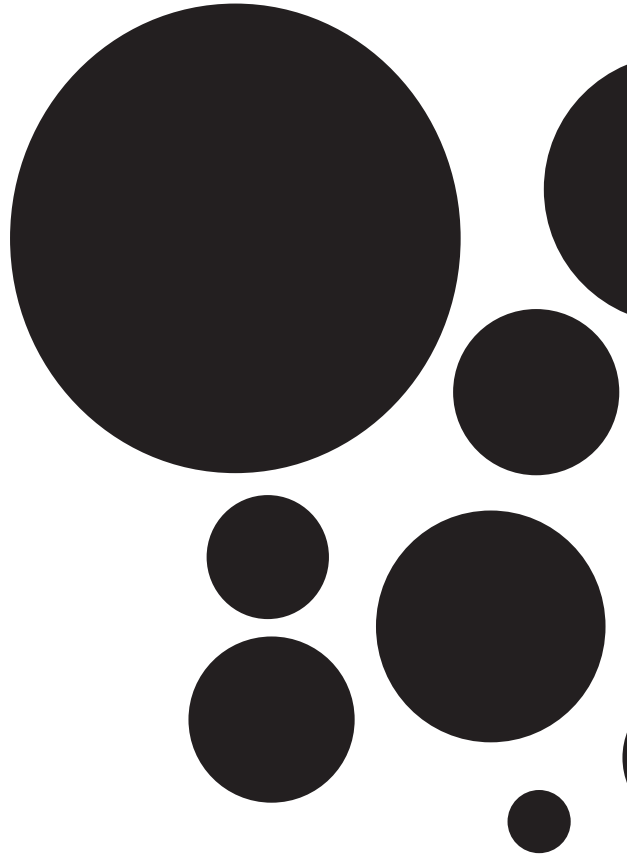


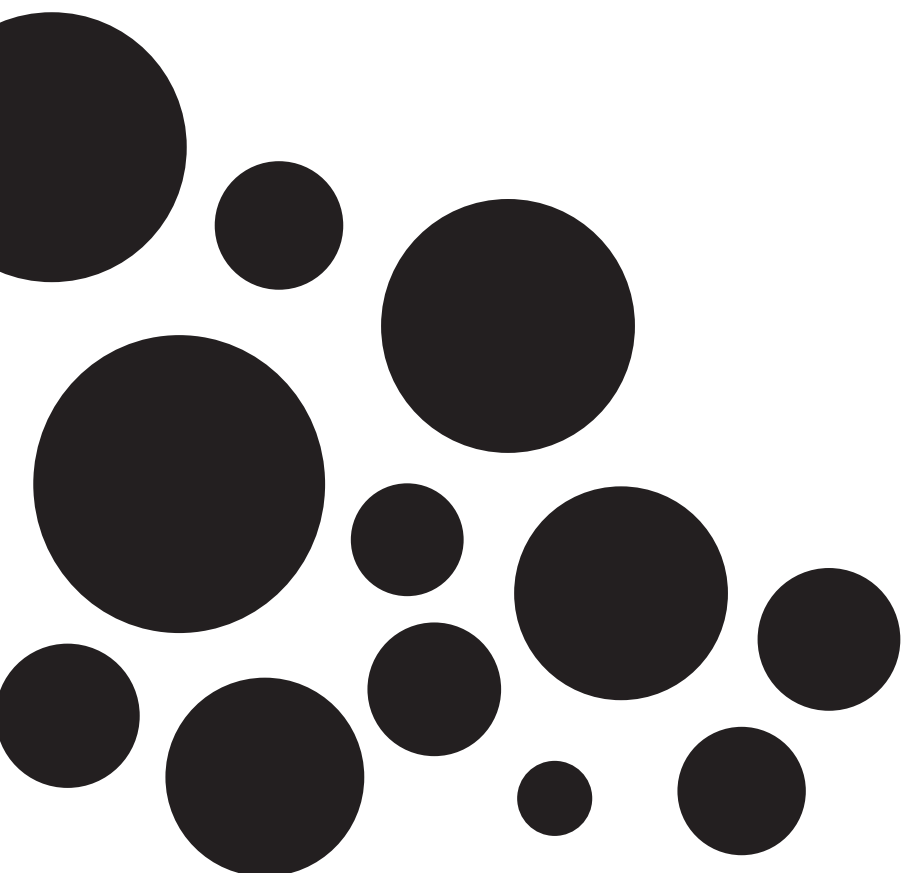
# Anamnesis

The Colorado College Journal of Philosophy

Volume VI • 2021







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## **Mission Statement & Acknowledgements**

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*Anamnesis* is the student-edited philosophy journal of Colorado College. The journal publishes philosophical undergraduate essays from colleges and universities nationwide. Colorado College students founded the journal in order to give their peers a taste of what the discipline can be at its best. In line with this goal, we aim to publish clearly written, elegantly argued essays. We also strive to publish essays that directly pertain to the most interesting, difficult, and pressing issues in both philosophy and our lives.

We would like to thank Cutler Publications for making the journal possible this year. We'd also like to thank Rick Furtak and Helen Daly for their thoughtful insights and support.

## **Letter from the Editors**

For the sixth volume of *Anamnesis*, we sent out a call for papers with no particular theme in mind. This past year has been a time full of strife and sorrow, and reading submissions with diverse subject matters has been an immense privilege. The first essay, written by Matthew Simons of Colorado College, discusses the intersection of child psychological development and language acquisition. The second essay, written by Logan Graham of St. Olaf College, gives a very creative and insightful account of internet meme culture, a growing part of our increasingly-online lives. The third paper, written by Anna Wermuth of Colorado College, gives a feminist- Marxist-critique of the structure of the growing automatization of the labor force. The edition closes with Colorado College student JohnMichael McCann's thoughtful consideration of the auditory imagination, a cognitive faculty most clearly demonstrated by notable modern creative visionaries.

We have weathered a uniquely challenging and isolating academic year. Many of us have lost loved ones over the course of the past year, and all of us have lost something else: opportunities to be close to those we love, to learn in the same spaces, to write in the same spaces, to philosophize in the same spaces. It is our hope that this edition of *Anamnesis* will do its part in carving out a virtual space for philosophical community and connection.

# It's Just Semantics

By **Matthew Simons**  
*Colorado College*





Say you are giving the definition of 'dog' to a child and explain it to be a creature with four legs and fur that lives with humans. The child then points to a cat and says, "That is a dog!" You would then correct the child and tell her that what she is pointing to is a cat, not a dog. But within the parameters of the definition given, the child is correct in assuming that the animal pointed to is a dog. After all, cats also have four legs and fur and live with humans. There is no way for her to tell the difference based on your definition. This is an example of "over-extension" in early childhood language development: the use of a word to refer to things that do not fit within its definition. But how do children fix their extension errors? How do we begin to use words correctly and understand exactly what they mean?

One would quite naturally assume that the words we use in our languages have meanings. And for a word to have meaning, there must be correct and incorrect ways of using that word. What determines how we use a word correctly? One possible answer is, "The meaning of a linguistic expression determines what counts as correctly or incorrectly applying the expression in particular instances."<sup>1</sup> This concept is called semantic normativity, and at first glance, it almost seems like a truism. The semantic normativity thesis should seem fairly natural to most language users; after all, when most people are in a dispute over what a word means, they look to the dictionary to define that word for them. A definition gives us the meaning of a word which then determines how to use that word correctly. Definitions can be viewed as rules for how to correctly use a word. And this idea that correctness is determined by the meaning or defini-

tion of a word is semantic normativity.

### I. The Regress and Gerrymandering Arguments

Ludwig Wittgenstein, in his book *Philosophical Investigations*, challenges the concept of semantic normativity. The regress and gerrymandering arguments, as they are called by Wittgenstein scholars, draw the reader's attention to the problematic nature of semantic normativity through two different thought experiments. Let us look back to the child misinterpreting the word 'dog' to understand the regress argument. After the child has incorrectly identified the cat with the word 'dog,' you would naturally correct her and then attempt to provide a more accurate definition of 'dog.' You could say that a 'dog' is usually bigger than a cat and barks instead of meows. The issue with this definition of 'dog' is that the child could also misinterpret it as she did the first one. She could see a coyote and refer to it as 'dog' because coyotes also bark and are larger than cats. A rule that clarifies a misunderstood rule can also be misunderstood. Even a rule explaining a rule is the same kind of thing: "The regress arises in each case because each thing we introduce to determine how it should be correctly applied is merely another object of this kind."<sup>2</sup> This generates an infinite regress in which there is no rule or definition that can remove all doubt as to how to correctly use a word.

