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The Logic of Desire

In ancient Greek thought, which had not yet formally theorized a mathematical concept of zero, the idea of nothing or lack nonetheless held a prominent place, perhaps most fully articulated through eros: desire. Or, as we more gently tend to translate it in English, love. This is an unfortunate softening, for the Greeks understood all too well that to play with love is to play with fire. Such pyrotechnics do not require the abandonment of reason, contrary to most common readings – just as we can admire jaguars, canyons, Siren songs, and other beautiful things without being witless enough to throw ourselves headlong into them, so we can flirt with desire without being consumed. This paper explores the possibility that refusing nothing – refusing to live with desire – is the fundamental error that sits at the heart of The Republic. If I am not entirely mistaken, the Socratic notion of desire is a deeply logical one deployed as a response to, and critical of, question-begging elements inherent in positive declarations derived from a reasoning process based wholly essentialist either/or oppositions. If so, the problem shifts from one of authoritative, unidirectional truth to one of diplomacy, tactics, and strategy. Truth has not disappeared, but it becomes enmeshed in relations between people and depends on the exercise of judgment, restraint, and friendship. Starting with nothing brings us back to politics.

Is the modern world really so disenchanted as we are continually being told? The claim resonates, and yet trends in modern photography indicate that things are practically fetishized, each object lovingly isolated and focused on in macro-miniature, each of its colors and curves fondled by the camera. Facebook and Tumblr abound with photographs of every meal, and young men spend unfathomable amounts of time each morning lovingly caressing wax into moustaches so magnificent, one wonders how they do not topple forward beneath the weight. At the same time, the current awestruck refrain that humans are made of stardust suggests that science has replaced religion as a source of the magical, where we partake of distant galaxies and this engenders the deepest reverence, even as Paul Lockhart tells us “...there is nothing as dreamy and poetic, nothing as radical, subversive, and psychedelic, as mathematics. It is every bit as mind

blowing as cosmology or physics... and allows more freedom of expression than poetry, art, or music... Mathematics is the purest of the arts..."¹ How does one square this with the claims of political theorists that modern life is disenchanted?

What strikes me as notable about each of these scenarios is not that we lack for sources of enchantment – indeed, as someone with a background in science, design, and technology, as well as art and now politics and theory, I am hard pressed to swear allegiance to only one of these fields on account of the intrinsic beauty of each, and the way in which they somehow all manage to tell us the same things in different languages, even as they bring forward for contemplation the endless ingenuity of human beings. But I am struck deeply by the observation that the sources of enchantment above and which seem to proliferate today share something disturbing in common – namely, that none of them involve an enchantment with people. If it is political theorists who have been consistently lamenting the demise of enchantment while no one else has, perhaps the problem is not that we are not enough enchanted by things,² but that our spheres of beauty have become ugly in their artificially imposed exile from one another. In other words, we no longer have ways to speak *to each other*. It is not the world that has become disenchanted, it is politics from which we seek our escape. But to flee politics is a deeply ironic move, for it is that very disavowal, tantamount to disavowing the pleasure of being with others, that renders it less beautiful. Politics is not something to leave behind any more than other people are. It is something in which to be lost.

My concern with the abandonment of politics for isolated escapist and professional spheres is two-fold. The first concerns the effects that such increasingly narrow specialization has on judgment through both a loss of ability to interpret widely

¹ Paul Lockhart, *A Mathematicians Lament: How School Cheats Us Out of Our Most Fascinating and Imaginative Art Form*, New York: Bellevue Literary Press, 2009.

² With apologies to Jane Bennett, whose work I actually find incredibly enchanting. In spite of this, I disagree with her assessment that it is things that require a reinjection of magic in the modern world. I think things have nearly *all* of our current attention. Nonetheless, her work, as all new materialist work, does not forbid enchantment with conversation, itself a material waveform that impinges upon our equally material ears. Calling for attention to “thingness” risks obscuring this fact of her own work, due to entrenched ways of thinking of things as visible and tangible.

as well as a growing dogmatic attachment to narrowly conceived truths. As with most contemporary accounts of judgment, this grows in no small part from my encounters with the work of Hannah Arendt and her observations concerning the impairment of judgment when confronted with these two factors. I take it that a democratic polity requires the basic ability to communicate intelligibly with others, an imaginative stance or range of experiences that allow one to interpret generously, and a sense of political judgment that permits one to assess the varied scenarios that one is politically confronted with each day and determine appropriate actions in response. While it is not clear to me that this requires a depth of knowledge with each domain, or even whether such knowledge is desirable, reason suggests that it minimally requires an ability to listen to and grasp what other people say even if they speak from outside of our own sphere of experience, as well as the imaginative ability to bridge across existing concepts, expand them, or apply them to novel scenarios.³

Linda Zerilli points out the double move that Arendt considers judgment to entail. It involves equally the ascertainment of truth as well a decision concerning the appropriate action. On this view, Arendt was largely critical of the Platonic split between knowing and doing as obliterating freedom and plurality, insofar as judgment requires the ability to enact decisions as much as make them.⁴ I would like to complicate this process by drawing out what I take to be a much more complex practice of Platonic judgment. This rendering is not nearly so far from Arendt's account as she held, but, rather than foregrounding the imaginative element of the process as Zerilli does following Arendt, I foreground the Kantian-Arendtian observation that the spectator is imbricated in the actor's decision/judgment to act,⁵ an observation which I take to be present in the work of Plato. On the account as I draw it, the split cannot be made at all, as the actions one engages in alter the truth that the world reveals, thus altering *doxa* and future

³ On the imaginative move that entails bridging across seemingly disparate concepts, see Bonnie Honig on catachresis. On the role of imagination in judgment, see Linda Zerilli, "We Feel Our Freedom," *Political Theory* 33 (April 2005): 158-188.

