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On the Adequacy and Substantiality of the Structuralist Thesis

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ABSTRACT. The idea that positions in structures have no mathematically significant non-fundamental features is a constitutive trait of non-eliminative structuralism; it underpins the restricted structuralist thesis that all fundamental properties are structural. So, a seemingly straightforward strategy to uphold the eligibility of non-eliminative structuralism is to prove a formal rendition of the thesis. However, the soundness of the strategy depends on two key aspects: the thesis has to be substantial, and materially adequate. The substantiality of the thesis is predicated on the non-synonymy of fundamental and structural properties. The adequacy is predicated on the synonymy between the formal definition of fundamental properties and the intuitive content of the notion. Two remarkable abstractionists accounts claim to have proven a formal, non-trivial, consistent version of the thesis. The first one, developed Linnebo and Pettigrew, arguably fails to satisfactorily accomplish this goal. However, the more formally sophisticated second one, developed by Schiemer and Wigglesworth, succeeds. This will be focus of the paper. I am going to argue that, precisely because it proves a non-trivial formal version of the thesis, their account of fundamental properties fails to be adequate. More precisely, I will show that the formal specifications of the fundamental properties needed to ensure the substantiality and soundness of the proof undergenerate and overgenerate structural properties. In the end, it seems that there is a trade-off between substantiality and adequacy. The arguments will inform some pessimistic conclusions about the overall strategy of establishing the eligibility of non-eliminative structuralism by means of such a proof of the structuralist thesis.

Keywords: *non-eliminative structuralism, variable domain Kripke models, abstraction principles, structural relations, fundamental relations.*

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1. The structuralist thesis

The idea that positions or places in structures have no non-structural properties is a fundamental and constitutive tenet of structuralism in the philosophy of mathematics. It was formulated over and over by prominent structuralists[1]. Benacerraf 's assertion[2], for example, that 'the "elements" of the structure have no properties other than those relating them to other "elements" of the same structure' is an illustrative formulation of this core trait of structuralism, which has come to be known as the *structuralist thesis*. Following the nomenclature, I will call this first pass of the thesis, *the unrestricted structuralist thesis*:

The unrestricted structuralist thesis: positions in pure/abstract structures have only structural properties/relations.

Of course, the thesis needs unpacking, specifically, by an operational characterization[3] of structural relations. The characterization employed by Linnebo and Pettigrew[4] and Schiemer and Wigglesworth[5] in their versions of a particular type of structuralism, namely *non-eliminative structuralism*[6], falls under what Korbmacher and Schiemer[7] call the *invariance account* of structural properties, namely that structural relations are those relations that remain invariant under isomorphism. Such an explication invites a view of pure structures as the result of a process of abstraction from 'concrete' isomorphic systems of objects; in accordance with the etymology of 'isomorphic' and along a non-eliminative structuralist line, we say that such systems exemplify or instantiate the same 'form' or structure. So, according to these versions of *nes*, a pure structure is the sediment of isomorphic systems obtained through abstraction.

Burgess[8] has convincingly argued that the unrestricted version of the structuralist thesis is incoherent: consider the (second-order) property of having only structural properties; according to the unrestricted structuralist thesis, positions in pure structures enjoy such a property, yet the property is not shared by

[1] See for example (Benacerraf, 1983, p. 291), (Resnik, 1981, p. 530), (Parsons, 2004, p. 57).
[2] (Benacerraf, 1983, p. 291)
[3] Given such characterization, the status of positions could also be clarified.
[4] (Linnebo & Pettigrew, 2014)
[5] (Schiemer & Wigglesworth, 2019)
[6] Henceforth abbreviated by *nes*. A formal description of *nes* is provided in the next section.
[7] (Korbmacher & Schiemer, 2018)
[8] (Burgess, 1999)

the corresponding objects in 'concrete' isomorphic systems, as can be easily observed by inspecting, for example, the properties of the set-theoretic objects, {Ø, {Ø}}, {{Ø}}, playing the role of 2 in von Neumann's, respectively Zermelo's, reconstruction of the natural numbers. Consequently, having only structural properties is a peculiar, non-structural property of positions in pure structures. One easy way out of Burgess's criticism is to circumscribe the range of relevant properties of positions to first-order properties. But this manoeuvre, as Linnebo and Pettigrew and Pettigrew[9] have argued, cannot account for mundane, first-order, mathematically extraneous properties of positions such as 'being John's favourite number', 'being the favourite example of a mathematical structure'. And such properties are unavoidable for any candidate for the reference of number theory discourse. Accordingly, the pure properties of positions have to be further restricted to first-order, 'intrinsic'[10] properties. Obviously, this move just pushes the problem under the rug of the meaning of 'intrinsic', so not much progress has been accomplished. Instead of providing a rigorous, intuition-sound definition of 'intrinsic', and then a satisfying characterization of the class of relevant properties of positions by tackling other possible shortcomings, I will follow Linnebo and Pettigrew, and assume that such a characterization has been provided under the label of *fundamental* properties of positions for the sake of articulating *the structuralist thesis*. Distilling the discussion in a slogan, the non-eliminative structuralist adheres to:

> *The structuralist thesis*: positions in pure structures have no mathematically relevant non-fundamental properties; moreover, all fundamental properties are structural properties.

Their way[11] of establishing the thesis is by proving a formal rendition of it – called *Purity*. Of course, a lot of formal work needs to be laid down in order to express and prove such a thesis. The task of the next sections is precisely that. But the guiding principle of the effort is that the specification of the class of fundamental properties should be independent of the invariance account of structural properties: "It is not an option simply to stipulate that 'fundamental' is to mean structural, as this would trivialize Purity: any object is such that all of its structural properties are structural'[12]. Thus, the non-synonymy of structural and fundamental relations is what gives substantiality to the structuralist thesis. So, it is no surprise that Linnebo and Pettigrew

[9] (Pettigrew, 2018)
[10] As Pettigrew (2018) qualifies them.
[11] As well as Schiemer and Wigglesworth's.
[12] (Linnebo & Pettigrew, 2014, p. 279)

list as a capital merit of their proposal that "it provides a principled and precise definition of 'fundamental' that makes Purity a substantial and philosophically interesting claim; and, moreover, one that is true"[13].

As mentioned, the task of the next sections is to set up the formal medium in which the thesis is couched and proved. This is done in steps and with a certain proviso. The first step is to formally characterize the type of structuralism that accommodates the thesis, followed by a specification of Linnebo and Pettigrew abstractionist version of it, and an assessment of the structuralist thesis in this framework. Afterwards, I will focus on a 'new and improved' abstractionist version, that of Schiemer and Wigglesworth, and asses the significance of the formal rendition of the thesis in it. The assessment will inform some pessimistic conclusions about the general strategy of providing decisive support for non-eliminative structuralism by proving a formal rendition of the structuralist thesis.

2. Non-eliminative structuralism

Following Linnebo and Pettigrew, I will present a formal characterization of the kernel of *nes* restricted to relational systems – conceived[14] as set-theoretic entities of the form $S = \langle D, R_1, R_2, \ldots R_n \rangle$, where, as the convention dictates, D is a set, and $R_1, R_2, \ldots R_n$ are relations on D. Accordingly, from now on, unqualified talk about systems and pure structures should be understood as set-theoretic talk about relational systems and relational pure structures. The technical concept underlying the precis characterization of *nes* is that of isomorphism of (relational) systems.

Definition 2.1:

Two relational systems, S and S', are isomorphic, in symbols,
$S \cong S'$, if $\exists f, f: D \rightarrow D'$, such that
a) f is bijective;
b) f is an embedding: for each R_i of arity n in S, the following holds:
$\forall x_1, \ldots x_n \in D\ [R_i(x_1, \ldots, x_n) \equiv R_i'(f(x_1), \ldots, f(x_n))]$

Non-eliminative structuralism can now be formally characterized by the adherence to the following theses:

[13] (ibidem)
[14] As the standard practice in model theory dictates.

Instantiation: Let *S* be a system, and [*S*] its corresponding pure structure. Then, [*S*] ≌ *S*, that is, every pure structure [S] is isomorphic with its instantiated system.

A moment's reflection shows that *Instantiation* is essential for giving the face-value reading of singular terms (of a non-algebraic theory), for any discourse about a particular object in the domain of a system S involving structural properties could, in virtue of *Instantiation*, be rendered as a discourse about the corresponding position in the pure structure [*S*]; thus, *instantiation* is a rigour demanded by the semantic constraint directed at singular terms purportedly denoting simple objects, like numbers, vertices, etc.

Purity: If Φ is a *fundamental* property of a position *a* in a pure structure [S], that is Φ(*a*), then, for any *S'* such that *f:* [*S*] ≌ *S'*, Φ is a property of *f*(*a*), that is Φ(*f*(*a*)).

Obviously, *Purity* is the formal counterpart of the quintessential restricted structuralist thesis: "purity is our consistent reformulation of the structuralists' claim that positions in pure structures have no non-structural properties".[15]

As it is formulated, *Purity* invites an intensional conception of properties, on pain of insurmountable difficulties concerning the structural character of an extensionally construed property. I will briefly discuss some of these difficulties in the context of Schiemer and Wigglesworth's proposal to overcome them by an articulation of an intensional view of properties.

Uniqueness: [*S*] uniquely satisfies *Instantiation* and *Purity*. Specifically, uniqueness demands that for every *S* ≌ *S'*, and pure structures [*S*] ≌S, [*S'*] ≌ *S'*, [*S*] = [*S'*].

Uniqueness is demanded by the face-value reading of singular terms purportedly denoting complex objects i.e., unique structures (purportedly described by non-algebraic theories), so, again, *Uniqueness* is an implementation of the self-imposed semantic constraint of *nes* directed, this time, at structure-denoting singular terms, such as ℕ or ℝ.

[15] (Linnebo & Pettigrew, 2014, p. 272)

3. LP-structuralism: structural abstraction via Frege abstraction

In 'Two types of abstraction for structuralism'[16], Linnebo and Pettigrew seek to provide a defensible non-eliminative structuralist account of pure structures by appeal to (neo)-Fregean abstraction principles. Their proposal, from now referred to as *LP-structuralism*, resides, roughly, in indicating how pure structures can be soundly detached from systems *via* abstraction principles. Beginning with Frege, abstraction principles were used to legitimate the introduction of new, more abstract, concepts and objects out of already accepted 'old' ones. To this end, abstraction principles provide identity conditions of abstracta in terms of equivalence relations of the old type of objects. For example, Frege's well-known abstraction principle for the directions of lines,

(DL): for every l, l', d(l) = d(l') iff l || l',

establishes the legitimacy of the concept of *direction* by giving the necessary and sufficient conditions of identity of the new objects falling under it – directions d(l), d(l') – in terms of the equivalence relation of parallelism || of good old lines l, l'.

Similarly, Linnebo and Pettigrew develop the abstraction principle that provides the identity conditions for pure structures:[17]

Frege Abstraction for Pure Structures:

Given systems S and S', $[S] = [S']$ iff $S \cong S'$.

As a *nes* candidate, pure structures obtained by abstraction principles should satisfy *Instantiation* so they should contain positions[18] corresponding to 'concrete' elements in isomorphic systems, and relations between those positions matching the relations between the corresponding 'concrete' elements in systems. Accordingly, the next obvious step is to provide abstraction principles for positions.

[16] (Linnebo & Pettigrew, 2014)

[17] Linnebo and Pettigrew propose that pure structures are *sui-generis* entities in order to avoid the Burali-Forti paradox.

[18] playing the role of simple mathematical objects and referents of singular terms in non-algebraic theories.

Frege Abstraction for Positions in Pure Structures:

Given systems S and S', and elements x of S and x' of S':
$[x]_S = [x']_{S'}$ iff $\exists f$ (f: $S \cong S'$ and $f(x) = x'$)

Collecting all such positions leads to the pure domain of a pure structure:

Pure Domains in Frege Abstraction:

For all x in S and their matching positions [x] in the pure structure [S] of S,
$[D]_S = \{[x]_S: x \in D\}$

Now that the positions and domain of a pure structure have been defined, Linnebo and Pettigrew proceed by specifying how to abstract relations on positions that isomorphically match relations on corresponding elements of systems.

Pure Relations on Pure Domains.

Suppose S is a system and Φ is an n-ary relation on the domain D of S.

Then: $[\Phi]_S(x_1, x_2, \ldots x_n)$ iff there are elements $u_1, u_2, \ldots u_n$ of D such that, for each i, $[u_i]_S = x_i$, and $\Phi(u_1, u_2, \ldots u_n)$.

As I have indicated in the first section, the restricted structuralist thesis presupposes the non-trivial identification[19] of a class of pure relations, called *fundamental* relations, that are provably structural. The success of such a non-trivial identification will substantiate the purity thesis that the only mathematically relevant relations that pure positions have are structural. The specific candidate for the role of fundamental relations that Linnebo and Pettigrew propose is:

Fundamental Relations among Positions

Suppose Φ is a relation on the positions of [S]. Then Φ is fundamental if there is a relation Ψ on the domain of S such that $[\Psi] = \Phi$.

[19] Meaning that the identification should be given in independent terms than those used for specifying what a structural relation is; in our case, this amounts to an identification that is independent of the invariance under isomorphism account.

Clearly, LP-structuralism is an insightful *nes* proposal that articulates a stepwise comprehensive mechanism for obtaining the philosophical stone of *nes*, pure structures. If it succeeds, then significant philosophical progress has been achieved. The goal of the next section consists precisely in the assessment of the proof and substantiality of *Purity* in Linnebo and Pettigrew's formal framework.

4. The structuralist thesis in LP-structuralism

Linnebo and Pettigrew contend that, modulo rigid systems, LP-structuralism proves the structuralist thesis under the formal guise of *Purity*[20]:

If S is rigid and $x_1, x_2, \ldots x_k$ are elements of D,
$[\Psi]_S([x_1], [x_2], \ldots [x_k])$ iff $\Psi(x_1, x_2, \ldots x_k)$

However, Schiemer and Wigglesworth dispute the claim of Linnebo and Pettigrew, rightly pointing out that LP-structuralism is at odds with *Purity*, and set out to give a corrected *Purity*-proof version of it – call it *SW-structuralism*. I'll discuss their criticism of LP-structuralism in relation to *Purity* next, and I'll outline their solution in the next section.

Schiemer and Wigglesworth's critique is two-folded. First, they contend that the abstraction principle for pure positions makes *Purity* irreconcilable with Linnebo and Pettigrew's formal proposal for fundamental relations and properties. Then, they argue that any attempt to reconcile the definition of fundamental relations with *Purity* has to rely on an intensional approach to relations. Let us tackle the issues in the order just presented.

W.l.o.g. consider a fundamental pure property $[\Phi]_S$ of a pure position $[x]_S$ in a correspondingly pure structure $[S]$. On the one hand, by being fundamental, *Purity* requires that $[\Phi]_S$ be shared by all elements in isomorphic systems S', i.e. $[\Phi]_S(f([x]_S))$, $f: [S] \cong S'$. On the other hand, according to the gloss accompanying *Pure Relations* – '$[\Phi]_S$ is the property that holds of an object iff that object is a pure position in the pure structure $[S]$'[21] – $[\Phi]_S$ is attributable only to $[x]_S$, so, in any isomorphic system S', $[\Phi]_S$ cannot hold of $f([x]_S)$ i.e. it is **not** the case that $[\Phi]_S(f([x]_S))$, contradicting, thus, *Purity*. Given this incompatibility, Schiemer and Wigglesworth propose to alter the definition of fundamental relations in a manner

[20] This is their *Proposition 5.2*

[21] (Linnebo & Pettigrew, 2014, p. 275)

consistent with Purity and the requirement of non-triviality. In order for this local definitional patch to work, an explicit general account of relations should be first articulated. To this end, they argue for an intensional understanding LP-structuralism by showing that, in the presence of the abstraction principle for pure relations, an extensional treatment of relations overgenerates fundamental relations. To make their argument transparent, let us recall that in an extensional account, relations are bound to particular systems and completely determined by their relata. In more precise terms, relations are identified with the set of ordered tuples of elements from a given system, acting as relata. For obvious reasons, this set is known as the extension of the relation; hence, a relation just is a 'local' or system-relative extension of ordered tuples. As a consequence, any relations that consist in the same set of tuples of relata are identical.

Now, let Φ be an *arbitrary* pure relation of pure positions $a_1, a_2, \ldots a_n$ in a pure structure [S] of a system *S*, $\Phi(a_1, a_2, \ldots a_n)$. By *Instantiation*, there is an isomorphism f: [S] ≅ *S* such that $\Phi(a_1, a_2, \ldots a_n) \equiv \psi(f(a_1), \ldots, f(a_n))$; by abstraction principle for pure relations, $[\psi]_S(a_1, \ldots, a_n)$; by fundamental relations, $[\psi]_S$ is a fundamental relation; by extensionality $\Phi = [\psi]_S$. So, any arbitrary pure property Φ can be transformed in LP-structuralism into a fundamental property. It is worth noting the contribution of the extensional treatment of relations to the argument in order to sharply understand the mechanism in Schiemer and Wigglesworth's proposal that effectively blocks the conclusion that every pure relation is fundamental.

5. SW-structuralism: structural abstraction via Kripke models

In light of the previous section's discussion, Schiemer and Wigglesworth articulate[22] a formal framework for structural abstraction capable of entertaining an intensional construal of relations, in which to define fundamental relations of positions in pure structures, not only respecting the non-triviality condition, but enabling
a proof of the structuralist thesis. The formal framework they consider adequate for this purpose is that of variable domain Kripke models. As they emphasize, one of the perks of using such a versatile framework is that it permits not only to provide 'an intensional account of mathematical properties' but, importantly, 'to formally capture a dynamic version of abstraction'.[23]

[22] In this section I am going to follow closely Schiemer and Wigglesworth's exposition.
[23] (Schiemer & Wigglesworth, 2019, p. 1204)

A variable domain Kripke model is a quadruple $\mathcal{M} = \langle D, W, \sim_{acc}, v\rangle$ equipped with the usual interpretation (D is a non-empty set acting as the universal domain, W a non-empty set of worlds, $\sim_{acc}$ an accessibility relation on W, v an interpretation of relations) plus the extra charge for v of assigning a set $D_w \subseteq D$, the local domain of quantification, to each world $w \in W$. Embedding LP-structuralism in such a framework is done by considering that the worlds $w \in W$ are relational systems, $w = \langle D_w, R_{1w}, ..., R_{nw}\rangle$, D is the set of all objects in all D_w, $w \in W$, and the accessibility relation $\sim_{acc}$ is the isomorphism $\cong$ relation between relational systems. Now, in this setting, intensional relations R^n are interpreted as functions $f^n : W \rightarrow \mathbb{P}(D^n)$, where $\mathbb{P}(D^n)$ is the powerset of all n-tuples from D. Accordingly, a nonempty n-ary relation R_w of a world–system w is essentially the local extension of R^n in w (henceforth $R^n{}_w$), defined by the value $R^n{}_w \in \mathbb{P}(D^n{}_w)$. Identity conditions for intensional relations[24] easily follow: $R_1 = R_2$ iff $R_{1w} = R_{2w}$ for all $w \in W$, i.e., two intensional relations are $\mathcal{M}$-identical iff they have the same local extensions. The accessibility relation $\sim_{acc}$ is defined unsurprisingly:

Definition 4.2.1. ($\sim_{acc}$)*:*

Given $w = \langle D_w, R_{1w}, ..., R_{nw}\rangle$, $v = \langle D_v, R_{1v}, ..., R_{nv}\rangle$,
$w \sim_{acc} v$ *iff* $\exists f: D_w \rightarrow D_v$, *such that*
a) f is bijective;

b) f is an embedding: for each k-ary relation R, the following holds:

$$\forall x_1, ... x_k \in D_w [R_w(x_1, ... x_k) \equiv R_v(f(x_1), ..., f(x_k)]$$

At this point in the presentation, it is instructive to mention another critique to LP-structuralism that Schiemer and Wigglesworth address[25], envisaging the nature of the abstraction process as articulated in the abstraction principles and operator. What particularly troubles them is that Linnebo and Pettigrew left unspecified how exactly the abstraction operators, represented by the square bracket notation [], work: they are supposed to act as functions $[]: S \rightarrow [S]$, and $[]: x \in S \rightarrow [x]_S \in [S]$, but their codomain is unspecified. The need of such a clarification is fundamental to any structural abstractionist project, let alone one that intends to rigorously recasts the LP-abstraction principles in a Kripke-models mould. For this reason, Schiemer and Wigglesworth turn to a predicative and dynamic understanding of abstraction.

[24] For readability purposes, I will drop the specification of the arity of the relations from now on.
[25] (Schiemer & Wigglesworth, 2019, p. 1208)

As conveyed by LP-structuralism, the structural abstraction process distils from each particular system *S* its corresponding pure structure [S]. Now, suppose that a collection of such systems is given. What dynamic and predicative abstraction does, in Schiemer and Wigglesworth's account, is to extend this initial collection of systems *S* by appending all the corresponding pure structures [S] obtained through structural abstraction. As they put it, 'mathematical abstraction, understood as a predicative and dynamic process, simply allows one to consider larger and larger domains of mathematical entities, independently of the question of their objective existence. In the case of LP-structuralism, the relevant abstraction principles introduce pure structures into the domain of consideration by giving their identity conditions, as well as the identity conditions for the pure positions that belong to those structures'.[26] Dynamic abstraction is implemented in SW-structuralism through the operation of Kripke model extension. As the name of the operation suggests, model extension refers to the embedding *via* the inclusion or identity function of a Kripke model $\mathcal{M} = \langle D, W, \sim_{acc}, v\rangle$ into another, larger one, $\mathcal{M}' = \langle D', W', \sim_{acc}', v'\rangle$; obviously, the embedding implies that $D \subseteq D'$, $W \subseteq W'$, $\sim_{acc} \subseteq \sim_{acc}'$, $v \subseteq v'$. Accordingly, the extended model is specified in three steps: 1) by defining *W'* and *D'*, 2) by defining $\sim_{acc}'$, and 3) by defining[27] *v'*. I proceed the exposition in order. For the first step, this means supplementing *W* with the members of the set of pure structures W_S, and D with the members of the set of pure positions D_P, thus obtaining $W' = W \cup W_S$, and $D' = D \cup D_P$. W_S and D_P are given by the well-defined operators echoing '*Frege Abstraction for Pure Structures'* and '*Frege Abstraction for Positions in Pure Structures'*:

Definition 4.2.2. Pure structure abstraction operator §:

Given $\mathcal{M} = \langle D, W, \sim_{acc}, v\rangle$, call a pure structure operator a function §: $W \rightarrow W_S$, $W \cap W_S = \emptyset$, such that

$§(w_1) = §(w_2)$ iff $w_1 \sim_{acc} w_2$, for all $w_1, w_2 \in W$.

Collecting the pure structures in a set gives $W_S = \{§(w) \backslash w \in W\}$

Definition 4.2.3. Pure positions abstraction operator σ:

Given $\mathcal{M} = \langle D, W, \sim_{acc}, v\rangle$, and relational systems $w_1, w_2 \in W$, call a pure position operator, a function $\sigma: D \rightarrow D_P$, such that for all $a \in D_{w1}$, $b \in D_{w2}$, $\sigma(a) = \sigma(b)$ iff there is an isomorphism f between w_1 and w_2 ($w_1 \sim_{acc} w_2$) and $f(a) = b$,

[26] (Schiemer & Wigglesworth, 2019, p. 1215)

[27] It will become clear that Schiemer and Wigglesworth define the valuation function *v'* only partially, restricting the specification of extensions to the members of the class of pure relations obtained by abstraction.

The set of pure positions is, then, easily defined as $D_P = \{\sigma(a) \backslash a \in D\}$.

The accessibility relation $\sim_{acc}$' can now be defined by extending $\sim_{acc}$ to include the unaccounted interactions between world-systems and pure structures in the new setting W' = $W \cup W_S$:

Definition 4.2.4. ($\sim_{acc}$'):

$$\textit{For all } w_1, w_2 \in W', w_1 \sim_{acc}' w_2 \textit{ iff } w_1 \sim_{acc} w_2 \vee w_1 = \S(w_2) \vee w_2 = \S(w_1)$$

Note that the pure structures §(w_1), §(w_2) are either identical or not $\sim_{acc}$ related.

Before presenting the third and final step in the construction of the extended model $\mathcal{M}$' and, based on it, the account of fundamental and structural relations, let's take stock, as Schiemer and Wigglesworth do, of two significant advantages of adopting Kripke models doubled by an intensional understanding of properties and relations, to convey a sound structural abstraction form of *nes*.

First, they claim that the intensional construal developed in the Kripke models infrastructure effectively blocks the argument that brought havoc to LP-structuralism, that all pure relations are fundamental. What blocks the argument according to their account is the fine-grained identification of relations: to be LP-fundamental, an arbitrary pure relation Φ on positions has to be co-extensional with the induced abstract relation $[\psi]_S$ in every system *S* in order to be identical with it. Note, however, that all Schiemer and Wigglesworth have managed to show is that extra-work is required in SW-structuralism for proving that all pure relations are LP-fundamental, not that this verdict is 'effectively blocked' by their account. I will succinctly return to this issue in the next section, after clarifying their take on fundamental relations.

The second, significant benefit of using Kripke models consists in the elegant explanation of the nature of pure structures, positions, and pure relations. To circumvent the Burali-Forti paradox, LP-structuralism simply asserts that they are *sui-generis* entities, keeping their status ambiguous. On SW-account, they can have the same status as the systems from which were abstracted without the threat of the Burali-Forti paradox because 'the pure structures are not members of the set of worlds in the initial Kripke model, but are introduced through a dynamic abstraction process as captured by extending the initial model'.[28].

[28] (Schiemer & Wigglesworth, 2019, p. 1217).

5.1. Pure, fundamental, and structural relations in SW-structuralism …

As advertised above, I am going to present Schiemer and Wigglesworth's definition of the valuation function *v'* and sketch their account of fundamental relations. Briefly, their strategy is to assign extensions at pure structures under *v'* only to those pure relations that are the extensions of relations that already have local extensions fixed by *v*, i.e., relations already interpreted by *v*. Of course, for this strategy to succeed one has to define what an extended relation is.

Definition 4.2.1.1. Extended relations:

Given $\mathcal{M} = \langle D, W, \sim_{acc}, v\rangle$, D', W', $\sim_{acc}'$, *say that an n-ary relation R extends an n-ary relation Q iff:*

a) $R_w = Q_w$ *for all* $w \in W$

b) For all $u \in W_S$ *and all* $d_1, \ldots, d_n \in D_u$, $\langle d_1, \ldots, d_n\rangle \in R_u$ *iff there is a* $w \in W$ *with* $b_1, \ldots, b_n \in D_w$, *such that*

i) $d_i = \sigma(b_i)$, $i \in n$

ii) $\langle b_1, \ldots, b_n\rangle \in Q_w$

In other words, a relation R in $\mathcal{M}'$ is an extension of a relation Q in $\mathcal{M}$ iff R is $\mathcal{M}$-identical to Q and is LP-abstracted from Q. The definition has a couple of remarkable features worth stating. First, it enables a rigorous characterization of the pure abstracted relations in SW-structuralism by considering them to be extended relations. Second, it leaves room for pure relations that are not the product of abstraction, allowing these unattended relations to act as the deposit of the unavoidable extraneous properties of positions discussed in section 1. Third, it does justice to the intuition that the relevant pure relations of a structure have to be connected with relations in 'concrete' systems. However attractive are these features, and this is highly significant, the definition cannot capture the class of fundamental relations, on pain of falsifying the structuralist thesis. This is due to condition b) of the definition permitting the generation of an extended relation by abstraction from an idiosyncratic,[29] arbitrary, relation of a system. It is both illustrative and highly relevant to see why using Schiemer and Wigglesworth's example[30]. Consider the Kripke model $\mathcal{M} = \langle D = \{N_Z \cup N_N\}, W = \{z, n\}, \sim, v\rangle$, where the system *z* consists of the set of finite Zermelo ordinals, N_Z, and *n* of the set of

[29] In the sense that it is specific to the system in question by not being preserved under isomorphism.
[30] (Schiemer & Wigglesworth, 2019, p. 1219)

finite von Neumann ordinals, N_N, both equipped with their 'usual ordering'.[31] Both systems exhibit the same pure structure $\mathbb{N}$, so §(z) = §(n) = $\mathbb{N}$. The 'set-theoretic property P of having exactly two members'[32] has the local extensions $P_z = \emptyset$, and $P_N = \{\{\emptyset, \{\emptyset\}\}\}$. According to the previous definition, one can extend P to P* by ensuring that P* is co-extensional with P relative to *z* and *n*, (condition a)), and that $P^*_{\mathbb{N}} = \{2\}$, where $2 = \sigma(\{\emptyset, \{\emptyset\}\}) = \sigma(\{\{\emptyset\}\})$ (condition b)). Under the naïve hypothesis that fundamental relations are just extended world-bound relations abstracted by means of the previous definition, P* would count as fundamental. But this would falsify the structuralist thesis, for the property of having exactly two members is not structural, as witnessed by the third Zermelo ordinal.

Consequently, if the class of fundamental relations would be completely defined by the class of extended relations, then not all fundamental relations will turn out to be structural. So, some extra conditions should be added to the definition of fundamental properties, to the effect that, in conjunction with the desirable and intuitively sound condition of being an extended relation, they will ensure the provability of the structuralist thesis. The missing, satisfactory condition that Schiemer and Wigglesworth propose to complete the definition of fundamental relations is definability.

Definition 4.2.1.2. Definable relation:

Given a language $\mathcal{L}$ and an $\mathcal{L}$-systems $w = \langle D_w, R_{1w}, \ldots, R_{kw} \rangle$, we say that an n-ary relation R_i is definable iff there is an $\mathcal{L}$-formula $\varphi(x_1, \ldots, x_n, y_1, \ldots, y_m)$ and for all w there are elements $b_1, \ldots, b_m \in D_w$ such that for all $d_1, \ldots, d_n \in D_w$:

$$\langle d1, \ldots, dn \rangle \in R_{iw} \Leftrightarrow w \vDash \varphi(d_1, \ldots, d_n, b_1, \ldots, b_m)$$

Their justification for choosing the definability condition is that as the troublesome definition of extended relations indicates, the fundamental properties should not be abstracted from arbitrary relations in 'concrete' systems, but 'from relations dealing with (or about) the internal structure of the systems in question',[33] and 'the special class of relations admissible for this kind of abstraction'[34] is that of definable relations, taken to reflect the inner structure of systems.

[31] ibidem
[32] ibidem
[33] (Schiemer & Wigglesworth, 2019, p. 1220)
[34] Ibidem.

As advertised, fundamental relations can now be fully characterized by the simultaneous satisfaction of the above two conditions.

Definition 4.2.1.3. *Fundamental relations*:

An n-ary relation R on the positions of a pure structure §(w) is fundamental iff there is an n-ary relation Q on the elements of an $\mathcal{L}$-systems w and a formula φ in $\mathcal{L}$ such that

i) Q is defined by φ, and
ii) R is an extension of Q.

Again, there are some remarkable consequences worth stating of this definition. The first thing to note is that fundamental relations become language-dependent.[35] This is not a peculiar structuralist position, as the practice of model theory indicates:

'Model theorists are forever talking about symbols, names and labels. A group theorist will happily write the same abelian group multiplicatively or additively, whichever is more convenient for the matter in hand. Not so the model theorist: for him or her the group with '•' is one structure and the group with '+' is a different structure. Change the name and you change the structure'.[36]

Secondly, not only are fundamental relations pure (in Linnebo and Pettigrew's sense), but are induced by abstraction (according to condition ii). Thirdly, fundamental relations are defined by the same formulas that define the relations from which they are abstracted, given that definability is preserved under extension of relations. Lastly, all intuitively fundamental properties concerning some familiar mathematical systems, mentioned and discussed by Linnebo and Pettigrew 2014, are captured formally by this definition.

The only thing that's missing for proving the structuralist thesis is a definition of structural properties. The definition goes as expected:

Definition 4.2.1.4. Structural properties:

R is a structural property of position a in the domain of §(w) iff for all systems $w \in W$ and for all isomorphisms f: §(w) → w, the following holds:

$$a \in R_{§(w)} \Rightarrow f(a) \in R_w$$

[35] This language relativity is not unprecedented in the structuralist literature, as Schiemer and Wigglesworth (2014) acknowledge by citing (Resnik, 1997).

[36] (Hodges, 1997, p. 1)

The structural thesis is proven in section 7 of Schiemer and Wigglesworth's paper under the label *proposition 1*:

'Suppose a is a position in structure §(w). If R is a fundamental property of a in §(w), then R is a structural property of a in §(w)'.

6. Adequacy *vs* substantiality of the structuralist thesis in SW-structuralism

6.1. The role of the intensional construal of relations

On a careful examination, one can observe that what effectively blocks the argument that arbitrary pure relations ($R_{\S(w)}$) turn out to be fundamental in SW-structuralism is not the appeal to intensional relations, but to definability, as Schiemer and Wigglesworth certainly recognize: 'Properties such as being John's favourite number fail to be fundamental since there are no definable properties from which they can be abstracted'.[37] More precisely, the appeal to signatures in specifying what counts as fundamental relations is what blocks the argument, but this move is available to Linnebo and Pettigrew 's version of structuralism.

6.2. Why definable?

It is instructive to ponder why the definition of extended relations is formulated in such a manner that it doesn't prohibit right from the start the abstraction from, or extension of, arbitrary, idiosyncratic relations (recall that it is sufficient for a relation Q to occur in a system *w* in order to be extendable). The definition can be easily adjusted so that the admissible relations for abstraction or extension are structural. Here is one way of rectifying it:

Given $\mathcal{M} = \langle D, W, \sim_{acc}, v\rangle, D', W', \sim_{acc}'$, say that an n-ary relation R extends an n-ary relation Q iff:
a) $R_w = Q_w$ for all $w \in W$
b) For all $u \in W_S$ and all $d_1, \ldots, d_n \in D_u$, $\langle d_1, \ldots, d_n\rangle \in R_u$ iff there is a $w \in W$ with $b_1, \ldots, b_n \in D_w$, such that
i) $d_i = \sigma(b_i)$, $i \in n$
ii) $\langle b_1, \ldots, b_n\rangle \in Q_w$

[37] (Schiemer & Wigglesworth, 2019, p. 1222)

c) *For all $w' \in W$, such that $w \sim_{acc} w'$, there are $c_1, \ldots, c_n \in D_{w'}$ such that $\langle c_1, \ldots, c_n \rangle \in T_{w'}$ iff $\langle b_1, \ldots, b_n \rangle \in Q_w$ where T is an n-ary relation.*

Amended in this manner, the definition of extended relations becomes synonymous to that of structural relations. And now we can clearly see why such an altered definition is untenable in *nes*: it trivializes the structuralist thesis by making all fundamental relations, understood as extended relations, definitionally synonymous with structural relations.

At this point, it becomes apparent that the wrinkle of definability as an essential condition for the characterization of fundamental relations has everything to do with the substantiality of the structuralist thesis. Stated in terms of extended and definable relations, the definition of fundamental relations is non-synonymous to that of structural relations, substantiating, thus, the claim of the structuralist thesis. Consequently, a proof of the structuralist thesis becomes a significant and revealing result.

6.3. Adequacy of the definition of fundamental relations

However clever and ingenious, Schiemer and Wigglesworth's rendition of the structuralist thesis, I argue, misses its mark. Just to be clear, I will argue that their definition of fundamental relations fails to capture what their explicit formal purpose was: essential features of the underlying structure instantiated in systems sharing the same signature. More precisely, it fails in two aspects: it overgenerates and undegenerates fundamental relations. To unpack my claim, consider some of the examples of relations and properties that they include in the 'intuitively fundamental' target set of the formal fundamental relations:

'Being the additive identity in a complete ordered field is one such property (of the zero position). Being an annihilating element for multiplication in such a field is another. The list could be extended for other types of structures: being an even number or being the second successor of the zero position are fundamental properties of certain places in the natural number structure. Being a node with a certain degree, that is, having a certain number of edges incident to it, is a fundamental property of nodes in a graph structure.' [38]

All these cases seem to be easily and quite naturally captured by their definition of fundamental relations:

[38] (Schiemer & Wigglesworth, 2019, p. 1220)

"Consider, for instance, properties of the positions in the natural number structure discussed above. Each of these can be induced by abstraction from a concrete property of elements in a natural number system that is definable in terms of the primitive non-logical vocabulary of the language of Peano arithmetic. The property of being an even number, for example, is clearly fundamental in this sense, since it can be abstracted from a property of numbers in a given concrete natural number system that is definable by a first-order formula '$\exists y(y+y = x)$'".[39]

But, as they claim, and I wholeheartedly agree, if the properties listed above are 'intuitively fundamental', then so it should be the property of being a non-standard number or an infinite successor of the zero position in a non-standard model of arithmetic. The non-standard numbers are at least as constitutive[40] for non-standard structures, as zero is for a field. Accordingly, their properties should count as intuitively fundamental for the non-standard structure of arithmetic. But it is an elementary result[41] regarding non-standard models of arithmetic that their characteristic properties are not definable in first-order Peano Arithmetic (PA). So, consider the Kripke model

$\mathcal{M} = \langle D, W = \{n^*, n^{*'}\}, \sim, v\rangle$, where n* and n*' are isomorphic non-standard models of arithmetic. Their pure structure, §(n*) = §(n*') = $\mathbb{N}^*$, should contain non-standard positions having the pure properties corresponding to those mentioned above as intuitive. But since these properties are not definable, they are not fundamental according to Schiemer & Wigglesworth's definition, although, as argued, they are intuitively fundamental by their own lights. By Dedekind's categoricity theorem, second order Peano Arithmetic has only standard models, so changing the logic in this context doesn't help, as it excludes non-standard numbers. Other types of logics, or the appeal to open-ended versions of PA or schematic theories could be excluded on appropriate grounds. And, in the end, it isn't even a matter of switching to the 'right logic', afterall, the study of such models in not only lucrative for better understanding and illuminating the standard model, but also worth pursuing for the mathematics of it. So, the definition undergenerates fundamental relations.

To see that it also overgenerates it is enough to consider properties representable in PA. With a sensible coding scheme of Gödel numbering, there will be a PA-formula coding the abovementioned 'property P of having exactly two members', or of being a formula of PA, or a term, or a sentence etc. All these recursive properties are representable in PA. Now, consider Schiemer and Wigglesworth's example of the Kripke model $\mathcal{M} = \langle D, W = \{z, n\}, \sim, v\rangle$, consisting of the set of finite

[39] (Schiemer & Wigglesworth, 2019, p. 1222)

[40] Although proving this takes a bit of effort: 'is not quite trivial to show that there must *be* some nonstandard numbers in any nonstandard model $\mathcal{M}$.' (Boolos, 2007, p. 303)

[41] For details see the 'overspill lemma' or 'principle' in (Boolos, 2007, p. 309) or (van Dalen, 2004, p. 122)

Zermelo and von Neumann ordinals equipped with their 'usual ordering' and expand the signature to that of PA, importing the usual interpretation of the symbols. In this model, the arithmetized version of the property P turns out to be fundamental, although, intuitively it shouldn't be. I am aware of the difference between the property as expressed and understood in metalanguage and its artihmetized counterpart, but that is beside the point, for in virtue of being representable there is a canonical way of reconstructing the metalinguistic meaning. The same holds for other syntactic properties, and all the other non-arithmetic recursive properties. But these arithmetized versions of non-arithmetical properties obviously go over and beyond what an intuitively fundamental property of the natural numbers is supposed to be. The definition overgenerates.

7. Concluding remarks

The substantiality of the structuralist thesis is predicated on the non-synonymy of fundamental and structural relations. The adequacy is predicated on the synonymy between the formal definition of fundamental properties and the intuitive content of the notion. If *structural* is taken to be invariance under isomorphism, as both Linnebo and Pettigrew, and Schiemer and Wigglesworth explicitly consider, then both abstractionist proposals fall short of upholding the eligibility of non-eliminative structuralism by proving the structuralist thesis. Linnebo and Pettigrew fail not only to convincingly circumscribe the class of fundamental properties, but also to prove the structuralist thesis. In Schiemer and Wigglesworth's reconstruction, the structuralist thesis is successfully proven, but it amounts to the fundamental but elementary result that definable relations are preserved under isomorphism. Now, how substantial is this result for *nes* is a matter of debate, given that the notion of isomorphism is intimately connected with the signature of a system. Isomorphisms are essentially defined with respect to a signature and a language. That much is an elementary observation.

'The isomorphism concept is intricately linked with that of formal language, which is a way of making precise exactly which mathematical structure one is considering. Whether a given one-to-one correspondence is an isomorphism depends crucially, after all, on which structural features are deemed salient'. (Hamkins, 2020, p. 30)

Nevertheless, the main point of my contention is that, even though the substantiality concerns raised above are surpassed, the class of fundamental relations, as sharply and ingeniously defined by Schiemer and Wigglesworth still won't cut it by their own standards: it unequivocally undergenerates and arguably overgenerates.

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Brouwer–Hilbert on the Limits of Mathematical Knowledge

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ABSTRACT. Brouwer famously challenged the limits of mathematical knowledge by arguing that classical formalism obscures intuitive evidence. Hilbert, by contrast, considered that intuitive insights could safely be ignored as long as formal systems remained consistent and complete. Such a disagreement created a paradigmatic tension between intuitionism and formalism in how the foundations of mathematics should be regarded. This paper evaluates Hilbert's eventual pragmatic dominance and explores, via a shared Kantian heritage, how intuitionistic insights might coexist with formal approaches. Focusing on axioms, the analysis reveals how neglecting certain epistemic values while admitting alternative forms of evidence shapes our understanding of mathematical limits.

Keywords: *philosophy of mathematics, Brouwer-Hilbert controversy, epistemic limits, Kantian heritage*

I. Introduction: Mathematics Between Knowledge and Ignorance

Among the sciences and other systematic forms of reasoning, mathematics has long stood as a model of knowledge, providing an epistemological pillar for our inquiry into empirical phenomena. Unlike other domains marked by radical conceptual shifts, mathematics has traditionally projected the image of a complete and self-contained body of knowledge, seemingly immune to internal gaps or inconsistencies. As Kant noted, the results of this discipline provide the most powerful instruments for scientific evidence through the precision of its synthetic *a priori* judgments: "Here is a great and proved field of knowledge, which is already of admirable compass and for the future promises unbounded extension, which carries with it

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thoroughly apodictic certainty, i.e., absolute necessity"[1]. Mathematics not only consolidates our reasoning with remarkable rigour but also enables the systematic construction of new results upon established foundations, without the apparent risk of encountering essential breakdowns. Indeed, its internal coherence, logical stability, and resistance to counterfactual variation[2] have long underpinned its distinctive epistemic status.

Few thinkers have shaped the modern conception of mathematics as decisively as Hilbert, whose efforts to establish the important results of this domain upon universal foundations and resolve all major open problems were intended to shield it from the prospect of *ignorabimus*[3]. His contributions extended beyond the systematic consolidation of prior developments, as Hilbert founded a formalist school of thought, alongside prominent mathematicians such as Bernays, Ackermann, and von Neumann, who advanced the axiomatic method and developed proof theory as a rigorous framework for analysing mathematical reasoning well into the contemporary era. These achievements remain landmarks in the foundations of mathematics. Despite the unrestricted ambition of Hilbert's early 20th-century programme to formalise mathematics as a complete system, its limitations became increasingly evident, particularly after the groundbreaking discovery of Gödel's incompleteness theorems. Even before these results, the historical episode of the *Grundlagenkrise* had already revealed cracks in this foundational optimism, most notably through the challenges posed by Brouwer's intuitionism. His critique questioned the ideal of completeness, thus anticipating the limits of the formalist perspective that Gödel would later prove.

At the same time, the privileged position Hilbert assigned to the axiomatic method as the sole reliable path toward a definitive basis of mathematics has faced various challenges over time, though it ultimately proved to be the most influential strategy. One of the most radical critiques came from Brouwer's intuitionism, which viewed axioms not as true foundations, but as linguistic artefacts that illegitimately

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1 I. Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics That Will Be Able to Present Itself as a Science*, P. G. Lucas (ed.), Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1953, p. 36.

2 For instance, mathematical judgments usually cannot be meaningfully evaluated through counterfactual hypotheses. There is no epistemic gain in supposing that 1 equals 2, since such an assumption merely generates a contradiction within the established system rather than illuminating any consistent alternative structure. This is why mathematics is associated with a stronger form of necessity, as counterfactual statements have a far more limited application within its framework compared to other fields.

3 See D. Hilbert, "From Mathematical Problems", in W. Ewald (ed.), *From Kant to Hilbert: A Source Book in the Foundations of Mathematics,* Vol. II, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1996, pp. 1096–1105; and D. Hilbert, "On the Infinite", in P. Benacerraf and H. Putnam (eds.), *Philosophy of Mathematics: Selected Readings*, 2nd ed., Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983, p. 200.

diverted attention from the true source of mathematical reasoning, namely, temporal intuition, to the features and rules of formal manipulation. Whereas Hilbert regarded axioms as the bedrock of mathematical foundations, Brouwer argued that such linguistic expressions lacked epistemic substance. They were not only redundant in relation to the insights and evidence provided by intuition, but also potential sources of weakness, susceptible to generating antinomies and unfounded results. Why, then, did Brouwer's objections fail to dismantle Hilbert's image of mathematics? How might mathematics be threatened by all these fissures, and why is it advantageous, even necessary, to overlook them? Lastly, how might the acceptance or rejection of axiomatic systems reflect the distinction between knowledge and ignorance in the foundational debates of mathematics, and what does the formalism–intuitionism polemic reveal about the nature of these two epistemological states? These will be the guiding questions addressed in the sections that follow.

The first part of this essay examines the foundational tensions between intuitionism and formalism, with particular emphasis on the role of axiomatic systems. This dispute is emblematic for the epistemology of mathematics, insofar as the problem of axioms reveals not only the intrinsic limits of formalisation but also the possibility of absolute boundaries of mathematical knowledge itself. I will argue that the Hilbertian approach largely overlooks Brouwer's objections, illustrating this claim through a simple intuitionistic counterexample to the unrestricted use of transfinite axioms, together with the formalist response devised to address this particular challenge. The second part evaluates the competing arguments of formalism and intuitionism by means of a method that, despite its apparent simplicity, carries considerable philosophical and mathematical significance: a comparative table designed to illustrate the pragmatic value of these two foundational positions. Inspired by formal epistemology, this approach is designed to quantify the epistemic trade-offs inherent to each standpoint, offering a novel explanation for the prevailing status of the Hilbertian position. The final chapter revisits the guiding questions and the formalist–intuitionist opposition in light of a philosophically based analysis, which departs from the pragmatic criteria previously considered. Drawing on Țurlea's observation that intuitionism and formalism share a Kantian root, I trace their deeper interpretative divergence and explain how this split has gradually favoured a Hilbertian position. Ultimately, I argue that the image of mathematical knowledge should be re-situated within a broader epistemological framework, one that acknowledges the reductive assumptions underlying its formal structures. These omissions, far from negligible, reveal vulnerabilities that may threaten the very foundation of mathematical knowledge.