A rule is in need of some interpretation by the person attempting to understand it. And if the first rule can be misinterpreted, then the next rule implemented to clarify the first misinterpretation, can also be misinterpreted. A definition uses words to explain what another word

means, but if the words in the definition are not already understood by the person learning the definition of the word, then the definition serves no purpose.

Despite the theoretical strength of the regress argument, we still seem to understand how to use words correctly. Most adult language users are not regularly confusing dogs with cats, bears, or anything else that does not fit the definition of 'dog.' Is this because they have fully understood the rule for how to use the word 'dog'? Does understanding the definition of 'dog' allow adult language users to know all possible correct situations in which to use the word? Wittgenstein does not think so, and he uses the gerrymandering thought experiment to demonstrate that knowing the meaning of a word cannot guarantee that anybody else will understand the meaning as you do.

Say you are given the series 4, 8, 12, 16, 20 . . . How would you continue that series? What is the rule for that series? Most people would say the rule for the series is +4 to each consecutive number. But I could also continue the series like this: 25, 30, 35, 40, 45, 50, 56, 62, 68 . . . You might be inclined to call my continuation of the series incorrect. In response, I explain that I thought the series was +4 for the first four numbers, +5 for the next five numbers, +6 for the next 6 numbers, etc. It is unlikely that most people seeing the original series would extrapolate this pattern, but my rule for the series is just as correct as the +4 rule. The reason we might reject my rule for the series is that we usually believe, for a series of this kind, that "the right step is the one that is in accordance with the order—as it was meant."<sup>3</sup> The creator of the series probably meant for it to be continued with

the +4 rule, but the series itself cannot guarantee a shared interpretation of how it is supposed to continue correctly.

This reasoning can be applied to words as well. Take the word 'pillow': All our knowledge of that word is based on past experiences we have had. Somebody pointed to an object and called it a 'pillow,' or we saw pillows on TV or in a store. These personal experiences we have with the word 'pillow' give us its meaning. Each use of 'pillow' in our life is like a number in the series, and the meaning of 'pillow' is the rule for how to continue the series. There is no guarantee that I will continue to use the word 'pillow' in a manner that seems intuitive to you. My understanding of the definition of 'pillow' might be different because I learned the word through different examples than you did. When I use 'pillow' to refer to a chair, you might try and clarify what 'pillow' actually means. But when you attempt to further explain what 'pillow' means, you fall back into the infinite regress in which I could misinterpret all the words you use in your definition of 'pillow.'

## II. Family Resemblance Model

The arguments against semantic normativity present us with a difficult dilemma. It seems that a word's meaning cannot create the rule for its correct usage, yet we usually understand when a word is being used correctly or incorrectly. So, there must be an alternative way to think about how we know the correct and incorrect usage of a word. Though Wittgenstein does not present a positive theory of language in *Philosophical Investigations*, he does introduce the concept of family resemblance

to suggest how we might know how to use words correctly. Family resemblance is the idea that words are connected through their various uses by a string of 'affinities and similarities' between each different meaning or way of interpreting the word. Wittgenstein explains the concept using the word 'game': "Look, for example, at board-games, with their various affinities. Now pass to card-games; here you find many correspondences with the first group, but many common features drop out, and others appear. When we pass next to ball-games, much that is common is retained, but much is lost. — Are they all 'entertaining'? Compare chess with noughts and crosses [tic tac toe]."<sup>4</sup> He then continues to describe various other games: some are competitive, some involve balls, some have teams, etc. But there is nothing that is common to all games, only a web of similarities that connect all of them. Wittgenstein seems to believe that all words function like this. Fake plastic lemons, drawings of lemons, non-yellow lemons, and normal lemons all have overlapping aspects, but there are not any characteristics that every single one of them shares.

The family resemblance concept escapes the pitfalls of semantic normativity because one cannot create a rule for the correct usage of a word based on meanings which are strung together with various affinities but no central idea. For a rule or definition to govern the correct usage of a word, there needs to be at least one characteristic that is central to every possible usage of that word. In the family resemblance model, there is no single characteristic that all uses of the word 'lemon' share. This makes it difficult to delineate exactly which uses of the word 'lemon' are correct and which are incorrect because the category of 'lemon'

does not have clear boundaries as to which things do or do not belong within the category based on some essential characteristic(s).

The family resemblance concept resolves a lot of the issues with semantic normativity and seems to explain a lot of the nuances in our language, but does the concept extend beyond the theoretical realm? Do we think of a word as a string of connections between its various iterations? The family resemblance model does not seem to comport with how I think most adult language users think about the meaning of the words they know. I do not think the word 'lemon' is a loose string of connections between the various ways I use the word; rather, there seems to be something that makes a lemon a lemon.

People have often been thought to understand concepts by the essential characteristics of a concept or 'what a thing is.' This is known as the classical theory of concepts, and it posits that a concept has necessary and sufficient conditions which determine its correct application. This is the conceptual basis for semantic normativity: a word, according to this theory, is basically a referential concept that has necessary and sufficient conditions for its correct usage. And it seems that when it comes to words and concepts, we think of them as having necessary and sufficient conditions that dictate whether something belongs in the category or not. So, is there any reason to believe that the family resemblance concept is actually how we know how to use a word correctly?

### III. Overextension, Underextension, and Prototypes

One way to see if the family resemblance concept applies to how we learn

and use words is to look at the early childhood development of language. When children first learn new words, they tend to overextend and underextend words. For instance, a child might only refer to their own dog as 'dog' when first using the word. This example would be an underextension because the child does not refer to all things within the 'dog' category as 'dog.' As our original example illustrated, an overextension would be if the child calls a cat a 'dog' because they see that a cat is also four-legged and furry. It is understandable why children would make these over- and underextension mistakes in the learning process, as the context in which they learn certain words might indicate various salient features about the referent that they regard with different degrees of importance. When referring to objects, children will overextend words because they do not have the appropriate words to describe the thing they are trying to talk about, so they find words with overlapping attributes to the given referent to use instead. If a child is trying to refer to a bear that she sees, she could call it a 'dog' because the attributes of 'dog' that the child has observed in previous uses of the word overlap with some of the characteristics she notices about the bear (fur, four legs). The child is using the shared attributes between bears and dogs to create a group for things that are furry, walk on four legs, and can run. And then the child associates this group of four-legged, furry, running things with the word 'dog.'

When asked to point to a picture of a 'dog,' children will choose the photo of a dog first. When they are asked to continue to point to more pictures of 'dogs,' children will also point to pictures of things they had previously overextended

the word 'dog' to (e.g. bears, cats). But they will never point to non-exemplars of 'dog' (e.g. train, house, anything that bears no resemblance to a dog). This indicates that they understand certain examples to be more prototypic than others: "they [the children] tend to choose objects that are prototypic insofar as the concepts underlying their use of the word is concerned."<sup>5</sup> For instance, the dogs in the neighborhood become the prototype of the word 'dog' because their parents will point and refer to the animal as a 'dog.' But anything with the observable characteristics of the dogs their parents pointed out to them—noisy, furry, four legs like a bear or cat—could also be referred to as 'dog' in the child's mind. This is because they seem to learn words by collecting information about the characteristics of each referent of a word and then applying that word to novel referents based on shared characteristics with previous referents of the word. Through these associations, they begin understanding how objects are related to each other and begin forming categories based on these associations. Words are then connected with certain categories of associated attributes, and this is how the family resemblance model functions.

This also goes to show that children are not necessarily aware of the salient features of 'dogs' that we as adults use to identify a dog, since children can think that the word 'dog' also refers to cats and bears. But to adults, cats and bears have features that differentiate them from dogs. This means that when an adult points out a dog, the child does not necessarily know what features of the dog differentiate that dog from other similar things (e.g. cats, bears). Even though adults know the difference between dogs

and cats, they are not much different from children when it comes to knowing what exactly a speaker means when making an utterance. Because we can never get inside someone's head to know exactly what they mean (i.e. what salient features of the referent they have in mind) when they use a word.

