal tradition that takes the masculine as the autonomous and universal subject of rights. I see your project as an attempt not only to re-humanize the maternal, but also to *maternalize the human*, which involves re-centering maternity as a relation that discloses our ontological condition of vulnerability, intimacy, and desire. Besides a stereotype, what is the maternal for you? Is it a constellation of qualities or a concept that picks out something in the world?

**Cavarero:** The maternal, or the figure of the mother is very powerful icon in the history of culture—especially in a Mediterranean cultural context. It is, of course, also a stereotype and the representation of a certain patriarchal symbolic order; but to disavow the stereotype because it oppresses women is to not fully engage its power. My focus on the maternal in the last three decades began with a reading of the mythical figure Demeter, *pace* Plato, as a terrifying sovereign power, which has the power to generate and to not generate, and even to end the human species. This is a terrifying and uncanny representation of the maternal. If we are frightened by it, we must also remember that everyone who lives, has lived, or will live, will have to be born by a mother and a woman.

**Liu:** Would your work be receptive to a queer political reading that seeks to problematize the link between the maternal and the feminine? What could a politics of gender anti-essentialism that seeks to disentangle the maternal and the feminine look like in your work? In other words, does a mother have to be a woman?

**Cavarero:** The fact that all of us have a mother does not mean that you, as a woman, must be a mother. It means only that there is a

primary relationship between mother and child that is essential for everyone who has been born. This is a “universal statement” so to speak—here I am teasing a bit this concept of “universality.” And yet, I was never overly concerned with essence and essentialism in the way that French and English-speaking radical philosophy and theory have been. I think that essence is one of the tools of the philosophical language. We can use it, deconstruct it, and rethink it. I don’t believe in a philosophical world in which essence equals evil, and multiplicity, transition and becoming (*divenire*) is good. This is dogmatism and it could be dangerous, insofar as dogmatism. One could connect essence and multiplicity, or *divenire*, through the concept of plurality, assumed in the Arendtian sense. If you agree with Arendt that each human being is unique—which is a fact, even just in a biological sense—then the human condition is necessarily made up of a plurality of human beings. This is a universal statement. Is it essentialist to say that each human being is unique?

I agree with you when you say that the figure of the mother is essentialist. But this is the stereotype that I want to dismantle by pluralizing it, by constructing alternative interpretations of it that have the potential to reshape it. We can do this, you could do this, especially because you are young and free. Imagination is free; there is no dogmatism in imagination. The only caveat is that you must take responsibility—ethical and political responsibility—for what you imagine. The mother, as we have imagined this figure on the public sphere and through the history of iconography, is a woman. The question is not one of fixing it as an eternal essence, but rather to ask: is it a powerful image? How can you reimagine it? Of course, womanhood and motherhood could also be social roles. So can a mother be a man? Yes! Not in the proper sense of giving birth, but we have the freedom of reimagining the *role*, because the mother is not only she who gives birth but all that the maternal entails, which is subsumed under the ethics of care. You can then substitute the mother with other figures of caregiving, indeed, a multiplicity of figures. The task is not to merely combine them, but to re-signify the power of the imaginary of maternity.

**Sam Allen:** Can we now turn to your most recent book *Inclinations: A Critique of Rectitude*? In it, you show that there is a spatiality, or geometric imaginary of the mother, which goes back to the ancient Greek conception of the *oikos*, the household, and the proximal. Plato and others in ancient Greece thought of the mother as a unitary origin, the singularity of the origin. The figure of the biological mother is bound by this logic of proximity and familiarity. If you want to retool the concept of motherhood, how does proximity figure into it? Does motherhood require kinship and the structure of the household?

**Cavarero:** My point is to start with the ordinary and what could be called “factuality”—it is a fact that when a child is born, there is a biological proximity. So what does this mean? If you take the maternal as either a disposition or as the symbol of care and concern for the Other, proximity is not necessary. You can be maternally inclined toward, and concerned about, someone who is not there. There is a particular genre of narratives in which the protagonist does not know who their mother is. The narration tells us about this search and leads us to a story of beginnings, which makes of the origin the object of desire in terms of the symbolic register. When I try, on the other hand, to construct a theory of inclination, I want to situate proximity in terms of a subject whose posture is not vertical and who is not autonomous in the way that Kantian ethics presumes human subjects to be. It is a subject who is structurally inclined toward an Other. Its relation to the Other is one of imperfect reciprocity. The inclined posture of the subject discloses the fact that we must try, with Emmanuel Levinas, to rethink ethics on dissymmetry. I propose to think of a proximity that is not characterized by symmetry.