⁴ Linda Zerilli, "Truth and Politics." *Theory & Event* 9, no. 4 (2006).

⁵ Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, edited by Ronald Beiner, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press (1989), p. 62.

judgments. I argue that the form of interactions emerges from the interplay of reason and desire, but this unfolding form *itself* informs actors' response to events on both levels of judgment. By altering both their interpretations of what is occurring as well as the proper course of action to take, even as it potentially alters their desires and goals, the form of the interaction becomes an inextricable part of the assemblage of judgment. In making this argument I am informed by both the work of Karen Barad and Jane Bennett, however, I believe that such an assemblage of judgment can be extricated from the Socratic dialogues on their own.⁶ That contemporary theory has been heavily influenced by attention to judgment, desire, and aesthetics from the work of theorists including Arendt, Foucault, and Derrida, themselves heavily influenced by Socrates, makes it no surprise that one should ultimately lose the thread of which theory begat which interpretation. It is my contention that this sort of causal confusion is inherent in the act of judgment, as each part of the apparatus is mutually entangled with, and constitutive of, the others. Rather than a clear causal chain which places primacy in the originator of action and proceeds in a finite, straight line, we end up with an infinitely regressive circle. This circle holds the possibility (but not guarantee) for non-domination, insofar as each party is equally involved in its shape.

While this entanglement makes the act of judging more complex, taking it up offers appealing possibilities for broadening the scope of what is considered reasonable and who is considered a welcome interlocutor, thus overcoming some of the more common criticisms of traditional liberal theory that accuse it of being overly constraining and smuggling pre-determined outcomes into the debate through the particular structure of what counts as discourse.⁷ It also offers a more precise explanation of how the process works and what, exactly, has been so insufficient about narrower renditions of public reason like those of Rawls or Habermas.

⁶ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press (2010) and *The Enchantment of Modern Life*. Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Meaning and Matter*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press (2007).

⁷ See Zerilli.

There is a second worry in addition to the general damage done to judgment through poor form, and that is the damage done to the goals and desires of individuals themselves. The fact that desire is very often not the gentle, sweet love that we comfort ourselves in thinking it is, but can often turn violent, particularly when denied, is of concern here.⁸ This is not to say that desire should be allowed to fulfill every whim it has, but to draw attention to the fact that refusing the desire of another is an extremely delicate task. Insofar as traditional renderings paint the purpose of reason as the denial of desire, one should ask in which way this is best accomplished to avoid engendering both resentment and aggression in those denied, particularly if we are to speak of disenfranchised groups who are denied the right to be heard or fulfilled even their perfectly reasonable requests again and again. In the latter case, it is worth asking whether the impulse to deny legitimate desires is itself a form of violent desire. It is my contention that it is on this count that Arendt's observation of the corrosiveness of absolute truth comes into play, for the claim that absolute truth attempts to make is that nothing other than it can even be fulfilled. It consistently denies the desire of others, in other words, and does so without even bothering with the formality of form, rhetoric, or beauty, so bringing a violent edge into discourse that becomes increasingly sharp over time, from both those who wield the truth and those who are subject to its cut. Absolute truths that cannot permit for a mutual intercourse infect public deliberations, altering their form and political judgment itself.⁹

For this initial foray into what appears to be nothing other than horrible folly, I have elected to extract the logic of desire in Plato's Socratic dialogues in order to expose linkages between his political, dialectical, and physical dynamics, which I argue are all grounded in desire. Such a sweeping project is made more manageable by recent work

⁸ Here I must disagree with large portions of Martha Nussbaum's corpus, insofar as she consistently underestimates the ugly side of desire and hope. See Nussbaum in *Erotikon* for one example.

⁹ See Kevin Duong, "What Does Queer Theory Teach Us About Intersectionality?" *Politics and Gender*, 8:3 (2012): 370-386 on the cruel optimism of feminist theory maintaining an emphasis on final, definitive knowledge as a source of liberation. This is not to suggest that I am arguing for nihilism or utter subjectivity, but simply to say that whatever kind of agreement we desire from others – not only in amount, but also in kind and levels of analysis – have repercussions that intersect with and may act against our other political hopes.

that focuses on the surprising extent to which desire pervades the Socratic dialogues, particularly work of those with interest in conversations on aesthetics and affect, including Jill Gordon, Paul Ludwig, and Anne Carson in her now classic work on representations of Eros in Greek thought. I am likewise assisted by the recent trend amongst others to attend to the literary elements and form of Plato's corpus, including the work of Ruby Blondell, Arlene Saxonhouse, Danielle Allen, and Catherine Zuckert. Both of these moves address the historical imbalance that tended to treat Plato's texts as a straightforward position concerned with reason and either its mathematical necessity or its political primacy. But even given these recent shifts to attend to such matters, I cannot help but feel that the way we explain politics remains sterile as long as these two sides – desire and reason, art and science – attempt to retain their separation. In recognition of a long tradition within literary theory to consider form and erotics connected (who cannot fail to think of Susan Sontag's forceful lament to bring erotics back into art by attending to form?) I wish to bring political theorists' conversations on desire and form together, but I would like to draw a third member into our conversation with form and eros – reason – in order to illustrate their mutual entanglement, and the way that form emerges out of a dialogue between desire and reason. In certain circumstances, this form can even be one which involves a shared, optimally rational arrangement, rather than the traditional rendering which would paint these spheres as necessarily exclusive.