The research on prototypes by Eleanor Rosch and Carolyn Mervis provides some evidence that the prototype/family resemblance theory applies to how adults conceptualize words too. Through six different experiments, they found a reason to think that prototypes of a given category are the ones with "the most attributes in common with other members of the category and least attributes in common with other categories."<sup>6</sup> The experiments showed that prototypes are not the members of a category that share a characteristic with all other members: "the salient attribute structure of these categories tended to reside, not in criterial features common to all members of the category which distinguished those members from all others, but in a large number of attributes true of some, but not all, category members."<sup>7</sup> For instance, a car would be the prototype of the vehicle category because it shares the most features with other members of the category (plane, train, bike), not because it has certain features that are common to all members of the vehicle category. These findings point toward an understanding of the meaning of words as categories that have overlapping similarities between all the members of the category. Because the prototypes of categories do not have essential characteristics as the classical theory of concepts suggests but rather have the most overlapping features with other members of the

category as the family resemblance model suggests. The various studies on prototypicality within categories support Wittgenstein's claim that the way we use words is not by analyzing whether a referent meets the necessary and sufficient conditions of the word referring to it. Instead, we seem to learn and use words through a string of connections between different uses of that word, some uses of a word being more prototypical than others.

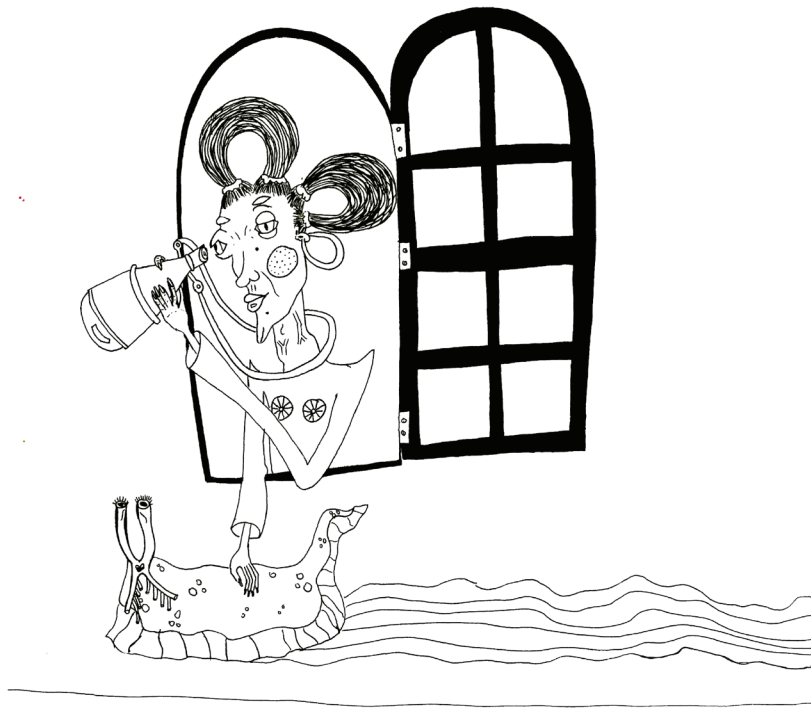
We learn words through various examples in early childhood, and then continually refine our understanding of that word by observing other people's use of that word. Our meaning of a word is thereby shaped by the examples we have learned and negotiated through social interactions with other people. And because of the similarities in the psychological, phenomenological, and social context within which most language users learn words, our understanding of word meanings converge enough to communicate fairly successfully. To make rules around the correct and incorrect usage of those words would be virtually impossible though. We all learn and use words through a vast array of different contexts that are similar enough for successful communication but different enough that we cannot know whether somebody else has the exact same idea of what any given words mean. The family resemblance model of semantics by no means explains all aspects of language acquisition and use, but it does explain how we might know what somebody is saying without actually knowing what they mean.

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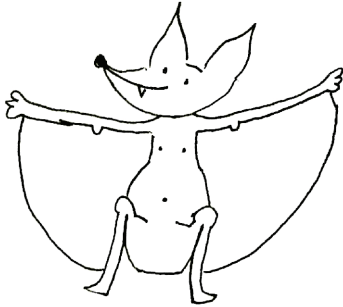
## Endnotes

- 1 Thomas McNally, *Wittgenstein and the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 71.
- 2 *Ibid.*, 58.
- 3 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte (Chichester: Wiley, 2009), §186.
- 4 *Ibid.*, §66.
- 5 Stan Kuczaj, "Thoughts on the Intensional Basis of Early Object Word Extension," in *The Development of Word Meaning*, ed. by Stan Kuczaj and Martyn Barrett (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1986), 105.
- 6 Eleanor Rosch and Carolyn B. Mervis, "Family Resemblances: Studies in the Internal Structure of Categories," *Cognitive Psychology* 7, no. 4 (1975): 573.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 580.



# Simulating the Self

Suffocating in the Quicksand of Internet Meta-Irony



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By **Logan Graham**  
*St. Olaf College*





In 1981, Jean Baudrillard painted postmodern theory in a layer of neon by developing a new framework for comprehending the late-stage consumer society that he felt Marxist orthodoxy failed to describe; this new critique was focusing on images and symbols used to transfer social meaning. In his opus *Simulacra and Simulation*, Baudrillard argued that our fixation on these symbols and society's capital predisposition for creating them led to the generation of simulacra—which are symbols referring to no original—that are neither real nor false, but rather “hyperreal.” Hyperreality is defined as “the generation by models of a real without origin or reality.”<sup>1</sup> Our lives, Baudrillard contends, are so focused on these simulacra that we have lost truth and meaning, and we now live in a hyper-real space dominated by these symbols.<sup>2</sup>

In this essay, I apply Baudrillard's simulacra framework to describe the sort of meta-ironic form of communication that pervades the discourse of people who are “terminally online”: a group which is largely composed of young people, characterized by their constant usage of and dependence on internet communities. The end goal is to show the corrosive and suffocating influence of this mode of communication, which threatens to devour our sense of the sincere.

## I. A Baudrillardian Description of Meta-Irony

Meta-irony is an uncommon term with contested meanings, so I ought to establish my definition. A typical ironic statement is the exaggeration of the antithesis of a sincere position so as to display the sincere position. Someone might say “I love waiting in lines” to convey they

do not love waiting in lines. This sort of irony is, by the internet generation, largely considered trite.

Meta-irony is adding another layer of obfuscation to the sincere intent. This can exist in four main ways, which model Baudrillard's four stages of simulacra. While Baudrillard's simulacra obscure the truth of something that exists in the world, meta-ironic statements add this obfuscation to what is sincere.

Baudrillard's first stage simulacra is an attempt at genuinely representing the world.<sup>3</sup> In Baudrillard's view, one can never grasp exactly what they are aiming to represent, as the viewing and recording of that thing threatens to change it.<sup>4</sup> A stage one meta-ironic statement employs additional layers of irony but the sincere intent is easily understood.

The second stage simulacra actively obscures the truth—it shifts and perverts what is true in what it represents.<sup>5</sup> A second stage meta-ironic statement similarly seeks to obscure the sincere perspective. This may be done for a number of reasons, but it is essentially the usage of irony to make a certain genuine opinion only visible to people “in the know”. Only those who can decode the subtlety of the irony, often obtained through in-group knowledge, have any idea what the statement means sincerely.

Once a simulacra enters the third stage, it exists to obscure the fact that there is no longer a basic reality.<sup>6</sup> This simulacra doesn't typically present itself as fully true, it presents itself as a second-stage simulacra—the difference being that there is no original reality upon which it ultimately refers to.<sup>7</sup> The third form of meta-irony is a statement that relies on intentional ironic ambiguity to mask the lack of a sincere opinion. Sometimes the

statement fully becomes sincere or insincere depending on others' reactions to it, but upon the moment of transmission, it is a statement that exists to engage with others while also hiding the lack of a genuine perspective. Many online political "jokes" fall into this categorization, wherein the joke is either representing or lampooning the perspective represented textually depending on people's reaction to it.

The fourth and final form of meta-irony is, unsurprisingly, a parallel to a stage four simulacra, wherein the symbol references nothing and becomes purely hyperreal.<sup>8</sup> A statement like this is one in which the speaker has no sincere intent anymore, the real being completely dissolved. Someone who loses sight of their sincerity or sense of self, but keeps the dopamine-fueled communicative momentum of the internet going, can descend into a world of fourth-stage meta-irony, where every statement is simply "going through the motions."

The rest of this paper will elucidate examples of meta-irony and will describe the impulses that might drive people to these methods of communication.

