MORAL PERFECTIONISM, INFINITE RESPONSIBILITY,

AND THE ETHICAL

IN CRITICAL RACE THEORY

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation is an investigation into the value of moral perfectionist thought broadly construed as a means of further developing antiracist strategy and theory, especially with regard to facilitating self-originary, antiracist political action by White subjects. To that end, I draw connections between the theoretical contributions of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Stanley Cavell, Michel Foucault, and Emmanuel Levinas regarding ethics and the ethical, and I argue that all four thinkers fall under the broad classification of moral perfectionist thought, albeit with distinct core assumptions and approaches. This dissertation submits moral perfectionist strategies for motivating White subjects to see the ethical harm inflicted upon them by practices of race, despite social, economic, and political inequalities from which they otherwise profit. Race per se represents an ethical harm to White subjects insofar as it denies people of color the status of "other" for whom Whites would otherwise care and accept responsibility; race also limits Whites' ability to do self-work and obtain their unattained, but attainable, next selves since it restricts who can count as the friend with whom they would otherwise converse (in the Emersonian perfectionist sense) and be constructively challenged. I position above moral perfectionist theorists into conversation with a variety of thinkers from the tradition of critical race theory to flesh out the importance and potential of the new model of ethical subjectivity that I propose.

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

The dissertation ahead is an investigation into the value of moral perfectionist thought broadly construed as a means of further developing antiracist strategy and theory, especially for White subjects. The project sets out under the assumption that practices of race are first and foremost problems that emanate from the concept and practices of Whiteness, and the creation, recreation, and perpetuation of discourses and social/economic/political practices that prop up the nebulous Whiteness attendant to White subjectivity. As such, I argue that we must entertain new theoretical means of challenging the practices of race, and these new means must involve strategies for facilitating and encouraging subjects deemed "White" to self-critique and do the arduous work manifested in Emersonian perfectionism: that of pursuing self-knowledge and achieving the next unattained, but attainable self. If anti-racism has any hope, it is in Whites changing themselves. We must cultivate a new subjectivity that does self-work rather than depend upon people of color to convince us that we continue to do harm to them and to ourselves.

The chapters that follow place the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Stanley Cavell and Emmanuel Levinas on ethics and subjectivity into conversation with theorists of race so as to construct new contributions to the body of critical race theory in the age of the Donald Trump presidency and the growing boldness of overt racist, anti-Semitic, Islamophobic groups, especially in the United States and Western Europe. The legal strategies and civil disobedience approaches of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s produced large scale but impermanent changes in American politics and society, and it is increasingly clear that such

approaches are insufficient to achieving even modest ends in our contemporary political moment. As such, I turn to works on ethics in order to get what I argue is closer to the problem: that race per se represents a fundamental ethical failure in that it denies the importance of care for the other (especially insofar as it denies everyone but Whites the status of "other" in the first place) which Levinas's corpus allows us to address. But in addition to the well-worn argument about race as a harm to the other, I argue that it is equally strategically important to show how even White subjects are harmed by race. Most descriptions and analyses of race focus on the economic, physical, emotional, psychological, and social damage that the nebulous practices of race inflict upon people of color, but this dissertation targets the harm that race does to Whites in an attempt to tease out ways that Whites can and must work on themselves in order to be full ethical subjects. People of color and Whites are harmed by race—this dissertation focuses on the ethical harm that race perpetrates on Whites, so as to challenge the "ally" model of social and political activism and replace it with a more nuanced model of subjectivity that is inseparable from both care for self and care for the other. Emersonian perfectionism allows us to get at the former, Levinas the latter.

Chapter 1: On Emersonian Moral Perfectionism and the Role of the Friend

The first chapter of this dissertation presents a broad engagement with Ralph Waldo Emerson's writings which illustrate the constituent fragments of his moral perfectionism. The first section of the chapter details and engages four key elements of the moral perfectionist approach: self-trust, Emerson's unique perspective on the relation between ethics and power which is distinct from norms and rules-based morality, the concomitance of self-reliance and genius, and the importance of the role of the friend.

I use Emerson's writings on each of these four areas to detail what I think the value of the Emersonian moral perfectionist approach is in beginning to theorize a self-motivated starting point for approaching the contemporary problem of race. I submit that the moral perfectionist approach can facilitate conversations about the harm that practices of race perpetrate against all subjects, even those who seem to benefit the most from them. These conversations are necessarily limited in what they can achieve, but are nonetheless crucial elements of a broader critical race theory and praxis.

I attempt to develop this latter point by showing how Emerson's own personal politics and perspectives on the practices of race necessarily fell short of confronting the depth of the problem of race. Emerson was on the forefront of challenging the most discernable practice of race during his time, that is, the economic system of race-based chattel slavery. But in spite of his rejection of transatlantic slavery, Emerson still accepted race as a given condition to which individuals could acquiesce or overcome through self-reliance (as he claims exceptional men like Frederick Douglass or Toussaint L'Ouverture did).

In the second section of the chapter, I engage the works of two of Emerson's contemporaries who wrote about race utilizing different perspectives and approaches, but nonetheless still embody the moral perfectionist spirit. I argue that David Walker and Maria W. Stewart, two of the first published black writers in American politics, engaged the problem of race on a deeper register and that Emerson could have benefitted from their influence and criticism. The writings of David Walker and Maria W. Stewart embodied elements of Emersonian moral perfectionist approach, particularly self-trust, an engagement with the relationship between ethics and politics, and the importance of self-reliance and aversion with respect to cultivating one's genius.

More importantly, I argue that Walker and Stewart performed the role of the Emersonian friend by challenging not only other Black subjects who shared similar experiences and status in America, but they also posed a challenge to Whites by showing them what was at stake in their own complicity and perpetuation of practices of race in America. Walker's and Stewart's modes of argumentation utilize religious imagery to show Whites the dire consequences of race, and the importance of making drastic changes to our understanding of ourselves and others if we want to achieve the best possible versions of ourselves. Engaging Walker's and Stewart's writings and speeches deepens the ethical responsibility for oneself that is at the heart of Emersonian thinking.

Chapter 2: Skepticism, Acknowledgement, and Racial Others

The second chapter of the present dissertation engages the work of Stanley Cavell in order to flesh out the problem of race as a pervasive form of selective skepticism of the pain and humanity of racial others. The chapter relates Cavell's discussion of external-world skepticism and other-mind skepticism to the persistence of practices of race. I also detail Cavell's conceptualization of the ethical stakes of acknowledgment in the face of skepticism.

By working through Stanley Cavell's analysis of skepticism and modes of response to it, I hope to show why even White subjects should begin to restructure the ways we see (and so position ourselves with respect to) the other to begin to allay the harm done by what I see as the unique form of other-mind skepticism present in an always already racialized world. To this end, the chapter ahead delves into the value, potential, and limitations of this conceptualization of skepticism of other minds and the response to it via acknowledgement as it pertains to the problem of practices of race. I will frame the issue of skepticism in terms of its relation to race-practice by discussing the problem of White subjects' skepticism of Black subjects' (full) humanity; I will also address the ways that racialized skepticism contributes not only to the

problem of domination and exploitation, but also, by only selectively and circumstantially

committing to the skeptical position that would otherwise enable the disruption of reliance upon

ordinary use-values of race, even White subject's ethical subjectivity is impaired. I argue that in

the context of a racialized world, the skepticism of other minds deploys the harmful elements of

skepticism (demanding and relying upon impersonal metaphysical essence of racial

categorization) while leaving unutilized the potential positive elements of skepticism (the

capacity to call into doubt and therefore change the criteria, agreements, and use-values of a

concept within a community).

After detailing the relevance of skepticism to the problem of race-practice, I will turn to

Cavell's notion of acknowledgment as his response (though not to say "solution") to the ever-

present threat (and potential) of skepticism in our relations to each other. I will work through the

implications of acknowledgment as a response to race-based skepticism, and highlight its

strengths and limitations.

The third section will bring Octavia Butler's 1993 novel *Parable of the Sower* into

conversation with Cavell's work on skepticism of other minds and acknowledgment in order to

tease out the stakes and potential of these concepts with regard to resisting the practices of race

in contemporary America. The novel's protagonist, Lauren Olamina, exhibits a condition known

in the story as "hyperempathy syndrome" that causes her to experience profound physical pain

whenever she sees other people (or animals) in pain. I suggest that Butler's depiction of this

condition within the novel's pain-language game provides support for Cavell's argument that our

relationship to others (and so our own subjectivity) cannot be reduced to a demand for

knowledge and certainty (which Olamina seems to approximate through her own experience of

pain at the sight of others'), but hinges upon our acknowledgement in spite of the backdrop of doubt.

Chapter 3: Foucault's Moral Perfectionism and the Call for a Worldly Ethics

The following two chapters engage Ella Myers's criticism of Michel Foucault and Emmanuel Levinas in her 2013 book *Worldly Ethics: Democratic Politics and Care for the World.* In Chapter 3, I work through Myers's contention that Foucault's late-career work on ethics and care of the self amounts to what she calls a "therapeutic ethics." *Worldly Ethics* suggests that not only does Foucault posit an ethics (a claim I contest), but also that that ethics is insufficient at best and at worst counterproductive. I pose counter-approaches to each of these positions in turn. I also analyze the structure of *Worldly Ethic*'s demand for an ethics that necessarily produces democratic association and action.

At the core of *Worldly Ethics*'s argument is a contestable understanding of the necessary but always insufficient grounding of democratic association. I dispute the deterministic structure that Myers's text places upon the relationship between ethics and democracy. Rather than insisting upon a set of norms, duties, and demands that undoubtedly produce the kind of association and practice she demands, I argue that democratic outcomes are by nature tenuous, unpredictable, and open-ended, and, so too, contest the assertion that any set of core conditions necessarily produces these indeterminate practices and associations. Perhaps the conditions for democratic action are as undefined as the democratic practices that arise from them.

I go on to contest the classification of Foucault as putting forward a "therapeutic ethics," and I engage *Worldly Ethics* framing of Foucault's late work on ethics. The chapter works through the works by Foucault that Myers relies upon most heavily in formulating the therapeutic label, and I pose counter-readings. Not only is Foucault not "therapeutic" (let alone

pejoratively so), but I argue that Foucault does not assert an ethics (i.e. a set of norms, codes, and prohibitions), but rather an engagement with the ethical.

The value of Foucault for the present dissertation is that his texts work through ethics and the ethical in terms of the self's relation to the self and how it shapes itself within and despite discursive practices. Whereas much of Foucault's career was indeed spent detailing the forces that structure, control, and produce subjects, his later work focuses on the ways that the self resists and challenges those forces—the ethical is a realm in which the self does work on itself in contrast to the determinism of discipline and normalization from outside the self. This is the work of becoming the kind of person one wants to be despite the myriad practices, norms, taxonomies, and power dynamics that otherwise shape a life. I rely heavily upon Foucault's last two lecture series that he delivered before his untimely death in 1984, *The Government of Self and Others*, and *The Courage of Truth: Government of Self and Others II*.

These lectures are fertile ground for working through the implications and potential of the kind of moral perfectionist project that I attempt to theorize in relation to the problem of race. I follow David Owen in his connecting Foucault's work on parrhesia with Cavell's notion of moral perfectionism as an impetus to work on the self. As such, I position Foucault's articulation of engagement with the ethical as a necessary, though by itself insufficient, foundation for a moral perfectionist mode of addressing race as an impediment of the flourishing of ethical subjectivity. This is part of what I argue is a crucial step in building an understanding of subjectivity that could then foster a White subject capable of doing the self work necessary to combat practices of race that have interacted to create them as "White" subjects in the first place. We must cultivate a subject capable of asking themselves what kind of person they want to be,

and do so with an ever-deepening engagement with and investigation of the ways that race pre-determines the kind of life one can live (and with whom one can live it).

Chapter 4: Worldly Ethics, Part II: Levinas and the Care for the Other

I continue my discussion of the ethical in Chapter 5, and again, Myers's text serves as fertile ground for developing and articulating my own perspective. This chapter picks up where Chapter 3left off by engaging *Worldly Ethics*'s classification of another theorist of the ethical, in this case, the work of Emmanuel Levinas. According to *Worldly Ethics*, Levinas's work represents a "charitable ethics," which, like Foucault's "therapeutic ethics," Myers depicts as at best insufficient, and at worst undercutting of a democratic ethics. I use Levinas to pose a distinctive perspective on the demands we place on ethics and our relationship to the ethical—ethics (or, rather, the ethical) is not a set of enumerated duties, prohibitions, or norms, nor should we demand of the ethical that it produce democratic behaviors with absolute certainty. To dictate behavior and association is incompatible with democratic self-governance.

What Levinas's work contributes to this dissertation is a particular understanding of subjectivity that allows us to reimagine our relationship to the other. Rather than thinking of the other as a recipient of pity, Levinas describes a relationship in which the demands and calls from the Other issued to the Self serves as the constitutive mechanism by which the self becomes a full subject. Within the Levinasian framework, the self's subjectivity is only developed through the taking on and approval of the responsibility that the expressed in the face of the other in their exposedness, nudity, and privation. The self's approval of a responsibility that can never be fully satisfied or discharged is constitutive of subjectivity for Levinas.

This approval of infinite responsibility to and for the other is a crucial part of building an active, reflexive engagement with the ethical. By framing subjectivity as always existing for the

other, Levinas allows us to approach the moral perfectionist project from the opposite side. Instead of beginning with infinite responsibility for work on the self as Emersonian perfectionism does, Levinasian moral perfectionism begins with the primacy of the other. This dissertation chronicles my particular effort to think of ethical subjectivity in new ways, in order to build an ethical theoretical approach that makes possible a White subject that can care for others and for themselves and so combat the practices of race that always already obstruct such care. Whites must understand that race not only stands in the way of caring for others (in fact, it hinders us from seeing people of color as others to be cared for in the first place), but it also diminishes even Whites full ethical flourishing by preventing us from self-knowledge and friendships that are imperative to personal growth and the attainment of our next unattained, but attainable selves.

Chapter 5: The Politics of Escape in Samuel Delany's *The Star Pit* and Levinas's *De l'evasion*: A Response to Neil Roberts's *Freedom as Marronage*

The final chapter of my project is a response to Neil Roberts's 2015 book *Freedom as Marronage* by way of reflecting upon the notions of escape in Samuel Delany's 1967 novella the *The Star Pit* and Emmanuel Levinas's 1935 essay *De l'evasion* (*On Escape*). This chapter brings together Delany's and Levinas's distinctive theoretical engagements with the question of escape in order to improve upon and fill in gaps that we find in *Freedom as Marronage'*s deployment of the concept *marronage*.

I begin by working through Levinas's ambitious first foray into theorizing Being, and beings' relationship to Being, after Heidegger. *On Escape* frames beings' relationship to Being in terms of their rivetedness/enchainment to Being and simultaneous urge and drive to escape Being. In addition to the terminology of being-bound, Levinas also analogizes beings' relationship to Being in terms of imprisonment, one's connection to the experience of nausea, of

ecstasy, limitation, and flight. After wrestling with the problem of the urge to escape Being, ultimately, Levinas's work seeks another way, a way he eventually calls in his last major work "otherwise than being;" not non-being, not escape from being, but being otherwise. *On Escape* lays the groundwork for Levinas's career-long work on the ethical, care for the other, and being-for-the-other.

Next, I explore the notion of escape presented by Samuel R. Delany in his early novella *The Star Pit*. Delany's builds a universe in which humanity has discovered the means of light speed interstellar travel and has colonized planets outside of our home solar system. Humanity has "escaped" the bounds of earthly life, but upon approaching a few lightyears beyond the edges of The Milky Way, the nature of reality changes in ways that the vast majority of humanity simply cannot survive. When most people encounter the "reality shift" just outside of the galaxy, they first experience profound psychological and emotional breakdown, and eventually, total physiological death. Even artificial intelligence and computer systems fail and collapse in this reality shift zone.

Eventually, however, individuals begin to emerge who are able to survive past the edge of the galaxy. These individuals are colloquially known as "golden." Whereas most of humanity remains bound to the galaxy in which they are born, these special few can traverse intergalactic space, and so are instrumental in further expanding human colonies, resource extraction, and trade. This special status translates into higher sociopolitical status. Eventually, though, we learn that whereas golden can "escape" to places the rest of us cannot, there are creatures that can transcend the limitations that bind even the golden. What most people (including most golden) fail to realize is that golden themselves are bound to this universe. As it happens, there are tiny, fuzzy, sloth-like creatures, which are often kept in terrariums as pets by children, that can

spontaneously "pop" between universes when they get startled. The seemingly "lowest" of creatures are unbound by limitations that even the strongest, "most free" experience.

Levinas's and Delany's respective models allow us to complicate and refine the model posed by Roberts. Roberts constructs a notion of freedom upon the foundational phenomenon of *marronage*, viz. flight from slavery, broadly (and, as I argue, problematically) construed. According to Roberts, various iterations of marronage (petit, grand, sovereign, sociogenic) are useful in conceptualizing historical (and even contemporary) movements, actions, and practices against oppression and domination. I position Levinas and Delany in conversation in order to constructively critique Roberts's approach and provide alternative perspectives and tactics.

CHAPTER 1: ON EMERSONIAN MORAL PERFECTIONISM AND ITS RELATION TO
THE PROBLEM OF RACE

Emersonian moral perfectionism is a meta-theoretical engagement with the problem of the self within the self/other framework of intersubjective ethics and politics. In the chapters to follow, I argue that moral perfectionism allows for a particular set of productive (though, still, limited) conversations about the problem of race. I modify Emersonian moral perfectionism (through a conversation with Levinas's works on ethics and subjectivity) and posit it as *sine qua non* of an ethical response to the problem of race by subjects deemed "White," in particular, even insofar as Emerson's own views of race are today seen to be problematic. The Emersonian moral perfectionist framework advances a sense of responsibility for and care of the self by shifting the ways that we think of the self and its relationship to the world, to others, to truth, and most importantly for our purposes, to the self and its potential. I argue that this expanded moral perfectionism can provide even those who otherwise benefit (economically and politically) from practices of race to see how race represents an ethical harm even to the White subject, and thus can self-motivate and sustain work on themselves and practices of race to which they are subject. We can say that the argument in this chapter applies some of the ideas that I believe are in Emerson's text *The American Scholar* to the writings of Emerson himself, as a measure of consistency. This is how Emerson considers the problem of moral perfectionism. He writes:

> The theory of books is noble. The scholar of the first age received into him the world around; brooded thereon; gave it the new arrangement of his own mind, and uttered it again. It came into him life; it went out from him truth. It came to him short-lived actions; it went out from him immortal thoughts. It came to him business; it went from him poetry. It was dead fact; now, it is quick thought. It can stand, and it can go. It now

endures, it now flies, it now inspires. Precisely in proportion to the depth of mind from which it issued, so high does it soar, so long does it sing.

Or, I might say, it depends on how far the process had gone, of transmuting life into truth. In proportion to the completeness of the distillation, so will the purity and imperishableness of the product be. *But none is quite perfect. As no air-pump can by any means make a perfect vacuum, so neither can any artist entirely exclude the conventional, the local, the perishable from his book, or write a book of pure thought,* that shall be as efficient, in all respects, to a remote posterity, as to contemporaries, or rather to the second age. *Each age, it is found, must write its own books; or rather, each generation for the next succeeding. The books of an older period will not fit this.*[1]

Rather than take Emerson's perspective as comprehensive in this chapter, I will lift out what I consider to be the most useful elements of Emerson's thinking, show their potential for today, and use these arguments to also highlight the elements missing from the Emersonian project. In the process I will also draw attention to some the conceptual problems with regard to Emerson's theorization of race, and show how understandably some of the racial conventions of his time crept into and circumscribed his thought. This is an important argument because I believe the problems in Emerson's theory of race potentially negate or mitigate what I feel to be Emerson's most important contribution to ethical thought: the claim of responsibility for and to the self and for the state society.[2]

I use a discussion of Emerson's trust in the self and Cavell's emphasis on the role of the friend to support my claim of the importance of the self as a site of ethical work, while simultaneously showing how race limits the self's ability to enter into conversation with the friend (and thus be intelligible to themselves) by constraining who can serve as the friend in the first place. Like Cavell, I suggest that work on the self does not take place without self-

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[1] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The American Scholar," in *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Selected Essays, Lectures, and Poems*, ed. Robert D. Richardson, Jr. (New York: Bantam Books, 1990), 87.

[2] This requires the destruction of the old and building of the new, self-accusation and uncomfortable self-scrutiny, self-reliance and self-direction with a coinciding hostility toward societal conformity, and the receiving and disclosure of messages from the oracles of the human heart. See Emerson, "The American Scholar," 92-93.

intelligibility, but self-intelligibility is not possible without the friend (or friend's intelligibility to themselves and to the self). To that end, I will highlight portions of Emerson's thought that concern the notion of friend and their productive influence on the self.

Race is an impediment to friendship in that it separates (or segregates) us and delimits the kinds of relationships we can have, and thus, constrains my potential understanding of myself.[3] Race as a set of practices and customs (and their attendant communities of opinion) to which we conform makes self-knowledge unsustainable.[4] Therefore, race impedes self-work. This argument has the benefit of emphasizing the stakes of challenging race as a set of practices, discourses, and customs, while remaining aware of the impediment that race poses to one's

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[3] See Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Ethics," in *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Selected Essays, Lectures, and Poems*, ed. Robert D. Richardson, Jr. (New York: Bantam Books, 1990), 75-76 for his comments on the power of the friend. I will discuss this later on in the chapter, but it is worth citing a portion of it here: "… so the relation which you sustain to other men is not to be determined by the will; but the mind of your companion and your own determine the character of the [connection] by their intrinsic nature… There is no need of professions: there is no need of promises: you know what impression you have made on any man by considering how superficial or how sincere communications he has made to you." (Emerson, "Ethics," 75). "The place where you are is your workyard. The work you can do is your office. The friend you love is your ordained yokefellow. Insist on yourself; never imitate. For your own gift you can present every moment with all the force of a lifetime's cultivation but can sustain it on the basis of the world; but of the adopted talent of another you have only an extemporaneous half possession." (Emerson, "Ethics," 76).

[4] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance," in *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Selected Essays, Lectures, and Poems*, ed. Robert D. Richardson, Jr. (New York: Bantam Books, 1990), 153. "The objection to conforming to usages that have become dead to you is that it scatters your force. It loses time and blurs the impression of your character. If you maintain a dead church, contribute to a dead Bible-society, vote with a great party either for the government or against it, spread your table like base housekeepers,—under all these screens I have difficulty to detect the precise man you are: and of course so much force is withdrawn from your proper life. But do your work and I shall know you. Do your work, and you shall reinforce yourself. A man must consider what blindman's-buff is this game of conformity. If I know your sect, I anticipate your argument… Well, most men have bound their eyes with one or another handkerchief, and attached themselves to some of these communities of opinion [such as the church or jurisprudence]. This conformity makes them not false in a few particulars, authors of a few lies, but false in all particulars. Their every truth is not quite true."

ability to challenge it in the first place. Like Emerson, I seek in my argument in the dissertation to develop a type of comportment or approach through which we can challenge the state of the self from within the self—a means of loving and trusting the self enough to care for, interrogate, and refine it.[5]

I argue that Emerson's historically situated notion of the self is burdened by practices and values from his 19th century post-colonial past, which are antithetical to the self-reliance he aims to create; as such, Emerson's self is both American and White, in that while this self has revolted against its prior imperial rulers to become American, it nonetheless fails to break from the European structures, values, and practices that defines the idea of Whiteness, something that Emerson consistently argues we should put behind us in the pursuit of the active soul driven by self-trust and self-reliance.[6] In spite of his critique of southern chattel slavery and the Fugitive Slave Act, Emerson fails to challenge the norms, customs, and valuations that comprise race, and rather adopts the racial ontologies available to him at the time to bolster the uniqueness of an American, post-colonial (though, thoroughly imperialist), White self. Even as Emerson argued for abolition of slavery and a critical awareness of the myriad ways we all patronize industries that utilize slave labor (coffee, tobacco, sugar, etc),[7] he stops well short of arguing that people of color have equal moral worth. Instead, he makes ontological arguments about *a priori*

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[5] For self-trust see Emerson, "Ethics," 76-77 and Emerson, "Self-Reliance," 149.

[6] See Chapter 1 "The Emersonian Prehistory of American Pragmatism" of Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 28-35 for a conversation of how Emerson's self-reliant, active soul is circumscribed by race.

[7] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Emancipation in British West Indies," in *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Mary Oliver (New York: Modern Library, 2000), 765. "The sugar they raised was excellent: nobody tasted the blood in it. The coffee was fragrant; the tobacco was incense…"

circumstances that prevent the enslaved (as well as Native Americans) from obtaining full humanity.[8]

Rather than merely restating Emerson's descriptions of people of color and his paternalistic abolitionism, my focus is on opening up the Emersonian radical potential in White subjects in particular for "self-sustaining self-overcoming"[9] since I believe that this would allow them to be invested in the discovery and confrontation of practices of race for reasons grounded in a different sense of the ethical, rather than humanist or paternalistic rights-based justifications that ultimately leave racial categories and differentiation intact. This perspective would, I argue, allow for the continued relevance of Emerson's writing on moral perfectionism in spite of his explicit racial politics. I seek to articulate the means by which we can energize the kind of ethical self-work up to the task of challenging racial differentiation per se, rather than merely taking racial categories as givens to which we can only respond or adapt.

This chapter is an introduction to the ethical force of moral perfectionism and its potential to address the problem of race as a particular crisis of the self/other relationship. The chapter is comprised of three sections: First, I will detail what I take to be the most crucial pillars of moral perfectionism as presented across the works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, specifically, power and ethics as distinct from norms, trust of the self, aversion, and the value of the friend. These

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[8] See Emerson, "The Cherokee Letter," in *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Selected Essays, Lectures, and Poems*, ed. Robert D. Richardson, Jr. (New York: Bantam Books, 1990), 101-105; Emerson, "Address on Emancipation of the West Indies," 753-776; Emerson, "The Fugitive Slave Law" in *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Mary Oliver (New York: Modern Library, 2000), 777-792).

[9] See Cornel West's description of the Emersonian project in West, *American Evasion of Philosophy*, 16.

various pieces are brought together here to establish my argument for the capacity for self-work and the development from the attained self to the unattained, but attainable, next self.[10]

The second section will provide an account of Emerson's perspective regarding the problem of race. Emerson addresses the problem of race, or more specifically, racial slavery. In spite of these efforts to address race in his abolitionist tracts, I glean evidence of a pervasive problem, not only for him as a thinker of the ethical but for what I want to claim is true for his particular description of a White subject. I argue that his problematic responses to slavery and the expulsion of Native Americans arise from his inability to fully internalize the strengths of his particular moral perfectionism, as exemplified most specifically in his failures to engage his Black contemporaries as interlocutors, or more crucially—as friends. To nuance and develop my argument with respect to Emerson and race, I will bring in the works by race thinkers who were contemporaries of Emerson, particularly David Walker, Maria W. Stewart, and Frederick Douglass. In so doing, I believe that I can make the argument that the resources of the friend are always available for the reinvention of the self, even if these potential friends are ignored, neglected, or abused in the present social conditions.

Despite these problems in Emerson's description of the moral perfectionist mission, the strength of moral perfectionism is that it provides for hope and potential in spite of current failings—in fact, I argue that moral perfectionism is precisely the kind of internally-originated inducement to self-work that we require in order to transfigure our race-permeated world. Moral perfectionism highlights the inextinguishable internal impetus that opens the possibility of being otherwise than we presently are and thereby calls us to challenge the nebulous practices,

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[10] See Ralph Waldo Emerson, "History," in *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Selected Essays, Lectures, and Poems*, ed. Robert D. Richardson, Jr. (New York: Bantam Books, 1990), 129 for Emerson's oft-sited introduction of the unattained, but attainable.

discourses, and relations that we call race that would otherwise appear insurmountable (or remain invisible to us), since they structure us as the racial subjects we are in the first place. Moral perfectionism is a necessary component in the creation of an ethical subjectivity in which White subjects bring themselves from their present attained selves to their next selves. Moral perfectionism provides a motivation to attain the heretofore unattained, but attainable, next self.

Emerson's Foundations

In the present section, I will lay out the core Emersonian contributions upon which to begin to build an ethical subject capable of self-work motivated from within. The core contributions that I argue are most central to my goal of facilitating a White subject capable of and driven to self-work are: trust in the self, Emerson's model of power and the attendant ethics as distinct from and contrary to norms/customs, self-reliance and genius, these pieces combine to facilitate self-work.

Self-Trust

Emerson's essay "Ethics" (1837) is one of his early attempts to articulate new understandings of the subject and its relationship to itself and the conditions in which it finds itself. In this brief, but important essay, Emerson builds a rough framework for trusting the self, as well as a means for determining the present state of the self.

> In the preceding lectures, we have been considering one after another, the elements of history, and have seen of each, that there are only the dealings of the soul of man with the external world that all these grave forms of which books and laws make so much, viz. Art, Letters, States, Religion, Customs, are only signs more or less near of the human will. History is ever inferring the hidden nature of the human soul from these gigantic and remote effects. What is that we explore with so much curiosity in all these conspicuous departments of study? Man is the game we hunt. Man is the mystery we unveil. There are nearer manifestations of this interesting being—in the walls of his house, in the walls of his flesh. The same phenomena which the world illustrates in capitals the house illustrates in small letter. To the clock of history the movement and mechanism is the same whether we read upon its face seconds, minutes, and hours or years, centuries, and millenniums. The history of a man is the history of the world, and if we would rightly understand our

subject, we must not always view it in the gross but sometimes also in the particular. A single house, said the Roman poet, will show all that is done and suffered in the world.[11]

This brief introductory paragraph lays out an early example of what will eventually be known conceptually as ordinary language philosophy. Emerson here is providing the means of approaching the otherwise mystified notion of the soul—we can observe the soul by observing the history of man's outward, grand action (i.e. art, letters, states, religion, custom), but also in the specific, the narrow, the particular—in ordinary things and events, instead of grand over-arching histories and abstract systems. Rather than peering into the large scale state or in the general, the entirety of the soul can be found in the actions, behaviors, and effects of one person, the "single house." The whole can be found in the part.[12]

Instead of focusing in the grand and sweeping themes of general history, we can just as easily find the human in much smaller scale and narrower focus. Emerson allows for the use of our particular selves as sites of work, focus, responsibility, and investigation—our own houses, instead of the whole, abstract society. (This early essay foreshadows the development of Emerson's "unattained, but attainable self" in "History" (1841) insofar as he begins to articulate a shift in focus from grand history to particular history as the record of the development of the

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[11] Emerson, "Ethics, 69.

[12] This is an early and recurring theme for Emerson. "The production of a work of art throws a light upon the mystery of humanity. A work of art is an abstract or epitome of the world. It is the result or expression of nature, in miniature. For although the works of nature are innumerable and all different, the result or the expression of them all is similar and single. Nature is a sea of forms radically alike and even unique. A leaf, a sunbeam, a landscape, the ocean, make an analogous impression on the mind. What is common to them all,—that perfectness and harmony, is beauty. The standard of beauty is the entire circuit of natural forms,—the totality of nature…Nothing is quite beautiful alone; nothing but is beautiful in the whole" Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Nature," in *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Selected Essays, Lectures, and Poems*, ed. Robert D. Richardson, Jr. (New York: Bantam Books, 1990), 25-26.

soul, as it shifts from one state to another. History becomes the archive of the development of the

soul and the conditions and possibilities from which the next self will potentially emerge.[13])

In addition to setting up the novel possibility of plumbing the actions of the self for the

soul and its present state, Emerson goes a few steps further in *Ethics*. He advances the notion that

this movement from one historical state of the self to another is more than mere mechanical

reaction to stimuli, but rather emerges from a possibility found within humanity—that is, in the

instinct and trust of the singular self and its insight.[14] Emerson highlights the radical capacity of

the soul to shape and perform work on itself, because of and in spite of the circumstances and

forces to which it is subject. The soul deepens its knowledge of itself through self-reflection (and

judgment of its past actions)[15] and the potential discovery is facilitated by the fact that the soul

cannot but express itself in the outward actions and effects of the subject. There is no limitation

to the soul-material upon which we can reflect since it necessarily finds outward expression:

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[13] Emerson, "History," 129.

[14] "The law of all action which cannot yet be stated, it is so simple, of which every man has glimpses in a lifetime and values that he knows of it more than all knowledge, which whether it be called Necessity or Spirit or Power is the law whereof all history is but illustration, is the law that sits as pilot at the helm and guides the path of revolutions, of wars, of emigrations, of trades of legislation. And yet private life yields more affecting examples of irresistible nature of the human spirit than masses of men or long periods of time afford us. In the present lecture, I will offer you some sketches of the appearance of this law in various parts of life, all suggesting the importance of instincts, that the simplest, the instinctive action is ever the part of the wise man" (Emerson, "Ethics," 69-70).

[15] See Emerson, "Self-Reliance," 154-155 for Emerson's thoughts on the self's past words and actions: "The other terror that scares us from self-trust is our consistency; a reverence for our past act or word because the eyes of others have no other data for computing our orbit than our past acts, and we are loth to disappoint them. But why should you keep your head over your shoulder? Why drag about this corpse of your memory, lest you contradict somewhat you have stated in this or that public place? Suppose you should contradict yourself; what then? It seems to be a rule of wisdom never to rely on your memory alone, scarcely even in acts of pure memory, but to bring the past for judgment into the thousand-eyed present, and live ever in a new day… Speak what you think now in hard words and to-morrow speak what to-morrow thinks in hard words again, though it contradict everything you said to-day."

We are always reasoning from the seen to the unseen. Hence the perfect intelligence that subsists between the wise men of remote ages. A man cannot bury his meanings so deep in his book but time and like-minded men will find them. Plato had a secret doctrine, had he? What secret can he conceal from the eyes of Bacon, of Montaigne, of Kant?
And as you publish all that you strive to conceal, so another property of your nature is that what you have within that only can you see without."[16]

The things we say and do reveal the state of the soul of which they are a manifestation. Just because we have managed to conceal the meaning of our words and actions from ourselves for the time being, suggests neither that it will remain so concealed from ourselves, nor from others who look on our actions (or read our words, as the case may be).

Emerson goes on to explain how it is that we could fail (at least temporarily) to see the states of the soul that are always already being shown through our outward actions. Specifically, he argues that the self must be in the right state to observe itself. "No man can learn what he has not preparation for learning, however much the object is before him… Thus God screens us evermore from premature ideas. Our eyes are holden and we cannot see things that stare us in the face; until the hour arrives when the mind is ripened,—then we behold them, and the time when we saw them not, is like a dream."[17] That I cannot will myself into seeing those things that are before me, (which, at present, I lack the capacity to see), does not mean that I will never develop such a capacity.

It is precisely the "ripening" of the mind that Emerson posits in *Ethics* that I argue is a core concern for moral perfectionism. Emerson's perfectionism is mindful of successive states of the self and the development of new capacities, but as of yet, I have not established how one would move from state to state, (or better yet, hasten one's transition from state to state); rather I have simply argued the position that such transitions are possible. What I seek to highlight is the

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[16] Emerson, "Ethics," 74.
[17] Emerson, "Ethics, 75.

capacity to actively do work, or "ripen" the self such that one may be struck by the sights before

the self. I argue that the broad moral perfectionism that I assemble throughout the dissertation

comprises a *sine qua non* of the means of self-work that must be present if we are to develop a

multi-front strategy for addressing the myriad ways that race functions. One such way that race

functions is in building (and so categorizing, valuating, and organizing) racialized subjects and

their relationships—how can racialized subjects contest the very forces that intervene to generate

subjects qua subjects in the first place?[18] Well, since norms and practices are the ways that race

operates, then a crucial starting point is examining the ways that we behave and think as

imbedded members of a society. As Emerson adeptly points out: we cannot hide our meanings

forever—everything we do is an expression of the soul.[19] Another property of the soul is that,

like fire, "it will not be hidden but evermore it publishes its nature through action, word,

countenance. A power quite superior to his private will forces every man to hang out his colors,

to give a tongue in every action to his ruling thoughts;"[20] therefore, if our conventions and norms

lead us to behave in ways that re-create and sustain race, then by looking at our everyday

valuations, organizations, pursuits, avoidances, (and hopefully, eventually, our obliviousnesses)

we can begin to get a picture of the soul that we would then begin working upon.