For the reasons outlined in this introduction, I hope the reader will bear with me as I attempt to explore the possibility of an alternative form of scholarship that remains wedded to the necessity of truth and reason, even as it insists on the political importance of training ourselves towards a more capacious ability to listen and be with others in the world.

The Logic of Desire

What is desire? The question is notoriously hard to answer, as multiple, often conflicting claims are made about it throughout Plato's corpus. *The Symposium* alone has half a dozen renderings from different interlocutors, in *Theaetetus* it is suspected of being madness, and in *Phaedrus* it is the most divine sensation in the universe provided its more lusty side is reined in. In order to focus on one of these, I treat the Socratic dialogues as character studies rather than straightforward explications of Plato or Socrates' own positions.¹⁰ The propositions put forward in each are best understood as illustrating the ways that a person's desires, strength of character, relationality to others, *doxa*, and reason interact to form judgments.

As an example of the difficulties of taking Socratic claims at face-value, it is stated late in *The Republic* that the worst life of all is that of the tyrant, the man who is doomed to eat his own children unknowingly. If we accept this – and it is common to do so – then we are left with a conundrum concerning how much of the rest of the book to trust since it early comes out that Socrates' primary interlocutor, Glaucon, has a deformed son, but it is later decided, with Glaucon's willing agreement, that the perfect city would banish all deformed children.

“No [the musical man] wouldn't [love an unharmonious person],” [Glaucon] said, “at least if there were some defect in the soul. If, however, there were some bodily defect, he'd be patient and would willingly take delight in him.”

“I understand,” [Socrates] said. “You have, or had, such a boy and I concede your point.”¹¹

But by Book V, Glaucon has become so caught up in the heady excitement of creating a perfect regime that he forgets his earlier hesitation:

“...they will take the offspring of the good and bring them into the pen to certain nurses who live apart in a certain section of the city. And those of the worse, and any of the others born deformed, they will hide away in an unspeakable and unseen place,

¹⁰ Ruby Blondell, *The Play of Character in Plato's Dialogues*, New York: Cambridge University Press (2002).

¹¹ Plato, *Republic* 402d.

as is seemly.”

“If,” [Glaucon] said, “the guardians’ species is going to remain pure.”¹²

Given this interpretive difficulty, I choose Socrates’ personal account of Eros presented in *The Symposium* as most representative of his position, bolstered by his claims in *Lysis* that his lifelong passion has been the making and understanding of friends.¹³ I flesh this out by comparing it to other renderings available at the time and by drawing out its inherent logic.

In *The Symposium*, Socrates relates the myth of the god Eros told to him by his teacher Diotima. Rather than being beautiful, as most would hold, Eros is the child of Poverty and Wealth. Like his mother, he is shoeless, hungry, dirty, and homeless; but, like his aristocratic father, he is clever and has a love of fine and beautiful things. It is a powerful combination, for precisely because he has little material wealth and feels the pinch of want, the whole of his cunning (of which he wants none at all) is directed to scheming up ways to get himself into the presence of beauty, the object of his desire, and so end his hungering.

As brief as this description is, it has a stunning number of potential implications and paradoxes, and unpacking it will unpack the logic and structure of desire itself. To begin, we should note that desire is predicated on absence or lack.¹⁴ This alone is impressive since the Greeks had not yet formally theorized the concept of zero, but it does match both intuitive and empirical experiences of the world and so makes its way into hundreds of boring truisms: a person does not generally want what they already have. The grass is greener. Familiarity breeds contempt. Less trite are the problems of self-negation and generation this implies. For if desire attains its ends, would it not cease

¹² Ibid., 460c. Xenophon’s *Memorabilia* 6.3 also contains a short Socratic dialogue between Socrates and Glaucon in which Glaucon expresses his desire to rule. Socrates probes him to determine how much he knows about the endeavor, and it quickly becomes apparent that Glaucon not only lacks the knowledge necessary for ruling, but does not even know what the knowledge is that he would need (as evidenced by periodic exclamations amounting to “I have to know *that?!?*”).

¹³ Plato, *Lysis* 211e.