**Liu:** This subverts the traditional juridical notion of justice, the symbol of which is the balanced scale. That imaginary of justice as perfect balance goes hand in hand with an imaginary of the subject of justice ontologically proportioned to fit that balance. How could one think through inclination to conceptualize an asymmetrical, imbalanced justice?

**Cavarero:** This was Levinas's project, which placed dissymmetry as the condition of the encounter with the face of the Other. In a rather problematic and unconvincing way, Levinas also posits justice as a Third. My project is not quite to develop a new notion of justice, but to describe the fundamentally asymmetrical structure of human relationships. The hegemonic Christian tradition, for example, is not alone in promising that, if I take care of my child, my child will take care of me when I am old. In certain hegemonic ethical traditions, symmetry and reciprocity are not thought in terms of absolute temporality, or synchronically, but rather diachronically: there will be a time when I will get back what I gave. To think an ethics that is absolutely asymmetrical requires a different ontological and ethical geometry. If I assume the vertical subject, I am already disabling asymmetry. The real question of the Italian and French feminist traditions is to think equality together with difference, plurality together with equal rights. This is the challenge for your generation: to combine plurality, difference, and uniqueness, with the traditional concepts of justice, equality, and equal rights.

**Liu:** Your postural ethics seems then to undermine the fact that, in modernity, the vertical subject is situated on the horizontal plane at a direct angle, so that it does not affect or pose obstacles to it.

**Cavarero:** The image that you have to confront is, beginning with Plato, that of the Good as being located beyond the vertical line. This is also the conceptual difference between justice and law. While justice is an underlying structure, law is a set of norms. The challenge is to rethink the traditional image of justice as a vertical structure in terms of plural inclinations, each embedded in uniquely asymmetrical relationships. Philosophers must carry out this job first, then others can reengineer the system of law. Inverting this sequence is very dangerous, as seems to be the temptation of so many populist undertakings today.

**Borradori:** Can you name any specific examples of populist discourses so as to clarify this point?



**Cavarero:** President Donald Trump's ban on immigration from a number of countries in the Middle East and his emphasis on border policing is a way of trafficking with law, not thinking in terms of justice, let alone a justice that honors and protects the vulnerability of the Other.

**Borradori:** We have so far been discussing inclination as a geometrical figure. But your texts suggest that inclination might be about movement rather than the fixity of spatial relations. You seem to suggest, in other words, that whether inclination has been demoted because of its association with animality or with the female register, it has been conceptualized as a swerving, a diversion, or a variation from the vertical. In re-conceptualizing inclination as a movement, we also debunk the prejudice against it that the tradition has taken.

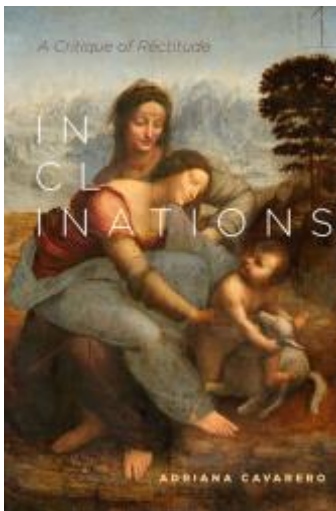


Figure 2 Cover Image of Adriana Cavarero's *Inclinations: A Critique of Rectitude*, published November, 2016.

**Cavarero:** Yes, you are right. My intention was to describe inclination as a tension. This is why I am transfixed by Leonardo da Vinci's painting (*The Virgin and Child with Saint Anne*, c. 1503, fig. 2), which is on the cover of the American edition of my book. The Virgin is represented as inclined, as pure tension towards, and as movement. The challenge is not to present inclination as a variation of the standard vertical subject. While it is difficult for philosophy to capture inclination in this ordinary sense, great artists have done it: inclination is the ordinary tension, of which verticality is a variation. If we

look at this specific painting, there is in fact a strong emphasis on verticality: for example in the prominence of the tree, which is a vertical symbol. And yet, the equilibrium of the painting is on an inclined diagonal, not on verticality.