Emerson has a complex answer for how one could even manage to see something in the

first place:

> And as you cannot read in the same book what your friend reads there; *as you cannot see anything that you have not within*; as you cannot be in a company where you do not belong; as you cannot conceal anything; *so the relation which you sustain to other men is not to be determined by the will; but the mind of your companion and your own determine the character of the [connection] by their intrinsic nature*. They refuse to abide

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[18] See Utz L. McKnight, *The Everyday Practice of Race in America: Ambiguous Privilege*, (New York: Routledge, 2010), 2-6 for a discussion of valuation and practice.
[19] Emerson, "Ethics," 69, 74, 75.
[20] Emerson, "Ethics," 75.

by any covenant: day by day they make their own. *That mood into which a friend can bring us is his dominion over us. To all the thoughts of that state of mind, he has a right.*[21]

Despite the conversations around the implications of Emerson's sense of the self and its relation to liberal individualism,[22] I argue that we cannot conceive of the self-reliance and the radical capacity for change that Emerson articulates without understanding the role of the other entailed in his philosophy.

Emerson's early work, particularly "Ethics,"*,* which I have referenced so heavily here, shows that he was more than a thinker of rugged individualism and self-imposed isolation, but rather realized the place in his theory for the other beyond simply a merely co-existent being, the obstacle, annoyance, target of derision, or object of teaching. The friend sees things in my actions that I, as yet, cannot—and she sees things even in spite of my best attempts at concealing them. The friend can bring upon me moods—there is a force exerted through the friend that lies outside of my intention, that resists my will. I argue that the force of the friend is inseparable from my capacity to work upon myself, especially insofar as they can "read" in me things I cannot yet see, be they strengths or weaknesses, excellences or faults.

Emerson's Framing of Power and Ethics

Our discussion of the strengths of Emerson's theorization of the work on the self begins in his earliest published essays and lectures. The broad scope and grand proclamations in *Nature* about humanity's relationship to nature and its force and abundance produces a sense of the

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[21] Emerson, "Ethics," 75. Emphasis added.
[22] See Jack Turner, *Awakening to Race: Individualism and Social Consciousness in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2012), 25-45 for a discussion of Emerson as a thinker of individualism.

radical capacity of humanity within Emerson's metaphysics of power.[23] As Cavell notes in "Finding as Founding," Emerson's configuration of humanity's relation to nature and the world changes between *Nature* and "Experience," but there are pieces of his notion of power that hold across these works.[24] In *Nature,* for instance, Emerson builds an argument for how humanity's actions are not merely pre-determined by flows of energy, nor only reactions to stimuli, but rather that human will is a part of both "Nature" and "nature." Uppercase Nature is the generative, divine force behind both man and lowercase nature, the world we find around us at every moment—the physical, the tangible, the material, the invisible (though affecting) forces and substances that comprise our surroundings. Human action is possible through the divine (Nature) and in connection to the common, ordinary, everyday world of nature.[25]

In *Nature,* we see Emerson craft his most grandiose and omnipotent man for whom nature is mere material from which to build another world in man's own image—that uppercase

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[23] See Mary Oliver, ed., introduction to *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Mary Oliver (New York: Modern Library, 2000), xii-xiii. "The best use of literature bends not toward the narrow and the absolute but to the extravagant and the possible. Answers are no part of it; rather it is the opinions, the rhapsodic persuasions, the ingrafted logics, the clues that are to the mind of the read the possible keys to his own self-quarrels, his own predicament. This is the crux of Emerson, who does not advance straight ahead but wanders to all sides of an issue;… who opens doors and tells us to look at things for ourselves."

[24] The world's secondary status in *Nature* as something upon which humanity projects itself changes in "Experience" to stand on its own and exists for its own reasons, but the radical capacity of humanity persists across his works. See Stanley Cavell's *Emerson's Transcendental Etudes* especially Ch. 6 "Finding as Founding" pp 110-113.

[25] See Oliver, *Essential Writings*, xiii. There, she argues, "in it [*Nature*] he refers, with equal serenity to "Nature" and to "nature." We understand clearly that by the first he means 'this web of God'—everything that is not the mind uttering such words—yet he sets our lives down among the small-lettered noun as well, as though to burden us equally with the sublime and the common. It is as if the combination, and the understanding of the combination—the necessary honoring of both—were the issue of utmost importance. *Nature* is a text that is entirely about divinity, and first purposes, a book of manners, almost, but for the inner man. It does not demean by diction or implication the life that we are most apt to call 'real,' but it presupposes the hearts spiritual awakening as the true work of our lives."

Nature imbues man with this power and capacity. Later on in "Experience," his idea of man is less hubristic, and gives more consideration to nature as standing for and by itself, rather than as mere play-thing for humanity. Emerson matures. Nevertheless, the gesture in *Nature* is no less crucial—Emerson is attempting to open up the capacity for radical change. This is both a justification of and response to the post-Revolutionary American moment. Through his essays and lectures, he works out for himself (and the rest of us who find ourselves in this "New World,") a way to continue the revolutionary project and realize its broader philosophical significance, beyond the formal rejection of British institutions and rules. Emerson facilitates a mode of relating to ourselves, distinct from framing our sense of self as extensions (colonies) of Old World nations. In the Introduction to *Nature*, Emerson says:

> Our age is retrospective. It builds the sepulchres of the fathers. It writes biographies, histories, and criticism. The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes. *Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe?* Why should we not have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs? Embosomed for a season in nature, whose floods of life stream around and through us, and invite us, by the powers they supply, to action proportioned to nature, why should we grope among the dry bones of the past, or put a living generation into masquerade out of its faded wardrobe? The sun shines to-day also. There is more wool and flax in the fields. There are new lands, new men, new thoughts. Let us demand our own works and laws and worship.[26]

And so he offers up Nature (and nature) as sites and sources of radical capacity for change and self-creation. Admittedly, Emerson's notion of humanity in *Nature* is problematic—in fact, more than a century later, Levinas will contest the forms of knowledge and mastery that Western philosophy tends to perpetuate. Emerson's argument for mastery and knowledge of nature is symptomatic of such a Western mindset.[27] Nevertheless, this comportment is in part the

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[26] Emerson, "Nature," 15. Emphasis added.
[27] See Section II of *Nature* in which Emerson discusses the commodities of nature. "The misery of man appears like childish petulance, when we explore the steady and prodigal provision that

condition in which we find ourselves, and serves as the attained starting line for our contemporary self-work.

America (and the Emersonian self) needs a way to ground itself now that it has rejected the old ways and institutions from its Old World forebears. We should not limit this revolutionary mentality merely to the colonial period and the politics of Independence, for taken from a 21st century perspective, I see in Emerson a call to surpass the politics and norms of even our own particular colonial/colonized practices and mindsets from the intervening decades his writing. To move past the practices and discourses that we currently inhabit, we need a framework of power relations within which we can position ourselves against the dominant social and political forces. It is useful to set the stage of radical creativity, but it is useful to ground our understanding of that creativity within a sense of power dynamics and the interaction of forces. We live in a world that resists and responds to our whims and actions.

The sense of power that I argue is most constructive in relation to my broader project (of fostering new race-critical responses to the problem of race, by those who think themselves White) is the sense of reciprocity and flow that Emerson articulates.[28] When Emerson writes his short essay "Ethics" in 1837, we see his first steps of working through the implications of the lofty proclamations and connections that he made in *Nature* between mankind and divine Nature and common nature. He begins to frame a concept of power and action in which there is no such

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has been made for his support and delight on this green ball which floats him through the heavens… 'More servants wait on man Than he'll take notice of.' Nature in its ministry to man, is not only the material, but is also the process and the result. All the parts incessantly work into each other's hands for the profit of man." (Emerson, "Nature," 20). The world outside of the self appears to exist as merely supportive and ancillary to mankind rather than for itself.

[28] His sense of power is proto-Nietzschean and proto-Foucauldian; according to Foucault, power is action, never held in abeyance, but always facing resistance and counter-powers. Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality: Volume One* (New York: Vintage, 1990), 92-102.

thing as strength separate from its expression, its effect; likewise, there is no action without re-action, no force without resistance. This is the beginning of his refinement of the boundless capacity of the individual that he articulates in *Nature*, where the world is merely that upon which the self projects itself, the receptivity to humanity's action.

Not only does he begin to refine his sense of power dynamics beyond the grandiloquent "will" of the individual in *Nature*, but he also branches out into the ethical implications of his new power-aware notion of human action. In "Ethics," Emerson shows us that ethics is that guiding principle which underlies all things, and more importantly, he shows us that ethics can be found in the individual human instinct—that kernel of action that drives the changes of history.

> It [Ethics] is what we mean by the phrase that goes current in all men's mouths, the Nature of things. The law of all action which cannot yet be stated, it is so simple, of which every man has glimpses in a lifetime and values that he knows of it more than all knowledge, which whether it be called Necessity or Spirit or Power is the law whereof all history is but illustration, is the law that sits as pilot at the helm and guides the path of revolutions, of wars, of emigrations, of trades, of legislation. And yet private life yields more affecting examples of irresistible nature of the human spirit than masses of men or long periods of time afford us. *In the present lecture I wish to offer you some sketches of the appearance of this law in various parts of life, all suggesting the importance of the instincts, that the simplest, the instinctive action is ever the part of the wise man.*[29]

Here, Emerson presents for us the kernel of unpredictability that Nature instills in each individual, which, on rare and precious moments, we each see past the circumstances that we have inherited to the realm of the ethical, unbound by our present norms and valuations, which all the same emerges, in unforeseen exceptional moments, within and before each of us even though we are made subjects by and through these norms and valuations. The otherwise accounted-for subject is opened-up to radical difference and change through the instinct. The

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[29] Emerson, "Ethics," 69-70.

instinct is that remainder which can never be fully accounted for or normalized away within

subjects. As such, ethics and the awareness of it through "the instinct" is that always already

present resistance to the social, political, and cultural forces that would otherwise situate, curtail,

and provide for the capacities of the individual.

In addition to articulating a remainder through which resistance is possible, Emerson also

builds a broader nuanced framework of power relations that allows for the emergence of

processes and procedures by which we can develop new capacities and modes of creativity and

resistance. In "Ethics," Emerson builds a model of power dynamics which refine the radical

capacity that he began in *Nature*. This model allows for particular conversations about the

capacity of the individual to persist and work on themselves in spite of their current state, faults,

and incapacities—that there is always potential for change, growth, and resistance:

> Nothing is so carefully secured as this, that whilst we live we shall learn. Why should we
> fret at particular events? For everything you have missed, you have gained something
> else; and for everything you gain, you lose something. Our education goes on, whether
> we dig or saw or read… When you act, you lose no time from your book, because you
> still study and still learn, so that you have a right mind and a right heart. If not, you still
> learn though all is mislearned…. Or can a man forget anything which he truly knows?
> No, for a man knows no more to any purpose than he practices, and that which he knows,
> that is he. The more knower, the more man… Keep the eye open to all impressions, but
> deepen no impression by effort. Keep the upright position. Resign yourself to your
> thoughts and then every object will make that mark, that modification on your character
> which it ought.[30]

This meandering passage highlights the necessary openness of man to the effects of his

experiences, and that even when we doubt that we learn, our lives imbue us with new

perspectives and new capacities to see. It is crucial to note the seemingly non-philosophical work

that he invokes—the work of the ordinary man (sawing, digging, etc.) is still life-work and so a

source of possibility and growth. Emerson goes on "The ship beating at sea gains a small

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[30] Emerson, "Ethics," 71-72.

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commission of miles for her true course on every tack: So in life our profession, our

amusements, our errors even give us with much parade, or with our own blushes, a little solid

wisdom."[31] For every zig and zag of our life's "tack" we gain a new experience, and so the

everyday life of the ordinary person is shown to be a site of expansion as worthy of

contemplation as canonical, high philosophers.

Not only is the ordinary life a site of constant growth of capacities and expansion of

horizons, but Emerson also argues that there is no outside authority to which one should appeal

to gauge the state of the mind.

> But to proceed from life to the laws of life,—one fact all just observation will teach,—the absolute self-sufficiency of the mind. The laws of the mind transcend all positive rules and take effect themselves. The mind wants nothing but to be aroused from sleep… We are to learn that the mind is its own measure; that the true call is the talent; true progress is conforming the life to the thought; true gratitude is to do what you can; true economy of time is fidelity to yourself; true pertinence is depth of thought."[32]

The self cannot but express itself—it cannot hide its internal state, for it is always expressed

without.

Emerson thus expresses a radical equilibrium at the base of his metaphysics of power.[33]

We can only see in others what we are within.[34] We can only practice that which we already

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[31] Emerson, "Ethics," 72.

[32] Emerson, "Ethics," 72.

[33] "Therefore, whoever is genuine, his ambition is exactly proportioned to his powers." (Emerson, "Ethics," 73). "If a teacher have any opinion which he wishes to conceal, his pupils will become as fully indoctrinated into that as into any that he publishes." (Emerson, "Ethics," 74). "And as you publish all that you strive to conceal, so another property of your nature is that what you have within that only can you see without." (Emerson, "Ethics," 74). "Another property of the soul is that like fire it will not be hidden but evermore it publishes its nature through action, word, countenance. A power quite superior to his private will forces every man to hang out his colors, to give a tongue in every action to his ruling thoughts. (Emerson, "Ethics," 75)

[34] Emerson, "Ethics," 74. "What can we see, read, acquire but what we are?... No man can learn what he has not preparation for learning, however much the object is before him."

know. We can only receive that which we project outward. There is a unique reciprocity to Emerson's sense of control and resistance. His is a non-moralizing understanding of power and potential, for within this equilibrium, there is an assumption that in limitation or failure there is no fault, to the extent that they represent an as-yet undeveloped capacity, but this demands that we take stock of the standards we have given ourselves—the kinds of people we have chosen to be. "Thus God screens us evermore from premature ideas. Our eyes are holden and we cannot see things that stare us in the face; until the hour arrives when the mind is ripened,—then we behold them, and the time when we saw them not, is like a dream."[35]

But even as Emerson's metaphysics of power is absolving in one breath, it is also a warning and a chastisement. "Human life is an endless exhibition of this law of balance or compensation. All things are double, one against another. 'Harm watch, harm catch"; says the proverb. And again 'for every grain of wit that a man hath, is there a grain of folly.'[36] Even as our capacities are situated and contextual, there is likewise a consequence for the actions or inactions within the conditions of those capacities. My failure to render aid to others still has repercussions despite my blissful ignorance of their need; the non-malicious repudiation of others' claims of injustice is not without result, even though I may not have been in the right mindset to see or hear their claims. I am responsible, even though I may not be to blame. The question is, have I become what I have set out to become, and what are the social and political practices that have either over-determined the kind of self I have chosen as my goal, or, interfered with my obtaining of that self. Race is a set of such social and political practices that

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[35] Emerson, "Ethics," 75
[36] Emerson, "Ethics," 78

intervenes in my ethics (the standards I choose for myself) as well as my ability to live up to those standards.

> The poets related that brute walls and iron swords and leather thongs forgot not the wrongs of their owners, that the belt which Ajax gave Hector, dragged the Trojan over the field at the wheels of the car of Achilles; and the sword which Hector gave Ajax was that one whose point Ajax fell… Authentic history and biography, and the walls of every house testify the same thing… They have testified that that came to pass in our times which was anciently spoken, *that when you put a chain around the neck of a slave, the other end fastens itself around your own*.[37]

So Emerson builds for us a dynamic of power in which the flow of causes and effects is detached from the consideration of intentions, and rather places human action and potentials within a web of actions and reactions. Power is never one-sided, never suspended or held in reserve. In addition to this notion of power as action, movement, or force is a deeper implication hinted at early on in the essay: that for Emerson, ethics is the level and realm of existence in which the consequences of power relations are most evident. "I cannot feel that we have explored all the divisions of our subject [man] until some essay has been made to unfold a part of philosophy very little treated in formal systems, and only treated, as far as I know, in the proverbs of all nations, and yet, a subject the most engaging and sublime we can study and which for want of a more exact title may stand under the name of Ethics. It is that we mean by the phrase that goes current in all men's mouths, the Nature of things."[38] I read Emerson as putting forth an argument for the ethical as a site of power dynamics, as well as an intervening source of political comportment and motivation. Accordingly, when Emerson claims that "when you put a chain around the neck of a slave, the other end fastens itself around your own,"[39] he is arguing not only that there are social, political, and material consequences to actions that exploit, demean, and

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[37] Emerson, "Ethics," 79. Emphasis added.
[38] Emerson, "Ethics," 69.
[39] Emerson, "Ethics," 79.

dominate others, but that there is a deeper, less perceptible effect—that our ethical subjectivity

bears the brunt of the redirected, rebounding force of our aggressions, indifferences, and, so too,

our kindnesses.

This approach to the problem of ethics leaves us the question of how to facilitate or

expedite the "ripening" of a sensibility (and sensitivity) such that we can more readily see these

ethical and political dynamics before us, rather than waiting for the circumstances to align such

that we are struck by them. I seek a strategy by which the self can actively develop these

sensibilities, not "on its own", but "for itself." Emerson tries to answer this requirement through

the remaining concepts of his moral perfectionism: self-trust and genius; aversion and self-

reliance; and the role of the friend.

Self-Trust and Genius

Emerson's reflections on the dynamics of power and the ethical segue nicely with his

notions of self-trust and genius. Across several of his early essays, especially "Ethics,"

"History," "The American Scholar," and "The Divinity School Address," Emerson lays the

groundwork for a re-figuration of the individual as the motor of history, as the site of potential

and vitality. As early as *Nature*, Emerson places the self in at the center of his study.[40] But more

than taking the individual as isolated and atomistic, he frames the self as in constant contact with

the world and society that produces it.[41] Though the self depends upon a world and a situated

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[40] Man is at the intersection of Nature and nature—the creative spirit (Nature) comes through both man and nature, so man's actions are as natural and radically generative as Nature. Uppercase Nature works on nature through man. See Emerson, "Nature," 15-19.

[41] Man needs requires a world on and in which to live. "A man is a bundle of relations, a knot of roots, whose flower and fruitage is the world. His faculties refer to natures out of him and predict the world he is to inhabit, as the fins of the fish foreshow that water exists, or the wings of an eagle in the egg presuppose air. He cannot live without a world. Put Napoleon in an island prison, let his faculties find no men to act on, no Alps to climb, no stake to play for, and he would beat the air, and appear stupid." Emerson, "History," 144.

position and circumstances within it, Emerson argues in "The American Scholar" that it is the
active soul, the self confidently expressing its genius is what pushes the history of transformation
and creativity.[42]

> The one thing in the world, of value, is the active soul. This every man is entitled to; this
> every man contains within him although in almost all men obstructed and as yet unborn.
> The active soul sees absolute truth and utters truth, or creates. In this action it is genius;
> not the privilege of here and there a favorite, but the sound estate of every man. In its
> essence it is progressive. The book, the college, the school or art, the institution of any
> kind, stop with some past utterance of genius. This is good, say they,--let us hold by this.
> They pin me down. They look backward and not forward. But genius looks forward: the
> eyes of man are set in his forehead, not in his hindhead: man hopes: genius creates"[43]

I read in Emerson a wellspring of hope for both work on the singular self, as well as broader
sociopolitical transformation and radical innovation. Emerson's thoroughly Protestant and
radically democratic model of man's relationship to God is more of an ethico-political
comportment than simply a declaration of theological doctrine.[44]

In praising self-trust and genius, Emerson actually cultivates the possibility of both in the
rest of us. His Phi Beta Kappa address "The American Scholar" is both exhortative and
encouraging of the self-styled elites gathered at Harvard. "The American Scholar" is a rejection
of all conventional measures of greatness that our social institutions perpetuate—indeed, it seems
a condemnation of such elite institutions themselves. Emerson encourages us to trust ourselves as

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[42] See also Emerson, "History," 130:"The student is to read history actively and not passively; to
esteem his own life the text, and books the commentary. Thus compelled, the Muse of history
will utter oracles, as never to those who do not respect themselves" (History, 130).

[43] Emerson, "The American Scholar," 86-87.

[44] This is not coincidental given Emerson's break from the ministry after the death of his first
wife. He resigned his position as minister in the Unitarian church. See Robert D. Richardson,
Emerson: The Mind on Fire (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 3-5. I see his
employment of "God" in his theoretical work as a description of human Being and potential,
rather than a declaration of dogma.. See Emerson, "Divinity School Address," 106-123;
especially "intuition of moral sentiment" on 107, "fountain of all good" in the self on 109, "God
incarnates himself in man" and "the eternal revelation in the heart" on 111.

embodiments of genius, and to reject the conformity to orthodox knowledges, traditions, and norms merely for their own sakes. The works of genius of previous generations should be used as inspiration to set for ourselves higher goals and to blaze new paths. Instead, we idolize the old masters and the canon. We can and should be more.

> What I must do is all that concerns me, not what the people think. This rule, equally arduous in actual and in intellectual life, may serve for the whole distinction between greatness and meanness. It is the harder because you will always find those who think they know what is your duty better than you know it. It is easy in the world to live after the world's opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after your own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude.[45]

In order to trust the self, Emerson argues that we must not only shake off societal constraints to the flourishing of creative genius, but also our own personal fixations with consistency between our past behaviors and opinions and our current ones.[46] The convention of holding on to things (un)said, (un)done, and (un)thought in the past is a stultification of intellectual and moral flourishing. The trust of the self is not, then, for Emerson to assume that one's particular intuition will withstand the test of time, but rather a confidence that one will be responsive to the revelations that present themselves to the self. Consistency is thus a false measure of the self's value. Self-trust is an openness to radical creativity, new horizons, and new perceptions. As Emerson says in "Self-Reliance," "When we discern justice, when we discern truth, we do nothing of ourselves, but allow a passage of its beams… Its presence or its absence is all we can affirm… My willful actions and acquisitions are but roving—the idlest reverie, the faintest native emotion, command my curiosity and respect…. But perception is not whimsical, but fatal."[47] I do not will that I see something, I simply do or I do not. There is thus a kind of

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[45] Emerson, "Self-Reliance," 153.
[46] Emerson, "Self-Reliance," 154-156.
[47] Emerson, "Self-Reliance," 158-159.

ethical and intellectual self-work set before us if we are to achieve the self-trust that Emerson holds up as our highest potential. There are social and political boundaries to our self-trust as well as singular, personal ones—though these, too, spring from the socio-political for Emerson. In working on the self, one opens the self to contesting and reconfiguring social practices, norms, and value systems. The comportment of self-trust and aversion to conformity is an opening of radical possibility of self-sustaining and self-initiated change from within—and since the self is the site and drive of historical change (the whole found in the part), then self-trust and openness to intuition and genius is no small matter. The particular becomes the means of universal transfiguration, or rather, the articulation of transfiguration. The active capacities of man emerge as continuities of Nature (or Spirit) as they take place within and upon nature.

If self-trust is the motor that powers radical change, then what significance could this possibly have in relation to the problem of race? The practices, discourses, and attendant use-values of race interfere with our capacity for self-trust and genius in that these practices and discourses distort our sense of ourselves by structuring ahead of time the ways that we perceive others (and so ourselves) as iterations of racial essences, as examples of a genre or a category. For instance, to be deemed "White," and to carry and project that racial label, is to have one's mode of being prescribed ahead of time from outside of the self, and therefore, to have one's relationships to others and to oneself prefigured, normalized, and semi-settled on the basis of one's classification as "White" in relation to others' classification as "White," "Black," "Asian," "Jewish," etc. This places Whites within social value and political power dynamics in which the best-case scenario is an interaction between those with equal access to resources and assumed equal social and moral value, and at worst, in positions of differentiated access and assumed value. Whiteness taken by Whites to be the standard/ideal against, as a thing through which

others are assessed and assigned value (Nietzsche), is the accumulated force of myriad social and political practices of differentiation along underlying criteria for counting-as-White—among them ancestry, phenotype, language and ways of speaking—and the ways the resulting classification impact our relative social and political positions. The practices and discourses of race are perpetuated not simply out of intentional decisions, personal opinions, or even unconscious beliefs, but rather find their expression through the coalescence of social and political use-values. The persistence of these use-values is supported by cumulative normalizing effects of conformity to the standards of relative moral and social value, affinities and revulsion, and predictive and descriptive convention.

I read in Emerson a method for seeking out the social and political practices (i.e. norms, traditions, rituals, and normal(izing) uses and recreation of assumed value of which he is so critical) that shape who we are, and taking the first brave steps at identifying their presence and force in determining our relationships to ourselves, primarily, and the other as a vehicle of returning to the self ("the world is an other me"). If race-as-practice distorts our relationships however to others and ourselves, then is the idea of aversion (the turning away from society that Cavell highlights in Emerson) as a first step in addressing, overcoming, and repairing the effects it has on the self even possible?

Aversion

Emerson frames the relationship between the self and nature, and the knowledge of each, as allowing the beneficiaries of racial categorization and hierarchy to take upon themselves the kind of self-work needed to contest the myriad practices of race that shore up their subject positions. Since race as such represents an ethical harm to subjectivity we must articulate a strategy by which those who benefit (or at least think they do) in the perpetuation of race (i.e.

especially those who think themselves "White" or "European") can discover and recognize the ways that race impedes full, ethical subjectivity. It limits our understanding of others and of ourselves. It over-determines our sense of possibility for relating to others by anchoring us to social practices, norms, and deference to social sovereignties that curtail who can be in our lives and the ways they can be in it.[48] It binds our imaginations by deciding in advance who counts as our superiors, equals, and inferiors in political and social life, and so too, operates to set *for us* the terms of the respectable life and the good life. The presumption within practices of race is that individual should not attempt to determine for themselves the terms of their own lives, but rather defer to the inherited practices, norms, and value systems that we call race.

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[48] See Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove, 2008) for Fanon's diagnosis of the over-determining impact of the White gaze upon Black subject's sense of and valuation of themselves. Fanon says: "The Jewishness of the Jew, however, can go unnoticed. He is not integrally what he is. We can but hope and wait. His acts and behavior are the determining factor. He is a white man, and apart from some debatable features, he can pass undetected. He belongs to the race that has never practiced cannibalism. What a strange idea, to eat one's father. Serves them right; they shouldn't be black. Of course the Jews have been tormented—what am I saying? They have been hunted, exterminated, and cremated, but these are just minor episodes in the family history. The Jew is not liked as soon as he has been detected. But with me things take on a *new* face. I'm not given a second chance. I am overdetermined from the outside. I am a slave not to the 'idea' others have of me, but to my appearance" (Fanon, *Black Skin,* 95). This describes Fanon's theoretical frame of the internalization of the force of race into the psyche of those who would be deemed less-than-human within racial discourse and power relations— although here he stops short of articulating his frame of the capacity for resistance to such internalization of psychical violence. I would like to add to this framework by adding, that Emerson's articulation of power allows us to see how the harm done to the other (i.e. by the White gaze) does not simply get projected out from the White self (and indeed is always already met with resistances), but also simultaneously rebounds on the White self as well. This is the power of Emerson's chain-around-the-neck analogy: "They have testified that that came to pass in your times which was anciently spoken, that when you put a chain around the neck of the slave, the other end fastens itself around your own" (Ethics, 79)—rather than as Turner reads it, that it makes me dependent upon the other (i.e. not self-reliant). I argue that this chain analogy describes an ontology of interpersonal violence—not one of dependency versus go-it-alone rugged individualism.

It is with these obstacles to self-knowledge and self-reliance in mind that I turn to the importance of aversion within Emerson's thinking. For Emerson, aversion is the necessity of turning away from convention and conformity because of its stifling effects on the expression of radical creation and the force of nature through man. Race not only impedes self-trust by obstructing one's ability to know oneself—because the self is homogenized into essential races, and therefore not a unique self at all—but the practices of race likewise form a system of norms, uses, and values that intertwine to bind the self into predictable and controllable behaviors and relationships. Aversion is Emerson's theoretical remainder in which we find hope and the potential to challenge the forces that would otherwise structure and control the self.

Friendship

Throughout several of his essays and lectures, Emerson takes seeming detours to consider the role of the friend in the life of the self-trusting, conformity-averse subject that he spends his life and career formulating. The friend represents an interesting step in the development of Emerson's thought—whereas Emerson was profoundly affected by his relationships with (and deaths of) his brothers, first and second wives, and those in his intellectual circles (Carlyle, Thoreau, Fuller, etc.), he is also the thinker of self-reliance and aversion, viz. the rejection of conformity and the dulling and alienating effects of life in the city, and the stultification of over-dependence on others.

I find in Emerson's work a celebration of the narrow and crucial function of the friend, though Emerson himself necessarily falls short of fully appreciating and integrating this into his own theoretical contributions. Because I intend to deploy the strongest facets of Emerson's thinking to the problem of race, I will first outline some of his considerations of the friend, and then show how the unchallenged practices of race intervened in Emerson's ability to fully draw

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out the revolutionarily creative potential of friendship. Like the genius of Emerson's heroes

(Goethe, Shakespeare, Plato), the friend should serve as an inspiration to excel and overcome

imperfections,[49] be a challenge (even to the extent that they become a beautiful enemy),[50] and

also stand and work alongside us as a yoke-fellow,[51] but the unchallenged practices of race of his

time constrained who could be a "friend" in the first place. Despite his admiration of Toussaint

l'Ouverture[52] and Frederick Douglass,[53] he respected them from afar as exceptions to the

conditional limitations of their race.[54] Emerson spoke and published numerous lectures and

essays on the atrocity of slavery, but was conditionally prevented from questioning the concept

of race writ large nor any of its other manifestations other than the forced labor and captivity of

chattel slavery.

Despite his theoretical framing of power and the reflection of domination back on the

dominated,[55] Emerson never deeply reflects on the effect of race's practices as such on Whites—

race is part of the conditions that one must overcome for *Black* subjects,[56] but there is no mention

of racialization's effects on Whites. Likewise, there is little analysis of the ways that Blacks are

exploited, demeaned, and relegated to third-class status even if they manage to make their way to

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[49] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Circles," in *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Selected Essays, Lectures, and Poems,* ed. Robert D. Richardson, Jr. (New York: Bantam Books, 1990), 192.
[50] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Friendship," in *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Brooks Atkinson (New York: The Modern Library, 2000), 211.
[51] Emerson, "Ethics," 76.
[52] Emerson refers to him simply as "Toussaint, and the Haytian [sic] heroes" in "Emancipation in the British West Indies," 774 (and to my knowledge, Emerson only mentions l'Ouverture once). This informal way of referring to someone admired from afar is odd, especially since Emerson alludes to most other "great men" by their surnames. One other notable exception is Napoleon Bonaparte.
[53] See West's analysis of Emerson's admiration in *American Aversion to Philosophy*.
[54] Toussaint reference is in Emerson, "Emancipation of the British West Indies," 774.
[55] See the chain-around-the-neck analogy discussed above in "Ethics."
[56] See West's discussion of race as condition in *American Aversion to Philosophy*, 28-35.

"free states." Harriet Wilson's anonymously published and semi-autobiographical 1859 novel *Our Nig: Or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black* is shocking particularly because it presents an unflinching criticism of Northern racism and brutality, instead of the more acceptable and fashionable invectives against the South.[57] Emerson condemns the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 that required citizens of free states to apprehend Blacks who escape from enslavement and further opened the potential of free-born Blacks to be kidnapped and transported to the South and sold into slavery,[58] but he otherwise reserves judgment on northern racism and practices of race. Like the rest of us, Emerson is bound by the sense of possibility of his time and place. The challenge I pose is to expand Emersonian criticism by committing to aversion, and so re-imagine the radical potential of his thinking if we supplement his notions of power/ethics, self-trust, aversion, and friendship with an awareness of how the concept of race is implicated in them.

Emerson's rejection of social convention and conformity and his general distrust of standard approaches to knowledge is nuanced by his appreciation of the friend and their unpredictable influence on one's life. In "Ethics," Emerson highlights the importance of the friend's ability to read the same book as I do and to glean completely different perspectives and values than the ones I find—to show me possibilities I have not even imagined (75). He also notes that the friend is one who serves as yoke-fellow, one who works alongside me and helps me bear life's burdens (76). But most significantly for my purposes is the way that he concedes unique powers to the friend: "That mood into which a friend can bring us is his dominion over

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[57] See Harriet Wilson's novel *Our Nig: Or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black* for a devastating depiction of the quality of life of a Black indentured servant in New England.
[58] This practice had always been a threat to Blacks in the North even before the Fugitive Slave Act. Free-born Solomon Northup of New York published his autobiography detailing his experiences after being kidnapped while travelling and working in Washington, D.C. (then a slave territory) in spite of his free status and his possession of documentation to that effect. See Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2000).

us. To all the thoughts of that state of mind, he has a right. All the secrets of that state of mind he can compel. This is no need of professions: this is no need of promises: you know what impression you have made on any man by considering how superficial or how sincere communications he has made to you."[59] The friend sees me in spite of all my attempts to hide my imperfections, faults, insecurities, and even gifts. Even then, the friend is not one whom we imitate, mirror, or from whom we absorb new talent or abilities: "Insist on yourself; never imitate. For your own gift you can present every moment with all the force of a lifetime's cultivation but can sustain it on the basis of the world; but of the adopted talent of another you have only an extemporaneous half possession."[60] The friend is an inducement, a challenge to find one's own way and new possibilities; they are not sources of that possibility.

When Emerson writes President Van Buren a letter in 1838 to condemn the treatment of the Cherokee Nation by the U.S. government, he invokes his status as fellow-citizen and so, too, as friend in order to challenge the president to reconsider the planned expulsion of the Cherokee from their tribal lands. Emerson begins his letter with an invocation of citizen-friend status:

> Sir—The seat you fill places you in a relation of credit and nearness to every citizen. By right and natural position, every citizen is your friend. Before any acts contrary to his own judgment or interest have repelled the affections of any man, each may look with trust and living anticipation to your government. Each has the highest right to call your attention to such subjects as are of a public nature and properly belong to the chief magistrate; and the good magistrate will feel a joy in meeting such confidence. In this belief and at the instance of a few of my friends and neighbors, I crave of your patience a short hearing for their sentiments and my own…[61]

Emerson taps into the power of the friend to call the self to a higher, and truer form—to be better than I currently am. To see beyond my present, attained self to the next unattained, but attainable

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[59] Emerson, "Ethics," 75.
[60] Emerson, "Ethics," 76.
[61] Emerson, "Cherokee Letter," 101.

self. Emerson does not have to personally know Van Buren to call him to be better—though that certainly could not hurt. But the choice to write as a friend is both a rhetorical and ethical move to challenge the other to see past the politically convenient rationalities for one's behavior to be better than they are--to be the better self for which they already have the potential.

In "History," Emerson indicates again friendship's role as the grand, revolutionary inducement to excel and transfigure the self, indeed to be self-reliant.

> It is the universal Nature which gives worth to particular men and things. Human life, as containing this, is mysterious and inviolable, and we hedge it round with penalties and laws. All laws derive hence their ultimate reason; all express more or less distinctly some command of this supreme, illimitable essence… This obscure consciousness of this fact is the light of all our day, the claim of claims; the plea for education, justice, for charity; *the foundation of friendship and love and of the heroism and grandeur which belong to acts of self-reliance.*[62]

The friend is inseparable from self-reliance. Emerson realizes that whereas not everyone is fit to serve as my friend and provocation to be more than I presently am, the friend is nonetheless crucial to my seeing my next self as attainable.