¹⁴ See Anne Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*, Champaign, IL: Dalkey Press Archive (1998).

to exist? And yet clearly it arises again and again in the face of absence. From whence, then? How does something come from nothing?¹⁵

There are several possible answers that arise. The first is in the story Socrates provides. Namely, that the absence is perceived in Eros' own mind and this inflames his desire. If this is the correct picture, then we are confronted with an infinite fractal of identity, since desire is contained within itself.¹⁶ This possibility is deepened by considering the rendering, with which Plato would have been familiar, presented in Hesiod's *Theogony*. Here, the first of all creation is Chaos, followed by Earth, and then Eros. On this account, Eros precedes nearly all the Gods (presumably because none of them could be generated without, shall we say, his assistance) and he arises from chaos. So Eros still arises from lack, specifically lack of order. Three possibilities exist here, two based on the existence of a mind and one that depends on a lack of mind. One is that it is simply the nature of Chaos to spawn things with neither rhyme nor reason, and so desire appears spontaneously. The other two require that there is a mind behind everything and, confronted with Chaos, it desired. Whether it found Chaos beautiful and desired Chaos itself (whether it said "Yes, yes!" to Chaos), or whether it recognized that Chaos lacked order and then desired order ("Dear Me, no!") are equally plausible, though which one chooses has radically different implications for politics. Let us call this the problem of judgment. In either case, the mind desired so desire arose within itself.

The arousal of Eros spontaneously, in the face of the beautiful, and in the hopes of something that is not present solves the problem of self-negation, since all of these things exist eternally, allowing desire to remain simultaneously a potentiality, an emerging reality, a reality, and a dying. Even as desire for one thing wanes, it waxes for another, and it lies in wait for still others. The paradox of how it is a thing can be both being and

¹⁵ This seems like a relatively asinine question, but we still struggle with this both scientifically, philosophically, and theologically, say when attempting to explain the origin of the universe. If everything started with the Big Bang, where did the Big Bang come from? Where is the first turtle?

¹⁶ The curiosity and apparent logical incoherence of fractals (of something being contained infinitely within itself) is explored in *Parmenides*

becoming thus becomes unproblematic in the form of Eros, as that which generates and is generated, that which destroys and is destroyed.

It is possible that some readers might be becoming uncomfortable at this point, insofar as what I am currently describing sounds very much like monotheistic notions of God the Creator who willed the universe into being through his reasonable *logos*, but most certainly not through something as impure as desire, which leads us astray constantly. Traditional readings of Plato often impose this interpretation on the texts, and there are admittedly many good opportunities to do so. I take it that these readings would limit the original moment of creation to the observation of chaos and the reasoned recognition that this moment required order, or perhaps even the creation of an order completely absent chaos right from the beginning. Those who would interpret Plato in this manner point to the place of the Good and the Beautiful as that which ought to guide us, and they render the Good and the Beautiful as the divine. Characteristics of the Good and the Beautiful include that it is infinite; it cannot partake in any way of what is not, what is bad, or what is false; and it knows everything.

There is a problem here, however: an unresolvable paradox that sits at the heart of this rendering. How can something infinite be entirely good without partaking of anything bad if bad things exist? If we follow this to its conclusion we either fall into a nihilism in which nothing human beings do or believe can possibly be bad or false because everything in the universe is divine and good, or else we are led to conclude that humankind is completely cut off from the divine and vice versa, since we are false and therefore not intellectually accessible to the Good. This difficulty with the Forms is most extensively dealt with in *Parmenides*, although it appears in multiple texts, including *The Republic*, *The Sophist*, and *Theaetetus*. The conversations are always preceded by an interlocutor being asked whether one can know what is or what is not, to which they all reply what is.¹⁷ (This itself is an ironic paradox, for how can we use the words “no” and

¹⁷ Plato, *Parmenides* 132c, *Sophist* 237 - 239, *Republic* 476d - 477a, *Theaetetus* 188e - 189a.

“not” if we cannot even conceive notness?¹⁸ But I digress.) Parmenides points out the difficulty to the young Socrates, who is forced to acknowledge that it has consequences he does not care for:

“You would say, no doubt, that if there is an absolute kind of knowledge, it is far more accurate than our knowledge, and the same of beauty and all the rest?”

“Yes.”

And if anything partakes of absolute knowledge, would you say that there is no one more likely than God to possess this most accurate knowledge?”

“Of course.”

“Then will it be possible for God to know human things, if he has absolute knowledge?”

“Why not?”

“Because,” said Parmenides, “we have agreed that those ideas are not relative to our world, nor our world to them, but each only to themselves.”

“Yes, we have agreed to that.”

“Then if this most perfect mastership and this most accurate knowledge are with God, his mastership can never rule us, nor his knowledge know us or anything of our world; we do not rule the gods with our authority, nor do we know anything of the divine with our knowledge, and by the same reasoning, they likewise, being gods, are not our masters and have no knowledge of human affairs.”

“But surely this,” said he, “is a most amazing argument, if it makes us deprive God of knowledge.”¹⁹

The difficulty, as Parmenides implies here and elsewhere, stems from the fact that this rendering attempts to create notions of absolutes based on a dichotomous purity of spheres. Each sphere, as impermeable, has no way to communicate with the other spheres.²⁰ Recall that this problem appeared in a different guise in *The Republic*, when Glaucon inadvertently banished his son to exile in order to maintain the purity of the race of guardians. Parmenides gently teases Socrates for his youthful error in assuming that

¹⁸ For those who would argue that these exchanges leave open the possibility of conceiving a concept without “knowing” the thing itself, I point you to the strong language used in several of them. *The Sophist* concludes that it is not even possible to conceive of not, to think it, or to speak it in any way whatsoever. *Republic* refers to even the thought of such a possibility as the greatest possible absurdity. “How could what is not be known at all?!” Glaucon demands, incensed.