Regarding the literature, the Brouwer-Hilbert dispute has been extensively studied, covering the historical controversy between their schools of thought as well as the broader contemporary tension between intuitionism (or constructivism)

and formalism[4], particularly concerning the status of axioms on both sides[5]. Our concern here, however, is to investigate a possible philosophical link between these two approaches, which were initially separated by epistemological considerations and divergences of mathematical practice. Even if various forms of synthesis have been attempted from a mathematical point of view, for instance by integrating constructive structures into classical results[6], the philosophical question of how intuitionism and formalism might be bridged remains unclear. Recent studies have explored such possibilities by focusing on the refined Kantian underpinnings of mathematical intuitionism and the interpretative shifts that led to the success of the Hilbertian vision, while the emergence of *Homotopy Type Theory* has re-contextualised the Brouwerian legacy as a robust framework for constructive mathematics[7]. Therefore, this inquiry aims to outline a possible route of co-existence, beginning from the knowledge–ignorance opposition and the Kantian influence shared by both thinkers.

II. Axiomatic Tensions and the Epistemic Divide Between Intuitionism and Formalism

The foundational dispute between formalism and intuitionism[8] from the beginning of last century revealed among other aspects how contrasting conceptions of knowledge and ignorance can unsettle the apparent solidity of mathematics. For

[4] Important references on the tensions between intuitionism (or constructivism) and formalism (or classical mathematics) include P. Mancosu (ed.), *From Brouwer to Hilbert: The Debate on the Foundations of Mathematics in the 1920s*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1998; Michael Dummett, *Elements of Intuitionism*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1977; and Arend Heyting, *Intuitionism: An Introduction*, Amsterdam, North-Holland Publishing Company, 1956.

[5] Discussions on the status of axioms in intuitionism and their epistemic implications in mathematics can be found in A. S. Troelstra and D. van Dalen, *Constructivism in Mathematics: An Introduction,* Vol. I, Amsterdam, Elsevier Science Publishers, 1988; for a more technical analysis, see A. S. Troelstra, "Axioms for Intuitionistic Mathematics Incompatible with Classical Logic", in R. E. Butts and J. Hintikka (eds.), *Logic, Foundations of Mathematics, and Computability Theory*, Dordrecht, D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1977, pp. 59–86.

[6] See, for example, the texts in S. Shapiro (ed.), *Intensional Mathematics. Studies in Logic and the Foundations of Mathematics,* Vol. 113, Amsterdam, Elsevier Science Publishers B.V., 1985.

[7] For a detailed reappraisal of these foundational tensions, see Carl J. Posy, *Mathematical Intuitionism*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2020; Paolo Mancosu, *The Adventure of Reason: Interplay between Philosophy of Mathematics and Mathematical Logic, 1900-1940*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010; and The Univalent Foundations Program, *Homotopy Type Theory: Univalent Foundations of Mathematics*, Princeton, Institute for Advanced Study, 2013.

[8] For a general historical context of the *Grundlagenkrise* at the turn of the 19th–20th centuries, see, e.g., I. Grattan-Guinness, *The Search for Mathematical Roots: 1870–1940: Logics, Set Theories, and the Foundations of Mathematics from Cantor through Russell to Gödel*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2000.

instance, what formalists present as stable epistemic ground, established through the axiomatic method, is regarded by intuitionism as a linguistic surface that conceals deeper indeterminacies and ignores the real source of mathematics, namely the mental faculty of intuition[9]. In Brouwer's view, these states of indeterminacy are inherent to mathematics, contrary to the image of completeness, and they appear mostly when we operate with the concept of infinity. This clearly suggests that the Hilbertian side tends to ignore, in the form of unrecognised ambiguity of mathematical reasoning, what resides at the very heart of what is classically considered rigour. From the formalist perspective, such cases of indeterminacy reflect a deficiency or limitation of our previous formal systems in fully articulating and systematising knowledge, a shortcoming that the axiomatic method seeks to overcome. Thus, there is no need to proclaim a crisis in mathematics or the necessity of reconstructing it entirely. Ultimately, the opposition rests not merely on methodological differences regarding the norms admitted for doing mathematics, but more generally on seemingly incompatible epistemological commitments regarding the nature of mathematical knowledge. For Hilbert, mathematics is fundamentally tied to the possibility of formalising its content in a consistent and complete manner, with axioms, rules of inference, and formulas systematically structured, and with the conviction that the semantics can be entirely captured within this linguistic framework. Intuitionism, for its part, offers non-classical modes of construction based on intuitive insights that challenge the assumption of completeness and expose the blind spots of formal abstractions.

Among the key points of contention between intuitionism and classical mathematics are the unrestricted use of certain logical laws, most notably the principle of the excluded middle, particularly when applied to transfinite sets, the interpretation and mathematical treatment of infinity, and differing conceptions of intuition. Yet perhaps the most profound divergence concerns the status of the axiomatic method, upheld by Hilbert and sharply contested by Brouwer[10]. The intuitionist critique, particularly during the *Grundlagenkrise*, elicited markedly different reactions within the scholarly community, depending on how mathematicians assessed both the severity of the problems confronting the classical conception and the

[9] Brouwer consistently argued that temporal intuition should serve as the primary source of mathematical knowledge. Across his career, he attempted to establish a constructive method based on the essential properties of intuitive evidence. See, for example, L. E. J. Brouwer, "On the Foundations of Mathematics", in A. Heyting (ed.), *Collected Works,* Vol. I, Amsterdam, North-Holland, 1975, p. 53; and L. E. J. Brouwer, "Intuitionism and Formalism", in *Collected Works,* Vol. I, p. 127.

[10] L. E. J. Brouwer, "On the Foundations of Mathematics", pp. 92–95, and "Formalism and Intuitionism", pp. 123–138, in A. Heyting (ed.), *Collected Works,* Vol. I, Amsterdam, North-Holland, 1975.

possible strategies for resolving them. Some, like Weyl[11], recognised the importance of exposing the epistemic fissures in the classical image of the continuum. In this view, previous atomistic descriptions of the continuum no longer met the rigour of constructive reasoning, as mainly established by Brouwer. Others maintained that the foundational crisis could be simply addressed by refining classical tools, especially through the adjustment of axiomatic systems, to prevent the emergence of antinomies and preclude various forms of indeterminacy. While Brouwer's initial doubts evolved into an ambitious project to reconstruct mathematics on intuitionistic grounds, his alternative vision gradually lost momentum, though its critical potential continues to be influential today. Ongoing debates about constructive procedures, the study of impredicative definitions, and scepticism toward certain logical principles continue to reflect its enduring legacy.

One of Brouwer's most radical claims in his early writings[12] was that the use of axioms, i.e. foundational statements assumed without proof, should be entirely avoided in mathematical constructions, as they merely formalise ideas already known through intuition without providing additional evidence. A clear example comes from arithmetic, where he rejected axiomatic foundations[13], in favour of constructions directly derived from the primordial intuition of time (ger. *Ur-Intuition*)[14], thereby grounding the generation of natural numbers on a philosophical framework[15]. For Brouwer, formalisation, especially that built upon Hilbertian ideals of completeness and consistency, did not represent either the starting point of mathematical construction or the authentic medium of reasoning, but rather an

[11] H. Weyl, "On the New Foundational Crisis of Mathematics", in P. Mancosu (ed.), *From Brouwer to Hilbert. The Debate on the Foundations of Mathematics in the 1920s*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1998, pp. 86–118.

[12] See L. E. J. Brouwer, "On the Foundations of Mathematics", pp. 77–81, and "Intuitionism and Formalism", p. 125, in A. Heyting (ed.), *Collected Works*, Vol. I, Amsterdam, North-Holland, 1975. Later, he recognised the utility of axioms in Heyting's formalisation of intuitionistic mathematics, although in his own writings he continued to avoid them.

[13] As classically formalised in arithmetic by G. Peano, or in the logical approach of Bertrand Russell, *The Principles of Mathematics*, London, Bradford & Dickens, 1942, p. 128.

[14] The foundational stages of mathematics, grounded in temporal intuition, are articulated by Brouwer through what he calls the two acts of intuitionism, as presented in his work "Historical Background, Principles and Methods of Intuitionism", in *South African Journal of Science*, 49 / 1952, South African Association for the Advancement of Science, pp. 140–142.

[15] More specifically, the philosophical method used here could be seen as a form of genetic constructivism, meaning that the origin of mathematics must be established in correspondence with certain foundational mental phenomena, such as the perception of change in time. Even if some commentators have interpreted this as a form of psychologism, however, I endorse the explanation from M. van Atten, *On Brouwer*, Belmont, Wadsworth Philosophers Series, 2004, pp. 72–76, that Brouwer had in mind transcendental phenomena, and not empirical ones.

arbitrary linguistic rendering of our intuitions[16]. From an epistemological perspective, intuitionism challenges the formalist conviction that axioms define the absolute limits of mathematical knowledge within which the reasoning operates. Such a manner of establishing boundaries in mathematics according to criteria that carry no intrinsic meaning beyond their syntactic function may itself be regarded as a form of ignorance, since it imposes an arbitrary condition that requires one to overlook intuitive insights[17].

Hilbert's decision to renounce any kind of meaning to the mathematical objects derived from an external source marked an essential step in safeguarding mathematics from potential sources of error. Accordingly, he regarded the complete elimination of such external meanings as the best means of overcoming epistemic vulnerabilities, since they did not belong to the content of mathematics as a pure formal discipline. This act followed from Hilbert's conviction that axiomatisation constitutes the most reliable path to secure the foundations of mathematics. As a natural consequence, his objective was to establish the whole of mathematics on a universal basis through the adequate choice of axioms. These axioms would generate a set of sentences that would be consistent and complete, relying on the mechanical manipulations prescribed by the rules of inference rather than on intuitive guidance. Although Hilbert acknowledged the heuristic role of intuition, he confined it to the restricted status of intellectual recognition of symbolic tokens, relevant at a pre-mathematical stage but epistemically insecure and undesirable later on. As Kreisel observed: "Hilbert's programme begins where the semantic leaves off"[18], thus representing a clear shift that dissolves all variations of meaning into purely formal language governed by syntactical rules. Moreover, driven by the ambition that every major mathematical problem could ultimately be solved, i.e. we have either a proof or a disproof for every well-formed formula A, Hilbert's approach reflected a deeply positivist stance. In *The Knowledge of Nature*, he famously declared: "For the mathematician there is no *ignorabimus*... We must know. We

[16] L. E. J. Brouwer, "Intuitionism and Formalism", in *Collected Works,* Vol. I, p. 128: "(...) neither the ordinary language nor any symbolic language can have any other role than that of serving as a non-mathematical auxiliary".

[17] In formalism, such formulas serve purely syntactical functions, with no semantic content. See David Hilbert, "On the Infinite", in *Philosophy of Mathematics: Selected Readings*, p. 197: "The symbols of the logical calculus originally were introduced only in order to communicate. Still it is consistent with our finitary viewpoint to deny any meaning to logical symbols, just as we denied meaning to mathematical symbols, and to declare that the formulas of the logical calculus are ideal statements which mean nothing in themselves".

[18] G. Kreisel, "Foundations of Intuitionistic Logic", in E. Nagel, P. Suppes and A. Tarski (eds.), *Logic, Methodology and Philosophy of Science*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1962, p. 201.

shall know"[19]. As a reason for the rejection of the possibility of inherent epistemic limits regarding the completeness of mathematics, Hilbert considered the axiomatic method as part of a broader scientific optimism of his time, inspired by breakthrough discoveries such as the theory of relativity and radioactivity. Within this historical atmosphere, mathematics was envisioned as the ultimate foundation of the natural sciences[20], and axioms were intended to preserve this apodictic character of mathematical status at any cost. This conviction had practical consequences in the development of mathematics: principles such as the Axiom of Infinity or the Axiom of Choice[21], though lacking constructive or intuitive justification, provided powerful tools that decisively influenced the axiomatisation of arithmetic, set theory and analysis. Ultimately, the authority of axioms in mathematics rested not on their semantic clarity, but on their syntactic efficiency and fruitfulness.

In his 1912 inaugural lecture *Intuitionism and Formalism*, Brouwer contested the prevailing formalist approach to the foundations of mathematics. More specifically, he argued that axiomatic systems fail to resolve the emergence of paradoxes, such as those stemming from the axiom of comprehension (or inclusion) in ZFC set theory, as well as various instances of vicious reasoning, like the axiom of induction in number theory[22]. For Brouwer, mathematical truth derives directly from intuitive constructions, not from the mere absence of contradiction within a linguistic framework. Making consistency within formal reasoning the sole criterion for mathematical validity, as Hilbert did, illegitimately subordinates mathematics to its linguistic representation. Moreover, Brouwer regarded completeness as a property of linguistic expressions rather than of mathematics itself. In Hilbert's vision, to achieve completeness within a formal system, every mathematical well-formed formula must be decidable: given any formula A, one must be able either to construct a proof of A or to derive a contradiction from its proof. In other words, *tertium non datur* must apply to every possible mathematical statement in our set of formulas.

[19] D. Hilbert, "Logic and the Knowledge of Nature", in W. Ewald (ed.), *From Kant to Hilbert. A Source Book in the Foundations of Mathematics,* Vol. II, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1996, p. 1165.

[20] This reflects Kant's claim that mathematics defines the very possibility of genuine science. See I. Kant, *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science*, M. Friedman (ed.), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 6: "In any special doctrine of Nature there is only as much genuine science as there is mathematics".

[21] See E. Zermelo, "Untersuchungen über die Grundlagen der Mengenlehre I", in *Mathematische Annalen*, 65 / 1908, B. G. Teubner, pp. 261–281. For a discussion on their non-constructivity, see M. Dummett, *Elements of Intuitionism*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1977, pp. 52–55.

[22] For example, Brouwer pointed to paradoxes such as the Burali-Forti paradox, concerning the well-ordering of sets, and the axiom of induction, which becomes impredicative in the formalist account. For further references regarding the axioms admitted by Hilbert, see L. E. J. Brouwer, "Intuitionism and Formalism", in *Collected Works,* Vol. I, p. 133.

As an objection to this ideal, Brouwer offered several counterexamples, including the unresolved question of whether the digit sequence "0123456789" appears in the infinite decimal expansion of π, to show his point by highlighting the limits of classical logic and completeness[23]. This proposition is currently neither provable nor disprovable, since there is no constructive method to verify or refute the presence of this sequence in the decimal expansion of π. Even if the sequence were eventually located at some stage *k* of a constructive enumeration of the digits[24], one could simply replace it with another sequence not yet encountered by stage *k*, thereby preserving the indeterminacy. Such examples illustrate that questions about infinite collections inevitably give rise to indeterminacy, as long as we want to talk meaningfully from an intuitive viewpoint about these kinds of sets. Unlike Hilbert, who formalised transfinite sets as complete mathematical objects[25], Brouwer maintained that infinite sets, such as the decimal expansion of π, cannot be meaningfully captured without acknowledging this inherent context of indeterminacy. This is not merely a practical limitation arising from our inability to examine every element of infinite sets, but a principled one: there exists no rule that fully determines the generation of all elements of such a set in a constructive manner.

To illustrate this contrast, let us briefly examine Hilbert's axiomatic approach to transfinite sets through the operator τ, introduced to reconcile infinite totalities with finitary mathematics. Hilbert acknowledged the need for a distinct axiomatic approach to the transfinite sets, yet insisted that such reasoning must be reducible to finite methods: "the free use and the full mastery of the transfinite is to be achieved on the territory of the finite"[26]. Consequently, he proposed a transfinite axiom, formulated as $A(\tau A) \rightarrow A(a)$, which allows the inference that if a predicate A applies to some specific object τA, then it applies to all objects *a*[27]. In other words, τ represents an arbitrary object satisfying property A and serves as a generic

[23] L. E. J. Brouwer, "The Unreliability of the Logical Principles", in A. Heyting (ed.), *Collected Works,* Vol. I, Amsterdam, North-Holland, 1975, p. 110.

[24] Meanwhile, this sequence was indeed found, but, as we have seen, it can be replaced with one that does not appear in the decimal expansion of π (see D. E. Hesseling, *Gnomes in the Fog: The Reception of Brouwer's Intuitionism in the 1920s*, Basel, Springer, 2003, p. 71).

[25] D. Hilbert, "On the Infinite", in *Philosophy of Mathematics: Selected Readings*, pp. 198–199.

[26] D. Hilbert, "The Logical Foundations of Mathematics", in W. Ewald (ed.), *From Kant to Hilbert. A Source Book in the Foundations of Mathematics,* Vol. II, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1996, p. 1140.

[27] To clarify this axiom, Hilbert uses the example of the predicate "bribable": if τA designates an ideally just person for whom it has been proven that they are bribable, then, according to the axiom $A(\tau A) \rightarrow A(a)$, it follows that all people are bribable. From an intuitionistic perspective, however, this inference appears meaningless, since such an ideal instance says nothing about the actual bribability of other individuals. The example reveals the gap between formal generalisation and intuitive meaning, highlighting how the transfinite operator abstracts away from constructive content (*Ibid.*, p. 1141).

placeholder, allowing quantified statements to be reduced to finitary terms and supporting the formalisation of transfinite reasoning within finite logic. This enables inferences from τ-objects to general domains, aiming to preserve consistency and completeness, even when dealing with infinite sets. However, from an intuitionistic position, this apparently elegant technique fails to resolve the epistemic ambiguity of the infinite. For instance, if A denotes the property "every possible finite digit sequence appears in the decimal expansion of π", then τA would designate a hypothetical decimal expansion satisfying A. By the axiom A(τA) → A(a), one could infer that this property holds for all decimal expansions, seemingly addressing the earlier counterexample to the law of the excluded middle. Yet from Brouwer's perspective, this inference does not address how or when such a sequence as "0123456789" actually appears. It merely postulates existence implicitly, without constructive proof. Thus, the τ-operator shifts the problem into formal language, bypassing intuitive justification. Infinite entities, in the intuitionist view, lack meaning unless constructively supported. While such axioms give the appearance of completeness, they remain detached from constructive grounding, relying on the law of the excluded middle without restriction, a principle whose absolute validity Brouwer confines to finite reasoning. His critique of formal axiomatic notions, such as the τ-operator, thus exposes ambiguities in formalist foundations and underscores the need to reconsider the limits imposed by intuition.

III. Pragmatic Success vs Epistemic Limits

To understand why formalist practices continue to shape the prevailing image of mathematics, while intuitionistic perspectives are often marginalised or regarded as historical curiosity, I will adopt a pragmatic method of comparison between these two foundational positions. Drawing on approaches from formal epistemology[28], this method evaluates the main strengths of each perspective, especially regarding the acceptance and use of axiomatic systems, via a structured comparative table, which may be further extended. The purpose is not to claim strict objectivity, but rather to highlight which framework currently offers greater epistemic utility in the foundations of mathematics. Therefore, in the current

[28] For example, D. Lewis employed a similar approach by pragmatically arguing that possible worlds should be regarded as equally real as our actual world, since this assumption better serves formal understanding. See D. Lewis, *On the Plurality of Worlds*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1986, pp. 3–5 (Ch. 1, "A Philosopher's Paradise"). In a comparable manner, Hilbert admitted the unrestricted notion of the transfinite to preserve and extend the developments initiated by Cantor in set theory.

context, mathematical utility serves as the principal criterion for assessing the use of axioms. Utility is understood in terms of practical advantages, such as the ease of integrating existing results, generating new theorems, the effectiveness of proof techniques, and sustaining productive mathematical development.

Before presenting Table 1, two clarifications are in order. First, the scoring system, based on an arbitrary scale from 0 to 15 points for illustrative purposes, is not intended as a rigorous evaluation of the arguments themselves. The goal is instead to provide a broader perspective on the conflict between intuitionism and formalism and to explore some of its immediate consequences in mathematics. Within this framework, pragmatic considerations must be the factor explaining the enduring dominance of the formalist image of mathematics, which will serve as the primary focus of analysis. Second, the scores should be regarded as flexible, approximate estimates, reflecting relative epistemic weight rather than absolute values. For example, if intuitionism were able to provide a compelling alternative to classical theorems, its score would increase substantially. In the current context, however, certain structural advantages of formalism, such as the preservation and consolidation of important classical results through axiomatic systems, constitute fairly objective benefits. By contrast, the richer semantics offered by intuitionism, while philosophically significant and valuable in constructive analyses, does not exert the same impact on mainstream mathematical practice. In moving beyond a purely descriptive account, the following table proposes a decision-theoretic lens through which to identify the specific utility thresholds that favoured the formalist image of mathematics. This heuristic reveals how the prioritisation of different epistemic values, such as constructive clarity versus axiomatic efficiency, fundamentally shapes the resulting conception of mathematical knowledge.

Table 1. Arguments Accounting

No.	Argument / Criterion	Intuitionism	Pts.	Formalism	Pts.
1	Consolidation and preservation of previous results	Theorems and propositions are partially reconstructed and generally weakened due to constructive constraints	5	Results are easily reproducible and reinforced within axiomatic systems	13
2	Epistemic foundation of constructions	Grounds mathematical activity in meaningful concepts (e.g. *Ur-Intuition*) that provide direct epistemic justification	7	Axioms are accepted for their efficiency and clarity, without additional semantic justification	4

No.	Argument / Criterion	Intuitionism	Pts.	Formalism	Pts.
3	Completeness and theoretical adaptability	Cannot reconstruct many classical theories (e.g. Cantor's transfinite set theory and certain axioms from real analysis); the system is conservative and restricts the uncritical acceptance of new mathematical objects	4	Covers a large part of classical mathematics and can easily integrate extensions, new theories, and additional axioms (e.g. ZFC, type theory)	11
4	Recognition of epistemic limits in mathematics	Acknowledges irresolvable problems and treats notions such as infinity, the existential quantifier, and the application of logical laws with appropriate restrictions.	8	Tends to conceal such limits, promoting unlimited confidence in the power of axiomatic systems	6
Sum			24		34

As the table indicates, one of formalism's major strengths lies in its ability to preserve and extend prior mathematical achievements without necessitating radical reconstruction. Thus, the formalist approach emphasises the continuity between established results and the axioms from which they are derived. Key examples include postulates like Zermelo's Axiom of Choice and set-theoretical results such as Cantor's construction of transfinite sets. As long as intuitionism cannot provide alternatives with comparable rigour and simplicity without simultaneously discarding results that are mathematically valid yet lack intuitive justification, it struggles to assert an objectively superior position in foundational debates. The mere fact that certain objects, such as higher cardinalities, cannot be meaningfully described does not, from the standpoint of mathematical utility, justify dismissing them wholesale as erroneous. In this regard, formalism possesses a clear pragmatic *raison d'être*, ensuring both continuity and productivity in mathematical research. From Brouwer's perspective, however, this pragmatic advantage conceals a deeper epistemic flaw: the detachment of mathematical knowledge from the intuitive meaning that endows it with valid significance. The demand for ubiquitous intuitive meaning, moreover, may reflect a philosophical commitment rather than mathematical necessity. For intuitionism, meaning must accompany every formal manipulation; semantic grounding in intuitive capacities is not optional but essential for legitimate

mathematical construction. Brouwer's critique thus exposes not only the limits of formal reasoning but also the inherent difficulty of reconstructing the edifice of classical mathematics on purely intuitionistic foundations.

Our analysis reveals a dual tension: while formalism ensures stability and extensibility, intuitionism uncovers the hidden vulnerabilities underlying formal precision. Each framework thus embodies both strengths and weaknesses. Formalism ensures continuity and wide applicability, but at the cost of detaching mathematics from its intuitive origins. Intuitionism, by contrast, preserves epistemic authenticity grounded in our intuitive mental capacities, yet struggles to reconstruct and extend certain classical results. This interplay highlights the intrinsic limits of formal foundations, where aspects such as intuitive insights, emphasised by Brouwer and dismissed by Hilbert, are systematically overlooked. Paradoxically, this very omission has become a decisive advantage: by privileging clarity, generality, and technical effectiveness, formalism has enabled the expansion and eventual dominance of mathematics.

IV. Kantian Roots as a Basis for Revisiting the Brouwer–Hilbert Controversy

As we have seen, intuitionism challenges the traditional image of mathematics as a complete and determinate body of knowledge, exposing fissures within formal reasoning. Although it offers valuable insights into the limits of mathematical knowledge, intuitionism has not established a sufficiently robust alternative to the dominant formalist paradigm. Our analysis so far has examined the epistemic and methodological divergences between these two perspectives, aiming to explain, from a pragmatic standpoint, how formalism achieved success with axiomatic method, despite its detachment from intuitive meaning. In this final part of the paper, we turn to a shared historical root: the distinct interpretation of Kant's philosophy of mathematics. Both Brouwer and Hilbert drew on Kantian ideas, yet they interpreted them in radically different ways, ultimately developing opposing visions of mathematical knowledge. These divergent readings reveal their contrasting approaches to epistemic limits and the role of ignorance, as each thinker emphasised particular elements of Kant's perspective while neglecting others. Understanding this interpretative shift clarifies how these parallel approaches shaped the trajectories that formalism and intuitionism ultimately followed. Adopting a Kantian root also allows us to see formalism and intuitionism not simply as radically opposed, but as distinct elaborations of shared philosophical foundation. This lens explains why their debate was so sharp, each side selecting one dimension of Kant's thought in contrast to the other, while also showing that both schools could legitimately claim

philosophical grounding in his legacy. Overall, revisiting their Kantian roots provides a deeper, more integrated understanding of how these seemingly incompatible positions emerged from a common philosophical background.

According to Țurlea, "The Kantian philosophy of mathematics inspired divergent and even rival foundational programmes: Fregean logicism, Hilbertian formalism, and Brouwerian intuitionism"[29]. Hilbert, for instance, developed his conception of geometry and mathematics more broadly, by explicitly invoking Kant's dictum that "all human knowledge begins with intuitions, proceeds through concepts, and ends with ideas"[30]. Brouwer, in contrast, sought a more radical reading of Kant, grounding mathematics entirely in temporal intuition, which he regarded as its authentic source. Neither thinker derived their positions systematically from Kant, yet both were influenced by his ideas. For Hilbert, Kant's legacy provided justification for the formalisation and systematic organisation of mathematics; for Brouwer, it supported a return to the mind's intuitive, pre-conceptual activity. A schematic reading of Kant's sequence, from intuition to concepts and finally to ideas, elucidates how each thinker reinterpreted these stages to demarcate the limits of mathematical knowledge.

intuitions → concepts → ideas

Interpreting Kant's sequence in two different ways clarifies how this shared philosophical root influenced Hilbert's and Brouwer's view of the origin and epistemic status of mathematics, particularly regarding the adoption of axioms. First, Hilbert interpreted these stages hierarchically, as a progressive ascent in which each level contributes increasing clarity. In this framework, intuition serves only a preliminary role, limited to the recognition of symbol strings, before being superseded by formal concepts and, ultimately, the pure ideas of reason, such as mathematical infinity. Accordingly, Kant's epistemic sequence provided Hilbert with a rationale for grounding mathematics primarily in formal concepts rather than intuition. He therefore situated the limits of mathematical knowledge after the initial stage, holding that mathematics should be built from pure concepts stripped of intuitive content. As a consequence, axioms are not intended to capture any intuition; instead, they function to ensure internal coherence and universality, allowing a systematic exploration of mathematical ideas free from uncertainty.

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[29] M. Țurlea, *Filosofia matematicii*, București, Editura Universității din București, 2002, p. 195.

[30] *Ibid.*, p. 209. Note that this is a paraphrase of Kant's original formulation, which refers to "sensibility" (or "sensation") rather than "intuition" as the initial stage of knowledge (I. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, P. Guyer and A. W. Wood (eds.), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998, A298/B355, p. 387).

Brouwer regarded Hilbert's interpretations as epistemically flawed. In his dissertation[31], he argued that mathematics is founded entirely in mental acts, with intuition serving not as a preliminary step but as the primary and genuine source of truth during the construction of mathematical reasoning. As he wrote: "the only possible foundation of mathematics must be sought in this construction, under the obligation carefully to observe which constructions intuition allows and which not"[32]. For Brouwer, intuition cannot be treated as a source to be later discarded, since the ultimate meaning of mathematics depends entirely on its presence. Concepts and ideas are valid only insofar as they carry intuitive content; they serve merely as tools to encode, communicate, and recall previous constructions, with their significance deriving primarily from the unfolding of intuition itself. Hence, in Brouwer's intuitionism, this schema must be understood as a derivative structure, in which intuition is primary, while concepts and linguistic ideas are essentially auxiliary. The epistemic boundary, in this case, lies between intuition and conceptualisation, whereas in Hilbert's framework, mathematics begins only after the intuitive step, once formal language has been established. These constitute two opposed directions of development along the Kantian sequence. Finally, Brouwer emphasised this limit to highlight that formal language alone can be misleading, suggesting clear scepticism about its ability to generate valid mathematical knowledge in comparison with direct intuitive construction, an approach which is, in some respects, more faithful to Kant's original intentions[33]. Significantly, we must distinguish Kant's formalist stance on general logic from his requirements for mathematics. Drawing on MacFarlane's analysis of logical hylomorphism, we observe that Kant characterises general logic as formal precisely because it must abstract from all semantic content to function as a constitutive norm for thought[34]. Since such logic remains epistemically blind to objects, valid mathematical knowledge conversely requires a content-based (transcendental) logic rooted in pure intuition, anticipating Brouwer's rejection of empty formalism.

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[31] L. E. J. Brouwer, "On the Foundations of Mathematics", in *Collected Works,* Vol. I, p. 52.

[32] *Ibid.*, pp. 94–95.

[33] Kant was indeed, with respect to pure linguistic constructs, an anti-formalist, as we can see in his critiques of the metaphysicians who created philosophical systems in forced correspondence with the results of science, for instance, those from astronomical calculations, calling them "subtle fictions which have no truth to them outside the field of mathematics" (See I. Kant, "Inquiry Concerning the Distinctness of the Principles of Natural Theology and Morality", in D. Walford and R. Meerbote (eds.), *Theoretical Philosophy, 1755–1770*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 168).

[34] For a detailed analysis of how Kant's conception of generality implies the complete formality of logic, see J. G. MacFarlane, *What does it mean to say that Logic is Formal?*, PhD Thesis, Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh, 2000, pp. 79–81.

At least two Kantian-based factors can explain why Hilbert's formalist interpretation prevailed. First, formalism, and other foundational schools such as logicism, considered intuition as an unstable and equivocal notion to serve as a reliable foundation for mathematical knowledge, privileging instead the clarity and universality of logical principles and formal language. This orientation fostered a shared epistemic framework that unified the mathematical community, gradually marginalising intuitionism as a deviation from the classical norms. The transparency of formal reasoning and the unrestricted application of logical laws provided Hilbert's approach with a pragmatic and institutional advantage, supporting its consolidation and success. Moreover, the areas of mathematics which were detached from intuitive meaning[35] and against intuitionism's criteria of validation developed consistently and could not be reconstructed satisfactorily. The choice to renounce these areas was a matter of preference rather than a real mathematical necessity. Second, Brouwer positioned himself more as a philosopher seeking to actualise Kant's legacy by grounding mathematics entirely in intuitive acts. His interpretation was guided by a philosophical demand, in which the mental faculties establish a direct epistemic relationship with mathematical constructions. In contrast, Hilbert sought to consolidate his existing mathematical edifice through eventual philosophical justification, representing an opposite approach to establishing the foundations of this domain. Consequently, while Hilbert drew on Kant to justify axiomatic clarity, Brouwer rejected this manner of reading the German philosopher, insisting that the concept of intuition, although modified and actualised, must remain the foundational basis of mathematics. Their divergent interpretation had implications in various areas of mathematics, such as the problem related to non-Euclidean geometries: for intuitionism, it exposed the limits of axiomatic systems and underscored the need to ground mathematics in intuition, as a more universal faculty from which we can take various perspectives on the structure of space, whereas Hilbert treated it as a challenge to refine and complete the system of axioms, a strategy that ultimately proved to be more influential. Ultimately, Hilbert's vision benefited from the universality and malleable character of axioms, while Brouwer's intuitionism faced challenges by relying on the philosophical notion of intuition, which is debatable and imposes significant constraints.

Yet formalism's dominance has not extinguished intuitionistic inquiry. Even within its internal coherence and impressive capacity for systematic development, mathematics conceived purely formally retains zones of epistemic opacity. These gaps, though not immediately destabilising, allow the system to operate without confronting foundational ambiguities that Brouwer insisted could not be overcome

[35] For example, set-theoretic arithmetic based on higher cardinalities demonstrates how certain mathematical constructions, though formally consistent, extend beyond the bounds of intuitive evidence.

by formalism. In turn, the polished image of mathematics as seamless and complete thus relies on bracketing questions of intuitive meaning, questions that remain essential for a deeper understanding of its foundations. At the core, the tension between formalism and intuitionism centres on the epistemic status of intuition as a limit of knowledge: should it be regarded as constitutive of the entire edifice of mathematical truths, or merely as a preliminary guide to a system of formal entities whose further external significance is suspended? Ultimately, this divergence directly affects how indeterminacy is treated, because if we confer authority to our intuition, then we must conclude that these results of incompleteness are inherent to mental construction. In this light, intuitionism functions as a critical counterpoint, highlighting the reductive assumptions embedded within formal structures and providing a framework for reassessing classical mathematics from an intuitive perspective. Although it cannot replace formalist practice, it continues to challenge its basic assumptions. As Bourbaki once remarked, intuitionism may eventually become a "historical curiosity"[36], but only after classical mathematics has addressed the foundational uncertainties it reveals, underscoring that the polished image of mathematical knowledge rests on selective omission and epistemic compromises.

By tracing the Kantian sequence, we can see how both Brouwer and Hilbert developed their positions through different ways of setting limits on the foundations of mathematics. A possible way to balance their seemingly opposing interpretations is to keep these boundaries as open and flexible as possible: to cultivate intuition in relation to formal structures without restricting the latter, especially when they prove consistent and mathematically fruitful. In this way, formal results may be seen not as opposed to intuition but as potential paths still awaiting fulfilment from an intuitive standpoint. Recognising the limitations and blind spots of formalism allows us to appreciate the epistemic value of intuitionistic critique, not as an alternative system to replace classical methods, but as a lens to expose the assumptions (or their absence) underlying them. By situating mathematical knowledge within a broader epistemological framework, informed by a Kantian understanding of intuition, concepts, and ideas, we can acknowledge both the power of formal structures and the irreducible role of intuition in shaping mathematical understanding. This perspective shows that the apparent dichotomy between formalism and intuitionism is not absolute; rather, it reflects complementary insights into the ways humans construct, justify, and interpret mathematical truth. Ultimately, embracing this dual awareness fosters a more reflective and philosophically grounded conception of mathematics, one that preserves rigour while remaining attentive to its foundational ambiguities.

[36] N. Bourbaki, *Éléments d'histoire des mathématiques*, Paris, Hermann, 1960, p. 56: "L'école intuitionniste, dont le souvenir n'est sans doute destiné à subsister qu'à titre de curiosité historique…".

V. Conclusion

Returning to our preliminary question, we now ask what truly distinguishes knowledge from ignorance in the foundations of mathematics? In certain domains, clear norms apply: empirical validation in natural sciences, moral action in ethics, or effective organisation in politics. On the other hand, in mathematics the validation criteria are non-experiential and diverge sharply from these examples. For Hilbert, knowledge is equated with formal provability, based on sets of axioms and rules of syntactic derivations. Intuitionism grounds proof in constructive acts of the mind rather than formal manipulations. Each approach thus advances a distinct epistemic ideal: one that values the universality of formal language, the other that emphasises the evidential force of intuitive construction. The opposition becomes especially acute in the case of axioms, which formalism treats as defining the boundaries of mathematical reasoning, while intuitionism sees them as potential sources of error. Yet the history of mathematics demonstrates the indispensability of axioms, though they are no longer preserved in Hilbert's initial form. Rather than undermining mathematics as a linguistic discipline, intuitionism broadens its epistemic roots by acknowledging ambiguity and treating indeterminacy as an intrinsic and meaningful component of the domain. Such prudence may ultimately offer a wiser and more sustainable stance than Hilbert's unreserved optimism. The debate over foundations between intuitionism and formalism does not expose a weakness of mathematics *per se*, but rather indicates a deeper truth: absolute clarity and certainty are inseparable from the risk of deliberate ignorance. A Kantian-inspired synthesis of intuitionism and formalism encourages us to view mathematics not simply as a self-sufficient, hierarchically ordered edifice, but as grounded in intuitive construction, conceptual meaning, and epistemic limitation. Recognising these limits does not diminish the status of mathematics, but completes it within a broader epistemological context. As Martin-Löf has noted, the Hilbert–Brouwer controversy has reached a form of resolution through developments like the double-negation interpretation and the Curry-Howard correspondence[37]. Furthermore, as Posy suggests, this Kantian-inspired perspective finds a contemporary revival in the necessity of a humanly graspable mathematics. For instance, by acknowledging the temporal and flowing character of intuition, characteristics rooted in the Kantian tradition, against the splittable nature of the classical set-theoretic continuum, we can reveal the transcendental limits of our finite minds as a necessary epistemological constraint

[37] P. Martin-Löf, "The Hilbert-Brouwer Controversy Resolved?", in M. Schirn (ed.), *The Philosophy of Mathematics Today*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1998, pp. 243–256.

on the reach of formal language[38]. Today, mathematical knowledge appears as a layered structure, balancing formal precision with constructive reasoning. The law of the excluded middle is no longer an unquestioned principle, but a contextual tool within epistemic boundaries. Ultimately, knowledge and ignorance in mathematics are not opposites, but intertwined in a dynamic and evolving process.

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Responsible Knowing in an Age of Ignorance: Feminist Critiques and Integral Possibilities of Sri Aurobindo

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ABSTRACT. Traditional epistemology treats ignorance as a passive absence of knowledge, overlooking its active production within socio-political structures. Feminist epistemology challenges this view by conceptualizing ignorance as a politically charged phenomenon shaped by power, privilege, and epistemic injustice. Drawing on thinkers such as Lorraine Code, Miranda Fricker, José Medina, and Nancy Tuana, this paper argues that ignorance is socially constructed and ethically consequential. Integrating Sri Aurobindo's philosophy of integral knowledge, it further expands ignorance beyond social structures to include metaphysical and ontological dimensions. The paper proposes epistemic responsibility and conscious knowing as forms of resistance that enable epistemic justice and transformative understanding.

Keywords: *Ignorance, Responsible Knowing, Feminist Epistemology, Social Epistemology, Sri Aurobindo.*

Introduction

Epistemology, traditionally conceived as the study of knowledge and justified belief, has long neglected its supposed antithesis—ignorance. While knowledge has occupied a central position in philosophical inquiry, ignorance has been dismissed as merely its absence, receiving minimal theoretical engagement. This oversight is not accidental; it reflects a deeper epistemic bias that privileges what is known while obscuring the mechanisms by which the unknown is sustained. Contrary to the simplistic view of ignorance as a passive lack of knowledge, this paper contends that ignorance is often an actively produced and strategically maintained phenomenon, especially within unjust social contexts.

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In Ancient Greece, Socrates, unlike his interlocutors who exhibited certainty of knowledge placed himself as an 'enthusiastic admirer' adopting methodology of ignorance. It led to the so-called Socratic ignorance in which he recognized himself as an ignorant person and this recognition is considered by many as virtue. In the Middle Ages, in the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas in *Summa* I-II, q. 76, ignorance is considered as voluntary when a man "wishes of set purpose to be ignorant of certain things" and it is sinful.[1] In contemporary epistemology, ignorance is commonly defined as the absence of knowledge or the lack of a true belief.[2] Timothy Williamson, for instance, identifies ignorance simply as *not knowing that p*, treating knowledge as the basic epistemic state and ignorance as its negation. Post-Gettier debates likewise construe ignorance as a failure of justification, reliability, or epistemic safety. Even in social epistemology, ignorance is often reduced to an informational deficit—such as public ignorance of scientific facts—thereby framing it as a passive epistemic shortfall rather than a socially produced condition. Contemporary discussants ponder on 'how can the unknown become known – and still be the unknown?'[3] and specify that human beings are surrounded by ignorance even though they ardently pursue knowledge. Ignorance as lack of knowledge is considered as the standard conception of ignorance in epistemology[4] and it is challenged by the New View of ignorance in which ignorance is lack of true belief.[5] The Standard View as well as the New View restrict ignorance to propositional ignorance[6] and these views are considered as propositional conceptions of ignorance. Sri Aurobindo identifies seven interrelated forms of ignorance that structure ordinary human consciousness and account for the fragmented and partial nature of human knowledge. The overcoming of these forms of ignorance is, for him, the condition for integral knowledge, understood as the realization of the

[1] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I–II, q. 76, a. 1, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1947).

[2] If knowledge is defined as "justified true belief," then ignorance would be the failure to meet one or more of these conditions. Even if someone holds a belief, if that belief is not true, they are still considered ignorant. This shifts the focus slightly from not knowing to believing wrongly, or believing falsely.

[3] Daniel R. DeNicola, *Understanding Ignorance: The Surprising Impact of What We Don't Know* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), 1–2.

[4] Pierre Le Morvan**,** "On Ignorance: A Vindication of the Standard View," *Philosophia* 40 (2012): 380–382.

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[6] Rik Peels, "What Is Ignorance?" *Philosophia* 38, no. 1 (2010): 58–60; and Rik Peels, "Ignorance Is Lack of True Belief: A Rejoinder to Le Morvan," *Philosophia* 39 (2011): 346–349.

truth of existence across material, mental, spiritual, and transcendental dimensions.[7] Feminist scholars, however, argue that phenomena of ignorance are produced and sustained in various ways[8] and it has an important role in epistemological theorizing.[9] For Lorraine Code, ignorance fosters beliefs leading to domination and subordination[10] and epistemologies of ignorance contribute to feminist epistemology as good epistemic conduct maintains of appropriate balances of knowledge and ignorance.[11]

This paper analyses the feminist conceptions of ignorance and their orientation. It argues that the study of ignorance is a substantive epistemic practice having positive and negative aspects. While the negative aspect addresses unjust attitudes that perpetuate oppression through power, the positive aspect presents value of ignorance and promotes cultivation of virtues. Therefore, endorsing a strategic approach towards ignorance offers a liberative possibility. We begin our analysis on ignorance that crystallizes oppressive and situated complexities of ignorance and proceeds to the responsible approach on ignorance with its liberative aspects. Integrating feminist and Eastern philosophical insights using the methodologies of conceptual analysis, critical synthesis and comparative epistemology, the paper advocates for a reconceptualization of ignorance as a substantive epistemic practice—one that can either sustain oppression or catalyse liberation. In doing so, it interrogates how ignorance is deliberately constructed through social habits and epistemic practices, and how dismantling it requires more than knowledge—it demands an ethical and political reckoning.

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7 Sri Aurobindo, *The Life Divine*, vol. 1, book 2, chap. 17, "The Sevenfold Ignorance," (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1990), 551–579.

8 Linda Martín Alcoff, "Epistemologies of Ignorance," in *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, ed. Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007), 42–45.

9 José Medina**,** *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and the Social Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 23–28; Nancy Tuana, "The Epistemology of Ignorance," *Hypatia* 21, no. 3 (2006): 3–10; Sandra Harding, "Two Influential Theories of Ignorance and Philosophers' Interest in Ignoring Them," *Hypatia* 21, no. 3 (2006): 20–25; C. Townley, *A Defence of Ignorance: Its Value for Knowers and Roles in Feminist and Social Epistemologies* (Maryland: Lexington Books, 2011), 15–22.

10 Lorraine Code, "The Power of Ignorance," in *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, ed. Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2007), 213–214; Lorraine Code, "Ignorance, Injustice and the Politics of Knowledge," *Australian Feminist Studies* 29, no. 80 (2014): 152–155; Lorraine Code, "Culpable Ignorance?" *Hypatia* 29, no. 3 (2014): 672–674.

11 Miranda Fricker, "Epistemic Injustice and the Preservation of Ignorance," in *The Epistemic Dimensions of Ignorance*, ed. Rik Peels and Maartje Blaauw (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 162–166.

Feminist Scholars on Ignorance

Feminist epistemologists fundamentally disrupt the conventional framing of ignorance as passive or incidental. For scholars like Lorraine Code, ignorance is neither benign nor accidental; it is cultivated and sustained by specific social and epistemic conditions. As Code asserts, epistemologies of ignorance investigate "the conditions that promote and sustain ignorance"[12] (This perspective reframes ignorance not as a lack, but as an epistemic force—one that actively obstructs knowledge and reinforces social hierarchies.

Feminist theorists argue that ignorance operates as a mechanism of exclusion, deliberately obscuring the experiences, knowledge, and agency of marginalized groups. Nancy Tuana, in particular, calls out the narrowness of conventional epistemologies that focus exclusively on what is known. Such frameworks, she argues, fail to interrogate the significance of what is not known, and more importantly, why it remains unknown.[13] Her taxonomy of ignorance reveals the systemic nature of "wilful ignorance[14]", "imposed deception," and "unknowing"—each a product of power relations that serve to maintain inequality. These are not innocent omissions but acts of epistemic violence that silence voices and obscure truths.

The deliberate maintenance of ignorance, especially by privileged groups, is not simply a failure of curiosity; it is a calculated strategy of epistemic gatekeeping. As Tuana emphasizes, ignorance is often preserved through apathy, self-deception, and vested interests. These mechanisms shield dominant groups from confronting their own complicity in oppression and sustain a status quo that benefits them. Thus, ignorance becomes a tool of domination—what Kristie Dotson terms "pernicious ignorance[15]", a form of epistemic harm that blocks understanding and deepens marginalization.[16]

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[12] Lorraine Code, "Ignorance, Injustice and the Politics of Knowledge," *Australian Feminist Studies* 29, no. 80 (2014): 154.

[13] Nancy Tuana, "The Speculum of Ignorance: The Women's Health Movement and Epistemologies of Ignorance," *Hypatia* 21, no. 3 (2006): 3.

[14] According to Robert Audi (2004), wilful ignorance consists in a subject's decision to avoid acquiring knowledge in order to escape the obligations and responsibilities that such knowledge would impose and according to Mills (2007), white ignorance is a cognitive and moral phenomenon that results from a refusal to know or acknowledge truths about systemic racism. It is not mere absence of knowledge, but a structured, often wilful, form of not knowing.

[15] Pernicious ignorance according to Dotson (2011) is ignorance that, in a given context, harms another or puts them at an unfair disadvantage. It is often sustained by social structures and norms, rather than being the result of mere cognitive failure.

[16] Kristie Dotson, "Tracking Epistemic Violence, Tracking Practices of Silencing," *Hypatia* 26, no. 2 (2011): 239.