Pages later in "History," Emerson praises the "rare, extravagant spirits [who] come by us at intervals, who disclose to us new facts in nature."[63] This, too, is the friend—the unforeseen but precious people who enter our lives and point to something beyond what we were previously capable of seeing, who are proof of excellence and inducements to surpass our current selves. While I, alone, am capable of the self-work necessary to bring about my next self, I cannot do so in absolute isolation. I need the other in order to know myself.

> Here also we are reminded of the action of man on man. A mind might ponder its thoughts for ages and not gain so much self-knowledge as the passion of love shall teach it in a day. Who knows himself before he has been thrilled with indignation at an outrage, or has heard an eloquent tongue, or has shared the throb of thousands in a national exultation or alarm. No man can antedate his experience, or guess what faculty or feeling

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[62] Emerson, "History," 128-129. Emphasis added.
[63] Emerson, "History," 140.

a new object shall unlock, any more than he can draw to-day the face of a person whom he shall see to-morrow for the first time.[64]

I require the other, especially the friend, in order to see and know myself. Self-reliance is nothing without the friend. Emerson echoes this point in "Circles," albeit it more confrontational terms. "The continual effort to raise himself above himself, to work a pitch above his last height, betrays itself in a man's relations. We thirst for approbation, yet cannot forgive the approver. The sweet of nature is love; yet if I have a friend I am tormented by my imperfections. The love of me accuses the other party. If he were high enough to slight me, then could I love him, and rise by my affection to new heights. A man's growth is seen in the successive choirs of his friends."[65] Friendship is the openness to fundamental challenge posed by the other—their greatness calls me to be more than I presently am, to know myself better than I currently do, and yes, a call to outdo the friend.

> The soul environs itself with friends that it may enter into a grander self-acquaintance or solitude; and it goes alone for a season that it may exalt its conversation or society… Thus every man passes his life in the search after friendship, and if he should record his true sentiment, he might write a letter like this to each new candidate for his love:--
> Dear friend,
> If I was sure of thee, sure of thy capacity, sure to match my mood with thine, I should never think again of trifles in relation to thy comings and goings. I am not very wise; my moods are quite attainable, and I respect thy genius; it is me as yet unfathomed; yet dare I not presume in thee a perfect intelligence of me, and so thou art to me a delicious torment. Thine forever, or never.[66]

The friend challenges me from without so that I may challenge myself from within, and see the next version of myself that I can attain. Only through the support of and spirited contest of the friend can we see past our present horizons of knowledge, self-knowledge, and sense of

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[64] Emerson, "History," 145.
[65] Emerson, "Circles," 192.
[66] Emerson, "Friendship," 204-205.

possibility. Genius is, thus, social.[67] "I do not wish to treat friendships daintily, but with roughest courage. When they are real, they are not glass threads or frostwork, but the solidest thing we know."[68]

Continuing the Emersonian Project

In spite of his framework of power/ethics, the twin calls to self-trust and nonconformity, and the recognition of the necessity of the friend—we arrive (finally) at the greatest obstacle to the realization of any of these mutually supportive theoretical pillars—practices of race. If race is itself an ethical harm manifested through political, economic, social, epistemological, and psychological practices, uses, and valuations; if it is a system of use-values that corral and coerce to conform—and so, determine the sense of self that we are supposed to trust and the terms and forms of friendships available to me—we must wrestle with how Emersonian Moral Perfectionism falls short of providing for self-reliance beyond the possibilities circumscribed and predetermined by the practices and ontologies of race in the first place. Emerson clearly did not fathom race as a subject of philosophical inquiry,[69] and this is partly because of the political power that race exerts to structure our subjectivities and determine senses of possibility, while simultaneously obscuring the fact that it has done so. This is why I argue that we can benefit from bringing in other race-thinkers who were Emerson's contemporaries into productive conversation with Emerson's writings.

We must trust ourselves enough to scrutinize everything we have inherited as settled and true for the sake of discovering and creating radically new interactions and so, too, possibilities

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[67] Emerson, "Friendship," 203.
[68] Emerson, "Friendship," 206.
[69] See West, *American Evasion*, 28-35. West excavates Emerson's journals and notebooks for his unpublished musings on race.

of new ethical subjectivity. Emerson rightly calls us to do the painful work of seeking out how

the practices of race keep us from the friend that could challenge me and allow me to be more.

As Emerson says in "History," "Rare, extravagant spirits come by us at intervals, who disclose to

us new facts in nature. I see that men of God have from time to time walked among men and

made their commission felt in the heart and in the soul of the commonest hearer."[70] And if race

serves to make my exposure to these rare, extravagant spirits even less common, then it is an

impediment to all flourishing, including the flourishing of those who think themselves White—

race curtails the possibilities of friendship, and over-determines who gets deemed a person of

great historical genius.[71] This is not to say that practices of race always succeed in keeping us

apart, but they constantly work against our capacity to love and challenge each other by

structuring our interactions (i.e. by determining with whom we are expected to interact, avoid, or

be indifferent), political geographies (i.e. *de jure* and *de facto* segregation), senses of value and

risk (i.e. assumptions of criminality, financial credit systems, and ideas about racialized

personality characteristics and perferences).

To bring Emerson to bear on our present racial moment, we should see how race was

present in his thinking and how it undermined the implementation of his form of perfectionism.

In so doing, we equip ourselves to suss out the ways that we too are sabotaged by our complicity

in practices of race. With respect to Emerson's power/ethics framework, by taking race for

granted rather than as a continually practiced and recreated sense of difference, Emerson was

prevented from considering how practices of race rebound on each of us as we differentiate our

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[70] Emerson, "History," 140.

[71] I add the reference to historical genius because of the inspiration Emerson receives from the great "men of letters" by whom he feels challenged and inspired—among them Goethe, Shakespeare, and Plato, but also his contemporaries Thomas Carlyle, Margaret Fuller, Henry David Thoreau.

level of responsibility for and similarity to others through those practices. These practices are

normalizing forces that operate through social norms, political structures, ontologies of the

human and sub-human, and epistemologies of racial classification. We tend to deploy race as an

apriori condition of one's existence, rather than a dynamic and contingent set of norms,

practices, and behaviors.[72] This assumption and imposition of race-as-fate is an ongoing

assumption and action between subjects, not an absolute. Emerson's call to aversion to societal

norms and standards (which he praises as central to the self-reliant subject) is deepened once we

see race as such as a potential target of aversion. In perpetuating the racial practices of praising

some Black subjects (l'Ouverture and Douglass) as exceptions above all others, he highlights

that the standard of their superlative status is their ability to transcend the limits of their race—

that is, they have left their race behind.

> So now it seems to me that the arrival of such men as Toussaint if he is pure blood, or of
> Douglas [sic] if he is pure blood, outweighs all the English and American humanity. The
> Antislavery of the whole world is but dust in the balance, a poor squeamishness &
> nervousness; the might & right is here. Here is the Anti-slave. Here is Man; & if you
> have man, black or white is an insignificance. Why at night all men are black… I say to
> you, you must save yourself, black or white, man or woman. Other help is none. I esteem
> the occasion of this jubilee to be that proud discover that the black race can begin to
> contend with the white."[73]

Race, for him, is not a product of human action and power, but is a condition of fate one must

overcome or not. With respect to people of color, humanity is achieved if they manage to break

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[72] See West, *American Evasion*, 31. "Yet the major significance of race in Emerson's reflections
on human personality has to do with its relation to notions of circumstance, fate, limits—and,
ultimately, history. Emerson's slow acknowledgment that there are immutable constraints on the
human powers of individuals resulted primarily from his conclusions regarding the relation of
persons to their racial origins and endowments. As a trope in his discourse, race signifies the
circumstantial, the conditioned, the fateful—that which limits the will of individuals, even
exceptional ones."
[73] Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Emerson in his Journals*, ed. Joel Porte (Cambridge: Belknap, 1984),
329 quoted in West, *American Evasion of Philosophy*, 30.

the bonds associated with their race. Race for Emerson is thus something for which Whites are not to blame, let alone responsible; in fact, it would be a disservice to attempt to interfere with the natural limitations of race—otherwise, there is no self-reliance, no emergence of genius in the face of all odds. By shifting our perspective from race-as-fate to race-as-practice, it becomes possible for White subjects to see their own personal investment in challenging race per se. Race becomes something for which White subjects can accept responsibility, without bearing blame for the creation of the concept of race.

Because of the circumstances and attendant horizons in which he wrote, Emerson necessarily misjudged how race is perpetuated through human action, recreation, and use. And because he could not see race-as-practice as a manifestation of power relations, he could not divine that race rebounds even on those who deploy it for their own economic, political and social benefit. Race ensnares those subjects who think themselves White, even as they attempt to impose it on others. This is the ethical harm that I want to argue prevents full subjectivity for "White" subjects. In Emerson's terms, then, race is the chain that fastens around my own neck as I latch it around the neck of the other.[74]

Emerson could not question race as such, merely its specific portrayal in chattel slavery in the South. He critiques the South's particular forms of race-practice, and is repulsed by the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 because it consigns New Englanders to being co-conspirators in the upkeep of slavery, but he lacks the theoretical means of seeing and addressing the myriad ways that New Englanders are already accomplices in the maintenance of racial differentiation and exploitation. In spite of the limitations of his era, Emerson's early rejection of slavery is a necessary pre-condition of his fellow White citizen's ability to come around to the perception of

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[74] Emerson, "Ethics," 79.

the moral failures represented by slavery as the most visible practice of race at the time. Turner's examination of Emersonian self-reliance as non-complicity highlights how Emerson conceived of the moral harm that slavery carried out on White subjects of the time in terms of posing an obstacle to full self-reliance and self-dependence. I see in Emerson an early kernel of my present project of stressing the ethical harm that race imposes on even White subjects—at the time, the practice of race most available for criticism was chattel slavery and its geographical extension in the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. For Emerson, the most available way of expressing that harm was in terms of slavery's interference with self-reliance. I argue, instead, that race-as-practice (including but not limited to institutional structures of which slavery is an example) is always an ethical harm precisely because it impedes self-trust/self-reliance, aversive thinking, as well as friendship (both inter-racial and intra-racial) necessary for moral perfectionist growth.

There is much potential in Emersonian thought if we can combine his astute reflections on power/ethics, self-trust and genius, aversion and self-reliance, and the tough love of the friend, but only if we supplement them with a non-essentializing, practice-based conception of race. Without integrating a more nuanced theoretical framework of race, Emerson's thought may simply remain fettered to the settler colonialist, atomistic individualistic mindset. I prefer to think that we can take the best of Emerson's thought as a call to work on the self, to responsibility for the self beyond shame and guilt, and an impetus to upend socio-political practices in which we are imbedded that impair self-knowledge and obtainment of the next attainable but unattained self. If we can facilitate the self-work of those most invested in our systems of racial differentiation, domination, and exploitation (i.e. those deemed White), then we stand a better chance of achieving our more democratic, more egalitarian, next collective selves.

Emerson's Race-Critical Contemporaries

I now present for consideration two Black abolitionist thinkers whose work preceded and/or debuted contemporaneously with the abolitionist writings of Emerson. The inclusion of the works of David Walker (1796-1830) and Maria W. Stewart (1803-1879) allows us to put into practice the moral perfectionist project developed by Emerson. By focusing on Walker and Stewart, the possibilities of critical race thought during the 19th century become clearer, and by extension, I think, we can better gauge our own possibilities in our 21st century racial moment. A new sense of possibility is inextricably tied to the moral perfectionist project of progression from our attained selves, to our unattained, but attainable, next selves.

David Walker

David Walker was born in Wilmington, North Carolina in 1796 to a free Black mother and an enslaved Black father, and so, inheriting the legal status of his mother, was born free. According to Walker's biographer, Peter P. Hinks, not much is known about Walker's early life in Wilmington, but it is likely that he was raised in the Methodist church and was exposed to the abolitionist messages and the Black congregant stewardship of the church's daily operations.[75] For a period during 1810, Walker travelled around the eastern seaboard most notably to Charleston, South Carolina (where he likely associated with the newly formed African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, home to slave-rebellion leader Denmark Vesey), as well as Philadelphia, Pennsylvania where Richard Allen founded the AME denomination in 1816.

Around 1825, after Vesey's rebellion was thwarted in the Carolinas and Georgia, and the AME Church in Charleston was burned in retaliation for the Black uprising, Walker moved to Boston to set up a used clothing store. There, he joined the local fervently anti-slavery Methodist

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[75] David Walker, *David Walker's Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*, ed. Peter P. Hinks (University Park, PA: Penn State Press, 2000), xv-xvii.

church, married Eliza Butler, a local woman, and rose to prominence in the small community of middle-class Black citizens in town.[76] Walker penned his incendiary *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* in Boston in 1829, which was circulated around the Northern free states and smuggled into Southern ports (via sailors' luggage and in cargo containers) for distribution among enslaved people and abolitionists. Southern whites were terrified and furious to discover Walker's essay had been smuggled into slave states.[77]

Walker's *Appeal* is particularly significant to my discussion of Emersonian moral perfectionism in that it embodies the core pillars of Emerson's thought, though it does so through political means unforeseen by Emerson himself. Similar to Emerson's notion of power as rebounding and recoiling, Walker frames the consequences of enslavement and abuse of Blacks by Whites in terms of divine retribution, as well as violent rebellion. Whereas Emerson speaks of power in terms of rebounding or recoiling upon the aggressor.[78] Walker's religious imagery of the wrath of an angry God punishing the Whites who have treated the "children of Africa," worse than any people have ever been treated to that time, straddles the line between the religious and the ethical.[79] By this I mean that Walker deploys religious imagery of divine violence to make clear the ethical implications of White American "Christian" violence against generations of Blacks in the Americas.

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[76] Walker, *Appeal*, xxi-xxiii.

[77] See Hinks's Appendix to the *Appeal* for documents from Virginia, Georgia, and South Carolina requesting that Boston's mayor and the governor of Massachusetts intervene and stop Walker from circulating his tract. (Hinks, *Appeal*, 83-110.)

[78] Emerson, "Cherokee Letter," 104. "However feeble the sufferer and however great the oppressor, it is in the nature of things that the blow should recoil upon the aggressor."

[79] See the preamble on Walker, *Appeal*, 3. "[We], (coloured people of these United States,) are the most degraded, wretched, and abject set of beings that ever lived since the world began; and I pray God that none like us ever may live again until time shall be no more."

Walker uses the Christianity of White Americans to shame and frighten them into

repentance and treating Blacks as members of the same human family, lest they be punished by

God worse than the Egyptians for their treatment of the people of Judea—this is in direct

challenge to Jefferson's biological racism in *Notes on the State of Virginia* which Walker calls

all Black people to publicly and definitively refute.[80] Walker's religious mode of arguing against

slavery as an act of ethical/religious violence is meant as much to unite Black Christians into

"proving their humanity" by resisting the evil done to them and other Blacks as it is an

indictment of White Christian hypocrisy and unmatched ethical failure. The divine retribution

Walker foresees is not simply executed by God on behalf of generations of Black people, but is a

retribution that will be carried out by and through Black people should Whites fail to change

their ways.

> It is not to be understood here, that I mean for us to wait until God shall take us by the
> hair of our heads and drag us out of abject wretchedness and slavery, nor do I mean to
> convey the idea for us to wait until our enemies shall make preparations, and call us to
> seize those preparations, take it away from them, and put every thing before us to death,
> in order to gain our freedom which God has given us. For you must remember that we are
> men as well as they. God has been please to give us two eyes, two hands, two feet, and
> some sense in our heads as well as they. They have no more right to hold us in slavery
> than we have to hold them, we have just as much right, in the sight of God, to hold them
> and their children in slavery and wretchedness, as they have to hold us, and no more.[81]

Walker openly derides what he sees as a habit among Blacks in America to be submissive and

accepting of domination by Whites. He recounts a story in which sixty enslaved people were

thwarted in their attempts to escape three of their captors when one of the captured women

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[80] See Walker, *Appeal*, 12, 14, 16-18, 28-30 for his direct challenge to Thomas Jefferson. Walker
argued that despite the absurdity of the claims made by Jefferson arguing that Black people were
biologically, intellectually, and morally lesser beings (and so naturally meant for servitude), the
fact that these beliefs are so widespread among Whites (due to Jefferson's influential status) that
these claims must be relentlessly challenged by Blacks themselves. See especially page 29.
[81] Walker, *Appeal*, 13-14.

helped one of the abductors escape—all the escapees were recaptured when the abductor alerted the nearest town and a search party chased them down.[82] Instead of kowtowing to Whites and betraying each other, Blacks in America should show that they are men by fighting back and refusing to submit, and thus execute the will of God themselves—especially when no other people would submit to Whites as Walker says Blacks do.[83] "I assure you that God will accomplish it—if nothing else will answer, he will hurl tyrants and devils into *atoms* and make way for his people. But O my brethren! I say unto you again, you must go to work and prepare the way of the Lord."[84]

Walker does not mince words; he even goes so far to say that the reason that Whites keep the Black population ignorant (even in the North) is that an educated population would expose American deeds to the rest of the world, and Whites know this. (Recall Emerson's comment that nothing will ever stay hidden forever and that the soul exposes itself through action.)[85] This is the importance of learning for Walker, though, I think that his assessment of the forced (or apathetic) ignorance of the Black population has a broader ethical import in addition to the practical implications related to racial material uplift—that it leads to servility to Whites, and meanness and deception to other Blacks amounts to an ethical condemnation (however fitting that condemnation may or may not be). He argues that learning is the key to ethical responses to the problem of slavery and White racism—it provides the means of seeing the harm imposed by Whites and bringing about God's vengeance by Black hands.

> …[For] coloured people to acquire learning in this country, makes tyrants quake and tremble on their sandy foundation. Why, why is the matter? Why, they know that their infernal deeds of cruelty will be made known to the world. Do you suppose one man of

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[82] Walker, *Appeal*, 25-26.
[83] Walker, *Appeal*, 29.
[84] Walker, *Appeal*, 32. Emphasis in original.
[85] See above note 43 regarding Emerson, "Ethics," 75.

good sense and learning would submit himself, his father, mother, wife and children, to be slaves to a wretched man like himself, who, instead of compensating him for his labours, chains, hand-cuffs and beats him and family almost to death, leaving life enough in them, however, to work for, and call him master? No! no! he would cut his devilish throat from ear to ear, and well do slave-holders know it. The bare name of educating the coloured people, scares our cruel oppressors almost to death.[86]

Walker relied upon religion and educational models to unify his community against the exploitation and violence imposed by Whites. Religion, in particular, was the most accessible method of demonstrating for Blacks (especially in the South) the ethical stakes of resisting slavery and White racism.[87] Walker prophesies that White Americans can never be vigilant enough to prevent escatological (or political) retribution. "The [White] Americans may be as vigilant as they please, but they cannot be vigilant enough for the Lord, neither can they hide themselves, where he will not find and bring them out."[88] And as Walker cites the Declaration of Independence just prior to this comment, as well as Old and New Testament scripture throughout the *Appeal*, he brings home the inevitability of a divinely inspired and sustained uprising by Blacks to overthrow White tyranny. His use of religious argumentation simultaneous bolsters his ethical and political model and ends

In addition to reflecting a deep sensitivity to the power dynamics of slavery, Walker's *Appeal* also bears a resemblance to Emerson's insistence upon self-trust and aversion. First and foremost, Walker pleads for Blacks to reject the toxic notion of Black inferiority that Whites perpetuate and impose upon them. He insists that Blacks are neither the inferior beasts that Whites have professed them to be,[89] nor are they descendants of the Biblical Cain or Ham—

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[86] Walker, *Appeal*, 34.
[87] See Hinks's introduction to Walker's *Appeal*, (Walker, *Appeal*, xix-xxii), on the centrality of the AME church in Charleston and the ensuing and persistent threat of violence from Whites.
[88] Walker, *Appeal*, 80.
[89] Walker highlights Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* as exemplary of the organized and meticulous viciousness of White justifications for enslaving Blacks.

rather Blacks are made by God in his image.[90] In truth, he argues, if any group's behavior

resembles that of Cain, it is certainly Whites who murder, kidnap, torture, exploit, and fragment

Black families and communities.[91] In the face of the hypocrisy of White Christianity, Walker

encourages those deemed Black to refute Jefferson's claims for themselves by "being men" (i.e.

actively fighting back and refusing to submit or betray other Black people).[92] This is a call to

trust themselves and be trustworthy companions to others in the fight against White

domination.[93]

This self-trust is inseparable from a commitment to aversion, just as it is for Emerson.

The self-trust Walker seeks to instill in Black people suffering in America emerges through

aversive thinking and action. All Black people in America and around the world should, refuse to

submit to the dehumanizing demands of Whites (i.e. to betray other Black people by informing

on them to Whites, to do physical harm to other Black people, to belittle those who attempt to

learn) as well as cast off the valuation imposed upon them by Whites by believing that God

created them in his image. But more importantly, Walker calls on all Black people to seek out

education as a means of seeing and actualizing their own potential.

> I advanced it therefore to you, not as a *problematical*, but as an unshaken and for ever
> immovable *fact*, that your full glory and happiness, as well as all other coloured people
> under Heaven, shall never be fully consummated, but with the *entire population of your
> enslaved brethren all over the world*. You may therefore, go to work and do what you can
> to rescue, or join in with tyrants to oppress them and yourselves, until the Lord shall
> come upon you all like a thief in the night. For I believe it is the will of the Lord that our
> greatest happiness shall consist in working for the salvation of our whole body.[94]

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[90] Walker, *Appeal*, 14.
[91] Walker, *Appeal*, 62-63.
[92] Walker, *Appeal*, 32.
[93] Walker, *Appeal*, 24.
[94] Walker, *Appeal*, 32.

To this end, he calls on the literate to read the *Appeal* to those who cannot read it for themselves. He calls on all Black people to seek knowledge for themselves, teach others, and to speak out—this is the example that Walker sets through the *Appeal* itself.[95] He puts his program into practice by publishing this provocative text and then smuggling it into the hands of Blacks in the South. The *Appeal* is an aversive act, in itself. It challenges the very notion that Black people were incapable of producing such thinking, as well as the paradoxical prohibition of teaching Blacks to read and write—if they were incapable of human behaviors like reading and writing (since they were not "men" in the first place), then there would be no point in punishing attempts to teach it to them, let alone in fearing what they would say.[96] The *Appeal* enraged and terrified Whites in the South and North as it represented his unique means of "turning his back" (per Emerson's aversion) on the norms, standards, and forces of conformity that otherwise should have prevented the possibility of its being written. The *Appeal*, then, simultaneously represents Walker's self-trust and a call for other Blacks to trust themselves, in addition to functioning as an act of aversive thought and action, and a call for others to do the same. It is a challenge to Blacks and Whites alike.

The *Appeal* is also, I argue, representative of the actions of an Emersonian friend to both Blacks and Whites. In it, Walker challenges and admonishes both Whites and Blacks to see beyond their present states, and to be more than they presently are. He indicts Whites' pretension to Christianity by showing how White Americans treat Blacks worse than any group has ever been treated in history (including the Egyptians' treatment of the Jews before the Exodus, which

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[95] Walker, *Appeal*, 30. "I call upon you therefore to cast your eyes upon the wretchedness of your brethren, and to do your utmost to enlighten them—*go to work and enlighten your brethren*!—Let the Lord see you doing what you can to rescue them and yourselves from degredation."
[96] See Walker, *Appeal*, 64 for Walker's discussion of the paradox of White fear of reading/writing when Blacks were alleged to be, by definition, incapable of such behavior.

God punished with ten great plagues),[97] and how they directly flaunt the Golden Rule and the Declaration of Independence.[98] Not only does Walker show their hypocrisy, but also the stakes of their cruelty—God's punishment enacted through the hands of Blacks themselves.[99]

Walker does not spare his Black audience from condemnation, though. Even though Whites are to responsible for violently exploiting Black labor and bodies, Walker argues that Blacks are themselves responsible for proving their humanity to themselves and forcing Whites to respect them as human. He indicts Black people for taking to submission too willingly and adopting servile habits, of which the most egregious is the betrayal of other Blacks (i.e. "treachery"). Walker tells his audience that they cannot wait for Whites to realize their sins and repent—they must bring about the realization themselves by resisting (violently if need be) White attempts to dehumanize and control them, even if it means that those who revolt die in the process.[100]

Maria W. Stewart

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[97] Walker, *Appeal*, 77.

[98] See Walker, *Appeal*, 66, 69, and 79, in particular, for Walker's argument for why Whites will be better off if they begin to treat Blacks as humans now, rather than waiting for revolution and/or divine punishment. He draws on White shame by showing that life under British rule was barely one one-hundredth as bad for White Americans as life is for Blacks under White domination, and yet Americans rebelled and cast out the British Empire. He encourages Whites to consider how devastating the Black revolution will be given how much worse life is in slavery (Walker, *Appeal,* 79).

[99] Walker, Appeal, 72. "I say, let us reason; had you not better take our body, while you have it in your power, and while we are yet ignorant and wretched, not knowing but a little, give us education, and teach us the pure religion of your Lord and Master, which millions of your have beaten us nearly to death for trying to obtain since we have been among you, and thus at once, gain our affection while we are ignorant? Remember Americans, that we must and shall be free and enlightened as you are, will you wait until we shall, under God, obtain our liberty by the crushing arm of power?"

[100] Walker, *Appeal*, 24. "These are some of the productions of ignorance, which he will see practiced among my dear brethren, who are held in unjust slavery and wretchedness, by avaricious and unmerciful tyrants, to whom, and their hellish deeds, I would suffer my life to be taken before I would submit."

Like David Walker, who had a profound effect on her, Maria W. Stewart deployed

scripture and core American texts and themes to excoriate and embolden the Black community

(especially in the North)[101] to unite in rebellion against White domination. Stewart is the first

Black American-born woman to write and publish a political manifesto; she is also the first

woman to deliver a public political lecture to an audience of men and women.[102] Her first

published text "Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality, The Sure Foundation on Which We

Must Build"[103] appeared in the abolitionist paper *The Liberator* in 1831, a year after Walker's

untimely death.[104] Stewart explicitly references Walker as a martyr to the cause of Black

liberation[105] and she takes up many of Walker's modes of argumentation including calling

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[101] Stewart ruffled feathers among some groups of African-Americans in the North when she declared "that if I conceived of [there] being no possibility of my rising above the condition of servant, I would gladly hail death as a welcome messenger… Neither do I know of any who have enriched themselves by spending their lives as house-domestics, washing windows, shaking carpets, brushing boots, or tending upon gentlemen's tables" (Maria W. Stewart, "Lecture Delivered at the Franklin Hall," in *Maria W. Stewart, America's First Black Woman Political Writer: Essays and Speeches* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987), 46). These were jobs many African-Americans depended upon for survival in the North. She also disparaged Northern Black men in "An Address Delivered at The African Masonic Hall (1833)," in *Maria W. Stewart, America's First Black Woman Political Writer: Essays and Speeches* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987), 58 for lacking ambition and courage.
[102] See Marilyn Richardson's introduction to the volume of Stewart's collected writings in Stewart, *Essays and Speeches*, xiii, 8.
[103] Stewart, *Essays and Speeches*, 28-42.
[104] Walker's *Appeal* would certainly have made him a potential target of White violence, and many of his friends and colleagues suspected that he had been stalked and killed for encouraging Black uprising. Walker's biographer Peter P. Hinks suggests that contrary to the suspicion of foul play, Walker succumbed to consumption just a week after his daughter died of the same illness. Peter P. Hinks, *To Awaken My Afflicted Brethren: David Walker and the Problem of Antebellum Slave Resistance* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 1996), 269-270. Nevertheless, Walker's death at the young age 33 added to the sense of urgency that Walker built in the *Appeal*.
[105] See Maria W. Stewart, "Religion and Pure Principals of Morality," in *Maria W. Stewart, America's First Black Woman Political Writer: Essays and Speeches* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987), 30, 40, and 57. See Marilyn Richardson's biographical introduction to the collection of Stewart's political speeches and tracts, for a discussion of the inspiration

Blacks to: prove their humanity (primarily to themselves), to seek education to overcome moral shortcomings and miserable quality of life, and if necessary, to exercise violent resistance to White abuses. Stewart also shares Walker's views on the inevitability of Black liberation as God's will and demonstrates aversive thinking and practice in her life, writing, and speeches.

Like Walker, Maria Stewart argued that Blacks could not wait for Whites to change, and that Black people had to change their circumstances themselves despite unchristian treatment by Whites. She likewise prophesies God's divine retribution against White cruelty and domination, but that it must be brought about by Black action. She emboldens her Black audience saying: "It is of no use for us to sit with our hands folded, hanging out heads like bulrushes, lamenting our wretched condition; but let us make a mighty effort, and arise; and if no one will promote or respect us, let us promote and respect ourselves."[106] And she issues an ominous warning to (White) Americans:

> You may kill, tyrannize, and oppress as much as you choose, until our cry shall come up before the throne of God; for I am firmly persuaded, that he will not suffer you to quell the proud fearless and undaunted spirits of the Africans forever; for in his own time, he is able to plead our cause against you, and to pour out upon you the plagues of Egypt. We will not come out against you with swords and staves, as against a thief [Matthew 26:55]; but we will tell you that our souls are fired with the same love of liberty and independence with which your souls are fired… [It] is the blood of our fathers, and the tears of our brethren that have enriched your soils. AND WE CLAIM OUR RIGHTS. We will tell you that we are not afraid of them that kill the body, and after that can do no more; but we will tell you whom we do fear. We fear Him who is able, after He hath killed, to destroy both soul and body in hell forever."[107]

Like Emerson and Walker, Stewart articulates a metaphysics of power in which force always eventually rebounds and recoils upon the aggressor and that divine and worldly reprisals shall

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Stewart drew from Walker's writing and life. See also Hinks, *To Awaken My Afflicted Brethren*, 85-86, 88-89, 113-114, and 253-254.

[106] Stewart, "Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality," 37.

[107] Stewart, "Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality," 39-40.

ultimately befall those who do harm to the other. Despite the passage indicating that "we will not come out against you with swords and staves," Stewart elsewhere professes that she would gladly sacrifice herself in the name of God and her brethren,[108] become a martyr like David Walker,[109] and would rather suffer death than submit to domination and servility.[110] Her most strident warning of a Black uprising is found in one of her most scathingly critical speeches *An Address Delivered at the African Masonic Hall* (1833):

> But many powerful sons and daughters of Africa will shortly arise, who will put down vice and immorality among us, and declare by Him that sitteth upon the throne that they will have their rights; and if refused, I am afraid they will spread horror and devastation around… Lend the hand of assistance to feeble merit; plead the cause of virtue among our sable race; so shall our curses upon you be turned into blessings; and though you should endeavor to drive us from these shores, still we cling to you the more firmly; nor will we attempt to rise above you; we will presume to be called your equals only."[111]

Stewart allows room for Whites to make right the centuries of harm done to African-Americans, but stipulates that nothing less than fully equal treatment will suffice to save them from divine retribution via Black violence. "They would drive us to a strange land. But before I go, the bayonet shall pierce me through. African rights and liberty is a subject that ought to fire the breast of every free man of color on these United States, and excite in his bosom a lively, deep, decided, and heartfelt interest."[112]

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[108] Stewart, "Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality," 29.

[109] Stewart, "Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality," 30.

[110] Stewart, "Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality," 33 and "Lecture Delivered at the Franklin Hall," 46, respectively.

[111] Stewart, "An Address Delivered at The African Masonic Hall," 63.

[112] Stewart, "An Address Delivered at The African Masonic Hall," 64. Stewart here references the American Colonization Society's (ACS) plan of resettling all free-born African-Americans in Liberia to prevent them from stirring up discontent and uprisings among the enslaved population. David Walker addressed the ACS's proposed resettlement tactics in *Appeal* (pp. 47-53, 67), particularly in the sections addressing Henry Clay, an influential member of the ACS.

Stewart also resumes Walker's two-fold strategy of fostering self-trust and aversive thought/action among her African-American audience, again, akin to Emerson's mode of argumentation which he directed at his White audiences. In *Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality*, she reminds African-Americans that they are made exactly as the Creator intended, imbued with reason and intellect,[113] and so should feel empowered to display their talents and excel in merit and virtue.[114] Despite the potency and ubiquity of White violence, African-Americans should cast aside the self-doubt of "I can't" and embrace the radical possibility of "I can," since God has granted them every talent and capacity as the rest of humanity. They can no longer wait for Whites to come around to Black humanity and change circumstances, it is up to the Black community to change themselves and their situation on their own.[115]

In *An Address Delivered to The African Masonic Hall*, Stewart levels criticism at Black men in particular in the hopes of moving them to self-trust. She calls them to be ambitious and see the power of their "natural force" that has been tamped down by fear of and servitude to Whites.[116] They should be unquestioningly confident in their capacities, especially when they realize that Black labor and ingenuity is the foundation for all White property in the New World.[117] It is only out of fear of downfall from challenging Whites that Black folks have remained in their low position. "The reason why our distinguished men have not made

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[113] Stewart, "Religion and Pure Principles of Morality," 29
[114] Stewart, "Religion and Pure Principles of Morality," 31.
[115] Stewart, "Religion and Pure Principles of Morality," 35, 37.
[116] Stewart, "Address to The African Masonic Hall," 57, 59.
[117] "Like King Solomon, who put neither nail nor hammer to the temple, yet received the praise; so also have the white Americans gained themselves a name, like the names of the great men that are in the earth, while in reality we have been their principal foundation and support. We have pursued the shadow, they have obtained the substance; we have performed the labor, they have received the profits; we have planted the vines, they have eaten the fruits of them." (Stewart, "Address to The African Masonic Hall,"59).

themselves more influential, is because they fear that the strong current of opposition through which they must pass would cause their downfall and prove their overthrow."[118] This leads her to her cutting assessment that Black men lack ambition and courage.

The self-trust Stewart advocates can only exist if it is accompanied by aversive thought and action, of which Stewart is a dedicated exemplar. Before even considering the content of her writings and speeches, the audaciousness of her decision to write or speak at all was seen by many Whites (especially in the South) to be outrageous, and the fact that she was a woman who spoke publicly about race and gender politics, and so refused to defer to men, was taboo among the Black elites in the North. Stewart spoke candidly on numerous occasions concerning her choice to speak out about the injustices she saw around her.

> I am sensible of my ignorance; but such knowledge as God has given me, I impart to you. I am sensible of former prejudices; but it is high time for prejudices and animosities to cease from among us. I am sensible of exposing myself to calumny and reproach; but shall I, for fear of feeble man who shall die, hold my peace? Shall I for fear of scoffs and frowns refrain my tongue? Ah, no! I speak as one that must give an account at the awful bar of God; I speak as a dying mortal to dying mortals. O, ye daughters of Africa, awake! Awake! Arise! No longer sleep nor slumber, but distinguish yourselves. Show forth to the world that ye are endowed with noble and exalted faculties.[119]

Stewart's boldness and open religiosity put her at odds with many in Boston's elite Black communities who preferred a calmer-tempered and less contemptuous style of argumentation, but she openly declared that religion was the means by which Black liberation would be brought about on the earthly plane. "And is it the applause of men that has prompted these benevolent ones to take their lives in their hands, as it were, to plead our cause before the great and powerful? Ah, no! It is that holy religion (which is held in derision and contempt by many) whose precepts will raise and elevate us above our present condition, and cause our aspirations to

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[118] Stewart, "Address at the African Masonic Hall," 63.
[119] Stewart, "Religion and Pure Principles of Morality," 30.

ascend up in unison with theirs, and become the final means of bursting the bands of oppression."[120]

Stewart credits her religious faith with providing her the inspiration and strength to continue speaking, chastising, and encouraging women and other African Americans to unite, strategize, and overthrow their oppressors—even when those very audiences sought to silence her for bucking gender norms and behaving uncouthly. "Methinks I heard a spiritual interrogation—'Who shall go forward, and take off the reproach that is cast upon the people of color? Shall it be a woman?' And my heart made this reply—'If it is thy will, be it even so, Lord Jesus!"[121] Stewart would rather be reject and be rejected by conventional society than to betray her convictions. She remained true to her own intuition even as it set her in conflict with those whom she sought to unite, energize, and arm in the battle for their survival and assertion of their own humanity.