¹⁹ *Parmenides* 133C-E.

²⁰ This same response is made by the Stranger in *Theaetetus*.

seemingly ridiculous and lowly things like mud and hair could not have an Idea of them, saying that when he is older and philosophy has taken hold of him, he will not begrudge spending ideas on such things, nor will he run any longer from the abyss of considering that what is true of one thing is true of all things.²¹

There are many possible solutions to the difficulty of incommunicability, all of which quickly get into thorny issues of dynamics, space, mathematics, and motion. One is to treat Eros as a medium between the Beautiful and the human, which would certainly be in keeping with Diotima's fable.²² Another would be to follow Parmenides' rendering, which, as a monistic account that claims Eros as the One who pervades the entire universe, contains all things (and so all paradoxes) within, thus making it manifold, simultaneously moving and unmoving, one and many, young and old, being and becoming.²³ Logically, the Good would be contained within Eros and Eros would arise within the Good when confronted with its own incompleteness, recognized through contemplation or recognition of something other. A third possibility would be to treat Eros as emerging in the empty space formed by the triangular relationship between three individuals.²⁴

It is my contention that each of these constructions, as equally logically plausible from the grounds and nature of desire, are for Socrates partially revelatory of individual truths. In other words, the way that an individual aligns them within his own soul is partially determinative of the way that he will act in the world. This brings us back, at least in part, to the problem of judgment and what it is that one chooses to say 'yes' to (what one deems beautiful and permits their desire to pursue) and to what one chooses to say 'no' (what ones deems unlovely by the dictates of reason). But it is insufficient to follow traditional renderings that reduce the problem to one of correct ontology, as

²¹ Ibid. 130d-e

²² Catherine Zuckert. *Plato's Philosophers*

²³ I take it as a given that *Parmenides* is speaking of Eros as the One; for those readers less familiar with the literature, Aristotle mentions Parmenides' One as Eros in *Metaphysics*. It was also common portray Eros as both young and old simultaneously, as the Stoics did. See Boys-Stones.

²⁴ Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*.

evidenced by the observation that Glaucon reveals himself a tyrant through his actions, but the same ontology is held by Theaetetus who is repeatedly declared to possess a beautiful soul by Socrates, as well as the young Socrates himself. So the connection between belief and beauty of soul is not a one to one relationship, nor does it appear that the connection between belief and action are.

A more useful way to draw the problem is one that captures the dynamic elements of Eros (as that which moves), as well as something that can capture the way in which one moves (the force). Judgment contains a double move: first, the assessment of whether a thing is desirable or undesirable, and second, the determination of the appropriate course of action to take. This process can occur tacitly or consciously. There is also a third possibility, mentioned in the story of the creation of the universe. That is that a desire springs up completely unbidden and without the assistance of the mind. In this case, no active judgment takes place, and the actor can be considered a passive vehicle.²⁵

Much focus on judgment and truth has been on the first part of this move – what is beautiful? To what are we drawn? How can we ensure it is the right thing? Without ignoring the importance of this question, I would prefer to emphasize the second: how does one approach the beautiful? Admittedly, paying attention to the first can be revelatory. If we take again the case of Glaucon, a crucial truth is revealed about him in the moment that he wonders. For the very lengthy duration of *The Republic*, Glaucon shows few signs of life, but he marvels, at last, when Socrates intimates that there is a way to gain immortality.²⁶ In stirring at this moment, Glaucon reveals his deepest fear is that of death, a fear Socrates believes stems from excessive self-love, given that the only reason one could have to be scared of death is to assume, erroneously, that one knows what death entails despite the fact that it necessarily belongs to the unknown.²⁷ Such excessive

²⁵ It is unclear to me whether Plato considers this possible, given the constant emphasis on the presence of the 'divine' mind in human beings, though if we consider the divine as a creative force, it may not be necessary that it be a thinking creative force.

²⁶ Plato, *Republic* 608d.

²⁷ Plato, *Apology* 29a-b. Note that "fear" appears in *Republic* several dozen times, while it appears less than one dozen times in any other single dialogue.

self-love – hubris – is characteristic of the tyrant. Though we use hubris today as a synonym for overblown pride, it is worth noting that it also had a technical legal definition in ancient Athens. Namely, rape. Regardless of whether the tyrant correctly recognized beauty or not, the error was in the approach.²⁸

On Approaching Knowledge

I contend that, on Socrates' account of Eros, it is possible to approach knowledge artfully, if not, perhaps, with guarantees of safety. Just as we can admire canyons, jaguars, Siren songs, and other beautiful things without being witless enough to throw ourselves headlong into them, so is it possible that the lover of knowledge can approach this fire without being consumed.

Nonetheless, I have found it necessary to completely rewrite this section five times on account of the stupidity inherent in approaching jaguars. My ultimate conclusion is that you must throw a lion skin over yourself²⁹ so that you appear as beautiful and terrifying as the object of your pursuit and you must distract it by making it look at something else as you come near.³⁰ Come in at a lower level than its head in order to project your submissiveness, and sing it gentle songs.³¹ If it charges you, put your arms over your head to make yourself look bigger than the beast and speak some sharp words to it.³²

I see no other way.