**Liu:** And there is roundness too, the curving back around the body. It is not an inclination outward, but it comes back into itself: maybe we could define it as a kind of ecstasy.

**Cavarero:** I agree, and this ecstasy is possible because there is baby Jesus, which anchors the virgin and allows precisely for that torsion. So we can see displayed here a structural relationship that allows for an ecstatic moment, which is not a moment toward nowhere, but a movement toward the vulnerable.

**Allen:** How does Aristotle, the most prominent theorist of *habitus* and habituation in the tradition, be read in terms of your model? Could there be an Aristotelian understanding of inclination?

**Cavarero:** I invite *you* to go to Aristotle and problematize *habitus*, as well as *hexis*: and maybe *you* can elaborate this as an example of inclination! I have been focusing on Plato because of his grounding in the image of the cave, in which the verticality is so clear. I think that in the ethical works of Aristotle it is possible to discover some concept or category that focuses on relationships. I left it aside because I would have had to extricate myself from the vast history of scholarship on the question of friendship in Aristotle. I think that Giovanna, who is very familiar with Derrida, would agree with me. I wrote an entire chapter on Saint Augustine and then threw it away because it would have taken me too far. This said, in the Aristotelian concepts of *habitus* and *philia* you may be able to find fertile ground.

**Allen:** Let me stick with the ancient world for a little bit longer. For the Neo-Platonists, *philia* is in a nexus of concepts that thematize friendship, but that also include *eros* and attachment in a familial sense. Is love an avenue for pursuing justice that is open to plurality and sameness within difference?

**Cavarero:** This is a difficult question for me because I have never really studied the political consequences of Neo-Platonism, a very rich and complex topic. There is a tension between the notion of *philia* in

Aristotle and the movement of elevation that is at the center of Neo-Platonist thought. This tension is *eros*. On this basis you could think justice in the plural. And this is my aim too, but I use Plato and Augustine, rather than Aristotle and Neo-Platonism.

**Allen:** *Inclinations* joins a body of work on vulnerability, which includes theorists like Levinas and Judith Butler. With respect to these theorists, how do you conceive of your contribution to the topic?

**Cavarero:** As far as I know, vulnerability is not a very frequent theme in the Western philosophical tradition. There is something of it, but not much, in Arendt, and there is a lot of emphasis on it in Levinas. In recent times, the word “vulnerability” has been used more often in economic discussions on global finance, as well as in sociology where theorists now refer to more or less vulnerable groups and subjects. In response to the recent use of this term by the social sciences, I want to ponder it as an ontological question rather than an ethical one. Aristotle grounds his politics in the ontological designation of the human being as *zōon logo echon*, often translated as the speaking animal. This is essential for his notion that the political animal has to be able to say what is good. The founding father of modernity, Thomas Hobbes, begins with an ontology as well—*homo homini lupus*—and the consequences of this strange and totalizing ontology is the construction of modern sovereign states. As I see it, the philosophical tradition’s first terrain of confrontation and challenge is ontology, which is the source of Arendt’s originality as well: her definition of politics and of action are based on her ontological definition of the human condition, based on mortality. Many focus on vulnerability within this framework, but my contribution is to think ontology in terms of asymmetrical relationships and inclined subjectivity.

**Liu:** Is your commitment to beginning with ontology related to your methodology, which I see as emphasizing images? How do you see the image’s relation to ontology?