In her very last public address, "Mrs. Stewart's Farewell Address to Her Friends in the City of Boston" (1833), Stewart delivers her strongest example of and case for aversive thought and action.

> The Spirit of God came before me, and I spake before many. When going home, reflecting upon what I had said, I felt ashamed, and knew not where I should hide myself. A something said within my breast, "Press forward, I will be with thee." And my heart made this reply, Lord, if thou wilt be with me, then I will speak for thee as long as I live. And thus far I have every reason to believe that it is the divine influence of the Holy Spirit operating upon my heart that could possible induce me to make the feeble and unworthy efforts that I have.[122]

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[120] Maria W. Stewart, "Cause for Encouragement," in *Maria W. Stewart, America's First Black Woman Political Writer: Essays and Speeches* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987), 43.
[121] Stewart, "Lecture Delivered at The Franklin Hall" (1832), 45.
[122] Farwell Address, 67.

Even though Stewart may not have thought of it in precisely this way herself, I argue that her speaking in the face of such oppressive social pressure to demure before her male abolitionist counterparts exemplifies the spirit of self-trust and aversion theorized by Emerson and practiced by Walker. She saw genius in herself, worth more than convention, norms, and social valuation— even though she attributed that genius to God.

She persisted in the face of opposition from among the very people she should have been able to rely upon the most—but such is the role of the friend: to tell painful truths in spite of great risks to the friendship.[123] Indeed, Stewart saw it her divine purpose to both chastise and encourage both Blacks and Whites to be better versions of themselves; she implored Blacks to give up sinful habits instilled by centuries of abuse and depravation (treachery perpetrated against other Black people, self-doubt, petty greed, cowardice, apathy, and excessive drink and dance) so that they could realize their full humanity and potential, and so cast off White domination and exploitation. "For several years my heart was in continual sorrow. And I believe that the Almighty beheld from his holy habitation, the affliction wherewith I was afflicted, and heard the false misrepresentations wherewith I was misrepresented, and there was none to help. Then I cried unto the Lord in my troubles. And thus for wise and holy purposes, best known to himself, he has raised me in the midst of my enemies, to vindicate my wrongs before this people; and to reprove them for sin, as I have reasoned to them of righteousness and judgment to come… I believe, that for wise and holy purposes, best known to himself, he hath unloosed my tongue, and put his word into my mouth, in order to confound and put all those to shame that have rose up against me."[124]

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[123] We will expand on the role of truth-telling and risk in chapter 4 when we discuss Michel Foucault's analysis of the parrhesiast.
[124] Farewell Address, 67.

Stewart called other women to embrace nonconformity and to see their own potential to leadership and prophesy, despite their lack of education. In fact, she encouraged them to channel their already present potential in order to better their quality of life by building their own businesses and schools, that is to see to their present value and potential as a means of seeing and obtaining their next unattained, but attainable, selves. Even as she sought to instill courage and self-reflection in her Black colleagues, she eventually decides that she can no longer remain in Boston and face the hostility of her community. "Yet, notwithstanding your prospects are thus fair and bright, I am about to leave you, perhaps never more to return. For I find it is no use for me as an individual to try to make myself useful among my color in this city. It was contempt for my moral and religion opinions in private that drove me thus before a public. Had experience more plainly shown me that it was the nature of man to crush his fellow, I should not have thought it so hard. Wherefore, my respected friends, *let us no longer talk of prejudice, till prejudice becomes extinct at home. Let us no longer talk of opposition, till we cease to oppose our own. For while these evils exist, to talk is like giving breath to the air, and labor to the wind.*"[125] In trying to speak necessary, but painful, truths to her contemporaries, Stewart embraced the role of the Emersonian friend until she could no longer manage the energy to do so. Marilyn Richardson points out that when Stewart reached New York, she had no less difficult a time as she attempted to establish Black schools and hospitals in the area. She was often denied support by organizations and parishes because of her association with the Episcopal Church, which made her unpopular among the Presbyterians and Unitarians.[126] Stewart, though, expands

[125] Maria W. Stewart, "Farewell Address," in *Maria W. Stewart, America's First Black Woman Political Writer: Essays and Speeches* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987), 70-71. Emphasis added.
[126] See "Sufferings During the War" in *Maria W. Stewart, America's First Black Woman Political Writer: Essays and Speeches* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987), 98-

her audience to specifically include Black women who had previously been paid less attention in the organized struggle for Black liberation.

Conclusion

This chapter has presented what I consider to be the most important elements of Ralph Waldo Emerson's core foundational concepts for his moral perfectionist project: a framework for a metaphysics of power and ethics, the interconnected notions of self-trust/genius and aversion, and the crucial role of the friend. While I argue that these are the core pillars of an Emersonian moral perfectionism, it is important to remain cognizant of the limitations of Emerson's own time and circumstances, especially regarding race politics. Even as he praised Frederick Douglass and Toussaint l'Ouverture, for his time, Emerson was a moderate abolitionist (and a late-blooming one at that).[127]

By paying attention to the works of Black abolitionists who were contemporaries of Emerson, I argue that we get a better sense of the extant possibilities for race politics during the 19th century in American politics, and so too expand the view of our own current possibilities. David Walker and Maria Stewart not only embody many of the same moral perfectionist sensibilities as Emerson, but they employ them in ways that explicitly confront the racial politics in antebellum America. Walker and Stewart's writing allows us to see conversations about race that include, but are not restricted to, the problem of slavery in the Americas. Walker's and Stewart's writing and speeches contribute to the potential of moral perfectionist thought and

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109 for Stewart's account of the hardships she faced during the Civil War as she continued her organizing work in the New York.

[127] Like many Northern abolitionists, he supported compensated abolition for quite a while, and only later on did Emerson extol the actions of radical abolitionists like John Brown. See Emerson's "John Brown Address" and the "Address on the Anniversary of Abolition in West Indies" in *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Brooks Atkinson (New York: The Modern Library, 2000).

practice to address race politics by showing us the ways that race functions to obstruct the enactment of a moral perfectionist framework in the first place.

In their own distinct ways, Walker and Stewart show how the concept of race functions as a power structure in itself, such that our ethical responsibility (and the flow and recoil of force) is obscured—especially from White subjects. Walker's, and later Stewart's, works highlight the radical political and ethical implications of self-trust and genius when they are coupled with aversive thinking and practice. Practicing self-trust and cultivating the expression of the creative genius of the individual is critical in a society that seeks to deny any such human qualities and capacities to those people deemed "of color." Stewart's speeches and writings are particularly powerful expressions of the necessary connection between self-trust and aversion. She and Walker show how practices of race within political and social relations serve to suppress the thriving of individuals, and groups of individuals by perpetuating norms and standards about what each group's capacities are and how they should behave in relation to each other. Walker focuses on the dynamics between White and Black men, primarily, whereas Stewart expands the scope to include a pointed critique of the ways that Black women's contributions have been stifled and subordinated in within the Black community, the political movement for abolition of slavery in the South, and the improvement of the quality of life for Blacks in the North.

In addition to these three pillars, Walker and Stewart embodied the role of the moral perfectionist friend for both African Americans to whom they addressed their works, but also to Whites, in spite of the latter's failure to hear them. David Walker's *Appeal* was rejected by Southern Whites as a subversive manifesto bent on inciting violence and overthrow of Southern slave owners, which of course it was—but through it, Walker also hoped to show White Americans their moral failures and the hypocrisy of their pretended Christianity. Walker

designed the *Appeal* to unite and charge enslaved Blacks to rise up against their oppressors, but he also used the *Appeal* to show Whites what was at stake should they continue their violence against enslaved people in the South.

Maria Stewart's works highlighted not only the failures of Whites in the South, but also the ways that Northern Whites condemned Blacks in the North to stultifying servility. She likewise critiques elite Black communities in the North for neglecting the influence and capacities of Black women in politics, religion, and education. Like Walker, Stewart also forewarns the Whites population of the consequences of continuing to neglect, demean, and exploit Black people's humanity and labor.

By engaging the political and ethical elements of David Walker and Maria W. Stewart, we can begin to mend the theoretical gaps and lapses in Ralph Waldo Emerson's writings that establish the foundation of moral perfectionist thought. In the chapters that follow, I will analyze the contemporary moral perfectionist thinkers Stanley Cavell, Emmanuel Levinas, and Michel Foucault and provide necessary theoretical considerations and supplements in order to refine a moral perfectionist strategy for addressing the ethical harm represented by practices of race.

CHAPTER 2: SKEPTICISM, ACKNOWLEDGEMENT, AND RACIAL OTHERS

The overall goal of the present dissertation is to construct a picture of the ethical harm of practices of race in the hope of motivating White subjects to seek out, articulate, and scrutinize the ways that practices of race (by which we are all made subjects) harm even those who seem to benefit the most from them. I hope to show the value of moral perfection for addressing the special case of the self/other problem found in practices of race.

By working through Stanley Cavell's analysis of skepticism and modes of response to it, I hope to show why even White subjects should begin to restructure the ways we see (and so position ourselves with respect to) the other to begin to allay the harm done by what I see as the unique form of other-mind skepticism present in an always already racialized world. To this end, the chapter ahead delves into the value, potential, and limitations of this conceptualization of skepticism of other minds and the response to it via acknowledgement as it pertains to the problem of practices of race. I will frame the issue of skepticism in terms of its relation to race-practice by discussing the problem of White subjects' skepticism of Black subjects' (full) humanity; I will also address the ways that racialized skepticism contributes not only to the problem of domination and exploitation, but also, by only selectively and circumstantially committing to the skeptical position that would otherwise enable the disruption of reliance upon ordinary use-values of race, even White subject's ethical subjectivity is impaired. I argue that in the context of a racialized world, the skepticism of other minds deploys the harmful elements of skepticism (demanding and relying upon impersonal metaphysical essence of racial categorization) while leaving unutilized the potential positive elements of skepticism (the

capacity to call into doubt and therefore change the criteria, agreements, and use-values of a concept within a community).

After detailing the relevance of skepticism to the problem of race-practice, I will turn to Cavell's notion of acknowledgment as his response (though not to say "solution") to the ever-present threat (and potential) of skepticism in our relations to each other.[128] I will work through the implications of acknowledgment as a response to race-based skepticism, and highlight its strengths and limitations.

The third section will bring Octavia Butler's 1993 novel *Parable of the Sower* into conversation with Cavell's work on skepticism of other minds and acknowledgment in order to tease out the stakes and potential of these concepts with regard to resisting the practices of race in contemporary America. The novel's protagonist, Lauren Olamina, exhibits a condition known in the story as "hyperempathy syndrome" that causes her to experience profound physical pain whenever she sees other people (or animals) in pain. I suggest that Butler's depiction of this condition within the novel's pain-language game provides support for Cavell's argument that our relationship to others (and so our own subjectivity) cannot be reduced to a demand for knowledge and certainty (which Olamina seems to approximate through her own experience of

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[128] Espen Hammer adroitly explains Cavell's notions of both the threat of and promise of skepticism. The temptation to skepticism certainly risks separating us from the community within which we create meaning, use-value, and knowledge, but there is also constructive potential in skepticism as it allows for the possibility of doubting and rejecting the criteria for and ways of using concepts in our language-games—and so opens the possibility of at least changing how race is used. In skepticism is the potential for changing forms of life. See Chapter 2 of Espen Hammer, *Stanley Cavell: Skepticism, Subjectivity, and the Ordinary* (Cambridge, MA: Polity, 2002), 40-43. "In Cavell's account of it, skepticism, the repudiation of criteria and thus the rejection of our attunement, is an inevitable function of language itself, a natural consequence of the fact that criteria 'are only human, nothing more than natural to us' [*Claim of Reason*, 47]."

pain at the sight of others'), but hinges upon our acknowledgement in spite of the backdrop of doubt.

Two Skepticisms

Stanley Cavell's expansive book *The Claim of Reason* (1979) is an articulation of and response to the problem of skepticism as not only a demand for ever more proof of the existence of the world outside of the self, but also the impact that such a demand for proof has on our relationships to each other and our place in the world, what Cavell calls the problem of other minds. While Cavell's analysis of external-world skepticism concerns the skeptic's doubt that the world itself exists (external-world skepticism), and the ultimately irresolvable set of demands for proof that the skeptic requires be met before he/she will admit to know the world's existence with certainty,[129] skepticism of other minds involves the doubt not of the other's existence, but rather the status of the other as one capable of experiencing what we would count as pain and whether such pain is present given the appearance of pain-behavior, for example, what one would ordinarily call "a wince," "a whine," or "writhing."[130] The other-mind skeptic doubts first, whether the being before him is one capable of experiencing what we would call "pain" at all, and second, if the other before the skeptic is determined to be capable of feeling pain, the skeptic doubts whether "pain" is present "behind" the pain-behavior.[131]

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[129] The full discussion of external-world skepticism can be found in Part Two of Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason:Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 127-243.

[130] Other-mind skepticism is the focus of Part Four of Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, 325-496. See page 337 for the example of the person whining when experiencing a cramp while playing a card game.

[131] Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, 353. "What is the problem of the other if it is not a problem of certainty?"

Part of Cavell's study of the two forms of skepticism in *The Claim of Reason* is the

possibility of envisioning a base-case circumstance for obtaining the knowledge and certainty

that the skeptic is so insistent upon. Cavell suggests that the best case for proof that the world

exists is in the individual's sensory data arising from the relationship to ordinary objects in the

world around them.[132] The proof of the other's capacity to feel pain, and the proof of the

presence of such a thing called "pain" lacks a best case for providing and accepting proof—all

that can be done is to analogize my own relationship to my body to other's relationships to their

bodies.[133] If the skeptic concedes the point that there is in fact a thing before them (that perhaps

looks like what they would call a human body), there is no way of knowing with certainty that

the criteria for "human-ness" have been met,[134] or whether the being before them merely "looks

like" a human, or its behavior resembles that of humans (i.e. an identical appearance would not

count as pain should the thing before us be a lifelike automaton, golem, or "pod person").[135]

There is no amount of knowledge that would conclusively dispel the skeptic's doubt about either

human status, or the presence of "actual pain" inside the human. Indeed, Cavell suggests that

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[132] Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, 432-433.
[133] See Cavell's discussion of the craftsman and the automaton for a discussion of having "pain" as opposed to pain, Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, 403-411.
[134] Cavell cites Wittgenstein's position that "Only of what behaves like a human being can one say that it *has* pains. For one has to say it of a body, or, if you like of a soul which some body *has*" (Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §283).
[135] Consider the way science fiction and horror films have addressed this problem. For example, in Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982), Alex Proyas's *I, Robot* (2004), Chris Columbus's *Bicentennial Man* (1999) which all revolve around the legal rights and status of androids and automatons in a world primary ruled by human beings. The debates in the films revolve around the risks to human beings' status should sentient machines be granted personhood. The horror genre of film has touched on this issue in the form of threats of being infected or replaced by non-human, but human-like, others in films such as John Carpenter's *The Thing* (1982), the zombie sub-genre films like George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) and television shows like *The Walking Dead* (2010-present), as well as monster films like *Queen of the Damned* (2002) in which life itself is at stake should we confuse a non-human being for a human, or be seduced or tricked by them.

much of Shakespearean tragedy is tied to the unremitting demand for knowledge and proof of the other's love even when the other makes declarations of love, (in other words, displays "love-behavior").[136] The trouble lies in the skeptic's demand for proof of the presence of something (e.g. love or pain) "behind" or "within" the "outward" expression of love or pain.[137]

Cavell relies upon Wittgenstein's discussion of pain-language and the problem of inside/outside as presented in the analogy of the contents of the painting of the boiling pot. For Cavell, the issue of asking the question of the contents of the painting of a boiling pot is to misunderstand what a painting is. To ask the question about a boiling pot is not the same as asking the same question of the painting of the boiling pot.[138] The question misapplies the notions of inside and outside. Cavell submits that this is a crucial part of the problem of other minds, of distinguishing an "inside" or "a mind" from its "outward" expression in the body. For Cavell (and Wittgenstein) the body is an expression of a soul, and to doubt that (i.e. demand more knowledge) about the existence or status of the other is to misunderstand what human relationships are.[139]

> We can describe the situation this way: The words "something accompanying my cry of pain" are forced upon us when we feel we must enforce the *connection* between something inner and an outer something. But those very words—or rather the insistence with which in such an eventuality they are employed, or the reservation with which they are withheld—exactly serve to break this natural connection… The philosophical task posed by Wittgenstein's parable (not, again, notably unlike a literary task) is to describe what is wrong with the assertion that "something is in the pictured pot"—i.e., to describe the emptiness of the assertion, the momentary madness in the assertion, that is its failure

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[136] See Cavell's analysis of *King Lear* in "Avoidance of Love" in Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002) and *Othello* in the conclusion to *The Claim of Reason*.

[137] Recall Cavell's insistence upon the importance of Wittgenstein's parable of the boiling pot. See Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, 332-343; see also page 381 for the inside/outside myth.

[138] Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, 333.

[139] See Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, 335 for Cavell's concern over the threat of psychosis within the doubt that I have "nothing going on inside" me. See also page 338 for a description of the picture of pain as a picture of a body in pain, and how the image is a part of pains expression.

to amount to an assertion within an insistent sense that it *is* one—without at the same time seeming to *deny* that something is in the pictured pot.[140]

Cavell shows that the implications of the skeptic's demands for proof (of pain, and so, too, of humanity) have more to do with the moral status of the skeptic than the epistemic status of the pain of the one on whom he places his demands. The slack of acknowledgement can never be taken up by knowledge.[141]

Espen Hammer, in analyzing Cavell's *The Claim of Reason* summarizes the difference between the two forms of skepticism: "[Whereas] external-world skepticism cannot be lived except on pain of psychosis, other-minds skepticism is descriptive of a constant possibility inflicting my condition as knower on others… With regard to others, however, I must remember the possibility of skepticism: that nothing other than my willingness to respond empathically to the other keeps the other alive to me, and thus that relations between us are restricted."[142] Skepticism is thus not something we can resolve or satiate—we must live our skepticism. The best case of knowledge of the human soul *is* the human body.

> The idea of the allegory of words is that human expressions, the human figure, to be grasped, must be *read*. To know another mind is to interpret a physiognomy, and the message of this region of the *Investigations* is that this is not a matter of "mere knowing." I have to read the physiognomy, and see the creature according to my reading, and treat it according to my seeing. The human body is the best picture of the human soul—not, I feel like adding, primarily because it represents the soul but because it expresses it. [143]

As I hope to show, the human soul/body is never a settled matter in a world where race is operative in the assignment of statuses of difference, and therefore, relative value.

Skepticism, Race, and the Limits of Soul Blindness

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[140] Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, 338.
[141] Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, 338.
[142] Hammer, *Stanley Cavell*, 75.
[143] Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, 356.

A problem arises when we attempt to apply the problem of other minds to a *racialized* other, to living, breathing people, who by virtue of their existence in a world permeated by practices of race, are always already shot-through with its ongoing, shifting impact. Part Four of *The Claim of Reason* contains one explicit attempt to reflect on race by introducing the relationship between the enslaved person and the slave owner.[144] Aside from the question of the advantage of the attribution of soul-blindness to the problem of race, there are also grounds for considering the generalizability of the relation of slave owner and slave to our contemporary circumstances. We must determine whether the master/slave relationship as outlined by Cavell contributes to the present attempt to analyze twenty-first century race in America.[145]

Consider for instance that instead of doubting the genuineness of the pain of the other before him, the skeptic doubts the capacity of the other to possess pain in the first place. If the human other before a White skeptic (or perhaps better put: anyone infected with White skepticism) has been deemed "Black," (is judged to "count as" Black under criteria on the dimensions of phenotype, heredity, self-identification, etc.) then, is the pain of the other already settled in the negative? This would amount to the skeptic's agreement that something is in fact in front of him, and (perhaps) that it moves about in ways that resemble pain-behavior (if one views it from afar), but that upon discovery of the human-like being's race, the pain-behavior can be ruled out, since the thing before the skeptic is not one who has the (full) capacity to feel pain, (or perhaps "feels" something "like" pain, but not pain itself, such as the ways we think of snakes or

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[144] See Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, 370-379.
[145] This is a problem of modelling time, history, and use-value—present-day practices of race are neither identical to, nor entirely detached from past practices.

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mockingbirds or pigs as having the capacity for feeling pain but that the pain does not demand a response from me the same way full human pain does).[146]

It is for this reason that we must first explore the value that race has in our capacities to see the "soul" of the other. The difficulty with Cavell's notion of soul-blindness is that it seems to make the slaveholder the exception to an otherwise natural or at least commonplace ability for us to see the souls of others. If we scrutinize the ways that the notion of soul-blindness is employed in the text, we will get a different sense of the. Firstly, the soul-blind slaveholder is placed in juxtaposition to the soul-sighted; that is, Cavell's narrator of the discussion considers themselves capable of seeing souls.[147] I think that considerations of race must account for the ways that the concept is used, deployed, and valued in order to best diagnose the problem of race, even as it pertains to the specific circumstances of slave-ownership. Rather than asking what is special, lacking, or noteworthy about the slave-owner, perhaps Cavell's own commitment to ordinary language philosophy can point us to the ways that race functions within the self/other pain-language game.

Whereas soul-blindness is useful in discussing the purported uniqueness of the slave owner's tendency to see people as "types of people," and he indeed cannot be forced (by others or himself) to see them differently, (or be "struck" by their appearance as something other than a type of person who is/should be a slave),[148] it is also useful to detail the ways that such a notion

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[146] This mirrors the basic conversation Cavell has about the automaton and the craftsman, though differing in the explicit address of the race of the being exhibiting pain-behavior.

[147] Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, 375. "Isn't all that I, who *know* that slaves *are* human beings, can tell him is what it means to want and see and feel human beings to be human beings?" (emphasis in original). See also 376. "But if this man sees certain human beings as slaves, isn't he seeing something special, not missing something (*he doubtless things I am missing something*)?" (emphasis added).

[148] See Jonathan Havercroft and David Owen "Soul-Blindness, Police Orders, and Black Lives Matter: Wittgenstein, Cavell, and Rancière," *Political Theory* 44, no. 6 (July 2016), 739-763 for

as race is used to facilitate such a way of seeing. Not only must we recognize that race is not

something the slave-owner creates (though he is part of the perpetuation of certain uses of it, i.e.

racialized slavery), we must also consider the extent to which those of us who think ourselves

attitudinally different (i.e. we say things like "I see, and know they are have souls and are

human," etc.)[149] are nonetheless still caught up in a racialized form of life in which practices of

race have present and historical value, regardless of our avowed progressivism. What is then

even more troubling than the exceptional status of the slave owner and their *Weltanshauung* is

the ways that I *do* manage to understand the slave owner, such as when he uses a racial epithet, I

"know what he means" in that I know that he uses it in ways consistent with how other people, if

not myself, have used it. That is, I know how or to what effect he is using it, and I know that it is

ordinarily used to insult, mock, label, exert authority over, or bond with others at the expense of

people who have phenotypes or ancestry that we say makes them "count as" whatever race the

slave owner is differentiating from the "fully human," that is, what the slave owner takes himself

and "others like him" to be. What I mean is that I am familiar with how the epithet is ordinarily

deployed to the extent that I know that is an unkind thing to say, that it means he values the

people he labels with that word less (perhaps) than he does people he deems "White," or that he

expects deferential treatment from those he targets with the epithet. I am, after all, a native

speaker of the language/practices of race—the other-mind skeptic and I are well-versed in the

use(s) of race.[150]

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a thorough discussion of the problem of "being struck" as it relates to Wittgenstein's notions of aspect dawning and aspect blindness, with regard to Cavell's notion of soul-blindness.

[149] Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, 375.

[150] See "Knowing and Acknowledging" in Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?* 238-239 on language mastery and the potential for critique from within language. "These concessions [to the skeptic] may themselves seem forced, or seem empty; but to show this you have to show that a master of English, who knows everything you know, has no real use for them. And how could

The separation between myself and the slave owner is not, perhaps, as profound as one might hope (or fear) and as Cavell seems to suggest by his formulation and diagnosis of soul-blindness as a distinct form of moral failure. Per Cavell, the slave owner's soul-blindness is a problem because he does not see *as I do*—but the question remains as to the value of my way of seeing-as, and whether my role is then to attempt bring the soul-blind closer to my way of seeing-as; however, as Cavell and Wittgenstein argue, being-struck is not up to me. I can will neither myself nor others into being struck by an aspect—I cannot force myself or others to see the humanity of an other.[151]

The appearance of soul-blindness in *The Claim of Reason*, strikes me as a departure (albeit not a radical one) from Cavell's performance of Emersonian moral perfectionist analysis in that soul blindness is largely used to diagnose another person's moral failure of the other, rather than as a means of bringing about *my* next unattained, but attainable, self. If soul-blindness is conceptually valuable, moral perfectionism as I read it requires that I use it to demand more of myself first and foremost. The problem of soul-blindness is not, then, just in the fact that the slaveholder's ways of seeing (or not-seeing) others differ from the ways I do see, but it is also in the fact that *my* approach to others via "seeing them as" may be far more similar to the soul-blind slaveholder than I may be comfortable admitting. But this embarrassing similarity is inseparable

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this be shown? An essential step in showing it would be to convince the skeptic—that is, the skeptic in yourself—that you know what he takes his words to say… But in the philosophy which proceeds from ordinary language, understanding from inside is methodologically fundamental."

[151] Havercroft and Owen, "Soul-Blindness," 745. "Because each way to taking the individual (as either a human being or a slave) involves not just one's relation towards the other, but one's practical relationship towards the society and social institutions in which and through which one relates to the other, the soul-blind individual inhabits a different world from the one who can see another's soul, that is, the 'world-hood' of the world is both distinct and incommensurable for soul-seeing and soul-blind persons. These two worlds occlude each other."

from Cavell's ordinary language approach—my form of life is shared and similar (though not identical); this is part of Cavell's and Wittgenstein's analysis of the argument against language as being private.[152] The slave-owner's way of seeing is made possible through language that we share, which is always intersubjective, and so constituted in community, as community is constituted through language.

But by thinking of race as a set of practices, we can see how race operates in our social conventions, our structures, and our valuations (in Wittgensteinian terms: our form of life), and then begin to formulate modes of practicing Emersonian aversion—turning our backs upon, upsetting, shifting, and challenging the ways that we participate in the recreation of race as difference and differential value in that form of life.[153] This aversion is never complete or finished.

Rather than asking what is special about the slave owner (the soul-blind), we should ask ourselves what about our community (uses, values, traditions, practices) allows for the possibility of such a blindness in the first place—and whether we are as differently sighted as we think. We do not fail to use race; we simply allow different modes of its use. And even though we may typically deploy race differently than the slave holder (in that we do not enslave), the threat of reverting to a previous use (or others' present use) cannot be ignored. Practices of race do not cease, merely their trending articulation. [154]

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[152] Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, 329-336.
[153] Wittgenstein's "Lecture on Ethics" *The Philosphical Review* 74, no. 1 (January 1965): 3-12, employs the imagery of running up against the walls of our language as analogous to our drive to get past the walls of a cage.
[154] This is the value of fiction in addressing race. Consider Derrick Bell's short story "The Space Traders" published in Derrick Bell, *Faces at the Bottom of the Well* (New York: Basic Books, 1992). The form of the use of race is not fixed, but *that* it is used is constant. Bell's story hypothesizes what would happen if extraterrestrials arrived on Earth offering abundant clean, renewable energy for the entire planet in exchange for delivering all Black people on Earth to the

The stakes of skepticism are not (only) in the judgment of the humanity of others

individuals, but in humanity as a set of practices, judgments, values and uses applied within

communities. If the skeptic manages to pull us into doubt about our uses of the concept of

"human," then he succeeds in undermining the terms of our community—and this may not

necessarily be a negative thing.[155] Such an upsetting of the terms of our agreement could then

bring us to question who "we" already do and/or should consider to be members of the

community and who have been deemed as outside (even as we often self-delude into thinking

that marginalized groups are not always already part of the "we" in the first place—part of the

problem is our denial of others' status as part of the community—it is rather the case that I take

myself out of community with them and not vice versa) to reevaluate and reestablish our criteria

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aliens. The story follows an influential Black conservative economist as he joins the president's
commission to determine how to respond to the aliens' offer. Ultimately they decide to take the
deal, and the economist is sent to the aliens along with all other Black people, despite his
prestige and lofty social and economic position. In the end, he was deemed as sacrifice-able as
all other Black people. Race persists as a force through the century and a half between the
abolition of slavery to the time when Black people achieve social and political power. Parallels
can be drawn between the presence of Golightly the economics professor in the short story, and
Barack Obama the first Black president was elected after having been an Ivy League law
professor, (and then subsequently denounced by many Whites in the "birther movement" within
which the next president, Donald Trump, was active). For all of their exceptionalism, both Bell's
character Golightly and Obama were sacrificed to allay White anxiety. It is not coincidental that
"Space Traders" is phonetically similar to both "slave traders" and "race traitors."

[155] See "Knowing and Acknowledging" in Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say,* 240 regarding
the skeptic's threat, not to beliefs, but to the ground of our beliefs.
See also Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, 352-353. Cavell raises a challenge to the other-mind skeptic
which amounts to the claim that the skeptic can never truly be skeptical enough within the
problem of other minds. "[The] other is still left, along with his knowledge of himself; so am I
along with mine. […] A first difference from the case of skepticism with respect to the external
world is that an essential element of that skeptic's initial condition is absent, viz., that no
position for knowing is better than the one *I* am in. In the case of other minds, it seems to make
sense to say that there *is* a better position; anyway, you do not know there is not." (Cavell, *Claim
of Reason*, 353). Even the other-mind skeptic (in spite of themselves, it seems) maintains that the
other exists, and so keeps open the possibility of new agreement, new community, new criteria
and practices.

for and uses of such concepts such as "race," "soul," or "humanity." But this capacity for casting aside of a practice cannot simply be done by fiat and we cannot simply will ourselves out of the use and effects of race. This is a mistake we make in the reliance upon "color-blind" legalism as a solution to the problem of race—we tend to assume that by changing vocabulary, we cease to use or value race.[156]

Race and Selective Skepticism of the Other's Pain

Race undergirds the unique form of other-mind skepticism present in Cavell's discussion of the slaveholder in that it allows for skepticism to be selectively applied. While I am sympathetic to Cavell's approach in attempting to address the persistence of skepticism as a broad philosophical concern, we must supplement the mode of addressing other-mind skepticism with a different conceptualization of race beyond the formulation in terms of a category of "kinds of human."[157] Indeed, part of the function of race is that it categorizes us into kinds, but these kinds are not value-neutral. The creation of kinds establishes and then relies upon criteria of difference, and likewise, the determination of difference arises from and dictates distinct uses, capacities, and differential values. Especially within our contemporary anti-Black practices of race, White subjects may doubt the sincerity of the other White subject's expression of pain, but because of difference-establishing practices of race, Whites do not ordinarily doubt other Whites' capacity to have pain; rather, if they doubt, it is at least not in the same way as they may

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[156] For all of the praise and criticism of Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow* (New York: New Press, 2012), it serves as an example of both recognizing the problem of the notion of color-blindness as a strategy of covering up explicitly racist intention (i.e. Nixon's "Southern Strategy") while simultaneously falling short of noting that practices of race are not simply new versions of the practices of race during Jim Crow segregation (yes, race still has use value—but it is also not reducible to Jim Crow law), but also that her body of evidence in "proving" that racism is alive and well in the prison system is simultaneously used by defenders of the system as "proof" that it "works."
[157] Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, 376-377.

doubt the ability of the person of color. This is not the case by virtue of *choice* to use the concept "race," but rather a product of the subjectivizing force of race, per se—the ways it positions us in relation to others in social contexts, molds our sense of our proper roles and interactions, structures our experiences, and prescribes how we should think of ourselves and others by taking cues from the markers of race within our community.

Cavell attempts to answer the seeing-as problem that the slaveholder experiences by invoking the notion of seeing people of color (particularly Black people) as "kinds of human" instead of as "not-human." The description of the slave owner as one who does, in fact, treat others as humans, but just as "kinds of human," runs the risk of taking race to be just another otherwise equivalent way of categorizing human beings, akin for instance, to gender, class, criminal status, age, or maturity.[158] These "kinds" all function on different axes to varying effects and so have irreducible use-values; this is not to say that these "kinds" cannot also be used to demean and dominate, but that the modes of demeaning and dominating are irreducible to each other.

One of the ways that practices of race function is the way it facilitates the doubt others' pain. Cavell (following Wittgenstein) goes to great lengths to relate the problem of pain to the problem of other minds. In so far as I see the other as having pain, then my response to that pain is expressive of my own humanity. Pain is then inseparable from humanity, both yours and mine. To doubt an other's capacity to feel a "human pain" is to throw into doubt my own humanity. Once we see an other's pain as of a kind different from my own, then we have necessitated the different valuation of that pain. Since practices of race instill and encourage this capacity differentiate and then doubt (particular) others' pain, then it is a threat to my humanity and to the

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[158] Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, 372 and 376-377.

other's very life. If I do not see the pain of others as of the same kind as mine (by virtue of their

being of a different race), then not only might I see their pain as making no demand on me to

alleviate it, but by virtue of the differential value of that pain, I might also see the inflicting of

pain upon them as not just allowable, but required of me.[159]

But there remains the question of how we self-styled "soul-seers" do not repeat the

attribution of "kinds" to people that the slave-owner would have no difficulty regarding as a

candidate for slavery.[160] Perhaps we all afflicted with racial soul-blindness but with outcomes

that have a different texture or mode. Havercroft and Owen (2016) for instance, suggest that

Wittgenstein's aspect-dawning (and Cavell's soul-dawning) presents a potential resolution or

shift from the slaveholder's present *Weltanschauung* necessary for them to see movements such

Black Lives Matter as having human souls, and so the capacity to feel the pain they are

expressing through protest and calls for justice. While I agree that my being-struck by the

humanity of the other is crucial (that is, I cannot acknowledge unless I am so struck), we must

wrestle with how race per se constantly shifts to avert this being-struck. Havercroft and Owen

utilize Rancier's notions of police orders and the distribution of the sensible [161] to account for the

structural/perceptual/aesthetic boundaries to being struck. I think the police orders and

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[159] Consider the White police officer in Georgia who attempted to allay a female motorist's fear of being shot by saying "But you're not black. Remember, we only shoot black people. Yeah, we only kill black people, right?" Pain here becomes a joke and a means of bonding against racial others. See German Lopez, "'We Only Shoot Black People,' Georgia Cop Assures Woman During Traffic Stop," *Vox*, updated August 31, 2017, accessed January 10, 2018, https://www.vox.com/identities/2017/8/31/16232880/georgia-police-cobb-county-video.
[160] See Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, 351 for Cavell's analysis of the fear of private language. "So the fantasy of a private language, underlying the wish to deny the publicness of language, turns out, so far, to be a fantasy, or fear, either of inexpressiveness, one in which I am not merely unknown, but in which I am powerless to make myself known; or one in which what I express is beyond my control."
[161] See Rancière's *Disagreement* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2004) and *The Politics of Aesthetics*: *The Distribution of the Sensible* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

distribution of the sensible is useful in bringing to bear the issue of hearing an utterance as a political argument or call to justice. But if we shift our approach to one highlighting behavioral and linguistic practices as the dimension of the exercise of race (while remaining mindful of the structural and cognitive aspects of race), then our responses potentially sidestep the problem of having to convince, show, prove, or educate the other-mind skeptic into seeing differently. As Cavell argues, the skeptic's demands are never met precisely because of their comportment.