Feminist epistemologies also foreground the situatedness of knowledge and ignorance. Linda Alcoff stresses that ignorance is not a neutral absence but a "historically specific mode of knowing and perceiving"[17], embedded in contexts of power. It is produced through social practices, institutional norms, and epistemic exclusions. Sandra Harding further underscores this point by highlighting how marginalized groups have fewer incentives to remain ignorant of oppressive systems than dominant groups, who benefit from such ignorance.[18]

Therefore, feminist scholars position ignorance not as a mere void but as a substantive epistemic practice—one characterized by structure, intention, and consequence.[19] Virginia Woolf (1927), in *A Room of One's Own*, powerfully illustrates this understanding. She recounts being denied entry into the library at Oxbridge solely because of her gender and lack of male accompaniment, thereby exposing how institutional structures actively regulate and restrict access to knowledge. Woolf further observes that historical narratives authored by male scholars systematically exclude or distort women's experiences, not through negligence but through deliberate epistemic practices that manufacture ignorance. This distortion serves to reinforce women's marginalization by rendering their lives and perspectives invisible. Additionally, Woolf emphasizes that poverty and material dependency are not natural conditions but socially constructed mechanisms designed to perpetuate women's intellectual and economic subordination. In her account, ignorance appears not as an accident or a gap but as an actively maintained strategy, crucial to sustaining broader systems of power and exclusion. Through this lens, ignorance must be interrogated not merely as an epistemic failure, but as a socio-political tool of silencing, erasure, and control. The feminist project of dismantling ignorance, therefore, demands not only the recovery of suppressed knowledges but also a critical confrontation with the structures and interests that perpetuate epistemic injustice. Accordingly, feminist epistemologies of ignorance extend the feminist project beyond the recovery of suppressed knowledges to a systematic critique of the social, political, and epistemic mechanisms that sustain ignorance. The following discussion offers a critical appreciation of these feminist

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[17] Linda Martín Alcoff, "Epistemologies of Ignorance," in *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, ed. Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2007), 51.

[18] Sandra Harding, *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking from Women's Lives* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 126**.**

[19] According to Alcoff, ignorance is a socially produced and power-indexed epistemic formation rather than a neutral limitation of knowledge (2007, 39–42); by contrast, Aurobindo's teleological account treats ignorance as cosmically functional but not constitutively bound to relations of domination.

epistemologies of ignorance by examining their key conceptual contributions, methodological strengths, and normative commitments in addressing epistemic injustice.

Feminist epistemologists argue that ignorance is not a mere absence of knowledge but is inherently situated and systematically produced.[20] There exists no ignorance-free space, as ignorance is both embedded within and perpetuated by sociocultural structures. Culturally induced ignorance obstructs access to knowledge, often mediated through complex intersections of power and privilege. Epistemic agents are not neutral observers; rather, they are embedded within and contribute to sustaining systemic ignorance through on-going and reciprocal processes. Understanding the multiplicity of forms that ignorance can take requires attending closely to how it operates contextually, serving particular interests and shaping what is known, what remains unknown, and why.

In certain contexts, dominant ideologies, theories, and values obscure or distort knowledge, while in others, ignorance is actively cultivated within specific groups. This ignorance is not always accidental; it often stems from cumulative acts of negligence—both structural and individual. Elaine Showalter, a pioneering figure in feminist literary criticism, particularly through her influential work *A Literature of Their Own* (1977), demonstrates how women's literary traditions have been historically ignored, distorted, and misrepresented by dominant male ideologies. Showalter argues that the absence of women's writing from mainstream literary history was not due to a lack of talent or creativity among women, but rather the result of systematic exclusion and marginalization within the structures of literary history, criticism, and cultural institutions. In *A Literature of Their Own*, Showalter explains that literary canons were largely constructed by men, for men, and about men. This process produced a distorted literary history in which women's contributions were marginalized or erased, and female characters were confined to rigid symbolic roles. Women writers were interpreted through reductive stereotypes—most notably the binary of the self-sacrificing "angel" and the transgressive "monster"—figures that functioned less as complex representations of women's lived realities than as projections of male cultural anxieties surrounding femininity and authorship.[21] Male critics frequently framed women's writing within restrictive categories, portraying

[20] Kristie Dotson, "Tracking Epistemic Violence, Tracking Practices of Silencing," *Hypatia* 26, no. 2 (2011): 239.

[21] Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (London: Virago Press, 1977), 11. Showalter draws on the "angel/monster" dichotomy, later theorized extensively by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, to describe the restrictive symbolic positions available to women within a male-dominated literary canon.

it as overly emotional, irrational, or secondary to the literary achievements of men. Showalter further highlights how literary scholarship systematically neglected the serious study of women authors and their contexts. Universities rarely offered courses focused on women writers, publishers often marginalized their works, and critics failed to develop appropriate theoretical frameworks for analysing women's literature. This negligence was not merely incidental but, as Showalter argues, a systemic feature of literary history itself, sustained through institutional practices that shaped what counted as literary value and authorship. She shows how women's writing was excluded from critical recognition and historical continuity, producing a tradition in which ignorance about women's literary achievements became normalized within education, criticism, and publishing.[22] At the structural level, institutions of literary culture—through canon formation, university curricula, and publishing practices—have repeatedly neglected or marginalized women's contributions, a pattern widely documented by feminist literary historians beyond Showalter's immediate study.[23] On the individual level, critics, scholars, and educators repeatedly chose not to engage with or validate women's literary experiences, thereby perpetuating a cycle of ignorance.

Feminist epistemology critically interrogates both the deliberate and structural production of ignorance, illuminating its origins and implications. This examination provides insight into the mechanisms that sustain ignorance and offers pathways for dismantling them as part of a broader project of intellectual and social emancipation. It is from this critical diagnosis that liberative feminist approaches to ignorance emerge, redirecting analysis toward practices of critical awareness, inclusive knowledge production, and the dismantling of structural barriers that sustain misinformation and exclusion.

Liberative feminist approaches to ignorance emphasize critical awareness, inclusive knowledge systems, and the dismantling of structural barriers that sustain misinformation and exclusion. Lorraine Code's work, particularly in *The Power of Ignorance*, explores the "darker effects" of both individual and systemic ignorance,

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[22] Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (London: Virago Press, 1977), 3–5, 11–13. Showalter describes women's writing as lacking a "continuous tradition" precisely because of institutional neglect, critical dismissal, and exclusion from canonical histories.

[23] See, for example, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 3–16; Joanna Russ, *How to Suppress Women's Writing* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983), 4–7; Mary Eagleton, *Feminist Literary Theory: A Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 1–12. These works document how curricular design, publishing norms, and critical standards systematically excluded women writers across periods.

identifying it as a mechanism that upholds unjust social orders.[24] She contends that participation in social ignorance reflects ethical and political failure—what she terms "an egregious failure of epistemic responsibility."[25] Overcoming such failures requires active engagement, reflexivity, and a commitment to transformative practices.

Feminist scholars have long challenged epistemic practices rooted in exclusion and ignorance, advocating for more equitable and accountable systems of knowledge. José Medina (2013) offers a compelling framework for confronting entrenched ignorance, grounded in a call to reform epistemic habits and attitudes in tandem with broader structural change. He distinguishes between two significant forms of ignorance: active ignorance, which involves the deliberate maintenance of unawareness, and meta-blindness, an unawareness of one's own ignorance.[26] Active ignorance is sustained by psychological and social mechanisms resistant to correction, and combating it necessitates cultivating epistemic virtues such as humility, curiosity, open-mindedness, and diligence. Meta-blindness, in contrast, exacerbates epistemic harm by obscuring one's own limitations and epistemic blind spots. Addressing it requires reflective engagement with one's positionality and social embeddedness.

Medina's integration of epistemic virtues with structural critique underscores the mutual entanglement of individual dispositions and systemic conditions. His concept of "kaleidoscopic consciousness"[27] advocates for epistemic friction through sustained engagement with diverse and resistant perspectives. This process is governed by two key principles: the *principle of acknowledgment and engagement*, which calls for meaningful dialogue across difference, and the *principle of epistemic equilibrium*, which seeks to balance and integrate disparate contributions. Chandra Talpade Mohanty's influential work, particularly her seminal essay *"Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses"* (1984), powerfully illustrates both the principle of acknowledgment and engagement and the principle of epistemic equilibrium. The principle of acknowledgment and engagement lies at the heart of

[24] Lorraine Code, "The Power of Ignorance," in *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, ed. Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 215.

[25] Lorraine Code, "Culpable Ignorance?" *Hypatia* 29, no. 3 (2014): 670.

[26] José Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and the Social Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 39.

[27] "Kaleidoscopic consciousness" refers to a dynamic epistemic orientation that embraces pluralism, shifting perspectives, and attentiveness to the lived experiences of the oppressed (Medina 2013, 4) and "A kaleidoscopic consciousness... is a cognitive-affective orientation that enables agents to shift perspectives, to be attuned to the plurality of social experiences, and to remain open to alternative ways of seeing and knowing" (Medina 2013, 279).

Mohanty's critique. She challenges Western feminist scholarship for often speaking *for* or *about* women in the Global South without genuinely engaging with their specific, lived experiences. According to Mohanty, Western feminism frequently homogenizes *Third World women*, portraying them as a monolithic, oppressed, and voiceless group. In response, she calls for a genuine, respectful dialogue across cultural, racial, and geopolitical differences — one where feminists acknowledge their own positionality and actively listen to the voices and experiences of the women they seek to represent. This commitment to meaningful cross-cultural engagement exemplifies the first principle. The principle of epistemic equilibrium is equally central to Mohanty's approach. Rather than advocating a wholesale rejection of Western feminist thought, she argues for a critical rebalancing — one that integrates diverse feminist voices, particularly from historically marginalized contexts, into the broader feminist discourse. Mohanty urges the feminist community to resist the dominance of Western frameworks and to embrace multiple, localized ways of knowing. In doing so, she promotes epistemic justice: a reconfiguration of feminist knowledge that values disparate contributions equally and dismantles entrenched epistemic hierarchies. Mohanty's work offers a compelling model for dismantling entrenched ignorance, fostering inclusive and dynamic epistemic practices rooted in dialogue, balance, and mutual recognition. These principles collectively serve to dismantle entrenched ignorance and promote more inclusive, just, and dynamic epistemic practices. Yet this commitment to dismantling harmful ignorance does not exhaust feminist engagements with the concept, as Cynthia Townley (2011) demonstrates by articulating circumstances in which ignorance itself may function as an epistemic resource. Townley (2011) offers a nuanced account of ignorance that acknowledges its potential epistemic value. In contexts shaped by historically oppressive knowledge regimes, epistemic agents—particularly those occupying privileged social positions—carry specific responsibilities rooted in their situatedness. A failure to recognize one's own epistemic location can result in irresponsible knowledge practices, even when motivated by good intentions. Traditionally, ignorance has been framed as a deficit to be overcome. However, Townley challenges this assumption, suggesting that ignorance can also serve constructive purposes in certain contexts. Strategic ignorance, when intentionally and reflexively maintained, may enhance pedagogical and epistemic practices. It can facilitate the acquisition of new knowledge, reduce informational noise, and foster creative thinking. By deliberately suspending presuppositions or avoiding premature conclusions, epistemic agents may open space for more critical and imaginative engagement.[28] Such an attempt we see in Elaine Showalter's (1977)

[28] Cynthia Townley, *A Defence of Ignorance: Its Value for Knowers and Its Roles in Feminist and Social Epistemologies* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011), 5–7.

concept of gynocriticism. It offers a compelling framework for understanding how strategic ignorance can function as a constructive tool in both epistemic and pedagogical contexts. Gynocriticism advocates for the study of women's literature on its own terms, rather than through the inherited lens of male-dominated literary traditions. This shift demands a deliberate and reflective disengagement from dominant androcentric frameworks—a move that closely parallels the notion of strategic ignorance.

In academic and classroom settings, this approach nurtures critical and creative engagement by prompting students and scholars to question the interpretive structures they may unconsciously rely upon. Through the practice of reflexive ignorance—choosing not to accept conventional frameworks uncritically—they become more attuned to what has been historically overlooked, marginalized, or misrepresented. Viewed in this way, strategic ignorance becomes a feminist epistemological strategy: a conscious refusal to centre patriarchal canons, aesthetic norms, or critical paradigms that have suppressed women's voices and experiences. Showalter's call to foreground female literary traditions, cultural history, and lived experience involves creating intellectual space—not to remain ignorant, but to relearn, reimagine, and reinterpret women's contributions outside the bounds of inherited authority. This act of unknowing, then, is not an absence of knowledge, but a precondition for epistemic renewal and feminist insight. Townley's approach reframes ignorance not merely as a hindrance but as a potential epistemic resource, especially when harnessed to challenge dominant knowledge paradigms and support more effective epistemic interactions. While Townley highlights the *situational and pragmatic value* of ignorance at the level of epistemic practice, Harding extends this discussion by situating ignorance within broader historical and theoretical structures that shape what philosophy itself takes to be knowable or worthy of inquiry.

Sandra Harding's (2006) analysis contributes a historical and theoretical dimension to feminist epistemologies of ignorance. Drawing from Marxian and Freudian traditions, Harding underscores the epistemic significance of recognizing ignorance as a concept that is both meaningful and socially embedded. Historically, the marginalization of Marxist and Freudian theories within Anglo-American philosophy was shaped by political anxieties, particularly the association of Marxism with Soviet totalitarianism. This context led to the dismissal of these theories as irrational or irrelevant.[29]

[29] Sandra Harding, "Two Influential Theories of Ignorance and Philosophy's Interest in Ignoring Them," *Hypatia* 21, no. 3 (2006): 23.

In recent decades, however, renewed interest in these frameworks has emerged, particularly among feminist scholars who have expanded Marx's insights into the social embeddedness of knowledge. This revival has enabled a more comprehensive interrogation of the intersections among gender, class, race, imperialism, and sexuality. Despite the limitations of Marxian theory—including its patriarchal and Eurocentric tendencies—feminists have recognized its enduring analytical utility. Similarly, Freudian insights into unconscious processes have been appropriated to understand the deeper, affective dimensions of ignorance and epistemic resistance. Angela Davis exemplifies a feminist thinker who critically revises Marxian theory to confront its patriarchal and Eurocentric limitations while retaining its structural insights. In her seminal work *Women, Race, and Class* (1981), Davis challenges both mainstream feminism—often focused on the experiences of white, middle-class women—and traditional Marxism, which tends to overlook the interlocking systems of gender and racial oppression. She contends that capitalist exploitation cannot be fully understood without recognizing how it is shaped by these intersecting forms of domination. Through a reapplication of Marxist concepts such as labour and class, Davis centres the historical experiences of Black women, whose labour—both in enslavement and wage work—has been systematically devalued yet remains foundational to capitalist economies. By exposing how conventional Marxism fails to address the compounded exploitation and sexual violence endured by Black women, Davis demonstrates that Marxian analysis, when critically expanded, offers a powerful framework for understanding structural inequalities across race, gender, and class.[30] These recuperated frameworks enrich feminist critiques of power and knowledge by sharpening analyses of how domination operates across intersecting structures of race, gender, and class; they also raise the question of whether such critiques might be selectively extended through engagement with integral perspectives—such as Sri Aurobindo's—that theorize ignorance at the level of consciousness itself, thereby foregrounding how modes of perception and misrecognition mediate the experience and reproduction of structural power.

Toward a Holistic Epistemology: Integrating Sri Aurobindo

Feminist epistemologies of ignorance offer a powerful critique of traditional epistemological assumptions by re-conceptualizing ignorance as an active, relational, and socially situated phenomenon. This approach foregrounds the ways in which ignorance is produced and sustained through power-laden processes that obscure

[30] Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race & Class* (New York: Random House, 1981), 221.

marginalized experiences, legitimize dominant norms, and perpetuate epistemic injustice. Central to this critique is the principle of *intersectionality*, which highlights the multifaceted nature of social hierarchies and their role in shaping what is known—and unknown—across axes of race, gender, class, and more.

Addressing ignorance thus requires more than expanding the content of knowledge; it necessitates a fundamental rethinking of epistemic practices and their ethical, political, and structural implications. Feminist epistemologists emphasize epistemic virtues that challenge dominant biases and foster more inclusive and pluralistic knowledge systems. Their interventions are particularly relevant in the context of global challenges such as climate justice, public health, and cultural preservation.

Nonetheless, while feminist epistemologies provide incisive critiques, they often lack a unified and holistic conceptualization of ignorance. Integrating the philosophical insights of Sri Aurobindo can enhance these critiques by incorporating epistemic, ethical, and spiritual dimensions into the analysis. Aurobindo's expansive vision transcends materialist limitations, offering an integrative framework that foregrounds consciousness, self-transformation, and spiritual evolution. His approach complements feminist calls for epistemic justice by inviting a more profound engagement with the inner dimensions of knowledge and being. In doing so, it enriches feminist efforts to transform epistemic structures, advance social justice, and promote more inclusive and ethically grounded practices of knowing.

Feminist epistemologies of ignorance have significantly advanced critical discourse by foregrounding how systems of power and privilege actively construct and sustain ignorance. These frameworks rightly emphasize the socio-political dimensions of knowledge suppression—revealing how hegemonic structures obscure marginalized voices and perpetuate injustice. However, by maintaining a predominantly material and systemic orientation, feminist critiques risk a reductionist view of ignorance. They often fail to account for its deeper existential and spiritual dimensions, thereby limiting their explanatory scope. In contrast, Sri Aurobindo's philosophical exploration of ignorance offers a more comprehensive and integrative framework that challenges and enriches feminist perspectives.

Aurobindo's account of ignorance is grounded in his non-dualist metaphysics, according to which Divine Consciousness constitutes the sole ontological reality. Ignorance and multiplicity do not arise from any ontological lack or epistemic rupture but from a self-limiting movement intrinsic to the One. The subject–object distinction is therefore not metaphysically fundamental but phenomenological, emerging through a selective concentration of consciousness rather than a real separation between knower and known. This framework underwrites Aurobindo's

rejection of representational epistemology: knowledge is not a mental correspondence with an external world but a graded mode of consciousness's self-disclosure. Ignorance, correspondingly, is not error, absence, or misrepresentation but a restricted modality of awareness operative at a specific level of manifestation. What appears as ignorance is thus involved or implicit knowledge—functionally adequate within its domain yet partial relative to integral consciousness—thereby challenging deficit-based accounts that define ignorance primarily in negative terms.

Ignorance also performs a constitutive role within Aurobindo's evolutionary cosmology. Epistemic limitation enables individuation, plurality of experience, and the formation of differentiated centers of consciousness, while remaining oriented toward eventual self-integration at higher levels of awareness. Ignorance is neither accidental nor merely obstructive; it is a necessary moment in a purposive process of manifestation. This role is clarified by Aurobindo's involution–evolution schema, in which consciousness is first concealed within matter and life and subsequently unfolds toward explicit self-knowledge. Ignorance is therefore transitional rather than static, though this transition presupposes a hierarchical ontology of consciousness ranging from inconscience through mind to supramental modes of knowing.

Sri Aurobindo (1939) identifies ignorance not merely as a social or epistemic lapse, but as a multi-layered ontological condition that permeates the entire structure of human consciousness. His categorization of ignorance into seven types—original, cosmic, egoistic, temporal, psychological, constitutional, and practical—establishes a nuanced understanding that spans spiritual, psychological, and material dimensions. For instance, original ignorance denotes the fundamental error of mistaking sensory appearances for the whole of reality, concealing the Absolute—the infinite divine reality—from human perception.[31] Similarly, cosmic ignorance reduces the universe to fleeting phenomena, obscuring its eternal essence. These forms of ignorance are not addressed within feminist frameworks, which tend to focus on the social construction of knowledge without interrogating the metaphysical assumptions underpinning human perception and consciousness.[32]

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[31] Sri Aurobindo, *The Life Divine*, vol. 2, part 2 (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Press, 1939), 549–553.

[32] Indian philosophical school of Buddhism identifies ignorance (avidyā) as the fundamental source of human suffering. Ignorance here is not a mere absence of knowledge, but an active misapprehension—a process of superimposing, distorting, and misconceiving reality, a kind of "anti-knowledge." Consequently, the Buddhist path may be understood as a therapeutic epistemology: a disciplined practice of cognitive purification aimed at dismantling false views and restoring clarity of understanding (Eltschinger, 2010).

This divergence reveals a fundamental limitation of feminist epistemologies. While they effectively deconstruct how ignorance operates through patriarchal institutions and social hierarchies, they often do so by relying on an immanent, material-centric worldview. Their critiques of power and exclusion remain largely situated in the external domain—within structures of gender, race, and class—without probing the inner architecture of consciousness that enables such structures to persist. Sri Aurobindo's philosophy confronts this blind spot head-on by arguing that ignorance is not merely a social artifact but an existential condition stemming from humanity's estrangement from its spiritual essence.

Feminist scholars have rightly framed ignorance as epistemic injustice, pointing to the suppression of women's knowledge, the invisibility of marginalized experiences, and the complicity of dominant epistemologies. However, these critiques often stop short of considering how inner fragmentation—egoistic, temporal, and psychological ignorance—contributes to systemic injustice. For example, egoistic ignorance, in Aurobindo's terms, fuels the illusion of separateness, which in turn legitimizes domination and hierarchy. Temporal ignorance confines individuals to short-term perspectives, undermining long-term ethical vision. Psychological ignorance limits human awareness to surface-level cognition, precluding transformative insight. Without addressing these interiorized forms of ignorance, efforts at social emancipation remain incomplete.

Moreover, the feminist rejection or marginalization of spiritual dimensions in the study of ignorance reflects a broader scepticism toward metaphysical inquiry in modern critical theory. Yet, this dismissal itself may be a form of epistemic limitation. By failing to integrate spiritual knowledge traditions—especially those outside Western paradigms—feminist epistemologies risk replicating a form of what they critique: the silencing of alternative ways of knowing. Sri Aurobindo's framework, rooted in Eastern metaphysical traditions, offers a corrective by situating ignorance not only as social injustice but also as spiritual estrangement and metaphysical confusion. His holistic approach insists that true liberation—be it epistemic, social, or spiritual—requires transcending fragmented modes of being and embracing the integral unity of human existence.

Thus, integrating Sri Aurobindo's multidimensional theory of ignorance into feminist epistemology would not dilute its critical edge; rather, it would enhance its transformative potential. It would enable a deeper interrogation of the interior conditions that sustain external oppression and offer pathways toward a fuller, more integrative vision of liberation. Feminist critiques must move beyond merely exposing the *effects* of ignorance in power structures to confronting its *sources* in human consciousness. By bridging epistemic, existential, and spiritual insights, Aurobindo's thought invites a reconceptualization of ignorance as a foundational

condition whose resolution lies in the harmonization of inner and outer realities. While feminist epistemologies have illuminated how ignorance operates within social and political systems, they remain incomplete as long as they ignore the spiritual and psychological roots of unawareness. Sri Aurobindo's philosophy compels us to broaden the scope of epistemic inquiry, recognizing ignorance as a deeply embedded, multi-layered phenomenon that transcends materiality. Only through such a comprehensive approach can we hope to achieve a truly emancipatory vision—one that heals not just social injustice, but the very divisions within the human soul.

While Sri Aurobindo's account of ignorance offers a systematic ontological and metaphysical framework, the forms of ignorance he identifies fall largely outside the analytical scope of feminist epistemologies of ignorance, which are principally concerned with the social, political, and ethical regulation of knowledge practices. Feminist accounts of epistemic injustice and epistemic responsibility focus on how ignorance is produced, maintained, and remedied through institutional arrangements, power asymmetries, and testimonial and hermeneutical relations, rather than on metaphysical claims about the structure of reality or the nature of consciousness. From this standpoint, Aurobindo's appeals to the Absolute, cosmic ignorance, or ontologically grounded misperception may not be accepted—or may be regarded as methodologically irrelevant—by theorists who intentionally bracket metaphysical commitments in order to preserve the critical, normative orientation of an epistemology of ignorance. Such metaphysical assumptions risk re-situating ignorance as an inevitable feature of human existence rather than as a socially sustained and ethically accountable condition, thereby weakening the normative force of feminist demands for epistemic justice. Consequently, although an integrative reading can be philosophically illuminating, it also risks diluting the concept of epistemic responsibility by shifting attention away from corrigible practices of knowing and toward ontological conditions that lie beyond social redress. Acknowledging this limitation is essential if dialogue with metaphysical traditions is to proceed without undermining the political and critical commitments that define feminist epistemologies of ignorance.

Conclusion

Feminist epistemologies conceptualize ignorance as an active and systemic epistemic practice that perpetuates oppression through hegemonic structures. While these approaches effectively expose suppressed knowledge and counter systemic inequalities, they remain predominantly socio-political, often neglecting existential and spiritual dimensions. Sri Aurobindo's integrative framework addresses

this gap by offering a holistic understanding of ignorance across spiritual, psychological, and material dimensions. His categorization of ignorance— spanning original, cosmic, egoistic, temporal, psychological, constitutional, and practical types—illuminates foundational aspects of human unawareness that underlie both individual and collective experiences. By incorporating spiritual and existential insights, Sri Aurobindo transcends the limitations of feminist approaches, positioning ignorance as a multi-layered phenomenon requiring comprehensive engagement for true liberation. Integrating his framework into feminist epistemologies would expand their scope, enabling a deeper critique of systemic oppression while addressing the interconnected roots of ignorance. This synthesis fosters a transformative vision of liberation that unites material, psychological, and spiritual dimensions, contributing to a more inclusive and holistic understanding of human emancipation.

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Denialism as Detrimental Epistemic Friction: Contexts, Agents, and the Politics of Disruption

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ABSTRACT. This article conceptualizes denialism as a systemic phenomenon rooted in both contextual and agentive dynamics, framing it as a form of detrimental epistemic friction. Departing from reductive approaches that treat denialism primarily as misinformation or individual cognitive bias, the analysis foregrounds the structural mechanisms through which denialism is produced, sustained, and normalized. By situating denialism within weaponized epistemic environments, the analysis shows how it reinforces power asymmetries and undermines the epistemic conditions required for inclusive and cooperative reasoning. The article provides both a diagnostic framework for identifying structural epistemic vulnerabilities and a basis for restoring democratic epistemic practices in contested knowledge landscapes.

***Keywords**: Denialism, Epistemic friction, Epistemic authority, Epistemic Resistance, Knowledge environments.*

1. Introduction

Denialism, characterized by the deliberate rejection of well-established facts, theories or evidence, has recently become a significant issue for both knowledge-based groups and democratic systems.[1] No longer limited to marginal viewpoints, denialist stories now cover a wide range of subjects including climate change, vaccine safety, historical wrongs, and systemic inequality.[2] This form of resistance consistently

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1 McIntyre, *On Disinformation: How to Fight for Truth and Protect Democracy*, The MIT Press, 2023, pp. 7-9.

2 Godulla, Seibert & Klute, "What Is Denialism? An Examination and Classification of Definitional Approaches and Relevant Actors", in *Journalism and Media,* Vol. 5, Issue 1, 2024, pp. 135-147.

erodes public trust in scientific authority and disrupts the socio-institutional structures vital for the generation, validation, and continuity of collective knowledge. In a time characterized more by various crises and disputed power relations, grasping denialism carries immediate practical and ethical importance.

Although the current literature on denialism has provided useful insights by examining its rhetorical techniques, psychological factors, and sociopolitical drivers, significant shortcomings persist. Studies have documented how doubt is systematically manufactured to serve political agendas[3] and how trust in expertise is shaped by increasingly complex informational environments[4]. Connected to the subject, feminist epistemologists[5] and agnotologists[6] have highlighted the deliberate creation of ignorance and the sidelining of dissenting knowers. Nonetheless, despite this expanding body of research, the epistemological dimension of denialism continues to be insufficiently theorized. Many strategies emphasize the consequences of denialism, yet few examine its distinct dynamics as a knowledge-based formation.

This study seeks to fill that gap by arguing for a conceptual reframing of denialism as a form of detrimental epistemic friction. Drawing on the work of José Medina[7], we adopt epistemic friction as the core analytic bodywork because it highlights the fundamental tension between cognitive freedom and constraint that characterizes both knowledge production and denial. Epistemic friction, in its productive form, is crucial for inquiry as it offers the resistance necessary for belief revision, accountability, and the collaborative pursuit of understanding.[8] However, we contend that denialism pushes the boundaries of this resistance.

To accomplish this goal, the article is organized in the following manner. The initial part outlines the current epistemic and political landscape where denialism has gained more prominence, emphasizing the factors that allow its discursive influence. The following section presents the core conceptual framework of epistemic friction, largely based on Medina's[9] research. Special attention is directed toward differentiating generative types of epistemic friction from harmful forms that hinder

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3 Oreskes & Conway, *Merchants of Doubt: How a handful of scientists obscured the truth on issues from tobacco smoke to global warming*, Bloomsbury Press, 2010, pp. 34-35.

4 Levy, *Bad Beliefs: Why They Happen to Good People.* Oxford University Press, United States of America, 2022, pp. 126-127.

5 See Sullivan & Tuana (Eds.), *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, State University of New York Press, 2007.

6 See Proctor & Schiebinger (Eds.), *Agnotology: The making and unmaking of ignorance*. Stanford University Press, 2008.

7 See Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and the Social Imagination,* Oxford University Press, 2013.

8 Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance*, p. 50.

9 Ibid.

investigation and perpetuate epistemic inequalities. This theoretical basis highlights how social positioning and power imbalances influence knowledge dynamics. Expanding this scheme, the third section conceptualizes denialism as an instance of detrimental epistemic friction. The proposal introduces a dual analytical approach that focuses on the two dimensions: the structural conditions enabling the efficacy of denialism, and the agents who intentionally navigate and reinforce epistemic hierarchies.

The relative deprioritization of the content of denialist messages is a deliberate methodological and theoretical decision grounded in the recognition that such content is highly contingent upon the specific socio-political contexts and the agents who produce and disseminate it. Denialist rhetoric is not fixed or uniform; rather, it is malleable and responsive to the institutional support, power structures, and epistemic environments in which it emerges[10]. Consequently, the conceptual and rhetorical features of denialist discourse are shaped and constrained by the broader epistemic contexts and the strategic capacities of the social and institutional actors involved. By expanding the framework to include structural conditions and the roles of agents, we acknowledge that denialism is not only about what is said but also about why and how such narratives gain traction within sociopolitical and epistemic contexts.

This work contributes to current literature by shifting the focus from denialism as cognitive failure to denialism as a relational, performative, and power-laden epistemic practice. In doing so, questions prevailing beliefs that additional facts or improved information can successfully combat denialist narratives. Rather, it suggests that a significant response must confront the fundamental imbalances of epistemic authority that enable denialism to thrive. Comprehending denialism in this manner creates new avenues for criticism and, importantly, for opposition.

2. Denial in the system: the social conditions of epistemic breakdown

Denial illustrates the phenomenon whereby individuals can register and even acknowledge information without fully internalizing its implications or acting accordingly;[11] individuals actively avoid confronting these implications for being uncomfortable knowledge[12]. A situation of this type can arise when an intense longing

[10] Schmid & Betsch, "Effective strategies for rebutting science denialism in public discussions", in *Nature Human Behaviour*, Vol. 3, Issue 9, 2019, pp. 931-939.

[11] Plesner & Justesen, "Digitalize and deny: Pluralistic collective ignorance in an algorithmic profiling project", in *Ephemera: theory & politics in organization,* Vol. 23, Issue 1, 2023, p 24.

[12] Rayner, "Uncomfortable knowledge: the social construction of ignorance in science and environmental policy discourses", in *Economy and Society*, Vol. 41, Issue 1, 2012, pp. 107-125.

for a particular object or outcome stands in opposition to the facts of the external world.[13] At its core, denial is a familiar human response—a palliative mechanism[14] through which individuals refuse to acknowledge facts that generate psychological discomfort or cognitive dissonance. In this sense, denial appears as a private and episodic phenomenon: a momentary lapse or defensive gesture that shields the individual from distress.[15] However, the following subsection contends that denial becomes epistemically and politically consequential only once it is no longer an individual coping mechanism but a collectively sustained and strategically organized mode of epistemic resistance.

2.1. From individual denial to collective denialism

While denial may arise from an individual's motivated reasoning, denialism involves organized efforts to construct and maintain a "worldview that both derives from and supports the denial of some inconvenient truth"[16]. It emerges when personal refusals crystallize into a worldview, becoming embedded in social practices and discourses that actively contest established knowledge. What was once inward and psychological becomes outward, strategic, and ideological; a phenomenon that thrives in the contested spaces of public discourse, where the legitimacy of knowledge is always at stake. This transformation is a matter of scale, but also of function.

The systematic study of denialism as a distinct epistemic and rhetorical phenomenon can be traced to the seminal work of Mark and Chris Jay Hoofnagle in 2007. Their essay, "What is Denialism?", provided the first comprehensive framework for understanding denialism beyond mere psychologic. The Hoofnagles conceptualized the phenomenon as the following:

Denialism is the employment of rhetorical tactics to give the appearance of argument or legitimate debate, when in actuality there is none. These false arguments are used when one has few or no facts to support one's viewpoint against a scientific consensus or against overwhelming evidence to the contrary. They are effective in distracting from actual useful debate using emotionally appealing, but ultimately empty and illogical assertions.[17]

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[13] Cohen, *States of Denial: Knowing about Atrocities and Suffering,* Polity Press, 2001, pp. 21-23.
[14] Ibid., p. 45.
[15] Bardon, *The Truth About Denial: Bias and Self-Deception in Science, Politics, and Religion,* Oxford University Press, 2020, p. 10.
[16] Ibid., cited in Altanian, *The Epistemic Injustice of Genocide Denialism*, Routledge, 2024, p. 59.
[17] Hoofnagle & Hoofnagle, "What is Denialism?", in *SSRN*, 2007, p. 1.

Pascal Diethelm and Martin McKee[18] later contributed to the academic discourse on denialism by proposing a systematic taxonomy of its rhetorical strategies. Their analysis identified the strategies outlined by the Hoofnagles, consolidating them into five key elements (conspiracy theories, selective use of data, promotion of unqualified experts, imposition of unattainable evidential benchmarks, and application of fallacious reasoning) which are still regarded as fundamental components of denialism.

We should consider that these networks do more than simply repeat denialist talking points, they actively mobilize material, symbolic, and organizational resources to broaden both the scope and the persuasive reach of their messages. For instance, the fossil fuel sector, ideologically driven think tanks, and supportive media organizations have been pivotal in fostering this atmosphere of denial by funding dissenting academics and spreading deceptive narratives that aimed to blur the scientific consensus.[19] These broader setups create a system that allows denialist rhetoric to flourish not due to its knowledge gaps, but specifically because it promotes specific economic and ideological goals.[20] In that sense, the operation of these components and processes relies on their deep embedding within wider social, ideological, and structural dynamics, which sustain their reproduction beyond isolated or ad hoc occurrences.

Central to their contribution is the identification of denialism as a social and communicative process, shaped by (and in turn reinforcing) broader ideological and group-based commitments. Its persistence and effectiveness cannot be separated from the social and technological infrastructures that facilitate the circulation and legitimation of denialist tactics. Here, denialism is seen as a coordinated social process, enabled and amplified by networks of actors, organizations, and discursive infrastructures.[21]

2.2 Reconfiguring knowledge through disruption

Melanie Altanian highlights a framework that conceptualizes denialism as a phenomenon that operates through both the manipulation of knowledge systems (epistemic dimension) and the coordinated actions of groups, institutions, and social

[18] Diethelm & McKee, "Denialism: what is it and how should scientists respond?", in *European Journal of Public Health,* Vol. 19, Issue 1, 2009, pp. 2–4.

[19] Oreskes & Conway, *Merchants of Doubt*, p. 19.

[20] Ibid.

[21] McIntyre, *The Scientific Attitude: Defending Science from Denial, Fraud, and Pseudoscience*, The MIT Press, 2019, pp. 159-160.

structures (collective dimension). These two dimensions function in dynamic reciprocity: denialism reconfigures epistemic conditions by mobilizing collective mechanisms of control, while those very mechanisms derive their sociopolitical efficacy from the epistemic destabilization that denialism actively cultivates.[22] It signifies both the rejection of particular knowledge claims and a broader attack on the social and institutional foundations that enable the production, validation, and dissemination of knowledge.[23]

As Mary Douglas observes, "knowledge does not float in the air; it has practical and social bases. The dissolution of empires entails the collapse of structures of knowledge. When an organization disintegrates, the forms of knowledge that have been called forth by the effort to organise disintegrate too"[24]. This claim should not be understood as denying the historical persistence or cross-cultural transmission of epistemic content—a phenomenon aptly captured by the notion of translatio studiorum. Rather, Douglas's insight foregrounds the extent to which knowledge depends upon institutional, normative, and organizational scaffolding for its authority, coherence, and practical efficacy. Although particular bodies of knowledge may endure the collapse of empires or organizations through processes of cultural translation and adoption, the epistemic frameworks that ground their legitimacy, regulate their validation, and enable their collective uptake are often profoundly disrupted or reconstituted. The collapse of epistemic structures, in this sense, does not entail the disappearance of knowledge per se, but rather the erosion of the conditions under which knowledge operates as a socially authoritative and action-guiding practice.

This insight draws attention to the extent to which knowledge is sustained by epistemic infrastructures rather than produced by isolated knowers. Knowledge takes shape within historically embedded constellations of norms, practices, and institutional arrangements that organize epistemic activity and confer legitimacy upon its outcomes. Institutional mechanisms such as peer review, disciplinary norms governing validity, and criteria for falsifiability exemplify the structured processes through which knowledge claims are evaluated, validated, and disseminated within a community.[25] Their role is foundational, as they enable knowledge to emerge through communal participation, ensuring that claims are subjected to rigorous standards of proof and justification. Through these frameworks, knowledge becomes

[22] Altanian, *The Epistemic Injustice of Genocide Denialism*, p. 44.

[23] Broncano, *Puntos ciegos*: *ignorancia pública y conocimiento privado,* Lengua de trapo, 2019, pp. 232-233.

[24] Douglas, "Forgotten knowledge", In M. Strathern (Ed.), *Shifting contexts: Transformations in anthropological knowledge*, Routledge, 1995, p. 16

[25] Levy, *Bad Beliefs,* pp. 55-56.

more than the aggregation of individual beliefs; it becomes a socially distributed and critically (r)examined corpus of justified understanding. This dynamic improves both epistemic reliability and democratic legitimacy by incorporating knowledge into a shared body of reasoning.[26] Nonetheless, the integrity of these mechanisms cannot be assumed to be self-sustaining. Their efficacy relies on the continual reinforcement of shared epistemic norms and the active maintenance of institutional and procedural safeguards. These mechanisms are particularly vulnerable when the criteria that undergird justification and evidential accountability are deliberately undermined. In such scenarios, epistemic evaluation becomes susceptible to manipulation, leading to distortions in knowledge production and authority.[27]

This line of reasoning brings into focus a foundational concern within epistemological discourse: the imperative to maintain belief-formation processes in active relation to empirical referents and within schemes of normative justification.[28] Epistemic integrity (understood as the convergence between empirical referents and normatively grounded foundations of justification), in this sense, hinges not solely on the aggregation of information, but on the institutional and discursive practices that enable distinctions between epistemically warranted claims and those shaped by prejudice, speculative reasoning, or ideological predisposition. In the absence of such differentiating mechanisms, the epistemic domain becomes increasingly unstable, susceptible to leveling effects wherein all propositions are treated with equal credibility, irrespective of their evidentiary grounding. This erosion of evaluative criteria represents a significant epistemic hazard. It blurs the thresholds of justification that structure meaningful deliberation and impairs the ability of epistemic communities to adjudicate between competing truth claims. When epistemic systems are no longer anchored by institutional protocols (such as peer review), discursive norms (such as the demand for public reason or transparency), or methodological filters (such as replication), they risk becoming self-validating and epistemically insular.[29] These enclosed systems of thought render critique irrelevant.

Moreover, such formations tend to privilege internal coherence over external accountability.[30] Within these environments, beliefs are reinforced through repetition and internal alignment rather than through exposure to contestation or empirical challenge. The epistemic landscape becomes closed off, marked not by openness to correction, but by a recursive logic that equates affirmation with truth.[31] Under

[26] Ibid., p. 147.
[27] Bardon, *The Truth About Denial*, p. 129.
[28] Ibid., p. 92
[29] Ibid., p. 48.
[30] Ibid., p. 24
[31] Ibid., p. 111.

these conditions, the generative and self-corrective dimensions of inquiry are supplanted by a stabilizing imperative, one that protects entrenched frameworks from disruption and consolidates their authority through epistemic insulation. The potential for these risks underscores the critical importance of maintaining mechanisms of external scrutiny and normative accountability as safeguards against epistemic enclosure and stagnation.[32]

This concern foregrounds the significance of resistance as a constitutive feature of epistemic life; a procedural mechanism essential for maintaining the vitality, integrity, and accountability of knowledge systems. Resistance should not be construed merely as antagonism or oppositionality; challenging assumptions ensure that beliefs remain tethered to empirical reality and subject to continuous critical evaluation. In this sense, resistance operates normatively: it is a structured, rule-governed practice that enables communities of inquiry to detect errors and prevent the uncritical ossification of knowledge. Rather than being a marginal or disruptive element, resistance is crucial to the self-regulating abilities that uphold strong and dependable epistemic systems This role of resistance is closely tied to what José Medina[33] conceptualizes as epistemic friction: the productive tension that arises when one's cognitive commitments encounter alternative perspectives or dissonant experiences.

Recognizing resistance and epistemic friction as elements of epistemic accountability necessitates careful consideration of the social and historical contexts from which they arise. The capacity of friction to promote critical reflection and revise knowledge is not dictated only by the procedural norms of inquiry but is significantly influenced by the wider framework of epistemic relationships. To completely understand the role of friction, it is essential to investigate how deep-rooted inequalities (formed by enduring patterns of exclusion and power) influence who has the capacity to express dissent and whose objections are acknowledged or disregarded within existing systems of epistemic authority.

3. Epistemic friction and its ambiguities

Medina's analysis of epistemic injustice demonstrates that the integrity of knowledge exchange cannot be fully grasped through procedural considerations alone; testimonial practices and knowledge interactions occur within a social context deeply embedded with inherited images, narratives, and cultural scripts.[34]

[32] Levy, *Bad Beliefs*, p. 87.
[33] Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance*, p. 50.
[34] Ibid., p. 28.

The social imaginary, as Medina puts it, frames who is heard and who is dismissed, whose claims are taken as credible and whose are pathologized or silenced.[35] In environments shaped by systemic oppression, epistemic resistance must also be directed toward these social distortions: toward inherited credibility deficits imposed on marginalized groups[36] and the often-unearned epistemic privilege granted to dominant voices. Under conditions of longstanding social oppression, the social imaginary is warped.

Distortions generated by oppression within the social fabric extend to the allocation of credibility. Historically marginalized populations are consistently subjected to unwarranted doubts regarding their credibility; culturally ingrained stereotypes diminish the perceived validity of their knowledge and their rightful participation in discourse.[37] In contrast, members of dominant social groups tend to be conferred with excessive epistemic credibility, benefiting from trust that at times exceeds deserved limits based on their behavior or moral character. This dynamic engenders a fundamentally asymmetric epistemic landscape, where mistrust is routinely imposed on some, while others enjoy near-universal acceptance.[38]

The persistent asymmetry in the distribution of epistemic credibility carries significant normative and epistemological consequences, extending beyond a mere social inconvenience. When certain individuals or groups are consistently granted an excess of credibility, their views are less likely to be questioned, and their authority tends to be accepted without critical engagement.[39] For instance, celebrity figures or media pundits with large followings may be granted disproportionate credibility on scientific or political matters, leading audiences to accept their claims uncritically, even when these claims contradict established evidence. Over time, this epistemic overvaluation fosters conditions in which critical scrutiny is bypassed and intellectual accountability eroded. In these environments, individuals who consistently enjoy higher epistemic status might create engagement habits that hinder self-correction and shield their beliefs from significant scrutiny.

This insulation contributes to the emergence of specific epistemic dispositions that obstruct responsible inquiry. Individuals immersed in such environments often acquire habits that reinforce intellectual complacency and diminish their responsiveness to disagreement or unfamiliar perspectives. Among the most salient of these are

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35 Ibid.

36 While Medina's framework focuses primarily on racialized and gendered forms of epistemic oppression, it may be critiqued for not explicitly engaging with capitalism as a structural system of domination that intersects with, and reinforces, these other axes of marginalization.

37 Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*, Oxford University Press, 2007, p.32.

38 Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance*, p. 67.

39 Ibid., p. 30.

what can be termed epistemic vices, which tend to thrive in settings with excessive credibility. For instance, epistemic arrogance manifests as an inflated confidence in one's cognitive reliability, often accompanied by a disregard for the insights or critiques of others.[40] Epistemic laziness takes the form of disengagement, a reluctance to seek out new information or alternative viewpoints.[41] Meanwhile, closed-mindedness entails an aversion to confronting dissonant evidence or complexity, reinforcing cognitive rigidity.[42]

Together, these vices do not simply reflect personal shortcomings; they are shaped and sustained by broader social arrangements. The emergence of these traits in environments rife with unquestioned credibility demonstrates the complex connection between epistemic character and structural power. When credibility is not evenly shared, the ensuing disparities can undermine the essential norms needed for cooperative knowledge activities. A distinct representation of this dynamic can be seen in the regular hesitation to address personal social privilege (such as through evasive or dismissive participation in conversations about race or gender) which frequently illustrates how these cognitive shortcomings converge in real situations. This state, labeled as meta-insensitivity[43], describes a type of cognitive and emotional numbness: a simultaneous lack of awareness regarding one's own knowledge limits and the wider structural implications of one's epistemic behavior.

In contrast, those from marginalized backgrounds, even while suffering from under-credited testimony or reduced access to resources, may be better positioned to cultivate certain epistemic virtues. Some of the instances of these virtues could be epistemic humility[44] (the capacity for self-doubt and openness to correction), intellectual curiosity[45] (a drive to learn, often sharpened by necessity), and open-mindedness[46] (the ability to move beyond one's group's perspective and genuinely hear others). Individuals who exhibit these characteristics can be described as meta-lucid subjects—a term that designates agents marked by the capacity to evaluate their own epistemic positioning within broader social and normative contexts.[47] This subject becomes acutely aware of specific social injustices while simultaneously recognizing the ways in which oppressive systems configure perception, influence patterns of reasoning, and condition the norms through which knowledge is evaluated and legitimized.

[40] Ibid., p. 31.
[41] Ibid., p. 33.
[42] Ibid., pp. 34-35.
[43] Ibid., p. 39.
[44] Ibid., p. 43.
[45] Ibid.
[46] Ibid., p. 44.
[47] Ibid., p. 197.

Epistemic vices are significant for understanding epistemic resistance, as the latter arises from the dynamic interaction between the internal dispositions of epistemic agents and the external social and structural contexts in which they function. Such internal opposition may emerge from a person's commitment to mental autonomy, their sense of ethical and knowledge-driven responsibility, or a cultivated inclination for reflective self-analysis. These traits (shaped by the presence or absence of specific epistemic virtues) empower individuals to challenge dominant narratives and remain receptive to alternative perspectives. The expression and recognition of epistemic resistance are shaped by broader social imaginaries: these culturally embedded norms, stereotypes, and representation methods that shape public views on who is regarded as a credible knower.[48] External forces frequently constitute formidable barriers to the exercise of epistemic agency, particularly for those individuals or collectives positioned on the peripheries of prevailing epistemic regimes.[49] Within such environments, the efforts of epistemic agents to articulate knowledge claims or engage in collective epistemic practices encounter a bifurcated form of resistance: internally, manifesting as self-doubt and the internalization of hegemonic and oppressive social norms; and externally, through entrenched institutional and normative mechanisms that systematically marginalize and discredit specific epistemic contributions. Epistemic friction emerges at this intersection of individual epistemic agency and socio-institutional constraints, representing a dynamic interplay between personal commitment to knowledge and the external pressures exerted by prevailing normative foundations.