²⁸ Unless, of course, one wishes to accept the claim that the person or society raped was asking for it on account of an objectively recognized beauty, in which case the approach is indeed irrelevant and the enlightened ruler may do as he sees fit. Here I make a distinction between morality (transcendental truth) and ethics (form and approach) and consider the latter as offering more clarity when examining the political sphere.

²⁹ Plato, *Cratylus* 411a, in which Socrates "has put on the lion helmet." See Aesop's fable "The Ass in the Lionskin" for the allusion.

³⁰ Namely, the good.

³¹ Plato, *Phaedo* 28a.

³² Plato, *The Republic*, Book I. See Thrasymachus.

The Cassandra Problem

Provided a thorough knowledge of the limitations and constraints of a system, as well as a grasp of logic, one can theoretically calculate the optimal outcome to any game. This is limited by the finitude of the resources in question. But since we are speaking of both desire and thought, which have been shown to be infinite, we do not have to worry about scarcity of resources. Infinite desire of an unlimited system provides the singular possibility of continuing indefinitely, provided constraints are recognized due to the temporary destruction of desire in the moment the object of desire is seized, as well as constraints imposed by the manner in which knowledge makes itself visible. Since these constraints are not on the resources, they are best considered constraints of form rather than content. Given this, it should be possible to construct an experimental model for the attainment of an optimal outcome between rationality and desire.

Concerning the manner in which knowledge makes itself visible, one must consider both maximizing the amount of knowledge one will have access to as well as her own ability to recognize the knowledge when it appears. For the purposes of this paper I am primarily concerned with the former. The most capacious kind of knowledge would be that of a universal, which has already been identified as desire. Desire is indistinguishable from thought of things, since desire vanishes at the moment of possession of things. Therefore, if we wish to maximize our access to knowledge, we must focus attention on pursuing the universals desire and thought.

I further posit that we must pursue both thought and desire in all the places they might appear, rather than simply alone in our own minds. For if desire is truly as manifold as our own thought experiment suggests, then it seems logical that it would manifest differently in different subjects, not only in the object of the subject's desire, but potentially also in the manner that their reason indicates that they should pursue it. If desire manifests in multi-faceted ways, then thought must also.

This will be limited by the difficulty that not all subjects may know their own desires or thoughts clearly, whether on account of their youthfulness or owing to some other unknown factor about desire or thought itself which we have not yet discovered. Our experimental apparatus must take this difficulty into account if we are to maximize access to knowledge. We cannot simply ask subjects directly what they desire, because they may be confused or even unwilling to answer. It will thus be necessary to test the consistency of their thoughts in order to determine their clarity. Finally, we should also consider the force with which subjects pursue their desires. How does it come to be that two subjects with the same object of desire manifest that desire in action so differently? Reason is the most obvious candidate, but it would be premature to discount some feature such as inherent nature or personality, life experiences, or beliefs in things like luck or right that may affect the subject's understanding of the constraints present when making rational calculations.

It will also be necessary to engage them in such a way that their desire is aroused and we can mark the points at which this occurs. Since desire is aroused in the presence or absence of beautiful things, we must bring forth a wide variety of objects and carefully observe the subject's reactions to each. Moments at which they marvel at the beauty of an object will be revealing, but moments at which they recoil should not be overlooked, as they may also be indicative, albeit as a negative finding. If there are enough negative findings on a single point, however, we may begin to tentatively conclude that whatever the particular object is that arouses universal revulsion is objectively unlovely. We should also not neglect to observe subjects' reactions to objects outside the experimental apparatus we set up. If there is another individual or event present that we did not anticipate, our subject can nonetheless be observed in their interactions with the other object. We are seeking as much knowledge as possible, so it would be counterproductive to ignore those pieces of information which we did not control or account for in advance. Nonetheless, it is possible in some instances that an outside object will threaten to destroy the knowledge-seeking apparatus entirely by being so unlovely that it destroys our carefully orchestrated attempt to cultivate desire in our subjects. In this case, it will

be necessary to decisively put an end to their destructive actions by a) determining what it is that they desire in behaving in such a manner and b) extinguishing that desire entirely. Given the infinite range of desires one may be confronted with, it is impossible to dictate in advance the appropriate action, but an example may help illustrate the point. If the attacker's desire is to appear most powerful in the group, the most successful effort to end the behavior would be to express one's own superiority.³³

Let us not neglect our own beauty in this endeavor. Recent research has indicated that the experimental apparatus actually affects the physical behavior of the system in question, thus altering outcomes. It is crucial to understand that the claim is more radical than implying that the ideal apparatus will attain objective truths if it is only organized just so – the claim is that the apparatus must necessarily always be entangled with the subject under study and will always alter it.³⁴ This need not be a cause for dismay, however. Our goal is to maximize our access to knowledge of desire and thought, and we know that desire fades in the absence of lack and grows in its presence, as well as in the presence of beauty. So we must conduct ourselves in order to appear desirable but maintain enough distance from the subject to avoid closing the gap.