The problem of seeing someone as a kind of person is what it calls for in terms of acknowledgment—seeing-as necessitates that I position myself a certain way according to how I see someone. If the slave owner sees a person "as Black" differently than the rest of us see a person "as Black"—the difference lies in *mode* of acknowledgment. To see a person *as something* (or a *kind of someone*) is to demand that I act *as if* I see them that way—there is no gap—my actions toward that person signal my comportment to them. My actions will always be situated within a particular world-view and circumstances. But asking what the possibilities of my comportment are places me in a particular relationship to my world-view, to others' worldviews, and my circumstances that makes shifts possible.

Acknowledgement as Response to Skepticism

In "Knowing and Acknowledgment," Cavell argues that what is at stake in entertaining the other-mind skeptic's demand for proof that the other is suffering is not certainty of a "fact" of pain, but how I respond (acknowledge) the pain of the other. The skeptic, Cavell points out, is of course right in arguing that I cannot have the "same pain" that the other has, and therefore my relationship to their pain is necessarily one of separation. But my certainty of the other's pain is not what is (or should be) demanded in the scenario—what is demanded in the presentation of an other's pain is demanded *of me*, and the question is about how I will respond to the *expression* of

pain exhibited by the other (for that is all we have to go on). The other-mind skeptic demands

ever less of himself and ever more of others in proving their case. I may wish for circumstances

to be otherwise, but it is unclear how *I* could experience *your* pain (and so be "certain" of it). So,

it seems that the other-mind skeptic's demand for certainty is wrongheaded not in that he is

"wrong" per se, but that his demand for certainty serves as an escape hatch for responsibility for

and to others, and the alleviation or prevention of their pain.

    Cavell also, though, sets acknowledgment (as distinct from certainty) in a normatively

ambiguous space. He situates it in terms of "a category in terms of which a given response is

evaluated" rather than a particular performative form of responding to the pain of others.

> So when I say that "We must acknowledge another's suffering, and we do that by
> responding to a claim upon our sympathy," I do not mean that we always in fact *have*
> sympathy, nor that we always ought to have it. The claim of suffering may go
> unanswered. We may feel lots of things—sympathy, *Schadenfreude*, nothing. If one says
> that this is a *failure* to acknowledge another's suffering, surely this would not mean that
> we fail, in such cases, to *know* that he is suffering? It may or may not. The point,
> however, is that the concept of acknowledgment is evidenced equally by its failure as by
> its success. It is not a description of a given response but a category in terms of which a
> given response is evaluated. (It is the sort of concept Heidegger calls an *existentiale*.)[162]

Given this clarification on the notion of acknowledgment, we might then begin to doubt its value

for our discussion of the question of an other's pain. But Cavell's next words, I think, pull

acknowledgment back from serving as mere label for a category of action.

> A "failure to know" might just mean a piece of ignorance, an absence of something, a
> blank. A "failure to acknowledge" is the presence of something, a confusion, an
> indifference, a callousness, an exhaustion, a coldness. Spiritual emptiness is not a
> blank.—Just as, to say that behavior is expressive is not to say that the man impaled upon
> his sensation must express it in his behavior; it is to say that in order not to express it he
> must *suppress* the behavior, or twist it. And if he twists it far or often enough, he may
> lose possession of the region of the mind which that behavior is expressing.[163]

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[162] Cavell, "Knowing and Acknowledging," 263-264.
[163] Cavell, "Knowing and Acknowledging," 264.

I take this to be applicable to the problem of practices of race insofar as the "failure to acknowledge" an other's pain evinces the *presence* of a callousness or coldness, or perhaps a deadening or benumbing of an otherwise responsive impulse to alleviate the pain of the other by *providing reasons* for not-responding to, or even increasing, the other's pain. How I acknowledge your pain (or fail to) is expressive of how *I* see you, what *I* see you as, which, instead, the other-mind skeptic takes as descriptive *of you*. Cavell's analysis of the concept of acknowledgment inverts the potential indictment; my response to your pain says far less about you than it does about *my comportment toward* you (after all, I cannot "know your pain," be in your skin, or "walk in your shoes" the way the skeptic seems to demand).[164]

Practices of race are the *sine qua non* of other-mind skepticism. Doubt of the other's capacities to feel pain or the genuineness of an expression of pain is not simply a thought experiment—it is a part of our everyday lives. Cavell even goes so far as to talk about the risks of maintaining other-world skepticism: psychosis and absolute detachment from ordinary bodily existence.[165] The stakes of other-mind skepticism are inhumanity and boundless cruelty—they go hand-in-hand; inhumanity and other-mind skepticism are the causes and effects of each other. One of the most pernicious and ubiquitous manifestations of this other-mind skepticism is found in and produced by practices of race as difference.

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[164] Cavell, "Knowing and Acknowledging," 259. "But there *is* someone who knows, there is a position which is totally different from mine in the matter of knowing whether he is in pain, different not only in being better […] but in being decisive, making the best position I can be in seem second hand: namely, *his* position."

[165] Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, 335. "The point is to ask us to consider where the suggestion comes from that perhaps (others have it in mind that) nothing is going on inside us. Why is such a suggestion—more or less psychotic on the face of it—so much as worth an answer, even a parable? Why is it alarming? (Why are psychotics alarming?)"

Cavell's description of the relationship between pain and the pain-behavior that expresses it is also instructive of the kind of considerations acknowledgement requires of us. In the passage above, the presence or absence of pain-behavior are themselves important considerations. "Just as, to say that behavior is expressive is not to say that the man impaled upon his sensation must express it in his behavior; it is to say that in order not to express it he must *suppress* the behavior, or twist it. And if he twists it far or often enough, he may lose possession of the region of the mind which that behavior is expressing."[166] I take this to mean not only that someone could be in pain and nonetheless suppress the expression of that pain—this is troubling in itself, for it calls into question why would the other attempt to hide their pain from me in the first place. They could be proud, vain, or macho, for instance. Worse yet, is that it is something *about me* that makes the other hide their pain from me. The other could perhaps know the likelihood of my *Schadenfreude* and so not want to give me the satisfaction of seeing their expression of pain; perhaps I (or people like me, or other men, or other White subjects) am part of the pain the other feels in that I either inflict physical, emotional, economic pains upon them, or I (or people like me) tend to ignore those pains, and so to express the pain before me would be to open themselves to my potentially perpetrating more pain upon them (and/or, as is often the case, placing the blame for these pains back upon the other experiencing them). This is one implication of the suppression of pain-behavior.

Another implication of withholding the expression of a sensation (despite "being impaled" upon that sensation) is the way that practices of race (as presence, instead of lack) operate to encourage not just the one experiencing pain to suppress an expression of it, but also the way that practices of race lead to the stifling of expression of how those witnessing the pain

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[166] Cavell, "Knowing and Acknowledging," 264.

of others *are* struck by their being-in-pain. Again, regarding the passage above, in order not to

express that I *am* struck by the other's pain, I have to suppress the behavior of my being-struck,

or "twist it." "And if [*we*] twist it far or often enough, [*we*] may lose possession of the region of

the mind which that [being-struck] behavior is expressing." Our otherwise natural responses to

the pain of others is discouraged and repressed to the extent that our capacity for

acknowledgment becomes atrophied to the point of losing "the possession of [or access to] the

region of the mind" where such being-struck lies. What becomes natural under practices of race,

then, is the doubt and denial of racial-others' pain. This is part of the other side of the function of

practices of race—they inculcate social and political responses to expressions of being-struck by

the pain of racial-others by explaining away the pain either by establishing ontological claims

about how "they" lack the capacity for feeling "our" kind of pain (because they are of a different

kind), or (again because of their kind/race) any pain "they" express is feigned in order to receive

benefits and treatment they otherwise have not earned via "hard work" or other moral

qualifiers.[167] The latter case ironically admits that the other is human (or at least human enough

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[167] The moralizing language of White resentment is prevalent in today's contemporary political discourse. In a recent immigration policy meeting with U.S. senators President Donald Trump reportedly questioned why the United States should continue accepting immigrants from "shithole countries" like Haiti and certain nations in Africa, instead of countries like Norway. Trump's comments are expressive if the kind of suppression of acknowledgment that I refer to here. The "s-hole" country comment is a designation of moral value of people who are from the places labelled this way. They are "s-holes" because either the people who live there are of a kind that deserves the health crises, instable infrastructures, and poverty prevalent in these places. Trump's message is that "we" Americans should not welcome such people into "our" country—that if things are bad in the countries he belittles, then it is their citizens' fault, or worse yet, just an extension of the citizens (and "their kind"), themselves. The implication is "s-hole" people come from "s-hole" countries. See Julie Hirschfield Davis, Sheryl Gay Stolberg, and Thomas Kaplan, "Trump Alarms Lawmakers with Disparaging Words for Haiti and Africa," *The New York Times*, January 11, 2018, accessed January 15, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/11/us/politics/trump-shithole-countries.html.

to feign human pain), while simultaneously denying that I have a moral obligation to attend to and alleviate that pain.[168]

So, when Cavell's soul-blind slaveholder inflicts pain with impunity on other human beings because they are of what Cavell calls a particular "kind" of human, it calls into question several things. First, if the division of humans into "kinds" then translates into such drastically divergent responses to them (and their pain), the value of the category of "humanity" itself is worth scrutinizing. It loses its value if we concede, as Cavell does, that the slave-holder treats the enslaved as human, but just as particular kinds of human. The "more or less human" argument by Cavell regarding being served by Black hands, rather than black paws, shows just how empty the category of "human" is.[169] The trouble, as I take it, is not that the slave owner "can mean nothing definite" by insisting on kinds of human; this simply means that the category is variable and open to various uses depending on context.[170] What empties "human" of value, is that within the indefinite use-meanings of "human," the temptation is always present, as if waiting in the wings, to deny full (pure) humanity to people who are deemed to be of an "other" race, and even when one is granted momentary "full humanity," the very next moment could find that status doubted and denied. Indeed, practices of race and the attendant importance of difference constantly threatens to find out, expose, or re-designate one's status as fully-human, almost-human, or sub-human. Other-mind skepticism, as epiphenomenal to practices of race, allows for the selective

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[168] Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, 379. "If the possibility that daunts you is that anything they can express they can feign, even that others may at any time and for no reason simulate their responses, this will lead you only, so to speak, to an epistemological agnosticism, not to a metaphysical skepticism, not to a surmise that perhaps there *are* no human beings. For surely nothing other than a human being, or something awfully like a human being, could *simulate* human responses?"
[169] Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, 376.
[170] Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, 376-377.

application of skepticism when it serves the aggressive psychosexual urges, economic needs, or political dominative ends of the slave-owner, indeed the ends of anyone who finds themselves in a position of relative power in our racialized society. Secondly, if the failure to acknowledge is a presence,[171] rather than a "lack" as Cavell suggests is the case of the "soul-blindness" of the slaveholder, then we are left with the question of how parse out where a presence (of, say, callousness) ends and a lack (of ability to see someone as fully human) begins. We should resist the impulse to think of the example of the slaveholder as a special case or aberration. The ambivalence of the slave owner should, I take it, be taken as an indictment of all of us—or in the moral perfectionist fashion, a particular indictment *of me*, of my singular self, as I cannot honestly say that the world-view (or "blindness," if you prefer) that consumes Cavell's slave owner is entirely foreign to me. How we respond to the question of presence (of callousness toward the other) or lack (of capacity to see the soul of the other) is important in determining how we want to be otherwise than we presently are, how we move beyond our present attained selves, and conceive of our next "unattained, but attainable selves.[172]

Acknowledgement and (Hyper)Empathy in Butler's *Parable of the Sower*

The next section of my reflection on other-mind skepticism and the potential of Cavell's concept of acknowledgment will engage with the ways Octavia Butler (1947-2006) illustrates the problem of the other's pain in her 1993 novel *Parable of the Sower*. Butler's novel is particularly interesting because its protagonist, Lauren Olamina, has the power (or affliction) of experiencing pain when others do. (She even feels pain when she sees that non-human others are in pain.)

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[171] See "Knowing and Acknowledging," in Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?,* 264.
[172] The attainment of a next self is the moral perfectionist trope found in Emerson's "History," and further developed in "Aversive Thinking" in Stanley Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 33-63.

Whereas the other mind skeptic would argue that the experience of pain when others are in pain gets us somewhat closer to the kind of certainty that the skeptic demands,[173] the events of *Parable of the Sower* allow us to approach the problem of others' pain in a different register than one that demands certainty regarding your capacity to feel pain (or the lack of such a capacity), the quality of your pain, or whether your expression of pain is genuine or feigned (though, as we will see Lauren can be "tricked" into feeling pain). Instead, by framing the problem of other's pain in terms of how *I* will respond when the other expresses their pain, we engage with the ethical implications of my comportment toward the other and how it is expressive, if not constitutive, of my own humanity or inhumanity. Lauren Olamina's hyperempathy shows that the demand for certainty, and even the attainment of such certainty (through "knowing their pain") impede our acknowledgment of others' pain; the former demands ever more of the other, the latter stifles my ability to tend to the other's pain, since I, too, am (potentially) overwhelmed by pain. As Cavell notes: "If the body individuates flesh and spirit, singles me out, what does the soul do? It binds me to others."[174] The circumstances of bodily and experiential separation are the grounds of my responsibility to and for you. This separation should not be seen as a lack, as the other-mind skeptic would have us believe, but is rather the basis of our acknowledgment of and engagement with each other.

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[173] Cavell also attempts to formulate such a connection to the other's pain with his adaptation of the Corsican brothers, "First" and "Second." Second only feels pain if First is harmed, but Second never feels pain if he is directly harmed; neither does First feel pain if Second is harmed. Indeed, First never feels pain even though his body has been subject to harm. Cavell's adaptation is an open-ended reflection on the relation between "knowing I am in pain" and "knowing your pain" or "*that* you are in pain." See "Knowing and Acknowledging" in Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 251-253.

[174] Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, 411.

Butler presents *Parable of the Sower* in the form of the protagonist's journal which chronicles her experiences amidst early twenty-first century American crises of climate change, extreme economic inequality, and xenophobia. The journal also serves as Lauren's medium for theorizing and passing on her new religion that she will eventually name "Earthseed." The California portrayed in the novel is divided ever more intensely along race and class lines, with communities walling-off their neighborhoods in last-ditch efforts to protect what little property they have and fend off the violence which accompanies the desperation of the ever-growing homeless population, drug addiction, and arson which has proliferated under the spread of one new drug in particular, "pyro," which makes those who take it experience sexual pleasure from starting fires.[175] Communities (and families within those communities) compete for ever-diminishing resources, as even water has become more expensive than gasoline. The highways are flooded with climate change refugees, economic refugees, and refugees fleeing homes destroyed by fire, plunder, violence, and slavery.

Lauren Olamina's journal depicts the struggles her family faces living in one of the few remaining walled communities left outside of Los Angeles. Lauren, though, faces a unique challenge even among her precariously placed community of Robledo. She suffers from a condition known as "hyperempathy syndrome," which is a congenital disorder common among children whose mothers abused "smart drugs," such as Paracetco, during pregnancy.[176] As a result of this condition, Lauren and other hyperempaths experience physical pain when they see others in pain. Lauren even feels pain when another person pretends to be in pain—her brother once tricked her into bleeding when he faked a nose-bleed.[177] Hyperempths are burdened with

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[175] Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Sower* (New York: Warner Books, 1993), 20.
[176] Butler, *Parable,* 11.
[177] Butler, *Parable,* 9-10.

their own everyday bumps, bruises, and illnesses, but also suffer simply by virtue of observing

that an other is in pain. Interestingly, Butler's hyperempaths do not experience pain when they

see dead bodies or when someone is unconscious. Feeling an other's pain depends upon the

other's being awake/alive to experience pain themselves. Additionally, hyperempathic

experience of pain seems to be limited to physical pain as well—when Lauren's troubled brother

Keith is tortured to death, her step-mother Cory is overwhelmed by crushing grief, and yet,

Lauren does not take on her emotional pain.[178] [179] Her friend Curtis encourages Lauren to let

herself feel something for her brother, to let herself cry.

> He said I should cry. He said no matter how bad things had gotten between Keith and me
> or Keith and the family, I should let myself cry. Odd. Until he brought it up, I hadn't
> thought about my own absence of tears. I hadn't cried at all. Maybe Cory had noticed.
> Maybe my dry face was just one more grudge she held against me. It wasn't that I was
> holding back, being stoic. It's just that I hated Keith at least as much as I loved him. He
> was my brother—half-brother—but he was also the most sociopathic person I've ever
> been close to. He would have been a monster if he had been allowed to grow up. Maybe
> he was one already. He never cared what he did. If he wanted to do something and it
> wouldn't cause him immediate physical pain, he did it, fuck the earth.[180]

Even with the link between Lauren's physical pain and the physical pain of the other, there are

limitations, boundaries. The ways Butler constructs the constraints on empathy are telling of the

ways that we are necessarily separated from each other's experiences, and also how we

rationalize away the pain of others and my lack of response to it.

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[178] Butler, *Parable*, 101.
[179] It is worth considering Cavell's analyses of the mind-body-soul linkages when we consider
this problem of emotional pain and Lauren's (and our) distance from it. If pain is "all in your
head" as Lauren concedes of her own hyperempathy ("The sharing isn't real, after all. It isn't
some magic or ESP that allows me to share the pain or the pleasure of other people. It's
delusional. Even I admit that" [Butler, *Parable,* 9]), then we should consider how emotional pain
is different, why Lauren would not be able to take on emotional pain as well as physical pain. As
with major depressive disorder, for instance, emotional or psychological suffering is inextricably
physical as well. But ultimately, the question is not whether I feel or know the pain, but how I
respond to the expression of it.
[180] Butler, *Parable*, 101.

Whereas the life of a hyperempath would be painful enough in the best of circumstances, the deteriorated conditions of the narrative's dystopic America makes existence even more vulnerable for those afflicted with Lauren's condition. She is inundated with the suffering of others every day—despite every effort of communities like hers to erect walls to keep out not only violence and robbery, but the very sight of others' pain. This is not to moralize against the impulse to protect ourselves and those closest to us, but rather to show that these walling measures contribute to the continuation of the harm from which we flee; indeed, *Parable* shows how walls make Lauren's community a target for the desperate. Eventually, her neighborhood is attacked and burned to the ground, and this catastrophe is what drives her and the other survivors to flee north to Washington state.[181] Turning a blind eye to the suffering of others puts us at risk from those we have refused to see, as well as, (and perhaps even worse) abandons our own ethical subjectivity—the other and I are both at stake in my response to their pain; the former is representative of a utilitarian justification of taking responsibility for alleviating the other's pain, the former is a moral perfectionist engagement, an ethical outlook distanced from cost-benefit calculus.

The remainder of this section will focus on hyperempathy as a tool for thinking through the problem of the pain of others. I will show how hyperempathy, in spite of "getting closer to knowing the pain of others," is nonetheless insufficient as a mode of motivating us to address the pain of others. Instead, acknowledgment (while always threatened by the alternative of avoidance) is the embodiment of my ethical comportment toward others. My separation from the other (and their pain) is necessary for acknowledgment to occur.

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[181] See chapter 14 of *Parable of the Sower* for Lauren's journal entry describing the night the neighborhood was attacked for the last time and destroyed.

The problem of one's relationship to the pain of others is a persistent theme throughout *Parable of the Sower*. Specifically, Lauren Olamina's hyperempathy emerges within the first dozen pages of the novel and resurfaces throughout the plot; it is the one constant in her life—whatever else happens, the burden of experiencing others' pain (and their rare pleasure) is always with her. The first two appearances of Lauren's hyperempathy are instructive for a discussion of the best-case scenario of knowing (as experiencing) the other's pain, and whether such knowledge would be of value in a world where we constantly deny (or in Cavell's terms: avoid) the pain of others. The first depiction of Lauren's hyperempathy is when she and her father's congregation travel to a neighboring walled community to participate in a baptism ceremony. The second depiction is a flashback to Lauren's early childhood when she fought with her brother and other children in her neighborhood.

The first instance occurs as Lauren and other members of her neighborhood leave the protection of the high walls around their cul-de-sac to visit another nearby community to pool their resources and participate in a joint baptism ritual.[182] Because water is so expensive, the only way either community can afford the luxury of holy water is through sharing the cost and reusing the water. Due to the rising costs of all resources, including gasoline, ordinary people must depend upon walking or biking, so the trip between the walled neighborhoods requires that travelers be exposed to the threat of violence, as well as to seeing the pain of those too hopeless, injured, starving, or intoxicated to inflict harm on others. So even when Lauren escapes the pain directed at her, she is still bombarded by the pain she sees others experiencing.

> Crazy to live without a wall to protect you. Even in Robledo, most of the street poor—squatters, winos, junkies, homeless people in general—are dangerous. They're desperate or crazy or both. That's enough to make anyone dangerous. Worse for me, they often have things wrong with them. They cut off each other's ears, arms, legs…. They carry

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[182] See chapter 2 of *Parable of the Sower*.

untreated diseases and festering wounds. They have no money to spend on water to wash with so even the unwounded have sores. […] As I rode, I tried not to look around at them, but I couldn't help seeing—collecting—some of their general misery.[183]

Butler's depiction of the lengths to which hyperempaths must go to survive in a world saturated with other's pain is edifying. Whereas the other-mind skeptic from Cavell's analysis points to the inability to feel the other's pain as a sign of the irresolveability of the problem of other minds, Lauren Olamina's best-case example of experiencing bodily pain when the other does still leads to the avoidance of the other's pain. She must avoid looking at the misery of the people forced to live on the streets, lest she be overcome by pain, herself. The consequences of her connection to other's pain are uncomfortably similar to the consequences of the other-mind skeptic's comportment. She "knows" their pain, and so must avoid them; the skeptic argues that he cannot be certain of their pain and therefore, also avoids them—the former avoids out of self-preservation, the latter out of a deficit of certitude. We are still at an impasse.

It could be argued, though, that those who can experience others' pain would be less likely to inflict physical pain on others, even if they do not respond to others' pain by attempting to alleviate it. Hyperempaths might at least refrain from contributing to the pain of others. The second depiction of Lauren's hyperempathy thwarts even this lesser prospect. When Lauren was eleven, her little brother Keith tricked her into bleeding by putting red ink on his skin. His feigned bodily harm translated into actual bodily harm for Lauren.[184] But this capacity to be tricked is just a stimulus to yet another problem: Lauren responds by inflicting as much pain as she can, in spite of, nay because of, the fact that she will suffer.

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[183] Butler, *Parable*, 9.
[184] Butler, *Parable*, 10. This, I wager, is closer to Cavell's portrayal of the risk that the skeptic feels (or could feel) which leads to the demand for certainty—the insistence upon certainty is considered by the skeptic to protect him from being duped by the other. The other is first and foremost a risk for the skeptic: a hindrance to certitude on one hand, and trust, on the other.

Keith only tricked me into bleeding that once, and I beat the hell out of him for it. I didn't fight much when I was little because it hurt me so. I felt every blow that I struck, just as though I'd hit myself. So when I did decide that I had to fight, I set out to hurt the other kid more than kids usually hurt one another. I broke Michael Talcott's arm and Rubin Quintanilla's nose. I knocked out four of Silvia Dunn's teeth. They all earned what I did to them two or three times over. I got punished every time, and I resented it. It was double punishment, after all, and my father and stepmother knew it. But knowing didn't stop them.[185]

Feeling such intense pain simply shifted the calculus for Lauren. Minor scuffles were not worth the pain—if she did get into a fight, though, she was going to inflict enough pain to make violence no longer worth it for the other children. What could be expected to deter conflict actually makes the conflicts that *do* occur even more violent.[186] [187]

But the matter is still not resolved. So far, the examples from Butler's *Parable of the Sower* depict a world where only some people are burdened with the pain of others. Butler later in the novel envisions a scenario where we are all situated in a similar relation to the other's pain, where we are all hyperempaths. While reflecting on the torture and murder of her brother, Lauren writes:

I think he was killed by monsters much worse than himself. It's beyond me how one human being could do that to another. If hyperempathy syndrome were a more common complaint, people couldn't do such things. They could kill if they had to, and bear the pain of it or be destroyed by it. But if everyone could feel everyone else's pain, who would torture? Who would cause anyone unnecessary pain? I've never thought of my problem as something that might do some good before, but the way things are, I think it would help. I wish I could give it to people. Failing that, I wish I could find other people

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[185] Butler, *Parable*, 10.

[186] Films such as *The Golden Compass* (2007) have experimented with this notion of shared pain and have arrived at similar conclusions. The film, directed by Chris Weitz, is based upon the young-adult fantasy novel *Northern Lights* by Philip Pullman, portrays a world in which a part of each person's soul resides in animal companions, known as dæmon. Whenever either party feels pain, the other likewise experiences it. This does not stop violence even between those who are bound together by a common soul.

[187] The implications of this dynamic cannot be overstated: even as nuclear arms have not officially been deployed since Hiroshima and Nagasaki, contemporary nuclear proliferation and issuance of threats regarding their potential use has intensified in the last year alone. Mutually assured destruction as deterrent of nuclear conflict appears less and less reliable.

who have it, and live among them. A biological conscience is better than no conscience at all.[188]

This is a challenging suggestion, and on its face, it even seems promising. One problem, though, lies in the notion of necessary and unnecessary pain. Even when we consider the case of Keith's being tortured to death on the streets of Los Angeles, the state of desperate survivalism to which people have been driven by economic inequality, climate change, resource scarcity, and nationalism emphasizes the indistinguishability between necessary and unnecessary violence. Lauren assumes that a rival drug dealer or gang leader was behind Keith's death, and so the survivalist logic seems to not only permit, but require such acts of violence to provide examples for those who would consider challenging or interfering with the business or territory of controlling gangs. Lauren's words are telling here: those inflicting pain would have to "bear the pain of it or be destroyed by it." And what better way to show that you are not to be trifled with than to harm others even as it hurts you? As long as you survive the pain you inflict on others, you have shown that you can and will bear torture in order to remain dominant. But there will always be someone willing and able to inflict and receive more pain.

Such survivalism has only one concern: continuation of bodily existence—life in the barest biological sense, not the *good* life. That Keith died at the hands of "monsters much worse than himself" is a result of the form of life that had already claimed him before he had even stepped outside of Robledo. According to Lauren, he was unaffected, unmoved by the pain of others (though even he took care of his mother, Cory, by sneaking back into Robledo to bring her extra cash from his dubious activities on the streets).[189] His capacity for acknowledgement was

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[188] Butler, *Parable*, 102.
[189] Butler, *Parable*, 101.

already diminished before the cruelty of life on the street made survivalism and avoidance/infliction of the other's pain his *modus operandi.*

Race in Butler's Parable of the Sower

In the previous section, I laid out the ways that Lauren Olamina's hyperempathy approximates the ability to know that the other-mind skeptic demands. Even this approximation of "knowing" the pain of the other is insufficient for grounding our ethical comportment toward the other. Firstly, Lauren and the other hyperempaths can still be tricked into feeling pain even when the other does not—this is part of the other-mind skeptic's constant leeriness of the other. The risk of being duped into thinking pain exists when it really does not is crippling for the other-mind skeptic, thus the never-ending demand for more proof. Secondly, even if the other's pain is actually present and the hyperempath feels that pain, there is nothing that guarantees that that "knowing" of the other's pain will lead to the prevention or relief of that pain now or in the future. As the example of the brutal fights of Lauren's childhood fights shows, (especially when only some people feel other's pain) when fights do occur, the "knower" of other's pain will inflict as much pain as possible in order to make physical conflicts not worth the pain-cost for the aggressor. Thirdly, whereas Lauren thinks that hyperempathy would be valuable if everyone experienced each other's pain, the ever-deteriorating economic, ecological, political, and social conditions of twenty-first century America have shown violence to be necessary for self-defense and the defense of loved ones. Even Lauren the hyperempath kills. Not only must she kill to survive, but her hyperempathy necessitates that she become a more precise, efficient killer—to injure others is to incapacitate herself, but by killing quickly and effectively, she is spared the brunt of the reflected pain. She feels a momentarily disorienting blow, but the effect quickly ebbs

as life leaves the person or animal she has targeted. Quickly ending the other spares the hyperempath pain that would presumably keep him from attacking the other in the first place.

These reflections on the pain-language game of *Parable of the Sower* are valuable contributions to Cavell's working through of the problem of the skeptic's demand for proof. For Cavell, "acknowledgement 'goes beyond' knowledge, not in the order, or as a feat, of cognition, but in the call upon me to express the knowledge at its core, to recognize what I know, to do something in the light of it, apart from which this knowledge remains without expression, hence perhaps without possession."[190] Knowledge will never be enough to energize an active engagement with the other or their pain. "The other can present me with no mark or feature on the basis of which I can *settle* my attitude. I have to acknowledge humanity in the other, and the basis of it seems to lie in me."[191]

Parable is also valuable for my present analysis of the involvement of other-mind skepticism with the persistence of the problem of race in several ways. First, race is depicted as a continuous presence without being foregrounded by Butler's prose. The biracial Olamina family, the centrality of African-American Baptist ministry led by Lauren's father, the racialized economic and social conditions facing the fictional Robledo community (20 miles outside of Los Angeles) as they struggle to survive in the face of desperate poverty and the constant threat of violence associated with the drug trade and drug abuse. Butler subtly sprinkles-in details of racial classification throughout the story without making race the central focus of the narrative. The novel's conditions of economic exploitation, industrial pollution, and the scarcity of basic

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[190] Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, 428.
[191] Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, 433.

necessities are reminiscent of the living situation of many working class and poor communities in which people of color are overrepresented in contemporary America.[192]

Race becomes foregrounded in the novel after Robledo is attacked and burned down, leaving Lauren and her friends with no choice but to abandon their neighborhood and head north. Before they even get on the road with the rest of the north-bound refugees, Lauren realizes that she and her two friends Zahra and Harry will be targeted if anyone realizes that Zahra (a young Black woman) and Harry Butler (a young White man) are an interracial couple. Since she is tall enough to pass as a man, Laura (who is also Black) suggests that she dress in men's clothes so that she and Zahra will be taken for a couple, and thereby avoid the heightened hostility of others on the road north.

In the midst of catastrophic drought, climate change, poverty, rampant arson, and the breakdown of government, people will still go out of their way to target interracial couples and friendships. For others to see you violating the norm of racial separation is to be exposed to even more danger than that which accompanies ordinary desperation. Butler seems to suggest that even in the worst of times, we will still cling to practices of race as difference and valuation.

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[192] In recent years, there has been several high profile disasters in which poor communities and communities of color have been subject harmful levels of air pollution and contaminated water sources. Consider the Flynt, Michigan lead water contamination disaster (see Jason Stanley, "The Emergency Manager: Strategic Racism, Technocracy, and the Poisoning of Flynt's Children," *The Good Society* 25. No. 1. 1-45.), the mid-1990s litigation against Monsanto chemical company for leaking polychlorinated biphenyls into groundwater in Anniston, Alabama (see Ellen Griffith Spears, *Baptized in PCBs: Race, Pollution, and Justice in an All-American Town* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016)), as well as civil cases recently brought against International Paper company for allegedly leaking carcinogenic chemicals into the air and local environment in the Africatown community in Mobile, Alabama (https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/jan/26/africatown-site-of-last-us-slave-ship-arrival-sues-over-factorys-pollution?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other).

But more important than the persistence of practices of race is the way that Lauren holds her friends together in the face of those practices and the threat of violence. She defends them and (cautiously) welcomes others (regardless of race) to join their group as they make their way north away from the wildfires and intense violence that is ever-spreading particularly in southern California. She acknowledges their pain by interceding, bringing them into her group. By bringing them into the fold, she adds more and more potential to experience pain herself. Every additional person is another potential victim of violence and, therefore another person with whom she will have to share pain.

Cavell's other-mind skeptic interlocutor is hounded by the threat of being duped about the pain of the other. Lauren Olamina exemplifies an intensified version of this threat as her own bodily experience is at stake in believing an other's expression of pain, and yet, she still takes on a responsibility for the other when she could very well practice avoidance and sidestep having feigned pain inflicted upon her as real bodily suffering. She acknowledges when she could avoid, and she does so beyond the call for certainty. Lauren's mode of "living her skepticism toward the other,"[193] is akin to Cavell's deployment of Wittgenstein's interlocutor's response to the skeptic.

> Sometimes Wittgenstein casts the skeptic in his ancient role from the Mysteries, as when he gives an interlocutor to ask: "But, if you are *certain*, isn't it that you are shutting your eyes in the face of doubt?" (*Investigations*, p. 224). The skeptic insinuates that there are possibilities to which the claim of certainty shuts its eyes; or: whose eyes the claim of certainty shuts. It is the voice, or an imitation of the voice, of intellectual conscience. Wittgenstein replies: "They are shut." It is the voice of the human conscience. […] It is not generally conclusive, but it is more of an answer than it may appear to be…. His eyes are shut; he has not shut them. […] When I said that the voice of human conscience was not generally conclusive, I was leaving it open whether it was individually conclusive. It may be the expression of a resolution, at least of confession. "They (my eyes) are shut", as a resolution, or confession, says that one can, for one's part, live in the face of doubt.[194]

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[193] Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, 440.
[194] Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, 431.

Lauren acknowledges pain fully conscious that the other may be feigning it. She practices acknowledgement not just as a product of eyes being closed to doubt, but closed to (an approximation of) certainty as well. Both feigned pain and "actual" pain become pain for Lauren; and so, certainty is beside the point.

Practices of race are the grounds of a large portion of other-mind skepticism in everyday life. Because practices of race facilitate and encourage doubt of the capacity of the other to feel (my kind of) pain[195] and the sincerity of expressions of pain, and they also constitute modes the differentiation and hierarchizing of some others' pain as more valuable than others. As such, the unavoidability of practices of race is, I think, linked to the unavoidability and irresolveability of the threat of skepticism. Lauren Olamina's self-originated ethics of Earthseed is her mode of articulating and passing on her mode of living in the face of doubt. It is her way of building a mode of life for herself that gives primacy to care of the other as an expression of her own humanity.[196] As such, Earthseed is an example of the pain-acknowledging life that Cavell highlights. Cavell, continuing with the idea of eyes being shut, says: "It is something different to live *without* doubt, without so to speak the *threat* of skepticism. To live in the face of doubt, eyes happily shut, would be to fall in love with the world. For if there is a correct blindness, only love has it. And if you find that you have fallen in love with the world, then you would be ill-advised to offer an argument of its worth by praising its Design."[197]

Conclusion

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[195] See the slave owner on "kinds of people" and "kinds of pain."
[196] Each chapter of *Parable of the Sower* begins with a passage from Olamina's Earthseed religious text as expressive of her ethics—even as she lives her ethics without the verbalization being necessary.
[197] Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, 431.

Whereas Cavell's notion of soul-blindness depicts the slave owner (i.e., the racist) as experiencing a lack, an incapacity to see people *as people*, I think that by instead, modulating his notion of other-mind skepticism as epiphenomenal to ubiquitous practices of race to which we are all subject (that is, practices of race are presences instead of "lacks"), that we get closer to the problem of race as one that implicates us all, not solely the exceptional case of the overt racist. Since persistent and evolving practices of race differentiate, valuate, and hierarchize subjects (and so establish discourses, institutions, and relationships based upon varying statuses and values), they envelop and penetrate our social, political, and economic relationships; consequently, I think that Cavell's notion of other-mind skepticism and the acknowledgment he postulates in the face of it are more valuable contributions to the addressing the problem of race than even the direct attempt to theorize the problem vis-à-vis the slave owner.