Medina's idea of epistemic friction builds upon frameworks such as Gila Sher's[50] exploration of epistemic responsibility by emphasizing the emotional, intersubjective, and power-laden dimensions of friction. The emergence of epistemic friction cannot be attributed solely to logical disagreement. It arises through interactions among socially positioned individuals whose diverse experiences, interpretative approaches, and situated knowledges contribute meaningfully to the epistemic encounter.[51]

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[48] Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, p. 38.

[49] For example, widely circulating cultural scripts that depict individuals with disabilities as cognitively deficient or economically non-contributive undermine epistemic subjecthood not due to actual individual incapacity but through socially imposed misrecognition. This form of epistemic exclusion limits the recognition of disabled persons as credible knowers. See Whyte, K. P., "Indigenous Science (Fiction) for the Anthropocene: Ancestral Dystopias and Fantasies of Climate Change Crises", in *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space, Vol. 1*, Issues 1–2, 2018, pp. 224–242.

[50] Sher, *Epistemic friction: An essay on knowledge, truth, and logic*, Oxford University Press, 2016, p. 3.

[51] Normative friction, in Sher's (2016) sense and in particular, is not distributed equally: it is shaped by power relations, institutional structures, and historical legacies that determine whose voices are heard, whose evidence is considered, and whose experiences are validated or marginalized. The standards that govern justification and credibility are themselves subject to contestation, and can be mobilized to exclude, silence, or disadvantage certain knowers.

Crucially, the intensity and trajectory of this friction are shaped not by abstract theory alone; they are conditioned by the relational practices and discursive behaviors of those who both generate and receive friction within specific contexts. The characteristics and direction of epistemic resistance depend on the contextual behaviors, motivations, and power relations of epistemic agents, who can either create friction to promote critical engagement and epistemic growth or utilize it to stifle opposition and maintain existing hierarchies.

Furthermore, epistemic friction is not a homogeneous phenomenon. Epistemic communities benefit from a certain degree of tension, which if properly oriented, is helpful for the advancement of knowledge: it constrains unwarranted belief, grounds inquiry in critical scrutiny, and enables processes of correction and learning.[52] Beneficial epistemic friction emerges from dissent, critical engagement, and contestation, elements that are foundational to the vitality and robustness of epistemic communities.[53]

This capacity for epistemic productivity likewise entails an inherent vulnerability: when epistemic friction is instrumentalized to obstruct inquiry, it becomes pernicious. Detrimental epistemic friction refers to this mode of resistance that, rather than facilitating the expansion of epistemic horizons, actively constrains and narrows the space of inquiry.[54] It emerges when the very norms and practices designed to promote critical scrutiny and epistemic accountability are redeployed as mechanisms of censorship and silencing. In such contexts, mechanisms like doubt and contestation are mobilized to constrain epistemic horizons, serving to suppress belief formation and foreclose alternative avenues of inquiry instead of promoting their expansion. Friction, in this pathological form, ceases to correct epistemic injustice and instead fortifies existing asymmetries. A key advantage of this approach is the redefinition of epistemic friction not just as a simple obstacle but as a crucial factor for epistemic advancement, stemming specifically from the interaction of social agents possessing differing viewpoints, experiences, and justifying methods. Such dialectical interaction generates a productive tension that challenges entrenched epistemic beliefs and fosters critical reflexivity, thereby supporting the development of more inclusive knowledge practices and facilitating transformative understanding.

The limited focus on this aspect highlights the necessity for a deeper examination of how epistemic communities manage disagreement in environments characterized by epistemic inequality. Disputes over knowledge claims are rarely neutral or evenly distributed; they unfold within institutional and cultural configurations

[52] Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance,* p. 49.
[53] Ibid., p. 50.
[54] Ibid.

that authorize certain forms of resistance while rendering others invisible or illegitimate. Institutions (often positioned as custodians of epistemic authority) occupy a complex and ambivalent role in this dynamic.[55] This uneven allocation of epistemic recognition shapes not only who is allowed to engage in processes of epistemic friction, but also which contributions are amplified, and which are marginalized. Such asymmetrical dynamics prompt critical reflection on the disparities embedded within epistemic resistance, and on the specific socio-political conditions that determine whether arguable engagements can lead to substantive epistemic and structural transformation.

Denialism demonstrates how epistemic resistance is fundamentally ingrained in, and influenced by, imbalanced systems of recognition and authority. Beyond irrational anomalies or trivial disturbances, denialist narratives obtain support specifically because they are expressed by individuals with significant institutional authority, symbolic capital, or financial assets.[56] Their capacity to mobilize epistemic friction from a position of privilege illustrates how institutions selectively authorize certain forms of resistance while delegitimizing others, particularly those emerging from marginalized or dissenting epistemic positions.

Consequently, denialism illustrates how epistemic friction, instead of operating consistently as a democratizing element, can be appropriated to reinforce power and stifle transformative contestation. This dynamic underscore the importance of extending analysis beyond the immediate content of epistemic disputes to include the structural and socio-political contexts that determine which forms of dissent gain recognition and possess the capacity to influence social change.

4. When epistemic friction becomes detrimental: the case of denialism

As discussed above, epistemic resistance manifests in diverse forms, each aligned with normative and strategic objectives. Some forms of epistemic friction promote emancipatory and corrective outcomes, while others serve to entrench existing structures of domination. Resistance is therefore neither uniformly beneficial nor uniformly harmful: certain disagreements and conflicts provide essential tests for biased or unjust epistemic frameworks. [57] Friction in knowledge practices is not intrinsically good or bad; its normative value depends on the purposes it serves and the conditions it engages.

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[55] Oreskes & Conway, *Merchants of Doubt*, pp. 7-9.

[56] Ibid. For example, in the context of climate change, fossil fuel corporations and affiliated think tanks have historically funded denialist campaigns that frame their positions as reasoned skepticism, thereby masking vested interests behind a veneer of scientific deliberation.

[57] Diéguez, *La ciencia en cuestión: Disenso, negación y objetividad*, Bookwire GmbH, 2024, pp. 115-116.

Against this backdrop, this section distinguishes epistemic friction that fosters justice and inclusion from friction that entrenches domination, with denialism exemplifying the latter. The analysis proceeds in three interrelated dimensions. It first examines the contextual conditions of epistemic breakdown, particularly in marginalized communities, where resistant epistemologies reveal structural exclusions while denialist practices exploit uncertainty and undermine trust. It then considers denialism contextually and agentively: the contextual dimension highlights degraded epistemic environments shaped by structural vulnerabilities, while the agentive dimension focuses on how denialist actors cultivate public identities and exploit asymmetries in epistemic authority. Together, these perspectives show how denialism is enacted, reproduced, and insulated from scrutiny. Finally, the discussion situates denialism within historically and institutionally shaped environments, showing how it perpetuates mistrust, erodes collective capacities for critical evaluation, and underscores the need for interventions that restore accountable knowledge production and deliberative public reasoning.

4.1. Friction without traction

In communities experiencing systemic marginalization (such as racial minorities, Indigenous communities, and economically challenged groups) distrust in established institutions of knowledge (like scientific bodies, academic institutions, and government) usually stems from individual encounters with exclusion and exploitation.[58] This type of skepticism illustrates what is referred to as resistant epistemologies: viewpoints that question the validity of institutions by attempting to reveal the selective, incomplete, and occasionally coercive tactics used to maintain epistemic power.[59] These critical orientations exemplify what are referred to as resistant epistemologies[60]: epistemic stances that interrogate institutional legitimacy by exposing the selective, partial, and sometimes coercive operations through which epistemic authority is maintained. Such resistance functions as a call for epistemic justice, seeking to address long-standing inequities in whose knowledge is acknowledged, validated,

[58] Medina, *The Epistemology of Protest: Silencing, Epistemic Activism, and the Communicative Life of Resistance*, Oxford University Press, 2023, p. 399.

[59] In *The Epistemology of Protest* (2023), Medina further develops this argument emphasizing how acts of protest and collective resistance can function as epistemic interventions. He contends that such practices contest institutional authority and seek to reconfigure the conditions under which credibility is assigned and knowledge is produced, thereby contributing to the democratization of epistemic life.

[60] Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance,* p. 302.

or disregarded.[61] Resistant epistemologies do not aim to dismantle the pursuit of knowledge itself. On the contrary, they endeavor to transform it—broadening the epistemic field to include historically excluded voices and demanding more equitable conditions for the validation, circulation, and uptake of knowledge claims. Challenging the authority of dominant knowledge frameworks makes resistant epistemologies illuminate the power dynamics that underlie processes of knowledge production. They draw attention to whose voices are legitimized, whose perspectives are marginalized, and how these patterns reflect broader systems of social and political inequality. In this way, they offer not only critique but also a transformative vision for more inclusive and accountable epistemic practices.

This insight emphasizes the significance of perceiving epistemic friction as integrated within specific social contexts. The capacity to be recognized as a trustworthy source, an individual whose statements are esteemed, differs inconsistently across social situations. The distribution of epistemic authority is conditioned by social status, institutional configurations, and deeply ingrained belief systems, which collectively determine whose knowledge claims are acknowledged and whose are disregarded or contested.[62] Hence, identifying beneficial versus detrimental forms of epistemic friction surpasses mere categorization and involves profound political and ethical duties.

Grounded in sociological analysis, this approach furnishes a critical structure for understanding the specific dangers inherent in denialism, regarded as a prime illustration of harmful epistemic friction. Denialism hampers investigative processes not through legitimate skepticism[63] or authentic contestation[64]. Rather, it overwhelms the epistemic environment with bad-faith objections, epistemic double standards, and manufactured mistrust toward knowledge-producing institutions. What renders it especially challenging to discern is its imitation of epistemic virtue: denialist actors commonly appropriate the language of democratic inquiry (such as appeals to free

[61] Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice,* pp. 54-55

[62] Medina, "Agential Epistemic Injustice and Collective Epistemic Resistance", in *Philosophy and Social Criticism,* Vol. 48, Issue 1, 2022, pp. 3–28.

[63] Denialism is also conceptualized as a form of *pseudoskepticism*—an epistemic posture that imitates the language and rituals of critical inquiry while systematically evading its responsibilities. Unlike genuine skepticism, which is marked by openness to revision and responsiveness to evidence, pseudoskepticism operates through selective doubt, rhetorical deflection, and bad-faith critique. It performs epistemic virtue without embodying it. See Torcello, L., "Science Denial, Pseudoskepticism, and Philosophical Deficits Undermining Public Understanding of Science: A Response to Sharon E. Mason", in *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective*, Vol. 9, Issue 9, 2020, pp. 1-9.

[64] Hansson, "Science denial as a form of pseudoscience", in *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science*, Vol. 63, 2017, pp. 39–47.

speech, balanced debate or scientific skepticism) employing these not to foster understanding, yet to create confusion and postpone consensus. These actors adopt the strategic posture of claiming that issues are unsettled, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, in order to present their views as worthy of serious consideration and prolong public uncertainty.[65]

The distinctive potency of denialism lies in its calculated appropriation of their outward forms. Denialist rhetoric seldom appears as a straightforward challenge to critical examination; it wraps itself in the guise of responsible doubt, thorough methodology, and open discussion. This rhetorical approach renders denialist actions seem credible, especially in democratic settings that value transparency and discussion. Sven Ove Hansson[66] contends that denialism involves a "mimicking of scientific methodological characteristics"[67] while concurrently undermining the foundational epistemic commitments that provide those characteristics with their justificatory value.

This deliberate imitation serves as a tactical disruption of the mechanisms by which knowledge is collaboratively created and vindicated. By deploying epistemic markers[68], denialist rhetoric cultivates a veneer of rational deliberation that simulates the formal structure of democratic discourse. Yet beneath this surface lies a corrosive dynamic: one that weakens the social infrastructures that support trust in knowledge practices.[69] In this sense, denialism constitutes a paradigmatic form of detrimental epistemic friction—namely, a force that neither promotes critical self-reflection nor facilitates the rectification of epistemic error.

The force and effectiveness of denialism is closely intertwined with—and frequently amplify—preexisting asymmetries in epistemic authority; differences in who is authorized to participate in knowledge-production, whose voices carry weight, and what forms of evidence are deemed admissible.[70] These asymmetries extend beyond narrow epistemological concerns and are embedded in and perpetuate deeper vectors of social power, including histories of exclusion, institutionalized

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65 Hansson, "Science denial as a form of pseudoscience", p. 3.

66 Ibid.

67 Ibid., p. 16.

68 Epistemic markers refer to discursive signals or rhetorical elements that indicate an apparent commitment to knowledge-related norms, such as objectivity, evidence-based reasoning, or expertise. In this context, they include references to empirical data, appeals to scientific consensus, or calls for open debate. While these markers are typically used to enhance the credibility of a claim, denialist rhetoric employs them superficially or manipulatively, giving the impression of epistemic integrity without adhering to its substantive standards.

69 Levy, *Bad beliefs*, p. 57.

70 Proctor & Schiebinger (Eds.), *Agnotology*, pp. 90-91.

marginalization[71], and entrenched structural injustices[72]. Denialism thus derives its potency not only from the content it rejects, but also from the ways in which it exploits and distorts the conditions of epistemic credibility, authority, and participation. By contrast, resistant epistemologies, although they generate epistemic friction, advance epistemic justice by exposing structural exclusions rather than undermining the conditions of inquiry themselves. The next subsection turns to denialism as a contrasting form of epistemic friction that lacks this emancipatory orientation.

4.2. Exploring the dimensions of denialism

As mentioned earlier, a comprehensive story cannot be reduced to mere misinformation or unusual epistemic conduct among knowledge factions. Its effectiveness and durability are best perceived as stemming from the dynamic interaction of various factors functioning at different levels of social reality. Core research in scientific and technological studies, along with social epistemology, suggests that epistemic practices are simultaneously influenced by shared norms and the discursive arrangements that establish how knowledge claims are expressed and challenged.[73]

Concentrating mainly on the context and actors, rather than the actual variable content, allows for a more refined and structurally aware comprehension of denialism as a type of harmful epistemic friction. Contexts create conditions that allow denialism to emerge, influencing which narratives can gain support and how epistemic resources are allocated or restricted. Simultaneously, individuals or collectives in different institutional, political, or economic positions engage in and promote denialist narratives, using particular rhetorical techniques and leveraging existing power dynamics to maintain their authority in knowledge.

Because denialist content is intrinsically linked to, and continuously shaped by, the evolving social and political contexts as well as the agents involved, an exclusive focus on the content alone risks overlooking the crucial institutional mechanisms and power relations that enable and perpetuate denialism. By directing analytical efforts toward the interaction between contextual conditions and the actors who navigate them, we gain a more nuanced and dynamic understanding of denialism as a sustained and adaptive phenomenon. This perspective brings into view the specific circumstances that facilitate its circulation, as well as the strategies

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[71] Broncano, *Conocimiento expropiado: Epistemología política en una democracia radical,* Akal, 2020, pp. 138-139.

[72] Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice,* p. 156.

[73] Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, pp. 1–20; Jasanoff, *States of Knowledge: The Co-Production of Science and the Social Order*, Routledge, 2004, pp. 1-25; Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance,* pp. 45–70.

through which denialist actors secure epistemic resources while evading scrutiny and accountability. Taken together, these considerations call for a more fine-grained analysis of denialism's operation across different levels of social reality. The following subsections develop this analysis in turn, beginning with the contextual conditions that enable denialist discourse.

4.2.1. Contextual dimension

Denialism frequently creates self-reinforcing and isolated epistemic enclaves, environments that are inherently protected from external examination and resistant to shifts in understanding.[74] Grasping the rise and persistence of these denialist movements requires thoughtful examination of the broader epistemic schemes from which they arise. These narratives do not emerge in isolation; they are formed within socio-institutional frameworks where the norms governing public reasoning, and the assessment of knowledge claims have been significantly undermined. Denialism embodies a form of epistemic resistance that proves counterproductive, as it obstructs the necessary conditions for open investigation, mutual recognition, and institutional accountability. These dynamics are particularly clear in contexts where the evaluative criteria essential for democratic dialogue are either compromised or deliberately misapplied.

The severity of this disruption is most evident in what Levy[75] describes as epistemically polluted environments—contexts in which the ordinary mechanisms for producing, filtering, and appraising knowledge are systematically degraded. Just as environmental pollution contaminates ecosystems and disrupts biological integrity, epistemic pollution damages the cognitive infrastructures that sustain responsible epistemic practices. This degradation may stem both from manifestly illegitimate actors and from institutions that continue to project epistemic authority despite transmitting signals no longer aligned with standards of evidence.[76]

Epistemically deficient settings establish the essential conditions for denialism to thrive. Denialist narratives thrive by leveraging the uncertainty of knowledge that emerges from tainted informational environments, where conventional indicators of reliability —like expert agreement, sound methodologies, or institutional authority— have either diminished or been appropriated.[77] In informational situations where standard indicators of trustworthiness have been undermined or widely duplicated,

[74] McIntyre, *Post-Truth*, The MIT Press, 2018, p. 155.
[75] Levy, *Bad Beliefs*, p. 110.
[76] Ibid., p. 115.
[77] Ibid.

denialist stories face little opposition. Modern information settings, especially those facilitated by digital platforms, often subject individuals to communicative material that replicates the rhetorical and visual standards typical of scientific investigation and democratic discussion.[78] Such messages frequently include references to empirical data or utilize procedural language intended to express principles of neutrality and transparency. Yet, these signals often do not possess the rigorous evidentiary backing and normative accountability essential to genuine epistemic inquiry. An important example of this phenomenon arose during the COVID-19 pandemic, when false information frequently took on forms resembling authentic scientific communication. Misleading assertions were spread via charts, infographics, and citations of alleged "studies", but these representations usually lacked peer review, methodological evaluation, or contextual accuracy.[79] This practice led to a merging of lines between science and pseudoscience, making it harder (especially for general audiences) to distinguish reliable information from misleading alternatives.

Indeed, this mimicry has profound consequences for public reasoning. Individuals navigating these environments must rely on heuristic cues (such as institutional affiliation, discursive form, or perceived neutrality) to assess the credibility of information. When these cues become contaminated, epistemic agents may recognize that something is epistemically questionable while lacking the tools or resources to pinpoint the source of the failure.

Compounding this state of disorientation, epistemic vices play a central role in shaping how agents engage with information. These vices are not merely individual moral or cognitive failings; they are often socially and institutionally reinforced, arising from the interaction between personal dispositions and the environments in which agents operate. For instance, overconfidence can lead individuals to overestimate their ability to evaluate competing claims, while gullibility may predispose them to accept information aligned with familiar heuristic cues, such as institutional affiliation or perceived neutrality, without sufficient scrutiny.[80] Closed-mindedness, in turn, inhibits the incorporation of corrective evidence, reinforcing false beliefs even in the face of clear counterevidence.[81] This interplay of vices and structural distortions creates precisely the conditions Levy describes: "I know it's wrong, yet I have no real idea how" [82]. In such a state, epistemic agents sense the inadequacy of a claim without possessing the tools to trace or challenge its source,

[78] Plesner & Justesen, "Digitalize and deny", pp. 21-22.
[79] McIntyre, *The Scientific Attitude,* pp. 163-164.
[80] Bardon, *The Truth About Denial,* p. 33.
[81] Ibid., p. 93.
[82] Levy, *Bad Beliefs*, p. 96.

making them especially vulnerable to denialist discourse. Here, epistemic vices function as both individual and systemic enablers of epistemic friction: they interact with compromised credibility cues and social asymmetries to allow disinformation to masquerade as legitimate knowledge, thereby eroding collective epistemic resilience and undermining the processes of accountable public reasoning.

It is within this environment of disoriented and compromised agents that denialism operates most effectively. Denialist narratives thrive on the uncertainty and evaluative fragility created by flawed epistemic contexts, whether online or offline. They do not merely exploit pre-existing confusion; rather, they actively cultivate and amplify it. Focusing on systematically undermining confidence in institutions and in the normative frameworks that guide public knowledge, denialist discourse diminishes the evaluative capacities essential for epistemic communities to distinguish genuine inquiry from instances of anti-epistemic disruption. In this way, the interaction of epistemic vices and structural vulnerabilities provides fertile ground for denialism to entrench itself within public discourse.

This analysis of the contextual conditions under which denialism thrives, however, captures only part of the phenomenon. To fully account for its persistence and effectiveness, it is also necessary to examine the agents who actively sustain and disseminate denialist narratives, and the strategies through which they manage their epistemic standing.

4.2.2. Agentive dimension

The adaptability of denialist strategies is closely associated with the way individuals involved in such activities cultivate and regulate their public identities. The designation denialist is rarely appropriated by those to whom it refers, given its strongly negative implications. Accepting such a designation would entail the forfeiture of any claim to epistemic legitimacy—a concession incompatible with the goal of maintaining influence within public discourse.[83] Accordingly, the rejection of the term performs a calculated function, aimed at preserving the image of impartiality and rational deliberation.

Nonetheless, the ability for strategic self-representation that defines denialist discourse is not available to everyone. It becomes feasible mainly because of institutional and socio-political influence.[84] On the one hand, many denialist interventions are consciously sustained by actors embedded in powerful infrastructures (media conglomerates, corporate lobbying organizations, political institutions etc.)

[83] McIntyre, *The Scientific Attitude*, p.156.
[84] Oreskes & Conway, *Merchants of Doubt*, pp. 34-35

that actively profit from the erosion of public epistemic clarity.[85] These actors are not peripheral to knowledge production; they operate from its centers. Their access to prestigious platforms (from financial means to legal safeguards) and established networks of trust enables them to dominate the substance of their dissent and the conditions under which that dissent is understood and assessed.[86] On the other hand, the individuals and groups most often subjected to denialist discourse (especially in politically charged epistemic contexts) tend to belong to communities that have historically experienced marginalization or systemic subordination.[87] These are frequently populations positioned at the crossroads of gender-based[88], economic[89], and colonial oppression[90], whose capacity to participate fully in social and epistemic life has been persistently limited by entrenched structures of exclusion.

This asymmetry underscores that dissent within contemporary public discourse is mediated less by evidentiary merit than by its circulation through structures of epistemic and social power. The same rhetorical posture (expressions of skepticism, calls for debate, or demands for open inquiry) can be received in markedly different ways depending on the institutional location and social standing of the speaker. While dissent from marginalized or non-dominant positions is frequently subjected to heightened scrutiny or dismissed as partisan, dissent aligned with dominant institutions is more readily framed in the legitimating language of rationality and procedural caution. A clear illustration can be found in the history of climate change denialism: as documented by Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway, political figures and representatives of fossil fuel corporations were able to question the scientific consensus on anthropogenic climate change from prominent media and legislative platforms.[91] Their statements, despite being at odds with the overwhelming body of peer-reviewed evidence, were treated as reasonable contributions to democratic debate, often given equal or greater visibility than the position of the scientific community. Comparable challenges voiced by climate activists, Indigenous leaders, or non-institutional scientists, however, have routinely been dismissed as "ideologically

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[85] McGoey, "Strategic unknowns: towards a sociology of ignorance", in *Economy and Society*, Vol. 4, Issue 1, 2015, pp. 1-16.

[86] Daukas, "Epistemic Trust and Social Location", in *Episteme*, Vol. 3, Issues 1–2, 2006, pp. 109–124.

[87] Berenstain, N., Dotson, K., Paredes, J. *et al.* "Epistemic oppression, resistance, and resurgence", in *Contemporary Political Theory,* Vol. 21, 2022, pp. 283–314

[88] Tuana, "The Speculum of Ignorance: The Women's Health Movement and Epistemologies of Ignorance", in *Hypatia*, Vol. 21, Issue 3, 2006, pp. 1-19.

[89] Broncano, *Puntos ciegos*, p. 57.

[90] Spivak, G. C., "Can the Subaltern Speak?", in C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, University of Illinois Press, 1988, pp. 271–313.

[91] Oreskes & Conway, *Merchants of Doubt,* pp. 169-170.

driven" or "alarmist", underscoring the uneven distribution of credibility.[92] The result is some kind of epistemic immunity: a structurally produced condition in which certain actors, including denialist agents, are shielded from the justifying and normative demands that ordinarily govern responsible epistemic conduct.[93]

This dynamic reflects the fact that denialist discourse is not merely a matter of isolated misinformation but a manifestation of broader struggles over epistemic authority. Vulnerable communities (such as Indigenous peoples contesting colonial histories or marginalized groups exposing systemic discrimination) often produce forms of knowledge that disrupt entrenched narratives and threaten vested institutional interests. These challenges undermine not only the content of dominant accounts but also the structural arrangements that grant them legitimacy. In turn, denialist discourse seeks to undermine these contributions by portraying them as unreliable, ideologically biased, or falling outside the scope of legitimate scholarly or public debate. When emerging from institutional centers of power, denialism functions as a mechanism of epistemic domination, one that consolidates authority by marginalizing dissenting voices and foreclosing avenues for epistemic redress.[94] The resulting asymmetry reinforces and amplifies detrimental epistemic friction within public discourse, eroding the normative grounds necessary for collective understanding and democratic deliberation.

The persistence and influence of such denialist narratives depend on infrastructures that both amplify their reach and insulate them from scrutiny. Media norms that prioritize "balance" over evidentiary weight, algorithmic systems that reward controversy, the credentialing work of sympathetic think tanks, and rhetorical strategies such as strategic ambiguity or "just asking questions" all function to reduce the accountability of denialist claims. Such mechanisms lower the evidentiary threshold for acceptance while raising the barriers to effective critique, allowing narratives to achieve disproportionate influence relative to their epistemic merit. Within this asymmetric regime of accountability, denialist discourse can circulate widely and erode the evaluative capacities essential for distinguishing genuine inquiry from anti-epistemic disruption.

4.3. Understanding the endurance of denialism in contemporary society

The preceding analysis of contextual and agentive dimensions provides a lens through which the operations of denialism can be recognized as a particularly destructive form of epistemic friction. Denialist discourse does not emerge in

[92] Whyte, "Indigenous Science (Fiction) for the Anthropocene…", p. 226.
[93] Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance*, p. 214.
[94] Medina, *The Epistemology of Protest*, p. 371.

a vacuum; it takes root in epistemic environments already subjected to sustained erosion. These are not merely disordered or fragmented spaces, but historically and institutionally shaped terrains where the normative commitments that guide inquiry have been systematically weakened.[95] Such environments are the outcome of protracted sociopolitical processes, shaped by technological infrastructures and institutional arrangements that gradually distort the ideals of public reason. Within them, the mechanisms that once enabled collective deliberation and critical assessment falter. The result is not simply a decline in knowledge production but a deformation of the conditions under which meaningful epistemic engagement can occur.

What marks this degradation as particularly pernicious is its capacity for self-perpetuation. Once certain distortions enter public discourse (amplified by actors who strategically present misinformation as rational dissent) they begin to replicate, crowding out practices that sustain epistemic integrity.[96] In this context, denialism accelerates their breakdown by embedding doubt, confusion, and selective skepticism as discursive defaults. This feedback loop corrodes trust in epistemic institutions (such as journalism, academia, and scientific bodies) not via abrupt collapse, but through a gradual process of delegitimization that compromises their capacity to perform essential public functions.[97] As confidence in them wanes, the space for denialist narratives expands. The more these narratives circulate, the more resistant the epistemic environment becomes to critical correction. In this way, denialism thrives on and contributes to a polluted epistemic ecology, where the breakdown of shared standards creates the very conditions that sustain its growth.

The agentive element of denialism highlights the tactical actions of individuals situated in positions of institutional advantage. These individuals function within well-structured networks of influence, where access to material assets and knowledge infrastructures allows for the arrangement of narratives with broad public impact.[98] Their influence emerges through alignment with systems that already confer

[95] Kahn-Harris, *Denial: The Unspeakable Truth*, Notting Hill Editions, 2018, pp. 39-41.

[96] Levy, *Bad Beliefs,* p. 122*.*

[97] Social media platforms are crucial in this context as they facilitate the swift, extensive spread of denialist stories and inaccuracies, frequently bypassing conventional control measures. The algorithms powering these platforms often elevate emotionally charged or contentious material, irrespective of its truthfulness, thus deepening epistemic polarization and uncertainty. As a result, the ongoing spread of misinformation disrupts public epistemic structures while also normalizing epistemic fragmentation. This, overall, complicates institutions' ability to fulfill their crucial roles in shaping collective understanding and public discourse. See Sinatra, G. M. & Hofer, B. K. *Science Denial: Why It Happens and What to Do About It*, Oxford University Press, 2021.

[98] Broncano, *Puntos ciegos,* p. 168.

legitimacy, allowing their claims to circulate as credible before they are even subject to evaluation. This positioning facilitates a mode of epistemic authority that is performative in nature: through presence within powerful discursive arenas—mainstream media, academic venues, or political forums—these agents cultivate the appearance of neutrality and expertise. Such performative authority acts as a protective shield, insulating their claims from the rigorous scrutiny and critical interrogation that typically govern epistemic evaluation. What seems to be simple involvement in public discussion functions through ingrained power dynamics that determine whose understanding is acknowledged and the way that acknowledgment is sustained.

Addressing the persistence of denialism necessitates a multifaceted approach that goes beyond the mere correction of wrong information. Interventions must engage with the deeper, structural dimensions of the epistemic environment, seeking to restore and fortify the conditions that underpin collective knowledge production and critical discourse. This involves the systematic reinforcement of shared standards of credibility, which are essential for distinguishing well-supported claims from ideologically or strategically motivated assertions. Equally critical is the cultivation of spaces in which reflective and critical inquiry can flourish, providing forums where deliberation is guided by principles of transparency and methodological rigor. Such interventions collectively aim not merely to counteract specific instances of denialist discourse but to reconstruct an epistemic ecology resilient to the self-perpetuating dynamics of distortion and delegitimization, thereby fostering a public sphere in which rational deliberation and evidence-based understanding can regain normative authority.[99] This analysis shows that denialism endures not despite epistemic degradation but because it actively exploits and deepens it, reinforcing a self-sustaining cycle of epistemic erosion.

5. Conclusion

This article has approached denialism as more than a cognitive failure or the inadvertent outcome of misinformation. Rather, it constitutes a complex and entrenched epistemic configuration, structured through the interrelation of institutional arrangements, affective regimes, and stratified systems of credibility. Conceiving denialism as an instance of detrimental epistemic friction reframes it from a mere aggregation of falsehoods into a deliberate and strategic disruption of the social processes by which knowledge is produced, validated, and circulated.

[99] Levy, *Bad Beliefs*, p. 123.

This perspective underscores the significance of both contextual and agentive factors in shaping the environments in which denialist interventions arise. Moreover, it demonstrates that the potency of denialist rhetoric and discourse is deeply intertwined with the broader social structures that govern the distribution and exercise of epistemic authority.

Although this study has created a theoretical framework for comprehending denialism as harmful epistemic friction, its examination has mostly been conceptual. Future studies might effectively explore the socio-technical systems that support the production, spread, and enhancement of denialist narratives. These inquiries may encompass thorough examinations of media contexts, platform algorithms, communication practices within organizations, and the networks of individuals who purposefully leverage these systems. Comparative and cross-contextual research (such as examining various political, cultural, and epistemic environments) can enhance understanding of how denialism evolves in different contexts, uncovering the relationship between structural weaknesses and active strategies that perpetuate epistemic blockage.

Framing denialism as detrimental epistemic friction provides a nuanced analytical lens that illuminates not only its operational logic but also its far-reaching societal implications. This framework advances scholarly discourse by moving beyond treating denialism as a mere collection of false claims, highlighting instead its systemic nature as an orchestrated disruption embedded within wider socio-political distributions of epistemic authority and power. By revealing how denialism thrives through structural vulnerabilities and strategic agentive practices that undermine the infrastructures of credible knowledge, the conceptualization equips researchers and practitioners with a critical tool to diagnose and address epistemic harm in a holistic manner.

Crucially, this approach extends beyond the analysis of denialism alone, offering a conceptual framework for examining a broader range of complex epistemic obstacles, including organized disinformation campaigns, widespread skepticism toward scientific authority, and politically charged disputes over knowledge. It highlights the importance of replies that tackle the deceptive information along with the foundational relational, institutional, and normative factors that maintain epistemic dysfunction. In the end, this analysis could aid in bolstering democratic epistemic practices by encouraging the restoration of damaged knowledge ecosystems and advancing more inclusive and robust public reasoning in progressively disputed epistemic environments.

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When The Far-Right Reads Lacan

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ABSTRACT. This article examines the recent appropriation of Lacanian Psychoanalysis by Aleksandr Dugin, who utilizes Lacan as a resource for nationalist and illiberal politics. Against the traditional split between the Lacanian Left and the Clinical Orientation, the paper argues for the emergence of an interpretative phenomenon that can be understood as a Reactionary Lacanianism. Through a close reading of Dugin's texts and interviews, it shows how Lacanian concepts are rigidified into algebraic formulas that foreclose dialectical negativity. This symptomatic misreading exposes both the dangers and the plasticity of Lacan's corpus: every attempt to stabilize him as a Master inevitably confronts the void at its core.

Keywords: *Reactionary Lacanianism, Far-Right, Aleksandr Dugin, Jacques Lacan, Left Lacanianism, Slavoj Žižek.*

Introduction

The master's disappearance has unfailingly compelled its disciples to engage in a contest of interpretation, a perpetual race toward the "correct" exegesis and the exhaustive mastery of the *oeuvre* he bequeathed. Yet this very moment has always inaugurated a fundamental disjunction among them: as we will see, as far as Lacanian legacy goes, some advanced ambitiously toward new horizons of thought, while others entrenched themselves in a posture of caution, rigidly defending what appeared as conservatism. The truth, however, is that no disciple has ever been in

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possession of the truth, just as the master himself was never unconditionally sincere. As Lacan observes in his conference Television[1], he always tells the truth, though never the whole of it – for he cannot, and because he does not know it. Every reading is, therefore, structurally a misreading, an interpretation constitutively marked by error, issuing from a hermeneutic fissure that can never be sutured. Such misreadings inevitably propel the master's thought beyond itself, even if certain conservative disciples imagine their gestures to be acts of "preservation." The very jouissance of not being like the others thus unites both the progressive and the conservative camps, for both, whether willingly or unwillingly, advance the master's legacy beyond what he desired or prescribed.

It is precisely within this horizon of constitutive misreading that the contemporary political fortunes of Lacan must be situated. Once canonized by the so-called "Lacanian Left"[2] as a resource for emancipatory critique, Lacan now circulates in contexts that radically displace this reception. This paper argues that the recent appropriation of Lacanian theory by reactionary[3] ideologues such as Aleksandr Dugin exposes the latent conservative dimensions of Lacan's oeuvre, dimensions that the Left has strategically repressed, thereby undermining its own interpretative monopoly.

The object of the present analysis is what we cautiously call the emergence of a "right-wing Lacanianism." At this stage it remains incipient, more symptomatic than structural, without a consolidated theoretical or institutional infrastructure. The "corpus" under examination is correspondingly limited: Dugin's Lacanian analysis of the 2024 U.S. elections (*Lacan and Psychedelic Trumpism*[4]), together with his interview with the streamer Haz Al-Din (*HAZ x DUGIN: Fascism, Žižek and Lacan*)[5].

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1 "I always speak the truth. Not the whole truth, because there's no way, to say it all. Saying it all is literally impossible: words fail. Yet it's through this very impossibility that the truth holds onto the real". Jacques Lacan, *Television: A Challenge to the Psychoanalytic Establishment*, ed. Joan Copjec, trans. Denis Hollier, Rosalind Krauss, and Annette Michelson, W. W. Norton, 1990, 3.

2 We have adopted the term "Lacanian Left" from Yannis Stavrakakis's well-known book *The Lacanian Left: Psychoanalysis, Theory, Politics*, Edinburgh University Press, 2007.

3 In this article, the term "reactionary" refers to a political stance that seeks to reverse the course of history rather than simply preserve tradition. While a conservative typically aims to protect existing institutions, a reactionary ideologue – like Dugin – views the modern liberal world as fundamentally broken or "decadent." Therefore, they use Lacanian theory to justify a radical break from the present in order to return to a presumably lost form of absolute authority, often rooted in national or religious identity. Essentially, it describes an attempt to turn a psychoanalytic theory originally focused on individual liberation into a tool for imposing strict social order and hierarchy.

4 Aleksandr Dugin, "Lacan and Psychedelic Trumpism," Arktos, September 19, 2024, https://arktos.com/2024/09/19/lacan-and-psychedelic-trumpism/

5 Infrared, HAZ x DUGIN: Fascism, Žižek and Lacan, YouTube video, posted January 7, 2025, https://youtube.com/watch?v=xjeozrLaIkM&t=2s

Despite their relative isolation, these instances are sufficiently revealing to trace the initial outlines of an ideological reconfiguration of Lacan's conceptual apparatus. If certain of Dugin's theoretical maneuvers may appear erroneous or distorted – as Žižek argues in his counter-essay "Vance, Dugin, Lacan"[6] – they cannot be dismissed as mere misunderstandings. Rather, they must be understood as necessary effects of an ideological operation of adaptation: Lacanian thought is selected, truncated, and reorganized to conform to an eschatological, authoritarian, and illiberal worldview. What emerges is not a naïve misapplication, though it retains elements of naivety, but a deliberate repositioning of key Lacanian concepts such as the Real, the Symbolic, and the Imaginary. This repositioning occurs within a political architecture fundamentally at odds with the premises of the Lacanian Left and the structural open-endedness of Lacan's own writings and teaching, upon which Dugin seeks to impose closure on through reactionary dogma.

The methodology of this paper is dialectical and it constitutes a close reading of both the article and the transcribed interview. Its purpose is not to dismantle Dugin's discourse by refuting it as a "mistake," but rather to decipher it in its conditions of possibility. To reduce such texts to errors would be not only insufficient but potentially dangerous, for there are no mistakes in the void: every misreading is itself a reading, situated within a determinate key, whose logic must be reconstructed. What is at stake, therefore, is an inquiry into how a discourse as antagonistic as Lacan's – premised on fundamental lack, constitutive negativity, and structural impossibility – can nonetheless become compatible with *ressentiment*-driven projects. The conditions for this compatibility are not merely external, geopolitical, or cultural; they are also latent within Lacan's own corpus. The theoretical Left, eager to claim his work in its entirety, has too often passed too quickly over these constitutive ambiguities. The thesis, it must be stressed, is that Lacan can no longer serve as a guarantor. Lacan is not a settled position but a political field of tensions.

Within the limited corpus considered here, Aleksandr Dugin proposes nothing less than an ideological reconfiguration of Lacan's conceptual apparatus. The registers of the Real, the Symbolic, and the Imaginary are mobilized to diagnose the contours of contemporary American politics. In this reading, the liberal enterprise, personified by Kamala Harris and the Democratic Party, appears as a delirious Symbolic that seeks to dissolve the traditional Imaginary, while "psychedelic Trumpism," supported by the Alt-Right, Peter Thiel, J.D. Vance, and others, functions as a right-wing Symbolic that is ironic, insurgent, and subversive. Dugin contends that this transfer

[6] Slavoj Žižek, "Vance, Dugin, Lacan," Sublation Magazine, October 25, 2024, https://www.sublationmag.com/post/vance-dugin-lacan

of unconscious energy signifies nothing less than a traversal of the fantasy, in which the dreamlike voter of the Left migrates into the conservative camp. In his recent interviews, Dugin explicitly claims Lacan as a conservative thinker and warns of the impossibility of substituting the Imaginary with the Symbolic without producing new forms of dictatorship. Power, he argues, is always Imaginary, yet never reducible to stasis: it is modeled through a Symbolic that remains active, onirical, and irreducible. Conservatism, in this view, is not stagnation but a dynamic form of mediation between the registers, a kind of ontological revolution that valorizes the very tension between desire, order, and the impossible.

With this methodological orientation and preliminary summary in place, the analysis will now proceed to the central zones of tension emerging from Dugin's texts and interviews: (a) Lacan's own political positioning (*Lacan, Maurras, and May 1968*); (b) the conservative inflection of Lacanian concepts (*Conceptual Freezers: From Vernunft to Verstand* and *Algebraic Reductions and the Imaginary*); and (c) the motivations behind Dugin's investment in Lacan at this historical juncture (*Why Dugin Desires Lacan*). With the methodological framework established and the specific trajectory of the investigation mapped out, it is now necessary to situate this phenomenon within the broader historical context of Lacanian reception.

Lacanianism after Lacan: The Established Bifurcation

Before addressing the specificities of the reactionary appropriation, one must first survey the theoretical landscape that Dugin seeks to infiltrate. This section outlines the historical and institutional bifurcation that has defined post-Lacanian scholarship for decades: the division between the "Lacanian Left," which mobilized psychoanalysis for cultural and political critique, and the "Clinical Orientation," which guarded the specificity of the analytic act. Understanding this established binary is crucial for grasping the novelty and the disruption posed by the emergence of a third, antagonistic current.

The hermeneutic impasse – the impossibility of "capturing" the master within a stable meaning – was one of the reasons why, beginning in the 1980s, a series of left-leaning theorists developed a sustained interest in Jacques Lacan's work. His corpus itself was already bifurcated: on the one hand, the *Écrits*[7], obscure and seemingly impenetrable; on the other hand, the twenty-seven Seminars, some

[7] See Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink, W. W. Norton, 2006.

edited and translated into various languages, others still circulating only in clinical editions, awaiting the light of publication.[8]

The first major division of post-Lacanian thought was articulated by authors such as Slavoj Žižek, Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, Judith Butler, and Alain Badiou[9]. Lacking professional training in the analytic clinic – although most of them had undergone analysis themselves – their primary function was to extend psychoanalytic logic into a variety of intellectual domains. The "Lacanian Left" thus appropriated both the form and content of Lacan's thought, translating them into metaphysics, epistemology, political theory, feminism, postcolonial studies, as well as literary and film theory. This multidisciplinarity, which Lacan himself would likely have welcomed, was nevertheless received with caution and skepticism by the other side of the division: the clinical orientation.

Led by Jacques-Alain Miller, Lacan's son-in-law and the editor of all published Seminars to date, this orientation consists largely of analysts trained and certified through the demanding, costly, and uncertain process of Lacanian formation. From the standpoint of the "Clinical Lacanians," the extrapolation of psychoanalytic concepts from the singularity of the analysand to macro-social phenomena such as society, capitalism, womanhood, or even the economy, is regarded with suspicion. For them, psychoanalysis can indeed have political effects, but only from the bottom up – emerging from the singular relation in the analytic setting. Miller proposes a vision of psychoanalysis as a form of private education with public structural consequences: "An immense project of private education! This is indeed how psychoanalysis must appear when one considers its practice as a political scientist. It does not take man en masse, so to speak, but one by one."[10] Practiced one by one within the intimacy

[8] Jacques Lacan's Seminars represent the oral core of his teaching, spanning from 1953 to 1980. While several volumes have been officially established and edited by Jacques-Alain Miller – such as *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan, W. W. Norton, 1998 – many others remain available only as "clinical editions" or unedited transcripts (*sténotypies*). These unofficial versions, such as *Seminar XXIV: L'insu que sait de l'une-bévue s'aile à mourre (1976–1977)* or *Seminar XXV: Le moment de conclure (1977–1978)*, circulate widely within Lacanian analytic circles and specialized clinical journals while awaiting formal publication.

[9] Some fundamental works for the way these authors interpret Lacan's thought are: Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Verso, 1989; Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, Verso, 1985; Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*, Verso, 2000; and Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham, Continuum, 2005.

[10] Jacques-Alain Miller, "Entretien: Lacan et la politique," interview by Jean-Pierre Cléro and Lynda Lotte, Cités 16, 2003, 106. Translation mine unless otherwise specified. Original French: "Un immense projet d'éducation privée! C'est ainsi en effet que la psychanalyse doit apparaître quand on considère sa pratique en politologue. Elle ne prend pas l'homme en masse, si je puis dire, mais un par un."

of transference, analysis transforms the subject by elucidating the singularity of the symptom. Yet its influence does not remain confined to the individual. Miller compares the broader cultural effect of psychoanalysis to the infiltration of Enlightenment ideals among believers as described in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*:

> He had foreseen from the outset that, step by step, there would eventually occur in society what he did not hesitate to call a psychoanalytic Aufklärung, and that it would result in a social tolerance toward the drives, unprecedented until then. This is precisely what we witness every day.[11]

What Miller, following Freud, calls psychoanalytic Aufklärung – a diffuse and silent enlightenment – produces, over time, a cultural mutation in collective sensibilities regarding drive, guilt, sexuality, and intimacy. In this act of conserving the analytic technique – though not conservatively – Miller nonetheless insists that the conceptual apparatus deployed in the clinic cannot be extrapolated to describe social, political, or economic dynamics. At the same time, he acknowledges the psychoanalytic axiom that the unconscious is permeated by the discourse of the Other, the socio-political order with its array of ready-made identifications, and that every analysis implicitly analyses the structure of the epoch and culture in which we live:

> The Freudian unconscious is not a substantial reality that would be hidden in the individual psyche, conceived as a closed world [...]. It is the unconscious of a subject who is structurally coordinated with the discourse of the Other. This subject has no other reality than being supposed to the signifiers of this discourse which identify and convey him.[12]

Every analytic act is, in this sense, an auto-reflexive, ideological act of scrutinizing social and economic mechanisms. It is precisely here that the clinical orientation categorically rejects the analyses of Žižek, Laclau, or Butler, which proceed "from above downward," frequently invoking their lack of clinical experience as the very cause of their ideological derailments. This division – between the political-theoretical appropriation of Lacan and the clinical defense of analytic singularity – remains unresolved to this day.

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[11] Ibidem, 107. "Il avait prévu d'emblée que de proche en proche il se produirait à terme dans la société ce qu'il n'hésitait pas à appeler une Aufklärung psychanalytique, et qu'il en résulterait une tolérance sociale inédite jusqu'alors à l'endroit des pulsions. C'est bien ce à quoi nous assistons tous les jours."

[12] Ibidem, 112. "L'inconscient freudien n'est pas une réalité substantielle qui serait cachée dans le psychisme individuel, conçu comme un monde clos [...]. C'est l'inconscient d'un sujet qui est structurellement coordonné au discours de l'Autre. Ce sujet n'a d'autre réalité que d'être supposé aux signifiants de ce discours qui l'identifient et qui le véhiculent."

With the methodological framework established and the specific trajectory of the investigation mapped out, it is now necessary to situate this phenomenon within the broader historical context of Lacanian reception to understand exactly what tradition Dugin is disrupting.

The Emergence of a Third Path: Reactionary Lacan

This section identifies and analyses the rupture in the Lacanian field: the explicit strategic turn of Aleksandr Dugin toward psychoanalysis. Here, we examine how the Russian ideologue reframes Lacan not as a resource for emancipation, but as a crucial instrument for decoding and combating Western hegemony. By tracing Dugin's public declarations and strategic injunctions to Russian patriots, we demonstrate how Lacan is being repositioned as a disputed territory in a clash of civilizations, effectively ending the Left's monopoly on his political interpretation.

For three decades after Lacan's death, post-Lacanian thought maintained a relatively stable bifurcation between a clinical orientation (Miller, Soler, and others) and a left-political trajectory articulated by figures such as Žižek, Butler, Badiou, and Laclau. This separation, while institutionally and discursively operative, has increasingly been destabilized as Lacanian discourse entered the broader public sphere of global ideology, becoming recognizable even within antagonistic political contexts. After several attempts at self-systematization, among which Yannis Stavrakakis's *The Lacanian Left*[13] occupies a central place, a new and emergent phenomenon has appeared, one that complicates the traditional division.