How to appear desirable is admittedly outside my normal field of expertise, as I regretfully must acknowledge that women generally tend to find poets much more magnetic than they do nearly any one else, but especially moreso than they do political scientists.³⁵ So, while this is perhaps a bit methodologically unorthodox, I hope the reader will bear with me as I attempt to glean insight into this question by observing poets in action. It is said that

...the Muse inspires men herself, and then by means of these inspired persons the inspiration spreads to others, and holds them in a connected chain. For all the good epic poets utter all those fine poems not from art, but as inspired and possessed, and the good lyric poets likewise; just as the Corybantian worshippers do not dance when in their senses, so the lyric poets do not indite those fine songs in their senses, but

³³ Plato, *The Republic*, Book I. See Thrasymachus.

³⁴ Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*

³⁵ Plato on the (literal) magnetism of poetry: *Ion* 533d-e

when they have started on the melody and rhythm they begin to be frantic, and it is under possession—as the bacchantes are possessed, and not in their senses, when they draw honey and milk from the rivers—that the soul of the lyric poets does the same thing, by their own report. For the poets tell us, I believe, that the songs they bring us are the sweets they cull from honey-dropping fountains in certain gardens and glades of the Muses—like the bees, and winging the air as these do. And what they tell is true. For a poet is a light and winged and sacred thing, and is unable ever to indite until he has been inspired and put out of his senses, and his mind is no longer in him...³⁶

In this, there are several qualities the poet possesses, but it is not clear just which make him so magnetic. He speaks true things, he acts frantically, and the things he speaks and sings are also sweet and have rhythm. If we compare this to other descriptions, though, we may be able to triangulate which of these qualities are necessary and/ or sufficient.

Hesiod speaks of princes, who must also be attractive to their people, and he compares their skills to that of poets. According to his account,

[The Muses] pour sweet dew upon his tongue, and from his lips flow gracious words. All the people look towards him while he settles causes with true judgments: and he, speaking surely, would soon make wise end even of a great quarrel; for therefore are there princes wise in heart, because when the people are being misguided in their assembly, they set right the matter again with ease, persuading them with gentle words. And when he passes through a gathering, they greet him as a god with gentle reverence, and he is conspicuous amongst the assembled: such is the holy gift of the Muses to men. For it is through the Muses and far-shooting Apollo that there are singers and harpers upon the earth; but princes are of Zeus, and happy is he whom the Muses love: sweet flows speech from his mouth. For although a man has sorrow and grief in his newly-troubled soul and lives in dread because his heart is distressed, yet, when a singer, the servant of the Muses, chants the glorious deeds of men of old and the blessed gods who inhabit Olympus, at once he forgets his heaviness and remembers not his sorrows at all; but the gifts of the goddesses soon turn him away from these.³⁷

³⁶ Ibid. 533e-534b.

³⁷ Hesiod, *Theogony* 75-100.

So here the prince lacks the madness of the poet, but he shares in his truthfulness and speaks gentle, honeyed words that are persuasive. And yet surely we as scientists speak the truth, in which case one must suspect that the variable of importance has to do with gentle or honeyed words.

A final example will serve to verify this hypothesis. Seers and religious figures are often widely believed, and yet it is unclear whether or not they speak the truth. But Greek culture included the well-known tale of the prophetess Cassandra who always spoke the truth and was always frantic, and yet was never believed.³⁸ The more common account has it that she asked for the gift of prophecy from Apollo and agreed that in exchange for learning to predict the future she would be his consort. But after being taught how to see the future, she revoked her promise and he cursed her so that she would always speak truly but never be believed.

It is my contention that her punishment was not an active retribution by Apollo, as is normally told, but is inherent in the fact that she came to be a truth-teller but stopped short of consummating the process by learning how to make herself gentle through experience with another. She did not learn properly how to make her words alight gently on our ears, nor did she learn how to gauge the responsiveness, pleasure, boredom, or displeasure of another by engaging in mutual exchange. Other seers use language that superficially appears highly irrational: "I see fire and lightning spring from the belly of the horse!" Cassandra says, "For heaven's sake, can't you see it's a trap, you stupid clods?!" Despite outward appearances, however, the former is in reality the more rational because it is more likely to draw listeners in, insofar as it is more attractive, having taken the pains to make itself beautiful but also slightly inaccessible. Provided that both statements are equally true, I put forward that the former is therefore preferable for he who wishes to make himself beautiful and thus create an experimental apparatus for eliciting and interpreting the greatest amount of truth from others.

³⁸ Euripides, *The Trojan Women*. Cassandra is referred to as "frantic" or "frenzied" no less than eight times.