By approaching the concept of race through skepticism, we get a different sense of our own implication in the problem (skepticism is not something that one can answer away, and so be done with), and also of the ways that the case of the racist (Cavell's slave owner) is not special at all, but rather underwritten by the very practices that structure all of our relationships and valuations. Such an approach, I argue, opens up room for more fruitful self-work by allowing us to think through the ways that other-mind skepticism has fostered avoidance of the other's pain by pre-determining first, whose pain we are exposed to at all (this is the power of racial segregation—it keeps us from even seeing the other, let alone their expression of pain) and second, by structuring the modes of valuing others and their pains in different ways along lines of racial difference (that even if I do acknowledge the capacity to feel pain, I may rationalize the other's pain as "just desserts" or a product of "their culture" or the result of market forces).

Practices of race undergird everyday other-mind skepticism as a selective doubt of the other's capacity to feel pain and genuineness of pain. This selective skepticism amounts to a threat to the very survival of the other and the humanity of the (selective) other-mind skeptic; that is to say all of our humanity. By avoiding the pain of the other, I express my own inhumanity. Impediments to my care for the other are simultaneously denials of my own humanity.

What Butler's *Parable of the Sower* demonstrates through the hyperempath's best case for knowing the pain of others is that (selective) other-mind skepticism is not resolveable through knowledge. The other-mind skeptic's demand for proof can never be met, at least not in terms of convincing them to intervene to remedy, prevent, or compensate for the pain of others. The demand for proof is always already an ethical positioning—it places the onus of the pain on those feeling it, rather than on those who observe or contribute to it. The authority lies with the person who is being appealed to, who demands that they be convinced of pain before they will respond at all.. As Cavell rightly notes, other-mind skepticism represents a wrong-headed engagement with the ethical by grounding it in the realm of knowledge, proof, and certainty, rather than acknowledgment in the face of separation from and doubt of the other.

In *Parable of the Sower*, Lauren Olamina illustrates her acknowledgment of others' pain as making a claim upon her by living (and composing in her journals) her new Earthseed religion. Instead of avoiding the pain of others (in the literal or Cavellian senses), Lauren takes on the responsibility for and to the other in ways that are atypical in our common place relationships with each other, let alone the near-apocalyptic world in which the *Parable of the Sower* is set.

CHAPTER 3: FOUCAULT'S MORAL PERFECTIONISM AND THE CALL FOR A
WORLDLY ETHICS

The primary focus of this chapter will be to articulate the value of Michel Foucault's contribution to the study of the relationship between the political and the ethical. In order to pursue this line of thought, I pose readings of Foucault's work that I hope will underscore the contributions for democratic and ethical thought. In *Worldly Ethics,* Myers labels Michel Foucault's later works on the care of the self to be a "therapeutic" approach to ethics. *Worldly Ethics* suggests that neither Foucault, nor Levinas (who will be the focus of Chapter 4), provide sufficient grounds for a democratic ethics. While I concede their insufficiency (since, as I will argue, democratic politics cannot be about certainty or deterministic relationships), I also argue that both thinkers' approaches open up potential for reimagining the connections between democratic action and the ethical.

Foucault's analyses reveal profound shifts in the understanding of subjectivity that are missed in the characterization of Foucault's work as positing a therapeutic ethics. As such, I will argue that not only do Levinas and Foucault astutely articulate different ways that the ethical impinges upon the political (and vice versa), but that they also provide us with new inroads on the problem of subjectivity. Myers' *Worldly Ethics* is primarily concerned with broad notions of collective action and democratic association, but I will show how Foucault's concern with subject formation within the democratic context reframes our notion of what it is that a subject is capable of doing/becoming within the social, political, and discourse-permeated world in which they find themselves. Though they approach the issue of subjectivity from different disciplines,

discourses, and methods, both Levinas and Foucault (especially when we look across their respective extensive corpuses) attempt to articulate different framings of how a subject comes to be, what practices co-constitute the subject, and how subjects work within and change practices, and what force(s) call/drive subjects' agency which remain unaccounted for by the systems and discourses of control, surveillance, survival, and discipline.

In order to develop the democratic potential of Foucault's works on ethics, I will draw upon portions of David Owen's 2006 article on parrhesia in order to show how the concern with truth-telling articulates an ethical relationship that cannot be reduced to the "therapeutic" label. (In so far as Foucault *can* be considered therapeutic, it is in the Wittgensteinian sense of the term).[198] Foucault's analyses of *parrhesia* and the care of the self are linked, and should not be equated with self-absorption or narcissism (though these are persistent threats to development of ethical subjectivity), rather amount to a call to work, action, and betterment of oneself *with regard to the other*. The care for the self is not self-absorption at the expense of the other, but rather a mode of bettering one's relationship to the other by changing the self.

The "dyadic model" critiqued in *Wordly Ethics* assumes that there are distinct selves and others, and that they exist in atomistic form. In deploying models like this, it becomes tempting to characterize Levinas as being concerned with the "other" side of the equation, while Foucault is concerned with the "self" side. We must we wary of this compartmentalization. Rather than

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[198] See Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* §133 on philosophy as therapeutic method. "We don't want to refine or complete the system of rules for the use of our words in unheard-of ways. For the clarity that we are aiming at is indeed *complete* clarity. But this simply means that the philosophical problems should *completely* disappear. The real discovery is the one that enables me to break off of philosophizing when I want to. – The one that gives philosophy peace, so that it is no longer tormented by questions which bring *itself* into question. – Instead, a method is now demonstrated by examples, and the series of examples can be broken off.— Problems are solved (difficulties eliminated), not a *single* problem. There is not a single philosophical method, though there are indeed methods, different therapies, as it were."

focusing on distinct sides of a self/other dichotomy, I submit that Foucault and Levinas pose the

in-between as the ground of work—which is also what I take *Worldly Ethics* to be working

toward by focusing on associative practices and concern for the world as a thing-in-common.[199]

For both Foucault and Levinas, there is no self (or at least not the best self) without the other (or

others). *Worldly Ethics* seeks to shift our perspective on the relationship between ethics and

politics away from a focus on inter-subjectivity and toward a concern for the world as a

contested thing around which subjects gather, debate, associate, and quarrel. I argue that if we

read Foucault and Levinas in the ways that I present, then we can see that their approaches do

contribute to the democratic practices that *Worldly Ethics* pursues, rather than undermine them.

This is not to suggest that their respective approaches account for everything, nor that they avoid

self-contradiction or aporia. In the next two chapters I will show how Foucault's and Levinas's

analyses and formulations of the ethical are more compatible with the guiding concern with a

"common thing/conditions" as presented in *Worldly Ethics* than may be apparent at first glance.

In addition to contributing to a democratic ethics broadly speaking, Foucault's study of

parrhesia (or *parrēsia*) speaks to the problem of racial subjectivity insofar as the parrhesiast (akin

to Emerson's truth-telling, agonistic friend) points the listener to their next self, by highlighting

their ethical failures that the listener would otherwise be unable to see. The political superiority

of the listener is challenged by the ethical superiority of the parrhesiast. My hope is that the

Foucauldian moral perfectionist parrhesiast can aid in the development of a race-critical

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[199] Ella Myers, *Worldly Ethics: Democratic Politics and Care for the World* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 2. "A world-centered democratic ethos aims to incite and sustain collective care for conditions, care that is expressed in associative efforts to affect particular "worldly things." Moreover, this ethos is tied to an explicitly normative conception of world as both a shared human home and mediating political space. Thus care for the world, which lies at the heart of democratic ethos, is expressed not only by associative action that tends to conditions but also by action that pursues particular substantive ends."

comportment that relocates the onus of motivating self-work and criticism from off the shoulders of those deemed racialized others and onto those who benefit most from hierarchical practices of race, i.e. White subjects, usually.

The Call to Be Democratic

In order to gauge Foucault's and Levinas's contributions toward a new theorization of democratic practice and association, it is useful to clarify what we demand of them in the first instance. I submit that a democratic theory worth its name should continually challenge the demarcation of hierarchies (and so too, the relative differentiating valuations) of moral/legal/political subjectivity, and to facilitate, (as opposed to pre-determine or necessitate) the association and organization of equal, democratic subjects. The question before us then, is whether Foucault and Levinas open up these possibilities for us.

Worldly Ethics focuses on addressing two specific crises facing democratic societies today: the pervasive disengagement of citizens (and so low-levels of participation in democratic processes) and the management of pluralism (i.e. how we can navigate the "competing and irreconcilable goods, faiths, and ways of life that characterize human existence").[200] These are common concerns within analyses of democratic societies.[201]

Beyond participation and navigation of pluralism, I suggest that even deeper concerns should guide our search for a democratic ethos. These two concerns are critical, but they are epiphenomenal to practices, discourses, and valuations that place us within or exclude us from the *demos* of democracy in the first place. I will show how Foucault, (and Levinas, in the next

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[200] Myers, *Worldly Ethics*, 3.
[201] See Bill Connolly *Ethos of Pluralization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995) and *Capitalism and Christianity, American Style* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008) for discussions of the navigation of pluralistic societies. In the both texts, Connolly works through the grounding democratic principle of "agonistic respect."

chapter) allow us to approach this set of concerns that I think should be given primacy over
questions of participation and pluralism.

I submit that the demands that *Worldly Ethics* places upon the approaches of Foucault
and Levinas would be precisely to make them anti-democratic. The chapters dedicated to
contesting the value of Foucault and Levinas argue that both approaches are insufficient for
democratic ethos *and* are in fact, anti-democratic. I will show how the claim of insufficiency
should not discredit the potential contribution to the democratic—moreover, I submit that
insufficiency is a defining characteristic of democracy. Potentiality, open-endedness and
unpredictability are inexorably tied to democracy, per se. To demand sufficiency and certainty
that particular outcomes take place is the goal of determinism, or at the very least, top-down
governmentality. To resolve all of the implications of Foucault's (or Levinas's) engagements
with the ethical or to universalize their theories would be to undermine what I take democratic
agency to be in the first place. Instead, I submit that the role of a democratic ethics is to open up
possibilities, rather than the *necessary* production of "democratic public practices." We should
not demand that a democratic ethics determine for us what is both possible *and* obligatory. This
is precisely what Levinas argues against—he wants to open up space—to define is to close off,
to concretize, to make static. I share *Worldly Ethics*'s goal of refining how we understand the
relationship between ethics (and the ethical turn) and politics, and I will do so by posing
alternative reads of Foucault and Levinas that I think place them squarely within the tradition of
developing and expanding a democratic ethos. Whereas *Worldly Ethics* presents an argument for
shifting our perspective from concerning subjects and the inter-subjective toward a concern for
the world as a shared and contested in-between thing around which citizens gather, I submit that
a democratic ethos must place questions of the inter-subjective in-between at the center. A

sustained analysis of care for the world is crucial, but it ultimately relies upon a grounding of responsibility for the self and the other.

The Challenge of Foucault's Studies of Ethics: The Contradiction Between Democracy and Determinism

In the following section, I will pose a counter-reading of Foucault's studies of ethics that diverge from the reading presented *Worldly Ethics.* I will do so by engaging the framing of the texts as well as *Worldly Ethics*'s characterization of Foucault as proposing a "therapeutic" ethics. I will also demonstrate problem of the skeptical comportment articulated in the demands and form of argumentation in the text's discussion of Foucault's work. Next, we must refine the subjectivity that Foucault develops across the trajectory of his work, which culminates with his lectures on parrēsia and truth-telling presented in the last few months of his life. Finally, we must contest the modelling implied by the criticism of Foucault and the proposal of "worldly ethics" distinct therefrom.

First, it is important to note the texts discussed in *Worldly Ethics* that yield the characterization of Foucault (and William Connolly) as positing "therapeutic ethics." Whereas Foucault's work traverses diverse historical periods, regions, and institutions, it is primarily in his later works that he begins to analyze the histories and conceptualizations of ethics and modes of self-work and self-creation.[202] Foucault's interests and focuses moved through various modes of analyzing the means by which bodies of knowledge, forms of discourse, modes of control/discipline/governmentality, and ideas of morality and ethics shape subjects. Later on in his career, Foucault moves to highlight the ways that discourses, knowledges, and means of

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[202] See especially *History of Sexuality, Vols. I, II, III;* and the College de France lecture series *Subjectivity and Truth*, *The Government of Self and Others,* and *The Courage of Truth.*

control are never complete; that domination is never total, and that there is always resistance.[203]

Worldly Ethics primarily engages Foucault's study of Greek and Roman "care of the self" in *The Use of Pleasure*.[204] It is crucial to read Foucault's late work on the self's modes of applying forms of ethics to itself as connected to his early studies on how the subject is disciplined, designated an object of study, and normalized rather than as bracketed off from the modes of subjectivization that make the subject possible in the first place. Indeed, in his work immediately preceding his untimely death, Foucault shifts his focus onto subjects rather than forces, but the one constant across his body of work is a refinement of ways of investigating the relationship between domination and resistance, processes and effects, determination and the incalculable.[205] He does not forget the work already done; he does, however, refine his approach and deploy a new perspective in each new work.

In order to avoid overlooking the potential of Foucault's work regarding the ethical, we must remain mindful of the co-constitutive relationship between domination and resistance across Foucault's work otherwise, we potentially discount Foucault's contributions to the study of subjectivity. For instance, even as Myers points out Foucault's argument that the self is not monadic or atomistic and that work on the self "may involve other selves"[206] (I would argue that

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[203] See Foucault, *History of Sexuality, Vol. I* (New York: Vintage, 1990), in particular.

[204] Myers also depends heavily upon "On the Genealogy of Ethics," and "The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom" both found in Paul Rabinow's edited collection *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth* (New York: New Press, 1998).

[205] I have often thought of Foucault as engaging with the problem of "how a thing becomes a thing." Consider *Birth of the Clinic* as an investigation of how "healthy/unhealthy" become ways of measuring and knowing the body, mind, and person. Consider *Discipline and Punish* as an analysis of what the definition, ends, means, and functions of "surveillance, confinement, and force" have on creating a normalized "citizen." *History of Sexuality* is an attempt to generate a genealogy of how "sex" and "sexuality" became behaviors or characteristics of subjects distinct from other behaviors and characteristics, as such, regimes of knowledge, and therefore control.

[206] Myers, *Worldly Ethics*, 34-35

it necessarily involves other subjects), the argument against the value of Foucault's conceptualization of the ethical appears to be that Foucault does not argue definitively or deterministically enough that the care of the self *necessarily will* lead to democratic practices.[207] It is worth pointing out that the chapter's mode of argumentation repeats the language of the skeptic throughout the chapter. A new democratic ethics seems to demand more proof, more facts, more definition, without ever accepting a call to respond, to posit an alternative. (This is the problem that Cavell tries to address in the *Claim of Reason*; it is not a condition one can avoid through proof, but rather must engage with affirmatively through one's comportment, through acknowledgement.)

We must be cautious of the temptation to skepticism: to call for a refinement of the implications of an approach is productive and deepens the engagement with the ethical, for indeed, it is quite reasonable to question whether Foucault proves that the care of the self necessarily leads to democratic association—in fact, he does not. But rather than demand certainty that an approach will yield the democratic association we seek, we should examine the value of proving such a causal relationship in the first place. To demand that care for the self necessarily lead to "associative action" is to narrow possibility and to ensure/guarantee/dictate particular results—these demands are in themselves anti-democratic. It is to accept Foucault and Connolly's invitation to determine for ourselves how work on the self can (and should) produce associate action; but to argue that it must, beyond a doubt, do so is to misconstrue what a democratic practice is. We must acknowledge and work within the undetermined and open possibility of democratic possibility, not lay out a work in which one theory will account for and dictate all future human action. Foucault puts forth self-care and cultivation as a *necessary but*

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[207] Myers, *Worldly Ethics*, 36 and 40.

not sufficient ground for intersubjective cooperation. It is up to us as subjects to take the care of the self to heart as a mode of moral perfectionism driven by the self, not as a dictate or edict from an authority (be it philosophical or political). Per the stated value of the ethical turn in *Worldly Ethics*, the ethical turn represents a call to create for ourselves and in ourselves the attitude and comportment for achieving a self that is up to the task of democratic practice.[208] Admittedly, this care of the self will look different across times, circumstances, and discourses, but this is precisely why the care of the self cannot be separated from the rest of Foucault's work.

Here, I would like to submit two of Foucault's last lecture series for consideration and expansion of the issue of the care of the self, particularly *The Government of Self and Others*, and *The Courage of Truth: Government of Self and Others II*. Whereas most of the textual analysis of Foucault in *Worldly Ethics* comes from the second and third volumes of *The History of Sexuality*, along with a few brief essays and interviews from *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, I think it is important to note that Foucault's attention to sexual ethics in Greek and Roman society should not be read as an attempt to project Greek or Roman ethical forms and modes into the present, an assumption that Myers seems to read into Foucault's work. Instead, his investigations of Greek and Roman sexual ethics should be seen as examples of the ways that the care of the self *has* been taken up historically, rather than as paradigms for care in any contemporary sense. I read Foucault's expansive corpus within the academic discourse of history as less about defining an ethical code[209] for the present than about articulating the ways that possibility and impossibility are contoured by the power relations within particular regimes of control/knowledge/governmentality, and thus, his work expands (not determines, defines, or

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[208] Myers, *Worldly Ethics,* 9-11.
[209] Myers, *Worldly Ethics,* 5 and 10

causes as Myers seems to require) the ways that we can potentially navigate our contemporary circumstances given these new ways of reading history. In considering Foucault's last two lecture series, I argue that we can eschew the notion of care of the self that Myers reads into Foucault, and remedy the characterization of this care as "therapeutic."

The Courage of Truth is the very last lecture series given by Foucault; in fact, he delivers the last lecture just months before his unexpected death. In it, Foucault studies the forms and functions of truth-telling and their respective values within the political structures of the time. I argue that truth-telling in general, and *parrēsia* in particular, perform powerful intersubjective work as well as embody the work of self-care.[210] In the following section, I will bring Foucault's late lectures into our discussion and will tease out the political value and import of such an ethical practice. In so doing, we can begin to contest the problematic label of "therapeutic" affixed to Foucault's "ethics" (if in fact we can say he posits an ethics at all). It is perhaps more useful to think of Foucault's study of ethics in terms of "the ethical" rather than as a set of rules, norms, and guidelines that frame particular behaviors—by thinking this way, we can segue to Levinas's work in the same realm. For instance, in "On the Genealogy of Ethics," (an essay from which *Worldly Ethics* also draws) Foucault says of his genealogy of Greek and Roman ethics:

> What is the *mode d'assujettissement* [the mode of subjectivation]? It is that we have to build our existence as a beautiful existence; it is an aesthetic mode. You see, what I tried to show is that nobody is obliged in classical ethics to behave in such a way as to be truthful to their wives, to not touch boys, and so on. But if they want to have a beautiful existence, if they want to have a good reputation, if they want to be able to rule others, they have to do this. So they accept those obligations in a conscious way for the beauty or glory of existence. [211]

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[210] See David Owen, "Perfectionism, Parrhesia, and the Care of the Self: Foucault and Cavell on Ethics and Politics" in *The Claim to Community: Essays on Stanley Cavell and Political Philosophy*, ed. Andrew Norris (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 128-155.

[211] Michel Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of a Work in Progress," in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: New Press, 1997), 266.

So the *realm* of the ethical that Foucault is trying to investigate comes through his "genealogy of

the subject as a subject of ethical actions."[212] So any "ethics" that he may be positing for us can

only be found through his historical analyses, and not as a set of concrete dictates that he delivers

to us in the present; therefore, at the heart of the temptation to identify Foucauldian engagement

with the ethical as therapeutic is a misinterpretation of how Foucault comes to the problem of the

ethical (not ethics as a code) in the first place. There is no obligation that assures democratic

association. To necessitate is not the role of the ethical. As Levinas argues, the ethical cannot

coerce one into acting in just ways—of course we *can* murder, lie, steal, etc. That is not the

point—the point is to investigate what calls (or could call) us to be and act otherwise, rather than

what merely prohibits or forces such things, or dictates that certain things be so.[213]

It seems that Myers's desired solution to the relationship between ethics and politics is a

set of assurances (if not rules) that *will* (not just *could*) produce "collective democratic practice."

This underlying demand ultimately undermines the potential contribution that Foucault and

Levinas bring to the project set forth in *Worldly Ethics*, I think; consider the way the argument of

Worldly Ethics shifts from questioning whether Foucault's ethics *will* lead to democratic

practices, to suddenly stating that they "cannot."[214] Not only is it suggested that Foucault's work

on the self is not *necessarily* democratic, but because it cannot be said to always lead to

democracy, then it *cannot* do so. This demand for rules and assurances positions *Wordly Ethics*

in a state of self-contradiction, for such demands are at odds with the ethical turn tradition within

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[212] Foucault, "Genealogy of Ethics," 266.
[213] See Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985),
85-92, regarding the persistence of the threat of murder. The ethical does not allay such a threat,
but provides the possibility of living differently.
[214] Myers, *Worldly Ethics*, 45-52.

which the text situates itself.[215] It simultaneously notes that the ethical turn aims at energizing the

subject's mode of comportment to such that they can live well (again distinguishing ethics from

morality), but then also seeks to resolve uncertainty about the likelihood of subjects' joining

together around (or in conflict concerning) worldly-things.[216] This paradox does not in itself

undermine *Worldly Ethics*'s project, but because it also deploys modes of inquiry and the

demands of the skeptic (which can never be satiated),[217] then the ethical question gets lost in the

demand for certainty. Certainty cannot bridge the gap between the self and the demand placed

upon them by the other.

Labelling an Ethics "Therapeutic"

In Foucault's "On the Genealogy of Ethics," it is important to remember that the form

that the care of the self takes in Greek life was a matter of *tekhne tou biou*—a technique of life,

and that to understand what this means, we must focus on the form of "life" highlighted by

"*bios*."

> What I want to show is that the general Greek problem was not the *tekhne* of the self, it
> was the *tekhne* of life, the *tekhne tou biou*, how to live. It's quite clear from Socrates to
> Seneca to Pliny, for instance, that they didn't worry about the afterlife, what happened
> after death, or whether God exists or not. That was not really a great problem for them;
> the problem was: Which *tekhne* do I have to use in order to live well as I ought to live?
> … A Greek citizen of the fifth or fourth century would have felt that his *tekhne* for life
> was to take care of the city, of his companions. But for [the Roman] Seneca, for instance,
> the problem is to take care of himself. [218]

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[215] Myers, *Worldly Ethics*, 10-11.

[216] Myers, *Worldly Ethics*, 16. "I argue that the therapeutic and charitable models of ethics … are
unlikely to inspire and sustain collective democratic activity, in which participants cooperate and
contend with one another in an effort to affect worldly conditions. Care for oneself or care for the
Other, though perhaps valuable, does little to encourage associative relations among citizens.
Moreover, it is a mistake to assume that forms of democratic engagement somehow follow from
proper care for the self or for an Other."

[217] See Cavell's *The Claim of Reason* on his deep analysis of the skeptic and the ultimately
unresolvable challenge they pose.

[218] Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics," 260.

In so far as Foucault can be said to posit a particular historical articulation of the ethical, he sees it taking the form of a technique of *bios*, of *political* life.[219] That is to say, when the analysis of *Worldly Ethics* frames Foucault's ethics as "therapeutic," it discounts the political nature of the self, and focuses solely on the "self" within a self/other dyad. This leads to the direct contradiction of Foucault's explicit comments regarding the distinction between a technique of the self and a technique of *life*. That Foucault points out the distinction is absolutely crucial here. The Greeks did not work on the "self" but on a way of living *with others*.

Ella Myers briefly justifies the use of the term "therapeutic," and in so doing articulates *Worldly Ethics*'s mode of engaging Foucault's corpus which I seek to amend, so that Myers' goal of a democratic, this-worldly ethics can make the most of Foucault's contribution to the study of ethics. Myers says:

> I use this term [therapeutic] to signify that the ethics in question, articulated in different ways by Foucault and Connolly, focuses squarely on the self as the primary site of engagement. The individual self is both the subject and object of ethical action, even if that self is seen as being situated, constructed, and malleable rather than as essential. The Greek term *therapeuein*, Foucault tells us, had three related meanings: "to give medical care to oneself, to be one's own servant, and to devote oneself to oneself." All three meanings involve a reflexive relationship. The label "therapeutic," as applied to Foucault's and Connolly's account of ethics, draws on this etymology and describes an ethics that consists of focused attention on oneself. This characterization applies to both Foucault and Connolly, despite the fact that the self is understood as a creative production and despite their shared belief that this ethics can generate effects beyond the self… The self's relation to itself is treated as fundamental, as the basis of other modes of relation, including democratic relations among citizens.[220]

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[219] Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 1 reminds us of the crucial difference between the Greek notions of *zoē* and *bios*. "[*Zoē*], which expressed the simple fact of living common to all living beings (animals, men, or gods), and *bios,* which indicated the form or way of living proper to an individual or group. When Plato mentions three kinds of life in the *Philebus,* and when Aristotle distinguishes the contemplative life of the philosopher (*bios theōrētikos*) from the life of pleasure (*bios apolaustikos*) and the political life *(bios politikos*) in the *Nichomachean Ethics,* neither philosopher would ever have used the term *zoē* (which in Greek, significantly enough, lacks a plural)."
[220] Myers, *Worldly Ethics*, 45-46.

If one sets aside the use of the term *bios* discussed above, then reading Foucault as articulating a "therapeutic" ethics is understandable. But if we broaden our read of Foucault and consider his extensive studies of the disciplines, knowledges, and forces that form of the subject and place them in conversation with his later work on the ethical, we see that this "attention on oneself" is *never* simply about attention on an isolated subject by the same.

An understanding of the relationship between the self and the forces that make the self possible is crucial. One of the troubles of parsing out the possibility of effects outside the self ("despite their shared belief that this ethics can generate effects beyond the self") is that it fails to pose a counter argument about how this could fail to be the case—how one could work on the self without having an impact (beneficial or harmful) on others. To work on the self is always to affect others. I will not go so far to say that these effects are always necessarily "democratic." But the democratic potential should not be ignored. In fact, I would argue that this potential is the best we can hope for from the ethical. To remove all doubt that democratic association and practice will occur is the goal of rigid rules and norms, not of ethical comportment. That we do manage to come together and work toward a common goal in spite of all the opportunities to act out of atomistic self-interest or apathy is what is worth coveting, not the disciplining forces that remove all doubt that I could behave otherwise.

If we calculate and measure and weigh consequences, we are engaging in what Levinas calls the political—the realm of knowing and totalizing. This is not to suggest that we can ignore the political, and even as the ethical is irreducible to the mere political, I want to hold the ethical out as an unenforceable force that cannot be dictated by causality, assurance, and necessity as *Worldly Ethics'*s case for an ethics centered on "worldly things" seems to demand that it be.

What is Foucauldian Ethics, Anyway?

Let us accept for the time being that the analyses of Greek and Roman ethics in

Foucault's works are examples of therapeutic ethics; Foucault still does not argue that either one

should be adopted for contemporary circumstances. When asked whether the Greeks offer a

plausible ethical model for the present day, Foucault is uncharacteristically frank:

> No! I am not looking for an alternative; you can't find the solution of a problem in the
> solution of another problem raised at another moment by another people. You see, what I
> want to do is not the history of solutions—and that's the reason why I don't accept the
> word *alternative*. I would like to do the genealogy of problems, of *problematiques*. My
> point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly
> the same as bad. If everything is dangerous, then we always have something to do. So my
> position leads not to apathy but to a hyper- and pessimistic activism.[221]

In this way, we can read the ethical as an unending engagement with the problem of living well,

not as a set of obligations or prohibitions that solve this problem—the approach to ethics

articulated in *Worldly Ethics* seeks the latter, and this places it at odds with Foucault's

comportment. As Foucault says, "everything is dangerous, and we always have something to

do," always more work to do on ourselves as parts of the political world that necessarily involves

and affects others. No subject or action exists in a vacuum. Once we recognize this, we open up

the possibility of care of the self to affect and foster a democratic ethics suited to the present

moment that faces the dual problems of citizen disengagement and strained pluralism.

In addition to "On the Genealogy of Ethics," *Worldly Ethic*'s chapter on Foucault

engages another interview in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, specifically "The Ethics of the

Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom." In fact, the latter has such a privileged place in the

text that the chapter's epigraph is taken directly from it: "Care for others should not be put before

the care of oneself. The care of the self is ethically prior in that the relationship with oneself is

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[221] Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics," 256.

ontologically prior".” [222] At first glance, this quote seems to contradict the mode of reading I

have put forth regarding Foucault's writings on the care of the self, but this is can be resolved

once it is placed in the context of the rest of the passage. The tone and force of the pull-quote is

striking. Foucault is rarely so blunt, so absolutist in his academic work on such matters as the

contemporary state of ethics. Here is the expanded context of the chapter's epigraph:

> But let me simply say that in the case of the free man, I think the postulate of this whole morality was that a person who took proper care of himself would, by the same token, be able to conduct himself properly in relation to others and for others. A city in which everybody took proper care of himself would be a city that functioned well and found in this the ethical principle of its permanence. But I don't think we can say that the Greek who cares for himself must first care for others. To my mind, this view only came later. Care for others should not be put before the care of oneself. The care of the self is ethically prior in that the relationship with oneself is ontologically prior” [223]

Foucault here is commenting on the particular Greek moral code and the understanding the

Greeks had of the ethical and the relationship of the self to it. It is crucial that we remember that

Foucault is not suggesting that we appropriate the Greek ethical mode as our own contemporary

one.[224]

We must keep in mind his early work on the forces that interact in the formation of the

self, so that when Foucault begins articulating the historical modes of resistance to these forces

in his later lectures, we can avoid the misstep of demanding a comprehensive ethical code, since

this is not his project in the first place.[225] This misstep is exemplified in Myers's argument that

“While this way of imagining the care of the self may have the merit of detaching the rule of

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[222] Myers, *Worldly Ethics*, 21.
[223] Michel Foucault, “The Ethics of the Concern for the Self as a Practice of Freedom,” in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth,* ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: New Press, 1997), 287.
[224] See Foucault's response to the suggestion that we adopt Greek ethics as our own discussed above and found in “On the Genealogy of Ethics.”
[225] See the quote from “On the Genealogy of Ethics,” regarding his interest in a history of *problematiques*, not a history of “solutions.”

oneself from rule over others, it does not offer an alternative framework for understanding how the relationship one constructs with oneself can guide, transform, or otherwise influence one's relationships with other selves… Foucault's work on ethics thereby persistently poses the question of politics without effectively addressing it." [226] The ethical is the realm in which I place demands, restrictions, goals, and structure upon myself—as such, the ethical is not concerned with universalizing my mode of being so much as a singular call, and thus one that is always about what I demand of myself in my relationship to the other, rather than the demand I place on the other. Foucault's corpus points out the possibility and actuality of historical resistance(s) to the forces of subjectivation, so given the read of Foucault I posit, it is out of place to demand that his work account for the present and dictate to us how we should resist our own contemporary modes of control and normalization. Across decades of academic work, Foucault chronicles numerous modes of control, domination, governance, and knowledge, i.e. the forces at confront, shape, and make subjects possible, and when his later work shifts to analyzing the ways that these forces fail to totalize or wholly determine the subject, we should resist the claim that his approach is not political enough.

Friendship and Parrēsia

It is useful, however, to consider how the objects of Foucault's historical studies, still retain some connection to contemporary social and political relations despite the divergent geographic, temporal, technological, and linguistic circumstances. That Foucault pays particular attention to friendship and truth-speaking in his last two lecture series gives us a means of relating the historical iterations of these political phenomenon to the present—Foucault does not

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[226] Myers, *Worldly Ethics,* 39.

demand that we do so, but merely shows us by his example that these phenomena have political, ethical, and social potential and are worth investigation.

For instance, consider Foucault's brief investigation of the role of the friend (and the philosopher as friend) in "The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom."

> What makes [care of the self] ethical for the Greeks is not that it is care for others. The care of the self is ethical in itself; but it implies complex relationships with others insofar as this *ethos* of freedom is also a way of caring for others… *Ethos* also implies a relationship with others, insofar as the care of the self enables one to occupy his rightful position in the city, the community, or interpersonal relationships, whether as a magistrate or a friend. And the care of the self also implies a relationship with the other insofar as proper care of the self requires listening to the lessons of a master. One needs a guide, a counselor, a friend, someone who will be truthful with you. Thus, the problem of relationships with others is present throughout the development of the care of the self. [227]

Not only does care of and work on the self necessarily affect others, but one cannot work on oneself without the other in the first place. Socrates's relationship to Diotima in Plato's *Symposium* comes to mind here.[228] I require others to challenge me, to encourage me, to be truthful with me. I require more than liberal tolerance or non-interference—I need the other, and the other needs me. This *is* a democratic ethos, and in fact I argue it is all the more radically democratic because it highlights the depth of the ties between the self and the other. Foucault's account of subjectivity runs counter to a liberal atomistic individualistic ethos of non-interference.

When Myers challenges William Connolly's work on linking Foucault's care of the self to democratic practices, she poses several questions:

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[227] Foucault, "Ethics of the Concern for Self," 287.

[228] It would be productive to flesh out the possibility of friendship and the connection to the social ontology. Consider Socrates's speech in *Symposium* regarding the lessons he learned regarding love from the priestess Diotima. Can Diotima really be Socrates's friend? The only way she takes part in the symposium is through Socrates's recollection of her lessons and challenges to him. She is disallowed the opportunity to practice parrēsia at the symposium because of her status as a woman.

Most notably, what prompts someone to take up practices of self-intervention in the first place, and what ensures that such intervention will generate democratic effects? ... How does such activity, which Connolly presents as integral to democratic practice, get off the ground? What motives this specific sort of reflexive relation, in which the self confronts diverse elements within itself and in the process becomes more forbearing and generous toward faiths other than one's own? [229]

When we take Foucault's comments on the need for relationships, guides, masters, and friends seriously, we notice that Foucault has already built in the answer: it is the other that prompts me to work on myself.

The other is not simply a secondary beneficiary of the care of the self, but is the ground of my capacity to work on myself, even if that work is seemingly only for my own self-interest. The idea that there is a possibility for me other than the form I presently take is only possible through exposure to others.[230]

But there is also another persistent concern that hounds *Worldly Ethics*, and that is the overwhelming insistence upon ensuring "democratic effects." This is an irreconcilable demand: no understanding of the ethical can guarantee with absolute certainty that "democratic effects" will always follow. That is the inherent precariousness of democracy: even democracy can produce authoritarianism. [231] It is a constant threat, a perpetual problem. I would argue that it is precisely this threat that prompts democratic vigilance, evocation of the ethical, challenging others and ourselves to realize the effects our actions have on others, even as we work on ourselves. Again, recall Foucault's comment in "On the Genealogy of Ethics": "If everything is dangerous, then we always have something to do. So my position leads not to apathy but to a

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[229] Myers, *Worldly Ethics,* 42.
[230] Recall the value of the friend for Emerson as discussed in chapter one. The friend is one who pushes me to attain my next self, and can even serve as my ostensible adversary.
[231] See Book VIII of *Republic* and Plato's warning against democracy as one step removed from tyranny.

hyper- and pessimistic activism." [232] There are no assurances, only activism. To attempt to build structures and institutions, means of education, new subjectivities, epistemologies, and ontologies that could definitively prohibit any deviation or challenge to democracy would be to commit anti-democratic, even authoritarian, action. The question is what kinds and how much violence are we willing to accept to attain these democratic effects, whatever they may be.