In 2023, Aleksandr Dugin, the Russian far-right ideologue known for his neo-Eurasianist doctrine and close association with Vladimir Putin's authoritarian regime, made a striking declaration on Russian television:

> Lacan is the key to understanding how the West thinks today, especially in its most intensive centres. Since the West exerts a tremendous influence on us, even a negative influence, and considering that we are in conflict with it, and we definitely are in conflict, without an understanding of Lacan, I fear everything we say about the West will be extremely inaccurate and incomplete. We cannot defeat what we do not understand. We cannot simply turn away from the threat; we must engage in a serious dialogue with it, and for that, we must comprehend what we are dealing with. That is why I believe that studying Lacan is an absolutely essential pursuit for every self-respecting Russian patriot.[14]

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[13] Yannis Stavrakakis, *The Lacanian Left: Psychoanalysis, Theory, Politics*, Edinburgh University Press, 2007.

[14] *Dugin on Lacan (with subtitles)*, YouTube video, posted by "bilet biletaa," December 10, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w1kg6higRcc

This passage constitutes a strategic statement: the ideological "threat" must not only be confronted but symbolically co-opted and integrated. In this respect, it echoes Deleuze's remark on Kant, that one must read and reread one's enemies without cessation[15]. Dugin's illiberal agenda, which rejects the three great political ideologies of the twentieth century, finds a strange resonance with Lacan's critique of the discourse of the Master. For Dugin, Lacan becomes indispensable as an analyst of the Western unconscious, perceived as decadent and degenerate. Within Lacan resides both the symptom of decline and the key to its resolution. He is, simultaneously, an adversary to be overcome – unlike the Lacanian Left, which views him as an ally of emancipation – and a mouthpiece through which reactionary theory can be disseminated. In this repositioning, Lacan is mobilized to consolidate a Russian theological-nationalist vision of history, one that the West, supposedly structured around Lacanian coordinates, will be compelled to recognize.

Within this framework, Lacanianism ceases to be a univocal ideological vector and becomes instead a contested terrain between emancipatory leftist projects and reactionary right-wing appropriations. This instrumentalization of Lacan by an ultranationalist, anti-liberal, and anti-Enlightenment agenda introduces a major symbolic rupture into the previously stable map of Lacanian discourse. Lacan no longer belongs exclusively to the radical Left or to the analytic clinic; he now figures as a reusable resource for the Far-Right in its effort to articulate a metaphysical alternative to the global liberal order.

Such a reappropriation marks a significant mutation in the public theoretical sphere: Lacanianism ceases to function as a politically guaranteed signifier. Questions that once appeared to configure their answers within a left-Lacanian horizon – What does political change mean? What should we expect from it? How can it be implemented? – now resurface in an indeterminate space where "Lacan," the Master Signifier, is emptied out into a battlefield for the reconfiguration of political metaphysics. This is not a marginal occurrence but a development of considerable consequence: if Lacan can no longer serve as a guarantor of leftist interpretation or of clinical exclusivity, it is because he was never, in truth, either one, as we will argue in the next section.

Having established the existence of this far-right project, we must now test its validity by confronting Dugin's claims about Lacan's biography against the historical record.

[15] Gilles Deleuze, *Pourparlers*, 1972-1990, Les Éditions de Minuit, 1990, 14-15.

Lacan, Maurras, and May 1968

Central to Dugin's appropriation is the construction of a historical lineage that paints Jacques Lacan as a consistent conservative thinker. This section critically interrogates these claims, contrasting Dugin's narrative of a Right-wing Lacan with the biographical and intellectual realities of Lacan's engagements – from his early interest in Maurras to his complex interactions with the student movements of May 1968 and the legacy of Stalinism. The aim is to expose the selective historiography required to sustain the fantasy of a reactionary psychoanalysis.

Dugin's recent writings and interviews repeatedly underscore the claim that Lacan was, in his essence, a conservative thinker. As he argues:

> Lacan was well aware that the model of the three orders casts doubt on the basic strategies of reformism, progressivism, and revolution. It is no coincidence that in his youth, he was right-wing and a monarchist, close to Charles Maurras. And in the 1960s, contrary to the "New Left," he supported the status quo and de Gaulle's rule.[16]

and elsewhere:

> But about Lacan I would like to stress one point – he was not Left. Lacan himself in his youth, he was a monarchist, he was [a] Nationalist, and it is not just [a] political attraction of youth. If we consider his system and his position towards [the] French Revolution of '68, he was extremely sceptical. (31:00 – 31:25)[17]

Both passages advance the same thesis: that Lacan was consistently a man of the Right, and that his political views, once extricated from leftist interpretation, must be re-inscribed within the horizon of the Right. Yet this interpretation ignores the radical revisions of his intellectual and political positions over time. The youthful fascination (1923) with Charles Maurras and the far-right group Action Française was followed, in 1933, by Lacan's entry into surrealist and Marxist circles, which promoted him as a "champion of the materialist theory of mental disorders."[18] In the 1930s and 1940s, Alexandre Kojève's lectures convinced Lacan to transform this aristocratic nihilism of youth into a critique of nationalist ideals. After 1945, he explicitly broke with Maurrasian traditionalism, adopting what he called a kind of

[16] Dugin, "Lacan and Psychedelic Trumpism."
[17] HAZ x DUGIN: Fascism, Žižek and Lacan.
[18] Élisabeth Roudinesco, *Jacques Lacan: An Outline of a Life and a History of a System of Thought*, trans. Barbara Bray, Columbia University Press, 1997, 58.

"democratic utilitarianism" and rejecting the notion of French civilizational superiority characteristic of Action Française[19].

When the student revolts of May 1968 erupted, Lacan suspended his seminar to discuss the events "in order to be worthy of them," signed petitions in support of Régis Debray (then imprisoned in Bolivia with Che Guevara), and co-signed a pro-student manifesto[20]. At the same time, he warned that every revolution risks a return to the "discourse of the Master", not out of loyalty to de Gaulle, but in order to expose how political desire inevitably gravitates toward the figure of a leader who sutures the constitutive void of the social order. By disregarding these transformations – the explicit break with Maurras, the critical engagement in 1968, and Lacan's own tripartite distinction between knowledge, truth, and ignorance – Dugin reduces a complex trajectory to a caricature, deploying Lacanian concepts as a pretext to claim him as a legitimating voice for a nationalist-conservative agenda.

This oversimplification is compounded by the claims of Haz Al-Din, who in a recent interview suggested that Lacan's theory was indirectly influenced by Stalin, via the reception of his 1950 text "Marxism and the Problems of Linguistics", as well as through Russian Formalism and Kojève's émigré Hegelianism:

> Haz: For Lacan's traversal of the fantasy, it ends up being and acknowledgement of the irreducibility of the gap between the symbolic and imaginary.
>
> Dughin: In that sense he was conservative.
>
> Haz: I agree to an extent. Yes, I think that is conservative with respect to the liberalism, to anarchism, to liberal leftism and the prevailing tendency in the French Revolution, but I also think that there is an element of conservative Stalinism here. Because, for example, Stalin's writings on the language were actually very famous and influential in French and I heard, I read somewhere, this actually ended up influencing Lacan. Because Stalin very famously in his intervention in this debate that was happening in the Soviet Union on the status of language: is it just the consequence of... is it the superstructure, is it just a reflection of underlying material relations or what is the status. And Stalin had a provoking contribution to Marxism. Stalin regarded language not as a superstructure, but more like a fundamental base, a material base, so this means the nihilism, nihilistic tendency of Western Materialism was rejected. For Stalin logos had the absolutely irreducible accumulation of the total history that was not inherently proletarian, not inherently bourgeois, not inherently serving this class, or that class but language as such as a horizon of reality that is somewhat still at a distance. I think that this is a profoundly Hegelian intervention within Western Philosophy of acceptance of distance and acceptance of gaps as the ultimate kind of reconciliation

[19] Ibidem, 175-176.

[20] Yannis Stavrakakis, *Lacan and the Political*, Routledge, 1999, 11.

> and yes that is conservative but simultaneously I also think that it is not simply a passive acceptance of the status quo... (36:23 – 38:48)[21]

Such assertions are problematic. Stalin's text did circulate widely in postwar France, particularly among intellectuals close to the Communist Party, and it was read as an attempt to reaffirm the active role of language within a materialist framework of society. Yet no direct or substantive influence on Lacan can be documented. Lacan's conceptualization of language derives not from a Marxist-Leninist doctrine of "superstructure," but from Saussure, Jakobson, Kojève, and Freud, within a structuralist and later post-structuralist trajectory that emphasizes the unconscious, divided, and non-operational dimension of language.

Roman Jakobson, probably the "Russian formalist" Haz alludes to, cannot in any meaningful sense be described as "Soviet." Although sympathetic to the 1917 Revolution, he was not a Party member, did not support Stalinist policies, and spent most of his career outside the USSR, in Czechoslovakia, Scandinavia, and, from 1941, the United States. His work on phonology, Russian poetry, and semiotics circulated widely in the West, while in the Soviet Union it was mostly cited critically until the post-Stalin thaw.

As for Kojève, one must, as the saying goes, give Caesar what is Caesar's: he transmitted to Lacan a singular, if often idiosyncratic, reading of Hegel, and an intellectual enthusiasm shared by an entire generation. Yet Lacan decisively distanced himself from Kojève's Stalinist inflections. Where Kojève saw in Stalin the figure of the Absolute Master reconciling history, Lacan shifted the emphasis from labour and recognition to desire and lack, insisting that the subject is defined precisely by the constitutive failure of satisfaction. In place of a completed historical synthesis, Lacan proposed an open model in which the Symbolic can never fully encompass the Real. The Kojevian "end of history," from this perspective, is nothing but a desperate attempt to close the incomprehensible advance of time, an echo that fades quickly in the infinite cavern of History.

Politically, Lacan explicitly rejected Soviet authoritarianism, describing it in Seminar XVII as a form of the university discourse[22]: a technocratization of knowledge that merely reproduces the structure of the Master under the guise of expertise. Far from endorsing the Kojèvian idea of the subject healed by a totalizing State, Lacan dismantled its very premise[23].

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[21] HAZ x DUGIN: Fascism, Žižek and Lacan.

[22] Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XVII: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Russell Grigg, W. W. Norton, 2007, 206.

[23] For a comprehensive analysis of Lacan's departure from the Kojèvian model, see Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan, W. W. Norton, 1998. In this seminar, Lacan redefines

If there is a "Stalinist influence" on Lacan, it exists only as a retrospective projection. Where Stalin conceived of language as a social instrument of communication indifferent to class, Lacan insisted that language speaks through us rather than we speak through language, and that the subject is produced not by idiomatic consensus but by a symbolic rupture. Language tends to reproduce the socio-political order only until it is disrupted by an evental break. To link Lacan to Stalin through the mere coincidence of textual circulation is to miss the radical specificity of his position: language is the structure of the unconscious, the medium through which the Other speaks to itself, not a neutral tool for interpersonal exchange.

Yet, Dugin's distortion is not limited to historical revisionism; it extends deeply into the theoretical structure itself, requiring a rigidification of concepts that we must now examine through a Hegelian, immanently logical lens.

Conceptual Freezers: From Vernunft to Verstand

Moving from history to theory, this section scrutinizes the specific conceptual mechanisms Dugin employs to domesticate Lacanian thought. By utilizing the Hegelian distinction between the Understanding (Verstand) and Reason (Vernunft), we argue that Dugin strips the registers of the Real, Symbolic, and Imaginary of their dialectical negativity. We will explore how his reading "freezes" these fluid, interpenetrating categories into static identities, thereby transforming a logic of contradiction into a tool for conservative stasis.

We begin here an analysis of the conceptual forms through which Dugin reconfigures, in a peculiarly distorted manner, the apparatus of Lacanian thought. In both his article and interview, Dugin invokes a series of Lacanian concepts: the Real, the Imaginary, the Symbolic, the Traversal of the Fantasy, the Borromean Knot, the objet petit a, the Dream, the Unconscious, and so forth. At first glance, one might believe itself confronted with a "master of psychoanalysis,"[24] as Dugin styles himself. Yet the way he understands and deploys these notions is symptomatic of the way the reactionary Right misrecognizes the Lacanian framework. It is, as Dugin himself concedes, "very easy" to apply Lacan to political phenomena, and indeed

desire not as a search for recognition (the Hegelian-Kojèvian *Begierde*), but as a relation to the *objet petit a*, which functions as a non-symbolizable remainder. While Kojève envisioned the Universal and Homogeneous State as the terminal point of the dialectic, Lacan insists on the impossibility of such a final reconciliation due to the structural incompleteness of the Big Other.

[24] HAZ x DUGIN: Fascism, Žižek and Lacan. „I am mastering many different theories: psychoanalysis, sociology... etc." (24:35 – 24:53).

one "can do it again and again", provided the concepts are reduced to oversimplified, non-dialectical dimensions. The triadic registers of Real, Symbolic, and Imaginary, instead of functioning as interpenetrating strata whose knots inscribe negativity, are in turn treated as rigidly separate categories.

Rather than rehearsing well-known counter-explanations, one can cite Žižek, who has remarked in his response to Dugin that "everything is wrong in this description"[25] of the Real, Symbolic, and Imaginary. His diagnostic is both precise and persuasive. What interests us, however, is less the correction than what this apparent "error" reveals: the dimension of ignorance that paradoxically makes manifest the truth-content of Lacanian theory. Why does Dugin get it wrong? The point is that truth emerges precisely through the exposition of ignorance, through the productive contradictions that make Lacanian concepts undulate in atypical and peculiar ways.

In Dugin's rendering, the Lacanian "model" is assimilated to the categories of the Understanding (Verstand), rather than those of Reason (Vernunft). This Hegelian distinction, we suggest, lies at the very core of the reactionary operation, and everything Dugin criticizes ultimately recoils upon himself:

> The Real is the domain where every object is strictly identical to itself. This absolute identity (A=A) excludes the very possibility of becoming, i.e., of being in a state of transformation. […] The Symbolic is the domain where nothing equals itself, where one thing always refers to another. It is an escape from the Real, motivated by the desire to avoid death and falling into nothingness. […] The Symbolic is the unconscious. The essence of a symbol is that it points to something other than itself (it does not matter what specifically, as long as it is not itself). The Imaginary is the domain where the dynamic of the Symbolic stops, but without the object dying and collapsing into the Real. The Imaginary is what we mistakenly take for Being, the world, ourselves - nature, society, culture, and politics. It is everything, yet it is also a lie. Every element of the Imaginary is actually a frozen moment of the Symbolic. Wakefulness is a form of sleep that does not realize itself. Everything in the Imaginary refers to the Symbolic but presents itself as supposedly "Real." […] The Real is nothing. The Symbolic is ever-changing becoming. The Imaginary consists of false nodes of the frozen Symbolic.[26]

For Dugin, the Real becomes the site of inert identity, where A = A; the Symbolic, as antithesis, becomes the space of endless slippage, where A is never equal to A;

[25] Slavoj Žižek, "Vance, Dugin, Lacan," Sublation Magazine, October 25, 2024, https://www.sublationmag.com/post/vance-dugin-lacan

[26] Aleksandr Dugin, "Lacan and Psychedelic Trumpism," Arktos, September 19, 2024, https://arktos.com/2024/09/19/lacan-and-psychedelic-trumpism/

while the Imaginary serves as a "freezing" – a telling word – of the Symbolic into an image. Stripped of dialectical negativity[27], these categories reveal not the depth of psychoanalysis but the cognitive mechanisms of conservative thought. Even when Dugin speaks of the Symbolic as a place of "movement," it is only an apparent movement, stasis disguised as dynamism, frozen within the categories of the Understanding. The three Lacanian registers, ordinarily caught in perpetual self-negation and interwoven through the Borromean knot, are thus reduced to a level of the Imaginary, abstract images, fixed conceptions without the concrete negativity that animates them. In his schema, the Symbolic is not transformed by its own inner dynamic but only by the Imaginary. Hence the relevance of the Understanding-Reason distinction as an explanatory key for reactionary formations.

The Understanding operates through rigid oppositions, excluding internal contradiction, and its aim is not to comprehend but to control and conserve the existing order. Negativity, in this framework, never arises from within but only from an external threat. The logic of identity is not undermined by the structural impossibility that A could equal A, but rather by the intrusion of some hostile third term that menaces the system from outside. For Hegel, such categories of the Understanding become "reactionary" precisely because they refuse to be sublated (aufgehoben) in dialectical movement. They transform everything into something fixed and finite, thereby blocking the opening to a dynamic conception of history – a history of the unpredictable.[28]

From this perspective, the Symbolic in Dugin's appropriation cannot undermine itself, cannot engage in genuine dialectical self-reference. Even if it appears to permit the sliding of signifiers, it remains a category identical with itself, preserving its autonomy from the Real and the Imaginary and allowing only a false rivalry among the registers. In short, the Symbolic as conceived by the Understanding is incapable of sublation, though in practice it constantly undermines itself through failure: the failed attempt to grasp the object. A failure that, through Reason, can be

[27] In this context, 'dialectical negativity' refers to the Hegelian and Lacanian conception of negativity as a productive, self-relating force of contradiction that drives the movement of the Symbolic (Vernunft). It designates the constitutive lack or gap within an identity that prevents it from ever fully coinciding with itself. My argument is that Dugin forecloses this internal negativity, reducing dynamic concepts to static, positive identities (Verstand).

[28] See G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller, Oxford University Press, 1977, §33, where Hegel discusses the necessity of making fixed thoughts fluid to overcome the rigidity of the Understanding (Verstand). Also, in §40, Hegel links this rigidity to dogmatism: "Dogmatism as a way of thinking, whether in ordinary knowing or in the study of philosophy, is nothing else but the opinion that the True consists in a proposition which is a fixed result, or which is immediately known", an effect that is directly attributable to the dialectic of the Understanding.

made explicit as the constitutive impossibility of identity. Žižek emphasizes that the Symbolic demonstrates its impossibility precisely through the endlessly fragmented attempt of the Real to equate A-the-signifier with A-the-object: „The Real is not a self-identity (A=A is strictly the formula of symbolic identity) but an obstacle immanent to the Symbolic, the impossibility of A=A, of any symbolic identity fully actualizing itself."[29] To cry out "it is" is, in fact, to say "it is not"; and in this ceaseless circling around a central void lies both the fundamental problem of language and its greatest virtue. The most radical limit of language is that it has no limits.

This static conceptualization does not merely freeze the concepts; it prepares the ground for them to be manipulated like variables in a rigid equation, leading to a specific form of algebraic reductionism.

Algebraic Reductions and the Imaginary

Building on the critique of static understanding, this section analyses the consequences of Dugin's "algebrization" of psychoanalysis. We investigate how the Borromean knot is reduced to a deterministic formula used to diagnose American politics, transforming the dynamic relations of the psyche into a fixed geopolitical board game. Furthermore, by employing cognitive metaphor theory, we reveal that despite his claims to wield the Symbolic, Dugin's discourse is fundamentally trapped within the aggressive and narcissistic rivalries of the Imaginary.

What Dugin articulates, far from being a merely naïve or erroneous logic, constitutes the peculiar outcome of a reactionary experiment imposed upon Lacanian thought. The rigid and isolated structure he attributes to each register is itself symptomatic of an Imaginary dimension. For Lacan, the Imaginary is the register of unity, autonomy, utopia, and the fantasy of overcoming any obstacle or division[30]. In this sense, Dugin is not wrong to employ the term "freezing," yet what he identifies is freezing qua failed attempt at freezing. What he cannot perceive – precisely because his discourse is structurally reactionary – is that this Imaginary dimension inheres in his very conceptualization of the three registers, generating a series of algebraic reductions:

[29] Slavoj Žižek, "Vance, Dugin, Lacan," *Sublation Magazine*, October 25, 2024, https://www.sublationmag.com/post/vance-dugin-lacan

[30] Sean Homer, *Jacques Lacan*, Routledge, 2005, 17–31.

> In other words, despite Lacan's own warnings about the unchanging structure of the Borromean rings, the Democrats are actively trying to destroy the American Imaginary, fervently wanting to replace it with the Symbolic. […] Even though the Democrats' narrative depicts the Imaginary as Trump - the tough, feminine Melania, the Republicans, and old liberal America - in the larger system, it is the Democrats who now embody the Imaginary, desperately holding onto power. […] In Vance, the Democrats' psychoanalytic strategy fails, as Vance himself embodies the atypical right-wing Symbolic pole. It is even possible that he understands this and is familiar with Lacan. […] The attempt to replace the Imaginary with the Symbolic is doomed to failure but will only generate a new Imaginary […].[31]

Thus, Dugin speaks of replacing the Imaginary with the Symbolic, or of the Real being subsumed by the Symbolic. His approach transforms Lacanian registers into fixed, quasi-mathematical variables, manipulable through formulas, thereby extending the precise mechanism of Hegelian Verstand: that form of understanding which, once it fixes oppositions such as finite/infinite, ceases to think and preserves them as separate existences. Through this, what we would call, *algebrization* the Borromean topology loses its circular co-conditioning (the cutting of one ring untying all the others), and the internal mobility of the concepts is replaced by block permutations. The result is a deterministic scenario in which every traversal necessarily ends in an identical, tautological and predictable knot. Truly, with this approach, Dugin transforms Lacanian Theory into an empty formalistic abstract exercise. The results can never take one by surprise.

By freezing the triad Real–Symbolic–Imaginary into compact, totalized, and mathematical units, conceived almost as numbers, Dugin makes change thinkable only in terms of substitution, addition, or elimination, rather than as dialectical becoming (Vernunft). Politically, this yields a reactionary grammar in which history culminates in closure and the only imperative becomes the return to the past. This Imaginary dimension is further sedimented at the level of what Lacan called the "topic of the Imaginary," the terrain of rivalry, competition, hatred, and aggression.

Dugin himself declares that "in spite of Lacan's warnings regarding the unchangeable structure of the Borromean knots, the Democrats are actively trying to destroy the American Imaginary, passionately seeking to replace it with the Symbolic." Few statements could more vividly illustrate the good old topic of the Imaginary. The sentence is saturated with markers of this register: it proposes a duel between personified entities ("the Democrats" versus "the American Imaginary"), employs verbs of spatial aggression ("destroy," "replace"), and frames the political

[31] Aleksandr Dugin, "Lacan and Psychedelic Trumpism," Arktos, September 19, 2024, https://arktos.com/2024/09/19/lacan-and-psychedelic-trumpism/

scene as a mirror-like competition for possession of an identity-image. Instead of indicating the structural gap that knots together Symbolic and Imaginary, the statement externalizes lack and treats it in military-topographic terms: the Imaginary becomes a territory to be conquered, the Symbolic a weapon of substitution, while "passion" signals the libidinal investment characteristic of Imaginary rivalry. The utterance itself performs the schema it describes: it fixes the registers as visible objects and sets them into narcissistic confrontation, exemplary of the Imaginary.

Moreover, Dugin sustains the illusion of a totalized block, denominated the "American Imaginary," a formation pervaded by its own Imaginary core – namely the fantasy of non-castration. By framing this Imaginary as a unified entity, Dugin disavows the inevitable lack within the social order, positing instead a mythical, self-identical wholeness that has supposedly escaped the divisive cut of the Symbolic. For Lacan, by contrast, the Symbolic inevitably fails when it formalizes itself; the lack is represented by a remainder, an ontological and epistemic surplus resistant to symbolization. Nothing can be articulated without such a remainder, which acts as a void around which the Symbolic is compelled to knot itself, like a vortex or maelstrom. This lack, which renders every symbolic structure incomplete, is covered by fantasy: a scenario that narrativizes the void as if it were a contingent obstacle to be overcome. Ideology itself functions in precisely this way.

From this perspective, the "attack" of the Democrats is portrayed by Dugin as the cause of the American Imaginary's decline, rather than recognizing that decline as intrinsic to the Imaginary itself. The external enemy threatens at the gates of the city; this is the grammar of reactionary thought. The enemy, whether Cancel Culture, LGBTQ movements, gender theory, or political correctness, must be expelled, and once expelled, peace and multipolar harmony will supposedly prevail. At the heart of this scenario lies what might be described, not without irony, as a reactionary "live, laugh, love": a fantasy of restored plenitude.

Yet this construction cannot be separated from Lacan's fundamental anti-utopianism. For Lacan, neither the alienation of the subject nor the alienation of the socio-symbolic order derives from contingent external attacks; they arise from the very structure of human subjectivity. If the New Left of 1968 desired a new Master, Dugin, too, secretly – though in truth visibly – harbours a desire for a new Master, this time a "Multipolar Master."[32] The deconstruction of his discourse reveals that the "American Imaginary" functions as a fantasmatic screen, designed to conceal the constitutive void of which Lacan consistently warned. Instead of negotiating lack through symbolic mediation, reactionary discourse insists that order can be restored by expelling dissonant elements. Yet in Lacanian terms, the

[32] Alexander Dugin, *The Theory of a Multipolar World*, Arktos Media, 2021.

operation produces precisely the opposite effect: the more violently the excluded part is forcluded, the more insistently it returns in the form of a terrifying and delirious Real-whether in the guise of conspiracy theories or unrestrained political delirium. This is, tellingly, what Dugin himself names "Psychedelic Trumpism."

Having deconstructed how Dugin manipulates Lacanian theory, a final question remains: why does he invest so heavily in this specific intellectual tradition at this precise historical moment?

Why Dugin Desires Lacan

To arrive at the final point of this inquiry, it is necessary to analyze the motivations that might underlie Dugin's decision to wager so insistently on Lacan and his oeuvre. Why must he present himself as a "master" of psychoanalysis, and why does he condition Russian patriotism on a deep understanding of Lacanian theory? In a recent interview, he stated unequivocally: "If you understand Lacan, you can be a thousand times more interesting than Žižek."[33]

This remark betrays a double ambition. On the one hand, it functions as an act of intellectual seduction aimed at Western audiences: to surpass Žižek, the emblematic figure of "popular Lacan", is to gain direct access to the global stage of critical theory. On the other hand, it reveals an opportunistic calculation: the Western space is not, as Dugin claims, defined by a Lacanian structure. Rather, Lacanian discourse has been institutionalized peripherally through the Ljubljana School (Žižek, Mladen Dolar, Alenka Zupančič) and, in a politico-discursive vein, through the Essex School (Laclau, Mouffe, Stavrakakis). Dugin perceives here a breach: these authors have demonstrated the versatility of Lacan's apparatus for ideological readings, and Western universities, through their centers for cultural studies and discourse analysis, continue to canonize him. Mastery of this code thus affords rapid legitimacy within a field already saturated by competitors.

Lacan also provides precisely the vocabulary through which two of the West's most vulnerable points can be simultaneously attacked: liberal individualism (through the notion of constitutive lack) and progressive utopianism (through the impossibility of fully traversing the fantasy). Both right-wing and radical-left audiences

[33] δ baudrillard-lacanian, „Aleksandr Dugin: 'We can be 100 times more interesting than Zizek thru Lacan' with Bracha Ettinger," YouTube video, 0:58, July 17, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eDc0kruPoDk. Unfortunately, this fragment is currently the only extant record of the discussion available online; the original full-length video can no longer be retrieved.

are susceptible to these critiques. On this wager, Dugin seeks to perform the role of geopolitical "translator" of the European unconscious, thereby offering Russia symbolic capital to compensate for its politico-economic isolation. In other words, Lacan becomes the pivot through which theoretical soft power is transformed into an instrument of civilizational influence.

Yet the very insistence with which Dugin displays his competence as a "master" of Lacanian reading betrays what Lacan himself described as the irrepressible function of *manque-à-être*. The master is always lacking, sustained by a void that discourse compulsively attempts to fill. The ostentatious exhibition of doctrinal sufficiency, coupled with the reduction of Lacanian registers to rigid identities, does not confer authority but rather reveals intellectual impotence. Dugin fails to internalize the constitutive negativity of the Symbolic and remains ensnared in his own fantasy of mastery – repeating, in effect, the very gesture that Lacan's thought was designed to deconstruct.

Conclusion

Dugin's reading transforms psychoanalysis into a static inventory of fixed labels, thereby missing the very wager of Lacanian thought: the production of structural ignorance, the constitutive not-knowing that binds the subject to truth. Rather than entering into the play of this lack, his reactionary interpretation projects negation outward, demanding a new Master to fill the void – an operation that reveals, at the level of discourse, the radical Right's persistent difficulty in integrating Lacan's discovery that every identity is fissured from within.

The conservative caricature collapses, however, when measured against Lacan's intellectual trajectory. After his early flirtation with Maurrasian nationalism, Lacan moved through surrealism, the Marxist Kojèvian milieu, engaged with the debates of May '68, and consistently ironized both progressive utopianisms and the Gaullist order. What emerges is not the glorification of power but the unrelenting dismantling of its fetish. This is the core that reactionary readings cannot domesticate: Lacan exposes the void at the heart of mastery, rendering every Master structurally incomplete. For Dugin, this contradiction is acute. If he wishes to secure an audience in the Western theoretical space already occupied by Žižek, Butler, or Laclau, he must perform a mastery of Lacanian discourse. Yet the very display of such expertise undermines his identitarian premise, for Lacanian discourse destabilizes identity from within. His position, then, becomes symptomatic: Lacan is ushered in through the front door as philosophical guarantor, while reactionary ideology sneaks in through the back, seeking cover under the same signifier.

What this emergent phenomenon ultimately demonstrates is the plasticity of Lacan's corpus. It can be mobilized by the emancipatory Left, by the analytic clinic, and now by reactionary ideologues, because Lacan offers no secure doctrinal position. His work functions instead as an apparatus of displacement: a set of tools with which anyone can do anything, but which simultaneously oblige every user to confront the vertigo of ignorance that accompanies every act of knowledge. To invoke Lacan is always to risk exposing oneself to the void he theorized.

In this sense, the encounter between Lacan and Dugin reaffirms a paradox. The very openness that allows Lacan to be appropriated across ideological divides also guarantees that no appropriation can remain stable. Each attempt – whether from the Left, the clinic, or the reactionary Right – ultimately confronts the same impasse: Lacan cannot be made into a Master without immediately being undone by the lack that sustains him. This is the lesson of Lacanian politics: that power and knowledge are never fully possessed, and that every discourse which claims them must stumble upon the structural impossibility at its core.

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Ignorance as Lack of Imagination (of the other) in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's Philosophy

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ABSTRACT. In Rousseau's thinking the anthropological difference is marked by the faculty of imagination, thus challenging the enlightenment consensus on the supremacy of ration. This paper discusses the significance of imagination within Rousseauean philosophical anthropology and philosophy of language, relying mainly on Jean Starobinski's and Jacques Derrida's interpretations. I argue that imagination, which preeminently requires the presence of the other, is the vital spark in the savage man's becoming a social being.

Keywords: *Jean-Jacques Rousseau, state of nature,* amour propre*, imagination, ignorance.*

Introduction

Imagination occupies a central position in Rousseau's philosophy, creating a link between his pedagogical theory, philosophy of language and political thought. "He who imagines nothing, feels only himself; he is alone in the midst of mankind."[1] – he writes in the *Essay on the Origin of Languages and Writings Related to Music* (from now onwards referred to as *Essay on the Origin of Languages*). As one of Rousseau's translators and editors of his collected works in English, Kristopher Kelly

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[1] Jean-Jacques Rousseau "Essay on the Origin of Languages and Writings Related to Music", in Ed. John T. Scott, *The Collected Writings of Rousseau vol. 7*, University Press of New England, Hanover, London, 1998, 309.

points out, for the Swiss thinker, philosophical thinking aiming to grasp some kind of truth is a rather boring activity, instead of which he prefers contemplation understood as primarily an aesthetic activity, stimulating imagination.[2]

In Rousseau's thinking, the anthropological difference is marked by the faculty of imagination, thus challenging the enlightenment consensus on the supremacy of ration. Interpersonal relations are set in motion as imagination awakens, causing the savage man to transcend the state of nature. In the essay Rousseau envisions a twofold origin of language. On the northern regions of the world, where the unfavorable circumstances force people to communicate for the sake of survival, language arises from need, while southern languages originate from the desire for company.[3] What these two origins have in common is their interpersonal framing: the call for help motivated by need and the expression of passion are both addressed to the other person. Imagination is set in motion by the presence of the other mediated in the experiences of need and desire.

This paper emphasizes the significance of imagination within Rousseau's philosophical anthropology and philosophy of language, relying mainly on Jean Starobinski's and Jacques Derrida's interpretations. Having examined Rousseau's concept of imagination in the anthropological writings, I attempt to convey that imagination is set into motion by the relation between the self and the other, thus playing a central role in savage man's becoming a social being.

Examining this statement from another angle, one can interpret the concept of ignorance as reluctance or inability to properly exercise the faculty of imagination upon the other person, arriving this way to the concept of *amour propre*. Rousseau uses this concept when referring to the moral corruption of people in civilized societies and their inability to feel neither authentic self-love, nor pity for others because of being preoccupied with appearances and superficial images of their own selves. Ignorance and *amour propre* can therefore be considered intersecting concepts within Rousseau's thought.

Imagined origins

Jean-Jacques Rousseau's philosophy is characterized by a strenuous search for origins. In his autobiographies (the *Confessions*, *Dialogues* and *Reveries*), he attempts to uncover the origins of his personality by revealing the deepest, most

[2] Christopher Kelly, "Rousseau and the Case against (and for) the Arts" in eds. Clifford Orwin and Nathan Tarcov, *The Legacy of Rousseau,* Chicago University Press, Chicago and London, 1997, 37.

[3] Ibid. 304 – 317.

intimate details of his psyche. Whereas in his anthropological writings – let us gather them using this term for the sake of simplicity –, such as the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, the *Essay on the Origin of Languages* and some parts of *Emile or Education,* he is eager to retrace the origins of societal inequality, language and moral judgment – key components of modern societal relations. In these writings, that are going to be discussed henceforth, Rousseau's main question is: *how did all this begin? What made society possible*? This paper attempts to highlight one particular aspect of Rousseau's answer, namely the role of imagination in society's coming into being.

Jean Starobinski argues that Rousseau's main motivation for his strenuous search for its origins is the presumption that society cannot be understood without knowing how it was constructed, just as individuals cannot be understood without knowledge about the environment in which they were socialized.[4] However, the state of nature should under no circumstances be interpreted as a historical concept, first of all because it describes a state both preceding and contrasting history:

> Let us therefore begin by setting all the facts aside, for they do not affect the question. The Researches which can be undertaken concerning this Subject must not be taken for historical truths, but only for hypothetical and conditional reasonings better suited to clarify the Nature of things than to show their genuine origin, like those our Physicists make every day concerning the formation of the World.[5]

Before turning to our main focus, imagination, it needs to be underlined that Rousseau's method in his search for the origin of society can be best understood as an exercise of imagination itself. He criticizes other contractualist thinkers, especially Hobbes, for missing the point by taking themselves too seriously, suggesting that the state of nature should be interpreted as a thought experiment, the purpose of which is to help better understand society by *imagining* how it came to life Whether it existed or not, the state of nature is necessary for establishing a zero point outside of history from where the historical distance can be measured.[6] Rousseau's vision about the state of nature is driven by the premise that by imagining a state of things contrary to that of ours, we can draw some conclusions about our current reality, which he finds unacceptable and striving for change. Rousseau's search for origin is inseparable from his attempt of gaining useful knowledge about the present of his society.

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[4] Cf. Jean Starobinski, *Rousseau: Transparence and Obstruction,* The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, London, 1988, 292.

[5] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality among Men" (from now on referred to as *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*), in Ed. Roger D. Masters and Christopher Kelly, *The Collected Writings of Rousseau vol. 3*, University Press of New England, Hanover, London, 1992, 19.

[6] Cf. Jean Starobinski. op. cit. 294.

The state of nature and its overcoming

How does Rousseau imagine humanity's state of nature in the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*? The main character of his thought experiment, the savage man, seems to be one among the various species of animals inhabiting the planet, or at least it resembles them more than a human being as we know it today. He has no desires other than his basic needs, which he manages to satisfy on his own. "[T]he only goods he knows in the Universe are nourishment, a female, and repose; the only evils he fears are pain and hunger."[7] Savage men are solitary beings who tend to avoid contact, therefore encounters between them are rare, short and contingent, during which their behavior reveals fear rather than hostility.[8] With this claim, Rousseau intends to counter the Hobbesian argument of *homo homini lupus*.[9] These circumstances do not require neither language, nor abstract thinking – the latter develops as a consequence of the former. Starobinski calls this description a negative anthropology, referring to the fact that it enumerates all the things savage men were lacking and that are impeding their transcendence of the state of nature.[10]

However, there is something that makes us different from other species within Rousseau's paradigm: the faculty of self-improvement or perfectibility. Animals remain the same throughout their lives, do not change or develop in unforeseeable directions. Only humans have the ability to surprise their creator by becoming something else than nature predestined them to be.[11] Perfectibility represents a *superfluity* only humans have. "The other animals possess only such powers as are

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7 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, op. cit. 27.

8 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Essay ont he Origin of Languages*, op. cit. 294–95. Rousseau uses this argument in the Essay, to support his claim according to which the first expressions had figurative rather than proper meaning, the latter having been established only after the former. "Upon encountering others, a savage man will at first be afraid. His fright will make him see those men as taller and stronger than himself. He will give them the name Giants. After many experiences he will recognize that as these supposed Giants are neither taller nor stronger than himself, their stature does not agree with the idea that he had first attached to the word Giant. He will therefore invent another name common to them and to him, such as the name man for example, and will leave that of Giant for the false object that had stuck him during his illusion. That is how the figurative word arises before the proper word, when passion fascinates our eyes and the first idea it offers us is not the true one." The birth of figurative language is a result of the work of imagination fuelled by fear.

9 Thomas Hobbes, *On the Citizen*, ed. Richard Tuck and Michael Silverthorne, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998, 3.

10 Cf. Jean Starobinski. op. cit. 308.

11 Cf. Jean-Jacques Rousseau: *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, op. cit, 26.

required for self-preservation; man alone has more."[12] This faculty of self-improvement is a natural predisposition to leave nature behind, a paradoxical tendency of nature to transcend itself actualized in humans. This inclination drives humans to abandon their original state, as well as to overcome it by establishing language and culture.

Perfectibility is a supplement *of* nature, stemming *from* nature. In the childhood of humanity, perfectibility presents itself as separation from nature as a caring and loving mother.[13] It means the abandoning of a simple, familiar, comfortable and repetitive way of living. The savage man, just like any other animal,

> […] has no sense of separation. No metaphysical divide separates consciousness from objects in the world. Man lives in perfect equilibrium with his environment: he is part of the world and the world is part of him. Need, desire and the world are in harmony. Desire, circumscribed by the present moment, never exceeds need, and need, inspired by nothing other than nature, is so quickly satisfied that feelings of want never arise.[14]

Transcending the harmonious state of nature implies a contradictory occurrence: *the appearance of absence*. A distance emerges between subject and object. Perfectibility gives rise to *desire*, which, contrary to need, cannot be satisfied immediately and exclusively by nature. "It is imagination which enlarges the bounds of possibility for us, whether for good or ill, and therefore stimulates and feeds desires by the hope of satisfying them."[15] As Jacques Derrida puts it, perfectibility is a possibility and a perversion at the same time.[16] Why is this? Natural totality, unity and unmediated presence is both contaminated and enriched at the same time by the emergence of absence. Perfectibility exerts its power in a contradictory way: due to the awakening of imagination absence appears, but the work of imagination is meant to fill this absence created by itself. Once awakened, imagination never ceases to function, its power becomes a double-edged sword, both producing and compensating for absence.

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[12] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile, or Education.* Online Library of Liberty, 45. (*Emile, or Education*. Translated by Barbara Foxley, M.A. (London & Toronto: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1921; New York: E.P. Dutton, 1921). Online Library of Liberty: Emile, or Education - Portable Library of Liberty

[13] The topos of "Mother Nature" is strongly expressive in Rousseau's anthropology. The perfect unity and the possibility of the immediate satisfaction of needs makes the reader associate the state of nature with a maternal bosom.

[14] Jean Starobinski, op. cit. 293.

[15] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile*, *or Education*. Online Library of Liberty, 44.

[16] Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*. The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London, 1997, 147.

Desiring also means the abandonment of an eternal present and the development of a sense of time and ephemerality. Imagination represents our relation to death in the form of ability to anticipate it. On the other hand, the freedom provided by imagination becomes a *supplement* of the lost unity with Mother Nature.[17] As imagination awakens, the closed original state becomes open.

In Rousseau's thinking the anthropological difference is marked by the faculty of imagination, thus challenging the enlightenment consensus on the supremacy of reason. The superfluity peculiar to humans is produced by the work of imagination which teaches us how to desire, thereby urging us to seek, thus making the once contented man of nature restless and insatiable. The dynamics of perfectibility that gradually turn the savage man into a social being can be followed through the work of imagination rather than that of reason.

Language and pity as products of imagination

In order to have an overview of how imagination functions, one needs to examine more closely Rousseau's vision about the origin of languages, as well as his concept of pity. These two elements of his anthropology are determined by interpersonal relations, as imagination manifests its force through our feelings for the other.

The origin of languages

In Derrida's interpretation, language consists of a chain of supplements compensating for the missing origin.[18] It fills the void created by the appearance of absence. In his *Essay on the Origin of Languages*, Rousseau marks the difference between visual and audible signs (gesture and voice) in the fact that while gestures are more punctual, more expressive, voice is what triggers imagination by managing to attract attention and truly touch the audience. Therefore, voice is a more efficient rhetorical tool than gesture, since it "holds the mind in suspense and anticipation of what is going to be said".[19] Using gestures we show things, while using language we describe them. Gestures require presence, as it can be interpreted only by seeing it, whereas voice implies a distant presence, where distance functions as a stimulator for desire and through desire, imagination.

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[17] Cf. Jacques Derrida, op. cit. 182–185.

[18] Cf. Ibidem 313–316.

[19] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Essay on the Origin of Languages and Writings Related To Music", in. (ed.) John T. Scott: *The Collected Writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. vol. 7*, The University Press of New England, Hanover and London, 1988, 290.

Rousseau envisages separate origins of northern and southern languages in a period when men are no longer savage but not yet socialized. This, he believes, was the happiest period of humanity, a "perpetual spring" that should have lasted forever.[20] In the frequently quoted part of the *Essay*, he describes southern languages as love children of the first men in whom desire for each other awakened:

> Young girls came to fetch water for the household, young men came to water their herds. There eyes accustomed to the same objects from childhood began to see sweeter ones. The heart was moved by these new objects, an unfamiliar attraction made it less savage, it felt the pleasure of not being alone. Imperceptibly water became more necessary, the livestock were thirsty more often; they arrived in haste and parted reluctantly. […] Beneath aged oaks, conquerors of years, an ardent youth gradually forgot its ferocity, gradually they tamed one another; through endeavoring to make themselves understood, they learned to explain themselves.[21]

While on the northern regions, where living conditions are harsher, language emerges from need for collaboration in order to survive. The first words pronounced were "love me" (*aimez moi*) on the south and "help me" (*aidez moi*) on the north.[22] The two origins, that of northern and that of southern languages seem to be polar opposites, but in fact they converge, as need and desire are intertwined. On the south, the pleasure felt from seeing the other soon turns into a need waiting to be fulfilled. The literal thirst which the fountain quenches turns into a thirst for the other person's presence and voice. ("Imperceptibly water became more necessary, the livestock were thirsty more often.") While on the north, the raw need for the other to survive soon turns into a pleasure deriving from their desirable presence.

Desire and need enter into a dialectical relation in the perpetual spring of humanity, fuelled by the work of imagination. The origin of languages reveals how imagination is set into motion in our relation to the other person. The invocations of "love me" and "help me" both express the experience of the other's absent presence. We imagine someone's presence motivated by desire for seeing them, when they are missing from our proximity. Imagination compresses a mixture of feelings: joy and curiosity awakened by proximity and the pain provoked by experiencing absence, these manifesting themselves in uttered words. Rousseau's description of the origin of language reveals that the first object of our imagination is the other person.

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[20] Ibidem. 310.
[21] Ibidem 314.
[22] Ibidem.316.

Pity

Apart from the origin of language, the feeling of pity also demonstrates how imagination connects us to the other person in a Rousseauean paradigm. Pity, as described in the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, is a natural feeling preceding reflection, which, by being the only common principle of our communal existence,[23] lays the groundwork for our social existence.

Pity is the first feeling that relates us to fellow humans. How does it work? When we see someone suffering, pity makes us put ourselves in the place of the sufferer with the help of imagination.[24] We feel compassion "by identifying ourselves with the suffering being. We suffer only as much as we judge he suffers; it is not in ourselves, it is in him that we suffer".[25] Imagination enables us to feel compassion: from the visible signs of suffering, and our own experiences related to it, we create an idea of how the suffering person might feel.[26] The same line of thought can be found in *Emile*, where Rousseau adds that "no one becomes sensitive till his imagination is aroused and begins to carry him *outside himself* [emphasis mine – E. R.]."[27]

It is important to highlight that pity is made possible by imagination and not by reason. Abstract thinking works contrary to compassion and reduces it. "[R]eason turns man back upon himself, it separates him from all that bothers and afflict him. Philosophy isolates him; because of it he says in secret, at the sight of a suffering man: perish if you will, I am safe."[28]

The *Essay* and the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* reveals that imagination is primarily stimulated by the relations between people and the influence they inadvertently exert on one another. The first words arise from desire for the missing

[23] Marsó Paula, "Forrásvidék", *Kellék*, No. 49, 2013, 26.

[24] Jean-Jacques Roussea, Discourse on the Origin of Inequality, 26–27.

[25] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Essay on the Origin of Languages. op cit. 306.

[26] The concept of pity is significant in understanding Rousseau's political thinking as well. In the *Essay* he states that our experiences need to have some commonality with those of the suffering person, otherwise we cannot be compassionate with them. "How could I imagine evils of which I have no idea? How would I suffer in seeing someone else suffer if I do not even know that he is suffering, if I do not know what he and I have in common?" (306.) This thought returns on the pages of Rousseau's Encyclopedia article on Political Economy, when he mentions that it is impossible to feel compassion for peoples in Japan or Tartary, and even if we can feel it, it remains a passive feeling, without grounding deeds. Therefore, he argues, compassion needs to be limited in order to make it active. Jean-Jacques Rousseau: *Discourse on Political Economy*. Ed. Roger D. Masters and Christopher Kelly, *The Collected Writings of Rousseau vol. 3*, University Press of New England, Hanover, London, 1992, 151.

[27] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile, or Education.* Online Library of Liberty, 168.

[28] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Discourse on the Origin of Inequality. op. cit. 37.

other, whereas pity requires for the imagination of the other's suffering. These two feelings are responsible for transcending the state of nature and transforming the solitary savage man into a socialized being.

Amour propre as a form of ignorance

Up to this point, this paper highlighted the importance of the faculty of imagination in Rousseau's anthropology. In the remaining part of my paper, I am going to examine the consequences of the lack of imagination. In the beginning of the 9th chapter of the *Essay on the Origin of Languages,* right after highlighting the interconnectedness of pity and imagination, Rousseau makes the following statement: "He who imagines nothing feels only himself; he is alone in the midst of mankind."[29] In order to underline the significance of imagination, I wish to provide an interpretation of this sentence. What does Rousseau claim here? The one who imagines nothing, feels only himself and as a consequence, he will remain alone, even if he is part of society.