I would also like to suggest that we permitted rhythm to fall out too quickly because Hesiod did not mention it as a quality of the prince; however, if we consider it at a higher level of analysis than simply that of the pattern of flow of individual words and so extend it over an entire interaction – first eager, then doubtful, first submissiveness, now active – we may avoid the boredom that is inevitable if we maintain a predictable pace throughout. Additionally, having each of these tools at our disposal will allow us to more fluidly deal with interruptions of the sort that were illustrated by the earlier case of the destructive chaotic or intervening variable. This adds a dynamism to the interaction that permits the greatest amount of desire to manifest within the experimental set-up. In this way we can channel or stop its flow with greater precision and intentionality and avoid both unintentional bias and premature withdrawal by subjects.³⁹ Subjects are very sensitive to alterations in the rhythm of conversation, and we would not be maximizing our data collection if we expected them to ignore ugliness on the part of the experimenter, regardless of whether it was intentional or not, especially now that we have knowledge of the impact the experimenter has as part of the apparatus.⁴⁰

When beginning the exchange, it is best to approach the subject from a slightly submissive stance.⁴¹ This maneuver is attractive to the widest range of people. It is non-threatening to both those of high and low station – the former being unused to direct challenges to their authority and the latter being inherently wary of such authority. It is

³⁹ See Plato, *Cratylus* 415 on flow and movement and their linguistic link to justice, also 411d-412b on wisdom, timing, and motion, 413e on injustice as blockage of flow. Nonetheless, the dialogue ends with the suggestion that the permanence of these links may be fallacious, based on a version of the claim that you can never step in the same river twice (because it is always changing/flowing).

⁴⁰ Plato, *Symposium* 206d. “. . . when the pregnant approaches the beautiful it becomes not only gracious but so exhilarate, that it flows over with begetting and bringing forth; though when it meets the ugly it coils itself close in a sullen dismay: rebuffed and repressed . . .”

⁴¹ In the first sentence of *The Republic*, Socrates is said to “go down” to the Piraeus. The Greek kata-baino (κατέβην) and Sanskrit ava-gam (अवगम) have identical lexical constructions and meant, literally, “down-go.” Both were also used idiomatically to mean “understand,” which itself retains an extremely similar conceptual link and spatial metaphor in English. The Greek version is rarely translated idiomatically, but the Sanskrit is nearly always taken this way in texts. Socrates is consistently self-deprecating at the beginning of nearly all exchanges with his interlocutors. Note later theorists’ attention to the requirement of the view from below when engaging in dialogue and philosophy, including Machiavelli standing beneath the prince on his mountain and Nietzsche’s Zarathustra “going down” amongst the people in order learn.

also flattering to the ego and mildly suggestive that you find the subject beautiful, implying that you prostrate yourself before them as one might before a lover or a teacher. It is best not to misjudge and sink too low, however, lest the subject be put off by any perceived weakness, weakness being widely considered unlovely.

It is important to remember that no subject is too unimportant for consideration, on account of our greediness to maximize access to information.⁴² But it will be most productive to temper our greediness with gentleness, since overzealousness on the part of the experimenter may upset the delicate balance of the exchange by overwhelming the subject. It is, after all, the subject's truth we are after. To this end, the ideal researcher will already have a thorough knowledge of him or herself which will prevent the need to interject inappropriately on account of some moment of self-realization that compels excessive excitement and so speech. Remember, it is the honeyed words of the poet that are attractive to others, so we should remain gentle whenever possible, to assist our interlocutor in giving birth to his own ideas and not biasing or overwhelming them with our own interruptions. The flow of desire is maintained with a light, not grasping, touch, one that permits it the air it needs to breathe.⁴³

In spite of our reservations in retarding the revelation of others' desires, our greediness for access to as much truth as possible in the experimental set up will necessitate very subtle adjustments that will prevent others' poor form from crushing the delicate revelations of still others. If it comes to our attention that our subjects' desires and reason are misaligned in such a way that they are overly oppressive of others, causing them to withdraw into themselves, some way of realigning, but not fundamentally altering, the interplay of their desires, reason, and actions will be necessary. The proper

⁴² ". . . you may see still more how greedy I am for images . . ." Socrates tells Glaucon. Plato, *Republic* 488a. See also 475c for the lover of knowledge as "hungry" and so not finicky about what he eats.

⁴³ In addition to the poets being gentle, gentleness is the quality most mentioned of Theaetetus, whom Socrates consistently refers to as possessing a beautiful soul. In more scientific discourses of the time, it is considered necessary that the dynamic force that causes motion must be whatever is the finest grained, most light-weight thing (for Democritus this was atoms, for Diogenes, air). See Aristotle, *De Anima* for a discussion of other thinkers' accounts of the lightness of flow. See Plato for the gentle beauty of *Theaetetus*.

response will be dependent on the unique combination of these variables within the subject, but perhaps an example will suffice. Let us say that the subject, on account of his education, is overly convinced that he has discovered the one true answer to the universe and so feels compelled to aggressively force this opinion on others, thereby blocking the free flow of their desires. In this case, we may choose either to humble the aggressor by bringing him to a state of aporia that proves he knows less than he believes, or we could put before him a person of whom he is very fond but whom we know disagrees with him. In the latter case, his unwillingness to hurt his friend may make him aware of the necessity of holding his tongue or otherwise reconsidering his actions.

While acknowledging the necessarily rough and schematic outline of this proposal, I hope that it will point towards a more optimally efficient manner of conducting our research that removes certain elements of bias from our current work. As a final remark, I should make clear an implicit difficulty haunting this proposal which has yet remained unstated. The ideal researcher should actually enjoy her work, insofar as the extreme sensitivity of subjects to ugliness suggests that, should a subject become aware that the researcher is exploiting the conversation entirely for her own ends – in other words, should it become obvious that the conversation is purely instrumentally rational and the researcher is not listening to the participant for the sheer pleasure of his company as one would a friend or equal – the subject's desire to speak and reveal themselves will almost certainly vanish.

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