The remainder of my discussion of Foucault will highlight some of the most important forms that the relationship between the self and the other can take, and how the other's relationship to truth (particularly through truth-speaking, and *parrēsia*) is instrumental to the self's care of the self. Like the mention of Socrates in "The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom" referenced above, it is important to see how Foucault teases out the importance of truth-speaking, and the role of the *parrēsiast* in particular for Greek ethics. Once we get a sense of the value it had in Greek culture and society, we can begin to open up possibilities for truth-speaking for our contemporary engagement with the ethical. Our current mode of subjectivation [*mode d'assujettissement*] cannot look like the Greeks', but seeing what was possible for them can ground our investigations of ourselves and our contemporary grapplings with and within the problem of the ethical.[233]

The Government of Self and Others

Foucault's penultimate lecture series *The Government of Self and Others* (1982-1983) is a fascinating analysis of the genealogy of the notion of *parrēsia* throughout ancient Greek and (early) Roman history. Through the series, Foucault teases out the ways that the use and

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[232] Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics," 256.
[233] See Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics," 263-266 for Foucault's discussion of the four aspects of the relationship to oneself, i.e. ethics: ethical substance [*substance ethique*], the mode of subjectivation [*mode d'assujettissement*], self-forming activity/asceticism [*practique de soi/l'ascetisme*], and telos [*teleologie*].

understanding of parrēsia shifted and changed across the various political circumstances and structures of Greek life beginning in the fifth century B.C. In order to work through these numerous discursive shifts, Foucault utilizes diverse texts like Euripedes's play *Ion*, Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex*, as well as Platonic letters, Socratic dialogues, and Plutarch's essays, each text exemplifying a particular moment in the history of the political and philosophic value of *parrēsia*, or, roughly translated, truth-speaking or frankness. The dynamic mode and value of this free-spokenness through history provides us with a venue within which we can begin to challenge the depiction of Foucault as positing a "therapeutic ethics" incompatible with democratic action. As we work our way through this lecture series, we begin to get a sense of not only the evolution of the notion of parrēsia, but also of the relationship between politics and philosophy and, most importantly. of the relationship between the self and the other that is so central to our study of ethics and its relation to practices of race.

First of all, Foucault's project in this lecture series is not a listing of historical alternatives or suggestions for today's philosophy and its relationship to politics. It is, however, a genealogy of the ways that philosophy has understood itself and its relationship to politics. *The Government of Self and Others* in fact begins with an analysis of Kant's essay "What is Enlightenment?" in order to prompt us to think about what Enlightenment means as far as a self-reflexive moment of philosophy, when philosophy has caught up to itself and has begun to question its present mode of practice and its current understanding of itself. [234] If we take the structure of Foucault's 1982-1983 lectures seriously, we can begin to see that his analysis is focused on precisely this

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[234] Michel Foucault, *Government of Self and Others: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1982-1983* (New York: Picador, 2010), 7-21.

problem, not simply of a history of ideas, but rather as how philosophy has understood itself through time and the what philosophy's potential is for us in the present.

What is most relevant to the challenge that *Worldly Ethics* represents with regard to any ethics (or rather any ethical relation) from this lecture series is how parrēsia relates to the dual problems of philosophy and politics. First, Foucault shows that parrēsia begins to shift from a political practice in Euripedes's *Ion*, where the orphan Ion is looking for his parents in the hopes that at the very least his mother is an Athenian citizen so that he can then be assured the right to speak before his fellow citizens and persuade them to act in the ways he suggests once he becomes a "front rank" citizen.[235] To be designated an immigrant in Athens, a city "without stain," would deny one any possibility of free speech before the assembly, let alone the special ascendant status of those elite few who rise above their legal equals to persuade the assembly to particular collective action. Ion has lofty goals of leading the Athenian demos, so his formal citizenship status is of absolute import—the play is the dramatic performance of his investigation and his (and Creusa's) navigation of the plots and ploys of Apollo to hide that he is Ion's father (and Creusa's seducer/rapist).

The significance of Ion's citizenship status is crucial not only for the characters in the play, but also for the myth of Athens's origins and autochthony. Once Ion claims his citizenship status in Athens (with divine paternal lineage from Apollo), he founds the four original constituent tribes of Athens, the Ionians, Achaeans, Dorians, and Aeolians. So, in the case of Euripedes' *Ion*, parrēsia has a particular tie to the originary mythical moment for Athens, and by extension, all of Greece. At stake in Ion's political parrēsia are the very issues of Athenian purity

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[235] See especially chapters 5 and 6 of Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others* for the description of the myth of Ion. Chapters 7 and 8 are focused on analysis of Euripedes's depiction of the myth and its relation to truth-speaking.

and self-origination. Foucault does not focus on this issue of indigenousness or self-origination of Athens and its connection to speech, but it is worth noting that later on parresia as free-spokenness or frankness or self-produced-truth will become much more important than it at first seems in the case of *Ion*.

In *Ion*, there are also (and more importantly) issues of parrēsia that emanate from Creusa's role in the play. As the victim of Apollo's seduction (or rape) and subsequent shame at not only her own victimization, but also at herself for having abandoned her illegitimate son to exposure (or so she thinks—Apollo actually has the child taken to the Pythian to be adopted and then to serve at the temple at Delphi). Foucault shows that Creusa exemplifies two different forms of parrēsia: of imprecation and incrimination, on the one hand, and of confession, on the other. Through her example, we see a splitting of parrēsia from the mere political practice of speaking frankly before a crowd toward a concern with the risk associated with a powerless being (a mere human) reproaching the powerful (Apollo, a god), as well as the dynamic inherent in a confessor confiding in a confidant or guide (in this case, her tutor). Even as early as Euripedes, we can see that the issue of parrēsia was not so settled, not so static.

What Foucault describes in this particular lecture series is the various ways that the term "parrēsia" is deployed throughout much of ancient politics, philosophy, and myth. What I want to highlight is the ethical value that parrēsia can have for us, and how it relates to one's relationship to oneself, as well as to others. From Euripede's tragedy *Ion*, we see that truth-speaking and frankness take three important forms: first, the orphan Ion sees parrēsia as part of a citizen's right by birth—only true Athenians (those born of an Athenian mother) have the right to speak frankly before the agora. This is political parrēsia in the strictest sense. This at first resembles *isanomia*, equal right of all citizens to speak in politics. But upon further investigation,

there is an even heavier implication this mode of parrēsia—Ion is a mythic character, who is ultimately given the status as the paterfamilias of the four originary tribes of Greece. Not only is this speech a right, but it is a birth right—the birthright of the founder. This speech issues from the founder, as the founder simultaneously issues forth from this utterance (or at least discovery of this right to utterance)—this could perhaps be referred to as mytho-political parrēsia.[236] There are thus dual values to Ion's parrēsia: the value of a citizen speaking frankly to his equals, and also, a higher level value of the establishment of origins for Athens (and thereby Greece as a whole). Foucault explains, saying:

> I think parrēsia is, in a way, a discourse spoken from above, which comes from a source higher than the status of the citizen, and which is different from the pure and simple exercise of power. It is a form of discourse in non-tyrannical conditions, that is to say, allowing others freedom to speak, the freedom of those who also wish to be in the front rank, and who may be in the front rank in this sort of agonistic game typical of political life in Greece and especially in Athens. It is then a discourse spoken from above, but which leaves others the freedom to speak, and allows freedom to those who have to obey, or leaves them free at least insofar as they will only obey if they can be persuaded.[237]

This is the mode of political parrēsia that takes place within a democratic politeia.

Secondly, and perhaps most importantly, Creusa's parrēsia is focused on the weak reprimanding the strong for their misdeeds—this parrēsia is true and honest speech by the weak (Creusa, a mere mortal) that is uttered in the face of risk from the strong (Apollo, the god of light and truth, who raped her). Creusa speaks painful truths at the risk of death. Her truth-speech is projected outward, in spite of everything that should otherwise silence, withhold, and restrain her. In this way, she is abandoning outside restraint and speaking her own truth. She is creating

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[236] Foucault does not analyze this moment of parrēsia in this way, but I think there is a particular value to Ion's concern with parrēsia that is even heavier given Ion's status as patriarch of the four tribal lines of Greece. *Ion* represents a very interesting problem in Athens of the "immigrant" who becomes the "founding father" of a purportedly autochthonous people.
[237] Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others*, 104.

the circumstances of her own next self—a self that speaks frankly, one that will not be dictated to or over-determined by threat. This is, of course, not to say that she is unaffected, but rather that her resistance mitigates the effect that the powerful has over her. Her speech is resistance in the face of Apollo's domination. (Note the difference between Creusa's parrēsia and Socrates's parrēsia discussed in Foucault's final lecture series *The Courage of Truth* that we examined in Chapter 2. Unlike Socratic parrēsia in which there exists a necessary condition that the parrēsiast face a risk to a friendship that allows for the truth to be spoken in the first place, Creusa's parrēsia does not require a friendship. She speaks her truth to a superior.)

Like Emerson's and Cavell's moral perfectionist, not only is she holding her own, but she calls even the powerful (in this case, Apollo) to self-reflect, to account for themselves, to come to a better version of themselves. She is re-establishing the truth, the truth until now suppressed, forgotten, and denied.[238] But in using her particular mode of parrēsia, she is not commanding—she is appealing.[239] Given Apollo's reticence to speak (in spite of being the god of truth) and his obfuscation of truth vis-à-vis oracular utterance, we get a sense of Creusa's parrēsia as actually directed at an ethical inferior, who happens to be a political superior, whereas Ion's ambition is to speak to political equals (insofar as their legal status as full citizens in a democracy), and yet he also wishes to ascend to front rank and convince them of rational action through parrēsia.

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[238]Lecture editor Frederic Gros's note on alethurgy *The Government of Self and Others*, 81 is helpful here: "… we could call 'alethurgy' (manifestation of truth) the set of possible procedures, verbal or otherwise, by which one brings to light what is posited as true, as opposed to the false, the hidden, the unspeakable, the unforeseeable, or the forgotten. We could call 'alethurgy' that set of procedures and say that there is no exercise of power without something like an alethurgy." Consider, too, the practices of race as involved in manifesting subjects as a potential knowers of truth.

[239] See the publisher's note in *Government of Self and Others* on 104: "The manuscript clarifies: 'Parrēsia is not the language of command; it is not speech which places others under its yoke.'

Thirdly, when Creusa confides in her tutor (who ultimately encourages her to attempt to poison Ion) parrēsia has the value of confession when one places one's own misdeeds and misfortunes in the hands of an interlocutor and confidant. This mode of parrēsia is less interesting to me as an early precursor to Christian purification, self-denial, and self-rejection through confession. My resistance to the productive value of this mode of parrēsia is akin to Emerson's (and Cavell's) rejection of shame as normalizing, rather than liberating.

Given Foucault's reading of *Ion*, we see that Ion's political parrēsia is actually propped up by Creusa's parrēsia of imprecation in the face of risk. Without Creusa's challenging the powerful (Apollo) with her own personal discourse of truth and reproaching him for his injustice, Ion would never have realized his own status in Athens. Creusa's confession, imprecation, and recrimination is indispensable to the establishment of Ion's right.[240] Even though Apollo is the only one in the narrative who knows the whole truth of Ion's lineage and past, the play implies that one cannot depend on the gods, nor on their oracular truth-telling.[241] It is ultimately humans, their passion, and their works that are the driving force behind bringing the truth to light.[242] Foucault sums this up nicely: "He [Ion] will not be enthroned as the result of a judgment which sooths quarrels and distributes rights. This is not what enables the hero to obtain parrēsia. It is, you recall, a series of manifestations of truth, a series of operations and procedures through which the truth is told. And these are generally characterized by the following: the cry of humans [Creusa] was needed to extract from the silent god [Apollo] the discourse which will

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[240] For a discussion of Creusa's parrēsia of imprecation, see Foucault, *Government of Self and Others,* 133-136.
[241] Foucault, *Government of Self and Others*, 140.
[242] Foucault, *Government of Self and Others*, 143.

rightly establish the power to speak." [243] He continues saying, "You recall that in fact these different elements of veridiction do not involve the discovery of the truth through a search and investigation as in *Oedipus the King*. They are difficult, costly speech acts, painfully extracted in spite of shame, through the intensity of passions, and in conditions such that this truth-telling is always accompanied by its shadowy double: the lies, blindness, and illusions of the characters." [244] These manifestations of truth are again Ion's political parrēsia (which is referred to explicitly as "parrēsia" in the text), Creusa's judicial parrēsia of calling out Apollo's injustices, and also her moral parrēsia as manifest in her confession to her tutor. Neither instance of Creusa's truth-speaking is designated "parrēsia" within the play. [245]

As Foucault continues through the particular moments of the shifting uses of parrēsia, we can see that parrēsia, truth-telling, has served various bridging functions: an inter-subjective bridge, a bridge between a subject and the particular politeia in which they find themselves (e.g. Ion speaks to the Athenian agora, Pericles advises the Athenian agora during and after the war with Lacedaemon/Sparta, Plato advises the despot Dionysus the Younger), as well as between philosophy and politics. [246] The intersubjective function is interestingly analogized to being a

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[243] Foucault, *Government of Self and Others*, 152. This "cry" is reminiscent of the pain language that Cavell so meticulously investigates in *The Claim of Reason*, and which serves as a guiding concern in this dissertation.

[244] Foucault, *Government of Self and Others*, 152.

[245] This failure to label her speech parrēsia is not unlike our contemporary tendency to both doubt women's capacity as knowers of truth (even as it concerns their own bodies), as well as deny women the opportunity to speak in the first place. I think that backlash against women who report sexual assault or dare to challenge a man's right to women's bodies are consistent with the lower social and political status of women from antiquity to the present.

[246] Regarding this last function, Foucault has a particular perspective on the independence of philosophy from politics, which I find challenging. I find it difficult to parse the two out as cleanly as Foucault seems to, but that is an issue for another time.

touchstone for another's soul, whereas the subject-to-government form is expanded to be crucial for all forms of politeia. Foucault's modeling of a philosophy/politics dyad is challenging.

The Inter-Subjective Function of Parrēsia

As we have discussed above with regard to *Ion*, I think the inter-subjective value of parrēsia is a necessary precursor to any formal political parrēsia. As such, Foucault's analogy of the parrēsiast as the touchstone of the others soul can serve as a useful approach to the notion of work on the self and other (or the titular "government of self and others"). Near the very end of the lecture series, Foucault comes to the touchstone analogy by way of Socrates's relationship to Callicles, though I think this mode of relationship is subtly present throughout the entire course of the lectures.[247] Unlike rhetoric which substitutes pleasure for the good (even as it claims to seek the good), Socrates (and Plato) are concerned with tekhne of conduction of souls (358). Hence, the implementation of *basanos* (test) of one soul by another, in order to examine the soul and its quality. The parrēsiast then serves as the touchstone for the other's soul.

> Here, the word basanos means that the discourse goes from one soul to the other as a test. In what sense is it a test? The use of the metaphor of the touchstone is interesting. What does a touchstone actually show? What is its nature and function? Its nature is that it has something like an affinity with what it tests which means that it reveals the nature of what it tests. Second, the touchstone operates on two levels: on the level or reality and on the level of truth. That is to say, the touchstone enables one to know the reality of the thing one wants to test, and by demonstrating the reality of the thing it tests one shows whether it really is what it claims to be, and consequently whether its discourse or appearance really does conform to what it is.[248]

The game is no longer agonistic, but rather of testing the soul's reality-truth (371). I can neither know my self nor ground any truth by which to reflect upon myself without a touchstone.

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[247] Foucault picks up the various modes of parrēsia in his next lecture series *The Courage of Truth* (New York: Picador, 2011). In this series, Foucault is less concerned with formal political parrēsia, and more with the risks necessary for any speech to qualify as parrēsia, rather than other modes of truth-speaking (prophesy, pedagogy, etc.).
[248] Foucault, *Government of Self and Others*, 370.

This is akin to Foucault's earlier observation of philosophy's role of challenging politics without doing so by political means.[249]

> What, for Plato, is this practice of philosophy? Before all else, essentially and fundamentally, this practice of philosophy is a way for the individual to constitute himself as a subject on a certain mode of being. The mode of being of the philosophizing subject should constitute the mode of being of the subject exercising power. So it is not a question of a coincidence between a philosophical knowledge and a political rationality, but one of identity between the mode of being of the philosophizing subject and the mode of being of the subject practicing politics. If kings must be philosophers it is not so they will be able to ask their philosophical knowledge what they should do in a given set of circumstances. It means that to be able to govern properly one has to have a definite connection with the practice of philosophy; *the point of intersection between "governing properly" and "practicing philosophy" being occupied by one and the same subject*.[250]

Now we can begin to see how a touchstone parrēsiast (embodied by Socrates) can serve as a means not only of self-work, but other-work. It is a way of self-fashioning which cannot take place without the friend, the lover, the guide, and which also allows one to do work on and with others in kind.

Rebutting the Label of "Therapeutic" Work on the Self

The limitation of the interpretation of Foucault as engaging in therapeutic ethics is a failure to discern the co-care, co-work within the ethical as examined in Foucault's last lectures. I cannot work on myself without the other. There is never just the self. The self is never fully isolated from others or the discourses that shape the subject, but there are modes of resistance of which parrēsia is one productive form. Parrēsia is a resistance that cultivates other resistances. If philosophy is work on the self, and politics is work on others, then parrēsia is a risky, yet multi-levelled, bridge between them: from subject to politeia (be it democracy, autocracy, or

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[249] Foucault, *Government of Self and Others*, 286. Here Foucault argues that the relationship of philosophy to politics (at least in Greek antiquity) is not to tell the truth about the use of power, but rather to tell the truth in relation to power.
[250] Foucault, *Government of Self and Others*, 294-295.

oligarchy), from weak subject to powerful subject, from disciple to teacher, or as in *The Courage of Truth*, from friend to friend in the face of risk.

The question now is to consider this parrēsia in terms of the problem of practices of race in contemporary America. If we consider the circumstance of white subjects' rejection of Black Lives Matter protests and claims to injustice, we see that parrēsia and risk are inseparable.[251] [252]The problem is this: if we always demand that the harmed (i.e. those in a position of diminished political power) testify and produce evidence of the harm they receive, and Whites do not acknowledge that harm (i.e. do not make any substantive steps to prevent or remediate previous and ongoing domination), then we are rejecting even the possibility of truth-speaking. Even as *parrēsia* does not count as such without risk (otherwise it would be another form of truth-speaking), the overwhelming refusal of Whites to acknowledge truths and pain-language uttered by non-Whites constitutes a far more dire position than the risk inherent in parrēsiastic utterance—it constitutes a maddening near-hopelessness, a not-quite-suicide-mission. "Risk" does not begin to describe it. Nonwhite subjects have always resisted, fled, subverted, pleaded, reasoned with, and reached out to Whites, and even when nominal concessions are made (e.g. Civil War Amendments, Reconstruction, 19th Amendment, Civil Rights Act of 1964, Voting Rights Act of 1965, etc.) they all depend upon White authority "giving up" something just to have the domination take a different form, or even to return later (*Shelby County v. Holder*

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[251] See Havercroft and Owen "Soul-Blindness" for a discussion of the relationship between aspect-dawning, soul-blindness, and Rancièran police orders.
[252] Foucault, *The Courage of Truth*, 11. "For there to be *parrhesia*, you recall—I stressed this last year—the subject must be taking some kind of risk [in speaking] this truth which he signs as his opinion, his thought, his belief, a risk which concerns his relationship with the person to whom he is speaking. For there to be *parrhesia*, in speaking the truth one must open up, establish, and confront the risk of offending the other person, of irritating him, of making him angry and provoking him to conduct which may even be extremely violent."

(2013), and just three years later unabashed White supremacists such as David Duke reemerging to run for public office, and/or being appointed to cabinet level positions). Creusa's parrēsiastic reproach of Apollo still leaves him a god, and her a mortal. This raises the question of whether risk can be so absolute that it no longer counts as risk at all, or rather it becomes a near-certainty, a constant.

What Socratic parrēsia in the mode of *basanos* allows for is a challenging of one's core truth and the self's relation to it. There is of course still a risk that Callicles will end their friendship, or refuse to listen, ostracize Socrates, force him into exile, or even kill him (as Athenians eventually do in *Phaedo*). The value of Socratic *basanos* is less about the weak (or those at risk) persuading the powerful of certain truths, but rather creating scenarios in which the powerful can challenge their current relationship to themselves and the discourse of truth. "And inasmuch as a soul manifests itself through what it says (through its *logos*, through the test, in dialogue, of the logos: knowing what it is in reality and whether what it is in actual fact conforms to reality and whether it tells the truth), then what is valid for the *logos* is also valid for the soul. The game is no longer agonistic (one of superiority); it is a game between two souls of the test of the soul's reality-truth through natural affinity and manifestation of authenticity." [253] Foucault's description of *basanos* still retains the risk necessary for parrēsia, but shifts the terms of the relationship to one of friendship, or at the very least guidance.

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[253] Foucault, *Government of Self and Others*, 371.This is a loaded term for post-Heideggerian theorizing. As I understand it, this use of "authenticity" is from the translation of the Greek word *etumos*. "Greek étymon the essential meaning of a word seen in its origin or traced to its grammatical parts (neuter of étymos true, actual, real)" http://www.dictionary.com/browse/etymon (Accessed November 2016). This use places *etumos* within the etymology of "etymology" itself.

In order for this touchstone soul-test to have any result, there must be *homologia.* Again,

I return to Foucault's explanation:

> This term *homologia* is repeated several times and refers to the identity of the discourse of both participants in the dialogue. One will have a criterion of truth when there is a *homologia* in the two souls tested through natural affinity, which means that what is said by one can be said by the other. The criterion of truth of philosophical discourse is not to be sought therefore in a sort of internal connection between the person who thinks and what is thought. The truth of philosophical discourse is not obtained therefore in the form of what we will later call evidence, but through something called homologia, that is to say, the identity of the discourse between two persons.[254]

For *homologia* to have "value as the locus of the formulation and test of the truth," [255] several

other things are required for this particular parrēsiastic touchstone-test of the soul: first, *episteme*

(that one says what one thinks is true), second, *eunoia* (that one speaks only out of benevolence

for the other), and third, *parrēsia* (the courage to say all that one thinks despite rules, laws, and

customs). "Through the pact into which Socrates invites Callicles, *homologia*, which will

develop and articulate the rest of the dialogue, will be the proof of the truth of what is said, and

so of the quality of the souls who say it. You see that in this conception of the touchstone, of

homologia, and of their internal condition which culminates in *parrēsia*, we have the definition

of the bond through which the *logos* of one can act on the soul of the other and lead it to the

truth." [256] As we reflect on this articulation of *homologia*, we can see that it is in fact a

complication of the parrēsiastic endeavor, and is principally a product of negotiation of both the

"natural affinities" and differing *logoi* between the two subjects in the discussion.

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[254] Foucault, *Government of Self and Others*, 371.
[255] We must remember that rhetoric and flattery can be part of a *homologia* as well, and Foucault admits this. He regrets that he is running out of time to parse this out at the very point in the lecture that *homologia* is discussed.
[256] Foucault, *Government of Self and Others*, 373.

Again, returning to the race politics around Black Lives Matter, is it not precisely the problem that practices of race create White subjects that resist any "contact" that would be necessary for a "touchstone" to find the truth of the relationship between the Black subject and the White subject? It is not merely an issue of changing perspectives, or of educating Whites about Black subjects' pain, but rather creating a White subject capable of touching the touchstone to begin with. This is why race is more than mere knowledge, education, opinions, preferences, or stances—there are both structural and philosophical boundaries to parrēsiastic utterances. The question is how we get White subjects (Callicles in this analogy) to work on themselves such that they can "be struck" by not only what it is that Black subjects are trying to tell them about injustice, but by the deeper-level issue of the injustice of having to be told and appealed to in the first place. This requirement of testimony before a White authority is one of the most pervasive instances of the problem of race in contemporary politics, and Whites' failure to hear or be convinced is but a symptom.

James Baldwin's letter to his nephew, published as "My Dungeon Shook: Letter to My Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation" in *The Fire Next Time*, highlights precisely this problem of Whites requiring that Black subjects act as risk-bearing parrhesiasts and bring the truth of White ethical failures to Whites' attention. The Foucauldian parrhesiast is therefore best understood as a problematic, rather than a solution to the problem of race-as-harm to ethical subjectivity. The figure of the parrhesiast is illustrative of precisely the problem that Whites cannot seem to see race as a deformation of their own souls; that Black subjects are always expected to serve as correctives for White failures is a key disclosure by Baldwin. As Baldwin says:

> I know what the world has done to my brother and how narrowly he has survived it. And
> I accuse my country and my country men, and for which neither I nor time nor history

with ever forgive them, that they have destroyed and are destroying hundreds of thousands of lives and do not know it and do not want to know it. One can be, indeed one must strive to become, tough and philosophical concerning destruction and death, for this is what most of mankind has been best at since we have heard of man. (But remember: *most* of mankind is not all of mankind.) But it is not permissible that the authors of devastation should also be innocent. It is the innocence which constitutes the crime.[257]

Baldwin is highlighting the importance of the accusative function of parrhesia here, and also that the depth of the ethical crime goes much deeper than the harmful effects that race has on people of color, to the very innocence, ignorance, and unquestioning presumption with which such harms are enacted. Baldwin is trying to arm his nephew with the knowledge of the sad fact that Whites have to have their ethical catastrophes pointed out to and explained to them—that this is a key element of the ethical failure fostered by practices of race. Later, Baldwin continues: "Please try to remember that what they believe, as well as what they do and cause you to endure, does not testify to your inferiority but to their inhumanity and fear."[258] The innocence with which White subjects project their inhumanity and fear upon subjects of color constitutes their own ethical harm and deformation.

Baldwin commits himself (and by implication his nephew) to the risk-encumbered work of parrhesia and showing Whites how to save themselves.

Any upheaval in the universe is terrifying because it so profoundly attacks one's sense of one's own reality. Well, the black man has functioned in the white man's world as a fixed star, as an immovable pillar: and as he moves out of his place, heaven and earth are shaken to their foundations. […] You have, and many of us have, defeated this intention [that you should perish in the ghetto]; and, by a terrible law, a terrible paradox, those innocents who believed that your imprisonment made them safe are losing their grasp of reality. But these men are your brothers—your lost, younger brothers. And if the word *integration* means anything, this is what it means: that we, with love, shall force our

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[257] James Baldwin, "My Dungeon Shook: A Letter to My Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation," in *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*, ed Toni Morrison (New York: The Library of America, 1998), 292.

[258] Baldwin, "My Dungeon Shook," 293.

brothers to see themselves as they are, to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it."[259]

But knowing this work is constantly needing to be done on and for the White subject should in itself serve as a motivation to moral perfectionist work on the self. Instead of constantly needing to have each act of viciousness (intentional or otherwise) brought to the attention of those who think themselves White, the refrain of White subjects that we should all be "responsible for ourselves" (a claim usually made in tirades against social welfare programs and in favor of market forces) is better served if we take seriously the call to ethical care of the self and seek out the obstacles, presumptions, and practices that prevent us from taking ethical care of ourselves (and others). A critical engagement with practices of race in their myriad forms, is thus, a necessary element of care for the self and the development of a truly democratic ethics.

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[259] Baldwin, "My Dungeon Shook," 294.

CHAPTER 4: WORLDLY ETHICS, PART II: LEVINAS AND CARE FOR THE OTHER

This chapter will again use the commendable trajectory of Ella Myers's *Worldly Ethics* as a springboard from which to engage Levinas's "ethics" and his purported "charitable" approach regarding the ethical. Not only do I pose an alternative reading of Levinas to that presented in *Worldly Ethics*, but I will supplement my counter-readings with secondary literature on Levinas, particularly the work of Simon Critchley. Again, I want to contribute to, redirect, and ultimately enhance Myers's effort to theorize a sense of the ethical up to the task of facilitating a this-worldly democratic subjectivity. I submit that if democracy itself is open-ended, then we must at least entertain the possibility that its theoretical foundations be likewise indeterminate. I see the question of a democratic engagement with the ethical as a matter of opening up potentialities and possibilities, rather than solidifying pre-determined ends. One cannot mandate that democratic subjects "be free" or exercise self-care, self-work—one can only work to keep the possibilities open.[260]

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[260] Rousseau (in)famously attempts to resolve this problem in Book I, Chapter VII, of *On the Social Contract* with his insistence "that whoever refuses to obey the general will will be forced to do so by the entire body. This means merely that he will be forced to be free." (Rousseau, 150). The Levinasian figure of the ethical contests this by framing the ethical as an unenforceable force. "[The Other] thus opposes to me not a greater force, an energy assessable and consequently presenting itself as though it were part of a whole, but the very transcendence of his being by relation to that whole; not some superlative of power, but precisely the infinity of his transcendence. The infinite paralyses power by its infinite resistance to murder, which, firm and insurmountable, gleams in the face of the Other, in the nudity of his defenseless eyes, in nudity of the absolute openness of the Transcendent." (Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969) 199.)

This is of course not to say that we should shirk vigilance and turn a blind eye to the

potential problems and disasters; this is part of that paradox of democracy that reminds us that

"true discourse is always threatened by democracy," as Foucault says.[261] If we read Levinas in

the ways that I suggest the chapter ahead, I think that we can avoid the misstep enacted in

Worldly Ethics which forecloses ethical possibilities to obtain a narrower formulation of

democratic praxis and association. I also think that Levinas's framing of the ethical circumvents

the assumption that theories predicate practices. Rather than building a universal code of ethics,

Levinas's post-Husserlian approach grounds a notion of asymmetrical responsibility in the

singular self, rather than in reciprocity amongst subjects. Critchley reminds us of this with his

impressive paraphrasing of Levinas's notion of the self's responsibility.

> Levinas phenomenologically reduces the abstract and universal I to me, to myself as the
> one who undergoes the demand or call of the other… [My] first word is not *ego sum*, *ego
> existo*; it is, rather, *me voici!* (see me here!), the prophetic word that identifies the prophet
> as interlocuted by the alterity of God. The subject arises in and as the response to the
> other's call; this is what Levinas calls 'the religiosity of the self'[*Otherwise than Being*
> 117]. *To put it another way, ethics is entirely my affair, not the affair of some
> hypothetical, impersonal or universal I running through a sequence of possible
> imperatives.* Ethics is not a spectator sport; rather it is my experience of a claim or
> demand that I both cannot fully meet and cannot avoid… For Levinas, I cannot even
> demand that the other respond responsibly to my response, 'that is his affair', as Levinas
> remarks in an interview.[262]

The ethics that *Worldly Ethics* demands of Foucault and Levinas comes awfully close to a

demand for rules, guidelines and norms, rather than the new framings that they provide us for

interrogating such "ethics." It is thus Levinas's re-envisioning of subjectivity that is the source of

the most productive challenge. His conception of "the ethical" issues forth from and constitutes

his new perspective on the subject. Levinas says in his preface to *Entre Nous*:

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[261] Foucault, *Governance of Self and Others*, 184.
[262] Simon Critchley, "Post-deconstructive Subjectivity?", *Ethics—Politics—Subjectivity: Essays on Derrida, Levinas, and Contemporary French Thought* (New York: Verso, 2009), 66.

What motivates these pages is not some urgent need to return to ethics for the purpose of developing *ab ovo* a code in which structures and rules for good private conduct, public policy, and peace between nations would be set forth, however fundamental the ethical values implied in these chapters may appear to be. The main intent here is to try to see ethics in relation to the rationality of the knowledge that is imminent in being, and that is primordial in the philosophical tradition of the West; even if ethics—ultimately going beyond the forms and determinations of ontology, but without rejecting the peace of reason—*could achieve a different form of intelligibility and a different way of loving wisdom*; and perhaps even—but I will not go that far—the way of Psalm 111:10.[263]

This intelligibility is attached to a different mode of living and loving. A different way of understanding the relationship between the self and the Other which does not produce, but, rather, *is* a different way of loving wisdom, and so, necessarily I argue, a way of loving the other. This new intelligibility is inseparable from love—they are co-constitutive. This is precisely what I take to be the role of political theory: to interrogate the relationships between new ways, modes of thinking and modeling, on the one hand, and other non-thinking behaviors, institutions, and practices on the other.[264]

First, several points to consider: in her introduction to *Is it Righteous to Be?* (2001), the collection of interviews and essays by Levinas, Jill Robbins brings forward some critical points about Levinas's body of work. She notes that Levinas's conceptualization of "the ethical" is a departure from Heidegger's concern with fundamental ontology, in that Levinas "asserts the

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[263] Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre Nous: On Thinking-of-the-Other* (London: Athlone Press, 1998), xi, emphasis added.

[264] As John Drabinski points out in his *Levinas and the Postcolonial: Race, Nation, Other* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), Levinas's own racial politics (necessarily) fails to fully enact the radical responsibility indicated in his new framing of the ethical. In spite of his laudable goal of "ignoring even the color of the other's eyes" that Levinas articulates in *Totality and Infinity*, and his dedication in *Otherwise than Being* in which Levinas ties the antisemitism of the Third Reich to other racisms (as that "same antisemitism"). See Drabinski, *Levinas and the Postcolonial,* 17-49, (especially 38-41) for a discussion of Levinas's phenomenological methodology. Because race is not about right belief or opinion, but rather functions through practices, even the framer of infinite responsibility for and to the other is not immune from the effects of race.

anteriority of the question of the Other to Heidegger's question of the being of beings." [265] In this way, we can say that Levinas is not pre- or anti-Heideggerian, but rather simply post-Heideggerian. He re-prioritizes (not unproblematically, of course) the primacy of the ethical and the ontological—Levinas wants to change our orientation toward and practice of philosophy by highlighting the ethical at the core of our experience as human.[266] (Levinas's thought shifts and grows and refocuses over the course of his long career, and this is best seen in the radicalization of the frame work of *Totality and Infinity* that takes place in *Otherwise than Being*.)[267] In addition to executing a shift from Heidegger's primacy of being, (specifically by contesting the problematic nature of the "Da," the *there* of "Dasein" *being-there*), Levinas seeks to re-ground ethics as an interruption of the self's boundless freedom (*enjoyment* in *Totality and Infinity*),[268]

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[265] Emmanuel Levinas, *Is It Righteous to Be?: Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 1.

[266] There is plenty of room for fruitful contestation of the anthropocentrism that Levinas presents, and that that "humanism" is also a Eurocentric one. As Robbins notes in the introduction to *Is It Righteous to Be?*, 7, the human is the only site of the ethical, for Levinas. This is one of those ontological hold-overs from Heidegger—Levinas has not gotten past the problem of authenticity, but has just changed the language. I agree with John Drabinski that we must supplement Levinas's theoretical approach in order to save him from his myopic misogyny and flippant racism. See Drabinski, *Levinas and the Postcolonial* for an extensive conversation on Levinas's ethical failures as regards Asians, Palestinians, (anyone outside of 20th century Europe, really) and his conceptualization of the feminine.

[267] Levinas appears to take seriously the charge (especially from Derrida) that his language in *Totality and Infinity* has not broken as drastically from the ontological approach (a la Heidegger) as Levinas perhaps wished. As such, we see shifts toward the discussion of the Saying and the Said (*le dire y la dit*), as well as reframing the Other from notions of lack, need, poverty in *Totality and Infinity* to one of condemnation, persecution, being held hostage, etc. in *Otherwise than Being*.