If we want to understand how it is to imagine nothing, we need to redirect our attention to man in the state of nature. As we have already seen, the savage man, just like any animal, does not have desires, apart from basic needs. His imagination lies dormant, until perfectibility awakens it. Moreover, the lack of imagination comes together with a solipsistic state of mind resulting in a natural feeling of self-love (*amour de soi*). In the XV-th note to the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, Rousseau states that man in the state of nature lives in a complete but non-conscious harmony with himself. He regards himself "as the sole Spectator to observe him, as the sole being in the universe to take an interest in him, and as the sole judge of his own merit,"[30] The savage and the civilized men are total opposites from every other standpoint, yet, in this sense only, they bear a resemblance. Someone in society, who is unable or reluctant to imagine, becomes similar to the savage man: he imagines nothing, feels only himself and therefore remains completely alone.

Rousseau formulates a harsh critique of civilization in the *Discourse on Sciences and Arts*, arguing that the development of science and culture results in moral corruption of people. Bourgeois society – Rousseau's generalized description of it is inspired from the world of 18th century Parisian saloons – is dominated by artificial and luxurious lifestyles that disconnect people from their natural feelings

[29] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Essay on the Origin of Languages. op cit. 306.

[30] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Discourse on the Origin of Inequality" op. cit. 91.

of self-love and pity. Real virtue is in decline, because the emphasis is put on appearance. People become more preoccupied with maintaining an outer image of themselves than being authentic or virtuous.[31] These circumstances make people disconnect from the natural sentiment of self-love, and their hearts become filled with *amour propre*, a sentiment closest to what could be described as vanity (*vanitas*). Rousseau regards *amour propre* as a deformed version of *amour de soi*, therefore he strongly criticizes it as a dominant sympthom of bourgeois society. While self-love brings peace of mind and contentment, *amour propre* results in restlessness and agitation. The first sentiment is authentic, the second is artificial.
As the examples of language and pity reveal, imagination is strongly related to the other person. *Amour propre* means being preoccupied with how others perceive us, seeing ourselves through the eyes of others; being concerned with recreating others' judgments about us. This type of imagination lacks the *real* relation towards the other. Paradoxically, neither does it create a real possibility for self-knowledge, as it results in a loss of the authentic self in experiencing the other.[32] Paul de Man argues that *amour propre* is a false consciousness (*mauvaise foi*).[33]

This sentiment, unknown to the savage man, can be grasped as the opposite of pity. Pity is an imaginary identification with the other's perspective, with the purpose of understanding what *they* feel, whereas vanity involves identification with the other's perspective in order to perceive *ourselves* through their eyes. Thus, in the sentiment of vanity, imagination leaves the frameworks of our own self only to return to itself after taking a roundabout way. This false self-love is not the work of imagination, but of reason. Comparison, categorization and grading are operations of abstract thinking, and their use indirectly results in men being constantly preoccupied with trying to determine their position within social hierarchies.

Civilized man, whose relation to himself is defined by the sentiment of vanity (*amour propre*) instead of self-love (*amour de soi*), is the one who – just like the savage man – *imagines nothing* – or more precisely noone other than himself throughout the gaze of others, which Rousseau considers to be a degeneration of the faculty of imagination. That is why he *feels only himself and is alone in the midst of mankind*.

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[31] Cf. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "A Discourse Which Won The Prize At The Academy Of Dijon In 1750, On This Question Proposed By The Academy: Has The Restoration Of The Arts And Sciences Had A Purifying Effect Upon Morals?" in Eds. Roger D. Masters and Christopher Kelly, *The Collected Writings of Rousseau vol. 2*, University Press of New England, Hanover and London, 1992.

[32] Cf. M. E. Brint, "Echoes of Narcisse", *Political Theory*, No. 4/November 1988, Sage Publications, 621.

[33] Paul De Man, *Allegories of Reading*. Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1979, 165.

However, the main difference between his and the savage man's solitude is that the latter is an original and unbothered state of mind, lacking any alternatives before the awakening of sociability, while the former is a negative condition that goes contrary to both the reasons and the goals of society's existence. According to Rousseau, people being alienated from each other is a pathological phenomenon in society.[34] They resemble *Valère,* the protagonist of Rousseau's early satirical play, *Narcissus, or the Lover of Himself,* who, just like Narcissus in the myth, falls in love with his own image, without knowing that he sees in fact himself. By excluding the relation to the other, *amour propre* sets a barrier to imagination and therefore it annihilates both real desire and pity. It makes man a prisoner of his own self, resulting in a form of ignorance.

Conclusions

By assuming a central role to imagination in his philosophical anthropology, Jean-Jacques Rousseau contests the enlightenment consensus on the supremacy of reason. In his thought experiment about the origin of social relations, perfectibility, articulated by the faculty of imagination, is the driving force in transcending the state of nature. However, as his description of the two definitive elements of the intermediary state between natural and societal existence, the origin of language and the sentiment of pity suggests, according to Rousseau imagination is unintelligible without an interpersonal framing. Imagination means, before anything else, the imagination *of the other.* Having this in mind, Rousseau's harsh critique of civilization can be better understood. He argues that in bourgeois society – his generalized description of it is inspired from the world of 18th century Parisian saloons – people become alienated from each other. As the emphasis is put on appearances, the mind becomes a prisoner of superficial approaches, thus the self is no longer capable of establishing authentic relations neither to the other, nor to itself. This is expressed in the shift from authentic self-love in the state of nature to its artificial equivalent in society, *amour propre*.

To conclude, it can be said that, according to Rousseau, without imagination, which is set into motion exclusively by our relation to other person, the solitary savage man would have never transcended the state of nature. Consequently, a condition lacking the possibility of establishing an authentic relation to the other, like the sentiment of *amour propre*, is equal to ignorance in a Rousseauean paradigm, because it blocks the creating force of imagination.

[34] See Csaba Olay, "Elidegenedés Rousseau gondolkodásában" ("Alienation in Rousseau's thought"), Magyar Filozófiai Szemle, No. 4, 2016, 9–30.

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God's Eternity in Creation in Augustine's *De Genesi ad Litteram*

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ABSTRACT. For Augustine, eternity holds a special significance, because understanding this concept correctly enabled him to understand God as he truly is: eternal, stable, unchangeable. For this reason, eternity is a key point in understanding how God created all things. God is eternal, and yet he created a world that is not eternal. How is this possible? Augustine attempts to answer this question, *inter alia*, in his extensive commentary on Genesis, *De Genesi ad Litteram*. Following the first chapter of Genesis, Augustine presents God as the eternal being who speaks, acts, and knows everything, but who in no way diminishes itself in the process of creating the *caelum et terram*. This paper aims to present specifically the way Augustine understood divine eternity in the creation process.

Keywords: *Augustine, De Genesi ad Litteram, eternity, creation, Genesis.*

Introduction

For Augustine, God is eternal and unchangeable, and nothing can be co-eternal with him. Furthermore, although he exists in eternity, he moves creation in time and place.[1] The aim of this paper is to examine the passages in which Augustine discuss God's eternity in the process of creation in his commentary, *De Genesi ad Litteram*.[2] In the first five books, we find explicit treatment of themes that

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1 Saint Augustine, "The Literal Meaning of Genesis," in *On Genesis*, trans. by Edmund Hill (New York: New City Press, 2017), VIII.23.44 (CSEL, 23:1-8). For primary works I have followed the standard title abbreviations.

2 Secondary literature on my topic that has appeared in the last four decades is relatively scarce. I have been especially helped by the following four works: Robert Dodaro, Cornelius Mayer and Christof

are of interest for this study, where Augustine presents the creation narrative of the six days followed by the seventh day of rest. While the entire commentary addresses the doctrine of creation based on the first three chapters of Genesis, the first book focuses on God's speech at creation and the manner in which the creator brought all things into being, whereas the fourth book examines how the divine being operates by first creating all things and then sustaining them. In the fifth book, Augustine analyzes God's knowledge and how all things are known by him even before they are created.

Did God know the things he intended to create before he created them, or did he create all things and then come to know them? How does the eternal God create "in the beginning" and then govern creation by sustaining it without undergoing any change? What does the speaking of God mean in eternity? Did God speak creation into being in eternity or in time? These important questions guide the present study, which follows Augustine's interpretation of biblical expressions that describe how God knows, speaks, and acts in the process of creation.

To Augustine's Christian mind, God is the creator of the whole world, unchangeable and eternal. Augustine's theology is thoroughly trinitarian.[3] See for example the following statement in *De Civitate Dei*, which reflects Augustine's doctrine of God along Nicaean lines and the way he links such belief with his doctrine of creation:

> We believe […] the Father has begotten the Word, that is, the Wisdom by which all things have been made, his only-begotten Son […]. And we believe that the Holy Spirit is at the same time the Spirit of the Father and of the Son, himself consubstantial and co-eternal with both, and that this totality is a Trinity in respect of the distinctive character of the persons and is also one God in respect of the inseparable omnipotence.[4]

In the same work, when touching upon the concept of creation, Augustine uses the Platonic idea of a benevolent creator bestowing some of his attributes to his product. Plato, in Augustine's reading, looking around at the goodness in the

Müller, eds. *Augustinus-Lexikon*. Basel: Schwabe, 1986-., esp. "Genesi ad litteram (-De)," "Manichaei," "Genesi ad litteram liber unus imperfectus (-De)," "Genesi adversus Manicheos (-De)"; *Augustine through the Ages*, ed. by Allan D. Fitzgerald (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1999), esp. "God," "De Genesi ad litteram," "Creation," "Eternity"; *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine*, ed. David Vincent Meconi and Eleonore Stump, 2nd edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); *Augustinus De Genesi ad litteram. Ein kooperativer Kommentar*, ed. by Johannes Brachtendorf and Volker Henning Drecoll (Leiden: Brill, 2021).

3 Michel R. Barnes, "God,", in *Augustine through the Ages*, 384.

4 Saint Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. by Henry Bettenson. (Londra: Penguin, 2003), XI.24.

world around him, concluded that it has a good creator, since nothing less than him could have produced such good.[5] If the creator and, consequently, creation are good in nature, next it must be seen how the creation itself unfolds according to Augustine.

When considering creation in Augustine's treatise on Genesis, as Gilson highlighted, God's actions are described as being coordinated by foreknowledge. God already knew everything even before creating. According to Augustine, the act of creation unfolds in a chronological manner, i.e., can be explained as an action performed in different successive stages, but is described in Genesis in such a way that human nature, with its limited epistemic capabilities, can understand it by rendering this act in language (the verbs that describe this are *fecit*, then *creavit*, which is *dixit*).[6] But God's creative act was in fact simultaneous. God did not follow some order but brought all things into being at once.[7]

This paper will address the problem of divinity creating the universe through a two-step approach. The first part will begin by tracing Augustine's spiritual and intellectual journey, with particular emphasis on his ideas in theology proper, and then will briefly discuss his attempts to analyze the Christian doctrine of creation as it appears especially in the first three chapters of Genesis. The constructive part of the paper proposes an interpretation of eternity in relation to divinity within this context, with special focus on Augustine's largest commentary on Genesis, *De Genesi ad litteram*. The chapter is divided into three parts corresponding to the three actions God undertakes in Augustine's reading of creation: knowing, creating *per se*, speaking.

Augustine's way to the eternal God

The life of Augustine revolves around numerous questions about God and his relationship with his creatures, as we see repeatedly in the *Confessions*.[8] His life demonstrates that answers can indeed be glimpsed, but only after laborious searching. He followed many paths before arriving at the truth that transformed his

[5] *Civ. Dei*., XI.21. The referenced Platonic text is Tim. 29e-30a.

[6] Étienne Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of Saint Augustine*, trans. L. E. M. Lynch. (Providence: Cluny, 2020), 297. This is most important especially for the *carnales*, i.e., those which cannot understand the spiritual things of God (*Gn. litt*., IV.35.56).

[7] *Gn. litt*., IV.33.51.

[8] Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. by Pine-Coffin. (London: Penguin, 1961), I.III.3.: "What, then, is the God I worship?"; *Conf*., I.V.5 Why do you mean so much to me?"; *Conf*., I.VI.10 "Where could such a living creature come from if not from you, o Lord?".

life completely.[9] While studying rhetoric, he encountered a book by Cicero that introduced him to philosophy and the quest for truth.[10] Cicero's words urged Augustine to devote himself to the search of truth, and thus he turned to Scripture.

Yet his first encounter with Scripture was disappointing, for that seemed to him "unworthy of comparison with the stately prose of Cicero."[11] He abandoned it at first because of its apparent simplicity, and because he was not yet prepared to penetrate its deeper meaning, as he later confessed.[12] He likely read the first chapters of Genesis, but was not ready to understand the profound notion of an eternal God creating a temporal universe. As a result, he "fell in with a set of sensualists, men with glib tongues who ranted and raved and had the snares of the devil in their mouths"[13] – the Manichees.[14] Their doctrine offered him a distorted

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9 Some relevant places where this journey is described are *Conf.*, III.IV.7; III.V.9; III.VI.10; III.VII.12; V.III.3; V.VI.10; V.VII.12; V.XIII.23; V.XIV.24; VI.III.3; VI.IV.5; VI.V.7; VII.IX.13; VIII.XII.28.

10 *Conf*., III.IV.7 "The prescribed course of study brought me to a work by an author named Cicero, whose writing nearly everyone admires, if not the spirit of it. The title of the book is Hortensius and it recommends the reader to study philosophy. It altered my outlook on life. It changed my prayers to you, o Lord, and provided me with new hopes and aspirations". *Inter hos ego imebecilla tunc aetate discebam libros eloquientiae, in qua eminere cupiebam fine damnabili et ventoso per quadia vanitatis humanae, et visitator iam discendi ordine perveneram in librum cuisudam Ciceronis, cuius linguam fere omnes mirantur, pectus non ita. Sed liber ille ipsius exhortationem continent ad philosophiam et vocatur Hortensius. Ille vero liber mutavit affectum meum et ad te ipsum, Domnie, mutavit preces meas et vota ac desideria mea fecit alia*.

11 *Conf*., III.V.9.

12 *Conf*., III.V.9: "So I made up my mind to examine the holy Scriptures and see what kind of books they were. I discovered something that was at once beyond the understanding of the proud and hidden from the eyes of children. Its gait was humble, but the heights it reached were sublime. It was enfolded in mysteries, and I was not the kind of man to enter into it or bow my head to follow where it led. To me they seemed quite unworthy of comparison with the stately prose of Cicero, because I had too much conceit to accept their simplicity and not enough insight to penetrate their depth."

13 *Conf*., III.VI.10.

14 Mani (born c. 216) was originally from Babylonia, which was at that time controlled by Persia. He received two revelations through which he was given a mission to spread what he called the "Religion of Light," and he considered himself a "follower of Jesus." This religion spread throughout the world and eventually reached North Africa, where Augustine encountered Mani's followers. Augustine describes them as heretics because they proposed a dualistic cosmology based on two principles: good, associated with Light, which is God, and evil, associated with darkness, which is matter. In the first phase, these two principles were separate. In the second phase, however, darkness invaded the Light, and as a result the visible world became a mixture of light and darkness. Their sect was divided into two groups: the Elect and the Hearers. The former strictly followed Mani's teachings, observing from their specific practices, prohibitions, and abstentions. The latter followed the doctrine more loosely, as they were subject to fewer restrictions; for example, they were permitted to marry, although this practice was discouraged. For more details about Mani's life, their practices and Augustine's relations with them see J. Kevin Coyle, "Mani, Manicheism,", in *Augustine through the Ages*, 520-524; Volker Henning Drecoll, "Manichaei," in *Augustinus-Lexikon*; Johannes van Oort, "Mani(chaeus)," in *Augustinus-Lexikon*.

perspective on how Scripture should be read and understood, for they "are in the habit of casting slurs on the scriptures of the Old Testament, which they have next to no knowledge of, and mocking and deceiving with their gibes the weaker brethren and the little ones among us, who cannot then find any way of answering."[15] From their teachings he learned what he will consider to be a false notion of God, because they consider that he is a material entity with bodily parts, and not a pure spirit. Augustine thus was troubled by their statements and tries to find answers to his problems concerning the nature of God, and the nature of evil.[16]

In the period when he was a "hearer" in the sect, Augustine could not perceive God as an eternal being who is distinct from the creature he creates. Moreover, he could not understand how God, who is good, could create something evil (*unde malum*?). He notes in the *Confesssions*:

> When I tried to think of my God, I could think of him only as a bodily substance, because I could not conceive of the existence of anything else. This was the principal and almost the only cause of the error from which I could not escape. For the same reason I believed that evil, too was some similar kind of substance, a shapeless, hideous mass, which might be solid, in which case the Manichees called it earth, or fine and rarefied life air. This they imagine as a kind of evil mind filtering through the substance they call earth. And because such little piety as I had compelled me to believe that God, who is good, could not have created an evil nature, I imagined that there were two antagonistic masses, both of which were infinite, yet the evil in a lesser and the good in a greater degree.[17]

What aided Augustine in approaching the Christian doctrine of the eternal and incorruptible God was his first encounter with Ambrose in Milan as he listened to his sermons.[18]

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[15] Saint Augustine, "On Genesis: A Refutation of the Manichees," in *On Genesis*, trans. by Edmund Hill (New York: New City Press, 2017), I.1.2.

[16] *Conf*., III.VII.12. "There is another reality besides this, though I knew nothing of it. My own specious reasoning induced me to give it to the sly arguments of fools who asked me what was the origin of evil, whether God was confined to the limits of a bodily shape, whether he had hair and nails. [...] My ignorance was so great that these questions troubled me, and while I thought I was approaching the truth, I was only departing the further from it. I did not know that evil is nothing but the removal of good until finally no good remains. How could I see this when with the sight of my eyes I saw no more than material things and with the sight of my mind no more than their images? I did not know that God is a spirit, a being without bulk and without limbs defined in length and breadth."

[17] *Conf*., V.X.19-20.

[18] *Conf*., V.XIV.24 "I had heard one passage after another fairly be maintained, especially since I had heard one passage after another in the Old Testament figuratively explained. These passages had been death to me when I took them literally, but once I had heard them explained in their spiritual meaning, I began to blame myself for my despair."

Ambrose helped Augustine understand that the mysteries of the Old Testament should be interpreted allegorically, following Paul's dictum that "the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life."[19] Augustine considers God as the eternal being a more functional concept for explaining theological matters as the origin of evil and the nature of God than the latter Manichean one.

Augustine rejects at this point the "the shape of a human body" when thinking of divinity. Pushing away the Manichaean vision of God, Augustine proclaims to adopt a vision of divinity inspired by Platonism. According to it, God can be conceived as unchangeable, stable, and the one who brought everything into existence.[20] Augustine confesses that platonic books turned him to himself and helped him saw the unchangeable light.[21] From this time on, understanding God as he is, i.e., eternal, stable and unchangeable, uncorrupted by anything corporeal and unlimited in time and space, became crucial for interpreting the first chapter of Genesis, where God as creator brings the whole world into being.

Augustine and his writings on Genesis

According to Christian the passage on creation from Genesis is one of the most visited and revisited passage in Augustine works.[22] The interpretation of Genesis was a constant preoccupation for Augustine, from his early period to the end of his life.[23] This concern is evident in the five books in which he discusses the doctrine of creation. He was interested in solving, or at least attempting to understand, the problems that Genesis presents: the relationship between God and creature, time and eternity, the creation and fall of human beings. In the final book of *De Genesi ad litteram,* he states that he affirmed and defended what was certain to him, while acknowledging that he encountered many uncertainties. He sought to

[19] 2 Cor. 3:6; *Conf.*, VI.IV.6. See Michael Cameron, "Augustine and Scripture," in *A Companion to Augustine*, eds. Mark Vessey and Shelley Reid (Malden: Blackwell, 2012), 203.

[20] *Conf*., VII.I.1.

[21] *Conf*., VII.X.16 "reminded me to return to my own self [...]. I entered, and with the eye of my soul, such as it was, I saw the Light that never changes."

[22] William A. Christian, "The Creation of the World," in *A Companion to Augustine*, ed. Roy W. Battenhouse (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 315. "Few other passages of Scripture intrigued Augustin as much as the first sentence of the book of Genesis. In the Confessions, in his treatises on Genesis, in the City of God, and elsewhere he dwells on it and recurs to it, as though he felt he could not exhaust its suggestions and implications His reflections on this sentence are ample evidence of the acuteness, force, and fecundity of his mind."

[23] St. Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, trans. John Hammond Taylor, vol. 1 (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1982), 1.

address these either through inquiry or by proposing alternative interpretations, refraining from making definitive claims when the text appeared obscure.[24]

In his commentaries on Genesis, Augustine employs a variety of interpretative methods to understand the words of Scripture: an anti-heretical commentary against Manicheans using the allegorical method; an unfinished attempt at a literal commentary on Genesis; an autobiographical work concluding with an allegorical contemplation of the first chapter of Genesis; a fully developed literal interpretation in *De Genesi ad litteram*; and finally, an analysis of the beginning of history as presented in the opening chapters of Genesis.[25] Karla Pollmann remarks that Augustine did not consider the various possible interpretation of the text to be of superior or inferior value.[26] Proof are Augustine's words himself, as the following two passages from the *De Civitate Dei* mentioned by Pollmann clearly state: "Rather we are to believe that the writing of this account had a wise purpose; that the events recorded are historical; that they have a symbolic meaning also, and that that symbolic meaning is intended to prefigure the Church"[27] or "there were real events, but they were prophetic also: earthly, but heavenly too; human, but divine! And if we were to investigate all their aspects, so fruitful of great mystery, we should fill many volumes."[28]

The first commentary written by Augustine on Genesis is *De Genesi adversus Manicheos* (388/389), in which Augustine debates with Manicheans in an allegorically manner on the first three chapters of Genesis. According to his *Retractationes*, on the one hand, Augustine aimed to defend the Old Testament against the Manichean theory of creation, which held that the world was composed of two opposing forces, Good and Evil, in constant conflict. On the other hand, Augustine sought to offer Christians around him the perspective that God is the sole good creator, and the world was made by him through his will:

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[24] *Gn. litt*., XII.1.1. "I have discussed the text and written down as best I could in eleven books what seemed certain to me, and have affirmed and defended it; and about its many uncertainties I have inquired, hesitated, balanced different opinions, not to prescribe to anyone what they should think about obscure points, but rather to show how we have been willing to be instructed whenever we have been in doubt about the meaning, and to discourage the reader from the making of rash assertions where we have been unable to establish solid grounds for a definite decision."

[25] Karla Pollmann, "Augustine, Genesis, and Controversy," in *Augustinian Studies* 38, no. 1 (2007): 205.

[26] Pollmann, "Augustine, Genesis, and Controversy," 205.

[27] *Civ. Dei*, 15.27: *sed magis credendum est et sapienter esse memoriae litteris que mandata et gesa esse, et significare aliquid, et ipsum aliquid ad preaefigurandum ecclesiam pertinere*.

[28] *Civ. Dei*, 16.37: *o res gestas, sed prohpetice gestas*; *in terra, sed caelitus*; *per homines*, *sed divinitus*! *Si excutiantur singula tnatis fecunda mysteriis, multa sunt implenda volumina*.

> After I was now settled in Africa, I wrote two books, *On Genesis, against the Manichaeans*. Although whatever I discussed in earlier books in which I showed that God is the supreme Good and the unchangeable Creator of all changeable natures and that no nature or substance, insofar as it is a nature and substance, is an evil, was intentionally directed against Manichaeans, yet these two books very manifestly were published against them in defense of the Old Law which they attack with the vehement intensity of frenzied error.[29]

In 393, Augustine returned to this subject, this time with the intention of writing a literal interpretation:

> After I had composed the two books of *On Genesis against the Manichaeans*, and had explained the words of Scripture according to their allegorical meaning, not presuming to explain such great mysteries of natural things literally, that is, in what sense the statements there made can be interpreted according to their historical signification – I wanted to test my capabilities in truly most taxing and difficult work also.[30]

However, as he later recalls in *Retractiones*, he never finished the book because he was yet inexperienced and "collapsed under the weight of so heavy a load."[31] In 426, he rediscovered this work and gave it the title *De Genesi ad litteram liber imperfectus*.

His third attempt to write about Genesis is found in the last three books (XI-XIII) of the *Confessions* (397-401). While in the first ten books Augustine narrates his conversion to God, in the last three books he praises the God he has encountered and presents the creator of his soul as the creator of the universe as well. He does this by analyzing the first chapter of Genesis allegorically, discussing time, which can be known and measured only in the soul, creation, and the Trinity.[32] In this commentary, Augustine was not compelled to adopt a defensive hermeneutics; instead, he proposed the "sweetness of the allegorical method" to present the relationship between human beings and God, in which human beings are dependent on God for their existence.[33]

The fourth and most complex attempt is Augustine's major book about Genesis, *De Genesi ad litteram* (401-415), in which he interprets, verse after verse, the first three chapters of Genesis *ad litteram*, that is, as historical events that truly

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[29] St. Augustine, *The Retractations*, trans. by M. Inez Bogan, (Washington, D.C: The Catholic University of America Press, 1968), 1.9.

[30] *Retract.*, 1.17.

[31] *Retract.*, 1.17.

[32] Frederick Van Fleteren, "Confessiones," in *Augustine Through the Ages*, 232.

[33] Pollmann, "Augustine, Genesis, and Controversy," 208.

occurred, but which can also signify future events or bear figurative meaning.[34] In the *Retractationes*, Augustine notes that he interprets "not according to the allegorical significations, but according to historical events proper."[35]

Although this work represents the *summa* of Augustine's reflections on creation and constitutes his most extensive treatment of the doctrine, he acknowledges that he posed questions rather than providing definitive answers. Moreover, many dilemmas were not resolved conclusively but remained open for further investigation.[36] According to Augustine, a literal interpretation affirms what really happened, even when this sometimes requires reading the text in a spiritual sense.[37]

In *De Genesi ad litteram*, Augustine addresses cosmological questions regarding the beginning of creation and defends the creation *ex nihilo*. He also identifies the *principium* in Genesis 1:1 with the Son of God from John 1:1 and equates heaven with the spiritual world and earth with the corporeal world. There he supports the idea of simultaneous creation, and examines the creation of angels, who are the light created before the seven days (Gen. 1:2). He further analyzes the creation of man and woman, the creation of the souls, and the fall that followed the sin of the first humans. Toward the end, Augustine moves beyond Genesis to discuss Paradise, as described by Paul in 2 Cor. 12:2-4.

Augustine's final attempt to interpret Genesis at length is found in *De Civitate Dei* (413-427), where Augustine, in books XI-XIV, analyzes the origin of the two cities, tracing their beginning back to the angels. In this work, he addresses the opening of Genesis, focusing on specific themes such as the creation of angels, their

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[34] *Gn. litt*., VIII.4.8: "What comes next, certainly, and the tree of life in the middle of Paradise and the tree of knowledge of discerning good and evil (Gen. 2:9), calls for more careful consideration, to avoid its forcing us into allegory and having to say that these were not real trees, but that they signify something else under the name of tree. [...] However, while there is an eternal Jerusalem in the heavens, there is also the city founded on earth by which that one is signified; and although Sarah and Hagar signified the two covenants, they are also nonetheless two women; and while Christ waters us with a spiritual stream through his suffering on the tree, he was also nonetheless the rock which poured out water to a thirsty people when struck with a wooden rod, and about which it is said, *now the rock was Christ* (1 Cor. 10:4). All these things stood for something other than what they were, but all the same they were themselves bodily realities." See also IX.11.22 and XI.1.2.

[35] *Retract*., 2.50.

[36] *Retract*., 2.50 "In this work, many questions have been asked rather than solved, and of those which have been solved, fewer have been answered conclusively. Moreover, others have been proposed in such a way as to require further investigation."

[37] *Gn. litt*. VIII.1.1: "There are, however, three generally held opinions about this topic [Paradise]; one held by those who think Paradise should only be understood in the literal material sense, another by those for whom only the spiritual sense is true, the third by those who take Paradise in each way, differently though in the material, differently, in the spiritual sense. So then, in a word, I admit that it is the third opinion which I favor." Cf. Pollmann, "Augustine, Genesis, Controversy," 206.

rebellion and fall, and the sin of Adam and Eve. Augustine also discusses the nature and origin of death, the consequences of the first human's sin, and the spiritual body that human beings will possess in eternal life. He concludes the books dedicated to the origin of the world by examining how God can bring good out of evil and, simultaneously, how grace restores what sin has destroyed.

At this point, it may be noted that Augustine returns to creation time and again for a very personal reason. Evolving from Manichaeism to Neoplatonism, and finally to the Christian faith, the theologian becomes convinced at an existential level that his own being exists only in relationship with the creator God who is Being itself. Because independence of creature from creator is thus impossible, creatures either turn to God or turn away from him. For Augustine, the only alternative that leads to true fulfillment is the former. Herein lies Augustine's theological interest for creation.[38]

Considering these, let us now turn to discuss how Augustine specifically discusses creation in relation with God's eternity in *De Genesi ad litteram.*

Creation and God's mind

According to Augustine, the creation can be understood as an act of bringing into being that which already exists in God's mind. God knows all things before they exist, through unchanging and eternal reasons, a conclusion drawn from John 1:1-3.[39] Everything exists noetically in God: "He has a steady and unchanging knowledge of all things."[40] He knew all things before he created them, so that Augustine can say that all things were in him eternally.[41] Yet, once they were created, things existed independently of God's mind in the way we know them, each according to its own kind.[42]

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[38] Augustine, *On Genesis*, 14-15.

[39] *Gn. litt*., V.13.29: *illis divinis incommutabilibus aeternisque rationibus, quoniam ipsa Dei sapientia, per quam facta sunt omnia, priusquam fierent, ea noverat*, *sicut scriptura testator* [...]. (CSEL 13:9-12).

[40] *Gn. litt*., V.19.37.

[41] *Gn. litt*., V.13.29. Cf. *Civ. Dei*., XI.21: "It is not that God's knowledge varies in any way, that the future, the present, and the past affect that knowledge in three different ways. It is not with God as it is with us. He does not look ahead to the future, look directly at the present, look back to the past. He sees in some other manner, utterly remote from anything we experience or could imagine. He does not see things by turning his attention from one thing to another. He sees all without any kind of change. Things which happen under the condition of time are in the future, not yet in being, or in the present, already existing, or in the past, no longer being. But God comprehends all these in a stable and eternal present."

[42] *Gn. litt.,* V.15.33.

For Augustine, the things that will undergo the process of divine creation can be distinguished according to three distinct moments: before creation, in the Word of God, second, during creation, and third, after the creation, in God's works as we can perceive them.[43] Augustine affirms that we can know only the third one "through the sense of the body and our familiarity with this life," but for the first two moments, we can obtain only a limited understanding because "they are so far removed from our sense and from what ordinary human thought is used to."[44] He proposed that we "believe them on divine authority, and then to come to some kind of knowledge of them from the things we already know."[45] Therefore, things exist in God's knowledge before they are created, and exist in themselves after they are created.[46] In God's knowledge things were "better" and "truer," because there they were "eternal and unchangeable:"[47]

> All this should be enough for anyone to know, or at least to believe unshakably, that God made all these things; and I do not imagine anyone could be so witless as to suppose that God made anything he did not know. Accordingly, if he knew them before he made them, it follows that before they were made, they were known "with him" in such a way as to be eternally and unchangeably alive and to be life, while once made they existed in the way all creatures do, each according to its kind.[48]

In the Word of God, all things are eternal, existing simultaneously. God knows all things at once, for to him there is no past and future: "[God] always is in the same way, and not only never changes but is absolutely incapable of changing. So, without bringing into existence yet any of the things which he made, he has all things primordially in himself in the same manner as he is."[49]

For Augustine, ideas, faithful to his Neoplatonic formation, refer to the unchanging and eternal essence of things.[50] Their existence is simple, without past or future in the divine mind, and the sensible world is created on their basis. When Augustine states that God knows everything in advance and that ideas already existed in his mind from eternity, he grounds his argument in Job 28:23-25: "God

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[43] *Gn. litt*., V.12.28.
[44] *Gn. litt*., V.12.28.
[45] *Gn. litt*., V.12.28.
[46] *Gn. litt*., V.12.28: *aliter se habeant omnium creaturarum rationes incommutabiles in Verbo Dei, aliter eius illa opera*. (CSEL 12:25-26).
[47] *Gn. litt*., V.15.33: *et utique ibi meliora, ubi veriora, ubi aeterna et incommutabilia*. (CSEL 5:26).
[48] *Gn. litt*., V.15.33.
[49] *Gn. litt*., V.16.34.
[50] Rowan Williams, "Creation," in *Augustine Through the Ages*, 253.

understands the way to it and he alone knows where it dwells, for he views the ends of the earth and sees everything under the heavens." These words demonstrate to Augustine that God knew all before he brought them into being. If he knew all before things took physical form, it follows that they existed *in* him: "So then it is things he knew that he made, not things he made that he knew."[51]

Creation and God's action

When it comes to how God made all things Augustine asks: how can the immutable and eternal God create changing things and yet not diminish Himself in the process?[52] Augustine states that God does not work through movements of temporal things (*temporalibus*), but through his eternal unchanging and stable Word.[53] God works in all the things he created, yet without any movement of his own (*sine ullo tali suo motu*) and without time being applied to him (*non enim et ipsi accidit tempus*).[54]

Further on, the difference between time and eternity should be sought for understanding God's eternity. Time requires change, whereas God is unchangeable, that is, eternal. Time applies to the world of corporal parts, which is subject to change. God creates everything simultaneously, without changing himself.[55] For the theologian, creation is twofold: first, God create "in the beginning," and then, after resting of all his works, God still works "until now," but in another way. Augustine tries to reconcile the two modes in which the eternal God works. First, he works *in principio,* creating the whole world in the beginning; then he works in the world, *until now,* sustaining it continuously.[56]

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[51] *Gn. litt.,* V.18.36: *nota ergo fecit*, *non facta cognovit*. *Proinde, anequam fierent, et errant et non erant: erant in Dei scientia, non erant in sua natura*. (CSEL 18:9-10).

[52] *Gn. litt*., 1.1.2: *et quomodo possit ostendi Deum sine ulla sui commutatione operari mutabilia et temporalia*? (CSEL 1:7-8).

[53] *Gn. litt*., 1.18.36: *Sed ante omnia meminerimus, unde iam multa diximus, non temporalibus quasi animi sui aut corporis motibus operari deum, sicut operatur homo vel angelus, sed aeternis atque incommutabilibus et stabilibus rationibus coaeterni sibi verbi sui et quodam, ut ita dixerim, fotu pariter coaeterni sancti spiritus sui*. (CSEL 1:20-25).

[54] *Gn. litt*., V.11.27: *Quis enim operator ista nici Deus etiam sine ullo tali suo motu? Non enim et ipsi accidit tempus*. (CSEL 5:9-11).

[55] Simo Knuuttila, "Time and Creation in Augustine," in *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine*, 104.

[56] *Gn. litt*., IV.11.21. "So it is that we are forced by the most compelling of reasons to work out, if we are able to, and to state how each can be true: both what is written here that God rested on the seventh day from all his works which he had made, and what he himself through whom they were made says in the gospel: My Father is working until now, and I myself am working (Jn. 5:17)."

In analyzing the first verse of Genesis "in the beginning God created heaven and earth," Augustine debates with the Manicheans, in *De Genesi adversus Manicheos*, affirming that their two questions, if God created in the beginning of time, what was he doing before creating, and respectively, what was the rationale for him creating out of a sudden,[57] are not properly posed. This is because God creates "not in the beginning of time but in Christ." Yet even if we are to believe that God creates at the beginning of time, that implies that before "the beginning of time there was no time."[58]

In *De Genesi ad litteram*, Augustine understands this expression in two ways: first, "in the beginning" can be understood literally, as the beginning of time, and second, can be understood figuratively, as the Word of God through which all things are made.[59] What is important for Augustine's theology in the interpretation of the first verse of Genesis is the fact that it reveals the Trinity in the act of creation in a figurative way:

> [W]e understand the Father in the word 'God' and the Son in the word 'beginning'; the beginning, not for the Father but for the creation created at the start through himself, and chiefly for the spiritual, and consequently for the totality of creation; while with scripture saying: *And the Spirit of God was being borne over the water* (Gen. 1:2), we recognize the complete indication of the Trinity being converted and perfected in order to be distributed into its various species.[60]

Because God is eternal and creation is the act of his will, Augustine concludes that "the beginning of the universe and of time, that is, the creation of changing beings, was not itself in time, nor did it take time."[61] God created heaven and earth in the beginning, and this act of creation does not imply any temporal duration.[62] The event takes place, as must be obvious, in eternity, in the sense Augustine uses the term.

The expression that God works "until now" signifies that he governs and sustains the creation he has made, but without creating anything new that was not created in the beginning (*non condidit aliqua genera nova*).[63] If God "did not work until now," creation would be destroyed: "the world will not be able to go on standing

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[57] *Gn. adv. man*., I.2.3.
[58] *Gn. adv. man*, I.2.3.
[59] *Gn. litt*., I.1,2.
[60] *Gn. litt*., I.6.12.
[61] Christian, "The Creation of the World," 319.
[62] Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of Saint Augustine*, 197.
[63] *Gn. litt*., IV.12.22;

for a single moment, if God withdraws from it his controlling hand."[64] What makes all things endure is the power of God: "it is the creator's power, after all, and the virtuosity, the skill and tenacity of the almighty, that causes every created thing to subsist."[65] If God were to distance himself from his creation, it could not sustain itself.

Augustine reconciles God's rest on the seventh day with the idea of a God who is still working in his creation. God finished creating all things in the beginning. Of these, he created some things in perfect form from the outset,[66] and others he created as "hidden seeds" in the form of *rationes seminales* which would evolve at the right time and moment. So, even though God no longer creates anything new, he sustains the entire creation, governs it, and guides it with his wisdom, causing the seeds he created to achieve the development he intended.[67]

Creation and God's utternace

For Augustine, creation is a simultaneous act of an eternal and almighty creator: *creavit omnia simul*.[68] This way of reading the beginning of Genesis allows him to understand that the creation of the universe cannot be described properly using human language. Yet, in order for us to understand the way God creates, he employs human language: "The transference [...] of words from human matters to express things divine is common form with the divine scriptures."[69]

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[64] *Gn. litt*., IV.12.22: "But he rested like this in such a way as to continue from then on and up till now to operate the management of the things that were then set in place, not as though at least on that seventh day his power was withheld from the government of heaven and earth and of all the things he had established; if that had been done, they would forthwith have collapsed into nothingness"; V.20.41: "These, however, would not go on being unwound along their tracks, if the one who set them going stopped moving them on by his provident regulation."

[65] *Gn. litt*., IV.12.22.

[66] Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of Saint Augustine*, 298-299.

[67] *Gn. litt*., V.11.27 "That he then worked at making all things simultaneously, without any intervals or periods of time between, while now he works through periods of time. Thus we see the constellations being moved through such intervals from their rising to their setting, the sky being changed from summer to winter, plants budding after so many days, growing bigger, turning green, withering; animals also at definite turning points in the course of time being conceived and fully formed and born, and running their course through every age until old age and death; and all other such temporal processes. Who but God, after all, works these things, even without any such movement on his part? Time, I mean, does not happen to him." See Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of Saint Augustine*, 300.

[68] *Gn. litt*., VIII.20.39. The quote is from Sir. 18:1.

[69] *Gn. adv. man.*, I.14.20.

In the first book of *De Genesi ad litteram,* Augustine analyzes the act of speaking of God from Gen. 1:3: "God said: Let light be made." Augustine wonders if this act is temporal, i.e., take place in a definite time, or in eternity, meaning in the Word itself.[70] If it were in time, it would involve change, yet God is unchangeable. Nor was it the voice of God an "audible sound," for there was no one to hear.[71]

God did not say *fiat lux* in time. If he had spoken in time, he would have been shown to be changeable by using physical instruments of speech. Therefore, God's speech is an eternal act, not a temporal one: "God's saying *Let light be made* is something eternal, because the Word of God, God with God, the only Son of God, is co-eternal with the Father."[72] God does not speak through a voice that can be heard physically. Rather, his speech is the eternal expression of divine reason, the eternal Word. Augustine understands this speech as metaphysical or spiritual communication that takes place outside of time.[73] When God says "let it be," he does so not with a voice, nor with words heard in time, but through the wisdom that is co-eternal with him, through his co-eternal Word.[74]

The divine utterance can be understood as God calling to himself the creation that is imperfect and yet unformed to become formed and perfect: "it is when it turns everything, in the way suited to its kind, to that which truly and always is, that is, to the creator of its substance, that it really imitates the form of the Word which always and unchangingly adheres to the Father, and receives its own form, and becomes a perfect creature."[75] In the first sentences of Genesis, *in principio fecit Deus caelum et terram*, *caelum* refers to the intelligible, yet unactualized and unformed matter, while *terram* refers to physical matter not yet formed. By God's utterance in the second verse, Augustine understands the perfection of matter.[76] The sky is the *creatura spiritalis*, and light represents the formation of matter. When God says "let there be light," he calls the *creatura spiritalis*, which already exists, and gives it perfection. Thus, when the spiritual creature turns to God, it recognizes its creator and perceives the eternal plan, which is the Word that was in the beginning.

Augustine observes that this utterance, and implicitly God's whole act of creation, "must not be understood in a childish way, as if God were weary in this work, seeing that he spoke and things were made by a word that is intelligible and

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[70] *Gn. litt*., 1.2.5: *utrum temporaliter, an in verbi aeternitate*. (CSEL 1:14-15).
[71] *Gn. litt*., I.2.5.
[72] *Gn. litt*. 1.2.6.
[73] Johannes Brachtendorf, "*De Genesi ad litteram* 1: Himmel und Erde, Licht und Finsternisder erste Schopfungstag," in *Augustinus De Genesi ad litteram. Ein kooperativer Kommentar*, 5.
[74] *Gn. litt*., I.2.4.
[75] *Gn. litt*., I.4.9.
[76] *Gn. litt*., I.5.10.

eternal, not vocal and temporal."[77] Even though God spoke in a way that could be perceived, he did so only for the *carnales* and *parvuli* to be able to understand the creation.[78] The *spiritales*[79] knew that God is eternal, unchanging, and immaterial, and therefore, they understand that God's voice was not something audible, like a human voice, nor did it have a beginning or an end.[80]

Conclusion

Augustine made multiple attempts to understand the text of Genesis accounting for God creating the universe. For him, it was crucial to know how God can be understood and, subsequently, the reasons that can be employed for explaining the act of creation. For this reason, I examined his complex *De Genesi ad litteram*, focusing on the ways in which God creates "in the beginning" and showing that Augustine emphasized the eternity of the true Being, distinct from the world created. Thus, I have shown how eternity functions for Augustine's understanding of the process of creation.

First, the paper showed the role God's knowledge plays in the process of creation, as he knows all that is in him, where things are present in the unchangeable ideas (*rationes aeternae*). God knows everything in the Word before he creates anything. Moreover, God's knowledge is not successive, but simultaneous. Second, this study discussed how God is working in creating all things, resting on the seventh day from all he created, and the way Augustine reconciled this with the expression of the Apostle that God works "until now," meaning that he sustains and governs

[77] *Civ. Dei*., XI.8.

[78] Johannes Brachtendorf, "Einleitung," in *Augustinus De Genesi ad Litteram*, 37.

[79] The distinction between *carnales* and *spiritales* is to be understood in a Platonic-Pauline key. Augustine is inspired by the Platonic doctrine according to which those who are philosophically educated, i.e. *spiritales*, possess a deeper understanding of eternal realities and are able to comprehend invisible and more profound truths that cannot be perceived by the senses, whereas the *carnales* can perceive only material realities. A similar idea appears in Paul who called the latter *parvuli* (infants in Christ): "But I, brothers, could not speak to you as to spiritual people; you were still fleshly (carnal), like infants in Christ. I gave you milk to drink, not solid food, for you were not yet able to bear it" (1 Cor 3:1-2). For a large discussion on this distinction see the section 7.3, "Augustins platonisch-paulinische Hermeneutik der Genesis", in Johannes Brachtendorf, "Einleitung," 30-35.

[80] *Gn. litt*., I.4.9 "God eternally says everything, not with the sound of a voice nor with thoughts running through the time which sounds take, but with the light, co-eternal with himself, of the Wisdom he has begotten. [...] Where scripture states, God said, Let it be made, we should understand an incorporeal utterance of God in the substance of his co-eternal Word." See Brachtendorf, "Einleitung," 37.

everything he has created. God created all things simultaneously in the *rationes seminales*, and then, as each thing developed in time according to its proper nature, God maintained and sustained his creation. The two modes of action do not diminish God's eternity and unchangeability.

Third, I showed that God's speech should be understood in an "eternal manner," because God cannot speak in time, being outside of it. Through God's speech, creation receives its form from him. If God did not call the heaven and earth back to himself, they could not be perfected by him and would therefore remain unformed, imperfect, and incomplete.

Augustine underlines in *De Genesi ad litteram* the idea that all creation is made by an eternal and good creator, who in no way diminishes itself in the process of making heaven and earth. It is worthy to note that Augustine analyzes the narrative of creation verse by verse, attempting to understand, defend, and affirm that the eternal God is the author of the whole creation. This doctrine of creation was important for his theological and philosophical conviction that the universe has an eternal, unchangeable, and stable God – distinct from the doctrine of the Manicheans and from the gods of the polytheistic world. His doctrine of creation would prove important to subsequent generations of Christian thinkers up to the present period.

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Boundaries of Interpretation: From Augustine to Nicholas of Lyra or from the Hermeneutical Jew to a Hermeneutical Hebrew

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ABSTRACT. As individuals need to define the unknown in order to tame it, by accepting or rejecting it, when it came to "the unknown neighbour"[1], from the late Antiquity to the Middle Ages, Church Fathers and theologians tried hard to build up an image of the Jew, from the perspective of what Christians considered to be their ongoing rejection of Christ. This paper follows the boundaries between knowledge and ignorance in the approach to the Jewish topic by two important figures of Christianity: Augustine and Nicholas of Lyra. Both their perspectives will be analysed according to the manner they influenced ethical and political decision-making processes, considering the fate of the Jews during the Middle Ages.

Keywords: *Theologia, Jews, Hermeneutics, Augustine, Nicholas of Lyra, Plato.*

Augustine and *Theologia*. The creation of the programme of a science[2]

The late Antiquity came up with the problem of a new science arising at the horizon: Theology. Its name comes from the Greek *Theologia*, a composed word, made up of two other items: *theos*, meaning God, and *logia,* a derivation from *logos*, a word with a broad range of meanings: word, reason, discourse, order etc.

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1 The topic relates to the title of Wolfram Drews' book, *The Unknown Neighbour. The Jew in the Thought of Isidore of Seville*, Brill, Febr 2006.

2 The title is a paraphrase to a sentence from the article of Alexander Baumgarten, "Când și cum se nasc umanioarele?", *Dilema*, 23.10.2024 https://www.dilema.ro/tema-saptaminii/cind-si-cum-se-nasc-umanioarele: "Therefore, Augustine creates the programme of a science".