**Cavarero:** First of all, I follow the lesson of Arendt, who, beginning in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, used not only historical documentation but also literature and narrative to articulate her political framework. Secondly, I think that images have great explanatory power, because in images you always have some meaning beyond the iconic. You have something like an extra-gift. In epic poetry, for example, you have words, but also sounds that go beyond words. In images, in their lines and their colors, you have something like a meaning in excess. Insofar as philosophy consists in rational argumentation and reasonable construction, it has very big limits. Even a genius of philosophy could not express the power of the image of the Virgin and the child in a text as Leonardo did in his painting. I am also interested in contemporary experimentations in style that mix narrative nonfiction, fiction, biography, and images. I want to mention W. G. Sebald, a German writer who lived in England. In his masterpiece, *Austerlitz*, he combines images, reflections, fiction, and nonfiction. The language of philosophy can be very rigid, indeed, poor in its capacity of expression, although there is a space for experimenting with repetition and rhythm, which thinkers like Jacques Derrida and Gilles Deleuze have done. Images can enrich the language of philosophy and this is all the more true from a feminist perspective, because the language of philosophy quintessentially expresses the patriarchal order. I have to confess, for example, that I prefer Plato to Aristotle precisely because of this: the role of images and myths in the making. The more philosophy becomes systematic, the more it becomes extraneous to feminine subjectivity, because inclination, maternity, and natality are rejected. I think that Irigaray thought interesting things about this topic; *Speculum* and *The Ethics of Sexual Difference* were seminal books for understanding this dynamic of linguistic and conceptual rejection.

**Borradori:** Could you speak more specifically of images in relation to myths, and the way in which images seem to hold the power of myth-making?

**Cavarero:** I think that images have the power to condense the dynamic element in myths. Myth, as you know, literally means

narrative. Myths are multilayered; they are made of multiple interpretations. They are plurally significant and ambiguous, and this is not their limit but their force. Myths never mean only one thing, so you can go back to the same myths and re-narrate them differently, which was the ancient way of transmitting meanings from one generation, cultural environment, or language to another. Myths are, therefore, the site of never-ending interpretation. In my opinion, one cannot try to reconstruct or recodify stereotypes without myths.

**Liu:** I want to ask about myths and self-making. If we return to “The Paradox of Ulysses,” one can tell myths about oneself, but ultimately the judge of those myths—the interpreter who brings out one among many possible interpretations—is the Other. What becomes of self-narratives, which one could consider practices or actions of self-representation, when their final significance is entrusted to the Other? I am thinking of the case of victims of terrorism and horrorism, who are remembered by the stories that the media reconstruct from traces left on social media. What do these social media constellations, composed of actions and practices of self-representation, become in the hands of the Other?

**Cavarero:** Take for example the myth of Oedipus. Beginning from modernity, this myth is reiterated and reinterpreted, not only by psychoanalysis, but in our epoch’s construction of its own mythology, which in the ecology of our contemporary media has to do with the visual and the spectacular. The original mythological register, which is narrative, is the intent of telling a story. Contemporary mythology is not made primarily of words and narratives. It is made of images and soundscapes. I remember when I saw the first invasion of Iraq on television in 1991: it was the visuality that constituted a new modality of mythology. The mythology itself was ancient: we arrive, we wage war, and we destroy the enemy. And yet, the feature of the visible does change something essential: perhaps it is the way in which the screen transforms myths into something material and very proximate, almost tangible.

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All those interested in contributing an essay to the 2018 issue of the *Journal* are invited to review the submission guidelines listed below. Every issue of the *Journal* has a theme, which is addressed in all of its pieces, though they may treat a wide variety of topics. The theme for this year is “Borders.”

“Borders” is a theme that lends itself to a multiplicity of philosophical approaches, including but not limited to: ethics, social and political philosophy, logic, aesthetics, metaphysics, epistemology, the history of philosophy, Critical Theory, philosophy of religion, and queer and feminist theory. Theoretically-oriented works from disciplines outside philosophy such as geography, literature, sociology, political science, mathematics, and art history are also welcome. An essay may treat the theme of “Borders” by interrogating such concepts as territory, genre, limit, gender, or taboo.

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**Format:** 12 point Times New Roman font, 5000-word maximum for a paper, 100-word maximum for the abstract. There is no minimum word count, provided that the topic of the paper is suitably addressed. Papers should not include your name or other identifying information. Please provide your paper title, name, email, and major **in a separate attachment for blind review**

**Citation Format:** Chicago Citation Style. 500-word maximum.

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**Deadline:** All materials must be submitted via email to [philosophyjournal@vassar.edu](mailto:philosophyjournal@vassar.edu) no later than October 20, 2017.

**Originality:** We accept only original work. Do not submit already published material. If you have submitted or plan to submit your paper to publications other than *The Vassar College Journal of Philosophy*, please disclose to us that this is the case.

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