## II. The Nakedness of the Digital Sphere

Meta-irony rules online communities. Meta-Irony does not necessarily dog all digital communication, but rather communities of individuals that exist specifically online. One of the defining traits of the modern internet, both for its supporters and detractors, is the fact that any sort of subculture can be found and cultivated online. The internet has provided a remarkably efficient network for people to escape geographical

distance and communicate more widely. Many young individuals with marginalized identities can come to rely on these internet communities, especially in cases where in-person communities based on their identity might be unavailable or actively suppressed.

The internet, of course, facilitates other communities, however. The common media narrative on internet politics is that they can be radicalizing, individuals being able to both find more radical subcultures and create "echo-chambers" for themselves so that they are never challenged by outside opinions. By implying that these radical communities would have existed anyway and that the internet has just allowed them to organize and grow, this narrative overlooks something crucial, which Baudrillard may remind us to consider: the fact that these communities are on the internet is what causes them to exist in their current form. These radical ideologies certainly existed before the internet, but it's possible that the internet becoming the prime communicative vector has changed them due to the markedly different rhetorical space the internet works within.

The defining feature of most internet subcultures is that they are *naked*. These subcultures can be found by nearly anyone at any time, which frees them to both recruits and critics. This is true of all major internet subcultures, and not just the radical ones. This creates a dual-audience issue for the subcultures, where they are bound in their communication by the "public's" ability to see them but are still wanting to authentically communicate the ideas/experiences of said subculture. There is also a worry of appropriation, where the language of a subculture can be subsumed into the

broader cultural milieu and deprived of its rhetorical punch or radical connotation. One only needs to look at the ubiquitous appropriation of phrases—like fierce, werk, yaaas queen, spilling tea, etc.—that emerged from ballroom culture, an underground and revolutionary subculture which originated in 1970s Harlem as protest by queer Black and brown communities.

In order to address this dual-audience, many internet subcultures have turned to meta-irony, specifically second-order meta-ironic statements. By obscuring the sincere position underneath turns of irony, obscure language, and omitted references, the members of the subculture can retain their privacy (in a limited sense). Perhaps more important than privacy, however, is retaining the feeling of a community. If everyone is “in” on it, it may not be a unique community that can help constitute one’s identity anymore. When these ironic signifiers can be spread with the incredible speed of the internet, it can supplant simple and sincere communication for the purpose of retaining this intimacy. A “terminally online” individual with some strong subcultural ties can scroll through their social media feeds and see the extent to which the content they consume would be incomprehensible to the uninitiated.

These elements have always existed in subcultures, of course—especially ones which have faced persecution—but these rhetorical turns seem to have become fundamentally inauthentic insofar as they never stop being created and there is no moment immune to being seen by the outside. Pre-internet, the hope of many subcultures was to create environments where the obfuscation could stop, but for communities which exist online, it

can never stop. To be engaged with ideas primarily online is to corrode them in the name of appropriating them. This new language of ideas, this discourse defined by second-order meta-irony, bleeds into non-online communication for young “terminally online” individuals. Like Baudrillard warned us when discussing Beaubourg, the medium of communication can elicit a stranglehold over the message itself.<sup>9 10</sup>

The medium has triumphed, and the nakedness that it forces has favored obstructing and corrupting the sincere.

### III. The Comedic Appeal to the Absurd

Of course, irony is often supposed to be funny. The internet subcultural desire for meta-irony is not exclusive to oppressed peoples and political radicals avoiding appropriation and subjugation. Meta-Irony is sometimes employed for the sole purpose of being funny. There is even a whole type of humor that exists solely to employ this second-order meta-irony: referential humor. Being able to create a web of symbols and irony that only someone with certain experiences could understand is one of the most common types of humor, and it has grown considerably on the internet.

Those jokes, however, still have some sincerity. They are referring to an experience or a position, oftentimes making a normative judgement on them. There is, however, a different form of humor that has reemerged from the internet: a comedic appeal to the absurd.

A comedic appeal to the absurd is strange, usually communicated with irony and obscure references, but the point of this appeal isn’t to comment on some idea

or experience, the point is to make as little sense as possible. If the viewer isn't left wondering "why does this exist?", the mark has been missed. Oftentimes, the references exist so the uninitiated might mistakenly believe there is a meaning that they are missing. The archetypal comedic appeal to the absurd is an image that went viral online. The image is of Mark Zuckerberg at his 2018 congressional hearing, but his face is merged with the video-game YouTube content creator Markiplier and the antagonist of Dreamworks' 2001 film *Shrek*, Lord Farquaad. The only text on the image is the capital letter E. This image went viral and became a landmark example of Gen Z humor. The joke is that there isn't really a joke—it is an appeal to complete absurdity and nonsense.<sup>11</sup> Another component of the virality of this image is to reply to anyone asking what the joke means just with 'E.'

This is a stage four meta-ironic statement. The "E-meme" is a joke which uses a web of references and irony to ultimately mean nothing. Perhaps one could argue that the comedic appeal to the absurd is a postmodern statement on the failure of structures of meaning, a resurgence in dadaism. It may be for some, but there are certainly many who find the ridiculousness of the content funny in and of itself. It isn't the audience laughing at the creator for making something so stupid; it is the audience and the creator laughing at the creation for being so stupid.

In a medium where there is an overwhelming stream of content at all times, a stage four meta-ironic statement like this serves to give the viewer something to react to without having to engage with a substantive point or

idea (again, there is nothing sincere underneath). There is simply too much available content at all times to engage critically with all of it, especially when the internet often serves as an escape from the criticality of "real" life. With this comedy, the viewer still gets the feeling of a sophisticated sense of humor by way of recognizing the references employed and by being self-aware about the absurdity of the humor itself. This is the utility of the comedic Meta-ironic, another triumph of the medium.

#### IV. The Power of Playing with Ideas

The next defining trait of the meta-ironic realm is that of "playing" with ideas. With the growing appeal of the absurd and the complete nakedness of ideas and subcultures, it has become common practice to constantly deal with high-impact ideas and ideologies. This is a related but slightly different phenomenon from political radicalization.

The best way to explain "playing" with ideas is to reference Simone De Beauvoir's *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, wherein she describes five archetypes of individuals who fail to reach a position of existential ethics. The Adventurer, one of Simone De Beauvoir's archetypes, puts their (largely fake) belief system(s) second to personal gain. "They proclaim their skepticism in regard to recognized values. They do not take politics seriously. They thereby allow themselves to be collaborationists in '41 and communists in '45, and it is true that they don't give a hang about the interests of the French people or the proletariat; they are attached to their career, to their success."<sup>12</sup>

The meta-ironic Adventurer dances across ideas, communicating them just

with third-order meta-ironic statements. They are hiding the fact that they do not believe in anything in particular; they aim to experience the ideological adrenaline of taking extreme, powerful stances. In the long run they are not beholden to or made responsible for any of this. They often hide under anonymity, or switch the subculture they operate in so as to fit their newest ideological plaything. Movement and obfuscation in this manner is the dual, dialectical nature of extreme internet communication; both exposed and often anonymous.

It is important to note that “what distinguishes adventure from a simple game is that the adventurer does not limit himself to asserting his existence in a solitary fashion. He asserts it in a relationship to other existences. He has to declare himself.”<sup>13</sup>

In an environment of total solitude, the Adventurer would not need (or even be able) to exist. An Adventurer seeks to identify and construct themselves, but must necessarily do so by negating their other possibilities publicly. In the meta-ironic world, the possibilities are extreme and endless. Simply being a moderate on any issue, or worse, undecided, does not function for the meta-ironic Adventurer. The meta-ironic Adventurer worries they are a “nobody” if they do not have a strong opinion, even on the most inane nonsense. A meta-ironic Adventurer places themselves in an untenable position, where they simultaneously need to keep an ironic distance from what they say (because they have no sincere position), while also putting on a front of absolute certainty.

It is common for the meta-ironic Adventurer to create a persona under the condition of a commitment to non-

sincerity, to play with an idea and see how it feels in their mouth. The persona either becomes genuine (a large source of the radicalization of the internet), they ditch the persona for a new one, or, in the worst case, they find the persona slowly eroding the sincere and, with no sincerity grounding the persona, become lost.