Its origins lie in the Ancient Greece, where it was connected to philosophy. Plato was the first to speak about this concept. According to Paula Fredriksen, "Platonists detected the effects of a single, transcendent deity, the ultimate source of everything else"[3]. It is true that Fredriksen speaks about Platonists and not about Plato and if we read *The Republic*, we'll find out that Plato uses *theologiai* in plural, meaning "discourse on Gods", namely "right speech about the gods", as the English translation by Shorey from 1969 reads, or "teaching about the gods", as the Romanian translation by Andrei Cornea from 2022 has[4].

Later on, Plato develops the rational/natural theology in Book X of *The Laws*. Here Plato argues in a rational way against the atheists and in favour of the existence of the Divine, while praising the sovereignty of the soul over body and flesh[5], an idea that will be retrieved in a different manner in Plotinus. Notably, Plato uses here the singular for God (*θεὸν*)[6].

Subsequently, Aristotle divided theoretical philosophy into *mathematike*, *physike* and *theologike*. The last one corresponds to what was later called metaphysics which included the discourse on the nature of the divine[7].

But the one who "creates the programme of a science" is Augustine. He builds up the "Christian Science", by taking over an idea from Plotinus and applying it.

> He produces a program of reading the world, from a semiological perspective, claiming that the world is made up of things and signs, and if we consider that the world is only about things, then we are pagans and we never understood its transcendent horizon, but if we treat the things as signs, then the love and the longing for what lies beyond (this means the territory where these signs are aiming) arouses inside us. [8]

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[3] Fredriksen, Paula, *Augustine and the Jews. A Christian Defense of Jews and Judaism*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2010, p.42.

[4] Plato, *Republic*, 379a (*The Republic*, Volume I, Books I-V, with an English Translation by Paul Shorey, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1982, p. 182; *Opera integrală*, Volumul III, traducere, introducere și note de Andrei Cornea, Humanitas, București, 2022, p.111).

[5] Plato, *The Laws*, II, with an English translation by R.G.Bury (Loeb Classical Library), Cambridge, Massachussetts, Harvard University Press, London, William Heinemann Ltd MCMLXXXIV, p. 339, *Laws, Book X*: "... then it would be a most veracious and complete statement to say that we find soul to be prior to body, and body secondary and posterior, soul governing and body being governed according to the ordinance of nature".

[6] Idem, p.361.

[7] Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, I,2,983a; VI,1,1026a.

[8] Baumgarten, Alexander, "Când și cum se nasc umanioarele?", *Dilema*, 23.10.2024 https://www.dilema.ro/tema-saptaminii/cind-si-cum-se-nasc-umanioarele. *(Prin urmare, Augustin nu face decît să preia o teorie plotiniană şi să o aplice. El produce un program de lectură a lumii*

Alexander Baumgarten's article from *Dilema* gave me the opportunity to reflect on the issue of the "birth" of theology as a science and on its "father". The suggestion the author made, that the programme of this science was created by Augustine, sent me to the way this Father of the Church built up his discourse and raised the question of what he really knew when he put the first brick in the wall of the Catholic thought, when turning it into a science[9], and what he thought he knew after all. He approached the topic of monotheism, by trying to rely on the authority of Greek philosophers:

> These philosophers, as we have seen, have been raised above the rest by a glorious reputation they so thoroughly deserve; and they recognized that no material object can be God; for that reason, they raised their eyes above all material objects in their search for God. They realized that nothing changeable can be the supreme God […] It is because of his immutability and this simplicity that the Platonists realized that God is the creator from whom all other beings derive, while he is himself uncreated and underivative.[10]

Nevertheless, his approach to the Greek theology was not very precise, as David Nirenberg notices, because "these philosophical ideas are not obviously compatible with Judaism or Christianity".[11] Moreover, he had to face not only the

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dintr-o perspectivă semiologică spunînd că lumea este alcătuită din lucruri şi semne, iar dacă considerăm că lumea se reduce la lucruri sîntem nişte păgîni şi n-am înţeles niciodată orizontul ei transcendent, dar dacă tratăm lucrurile drept semne, atunci se naşte în noi iubirea şi dorul de ceea ce este dincolo, adică de teritoriul la care trimit semnele astea.) The English translation belongs to the author of this article.

9 See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I, Q 1, art.2, Obj. 2: "On the contrary, Augustine says (De Trin. xiv, 1) "to this science alone belongs that whereby saving faith is begotten, nourished, protected and strengthened." But this can be said of no science except sacred doctrine. Therefore, sacred doctrine is a science." (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, translated by Edwin Clemenz, Christian Classics Ethereal Library, p. 7, https://www.academia.edu/45424404/Summa_Theologica), and Augustine, *On the Trinity*, XIV, 1: "That this is the wisdom of man, which we have already explained in the twelfth book of the present work, is proved by the authority of Sacred Scripture in the book of Job, the servant of God, where we read that the Wisdom of God said to the man: "Behold, piety is wisdom, but to abstain from evil, knowledge" [cf. Job 28:28]. But some have also translated this Greek word epistêmê, as disciplina, which has certainly taken its name from discendo, and for this reason can also be called "knowledge." For everything is learned in order that it may be known." (Augustine, *On the Trinity, Books 8-15*, Edited by Gareth B. Matthews and Translated by Stephen Mckenna, Cambridge University Press 2003 (Virtual Edition), p. 137).

10 Saint Augustine, *City of God. Concerning the City of God against the Pagans*, Penguin Books, London, 2003, pp. 307-308 (8.6).

11 Nirenberg, David, *Anti-Judaism. The History of a way of thinking*, Head of Zeus Ltd, London, 2013, p. 95.

challenges the Greek philosophy were posing to him, but also the complexity of the early Christian society. This was the climate where he built up his discourse.

Further on, it seemed challenging to see the way this discourse influenced the perception of the Jews and consequently, the relations of the Gentiles and later, the Christians with them.

In a period of struggles for affirming the Christianity and the rising Church in the old Roman Empire, it was necessary to have a "science" that would consolidate the power of the new faith. How can one prove that this new faith is superior to the old ones? How could it gain so much respectability, as to rule over the others? Most probably, by building up a programme of science out of it.

As Paula Fredriksen notices, "theology differs from other types of religious thought in its efforts to be systematic […] To be « religious » requires belonging to some sort of community, but to be « theological » requires an effort at systematic thought."[12]

"The systematic thought" was needed to build up a sound construction. The new religion, expressed by the texts of the New Testament, needed a serious validation and this couldn't come from anywhere else than the Old Testament, where the prophecies were the supposedly undeniable argument that Jesus was the Messiah and that Christianity was the only valid, acceptable faith. It was also the only religion meant to rule the world. It was not only about faith, but about power as well. But there was one problem left unsolved. The Old Testament was the book of the old religion from the Christian point of view, the book of the Jews who were still attached to this old religion and reluctant to accept the new one. Moreover, they rejected the Christ as a false Messiah and were still waiting for the real one to come. However, this was not a problem in the time of Augustine, when people were more tolerant in matters of faith, but it could become one since the Gentiles were still pending between the two religions, Judaism and Christianity[13]. And even Christianity was not yet a unique, dogmatic denomination. There were too many factions, dividing the alleged truth among them. In this perspective, a righteous and unique reading of The Old Testament was imperiously necessary. This reading should have taken distance from the Jewish Scriptures, underlining the importance of supersession, the fact that the new religion would replace the old one. According to Paula Fredriksen, turning the Old Testament (in fact, The Jewish

[12] Fredriksen, Paula, *Augustine and the Jews. A Christian Defense of Jews and Judaism*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2010, p. 51.

[13] Cohen, Jeremy, *The Friars and The Jews. The Evolution of Medieval Anti-Judaism*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1983, p. 19: "On the one hand, he [Augustine] witnessed the still frequently successful cases of Jewish proselytization among Christians…".

Scripture) into a Christian book "required strenuous efforts and reinterpretation"[14]. Fredriksen claims that those efforts characterized the sermons and commentaries of that period.[15]

As one of the main subjects of this study is Augustine, it will focus on his interpretation of the Old Testament and of the way he assumed that the Jews were reading it, and it will aim to explore the way he tried to justify the Christological argument through the reading of the Old Testament which laid the basis of his theology, emphasising the way Jews allegedly failed to understand it.

It is to be noted the fact that Augustine drew on two lines of thinking when it came to Jews. These two lines originated in his two most important debates: the one with the Manichees and the other with the Donatists.

The Manichees were following the line of Marcion, who had had a strong inclination to anti-Judaism. They claimed that the God of the Old Testament who created the material world, with the sufferance and all the evils within, was bad. This God of the Genesis was the great Archon Saklas, a hypostasis of The King of Darkness[16]. Following this narrative, it was obvious that there was the risk to remove all authority from the Old Testament, to compromise the basis of the New One, cancelling prophecies altogether with the Christological argument. Noticing the danger[17], Augustine built up his argument against Faustus the Manichean from the defense of the Jews and their books. He claims that Jews understood the Scriptures only fleshly and not spiritually, but this literal understanding was necessary in order to give their words a prophetic meaning through the allegorical reading of the Christians:

> Augustine now argued the opposite. "The Jews were right to keep all these things" – immersions and seasons and food laws and *most* especially blood sacrifices and circumcision – because only in so doing could they have enacted the Law by their behavior, in the flesh, within historical time (*c.Faust*. 12.9). In this way, the whole people of Israel stood as a prophet foretelling the coming in the flesh, the suffering in the flesh, and the redemption of the flesh through the truly incarnate Christ (4.2, 13.15, 22.4, 26.8, and frequently elsewhere).[18]

[14] Fredriksen, Paula, op. cit., p. 100.

[15] Ibidem.

[16] Culianu, Ioan Petru, *Gnozele dualiste ale Occidentului*, Nemira, 1995, p.227. See also Fredriksen, Paula, op. Cit., pp. 110-112.

[17] Fredriksen, Paula, op. cit., p.125: "Read in the light of Ambrosian allegory, the old Jewish texts revealed Christ and his church. The Manichees had it all wrong. The Old Testament, understood spiritually, really was a Christian book".

[18] Fredriksen, Paula, "Augustine and «Thinking with» Jews: Rhetoric Pro- and Contra Iudaeos", in *Ancient Jew Review*, february 13, 2018, https://www.ancientjewreview.com/read/2018/2/3/augustine-and-thinking-with-jews-rhetoric-pro-and-contra-iudaeos.

According to Fredriksen, Augustine had used a similar argumentation in his prior debate with Jerome on the topic of the interpretation of the Scripture:

> Augustine asserted against Faustus regarding the Old and New Testaments what he had asserted against Jerome regarding Galatians: scripture had to be read and understood *ad litteram* and *proprie*.[19]

Besides, the books and the ongoing rituals of the Jews would have an educational role for Christians in order not to forget their own sins. Therefore, Jews would be for Christians like *capsari*, the slaves that carried the books for the pupils during Antiquity.[20]

On the other hand, he seemed to regard the Church and the Synagogue both related to the Christ in a way that would make them part of one big family, as Augustine himself points out in his treatise against Faustus the Manichean (while the Church was the bride of Christ, the synagogue was his mother):

> *... reliquisse etiam matrem synagogam Iudaeorum, Veteri Testamento carnaliter inhaerentem, et adhaesisse uxori suae sanctae Ecclesiae...*[21]
> *Cum autem dicitur de patre esse sororem Christi Ecclesiam, non de matre, non terrenae generationis quae evacuabitur, sed gratiae coelestis quae in aeternum manebit, cognatio commendatur. Secundum quam gratiam genus mortale non erimus, accepta potestate ut filii Dei vocemur et simus. Neque enim hanc gratiam de Synagoga matre Christi secundum carnem, sed de Deo patre percepimus.*[22]

Still, this benevolent attitude of Augustine towards the Jews is not without a bit of malice, as long as he sees the Jews similar to ancient slaves, turning them into slaves to the Christians. But departing from this "defending line", which was the basis of "the doctrine of «the Jewish witness»"[23], drawn out from his controversy

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[19] Ibidem.

[20] Filoramo, Giovani, *Crucea și puterea. Creștinii, de la martiri la persecutori (La Croce E Il Potere. I cristiani da martiri a persecutori)*, Humanitas București, 2022, p. 399. See also Fredriksen, Paula, op. cit., pp. 319-324 (p. 321: "«The Jews serve us, as if they were our *capsarii* carrying *codices* for us to study», he says in his sermon on Psalm 40. [...] The law and the prophets universally speak about Christ; the Jews, reading wrongly, unwittingly carry these books that they think are theirs but that actually belong to the church. In this way, the Jews help the church to spread the gospel".

[21] Augustinus, *Contra Faustum Manichaeum*, 12, 8, PL 42, p. 257.

[22] Idem, 22, 39, p. 425.

[23] Cohen, Jeremy, *Living Letters of the Law: Ideas of the Jew in Medieval Christianity*, University of California Press, 1999, pp. 23-66 (*Chapter 1 The Doctrine of the Jewish Witness*), https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt4cgfgv.7.

with the Manichees, he makes no big effort to define the Jews or to label them in an insulting way. This will come later, during the long and tough struggle he will be having with the Donatists[24]. This is the moment when the difference between things and signs has to be made, when the importance of the symbol takes the discourse to a new level. Wherein Augustine proves that he also can excel in the rhetoric *adversus Iudaeos* as well as his more aggressive forerunners, Justin, Origen and Jerome[25]. He complains, like the others, of the Jews being rednecks, stone-hearted, fleshly, with carnal practices[26]. It becomes obvious for him that they are the people of the things, of the material world, while the Christians are the people of the signs, of the spiritual world. The former belong to the city of this world, while the later to the City of God, as he writes down in his greatest work, *City of God*:

> Those who are Israelites only by physical descent, and not by faith, are a part of that godless city; they are also enemies of this great king himself, and of his queen. For Christ came to them; but he was slain by them; and so he became instead the Christ of the other men, men whom he did not see in his incarnate life.[27]

His discourse becomes more and more aggressive in the commentaries on psalms, in the sermons and the tractates on the Gospel of John. The Jews gradually became "our enemies", "enemies of God" and "enemies of the truth"[28], subsequently

[24] Brown, Peter – *Augustine of Hippo. A Biography*, A New Edition with an Epilogue, University of California Press, Berkley and Los Angeles, 2000, pp. 207-221, the chapter *Ubbi Ecclesia?* talks about the Donatist "issue", presenting the Donatists as a schismatic rather then a heretical sect, which focussed on the moral purity of its members and the interaction had by Augustine with them, which led to fervent debates, after he had detected the danger that had laid under their rigor.

[25] Shaw, Brent D., *Sacred Violence. African Christians and Sectarian Hatred in the Age of Augustine*, Cambridge University Press, 2011, pp. 274-275: "When preaching on this theme, it has been aptly noted, he could be as hateful and vicious as any Chrysostom". See also note 53 on this topic: "Fredriksen (2001), p. 129, referring, rightly, to the work of Efroymson (1999): «On this topic… not the least in his sermons on John's Gospel – he can be as hateful, hurtful and vicious as Chrysostom, Cyril, or any other father of the Church»".

[26] Fredriksen, Paula, op. cit., p. 311: "A glance at the subject index under *Jew* or *Judaism* in any volume of Augustine's sermons reveals the familiar themes of *adversus Iudaeos* invective: Jews are blind, hard-hearted, fleshly, stubborn, and prideful; they murdered Christ; they are exiles; they carry the church's books; they are saved only by conversion." The last affirmation is really surprising, taking into account "the doctrine of the Jewish witness", where Augustine insisted upon preserving and protecting the Jewish practice.

[27] St Augustine, *Concerning the City of God against the Pagans*, Penguin Books, London, 2003, p. 748.

[28] Shaw, Brent D., op. cit., p. 272.

they are called "raging Jews" (*Iudaei saevientes*)[29], to eventually become "wolves" and "children of the Devil".[30] One has to notice that this type of rhetoric appears mainly in the anti-Donatists sermons.

It is quite a difference from Augustine's previous position, when he developed "the doctrine of the Jewish witness". Maybe we should recall the fact he was a great rhetor and that he used arguments pro and contra for rhetorical purposes. But what it is of interest for this paper is what exactly did Augustine know about Jews. Actually, the Jews of his lectures do not seem to be historical Jews. They seem rather drawn out of the Scriptures, where Augustine learned about them, so they were rather what Paula Fredriksen named "hermeneutical" Jews. In other words, they were constructs or rather rhetorical constructs, used to deconstruct the arguments of the opponent in the debates. This is the rhetoric of "not even the Jews would do that". As Fredriksen notices,

> « Hermeneutical » Jews peopled the tropes of traditional ecclesiastical rhetoric *contra Iudaeos*, serving to damn perceived competitors whether Jewish or (far more often) Christian and gentile: we see them displayed particularly in Augustine's anti-Donatist sermons. The « Jews » of Augustine's *pro Iudaeis*, anti-Manichaean arguments were no less a rhetorical construct, there deployed positively.[31]

The fact is that, according to Brent Shaw, Augustine's knowledge of Jews, as a community or as a people, comes mostly from the Bible rather than from the direct contact with the African Jewish communities, but it is of consequence for the real Jews:

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[29] Ibidem, p. 274, where Shaw quotes from Augustine's Sermon 284.5-6: "As he hung on the cross, the Jews raged madly... they raged wildly, barking around him like dogs, they insulted him as he hung on the cross, like crazy madmen they raged around that one good doctor who had been sent to heal them." (*Adducet Iudaeos, non iam adulantes, sed saevientes: vasa sua possidens clamabit linguis omnium'Crucifige! Crucifige!... Pendebat in cruce', Iudaei saeviebant... Illi saeviebant, illi circumlatrabant, illi pendenti insulatbant; quasi uno summo medico in medio constituto, phrenetici, circumquaque saeviebant*).

[30] Ibidem, op. cit., pp.298-299. See also n.173, regarding Augustine's Sermon 89.1, from p. 299: *Sed nescio ubi tamquam a lupis depraedati latebant in vepribus; et quia latebant in vepribus, ideo ad eos inveniendos non pervenit... illi occiderant... et credentes sanguinem biberunt quem saevientes fuderunt*.

[31] Fredriksen, Paula, „Augustine and „Thinking with" Jews: Rhetoric Pro- and Contra- Iudaeos", Ancient Jew Review, Febr 13, 2018, https://www.ancientjewreview.com/read/2018/2/3/augustine-and-thinking-with-jews-rhetoric-pro-and-contra-iudaeos.

> Although much of the rhetoric is directed against a model of "the Jews" taken from the biblical texts, it is clear in a sufficient number of instances that the condemnation of the whole people applies to the Jews of Augustine's own day and for the same basic reason: their obstinate rejection of the truth.[32]

The Jews who appear in his late homilies are considerable distinct from those who were involved in the "doctrine of the Jewish witness". Even Fredriksen remarks that Augustine's Johannine Jews seem a different tribe from the one encountered in *Against Faustus*.[33] Anyhow, both kinds of Jews were figures of the rhetoric he used in the debates against various opponents (Jerome, Manichees, Donatists etc) and all this consisted in what was called "an Augustinian theology of Judaism."[34]

From book to life, from what one thinks he knows to what everybody learns from him and becomes the truth for the next generations, it was only one small step. Consequently, in the next centuries, the status of Jewish people changed. Their situation declined progressively. Augustine's "hermeneutical" Jews became the official enemy. As Cohen noticed, Augustine's approach to Jews and Judaism "determined the basic stance of virtually all early medieval Christian polemics against the Jews."[35]

The eleventh century brought about the first Crusade, with the first major massacre of the Jews[36]. It was followed by the second Crusade, as bloody as the first one for the Jews and the way it was "unleashed" towards the Jews made James Carroll claim that:

> The theology of anti-Jewish hatred could not be more clearly stated. Its meaning could not have been more firmly grasped than it was then by the Jews of Mainz[37].

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[32] Shaw, Brent D., *Sacred Violence. African Christians and Sectarian Hatred in the Age of Augustine*, Cambridge University Press, 2011, p. 286.

[33] Fredriksen, Paula, op.cit., p. 305.

[34] Cohen, Jeremy, op.cit., p.19.

[35] Idem, p.20

[36] Carroll, James – *Constantine's Sword. The Church and the Jews*, A Mariner Book, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston. New York, 2002, pp.237-245. The chapter 24, *The War of the Cross*, presents the topic of the first crusade from the point of view of its first victims and it opens up with a passage from *The Hebrew First Crusade Chronicles*: S, cited by Chazan, *European Jewry*, 225: "[...] They said to one another: «Behold we travel to a distant land to do battle with the kings of that land.' We take our souls in our hands' in order to kill and subjugate all those kingdoms that do not believe in the Crucified. How much more so (should we kill and subjugate the Jews, who killed and crucified him». They taunted us in every direction. [...]".

[37] Ibidem, p.261

The *contra-Iudaeos* rhetoric infested the new-born universities. In the middle of the thirteenth century (1242) there took place *The Disputation of Paris*, also known as *The Trial of the Talmud* and thousands of Hebrew manuscripts were put at the stake[38]. No matter how little the Christian scholars knew about the Hebrew culture, they learned even less about it, as time passed. Nevertheless, things started to look different when a new scholar appeared, changing a lot of what older theologians had taught about Jews and The Old Testament and coming up with a new interpretation of the prophecies.

Nicholas of Lyra. The war of the hermeneutics

In 1332 the Franciscan Nicholas of Lyra completed his most important work, *Postilla litteralis super Bibliam*.[39] Started in 1322, the work aimed to a new vision of The Old and New Testament, taking into account the writings of some Jewish scholars, especially Rashi[40]. A new programme of „reading the world", departing from Augustine, Jerome and Thomas Aquinas, laid the foundation of this theology that sums up the efforts of thought of both Christians and Jews.[41] According to this new perspective, one has to explain why Jews were still firmly rejecting the Christ, while they were still alive and God apparently delayed their punishment. It became a necessity to convince them and especially the heretics that Jesus was the true Messiah. The main issue was to prove the unbelievers that Christ had already come and his advent could have been obvious to Jews by the prophecies. According to Deeana Copeland Klepper:

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[38] Ibidem, p. 309, also Cohen, Jeremy, op.cit., pp.60-76, Chapter 3, *The Attack on Rabbinic Litterature, The Condemnation of the Talmud*.

[39] There is a debate regarding the year Lyra accomplished his work. According to Deeana Copeland Klepper, *The Insight of Unbelievers. Nicholas of Lyra and Christian Reading of Jewish Text in the Later Middle Ages*, University of Pennsylvania Press Philadelphia, 2007, *Postilla* was written between 1322 and 1332 (p 9). On the other hand, Sarah Bromberg in her article, "Exegetical Imagery for King Manuel I of Portugal: Solomon's Temple in Nicholas of Lyra's *Postilla"*, *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte,* 2.77 (2014), pp. 175-198, Deutscher Kunstverlag Gmbh Munchen Berlin, claims that: "By 1333, Nicholas of Lyra (1270-1349), a Franciscan exegete at the University of Paris, completed the *Postilla super totam bibliam…*".

[40] Rashi is the acronym for Rabbi Shlomo Itzaki, born in 1040, in Troyes, one of the most important exegetes of the Bible and Talmud. According to Louis Finkeltsein, "To this day, it is impossible to study Talmud without recourse to Rashi's commentary, which has become a classic in its own right" (see Herman Hailperin, *Rashi and the Christian Scholars*, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1963, p. V).

[41] Cohen, Jeremy, op.cit., p.175: "[...] Nicholas decries the scribal corruptions of the text of the Vulgate as well as the distortions of meaning which invariably appear in any translation, justifying the need to resort to *hebraica veritas*".

> Quite a number of Franciscan scholars in the late 13th and early 14th century began to ask questions concerning the possibility of proving Christ's advent, or similar theological truths, by means of Jewish Scripture or prophetic texts.[42]

Thus, Jews could be persuaded to accept the Christian truth, the only acceptable theological truth from Christians' point of view, by means of the science that rationalised the beliefs, by means of what they thought it was knowledge and the opposite to ignorance. Persuasion was necessary, because forced conversion was forbidden by Augustine's "doctrine of the Jewish witness".

Among the scholars with interest in this topic, Lyra stands out. Unlike Augustine and the late thirteenth century Franciscans "who saw themselves as anti-Thomistic Augustinians"[43], Lyra claims that the Jews were not ignorant when they rejected Jesus. They knew who he was, but, from different reasons, they chose not to accept his truth. He brings up Aristotle's *Nichomachian Ethics* in his argumentation and introduces the notion of "incontinence" as moral weakness, drawing thus a line between intentional immorality and intemperance.[44]

Klepper explains the phenomenon as it follows:

> Where the intemperate man adheres to a false moral code, the incontinent man knows right from wrong but, swept away by passion, fails to transform his habitual (universal) knowledge to actual knowledge in a particular situation, and so he pursues a cours of action that he would otherwise know is morally wrong.[45]

Considering himself a very good expert of Hebrew[46], Lyra assumed his knowledge of the Jews' language and their writings would allow him to estimate their "incontinence". And he made use of the prophecies, in order to prove that they could be literally interpreted, that even if Jews hadn't had access to signs, but only to things, because of their carnal nature, they still could have understood the deeper meanings of the scriptural texts. It was just their obduracy that made them not only reject the truth, but even corrupt the texts, in order to hide the

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[42] Klepper, Deeana Copeland, *The Insight of the Unbelievers. Nicholas of Lyra and Christian Reading of Jewish Text in the Later Middle Ages*, University of Pensylvania Press, Philadelphia, 2007, p. 63.

[43] Ibidem, p. 70.

[44] Ibidem, p.87.

[45] Ibidem.

[46] See Klepper, Deanna Copeland, op. cit., p. 32: "Nicholas of Lyra's renown as a Hebraist surpassed that of virtualy all of his predecessors and contemporaries. By the time of the Reformation, Nicholas, «the second Jerome», was one of the very few medieval Hebraists whose name was still familiar."

prophecies.[47] His polemical nature in this matter is more than obvious, as his modern biographer Henri Labrosse notices:

> Nicholas is a polemicist above all. To convince the Jews [of the truth of Christianity] – that is his constant preoccupation, the constant and definite goal of all his work.[48]

There are several examples of the way Lyra chose to read the Jewish texts, in order to force through the proves of the Christian truth from the Jewish Scriptures and, as also Klepper noticed, his approach to the topic shows the influence of thirteenth-century Dominicans (Paul Christian and Raymond Martini), "who used rabbinic traditions to prove the truth of Christianity to Jews in forced sermons and disputations."[49]

The most important issue to prove, in fact, was the dual nature of Christ. By the early fourteenth century, before the *Postilla*, Lyra had had a series of quodlibetal questions on "whether the Jews perceived Jesus to be the Christ promised to them, which does not appear to be the case"[50] and "whether from Scriptures received by the Jews it is possible to prove effectively that our Savior was both God and man"[51]. Those questions were developed in the two anti-Jewish Treaties: the first one – *Questio de adventu Christi/Quodlibetum de adventu Christi* – originated in a scholastic discourse from 1309[52], and the second one – *Responsio ad quendam Iudeum ex verbis Evangelii secundum Matheum contra Christum nequiter arguentem* – completed in June 1334[53].

In *Questio de adventu Christi – Libellus contra perfidiam iudeorum*, Lyra focussed his efforts on proving the trinitarian nature of God. For this purpose, he makes some allegations on the use of the plural *Elohim* in the Jewish Scripture. Therefore, he claims that whenever the word *Elohim* appears, even if it is a plural name, it is used with the verb in singular. As, again Klepper noticed,

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[47] Hailperin, Herman, *Rashi and the Christian Scholars*, University of Pittsburgh Press, Pensylvania, 1963, pp.169-170. Quoting from Lyra's second Prologue to the *Postillae*, Hailperin says: "«The Jews have corrupted a few of these for defending their error, as I have, in part, declared in a *Quaestio de divinitate Christi*, and I will declare it [in this work] more fully when such places appear – God granting.»". See also Deeana Copeland Klepper, op. cit., p. 108.

[48] Apud Cohen, Jeremy, op.cit., p. 177 (Labrosse, *Oeuvres*, p.377).

[49] Ibidem, p.91.

[50] Klepper Copeland, Deeana, op. cit., p. 85.

[51] Ibidem, p.89.

[52] See Klepper Copeland, Deeana, op. cit., p.8 and Cohen, Jeremy, op. cit., p.180.

[53] Cohen, Jeremy, op. cit., p. 185.

> In answer to the Jewish objection that whenever the name *Elohim* appears in relation to God it must be interpreted in the singular, Nicholas introduced a series of examples where the name *Elohim* was used with intentional plurality to speak of God and no other.[54]

In this way, he concludes that the hidden meaning of this construction is that there is a plurality of persons in the essential unity of the divinity.[55] And, next, he accuses the contemporary Jews of distorting the meaning of the ancient text, because they deny the plural meaning of *Elohim*. So, he assumes that the "said excuse is false" (*praedicta evasio est falsa*).

> Hence it is clear that is not against the intention of the ancient Hebrew doctors that some plurality might be replaced in God or the Gods while the unity of the deity is still preserved, which unity the Catholics most truly affirm. This last response, which as has been seen, contains the truth, later Jews distort, saying that divine knowledge, goodness, and power are those three properties in which God created the world… But this response is not reasonable.[56]

Moreover, when he analyses the messianic prophecy in the *Probatio* section from the manuscript (see supra), he claims that the divinity was represented by the Tetragramm in the Hebrew text (translated by him with *Dominus* in Latin), and replaced by the Jews, when read, with *Adonai* and *Elohim*, because the Jews would have corrupted the text, by introducing names that could be also used for dignitaries and upper class people, in order to hide the real meaning of the Tetragramm, which, according to Lyra, when he reads *The Lord, our Righteous Savior (Dominus iustus noster)*, is referring to Jesus Christ himself.[57]

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[54] Ibidem, p. 92.

[55] Lyra, Nicholas of, *Contra perfidiam Iuadeorum*, included with *Biblia… cum postillis Nicolai de Lyra*, edited by Sebastian Brent and printed by Johannes Froben&Johannes Petri, Basel 1498: "*Hebraica veritas sic habet: In principio, creavit heloym celum et terram etc. Heloym est nomen plurale huius nominis hel vel helo quod significat Deus in singulari; et hoc satis patet scientibus proprietates idiomatici hebraici per hoc autem quod nomen plurale divinum conjugitur cum verbo singularis numeri cum dicitur: Creavit heloym ac si diceret. Creavit dii ostenditur im Scriptura quod in Deo est alique pluralitas in unitate esentie; que talis modus loquendi semper in veteri testamento invenitur de Deo et de nullo alio. Ex quo patet quod alique pluralitas personarum in unitate divine esentie est que nulla alia invenitur natura; et hoc est pluralitas personarum in una simpla esentia que inpredicto modo loquendi designatum per verbum singularis numeri conjunctum nomine plurali.*"

[56] Lyra, Nicholas of, *Biblia*, 6:276A , apud Cohen, Jeremy, op. cit., p. 181.

[57] Lyra, Nicholas of, *Contra perfidiam Iuadeorum*, included with *Biblia… cum postillis Nicolai de Lyra*, edited by Sebastian Brent and printed by Johannes Froben&Johannes Petri, Basel 1498: *"Si autem non possunt haberi antique biblie non corrupte, recurrendum est ad alias translationes quas iudei*

But one of the most outstanding examples of the way Lyra's knowledge of Hebrew came to his aid in finding hidden testimonies of the mystery of Incarnation is the one referring to Isaiah, 9:5-6:

> "For a child has been born to us,
> A son has been given us,
> And authority has settled on his shoulders.
> He has been named
> "The mighty God is planning grace;
> The Eternal Father, a peaceable ruler" –
> In token of abundant authority
> And of peace without limit..."[58]
>
> *Versus:*
>
> "For to us a child is born,
> To us a son is given;
> And the government will be upon his his shoulder,
> And his name will be called[59]
> «Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
> Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace».
> Of the increase of his government and of his peace
> There will be no end..."[60]

First of all, Lyra makes a confusion between the grammatical tenses of verb *to call* (*liqro (לקרוא)* in Hebrew), because he disregards the structure, named *vav-coversive*_or *vav-consecutive*. This one is a grammatical construction, mostly used in Biblical Hebrew, by prefixing a verb with the conjunction *vav* (*ו*) in order to change the text. Thereby, even if the form of the verb is *iqra (יקרא)* in Hebrew,

rationabiliter negare non possunt. Et primo deprehenditur per translationem LXX interpretum que sic habet ut translatio Hieronymi; ut pertinet per officium ecclesiasticum quod de ista translatione assumptum est, in que quodem officio sic ponitur ista auctoritas. In diebus illis saluabitur Iuda; et Israel habitabit confidenter; et hoc est nomen quod vocabunt eum Dominus iustus noster. Ex hoc patent que nomen domini Tetragramatton ad Christum refertur,"; *"In hebraico ponitur heloym; et consimilia habentur in pluribus locis et similiter habetur de hoc nomine adonay; quod imponitur ab universali presidentia et ideo bene dicitur in Scriptura de potentibus et regibus; non autem ita est de nomine domini Tetragrammaton quod significat divinam essentiam nudam et puram..."*.

[58] JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh, Philadelphia, 1999.

[59] Here, Lyra's text reads *vocabitur*: *"Et vocabitur nomen eius de ante admirabilis consilio deus fortis..."* (Nicholas of Lyra, *Contra Perfidiam Iudaeorum*, op. cit.).

[60] Bible Gateway, https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Isaiah%209%3A1-6&version=NIV.

which means *will call*, the presence of the *vav* in front of the verb (*veiqra* – ויקרא) will change the future into past and should be translated with *he has been named*, as in the JPS translation, and not *his name will be called*, as in the Christian tradition, as we find it on Bible Gateway. Besides, Lyra makes another confusion regarding the vocalization of the word *veiqra*, claiming that it should have been read *veiqru* instead of what he thought it was distorted by Jews in the Masoretic Text, where they read *veiqro* (*they will call him* instead of the Masoretic *he will call him*)..[61] The whole point of this discussion is targeting in fact the same debate he had so far, in proving that the entire prophecy was about Jesus Christ and not Hezekiah, as the Jews were asserting.

Still, the most stunning reading key for this fragment is yet to come, when he analyses the last two lines of it, when it comes to *the increase of his government and of his peace*.

The Hebrew word for *to increase* (or *to multiply,* as in the Latin text of Lyra, the word is *multiplicabitur*) is *lemarbeh* (למרבה), spelled with the Hebrew equivalent of "m", named "mem". There are two types of "mem" in the Hebrew orthography, an usual one, which is open, that should be used at the beginning or in the middle of the word, and the one called "mem sofit", a closed form, which is used at the end of the word. In the modern Tanakh, one can find both forms of the word *lemarbeh*, with open mem (see above) and with the closed one (mem sofit), spelled differently (למרבה). Their presence at the same time indicates the options *ketuv* and *qere* that engage first the writing of the option *ketuv*, without vocalization and then of the option *qere,* with vocalization.

Lyra claimed in his *Quaestio de adventu Christi – Probatio incarnationis Christi* that he found only the second form of the word, the one with the unusual mem sofit in the middle. And that made him conclude that it was a way to point out that Christ was to be born from a closed virgin, against the manner of nature, which was obviously a prophecy, one that the Jews failed to understand, or, rather, according to his Aristotelian theory of incontinence, they failed to accept it.

> *Men clausa semper ponitur in fine dictionis, men autem aperta in principio et in medio, hoc autem ut dictum est ponitur men clausa in medio dictionis contra naturam litere et modum scribendi, ad denotandum que Christus de quo loquitur propheta erat nasciturus de Vergine clausa contra modum nature et que mysterium incarnationis erat clausum et secretum, sicut enim poete per figuras grammaticales signant aliquod subtiliter intellegentibus*.[62]

[61] Apud Cohen, Jeremy, op. cit., p. 184.

[62] Lyra, Nicholas of, *Contra Perfidiam Iudaeorum*, op. cit.

If theology was supposed to make an effort at systematic thought, then definitely Lyra made a lot of effort to establish messianic references and to forcefully link a questionable matter of orthography to a prophetical meaning. It is hard to find out exactly what the Hebrew writer had in mind when he slipped the mem sofit in the middle of the word, but most probably, according to some scholars, there is a possibility that the word was a contracted form of two other words, one of them ended in mem sofit, forgotten afterwards in the middle of the word[63].

Nevertheless, the effort made by Lyra to force a possible grammatical error into a theological argument and to prove, in that way, the obduracy and the incontinence of the Jews remains one of the most debatable ways to prove one's knowledge and a certain boundary of interpretation. Not to mention that the scholars who studied his works in the modern times seriously questioned Lyra's abilities of understanding Hebrew and the Jewish Hermeneutics of the Scripture.[64]

Conclusions

Man has always tried to fill in the gaps in his understanding of the surrounding world. Since the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge, he thought that getting to know everything would make him equal to God. Knowledge was power, eternal life. Ignorance was weakness, the mortal condition of the humankind. Terrified by the unknown, he tried to put the right questions in order to decipher it. But what happens when the questions are wrong, seeking for an escape goat?

It is in the human nature to search for the truth, to question everything and to try to get the answers. By making efforts at our thoughts, we invented science. But what happens when the answers become more important than the

[63] I asked referrences to professor Francisca Băltăceanu, one of the two Romanian translators of the Hebrew Bible, and she consulted Ovidiu Pietrăreanu, lecturer at the Department of Oriental Languages and Literatures of the University of Bucharest and also a member of the focus group for Biblical Hebrew in New Europe College. He gave me the explanation prsesented in the body text, according to a pdf document, published by the orthodox Judaic organization Dirshu (here is the link to the document: https://www.dirshu.co.il/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/%D7%91%D7%A1%D7%95%D7%93-%D7%A2%D7%91%D7%93%D7%99%D7%9A-%D7%A4%D7%A8%D7%A9%D7%AA-%D7%99%D7%AA%D7%A8%D7%95.pdf).

[64] Ari Geiger, "A student and an opponent. Nicholas of Lyra and his Jewish sources", in Gilbert Dahan éd., *Nicholas de Lyre, Franciscain du XIV^e siècle exégète et théologien*, Paris, Institut d'Études Augustiniennes, 2011, pp 167-203, here pp185-187. See also Klepper Copeland, Deeana, op. cit., p.125, talking about Paul of Burgos' critique of Nicholas of Lyra's works: "He defended the traditional interpretations of Jerome and the *Glossa ordinaria* over Nicholas and Rashi, often by arguing that Nicholas did not properly understand the sense of the Hebrew".

questions and the questions aren't seeking for the truth, but are forced into the convenient answers? What happens when ignorance is not replaced by knowledge, but by a pale imitation of it and what happens when instead of asking questions as a means to reach an answer, one asks them in order to justify a preexisting one? What happens when we are convinced of our truth, when we don't doubt anymore? These are just some of the questions this study sought to raise.

In order to do that, it took into account the way two of the most important figures of Christian theology – "the greatest philosopher of Antiquity"[65] and "an important Franciscan Hebraist and Bible scholar"[66]. The latter's main work, *Postilla litteralis super Bibliam* was to become, along with the *Glossa ordinaria*, "the most widely used Christian reference work on the Bible"[67]. The paper tried to analyse, from the perspective of the Jewish topic, their efforts in building up a science – the former – and in taking this science to a new level – the latter. How much they succeeded and how much they failed are questions that remain open for further debates. For now, we can only notice that both Augustine and Lyra are a long way from Descartes, from *dubito, ergo cogito*. Moreover, they don't allow themselves to doubt. Their science needs firm answers, not unanswered questions. The former has a Church and a religion to strengthen; the latter has a Church that needs to eliminate all doubt. In both cases, Jews are needed not for missionary purposes, but for pedagogical ones and as a guidance of the Christian community.[68] Besides, as we saw at Brent Shaw, Augustine had little contact with the African Jewish community. As for Lyra, it is hard to say how many Jews he really met, as long as, by 1334, most of the French Jewry had been expelled from the realm.[69]

Augustine uses "the hermeneutical Jews" as rhetorical arguments, in order to attain his purpose, by winning the debates with the several factions (sects and heresies) that threaten his new born religion. Lyra uses them in scholastic disputations and here we have a valid point of view from Herman Hailperin, connected to the topic of this paper:

> Lyra, it seems, faced the question: How far can one go in the application of logical argument for proof of religious truth? Labrosse, *op. cit.*, p.180, n. 2, points out that Lyra gives evidence of a remarkable grasp of the relative value of logical

[65] Arendt, Hannah, *Love and Saint Augustine*, Edited and with an Interpretive Essay by Joanna Vecchiarelli Scott and Judith Chelius Stark, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago-London, april, 1998, p.

[66] Klepper Copeland, Deeana, op. cit., p.1.

[67] Ibidem, p. 117.

[68] Cohen, Jeremy, op. cit., p.187.

[69] Ibidem, pp. 186-187.

> reasoning as applied to religious beliefs. "Nicolas is fully aware of this difficulty, and this is even one of the objections he raises that if one could prove the truth of the Christian religion in an absolute manner, one could not bear to see educated Jews – thoroughly virtuous and in good faith – to live and to die in the Jewish religion. Nicolas declares that a distinction ought to be made between an evident demonstration and a sufficient demonstration. In religious matters an evident demonstration is not possible. We have to be satisfied with a sufficient demonstration.

Labrosse has here in mind Lyra's *Postillae* on Matthew 21:46, and on the Epistle to the Hebrews 1:5.[70]

It becomes obvious that one of the biggest problems of the Christianity was how to claim supremacy and keep good relations with another monotheistic community, without coming in contradiction. That's why, according to Nirenberg,

> "Jews" multiplied as negative types in Christian writing, and the living Jew (as opposed to the prophets of the past) became in the Christian theological imagination the enemy of Christ.[71]

Thus, even though he's aware of the difficulty of proving the Christian truth, as his modern biographer said, yet, Lyra uses the Jewish texts and the Jews' language only to make them adhere to his truth, the only one acceptable, the only one not questionable. He lives not even a century later than another scholar that used Hebrew and Jewish texts, but only to be part in the process of burning the Jewish books. We are talking about William of Auvergne, scholar at Sorbonne, before Nicholas of Lyra. While Lyra quoted Rashi, Auvergne quoted Maimonides. The former won't take part in putting books at the stake, but his texts will be used one day in the build-up of the antisemitic discourse of Martin Luther[72].

[70] Hailperin, Herman, op. cit., p. 287, n. 47.

[71] Nirenberg, David, op. cit., p. 91.

[72] Martin Luther's *On the Jews and their Lies* (edited and introduced by Thomas Dalton PhD, New York, London, Clemens&Blair, LLC, 2020), one of the most virulent anti-semitic treatises, appeals several times to Lyra's authority and it would be useful for this study to quote a phrase from the very first chapter of it: "Those two excellent men, Lyra and Burgensis [Nicholas of Lyra and Paul of Burgos], together with others, truthfully described the Jews' vile interpretation for us 200 and 100 years ago, respectively. In fact, they refuted it thoroughly." And probably, nowhere else does the connection between the two appear more obvious than in this punning rhyme from the sixteenth century that became famous: *Si Lyra non lirasset, Lutherus non saltasset*.

Taking into account the similarities between Lyra and Auvergne, it may be appropriate to end with a quote from Auvergne's monography, written by Lesley Smith, which underlines the main idea of this paper, showing not only the boundaries of interpretation, but the traps of misused knowledge, as well:

> He cites Maimonides, but regards him as belonging to a childish people. He reads Greek and Arab texts that the Church believed to be dangerous for students, but has a part in burning the books of scholars of another faith. None of us is consistent.[73]

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Augustine and Ignorance: Two Roman Cases in the *City of God*[*]

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ABSTRACT. This paper argues that Augustine is consciously careful when associating Romans of pre–Christian times with ignorance in *De civitate Dei*. After proposing three types of Augustinian ignorance based on *De libero arbitrio*, I examine the case of exemplary pagan Romans in *De civitate Dei*, Book V, where their inherited deep ignorance leads to a positive assessment. Then, I examine the negative perception of Varro, representing erudite pagan Romans in the same work, linking it to Augustine's views on the ascent of the soul to God. Lastly, a comparative analysis of Augustine's Varro in *De consensu evangelistarum*, Book I and his "updated" Varro in *De civitate Dei*, Books VII and XIX shows that he deliberately reverted Varro to a state of ignorance after he reviewed Varro's identification of Jupiter with the God of the Jews.

Keywords: *Augustine, ignorance, pagans, pre–Christian Romans*, exempla, *Varro*, De civitate Dei, De consensu evangelistarum

For Augustine, man is necessarily an ignorant being. Of course, it is easy to attribute ignorance to man in general, given the common understanding of the noun *ignorance* as the absence or lack of knowledge[1]: there is always something we are ignorant about or ignore, and our knowledge of things is far from complete.

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[1] For a brief but thorough introduction on the meanings of ignorance and the state of "ignorance studies", see Selena Arfini, *Ignorance*, in *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of the Possible*, edited by Vlad Petre Glăveanu, Palgrave Macmillan, 2022, 711–719.

But to a Christian thinker and especially to Augustine, who dedicated much of his work to interpreting the Genesis creation narrative[2], it is clear that this trait carries an additional layer of necessity, as it is part of the punishment God inflicted upon Adam and Eve – and through them upon all of mankind –, because of their original transgression. As far as a complete knowledge is concerned (that is, one that does not miss any parts), it was through disobedience that the pair gained it and, consequently, it was swiftly taken away from them. The nature of future humans then became, in a way, synonymous with their penal condition[3], one of mortality and weakness, and, most importantly here, one of ignorance and difficulty. As such, it seems impossible to view ignorance as something positive as long as it is someone's state or trait, but can ignorance in the right context enable positive assessment of its bearers? To show that, under certain conditions, ignorance can indeed call forth not just blame, but even praise in Augustine's writing, I propose a closer look at two distinct cases from *De civitate Dei*, in which Augustine refers to ignorant pagan Romans of pre–Christian times. I argue that Augustine transforms ignorance into the basis for sincere praise when he talks about non–intellectual pagan Romans in Book V of *De civitate Dei* (Case 1), while in the case of intellectual pagan Romans, such as Varro especially in Book VII, ignorance becomes an insurmountable limitation, rendering any praise they receive in the work doubtful (Case 2). To underline how intentional Augustine's differentiation is, I also offer a comparative analysis of Varro's portrayal in *De consensu evangelistarum*, Book I and *De civitate Dei*, Books VII and XIX (as an extension to Case 2), which shows Augustine revising his thoughts on Varro's condition, after revisiting the latter's work in preparation for *De civitate Dei*.

[2] Augustine's interest in Genesis interpretations, especially in the literal sense, is rooted in his anti-Manichaean polemic started soon after his conversion to Christianity and it resurfaces in works as late as *De civitate Dei*; it is central in *De Genesi contra Manichaeos*, *De Genesi ad litteram imperfectus liber*, *Confessiones*, Books 11–13, *De Genesi ad litteram libri XII*, and *De civitate Dei*, Book 11.

[3] To follow Augustine's own words, 'human nature' can refer to the original, innocent state of man, as well as to his fallen, punished state, characterised by mortality, ignorance and difficulty; see *De lib. arb*. 3.19.54.185 (for the current paper, I am using Peter King's English translation: Augustine, *On the Free Choice of the Will, On Grace and Free Choice, and Other Writings*, Cambridge University Press, 2010). Notably, Augustine shares this view with Ambrose, as they both view the Fall as a corruption of behaviour, on a strictly moral dimension of man, rather than a corruption of his nature, therefore evil and sin imply straying from man's good nature, not inflicting a change upon it; see, for example, Andrew Lenox-Conyngham, *Sin in Ambrose*, in *Studia Patristica* 18.4, edited by Elizabeth A. Livingstone, Cistercian Pub. & Peeters Press, 1990, 173–174.

The only ignorance that matters

First it is important to review what "Augustinian ignorance" refers to. In the third book of *De libero arbitrio*, ignorance (*ignorantia*) and difficulty (*difficultas*) form a pair of penalties inflicted by God upon Adam and Eve, and consequently upon all their descendants. While difficulty has a more straightforward meaning and role, ignorance as it is encountered even in this early treatise of Augustine invites the reader to notice its multiple degrees and dimensions. The quote below can serve as our guiding light in understanding this contrast between the two penal conditions:

> *Here there arises a disparaging question that people who are ready to lay the blame on anything but themselves for sinning often mutter to one another: "Suppose Adam and Eve sinned. What did we unhappy people do, on our part, to be born with the blindness of ignorance and the torments of trouble? First, not knowing what we should do, we fall into error – and then, once the precepts of justice begin to be revealed to us, we will to do these things but we cannot, held back by some sort of necessity belonging to carnal lust!"*[4]

Here Augustine intentionally separates this kind of reply from his own character in the dialogue and that of his friend Evodius[5], giving it to the voice of unbelievers who became gradually familiar with Christian teachings, but did not submit their wills to that of God, so as to invite His help to overcome human weakness. This reply, in context, hints at one of the core beliefs of Manichaeans, the implied main opponents in *De libero arbitrio*[6], who find evil in matter (in something external to the soul), but not, as suggested here, in themselves (in the will of the

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[4] *De lib. arb.*, 3.19.53.180 (King, 109): *Hic occurrit illa quaestio quam inter se murmurantes homines rodere consuerunt qui quodlibet aliud in peccando quam se accusare parati sunt. Dicunt enim: 'Si Adam et Eva peccaverunt, quid nos miseri fecimus, ut cum ignorantiae caecitate et difficultatis cruciatibus nasceremur et primo erraremus nescientes quid nobis esset faciendum, deinde ubi nobis inciperent aperiri praecepta iustitiae, vellemus ea facere et retinente carnalis concupiscentiae nescio qua necessitate non valeremus?*' For the Latin text, I am using the CCSL edition: *De libero arbitrio*, edited by W.M. Green, in Sancti Aurelii Augustini *Contra Academicos, De beata vita, De ordine, De magistro, De libero arbitrio*, Corpus Christianorum Series Latina 29, Brepols, 1970, 211–321, here 306).

[5] Both Augustine and Evodius were already baptised Christians by the time Augustine began and finished *De libero arbitrio* (Book I: 387–388; Books II–III: 391–395); cf. James J. O'Donnell, "Evodius of Uzalis", in *Augustine Through the Ages. An Encyclopedia*, edited by Allan D. Fitzgerald, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009 (hereafter *ATTA)*, 344.

[6] See also *Retr.*, 1.9.2, 1.9.4 and 1.9.6, where Augustine explicitly mentions this.

human soul)[7]. It also indirectly addresses both penal conditions of mankind that Augustine began to establish gradually in the dialogue, starting roughly from *De libero arbitrio*, 3.18.51.172: ignorance as a culpable lack of knowledge and difficulty as culpable desire[8]. But this ignorance is not simply a lack of general knowledge or a lack of a complete knowledge; instead, it is the lack of a very particular *part* of what a complete knowledge would entail for us nowadays. Shifting our attention away from ignorance's purely epistemic dimension, the opponents' reply, carefully and concisely phrased by Augustine, emphasises its moral and eschatological dimension. This ignorance is deeply connected to what Augustine views as the rightful most important concern a man should have regarding his own soul, namely its salvation, and therefore it becomes the ignorance of crucial information necessary for reaching this particular goal. I view this Augustinian ignorance as having three distinct states: (1) unwilful ignorance of *what* to rightfully worship (namely, God Himself), (2) unwilful ignorance of *how* to rightfully worship it (namely, according to His will, as expressed in the Scripture), and, most importantly, (3) wilful ignorance of the *what* and the *how*[9]. The key to noticing this ignorance's threefold nature lies in how the opponents are described to feel about their own situation. The reply suggests that the opponents consider they have overcome the first two states of ignorance already, but are displeased that they can still err. However, if the opponents had not been in an additional, *third* state of ignorance, they would have not been been displeased; in fact, in that scenario, they would have been ideal Christians in Augustine's eyes, content with their dependency on grace[10], and it would have been unnecessary to

[7] On Manichaean doctrine and Augustine's relation to it, see, for example, J. Kevin Coyle, "Mani, Manicheism" and "Anti-Manichean Works", in *ATTA*, 520–525 and 39–41, respectively.

[8] Difficulty makes man subject to strong, troublesome desires, that are, since the Fall, always present in the human soul and only partially, if at all, controllable. Augustine refers to these harmful desires most commonly using the term *concupiscentia*, as well as *libido*. For an overview of this concept in Augustine's thought, see Peter Burnell, "Concupiscence", in *ATTA*, 224–227.

[9] I propose categorising Augustinian ignorance this way for the current paper, so as to be able to identify subtle differences and implications when comparing communities or individuals Augustine associates with ignorance throughout *De civitate Dei*. Since I focus on pre–Christian Romans, the first and second state often "fuse" into what scholarship usually calls "deep (inherited) ignorance", but this, to me, seems too broad of a concept when discussing detailed cases. However, separating Case 1 from Case 2 based on these types is crucial for understanding Augustine's radically different expectations for the Romans implied in them.

[10] Even in his fallen state, in which man is unable to perfectly express and follow his true nature, which is good, he is not deprived of means to 'repair' it. But on his own this is possible only partially: through inquiry of useful things and recognition of his weakness (*De lib. arb*., 3.19.53.182), he can prepare himself to be as receptive to divine help as possible, as any real "repair" of his inherited incomplete knowledge and necessary hardship depends on God's acts of grace (*Retr*., 1.9.6), that is, gifts He freely bestows upon man despite his postlapsarian unworthiness. See also chapters 6

mention them in the dialogue. It seems that overcoming the first two states of ignorance amounts to nothing, if after such achievement the third state of ignorance is not discarded too. What makes this third ignorance so critical to the salvation of the soul?

The first two states of ignorance are essentially a lack of particular information and thus privative in a familiar, epistemic sense. Both of them are also nonvoluntary: they are part of an ignorance the opponents, like all people, are *born into* and so they can be understood as states of deep ignorance,[11] an aspect I will return to shortly. However, the third state is unquestionably voluntary, an ignorance characterised by the lack of *assent* to the information of (1) and (2). In other words, in this third state, one possesses the information of the *what* and the *how* (separately or together), but does not "believe" them. Therefore, the resulting ignorance becomes a mark of the absence of faith in God and, furthermore, it becomes a mark of the "failure to believe the truth"[12], here where God and Truth are, for Augustine, identical. But what is interesting is that, according to this model, a person becomes a bearer of these marks only after reaching this third state of ignorance and willingly leaving it unresolved[13]. This state is, consequently, deserving of blame, but what about the first two? Leaving aside the tricky question whether deep ignorance of

("The Fall") of Carol Harrison's *Rethinking Augustine's Early Theology: An Argument for Continuity*, Oxford University Press, 2008, 167–197.

[11] In using the term "deep ignorance", I think of what Rik Peels called the "New View on Ignorance", where (propositional) ignorance is considered the absence of true belief, and different sufficient conditions are formulated for when an epistemic subject can be called ignorant of something (see Rik Peels, *Ignorance. A Philosophical Study*, Oxford University Press, 2023, 48–72). Among the sets of conditions Peels cites as examples are those of René van Woudenberg, where the case of deep ignorance entails that "(iiib) S never so much as entertained p and accordingly neither believes nor disbelieves p" (cf. René van Woudenberg, "Ignorance and Force: Two Excusing Conditions for False Beliefs", in *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 46(4)/2009, 375, cited in Rik Peels, *Ignorance*, 50–51). While my discussion certainly concerns different subjects, I find the material that Augustine offers to be compatible with the interests of contemporary studies on ignorance.

[12] cf. Michael J. Zimmerman, *Living with Uncertainty: The Moral Significance of Ignorance*, Cambridge University Press, 2008, ix, cited in Rik Peels, *Ignorance*, 50.

[13] However, one must note that even after these three types of ignorance have been hypothetically resolved and a man is no longer ignorant in the Augustinian sense, he remains far from omniscient and can still err not only regarding *how* to worship, but also *what* to worship. See, for example, *De civ.*, 15.7, on the many ways one can err in a cultic act of sacrifice, despite it being consciously directed to the one true God, and 15.22, where Augustine points out how quickly man can fall into the error of worshipping not God, but a substitution of Him, that is still believed to be Him; these mentions are made whilst discussing the first biblical generations. See also, more recently, Katherine Chambers's examination about Augustine and sinning through ignorance in the case of Christians, in Katherine Chambers, *Augustine on the Nature of Virtue and Sin*, Cambridge University Press, 2024, 313–326.

the *what* and the *how*, of God and His precepts, is still possible after the coming of Christ and the spread of Christianity[14], in pre–Christian times pagan people (or any people outside of the Jewish tradition) can be more easily described as people in deep ignorance because they were not meant to have such knowledge by Providence, and exceptions can only be searched for among individuals with intellectual inclinations, or so Augustine – more or less hesitatingly – believes[15].

I now propose focusing on the aforementioned cases from *De civitate Dei*. Both of them feature pre–Christian pagan Romans, yet there is a stark contrast between them and how they appear in the work. On one hand, the first case relates to the first two states of ignorance (unwilful ignorance of the *what* and *how* to rightfully worship), while the second relates to the third state of ignorance (wilful ignorance of both). On the other hand, as I shall show, the first bears witness to Augustine's reluctance to blame the deeply ignorant from that period of time and his contextualised sincerity when praising Roman virtue, while the second offers a testimony to one of Augustine's many revisions regarding his own optimistic past judgements about the intellectuals' capacity to seek, find and acknowledge God by reason alone. But in both cases ignorance plays a central role in shaping Augustine's perception towards the two groups of people.

Case 1: exemplary pagan Romans in *De civitate Dei*, Book V

Thematically, Book V of *De civitate Dei* consists of a first part in which Augustine refutes the astrological and philosophical definitions of fate (*fatum*), and a much longer second part in which Augustine denies pre–Christian Roman virtue (*virtus*) the full credit for the success of the Roman empire. Instead, this success is viewed as a gift God bestowed upon the Romans all according to His divine plan. Largely following Sallust's historical writings, but also invoking Vergil and Cicero[16], Augustine aims to paint a credible portrait of the predecessors of his pagan Roman public, but the making of such a portrait is, in this context, a much more delicate matter than one would expect at first: it seems that an acknowledgement of their *virtus* is unavoidable in the speech, and yet *virtus* as a whole needs to be redefined

[14] In that regard, see Chapter 9 of Katherine Chambers's study, mentioned in the previous note.

[15] See our discussion in Case 2 below, together with note 41.

[16] On Augustine's classical sources for *De civitate Dei* in general, see Gerard O'Daly, *Augustine's City of God: A Reader's Guide*, 2nd edition, Oxford University Press, 2020, 11. Influences and Sources, 265–297, and Harald Hagendahl, *Augustine and The Latin Classics*, Volume I: Testimonia, Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis, Göteborg, 1967.

in light of the now revealed and already dominant *vera religio*. Those Roman pagans were driven not by love for God or Truth, but by their love for glory, and if indeed "true virtue presupposes true religion"[17] in Augustine's view, then their *virtus* must be retroactively rendered false. However, within the same book, Augustine repeatedly concedes to the virtuous Romans of those times the value of their achievements, always taking into consideration that it was impossible for them to know and do better at that time:

> *However, men who do not obtain the gift of the Holy Spirit and bridle their baser passions by pious faith and by love of intelligible beauty, at any rate live better because of their desire for human praise and glory. While these men are not saints, to be sure, they are less vile.*[18]

> *Those Roman heroes were citizens of an earthly city, and the goal of all their loyal service to it was its security and a kingdom not in heaven but on earth. Since there was no eternal life for them, but merely the passing away of the dying, who were succeeded by others soon to die, what else were they to love apart from glory, whereby they chose to find even after death a sort of life on the lips of those who sang their praises?*[19]

It is here that the question of Augustine's sincerity becomes intriguing: are those positive acknowledgements mere rhetoric and strategic flattery to win his Roman audience over? are they a display of Augustine's own patriotism[20]? or are they sincere in the sense that Augustine knew his speech would not lose coherence if he grants them to the Romans of the past? I argue for the latter: there is an observable sincerity in this regard in Book V, rooted in internal, long-term coherence, because Book V's speech happens within the same early framework of Augustinian ignorance, and Augustine has a very specific category of Romans in mind.

Chapter 12 marks the beginning of the second thematic part of Book V: Augustine openly addresses the transition he is about to make, and then begins the second part with a concession:

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[17] To use Michael Moriarty's elegant way to sum up Augustine's view on virtue; see his book *Disguised Vices: Theories of Virtue in Early Modern French Thought*, Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 64.

[18] *De civ.*, 5.13, in William M. Green's translation, 209 (Augustine, *City of God*, Volume II: Books 4–7, translated by William M. Green, The Loeb Classical Library 412, Harvard University Press, 1963).

[19] *De civ.*, 5.14 (Green, 215).

[20] Here I allude to what Robert Markus observed was Augustine's own pride as a Roman citizen, which manifested as a certain sense of patriotism in his work; see, for example, Robert Markus, *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St. Augustine*, Cambridge University Press, 1989, 57–58.

> *Although the ancient Romans of the earliest times worshipped false gods—as did all other races except one, the Hebrew race,—and sacrificed victims not to God, but to demons, nevertheless, as their history declares with approval, "they were eager for praise, generous with money, and sought unbounded glory, and riches honourably gained." This glory they most ardently loved.*[21]

This concession is particularly noteworthy, because it forms the basis of Augustine's whole discussion on glory in Book V, which is the fact that past Romans were subject to a necessary ignorance shared by all peoples with the exception of the Jews. The mention of the latter is likewise noteworthy, because it implies that the knowledge of the *what* and the *how*, of the true God and His precepts, was present and being transmitted on earth, and thus a new problem is tacitly established, that of the accessibility of said knowledge. Like the first biblical generations, the Jews could maintain contact with the doctrine that contains indication of what to rightfully worship and how to worship it, and thus they had the possibility of reversing their inherited penal ignorance through faith and observance[22]. Outside this group of people, everyone lacked access to this knowledge of crucial eschatological importance, just as they lacked awareness of their lack of access in itself. Mass–access to that key information started being actively cultivated only after Christ's coming and redemption of the nations, and Augustine frequently emphasises the importance of the written word in this process, as well as in general. In *De civitate Dei*, his preference for written culture fuels his critique of the scarcity of writings within Roman polytheism[23], in contrast to the wide spread of the Scriptures, to him one of Christianity's core aspects. This preference is also tied to the idea of an open,

[21] *De civ*., 5.12 (Green, 191); here Augustine includes a quote from Sallust, *Cat*., 7.6.

[22] For Augustine, Jews, like all nations after the spread of Christianity, had the option to remain wilfully ignorant or discard that state by converting to the true religion. Additionally, one must take divine justice and its temporal dimension carefully into account when discussing the ignorance of the Jews in general, and this particular analysis is not within the scope of my paper. For further discussion, see, for example, Chambers, *Augustine on the Nature of Virtue and Sin*, 317–319, on how Augustine viewed the Jews' role in Christ's crucifixion. As Chambers argues (318), they sinned by *maliciously* condemning an innocent man, whom they rightfully considered judged guilty, as far as temporal affairs were concerned. Augustine's critique of them focuses on this aspect rather than on their ignorance that he was the Son of God (an ignorance imposed by Providence).

[23] The subject of committing especially moral laws to writing is already a frequently recurring one in the first books; see, for example, *De civ*., 1.6, 10, 14, 20, 2.3, 7, 22, 25, 3.10 and 4.1. On Roman polytheism and written tradition in the last three centuries BC, and then its contrast with the material accessibility of Scripture, see, for example, Jörg Rüpke, *Pantheon: A New History of Roman Religion*, translated by David M.B. Richardson, Princeton University Press, 2018, 158–182, and Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom*, 2nd edition, Blackwell, 2004, 62–63, respectively.

universal doctrine as opposed to closed circles of knowledge transmission, rooted, in *De civitate Dei,* in Augustine's perception of pagan cults as operating under local, numerical and ritualistic restrictions[24].

But in this case the times were fundamentally different. Pre–Christian Romans did not and, by Providence, were not meant to have mass–access to that particular information[25]. Their deep ignorance made it impossible for them to even consider rearranging their lives according to man's true supreme good, so they came up with a supreme good of their own: glory. Augustine presents this scheme keeping close to the heart of Romanness as reflected in the works of its most important authors, here mainly Sallust, given how central his historical works were to the Roman education Augustine and his audience shared[26]; therefore, in Augustine's speech, Rome's predecessors were – to no one's surprise – inclined *naturaliter* to the pursuit of glory. Borrowing Sallust's active, soldierly understanding of *virtus* for this portion of the speech[27], Augustine presents the past Romans as heroic representatives of a people who *earned* God's reward of earthly glory despite their deep ignorance, and in this Augustine moves from addressing them as a collective to singling out individuals, in a recurring rhythm noticeable in chapters 12 to 18, doubled by a recurring sense of dissatisfaction projected upon the state these heroes belonged to. Rome had no means to properly reward the virtuous Cato[28], and likewise was famously ungrateful toward Camillus[29], but statements like these are paired with concessions enabled by their condition of deep ignorance: they had no other *patria* to love and serve, they knew no other homeland to live in; in short,

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[24] See *De civ*., 2.26.

[25] See especially the end of *De civ*., 5.14, together with the start of 5.15.

[26] Augustine notably underlines Roman education as a fundamental thing he and his audience share, for example, in *De civ.*, 2.8, 2.19, and 3.17.

[27] See D.C. Earl, *The Political Thought of Sallust*, Adolf H. Hakkert – Publisher, 1966, 10–12, and Viktor Pölsch, *Grundwerte römischer Staatsgesinnung in den Geschichtswerken des Sallust*, Walter de Gruyter, 1940, 20–22.

[28] In fact, Rome's set goal of glory and its tight association with military victory (see, for example, John Rich, "Fear, greed and glory: the causes of Roman war-making in the middle Republic", in *War and Society in the Roman World*, edited by John Rich and Graham Shipley, Routledge, 1993, 54–55) can be seen as what drove Cato Minor to his suicide, denying Caesar a proper defeat of his enemy and, thus, any glory derived from it. However, this mechanism also denied Cato proper praise of his own virtue within the city, so, in Augustine's eyes, historians like Sallust undertook that task in writing; see *De civ*., 1.23–24, together with *De civ*., 5.12.

[29] *De civ*., 5.18: "After Furius Camillus had cast from the necks of his countrymen the yoke of those bitter foes, the men of Veii, he was condemned and banished by his rivals. But though his country was thus ungrateful, when she was attacked by the Gauls, he freed her a second time, since he had no other country in which he could live with more honour" (King, 227–229).

they did not have the luxury of choice. Similarly, when Augustine states that the virtue of Scaevola, Curtius and the Decii was outdone by that of the Christian martyrs, he immediately underlines that this is the case now only because those Romans had no other option than to seek glory on earth, one of the many goals they could select from, all of them wrong in hindsight[30]. All past Romans like them displayed a type of virtue while seeking glory the honourable way[31]: it was inferior to the true virtue rooted in Christian faith, but a palpable, commendable virtue nonetheless, so the least Christians can do in present times, Augustine repeatedly says[32], is to "outdo" them in that regard, only this time pursuing the rightful love they had the temporal or "historical" privilege to know.

In all this, Augustine finds a favourable context for tacitly establishing a certain blamelessness of past Romans. While glory in itself was a civilizing goal to follow[33] among earthly things, its love, that is, the will to attain it, was easily corruptible, an idea any reader of Sallust should have been familiar with well before being confronted with Augustine's remarks on it. And while past Romans could be reasonably blamed for many historical instances when they erred loving glory through *ambitio*, they could not be reasonably blamed for turning away from a supreme good they were unaware of[34]. Blameless in relation to what matters the most for Christians because they were deeply ignorant by necessity, remarkable Romans of the past thus become worthy of emulation, a striking suggestion that is

[30] *De civ*., 5.14: "Since there was no eternal life for them, but merely the passing away of the dying, who were succeeded by others soon to die, what else were they to love apart from glory, whereby they chose to find even after death a sort of life on the lips of those who sang their praises?" (King, 215).

[31] The honourable way (*virtus*) and the dishonourable way (*ambitio*) to gain glory, as well as the good arts (*bones artes*) and bad arts (*malas artes*) are "mechanics" Augustine borrows from Sallust's historical model. Augustine explicitly mentions Sallust as his source at the beginning of this section of Book V (*De civ*., 5.12); in the case of *virtus*, he follows Sallust's understanding until later, in *De civ*., 5.18, where he reverts to his usual, "Ciceronian" understanding of *virtutes* as spiritual qualities (plural) instead of *virtus* as an active behaviour (singular).

[32] Particularly in *De civ*., 5.18.

[33] *De civ*., 5.12, 23 and 17.

[34] In earlier books too, the Roman ancestors' deeply ignorant condition enables shifting blame away from them in subtle ways that did not go unnoticed. For example, as Gerard O'Daly mentions in his reading of Book III, even there, Augustine intentionally avoids presenting the sufferings the Romans endured throughout their history as punishments (cf. Gerard O'Daly, *Augustine's City of God: A Reader's Guide*, 108). It can also be linked to rhetorical considerations, based on his opponents' psychological profile, if to a "practical, straightforward Roman mind" it would appear ridiculous to abruptly render all of pre–Christian humanity as punished for someone else's (Adam's) fault: here we recall the phrasing (in quotes) used by Andrew Lenox-Conyngham when he described Ambrose's own "Roman mind" approaching the subject of Adam's fall; see Andrew Lenox-Conyngham, *Sin in Ambrose*, 174).

interwoven with an intense critique of earthly glory as a *current* goal, especially in chapter 18. This chapter has the highest "concentration" of individualised virtuous past Romans in Book V. From early Roman history to the 3rd century BC, the 12 exemplary figures (*exempla*) invoked range from legendary to historical: they are, in this order, Junius Brutus, Titus Manlius Imperiosus Torquatus, Marcus Furius Camillus, Gaius Mucius Cordus "Scaevola", Marcus Curtius, Publius Decius Mus (both the father and the son), Marcus Horatius Pulvillus, Marcus Atilius Regulus, Publius Valerius Publicola, Lucius Quinctius Cincinnatus, and Gaius Fabricius Luscinus[35]. These Roman *exempla* are invoked in order to strengthen the contrast between the earthly city and the heavenly city from one particular perspective. The conditions to gain glory are no longer the same as they were in the earthly city, in past Roman ways, and no longer would it "require" to do actions ranging from retiring to the modest life of a farmer to killing one's own sons (traitors of the state or not), because with the coming of Christianity, glory – *true* glory – universally ceased to be something that humans could amass: all glory is God's and ought to be redirected to Him[36]. Therefore, regarding the *exempla,* what remains worthy of emulation by Christians despite the change of times is the ardent way they loved glory[37], the one thing they could not, at that time, know anything "better than".

Amidst many warnings to current Christians to be wary of love for glory, both the praise of past Romans as a society and the suggestion of emulation of their exemplary citizens are made possible only thanks to the deep ignorance Augustine attributes to them right from the start of this section of Book V. This way, Augustine establishes bridges where there could have been ruptures: between an exceptionally rich, albeit pagan, past culture and current, Christian times, as well as between his pagan Roman audience and him as a representative of the Christian community. Moreover, he avoids painting past Romans as a people collectively punished for a distant action that was wholly outside their personal control, namely Adam and Eve's transgression. Much later in *De civitate Dei*, moving away from discussing Roman history, Augustine argues much more directly and freely that one's virtue is true only when his will follows the only rightful love, that of God[38], but in this phase of his enormous work, the continuous taking into consideration of past Romans'

[35] As an extension to Fabricius's example, one can add the unnamed reference to Publius Cornelius Rufinus, whom Fabricius as censor expelled from the Senate, despite Rufinus having a remarkable military career that his remarkable avarice nonetheless outshined.

[36] *De civ*., 5.14. This idea is repeated much more frequently in the second half of *De civitate Dei* (see De civ., 14.28, 15.21, 17.4–5, 18.32 etc.).

[37] *De civ*., 5.12.

[38] *De civ*., 5.19 and 19.25, with Michael Moriarty, *Disguised vices*, 64–67.

deep ignorance lessens the impact of rendering their *virtus* as false when related to the now revealed Christian doctrine, seen as the container of truth, and so this ignorance, paradoxically, works much to the advantage of their general image, painting them in a distinctly positive light in the context of Augustine's apologetic work. This is only possible because their ignorance is of the first and second type: they cannot be blamed for their unwilful ignorance of *what* to rightfully worship as humans and their unwilful ignorance of *how* to worship it, but they can be openly praised for their virtuous behaviour and achievements in temporal affairs – by a Christian bishop no less – precisely because of these two states they carried, unaware.

Case 2: erudite pagan Romans – Varro in *De civitate Dei*, Books VII and XIX and *De consensu evangelistarum*, Book I

It is an early belief of Augustine that the availability of key information for the soul's salvation is different when individuals of remarkable erudition and intellect are concerned, and this would apply to non–believers from all periods of time, as I shall discuss below. Consequently, access to that key information was not, in fact, *completely* out of question for pagans in pre–Christian times. Augustine's attitude is indeed strikingly different in the second case I shall now discuss, that of the antiquarian and scholar Marcus Terentius Varro. I shall first analyse the way he is portrayed in *De civitate Dei*, focusing especially on his presence in Books VII and XIX, while putting Augustine's remarks in the work's general context, as well as that of his views on the soul's possibility to ascend to God through reason. Then, as an extension to Case 2, I shall focus on how Varro is depicted in another, earlier work, namely *De consensu evangelistarum*, Book I, and show, through a comparative analysis, how Augustine parted from his earlier vision of Varro when revising his ideas years later for *De civitate Dei*.

Despite being a pre–Christian pagan Roman himself, thus born with the same deep ignorance as his ancestors, Varro's antiquarian occupation and his status as the *sine dubio* most erudite Roman[39] radically affect the "resistance" of the condition he inherited – that is, its resistance to change. Within Augustine's discourse, there is indeed a noticeable difference between Varro's case and that of the heroic past Romans: none of the virtuous Romans collectively implied throughout Book V and none of the Roman *exempla* ennumerated, for example, in *De civitate Dei*, 5.18

[39] *De civ*., 6.2, as well as many other places where Augustine offers this kind of title to Varro: see Daniel Hadas, "St. Augustine and the Disappearance of Varro", in *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies*, 60(2)/2017, 80.

were philosophers, antiquarians or, more generally, known specifically for being intellectuals, but Varro himself belonged to this category and was a representative of it without a doubt. The former were exemplary Romans known for mainly their political and military careers; Varro, on the other hand, from the moment he is properly introduced in Book VI[40], stands as a self–evident case of an extraordinary scholar, a researcher, and a collector of the widest range of information and doctrines, investigating all kinds of subjects and cults. But that same laudatory introduction quickly embraces a critical tone, pointing out that, in his *Antiquitates rerum divinarum*[41], for the sake of political stability (an otherwise historically understandable aim in the Late Republic's context), Varro proposed a tripartite theology[42] in which he was willing to selectively undermine what Augustine perceives as parts of a single unchanging truth. In Book VI, these "parts" of the truth refer to the real relation between mythical theology and civil theology, the latter deriving much of its ritualistic contents from the former, and both of them revealing the false and morally reprehensible nature of the Roman gods and pagan religious practices upon closer inspection. Varro's biased behaviour in Book VI, perceived so negatively by Augustine, forms the basis for a much harsher critique in Book VII, when Augustine examines Varro's treatment of the remaining part of his tripartite theology, that is, his account of natural theology. And for our present discussion on ignorance, a very particular, yet very important part of this account is especially relevant.

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[40] *De civ*., 6.2. Of course, Varro is already mentioned in earlier books (see *De civ*., 3.4, 4.1, 9, 22, 31 and 33), but only in Book VI does Augustine offer him a dedicated portion of his discourse, with the appropriate weight to underline his importance as a most erudite person, seeing that during an excursion in *De civ*., 4.1, which alludes to the contents of Book VI, his first short introduction begins with a typical mention of his erudition, but ends with emphasis on his inescapable Romanness, alluding both to the real object of his love, Rome and its glory, and to the fact that he is "enslaved" to it as a writer, with limited freedom to express views contrary to its *traditio*. For the purpose of separating his audience from their cultural pillars, Augustine strategically makes Varro repeatedly appear in *De civitate Dei* as a writer constrained by the tradition of his city, much like other Roman literary authorities he invokes; see, for example, *De civ*., 4.1, 31, 6.5–6, 7.17 and 28.

[41] This major work of Varro – no longer extant, but intensely quoted – survives in fragments, for which I am using Burkhart Cardauns's Latin edition (M. Terentius Varro, *Antiquitates Rerum Divinarum*, Teil I: Die Fragmente, edited by Burkhart Cardauns, Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur/Franz Steiner Verlag, 1976).

[42] Varro's tripartite theology included mythical theology, as transmitted in the works of poets, natural theology, as transmitted by philosophers, and civil theology, as transmitted by rulers of the state; see *De civ*., 6.5–6, as well as 4.27, where Augustine describes the tripartite theology developed by Scaevola Pontifex, potentially the base for Varro's own model. On this topic, see Emanuele Stolfi's commentary of *De civ*., 4.27, that is, F. 102 in Quintus Mucius Scaevola, *Opera*, edited by Jean-Louis Ferrary, Also Schiavone and Emanuele Stolfi, Scriptoris iuris Romani 1, «L'Erma» di Bretschneider, 2018, 412–415, and Jorg Rüpke, *Religion in Republican Rome. Rationalization and Ritual Change*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012, 172–175.

Varro, "the most learned man" among the pagan Romans, was certainly deeply acquainted with philosophical ideas thanks to his antiquarian occupation and his interest to give Rome a functional state theology. In its tripartite form, it included one part, natural theology, that heavily borrowed from natural philosophy. As such, it was meant to supplement the civil theology by making its "physical interpretations" of the Roman gods available to those who desired a more rational, rather than accidental, background for Roman polytheism[43]. Of course, Varro is not considered a philosopher in *De civitate Dei*; in fact, he is called a historian[44] by virtue of him chiefly making (preferably uncritical rather than reflective) records of the past. Nonetheless, given that Varro selectively incorporated contents of the philosophers' natural theology into his tripartite model, he is portrayed as a learned man who voluntarily and consciously came into contact with philosophical doctrines, even of the kind that was, according to Augustine, compatible with Christian thought: the rather nebulous "Platonic philosophy", in Augustine's own, particular understanding.

Throughout his life, Augustine believed in the possibility of reaching awareness and understanding, albeit limited, of God[45] – that is, the possibility of overcoming ignorance of *what* to worship – by use of reason alone. This is a concession that Augustine makes to philosophers, especially to (his version of) the "Platonists"[46]: he generally sees them as capable of grasping God's immateriality, immutability and immanence through inquiry of his creations[47], as well as capable of recognising Him as the origin of the soul and its faculties and source of happiness by participation. Thus, to Augustine, it is more proper for a Christian to hold a debate with *these* philosophers about *what* to worship, because their concept of the supreme being is, at the very least, compatible with Christian monotheism[48], while the fact that their philosophy has a strong ethical component would only bring the two groups closer. Augustine himself succeeded in grasping God's immateriality initially through what he calls "Platonic" philosophy[49], and so, by projecting his own, personal example as a rational, contemplative man onto other such people, he (at first) considered

[43] See Claudia Moatti, *The Birth of Critical Thinking in Republican Rome*, translated by Janet Lloyd, Cambridge University Press, 2015, 18–19.

[44] *De civ.*, 18.17.

[45] On Augustine and ascents of the soul to God, see Alfonso Herreros Besa, "Augustine on pagan knowledge of God and the Trinity", in *Studium. Filosofía y Teología*, 38/2016, 245–260.

[46] On this topic, see Luigi Gioia, *The Theological Epistemology of Augustine's De Trinitate*, Oxford University Press, 2008, 50–58.

[47] See *De Trin.*, 4.20–23. See also Luigi Gioia's analysis of Books IV and XIII of *De Trinitate*, in *The Theological Epistemology of Augustine's De Trinitate*, 41–47.

[48] See *De civ.*, 6.1 and 8.1.

[49] *Conf.*, 7.9.13–7.10.16.

this road to God was open for this type of people regardless of when or where they lived, or what knowledge and sources they had access to. To him, what lies at the end of the *truly* philosophical road is the one, unique Truth that the Scriptures also point to[50]. Since this applies to Varro the scholar as well, what is criticised in his case is then that he *voluntarily* preferred other things (Rome and its tradition) to said unique Truth, despite recognising it at the end of his intellectual journeys into the philosophers' soothing (because coherent) domain[51]. What is worse, Varro *subordinated* it to the contents of civil theology. The process of selection already betrays a careful examination and, for Augustine, the fact that a deep understanding of the things voluntarily chosen or avoided was reached[52], and so Varro becomes accountable based on the selections he made and for the ignorance he chose to maintain.

One selection of this kind, that Augustine gave particular attention to, is Varro's transmission of the identification of Jupiter with the God of the Jews[53]. This example changed its form and value as Augustine matured; when analysed across works, it can shed light on Augustine's rethinking of the limit between ignorance and its complete elimination in learned pagans, and so I propose a brief parallel analysis of this point in two Augustinian works.

The identification of Jupiter with the God of the Old Testament is an extensive key argument in an earlier work, namely in *De consensu evangelistarum*. This makes its complete absence in Book VII of *De civitate Dei* all the more striking, since Book VII can be considered the "proper" place to include such argument in this later work, given that Book VII is the place where Augustine discusses each of the twenty selected gods (*dii selecti*) proposed in Varro's *Antiquitates*[54] and what natural principles or things they are thought to represent. Instead, this supposed identification reappears in a modified form much later, in Book XIX, and, as we shall see, its modification indicates the fact that Augustine's perception of Varro, the limits of ignorance, and the ascent of the soul have received an "update".

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[50] In the same manner, a *true* philosopher – a *true* lover of wisdom – is, to Augustine, a lover of God (*De civ.*, 8.1).

[51] *De civ.*, 7.23.

[52] It is so in the case of Scaevola Pontifex too (*De civ.*, 4.27). On the topic of selections such as Varro's leading to canonisation in religion and culture, see Alessandra Rolle, "Coming Home: Varro's *Antiquitates rerum divinarum* and the Canonisation of Roman Religion", in *Canonisation as Innovation. Anchoring Cultural Foundation in the First Millenium BCE*, edited by Damien Agut-Labordère and Miguel John Versluys, Brill, 2022, 263–284.

[53] Varro, *RD*, fr. 14, 15, 16* (ed. Cardauns).

[54] *De civ.*, 7.2; these gods are Janus, Jupiter, Saturn, Genius, Mercury, Apollo, Mars, Vulcan, Neptune, Sol, Orcus, Liber, Tellus, Ceres, Juno, Luna, Diana, Minerva, Venus, and Vesta.

Around 10 years prior to when Augustine began composing *De civitate Dei*, he argued against pagan Roman critics (and Manichaeans, once again) in the first book of *De consensu evangelistarum* (dated ca. 400–405[55]). There he argued against those who recognised Christ as the wisest man, but not as a god, who saw Him as a *magus* and author of books on the magical arts, or who were suspicious that the New Testament included things outside His teachings, like precepts against idolatry presumably added by his disciples. The last point led Augustine into a large digression that shapes the entirety of the first book, which is thematically distinct from Books II–IV; the subject demanded the defense of the identity between Christ and the God of the Old Testament, which in turn led him to invoking several classical references to support the idea that the God of the Jews was indeed a god already recognised by his adversaries' authorities. Among them – it seemed to Augustine at that point in time –, Varro too understood Him as the equivalent of Jupiter, just by another name. Augustine turns to Varro's testimony to illustrate this one view among the numerous views Roman pagans could hold regarding God (other identifications such as that with Saturn or the world soul), but he does so in a manner that indicates recalling Varronian ideas from memory rather than from texts consulted specifically for formulating his arguments. This lies in a stark contrast to how he returned to such works in preparation for *De civitate Dei*[56]. The same thing happens regarding a later point in *De consensu evangelistarum*, which also makes an updated appearance in *De civitate Dei*: regarding Varro's supposed Euhemerism, it has been shown that Augustine misunderstood Varro in *De consensu evangelistarum*[57] and later corrected this himself on this point in *De civitate Dei*. But Varro's identification of Jupiter with the God of Israel is likewise a point that Augustine carefully reframes (and even avoids) in *De civitate Dei*.

In his earlier work, Augustine optimistically reports that the most erudite of "their" authorities recognised the God of the Jews as the supreme god, by understanding the implications of the idea of a god of which nothing higher (*nihil superius*[58]) can be conceived, and then grasping this aspect of God through his similar understanding of Jupiter as the king of gods and omnipresent vivifying spirit.

[55] cf. Mattias Gassman, "The Composition of *De consensu euangelistarum* 1 and the Development of Augustine's Arguments on Paganism", in *Augustinian Studies*, 54(2)/2023, 157–175.

[56] In our current context, see especially Richard M.A. Marshall's article "Bi-Marcus? The two Varrones of Augustine and Nonius Marcellus", in *Res Publica Litterarum: Studies in the Classical Tradition*, 39, 2016.

[57] *De cons. ev*., 1.32–33, with Richard M.A. Marshall, *Bi-Marcus?*, 193–195.

[58] *De cons. ev*., 1.30; see also 1.31 and 42.

The steps this "first Varro"[59] had taken to reach this knowledge of God are somewhat similar to Augustine's steps towards this knowledge in the *Confessions*, thus overcoming his ignorance of the *what*. Next, Varro's awareness of Jewish worship could have made him overcome his ignorance of the *how*, but that is not a primary concern in this case. However, Augustine's comment on Varro's fearfulness in front of His greatness can be read as a shy suggestion of a more personal acknowledgement of God as supreme deity, an assent even if it is only based on rationally following definitions (of a "highest being") through to their logical end. Moving over to *De civitate Dei*, Augustine's presentation of Varro in this regard is much less optimistic:

> *But let us listen, rather, to the physical interpretations with which they try to colour their foul and miserable error, making it looks like a more profound doctrine. First of all, Varro commends these interpretations by saying that the ancients designed the images, attributes and ornaments of the gods so that men who had approached the mysteries of the doctrine, when they considered these visible things, might gain mental insight into the world and its parts, that is, the true gods. (…) But, O most accute of men, (…). Your soul was learned and naturally gifted, and for this reason we deeply grieve for you, but that same soul was quite unable to reach its God through these mysteries of pagan doctrine—(…).*[60]

The fragments quoted above set the tone of Augustine's perception of Varro in Book VII, and are in fact an "organic" consequence of previous critiques form Books IV and VI. This "second" Varro is presented as someone who did not undo his ignorant condition, because he turned away from the truth once he reached it (or, rather, Him) at the end of his arduous research. As such, there is no mention in Book VII of anything similar to the idea that Varro once entertained and assented to the thought that the Roman Jupiter refers to the same deity as the God of the Old Testament, just by a different name. Varro's identification of Jupiter with the God of the Jews curiously reappears only very late in *De civitate Dei* in an explicit form, in

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[59] Just like Richard M.A. Marshall proposed "two Varrones" in his *Bi-Marcus?* article, where he reffers to "one Varro" as portrayed in Nonnius and "another Varro" as portrayed in Augustine, I find working with the idea of "two Varrones" efficient even when focusing on Varro's portrayal within the same author's works, given that there are significant differences that justify treating them as "separate people" on a methodological level. The one anchored in Varro's identification of Jupiter with the God of the Jews is one such difference, and one that Marshall mentions, but does not analyse further in his article (*Bi-Marcus?*, 192, 196), focusing on Varro's mistaken Euhemerism in Augustine instead. He convincingly shows that Augustine corrected this misattributed Euhemerism in *De civitate Dei* after revisiting the antiquarian's work, whereas pre–412 he relied on his memory. I now propose that Augustine also corrected the significance of Varro's aforementioned identification and the limits of his understanding of a (or, rather, *the*) supreme deity.

[60] *De civ*., 7.5 (Green, 391–393).

Book XIX. There, Augustine's reference to Varro is very similar to that from *De consensu evangelistarum*, 1.30, but with the notable remark that Varro did not know what he was talking about. This important difference becomes immediately clear when comparing the two relevant quotes (see below):

> *[De cons. ev.] But their own Varro, than whom they can point to no man of greater learning among them, thought that the God of the Jews was Jupiter, and he judged that it mattered not what name was employed, provided the same subject was understood under it; in which, I believe, we see how he was subdued by His supremacy. For, inasmuch as the Romans are not accustomed to worship any more exalted object than Jupiter, of which fact their Capitol is the open and sufficient attestation, and deem him to be the king of all gods; when he observed that the Jews worshipped the supreme God, he could not think of any object under that title other than Jupiter himself.*[61]

> *[De civ.] But the reply may be made: "Who is this God, or how is he proved worthy, and no other god besides, of the worship an sacrifices of the Romans?" He must be very blind who still asks who this God is. He is the very God whose prophets foretold the things that we behold. (…) He is the very God whom Varro, most learned of Romans, thought to be Jupiter, albeit knowing not what he said; a fact which I deemed worth mentioning merely because a man of such learning was unable to deny the existence of this God or to think him of no worth, inasmuch as he believed him to be the same being as his supreme god. (…)"*[62]

And so, many books later, Augustine comes to address this point he much relied on in his previous work and now openly, decisively abandons his earlier perception that Varro successfully reached awareness and acknowledgement of God. But any key knowledge that Varro could have gained by reason and inquiry alone has already been declared null in Book VII, only there it was already disconnected from the Jupiter–God identification; Varro not only had no knowledge of God as supreme deity, but also no knowledge of Him as the one source of happiness and the creator of all things, including all souls. These and other more particular aspects that Varro did not grasp are presented extensively in the powerful rhetorical sequence in Book VII we already partially encountered, quoted above, where Varro is addressed directly. Below is the full fragment that we can now see in a larger context:

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[61] *De cons. ev.*, 1.30, in S.D.F. Salmond's English translation, 89 (Saint Augustin, *Harmony of the Gospels*, translated by S.D.F. Salmond and edited by M.B. Riddle, in Saint Augustin, *Sermon on the Mount, Harmony of the Gospels, Homilies on the Gospels*, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church 6, WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1956, 77–236).

[62] *De civ.*, 19.22, in William Chase Greene's English translation, 213–215 (Augustine, *City of God*, Volume VI: Books 18.36–20, translated by William Chase Greene, The Loeb Classical Library 416, Harvard University Press, 1960).

> *But, O most accute of men, (...). Your soul was learned and naturally gifted, and for this reason we deeply grieve for you, but that same soul was quite unable to reach its God through these mysteries of pagan doctrine—the God, that is, by whom it was made, not with whom it was made, the God of whom it is not part, but the creature, the God who is not the soul of everything, but who made every soul, the God by whose light alone the soul gains happiness, if it is not ungrateful to his grace.*[63]

Varro is portrayed as the tragic case of a man who, by reason alone and with philosophy and pagan doctrine at his disposal, ended up failing in his quest to understand God. This is because the lack of a personal assent to the very important information he came in contact with nullifies any prior victory over ignorance of the *what* and the *how* that was achieved by him. Had the assent existed, there would have been changes in Varro's behaviour and preference for civil theology too, yet no such thing happened – much like in the case of the unbelieving Manichaeans, who remained disatissfied despite overcoming their ignorance of the what and the how. And so, to this "second Varro", it seems that the knowledge necessary for his own true well–being and happiness is unattainable, and Augustine can only declare his pity for him, in a rhetoric infused with sincerity, as he reverts Varro to a state of permanent, wilful ignorance. Any praise offered to him in *De civitate Dei*, while well-deserved and sincere in relation to his intellectual work, consequently stands in the shadow cast by his ignorance, leaving the intended pagan Roman readers with a negative image, only amplified by his internal contradictions and concessions to tradition that Augustine hunts down in his *Antiquitates rerum divinarum* and presents to his educated public.

Conclusions

Not ignorance in the general sense matters the most to Augustine, but only ignorance of key information that has eschatological value, in a Christian framework. With this in mind, and based on *De libero arbitrio*, 3.19.53.180, I proposed three distinct states of "Augustinian ignorance": (1) unwilful ignorance of *what* to rightfully worship (namely God), (2) unwilful ignorance of *how* to worship it (that is, according to His precepts), and (3) wilful ignorance of both (a voluntary refusal to accept this knowledge on a personal, interior level). All humans before the coming of Christ, with the exception of the Jews, were born subject to the first and second types of ignorance, but, as I have shown, this condition's resistance to change and implications differed based on the personal occupation of its carrier.

[63] *De civ*., 7.5 (Green, 393–395).

In Case 1, I discussed how Augustine was aware that pre–Christian exemplary pagan Romans (*exempla*, meaning legendary and historical heroes, virtuous citizens of Rome and other such models) had no means to overcome their deep inherited ignorance, and how that same condition, paradoxically, enables a favourable assesment of them in *De civitate Dei,* Book V. In Augustine's eyes, exemplary Romans such as those ennumerated in *De civitate Dei*, 5.18 clearly demonstrated *virtus* despite their deep ignorance – an earthly virtuous behaviour, because of Rome's goal of earthly glory, but real and admirable nonetheless. Ignorance of the first and second kind is what Augustine repeatedly concedes to them throughout Book V, and this, in turn, makes direct praise of them possible, despite their pagan beliefs and wrong supreme good. However, in the case of intellectuals such as Varro – invoked as literary authorities – that same ignorance works exclusively to their disadvantage, because theirs is a wilful ignorance and a voluntary distancing from the truth they could nonetheless approach by reason alone. Focusing in Case 2 on Varro's portrayal in *De civitate Dei*, I first contextualised his inherited ignorance within Augustine's views on the rational ascent of the soul to God and showed how, from Augustine's perspective, Varro's occupation as a scholar presented him with an open path to the key knowledge that was out of reach for others, such as the exemplary Romans of Case 1. To demonstrate how intentional this is on Augustine's part, I compared his representation of Varro from *De consensu evangelistarum*, Book I with that from *De civitate Dei,* Books VII and XIX. Inspecting Varro's identification of Jupiter with the God of the Jews in both works, I argued that Augustine actively revised the limits of Varro's capacity to reach an understanding of God by reason by the time he worked on *De civitate Dei*, concluding that he is a voluntary "prisoner" of the third type of ignorance. Given that Varro is representative for all pagan scholars, by extension this ultimately renders them all undesirable to emulate (unlike in the exemplary Romans' case) and unreliable as authorities, effects that serve Augustine's purpose of distancing present pagan Romans from their "guides to Romanness". Augustine warns that these ignorant guides would only lead them back to a place where they will not find the knowledge required for the start of a truly virtuous, happy life.

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