## V. Self Simulating and the Habituation of Self

One of Baudrillard’s greatest insights is that of ‘simulation,’ and the way that something simulated both is and is not truly the thing which it aims at. The metaphor used is that of simulating a sickness; if you stay in bed and begin to simulate the symptoms, it would be inaccurate to say either that you purely are or are not sick.<sup>14</sup>

Sincerity and meta-irony can function in a similar way. If you are constantly communicating with this meta-irony, especially third or fourth-order meta-irony where there is no sincerity, you begin to simulate being a genuine self. From an external perspective you are just living, your ironic persona becomes a full person to the outsider, regardless of the fact that internally you are dealing with a simulation and not the “real thing.” The distinction between genuineness and self simulation arrives from the origin of your actions and statements. To the genuine individual, intent comes from life experiences and actually-held beliefs. For one simulating a self, intent arrives from the concatenation of influences which lead them to act in this inauthentic, Meta-Ironic way.

This sort of conflict, of course, does not come from a single instance of meta-irony. Laughing at the ‘E Joke’ is not grounds for self-simulation. The habitua-

tion and internalization of the meta-ironic, however, can be. It is no controversial statement to say that language and modes of communication can influence us. The dramatic acceleration of linguistic change in public and private communication, which has come with the internet era, perhaps implies that the internet as a medium is especially effective in causing this internalization. The internet worships personas; it loves novelty and encourages an endless parade of internalization. It seems that one needs to be commenting and consuming all manners of ideas and conflicts from numerous corners of the human experience.

The internet *appears* to be a genuine discussion on cavalcades of events and ideas. In reality, one can interact with everything the internet places in front of them without ever once having to genuinely hold beliefs about the content. Is it any surprise it has become so ubiquitous? I think it is impossible to come to fully authentic and thoughtful conclusions on everything the internet demands: there isn't enough time and energy in the day. This efficient detachment and subsequent praise can be intoxicating.

This is not to fall into Baudrillard's characteristic nihilism;<sup>15</sup> someone who habituates this method of communication has not necessarily lost all sign of the sincere. I think that most people who have habituated meta-irony have done so in a moderate degree; their sense of self does not seem to have been annihilated. Perhaps they just ingrain a tendency to be clever and ironic rather than authentic or honest.

I think coming to authenticity is still possible with effort. The struggle of fully internalizing the questions, "do I re-

ally believe this?", and "do I really want to be someone who says things like this?", in our inauthentic times, cannot be understated. Nonetheless, it is possible. This state of affairs, however, still leaves us in a slippery plight. Millions of individuals becoming socially conditioned (via excessive habituation to and dependency on social media) toward a nihilistic tendency to destroy authenticity in the name of clever irony is still a serious social ill. This is to say nothing of the absolute worst case, however.

## VI. The Tragic Internet Wanderer

It is fully possible for an individual to create one of these online personas and find that it supplants any genuine sense of self. This can often arrive from dependence on an internet community. If someone feels left behind, isolated, and that their real-world community does not care about them (an epidemic amongst young people now), they can come to rely on one of these internet subcultures. Due to the nakedness of these subcultures, however, they can tend toward conformity.

If someone finds their primary source of love and community to be a fringe internet forum, the meta-ironic modes of communication that are demanded by those communities can supplant sincerity. This is often true of meta-ironic Adventurers, who have gained this sense of community by acting as their persona. If being that persona is, in your mind, the only thing that could afford you love and community, would you care about being sincere?

When sincerity has been forsaken in the name of a meta-ironic persona, a person becomes fully simulated, they

continue to engage in self-expression only based on the inertial forces of internet communication and a desire for the validation their community can give them. Sincerity no longer becomes a factor.

This is quite a specific person I've described, to be sure. Most who have habituated meta-irony still care about sincerity, even if that takes the form of a somewhat painful, day-to-day struggle between that habituation and sincerity. This sort of person, the one who has lost all sincerity, seems to have given up on the fight and struggle. Our Tragic Internet Wanderer has acquiesced to the consumptive meta-irony; it has supplanted anything real and sincere.

I believe this sort of person is someone we ought to have deep sympathy for. Pushed away by the careless isolation that many face, they fall into the arms of a community that unintentionally tears them in and out. Not only is this harm treated as a prerequisite for love, validation, and joy, it is also by necessity done by their own hand.

There is an important question here to address. If someone allows themselves to be consumed by this persona, how can we say that this is inauthentic, insincere? Perhaps the transition was, but now, if this transformation has truly happened, this is who they are. The meta-ironic becomes the sincere.

I think this is a valid reading of the circumstances at hand, and it fits cleanly into Baudrillard's framework; this could be the "hypersincere," based on no original sincerity but which now has taken its own form and is effectively sincere, even if

perverted.

This would be a grim case indeed. Someone would not really be able to return from this state. Since the self is both the object and the subject of this sincerity question, once you have become corrupted into a hypersincere space, you would be powerless to get back to sincerity. In a sense, this is a far more faithful application of *Simulacra* and *Simulation* to the self, as Baudrillard frequently argued for a similar, unfixable despair for society at large.<sup>16</sup>

Perhaps on poor, anecdotal evidence, I am inclined to think differently. I have spent lots of time in these fringe internet communities, and I have spoken to people long gone to meta-irony. I've been on niche meme pages, political forums housing radicals of all stripes; the sorts of places where people hunt for the most obscure philosophical positions. If the above is true, these are the places where sincerity goes to die. Even in the most extreme cases, there seems to be a sense of internal dissatisfaction. I don't believe someone can keep the act going forever. It seems that, irreducibly, there is still some sincerity left, that their original sense of self is not totally gone. If this corrupting force is as strong as a Baudrillard would imply, I'm afraid the insincerities of the modern day have ruined us all. Call me Kierkegaardian,<sup>17</sup> but it seems that there is some extent to which habituation cannot fully corrupt us, there is some part of us, even if hidden for the time being, that will keep its grasp on authenticity and sincerity.

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- 1 Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation, The Body, in Theory* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 1.
- 2 *Ibid.*, 157.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 6.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 11.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 6-7.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 6.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 13-14.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 6-7.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 70-71.
- 10 Baudrillard also discusses that, with the death of the media “message” as a unit of meaning, the medium has become the message, 82.
- 11 “The Deep-Fried E Meme Shows Just How Weird Memes Can Get,” *The Daily Dot*, May 2, 2018.
- 12 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 2018, 64.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 65.
- 14 Baudrillard, 3.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 164.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 157.
- 17 Kierkegaard argued for an immortal and “true” self, which we must strive to actualize in our lives. This idea is most deeply explored in *The Sickness Unto Death*, one of his later pseudonymous works.





# The Task of the Illegitimate Offspring

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Imagine for a moment a society much like today's in regard to its political climate but with one major difference: the entire manual workforce has been automated. Robots in industrialized factories assemble consumer goods, personal electronics, processed food, auto bodies, weapons, and other robots. The market still controls supply and demand, and "unskilled" members of the population are left without jobs, or worse, reserved and regulated by the state for other political purposes. For many, a sense of dread and even helplessness arises in this imaginary space. It begs the question: what is it that we fear? Is it the machines themselves, or their potentially insidious applications? Facing this hypothetical reality, do we seek to dominate or do we feel helpless in the wake of domination?

Many scholars and philosophers have posited that our sociopolitical reality defines our orientation toward technology; therefore, we must investigate the forces which build our social structures in order to analyze our relationships to technology in the modern age. One such investigation might lead the astute observer to conclude that present social hierarchies and economic systems are designed to ensure that the benefits of technological development are bestowed disproportionately to the powerful and wealthy. Meanwhile, the working class remains an "undeveloped" entity, a body of subhuman labor reserves which is subject to technological implementation and dominance but is not active in its production or integration into society.<sup>1</sup> This is, in fact, a stark and pressing political issue considering the dense biopolitical terrain of militarism and capitalism in which we live—one that weaponizes technology for the control of populations and the maxi-

mization of profit.<sup>2</sup>

The perceived inevitability of technology's omnipresent role contributes to a sense of dread that the majority of society will remain powerless in the face of its exponential expansion. However, one could argue that this view strips vulnerable parties of their political agency and instills a sense of technoparanoia that grants further authority to those who are most intensely feared for their control over technological development. Philosopher of science Donna Haraway makes such an argument; she brings to the table an alternative view which centers people experiencing oppression as the most important actors in the reshaping of reality. Her groundbreaking 1985 essay "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century" is a myth of the future, a declaration of empowerment for those who live in uncertainty on the margins of society, and a way of visualizing resistance to the dominant biopolitical forces of our time. Haraway urges us to dissolve the restrictive dichotomies which separate self from other, man from woman, and even human from machine. Her underlying fundamental claim is that we must embrace technology because we are all already cyborgs—"cybernetic organisms" who are communicative chimeras of the organic and the technological.<sup>3</sup> Having used technology to aid in our social development throughout the ages, human beings are anything but removed from the weapons and cell phones we bear.

This embrace of technology is by no means politically neutral. Haraway situates herself as a socialist feminist and a strong advocate on behalf of the working class. She recognizes that throughout time, the top-down tendencies to naturalize and

instrumentalize human bodies have led to a much larger political concern: the exploitation of racialized and feminized populations in the global labor force. Science has not been, in her perspective, an “objective” descriptive apparatus—it has actually played an active role in the subjugation of specific social groups. This history contributes to what she has deemed “the informatics of domination”: the complex matrices of information and communication technologies that reinforce the authoritarian power structures of our present society.<sup>4</sup> Her uniquely imaginative notion of “technoscience” on the other hand, is a hybrid of science, technology, and radical politics: an embodiment of demilitarized technological tools that are designed and implemented through a mode of resistance to the oppressive power structures of our time. While we, cyborgs, are, in fact, “the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism,” Haraway draws in those of us who are implicated in this political struggle by noting that “illegitimate offspring are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins.”<sup>5</sup>

The question now becomes, how might working-class individuals and groups express such infidelity to the exploitative economic system that employs them? Or, as Haraway asks, “What kind of political accountability can be constructed to tie [us] together across the scientific-technical hierarchies separating us?”<sup>6</sup> Using Haraway’s argument for the effectiveness of political affinity and accountability as a mode of resistance and by outlining Foucault’s theory of biopower to contextualize that resistance, I will suggest that cyborg politics create new terrain for the working class in the struggle to overcome the informatics of

domination. An example of how such a politic applies to current technological developments will be explored through a discussion of automation in the workplace, which has pressing implications for the global labor force. I will contend that cyborg politics can build solidarity among working-class people, allowing for increased agency and resistance to the concentrated control of knowledge and resources which has created our highly militarized capitalistic society. Collective liberation for a marginalized labor force can be found in the vision of a socialist, egalitarian cyborg society—one which consciously demilitarizes and democratizes the use of technology while deconstructing the binaries that divide us.

### **Biopower and the Informatics of Domination**

One expression of authoritarianism in the technological terrain of modern society is the exercise of biopower. Michel Foucault articulated the theory of biopower in 1976, defining it as the state regulation of populations.<sup>7</sup> The assertions made by biopower theory that are relevant to my argument include the following: 1) the production of knowledge informs the use of power; 2) the “biological” human body is the site of knowledge and power reproduction as well as the site of state regulation; 3) where there is power, there is resistance; and 4) biopower is intrinsically connected to the exploitation of the global labor force. In regards to the final point, Foucault writes: “Biopower was without question an indispensable element in the development of capitalism; the latter would not have been possible without the controlled insertion of bodies into the machinery of

production.”<sup>8</sup> This point is also highlighted by political theorist and author Kathleen R. Arnold when she writes that in controlling the labor force, “species thinking and thus biopower are at work. Racial, gendered, and ethnic thinking, prejudice, and antagonisms are the ideological and discursive effects of biopower, as sovereign power and capitalist values increasingly intersect.”<sup>9</sup> Thus, the pyramid structure of today’s economy—with its vastly underpaid and mistreated workforce at the foundation, supporting the material and political wealth of the oligarchy—has been made possible through the exercise of biopower.

The instrumental, top-down division of the labor force has been carried out with the help of biological essentialism and reductionism. Delegating tasks based on “biological” factors such as race and gender has been a useful tool in the colonial projects of capitalism and militarism since it allows for nation-states to regulate and exploit the physical bodies of subjugated populations. A strong critic of biological essentialism, Donna Haraway traces the social-historical path of the “life sciences” in her essay “The Biological Enterprise: Sex, Mind, and Profit from Human Engineering to Sociobiology.”<sup>10</sup> In doing so, she problematizes the origins of biologically deterministic ideologies such as racism and sexism:

Between the First World War and the present, biology has been transformed from a science centered on the organism, understood in functionalist terms, to a science studying automated technological devices, understood in terms of cybernetic systems. Organic form, with its hierarchical and physiological co-operation and competition based on ‘natural’ domination and division of labor, gave way to systems theory with its control schemes based on com-

munications networks ... This fundamental change in life science did not occur in a historical vacuum; it accompanied changes in the nature and technology of power, within a continuing dynamic of capitalist reproduction.<sup>11</sup>

To trace the development of the aforementioned “control schemes based on communication networks,” Haraway writes of the “informatics of domination,” the complex web of communication technologies that fortify the logic of militarism and capitalism. She argues that this matrix of control over populations contributes to “cultural impoverishment” and creates a “common failure of subsistence networks for the most vulnerable.”<sup>12</sup> The vulnerable population at the heart of this essay, of course, is the working class, which by definition lives within precarious subsistence networks due to the illusion of scarcity that accompanies low socioeconomic status. Haraway’s conceptualization of authoritarian technology, therefore, demonstrates the complicity of non-working class actors in keeping well-oiled and efficient the informatics of domination and exposes how the exploitation of human bodies for labor is made possible through state regulation.

The constructed biological binaries of history have been nothing short of devastatingly violent for those subjugated. To further emphasize potential empowerment for the global labor force, Haraway goes on to write, “as Marx showed for the science of wealth, our reappropriation of knowledge is a revolutionary reappropriation of a means by which we produce and reproduce our lives.”<sup>13</sup> Here, the hegemonic machinery of biopower is at stake: in reclaiming our bodies and the production of knowledge about them, as Haraway challenges us to do, the mechanics of biopower’s efficacy over our physical forms is

called into question.

With regards to the concrete and rather pressing example of workplace automation, philosopher of technology Mark Coeckelbergh discusses the master-slave dialectic that informs our perception of automation technology. He, like Haraway, writes about the harmful dichotomy between humans and machines, one which turns the self into either a passive subject under the influence of the device (slave) or an active authority figure who oversees the activity of the device (master). He notes that “even if and when machines are given ‘agency,’ this agency can only be understood in relation to the human. It is delegated agency, and delegation is a human process. There is not the machine apart from the human.”<sup>14</sup> The key point here is that we must acknowledge technological integration into society as a highly social process. In the spirit of Foucault, Coeckelbergh goes on to provoke the reader:

Automation is not only about a kind of power struggle between humans and technology ... it is also about social relations between humans. Is automation in the form of robotics and AI used to increase inequality and injustice? By whom is it used, or will it be used? If the use and development of automation grows, who will gain and who will lose? What will be the societal consequences? How does automation change and make possible different power relations?<sup>15</sup>

Haraway is, of course, concerned with these very questions on power relations, and cyborg theory provides a point of engagement. In her view, “the cyborg is not subject to Foucault’s biopolitics; the cyborg simulates politics, a much more potent field of operations.”<sup>16</sup> If cyborgs are inherently hybridized

and cannot be described in essentialist biological terms, then they are no longer the targets of biopower. Instead, cyborgs create an entirely new terrain in which political struggles are played out. The question is no longer about the machines themselves, but about who controls their design and implementation. Within this terrain, a working class, theorized as cyborgs, could gain the agency to resist the informatics of domination.

### The Terrain of Cyborg Politics

The cyborg metaphor carries with it many imaginative tools which can be strategically employed in the interests of working-class solidarity and empowerment. In the same way that the Internet is coded with certain algorithms to direct online traffic, Donna Haraway urges that we, cyborgs, in the development of a feminist socialist science, must “code” ourselves toward our political orientation. Ideas of what to code to ensure the empowerment of the global labor force include reclamation of the means of production, equal distribution of resources, and a post-gender anti-racist society which no longer relies on biological essentialism for social stratification and economic hierarchy. As Haraway emphasizes, “it is not just that science and technology are possible means of great human satisfaction, as well as a matrix of complex dominations. Cyborg imagery can suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves.”<sup>17</sup> In transgressing the binaries which have historically constrained us, we as cyborgs embody the metaphor of the unfaithful offspring—a rebellious new generation borne of an emergent technoscientific

revolution.

The terrain of cyborg politics, as I see it, is fertile with resistance to the informatics of domination. It must hold true that resistance is at play, according to Foucault's claim that "where there is power, there is resistance."<sup>18</sup> If the informatics of domination communicate directly with the power we seek to resist, the role of a feedback-controlled cybernetic organism is essential in disturbing that communication: "Information is just that kind of element which allows universal translation, and so unhindered instrumental power ... The biggest threat to such power is interruption of communication."<sup>19</sup> If the working class (i.e., the majority) could, for example, interfere with the operational norm of command-control-communication-intelligence (C<sup>3</sup>I) that constitutes military informatics, a global uprising against economic instability would become possible. Additionally, the threat of an automated workforce that would leave the most vulnerable without political agency becomes obsolete if the informatics of domination are actively deconstructed. Grounding the example even further, Haraway writes:

The computer is not just a machine built according to laws of domination related to labor and war. Communications sciences, including sociobiology, are human achievements in interaction with the world. But the construction of a natural economy according to capitalist relations, and its appropriation for purposes of reproducing domination, is deep. It is at the level of fundamental theory and practice, not at the level of good guys and bad guys.<sup>20</sup>

If the terrain of cyborg politics requires a radical reshaping of our current biopolitical terrain, how is it possible that a heterogeneous body of working-class

citizens around the world can come to a common understanding of cyborg politics? What is necessary for the paradigm shift into socialist feminist technoscience to take place?

### **Political Affinity as a Bridge to Cyborg Politics**

Affinity: related not by blood but by choice ... actually manages to hold together witches, engineers, elders, perverts, Christians, mothers, and Leninists long enough to disarm the state.<sup>21</sup>

A relevant shortcoming of political movements in the liberal sphere is their tendency to restrictively focus on identity politics. This problem can be seen in the mobilization of white feminists, who unwittingly exclude women of color and other people who do not conform to stereotypical, naturalized descriptions of "woman," which Haraway warns is deeply counterproductive to cyborg politics.<sup>22</sup> Instead, she stresses that we learn "to craft a poetic/political unity without relying on a logic of appropriation, incorporation, and taxonomic identification."<sup>23</sup> She claims that affinity, rather than normative identity, can serve as an imaginative bridge to solidarity in cyborg politics.

I interpret the basis of that affinity among cyborgs to be their "illegitimate origins," and the need to be "unfaithful" to those origins. Such a commonality could be a uniting force for the global working class, which is, in its entirety, a product of white supremacist militarism and patriarchal capitalism. The radical restructuring of who performs labor, through what means, and for what purpose requires a new vision of an egalitarian cyborg society—one which is concerned not with the "biological" identity categorizations

of race, gender, and ability, but with the collective consciousness of affinity in the efforts to resist the informatics of domination. The blurring of binaries between male and female, humanity and nature, and nature and technology creates a generative societal challenge—one which requires us to form social bonds that transcend categorical experience.

Haraway writes, “in the fraying of identities and in the reflexive strategies for structuring them, the possibility opens up for weaving something other than a shroud for the day after the apocalypse.”<sup>24</sup> Without negating the real historical implications of these identities, affinity unites movements through common cause. The development of technology for democratic and life-affirming purposes rather than violence is a struggle we have yet to lean into. Thus, affinity is one potential outcome of fractured identities. When the working class struggle of resistance to illegitimate origins is seen as a common political ground for cyborg politics, an unbreakable affinity can be formed.

Furthermore, I believe affinity is the first step toward the “political accountability” question posed by Haraway. If we are to unite “across the technical-scientific hierarchies separating us,” we must first recognize that the outdated biological descriptions of human communities may no longer serve to tell our complete origin stories.<sup>25</sup> Instead, “feminist cyborg stories have the task of re-coding communication and intelligence to subvert command and control.”<sup>26</sup> Through the act of being rebellious to their origins, working-class cyborgs redefine and re-code political affinity and accountability to each other.

Coding resistance through the

modes of affinity and accountability will ultimately weave rich networks of solidarity among the working class. Solidarity is defined in one context as a set of “shared practices reflecting a collective commitment to carry ‘costs’ (financial, social, emotional, or otherwise) to assist others. It is important to note that solidarity is understood here as a practice, and not as an inner sentiment or an abstract value.”<sup>27</sup> If solidarity is the practice of carrying costs, then cyborg affinity is the jumping-off point for that practice, and political accountability is the method by which to practice it. In this example, the burdensome cost of unionizing or striking against exploitative working conditions is carried by the whole of the community, the survival of the vulnerable is made possible, and the doors to further acts of resistance are opened. This is achieved so long as the nuances of identity do not isolate or alienate certain groups, and if demilitarization of technology is the common goal through which responsibility to each other is formed. A solidarity network of working-class cyborgs would, in theory, be able to interrupt the communication flow of the informatics of domination, paving the way to a radically transformed society of technology.

### **Embodied Technoscience for Egalitarian Society**

The implications of technological innovation for the global labor force are inextricably bound up in the production of knowledge, power, and the informatics of domination. In our sociopolitical reality of extreme militarism and late-stage capitalism, the image of automated work robots fashioning highly advanced



weaponry at lightning speed is not an entirely absurd one. Yet, however fearsome this may seem, there is little progress to be found in an outright rejection of technology. If we accept that we live in a technological age and that technology can be empowering rather than oppressive, how can a new culture of egalitarianism be coded?

Donna Haraway leads us to think that a literal, material embrace of technological tools is the only way to resist their potential destructiveness. By reclaiming the methods of production through which our tools are designed and created, we eradicate the sense of alienation between laborer and product. Then, we can integrate those self-made tools into our solidarity networks, striving for the active democratization of technology and the empowerment of our communities. "Intense pleasure in skill, in machine skill, ceases to be a sin, but an aspect of embodiment ... We can be responsible for our machines; they do not dominate or threaten us."<sup>28</sup> Here, Haraway is nudging us toward a greater affinity for the desire to arm ourselves with technology that augments our political agency and to subvert the potential for its domination by embodying its deployment. This radical embodiment exists outside of the realm of biopower that Foucault describes. Cyborgs cannot be taxonomized, essentialized, or naturalized; likewise, cyborg society cannot be divided, regulated, and exploited

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on the basis of sociobiological characteristics.

The cyborg metaphor creates more than just an imaginative ontological terrain—it is the philosophical foundation of a new society. Having presented us with the deeply political consequences of cyborg theory, Haraway sends us out to do work:

There is a myth system waiting to become a political language, to ground one way of looking at science and technology and challenging the informatics of domination—in order to act potently ... Taking responsibility for the social relations of science and technology means refusing an anti-science metaphysics, a demonology of technology, and so means embracing the skillful task of reconstructing the boundaries of daily life, in partial connection with others, in communication with all of our parts.<sup>29</sup>

Her vision is indeed a potent one. Using the coded language of cyborg politics, the working class can be mobilized. Through embodied technoscience, a solidarity network of communicative, rebellious cyborg offspring can be built. Egalitarian technological access can pave a way to collective liberation for those whose labor has been exploited in the interests of militarism and capitalism. The paradigm can shift to a new one, a socialist feminist cyborg society.

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- 5 *Ibid.*, 151.
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- 7 Michel Foucault, "Right of Death and Power Over Life," in *The History of Sexuality Vol. 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976), 139.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 141
- 9 Kathleen R. Arnold, *America's New Working Class: Race, Gender and Ethnicity in a Biopolitical Age* (University Park: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 2008), 201.
- 10 Donna J. Haraway, "The Biological Enterprise: Sex, Mind, and Profit from Human Engineering to Sociobiology," in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, Inc., 1991), 43-68.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 45.

- 12 Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto," 172.
- 13 Haraway, "The Biological Enterprise," 45.
- 14 Mark Coeckelbergh, "The Tragedy of the Master: Automation, Vulnerability and Distance," *Ethics and Information Technology* 17, no. 3 (2015): 225.
- 15 Ibid., 226.
- 16 Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto," 163.
- 17 Ibid., 181.
- 18 Foucault, 95.
- 19 Haraway, 164.
- 20 Haraway, "The Biological Enterprise," 68.
- 21 Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto," 155.
- 22 Ibid., 157.
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 Ibid., 158.
- 25 Ibid., 169.
- 26 Ibid., 175.
- 27 Barbara Prainsack and Alena Buyx, "Understanding Solidarity (With a Little Help from Your Friends)," *Public Health Ethics* 5, no.2 (2012): 346.
- 28 Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto," 180.
- 29 Ibid., 181.

# The Auditory Imagination

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Sometimes we find ourselves at a loss for words. We know what we are trying to say though the words don't materialize before us. How can we find ourselves in this position? How can we reject an interlocutor's suggestion about what we might be trying to get at—that act itself indicating that we have some idea of what we are trying to say—yet not know what we want to say? This seems to be a contradiction. We only know something by what it is not and yet we cannot pin down what we are trying to say. In his brilliant essay, *Thoughts Into Words*, Eli Alshanetsky raises an elegant solution: there is certain knowledge that we can put into words and certain knowledge that we cannot put into words. We might not be able to describe the difference between shades of blue, but we could certainly tell them apart. I would like to offer a supplemental solution to the problem: the auditory imagination. In order to properly show how the auditory imagination resolves Alshanetsky's quandary, I will first offer an attempt to explain what the auditory imagination is before attempting to expand the notion of what the auditory imagination could be.

The auditory imagination is a space where listening becomes an imaginative skill. It is a type of noise that someone (traditionally a poet) hears before they have words for them. The noise is very faint and easy to lose, the noise does not contain words but contains a rhythm that one may set words to. To be clear, the auditory imagination is not an actual physical sound audible to outside observers but rather is an internal rhythm that feels like it is coming from outside of oneself. It only exists inside the head of the listener but it feels as if one is listening to rhythms born from the world. The modernist poet, T.S. Eliot first wrote this term down in

his 1933 *The Use of Poetry and The Use of Criticism*.<sup>1</sup> Shortly before him, the stunning Russian poet Osip Mandelstam spoke of being called to a “secret hearing.”<sup>2</sup> The auditory imagination is about listening to what one doesn't know and trusting that the rhythms which one cannot place will lead you to the words one was searching for.

When a poet listens to the auditory imagination, they are acting like an archeologist. The auditory imagination requires an active and attentive listener to hear the rhythms. Fundamentally, the listener is not the creator of the rhythms in the same way that an archeologist is not the creator of whatever they might find. Both the poet and the archeologist have to actively learn how to understand signs which are not visible to others. Neither poets nor archeologists are certain of what they may find or when they will find what they are searching for, they can only be reasonably sure that if they keep digging they will find something of value. The poet would be unable to find words if there were no rhythm to draw from, and archeologists would be unable to uncover artifacts if there was no earth—with its pentimento surface—to dig into. Poets dig into faint rhythms and archeologists delve into the earth. An archeologist is perhaps the most physical embodiment of the way the auditory imagination resolves Alshanetsky's quandary. The archeologist searches the ground in much the same way poets search through faint rhythms, in much the same way we all search through a background noise for the words beyond the tip of our tongue. Both poetry and archeology require activity and passivity.

The auditory imagination contains a mixture of passive and active action. A meaningful part of the active action of the

poet is the translation of rhythm. Poets hear a rhythm and attempt to put rhythm into words. Poets, like any other translator, are limited by the words available to them in their quest to express inexpressible music. When a poet learns a new word, they add a new tool to their pack and can perhaps now crawl that tiny bit closer to the elusive music. Perhaps the music inspires a poet to a new turn of phrase, but even still a poet must operate within the vocabulary they have at a given moment. The vocabulary a poet knows is what they bring to the music. The music that a poet hears is what they cannot control. No matter how closely someone listens to a song, they cannot change the rhythm of the sound.

The idea of the auditory imagination would suggest that our thoughts are not entirely our own. We draw our thoughts from the world. The experimental Brazilian novelist, Clarice Lispector gets at this sentiment, writing: “The world’s continual breathing is what we hear and call silence.”<sup>3</sup> Our thoughts stem from the rhythm of the breathing of the world, what we can say is defined by how the world breathes and our ability to listen to every note of the music. In the pause between our words—when we can’t find a word, in those moments of thinking—perhaps we are engaging in a moment of listening to the auditory imagination. The music that T.S. Eliot heard was the breathing of the earth. Neither he nor Mandelstam could ever control how the rhythm sounded, they could only listen to their environments. The auditory imagination is a little bit like a radio with one station: you can either tune out or listen to the music that is playing.<sup>4</sup> Our imagination is not entirely private and disconnected from the world. In a very

similar fashion, the auditory imagination is not disconnected from other forms of imagination that seem to come from outside of the person themselves.

Poets, who are very attuned to the music of words hear the auditory imagination, but it is not just the poet who can experience something analogous to the rhythm that T.S. Eliot described. We all listen to silence and feel sensations. Eli Alshanetsky came up with a similar notion to the idea of the auditory imagination, but he thought of it as something more physical than auditory. He writes, “Just as we can reidentify a color by relying on a trace of our experience of it, we can recognize a thought in the words that express it by relying on its ‘signature’ the distinctive way it imprints itself on our experience.”<sup>5</sup> The idea of the “signature” of a thought is remarkably similar to the vague sound that needs to be focused on to be heard. A signature seen at a distance will likely be indistinguishable from a great number of other signatures. Similarly, if one is only half listening to a rhythm it is very easy to miss small changes in a rhythm. The more carefully one looks or listens, the more distinct the rhythms and signatures will feel.

The primary difference between Alshanetsky’s idea of a signature and Eliot’s auditory imagination is that a signature is visual and the auditory imagination is musical. Poets trade in music and philosophers focus more on larger shapes. One could imagine that a chef might feel a taste before they have ingredients for the flavor. The famous director Stanley Kubrick once said, “I do not always know what I want, but I do know what I don’t want.”<sup>6</sup> It would seem that Kubrick, like Alshanetsky, had a sense of a visual imagination. His infamously

perfectionist style of directing, once demanding over 120 consecutive takes of a scene, shows us that he had an image in his head that he would stop at nothing to realize. He had a vision of a frame that he wished to shoot, and he forced his actors to keep doing the take until the shot in his head and the one that he beheld matched. Kubrick represents a bit of an anomaly: he saw what things weren't as opposed to others who see what things are. I believe that, despite appearances, Kubrick's sentiment doesn't explode the foundations of the auditory imagination. Kubrick likely had an image that wasn't as precise as he would like and so he described the image as a negative. There can be variations of process within the process of the auditory imagination, the auditory imagination is not a single process but rather a set of similar processes.

Turning one final time to Alshent-sky's paradox: we know on some level what we wish to say, but we cannot say

what we want to say. I think this paradox can be resolved through the idea of a concept like the auditory imagination, and perhaps the logic of the auditory imagination can be applied much more broadly than even T.S. Eliot imagined. I have no doubt that further exploration would reveal more analogous concepts across a vast array of fields. While I believe a master mechanic might have some intuition of how to fix a complex problem, could a novice mechanic access something like the auditory imagination? Future essays that focus on the auditory imagination would do well to explore how much further,-- beyond the field of poetry,-- similar concepts might be found. Can you experience an external imagination for tasks in which there is a correct answer? These questions, when answered, will only lead to more questions. questions that we indeed will have time for before the taking of the toast and tea.

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## Endnotes

- 1 Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (Osaka: 1944).
- 2 If there is a single work of literature that I could make everyone read it would be Osip Mandelstam's *Stolen Air*. Mandelstam's story is beyond incredible, he wrote against Stalin, was saved by Stalin's affinity for poetry, then arrested and killed in a gulag. The police apparatus attempted to erase Mandelstam's work so his wife Nadezhda memorialized everything he ever wrote and 48 years after Osip died was published in Russia. Of course, there is so much more to this story and his poetry is written with the greatest reverence for life whilst maintaining the deepest unflinching honesty. It is alive in every sense, unapologetically honest, and displays the soul of a poet who would rather die than give up his craft.
- 3 Clarice Lispector, *The Passion According to G.H.* (London: Penguin, 2017).
- 4 There's an important distinction between a radio with one station and the auditory imagination: the rhythms from the auditory imagination are much less predictable. The music of the auditory imagination is not governed by any rules the way a radio will likely finish a song before starting a new one. The last and most important distinction is that the auditory imagination is like listening to sounds with earbuds whilst a radio is most commonly played for all to hear.
- 5 Eli Alshanetsky, "What Comes First: Ideas or Words? The Paradox of Articulation," *Aeon*, (2020): accessed November 3, 2020, <https://aeon.co/essays/what-comes-first-ideas-or-words-the-paradox-of-articulation>.
- 6 Vincent LoBrutto, *Stanley Kubrick: A Biography* (Da Capo Press, 1999).