[268] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 134. "[Play or enjoyment of life] is carefreeness with regard to existence, which has a positive meaning: it consists in sinking one's teeth fully into the nutriments of the world, agreeing to the world as wealth, releasing its elemental essence. […] In enjoyment I am absolutely for myself. Egoist without reference to the Other, I am alone without solitude, innocently egoist and alone. Not against the Others, not "as for me…"—but entirely deaf to the Other, outside of all communication and all refusal to communicate—without ears, like a hungry stomach."

rather than as a set of precepts or rules by which to hold oneself accountable. Levinas's notion of

the ethical expands the common use of the word from a rule-based set of duties and prohibitions

to a much more foundational (infinite) responsibility. This is perhaps the most crucial difference

between Myers's reading of Levinas in *Worldly Ethics* and the one that I posit here: What is at

stake for Levinas is not the Heideggerian being-with (*mitsein*) but rather being-for-the-other. "To

respond to the other is, as it were, to dig deep into one's poverty, in a hollowing out that allows

for neither the self nor its initiative. Levinas's ethics become legible only within a certain

experience of impossibility."[269]

Responsibility Versus Charity

The scope of the implications of Levinas's thought is narrowed when his framing of an

engagement with the ethical is equated with mere charitable work in *Worldly Ethics*.[270] Giving of

one's own material possessions in order that the other live of course fits within Levinas's

framework, but it is hardly the ceiling of one's responsibility. Contrary to Myers's reading of

Levinas as "charitable," Robbins points out that the stranger, the widow, and the orphan in

Levinas's work refer to the defenselessness of the other, not categories of the other.[271] This is an

unfortunate misstep in Myers's read, which ultimately causes her to label Levinas a theorist of

charity. My responsibility to the Other is not merely a charitable one where I (a "have") must

give of my excess to fulfill the Other's lack (as a "have-not"). If this is what Levinas was saying,

then Myers would of course be right to critique him—this "charity" is dependent upon the

perpetuation of inequality. Under the charity model, there must be "haves" with more food,

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[269] Jill Robbins, introduction to *Is It Righteous to Be?*, by Emmanuel Levinas (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 8.
[270] Myers, *Worldly Ethics*, 71-73.
[271] Robbins, introduction to *Is It Righteous to Be?*, 11. Find Levinas's discussion in "Vocation of the Other," in *Is it Righteous to Be?,* 105.

money, clothes, shelter so that they can temporarily satisfy the material and bodily needs of the "have-nots." But this is a reductive reading Levinas, and so misattributes the characteristics and implications of his contribution to philosophy and political thought.

When Levinas posits the face as a powerless demand ("Thou salt not kill"), it is not simply a demand for non-interference. It is a "paradigm of positive responsibility" a ceaseless demand that one "do everything in order that the other live."[272] Again, I do not read this as mere living (bare life?)—this would place a cap on infinite responsibility. I am responsible for not only the barest means of physical survival for the Other. (I would call such a bounded responsibility something like a "perpetually quotidian responsibility"). I, on the other hand, read Levinas as demanding this and much more of us. True, my existence as "usurping the other's place in the sun" is my taking up the other's physical space, but I also lay claim to the other's psychic, social, economic, intellectual, emotional, and sexual "space."[273] My social value comes at the expense of another's—this is part of what Whiteness (as well as class, gender, heteronormativity, ableism, etc.) does. It is a usurpation of the Other's "place under the sun" at so many levels. It is with this in mind that I argue that Levinas's conception of the ethical should not be limited to the one-on-one circumstance as some read Levinas to be suggesting. After all, we are never simply two beings before each other without origins, pasts, social forces, discourses, economies, and knowledges. Even Levinas does not limit his theory to this one-on-one existential space alone—he recognizes the political and attempts to theorize it through the "third" however insufficiently.[274] We must not only read Levinas as a philosopher of the singular

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[272] Levinas, *Is It Righteous To Be?*, 2.
[273] See Levinas, *Is It Righteous to Be?*, 53, 63, 128, for Levinas's reflections on Pascal's formula: "This is my place in the sun, the usurpation of the whole earth begins here."
[274] Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being, or, Beyond Essence* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 16. I would be the first to admit that Levinas is insufficient (and he

Other; I argue that we must read his works as positing a mode by which we can engage with and impinge upon concrete, political practices (i.e. engage with justice as a political concern[275]) through new understandings of the ethical, and the ethical subject.

According to *Worldly Ethics*, Levinas constructs a self/Other dyad that fails to provide enough of a foundation for "associative democratic practices." While I share Myers' goal of theorizing an ethics that can facilitate new modes of contesting the ways that race undermines democratic practice and care, I argue that *Worldly Ethics* misinterprets the self/Other model that Levinas constructs. First and foremost, I emphasize the role of "the infinite" as it is manifest in the face-to-face, not only of the infinite that is (in) the Other, but also of Levinas's position on infinite responsibility. Secondly, we must flesh out what each of these modes of the infinite mean, and how they contest the categorization of "dyad" that Myers reads into Levinas—the reading Levinas in *Worldly Ethics* sets aside his conception of alterity and his rejection of attempts to totalize away and account for the Other as singular.

Myers own Arendt-informed conception of the world as both common home and as in-between could benefit from a Levinasian influence in that in his model, the self's subjectivity is always already tied to the Other.[276] Even as the self and Other are irreducible to each other, they

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himself admits this—The self can and does kill the Other), but insufficiency does not mean unnecessary.

[275] Levinas, "Vocation of the Other," *Is It Righteous to Be?*, 108-109 engages the idea of justice and its relationship to the ethical. Here Levinas addresses the necessity of comparison and calculation (political action) with love of the other man in his uniqueness/alterity (the ethical). Within these two short pages, Levinas engages with the complication that the ethical and the political pose for his thought; on one hand, "Alterity is strangeness…The other has a tribal link with no one. That is precisely his departure from the community of genus, the total alterity" (109) and on the other, we have the problem of race and tribe. "It is not that the tribal is proscribed; it comprises many virtues. But in principle, the human is the consciousness that there is still one more step to take: to appease the tribal, scandalous exigency!" (109).

[276] Myers, *Worldly Ethics,* 112-126. See especially page 113. "To claim that the world is a shared home is not to make the unsupportable assertion that the world is shared at all equitably. Rather,

are none the less co-constitutive, or at the very least Other-centric. Even as Levinas begins with

the self (i.e., looking out from the self, as is the methodology of phenomenology) the self only

becomes I by virtue of the call of the Other.[277] There is no self that then becomes an ethical self

(that would be to revert to Heidegger's ontology-first phenomenology), the self is always already

for-the-Other. This conceptualization of the self/Other is in contrast to Myers's "extra-

subjective" focus that aims at critiquing both Foucault and Levinas as merely "intra-

subjective"/"therapeutic," or "inter-subjective"/"charitable", respectively. Myers is right to point

out that Levinas's theoretical approach seems (at least at first glance) to be disconnected from

worldly conditions, and therefore of suspect value in approaching contemporary political

concerns like the set of practices that comprise race.[278] Myers's critique of Levinas is insightful

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it is to say that the world, conceptualized as a tangible and intangible, organic and inorganic web, partially given to human beings and partially made by them, ought to provide hospitable conditions for all, not just some, human beings... I want to defend a normative conception of the world as common in the sense of being a home for all people. More specifically, I argue that in order for humans to be at home in the world, certain of their basic needs must be met. Collaborative pursuit of this aim of universal provision of basic needs is part of what it means to care for the world as world."
See also 123 for the in-between nature of the world. "The world mediates between people in this double sense: it establishes a connection that preserves distinction; it is the simultaneous antidote to isolation and massification. As Reinhardt notes, this emphasis on the world as in-between is striking in its claim to a form of political commonality that is not subject centered; what is common here is extra-subjective, between us, not in us."
[277] Lisa Guenther, *Solitary Confinement: Social Death and Its Afterlives* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013) highlights the importance of the Levinasian other in maintaining subjectivity in her critique of the continuing use of solitary confinement, overcrowding, and "supermax rhetoric." Guenther argues that both the incarcerated and the incarcerator are harmed in the deployment of solitary confinement. See Chapter 9, especially 246. "In *Total Confinement*, Lorna Rhodes recounts one warden's insight that the policy of total control undermines the humanity of the *prison staff*, as well as the prisoners, by putting them in a position of unsustainable, irresponsible power over others. […] [That] even the guards risk losing their humanity when put in the structural position of Gyges resonates with Levinas's claim that 'not only modern war but every war employs arms that turn against those who wield them' (*Totality and Infinity*, 21)."
[278] Myers, *Worldly Ethics*, 11. "But it is a mistake to declare that ethics as such is always and only alienated from the world, understood as the messy, power-laden, varied space of democratic

in stressing the need to address conditions and practices taking place around subjects that reveal

and form unjust predispositions, thoughts, valuations, relationships, and

economic/health/educational obtainment, and whether one can live at all, let alone live a "good

life." But what the reading presented in *Worldly Ethics* misses, is that the self and other are each

other's common circumstances—we are each other's things-in-common, or at least parts of a

thing-in-common. The self works on or for the self, but the self also works on/for the Other.

Neither happens without the other, so it is strange to see Myers so simplistically separate politics

into the realms of the intersubjective, intrasubjective, and extrasubjective.[279] That *Worldly Ethics*

references Bruno Latour and Jane Bennett who (by Myers's own admission) disturb the stark

demarcations of subject/object and activity/passivity should give us pause when our readings so

quickly revert to strict categories, demarcations, and separations.[280]

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association. This book argues, on the contrary, for a distinctively worldly ethics, not only as a possibility but as a reality, one that is already expressed and enacted today by admirable forms of joint action. […] The book's case for worldly ethics centers on an associative conception of democratic politics that emphasizes joint action by citizens aimed at shaping *shared conditions*." Myers is on to something here with her concern for shared conditions, of which practices of race are an example. Where we diverge is in our judgements of the value of Foucault and Levinas in shaping worldly conditions.

[279] "As Reinhardt notes, this emphasis on the world as in-between is striking in its claim to a form of political commonality that is not subject centered; what is common here is extra-subjective, between us, not in us" (Myers, *Worldly Ethics*, 123). This seems to set subjects as the boundaries of the thing in common, rather than allowing for others to be part of that commonness. Even as Myers briefly mentions challenges to active/passive binaries, she reverts to referring to subjects as actors performing work, and to conditions as if they were passive and worked upon. Following Arendt, Myers refers to conditions and worldly things as multiple tables of dispute and engagement around which subjects gather (see p. 93).

[280] This is a problem for Arendt, in particular. Myers herself challenges Arendt's tendency to shunt-off realms and create stark lines of distinction within her metaphysics (e.g. the separation of the social and the political, the world and the earth, etc.). See Myers, *Worldly Ethics*, 199-120. But even as Myers notes this proclivity in Arendt's work, it still manages to sneak back into *Worldly Ethics*. Neither Foucault nor Levinas are as rigid, though *Worldly Ethics* depicts them as being so.

It is important at this point in the discussion of Levinas to re-emphasize that I am not

advocating that we take Levinas's body of work as providing solutions, but rather possibilities

that even he himself may not have entertained, agreed to, or foreseen. [281]

Levinas should not, in my understanding, be read as advocating mere charity, especially

given some of his interviews in *Is It Righteous to Be?*. Such a reading sets aside Levinas's own

admissions of the complication that the appearance of "the third" poses to any conceptualization

of the ethical, even as Levinas leaves the details and practices of the political realm largely

unresolved. The charity that Myers reads into Levinas is political charity—the charity that takes

place in precisely the conditions of material inequality that she rightfully laments. This is

however a misattribution of the conversation into the context of the political, rather than in the

ethical which interrupts and impinges upon the political.[282] There is no reference to the infinite in

this version of responsibility. *Infinite* responsibility is what sets Levinas apart, not simply

"responsibility."

We must remember that my responsibility is non-transferable—which is to say that it is not

charity at all. [283] Someone else *could* provide the blanket, the bowl of soup, the bed. Charitable

organizations like Catholic Social Services or The Salvation Army, for instance, pool

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[281] "The human I is not a unity closed upon itself, like the uniqueness of the atom, but rather an *opening*, that of responsibility, which is the true beginning of the human and of spirituality" (Levinas, "The Awakening of the I," in *Is It Righteous to Be?*, 182, emphasis mine).
[282] See Simon Critchley's "Five Problems in Levinas's View of Politics and the Sketch of a Solution to Them," *Political Theory*. Vol. 32., No. 2 (Apr. 2004), 172-185. "On my view, ethics is ethics for the sake of politics, that is, for the sake of a politics that does not close over in itself, becoming what Levinas would call totality, becoming a whole. Following Levinas's logic, when politics is left to itself without the disturbance of ethics it risks becoming tyrannical," (p. 182).
[283] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity,* 244-245. See Critchley's *Infinitely Demanding,* 11 "[The ethical subject] is a *split subject* divided between itself and a demand that it cannot meet, a demand that makes it the subject that it is, but which it cannot entirely fulfill." If responsibility is fulfillable, then it would be finite, and if it is transferable, then it would comprise another's subjectivity instead of my own.

responsibility among contributors and workers. Levinas's responsibility, on the other hand, is

non-diffusable. It is mine, regardless of what other people do. In various interviews in Is it

Righteous to Be?, to bolster this position, Levinas habitually invokes Dostoevsky's famous line

from *Brothers Karamazov*.

> The important thing here is that *I* am the hostage. In this connection, it is important—and this
> was not seen by German idealism—that the I is without reciprocity. It cannot be said that we
> are "I"s in the world. And therefore, *I* am responsible, and may not be concerned about
> whether the other is responsible for me. The human, in the highest, strictest sense of the
> word, is without reciprocity. I didn't discover that, Dostoevsky did. It is his great truth: "We
> are all guilty in everything in respect to all others, and I more than all the others." This last "I
> more than all the others" is the important thing here, even if that means in a certain sense to
> be an idiot.[284]

The unreasonableness of this responsibility is part of Levinas's stance on the ethical as existing

outside of totalizing, calculating, grasping thought of the political.

Related to this description of responsibility as outside of totalization, for Levinas, the

other is absolutely and irreducibly Other. Alterity is more than mere difference, and therefore

cannot be accounted for merely by reference to genus, and iterations of such a genus.[285] This is

part of Levinas's attempt to distance himself from Heidegger's concern with *Dasein* as a being

for whom concern for Being (and the meaning of Being) is a part of its very being.[286] As such,

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[284] Levinas, "Being-Toward-Death and Thou Shall Not Kill," in *Is It Righteous to Be?,* 133.
[285] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity,* 36. "The alterity, the radical heterogeneity of the other, is
possible only if the other is other with respect to a term whose essence is to remain at the point of
departure, to serve as *entry* into the relation, to be the same not relatively but absolutely."
[286] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 89. "The miracle of creation lies in creating a moral being. And
this implies precisely atheism, but at the same time, beyond atheism, shame for the arbitrariness
of the freedom that constitutes it. We therefore are also radically opposed to Heidegger who
subordinates the relation to the Other to ontology […] rather than seeing in justice and injustice a
primordial access to the Other beyond all ontology. The existence of the Other does not concern
us in the collectivity by reason of his participation in the being that is already familiar to us all,
nor by reason of his power and freedom which we should have to subjugate and utilize for
ourselves, nor by virtue of the difference of his attributes which we would have to surmount in
the process of cognition or in a movement of sympathy merging us with him, as though his
existence is an embarrassment." See also 45-47.

each subject is but (to varying degrees) a mere instance of Being, an example of difference but not alterity. This is one of Levinas's primary concerns with Heidegger.

Additionally, Levinas's critique of Western philosophy (as exemplified by Heidegger) is that it hinges upon a violent grasping, cataloging, and parsing out of beings, and so the negation of alterity into mere difference. This is, I think, a core contribution by Levinas toward a critical race theory similar to the points made by James Baldwin in his brief, but compelling opening section of *The Fire Next Time*, "My Dungeon Shook," which we touched on earlier. Baldwin warns his nephew not to make the same mistake as his grandfather when the latter believed what the White man said about him: "[He] was defeated long before he died because, at the bottom of his heart, he really believed what white people said about him… You can only be destroyed by believing that you really are what the white world calls a n-----. I tell you this because I love you, and please don't you ever forget it."[287] The White world seems to need a particular set of notions about and demarcations of the in order to ground its sense of itself. So the ontological violence of practices of race, actually doubles back upon the White world. The notion of "White" is perched atop an ever-expanding framework of violence. "Please remember that what they believe, as well as what they do and cause you to endure, does not testify to your inferiority but to their inhumanity and fear."[288] The foundational ontological violence of practices of race not only fails to truly grasp and account for the Other's alterity, but it also separates us from each other such that we are obstructed from accepting a fecund responsibility for each other, and so, our always already inter-subjective selves become root-bound in constraints of our own reproduction.

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[287] Baldwin, "My Dungeon Shook," 291.
[288] Baldwin, "My Dungeon Shook," 293.

Levinas sees Heidegger as lacking any concern for the other—what matters to Heidegger and *Dasein* is being at all costs.[289] Levinas is reaching toward an idea of subjects as "otherwise than being." Their being is defined by concern with the persistence of (their own) Being, but rather in a mode that is beyond mere being, that is to say: being-for-the-other. This self is, thus, other-centered rather than self-centered. If we can set aside his problematic categorization of Europe (or European metaphysics?) as comprised of the Bible and the Greeks (which Drabinski addresses at length in *Levinas and the Postcolonial*),[290] we can see how Levinas reads Judeo-Christian scripture as touching on the responsibility that he first articulates through the phenomenological tradition. Regarding a question about the problem of ethics as positing any norms, as well as Hegel's ethics developed out of the relationship of mutual recognition, Levinas responds saying, "The Old Testament already said this perfectly. What does the Bible in fact say? The text says: 'Thou shalt not kill.' It also says that there are a variety of ways to kill. It isn't always just a matter of killing, say, with a knife. The everyday killing with a good conscience, the killing in all innocence—there is such a thing as well! 'Love thy neighbor' and 'thou shalt not kill' mean the same thing." [291] I think this can help us move away from the fraught conception of mere charity as an implication of Levinas's work. One does not care for the Other only in the present moment—one does everything possible to care for the Other so that they live, rather than simply survive.

Of course, one must also realize that Levinas's obligation is not a product of cognition, or recognition, or sentiment, but rather grounds the subject in the very moment of the face-to-

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[289] Levinas, "The Awakening of the I," *Is It Righteous to Be?*, 185-186.
[290] Drabinski, *Levinas and the Postcolonial*, 4-9.
[291]Levinas, "Being-Toward-Death and Thou Shalt Not Kill," in *Is It Righteous to Be?,* 133.

face.[292] It is here that we can finally begin to discuss the infinite and how it comes into Levinas's position.

The Relationship Between the Ethics and the Political

Can we think of calculated political justice as actually intensifying the commitment that the Other imposes upon me in the ethical instead of as a way out or a slippage from the ideal to the actual? I want to argue that engagements with the pain of others that are produced by and on behalf of those who experience it are framed by a base comportment that not only informs an engagement with the world, but is grounded in engagement with the world per se. In this way, I am sympathetic to Myers focus on "worldly things," but I diverge from her in that I take the other to be part of my worldly circumstance. Whereas politics can certainly pose a significant problem to engaging with the ethical, (after all this is one of *Totality and Infinity*'s primary foci),[293] especially as we notice that the one-on-one singular relationship between the self and Other never exists in exactly the way that Levinas suggests through his early deployments of the phenomenological method. There are always other Others. We are never simply a dyad. In fact, we are genetic products of these "thirds," cultural participants, [294] societal actors, economic

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[292] Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 96. "Responsibility in fact is not a simple attribute of subjectivity, as if the latter already existed in itself, before the ethical relationship [i.e. the face-to-face]. Subjectivity is not for itself; it is, once again, initially for another."

[293] One of *Totality and Infinity*'s contributions is how it shows that totalizing thought de-faces the Other and attempts to neutralize her alterity. It thereby shows us how certain ways of (political) thinking undermine the ethical, but it also shows how the alterity of the Other persists in spite of totalization. See Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 40. "The breach of totality is not an operation of thought, obtained by simple distinguishing of terms that evoke one another or at least line up opposite one another. The void that breaks the totality can be maintained against an inevitably totalizing and synoptic thought only if thought finds itself *faced* with an other refractory to categories. Rather than constituting a total with this other as with an object, *thought consists in speaking*. We propose to call 'religion' the bond that is established between the same and the other without constituting a totality."

[294] See Derrida's "Violence and Metaphysics," in *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1978), 116-117 in relation to the violence inherent in language, difference, and

consumers and producers, language learners and deployers—all which exist within a multitude of selves and Others.

Levinas seems to suggest that the ethical impinges upon and interrupts the political, but there are also ways of calculating, comparing, and deciding that can actually deepen ethical commitment. The most relevant example for our purposes is the radical Black intellectual tradition and the critical race theory discipline that inherits that tradition. Critical race theory uses resources from political science, sociology, history, economics, psychoanalysis, postcolonial studies, world literature, feminist studies and art/poetry in order to show in this-worldly, context-informed political terms precisely how the political has failed us all. Critical race theory gathers evidence from all of these sources to disclose the myriad ways that living, breathing people of color as well as Whites are harmed by practices of race. These practices "compare the incomparable," demarcate, hierarchize, separate, classify, reify, confine, dominate, fetishize, manipulate, dehumanize, vilify, exploit, demean, and exceptionalize. One of the most valuable contributions of the critical race tradition is the way it facilitates the articulation and scrutinization of the specific ways that race harms non-Whites,[295] but we must also grapple with the ways that these practices harm even those who seemingly benefit from them.[296] I believe that Levinas's work can not only refine our conceptualizations of harm and responsibility toward

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justice, even as we seek to diminish that violence as much as possible. In future phases of this project, I will work through the problem of the third for Levinas's work. I find it problematic to simply overlay the ethical and the political from Levinas's thought into an "ethico-political" as Madeleine Fagan argues *Ethics and Politics after Poststructuralism: Levinas, Derrida, and Nancy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016).

[295] I have attempted to engage some of the earliest contributions to this tradition by engaging with David Walker's and Maria Stewart's writings in chapter one of this dissertation.

[296] See Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, xiii-iv. "The black man wants to be white. The white man is desperately trying to achieve the rank of man. [...] The white man is locked in his whiteness. The black man in his blackness."

non-Whites, but also provide the tools for examining how Whites themselves are harmed.

Perhaps we can employ critical race theory in ways that actually refine Levinas's term "the

political" as a very specific form of the political, that is, race-practices that surround, affect, and

subjectivate us all.[297]

We must also grapple with the ways that Levinas's formulation of the ethical is

problematic, specifically in that it denies the very terms by which so much injustice is inflicted

upon so many Others. If within the ethical "The best way of encountering the Other is not even

to notice the color of his eyes! When one observes the color of the eyes one is not in social

relationship with the Other," this is a way of abstracting away the lived conditions that

engagement with the ethical should be used to confront.[298] Levinas is infamously callous (or at

the very least tone-deaf) with regard to the problem of race.[299] He pays it lip service in a few

interviews and short works, but as John Drabinski says, we must supplement Levinas's

theoretical contribution in order for his work to be deployed in service of a more just (i.e. less

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[297] The tendency to link practices of race to "ideology" is an attempt to address Whiteness as harmful even to those who are considered (or consider themselves) "White." This raises significant theoretical concerns, however. We run the risk of allowing the shortcomings of orthodox Marxism to sneak into our analyses, particularly class-reductionism, the false equivalence of race as capital (and of the relationship to the means of its production) and the problem of admitting the premise of an empirical or objective truth below or within race itself. If race is an ideology and we are merely experiencing "false consciousness," then what would an accurate "race consciousness" look like? We must do more than merely act within race as a given, and rather find ways of undermining race without accepting its terms and dictates.
[298] Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 85.
[299] Drabinski, *Levinas and the Postcolonial*, 1-8. Drabinski clarifies the goal of his adaptation of Levinasian philosophy to better engage the problem of race and colonialism: "That is, if Levinas's work is not simply a model either exalted by how it champions the Other of totality or compromised by the racism of its author, and is instead already a broken theory of the globally totalizing thinking, then I think the ethical can be readdressed—albeit in importantly modified forms—both by and to the postcolonial experience of otherness" (9). Drabinksi puts Levinas in conversation with Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, Edouard Glissant, and Subcommandante Marcos in order to address some of Levinas's more conspicuous shortcomings.

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violent) politics. His most obvious attempt to address the problem of race over-generalizes forms of essentializing violence by collapsing them into the problem of antisemitism. The epigraph of *Otherwise than Being* reads: "To the memory of those who were closest among the six million assassinated by the National Socialists, and of the millions on millions of all confessions and all nations, victims of the same hatred of the other man, the same anti-semitism." While he seems to ground anti-semitism and general xenophobia in a common underlying problematic, which is laudable—after all we must find a common ground upon which to mount a challenge to the problem of various Others—we must also see how it is problematic to frame practices of race in terms of the specific hatred experienced by European Jews (i.e. those considered and consider themselves to be White or "almost White" according to Charles Mills), and practices of race that affect all other non-White subjects, in fact all subjects. In *The Racial Contract*, Charles Mills points out precisely this point. That the Shoah is considered the prime example of inhumanity in popular discourse, and that it receives the weighty moniker of *The* Holocaust, betrays the fact that while it is an unimaginable catastrophe that resists all understanding, it is nonetheless not unprecedented. [300] Mills argues that the Shoah has the weight it does for us collectively because it happened to White (or those deemed "almost White") people in Europe. Genocidal holocausts with body counts ten times the size of the Shoah have been perpetuated by Whites upon those deemed non-White for centuries in the colonization of the Americas,[301] and yet it is the White-on-White genocide that sets our standard for inhumanity. The Shoah is a horror, and even more so when we consider that it is not unique.

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[300] Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, NY: Cornel University Press, 1997), 102.
[301] See *Racial Contract*, 98-99, and endnote 16 referencing David Stannard's *American Holocaust*.

Another significant challenge posed by Levinas's notion of the face as destitution, nudity, and precariousness is that it only glosses on how the Other could be in that position in the first place.[302] Admittedly, most of his discussion of the Other is within the context of "the ethical," but for the moment, I am more concerned with the political. Yes, the infinite demand of the face interrupts my boundless, self-absorbed *jouissance* and enjoyment of everything before me,[303] but there is also my active contribution to the Other's being-in-pain. Levinas comes closest to addressing this problem with his notion of the self as having taken the Other's place in the sun [304] (thus the accusative nature of Levinasian subjectivity), but we must question we this alters the theoretical contribution if I am not merely an accidental usurper, but rather one who actively seeks to seize from the Other the means of survival. The fact is that I am not always simply a clumsy, thoughtless appropriator [305] (what I take to be the issue referenced in many conversations of White or male or *cis* or able-ist "privilege"), but rather an active predator, an oppressor—a murderer in spite of the "Thou shall not commit murder" that emanates from the face.[306] Levinas knows that we can (and, more often than not, *do*) shirk the call/demand of the face; even when we engage the demand, we necessarily fail to fulfill the demand—the responsibility is un-dischargeable.

But we should ask ourselves if such an active predation changes the political weight of the failure to care for the other, or whether such a comportment is merely the result of a self who is immersed in a totalizing social ontology that is imposed from without. Either way, we must wrestle with the ontologies that allow us either to stomp around blissfully ignorant of the harm

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[302] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity,* 197-201.
[303] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 171 and 198.
[304] Levinas, *Is It Righteous to Be?*, 53, 62, 98-99, 225, 253
[305] I revisit this issue in Chapter 5 in my analysis of Samuel R. Delany's *The Star Pit*.
[306] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 198-199.

we do to both those who are granted the status of the Other (for whom we are responsible), and those other Others to whom we deny even that. This is the problem of how to respond to the National Socialist, the Holocaust denier, the eugenicist, the slavery apologist, the human trafficker, the pimp, the White nationalist, the rapist, the xenophobe,—and ultimately, to how we respond to every one of us who do not fall so cleanly into these characterizations, but nonetheless share tendencies, practices, and ways of thinking that differ, at best, in degree, rather than in kind. Levinas's rejection of Heidegger's and Hegel's totalizing ontologies are grounded in many of the same concerns, though the extent to which he breaks from them (especially Heidegger) is up for debate. [307]

The Infinite and the Infinite Demand

As we leave Myers's argument, having (hopefully) successfully argued for new possible productive readings of Levinas, we now turn to some of the most theoretically compelling parts of Levinas's engagement with the ethical. One such compelling contribution is Levinas's articulation of the infinite which recurs throughout his various works. Particularly in *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas argues that the face of the Other is an expression of the infinite. This is profoundly important for understanding the self/Other relation. The Other is both irreducible to a countenance as well as expressed through it. The notion of "face" of the other is reminiscent of Descartes's engagement with the word "infinity" itself—as containing more than it holds.

> From the 1950s onwards, [Levinas] describes the ethical relation to the other in terms of infinity. What does this mean? Levinas's claim is very simple, but even quite

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[307] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 21. "The visage of being that shows itself in war is fixed in the concept of totality, which dominates Western philosophy. Individuals are reduced to being bearers of forces that command them unbeknown to themselves. The meaning of individuals (invisible of this totality) is derived from the totality. The unicity of each present is incessantly sacrificed to a future appealed to to bring forth its objective meaning. For the ultimate meaning alone counts; the last act alone changes beings into themselves. They are what they will appear to be in the already plastic forms of the epic."

sophisticated readers still get it muddled. The idea is that the ethical relation to the other has a *formal* resemblance to the relation in Descartes's Third Meditation, between the *res cogitans* and the infinity of God. What interests Levinas in this moment of Descartes's argument is that the human subject has an idea of infinity, and that this idea, by definition, is a thought that contains more than can be thought. As Levinas puts it, in what is almost a mantra in his published work, "In thinking infinity the I from the first *thinks more than it thinks.*"[308]

It is not that the face is a mask that stands between the self and the infinite depth of the Other, but rather that it is through the face that we interact with the infinite. It is crucial that one remember that the face is not a literal face—it is not the skin, muscles, and openings on the anterior of the cranium. It is that which expresses the infinite, that which is beyond. Just as "infinity" is not infinity, neither is the "face" the whole of the Other, but that which gestures toward and emanates from the Other, as expression of the Other.

This infinite is a crucial phenomenon for Levinas because it grounds his rejection of ontology as a means of accounting for and neutralizing away that which is incomparable and beyond classification. The infinite resists all violence that would deny it, constrain it, or reason it away.[309] The importance of the infinite shows us one of the most profound disagreements between Levinas and Heidegger, to whom the former is deeply indebted. As Levinas sees it, the primacy given ontology and the understanding of being in Heidegger is a dire mistake as it leaves beings concerned primarily with Being (and therefore their own Being—this is the central characteristic of *Dasein*), and leaves other beings at best ignored as mere other iterations of Being, and at worst, destroyed as impediments to the self's flourishing and Being. The Other is

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[308] Simon Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding* (London: Verso, 2013), 58.
[309] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 34-40.

not of much concern for Heidegger. Thus Levinas's articulation of ethics (rather than ontology) as first philosophy.[310]

The infinite in the other, and the other's "height" and irreducibility to my ontology take precedence over ontology itself. "The Other—the absolutely other—paralyzes possession only because he approaches me not from the outside but from above. The same can not lay hold of this other without suppressing him. But the untraversable infinity of the negation of murder is announced by this dimension of height, where the Other comes to me concretely in the ethical impossibility of committing his murder." [311] Levinas later reemphasizes the importance of the separation and asymmetry of the relation between self and other in terms of height:

> [The] relation between me and the other commences in the *inequality* of terms, transcendent to one another, where alterity does not determine the other in a formal sense, as where the alterity of B with respect to A results simply from the identity of B, distinct from the identity of A. Here the alterity of the other does not result from its identity, but constitutes it: the other is the Other. The Other qua Other is situated in a dimension of height and of abasement—glorious abasement; he has the face of the poor, the stranger, the widow, and the orphan and, at the same time, of the master call to invest and justify my freedom.[312]

This height contradicts any attempt to lump Levinas in with the "charitable" moralists or the (Heideggerian) fundamental ontologists.

In *Infinitely Demanding*, Critchley confronts the problem of motivational deficit in democratic societies, as well as its twin materializations: active nihilism and passive nihilism. To accomplish this, Critchley argues that the core of any ethical experience (and, thus,

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[310] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity,* 79. "The establishing of this primacy of the ethical, that is, of the relationship of man to man—signification, teaching, and justice—a primacy of an irreducible structure upon which all the other structures rest (and in particular all those which seem to put us primordially in contact with an impersonal sublimity, aesthetic or ontological), is one of the objectives of the present work."

[311] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 171.

[312] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity,* 251.

motivation) is the demand directed toward and approved by an ethical subject. This is the

moment in which the infinite plays its most auspicious role in Levinas's framing of ethical

engagement. Whereas Critchley employs Alain Badiou and Knud Ejler Løgstrup in describing

the parts of the ethical subject within the ethical experience, Levinas has his own particular

("structurally Judaic") formulation of the ethical subject.[313] Critchley elaborates on this point

saying:

> If Christianity privileges the present where contact with the divine is mediated through
> the presence of the Son, Jesus Christ, then Judaism privileges the past expressed in the
> covenant with the Father on Sinai… The event in relation to which the Jewish subject
> constitutes itself is not the eternal presence of Christ in which one can participate through
> an act of communion, it is rather the acknowledgment of a fact about the past, of what
> Levinas sees as the dimension of 'facticity' to which one is bound whether one likes it or
> not.[314]

This poses an interesting problem for us. If Critchley is right about Løgstrup's "structurally

Christian" ethics, then it parallels Levinas's in its urging of infinite responsibility, but differs in

that Løgstrup suggests that the responsibility is extended even to the foe, the attacker, and not

just to the stranger or the neighbor.

The issue of the connection to God posed by the quote above creates an interesting puzzle

regarding the relation of time to ethical responsibility. If Levinas's sense of the ethical subject is

grounded in the always prior covenant, and facticity (of "Jewish identity") but Løgstrup's ethical

subject is always in relation to God via the perpetual presence of Christ and one's ongoing access

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[313] Critchley compares Løgstrup's "structurally Christian" formulation of responsibility to
Levinas's "structurally Judaic" formulation of responsibility on *Infinitely Demanding,* 50-51.
There is a difference in each thinker's figuration of time, demand, and idea of for whom one is
responsible given the scriptural foundations of each. Both Løgstrup and Levinas studied in
Strasbourg Freiburg around the same time and both read and were heavily influenced by
Bergson, Husserl, and Heidegger (see also page 50). The differences of conceptions of the
infinite, un-assuageable responsibility are interesting given the intersections of their scriptural
traditions.
[314] Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding*, 50.

to him through communion, then perhaps chronological time is more of a dilemma for Levinas's

relevance to ethical responsibility than we at first notice. Here, the infinity of the ever-further

past (the Covenant) could be seen as at odds with an infinite series of presents in which Christ is

present.[315]

> Løgstrup's understanding of Christianity is that the individual's relation to God is
> determined *wholly* at the point of his relation to the neighbor. Therefore, one's existence
> is completely at stake in the relation to the other person and to fail the other is to fail that
> existence irreparably… Against the existentialist emphasis on radical choice as the basis
> for one's moral projects, Løgstrup insists that the ethical demand that faces the individual
> subject in a situation is independent of and prior to objective choice.[316]

Interestingly, even under a Christian ethical framework, the demand is still always prior. What

difference then does the past Covenant have in relation to the ongoing presence/presents of

Christ? Critchley ultimately employs Løgstrup's extension of responsibility to the neighbor,

stranger *and* the foe in his particular articulation of the ethical subject.[317]

Although we have certainly not explored all of the facets of Levinasian "infinity" we can

begin to sharpen our picture of the moment of approval of the demand presented by the Other by

putting these dual "infinities" in conversation. The Other is not only infinitely (and irreducibly)

Other (and, as such, otherwise than being) and ungraspable/unknowable (that is, not susceptible

to ontology), but as such the Other beckons/calls/pleads of the self an infinite responsibility to

care for them in their nudity and exposedness.[318] There is simultaneously an infinite distance

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[315] Consider "the eternal presence (presents/present moments?) of Christ" referenced in the
Critchley quote above.
[316] Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding*, 51.
[317] Honestly, my exposure to Løgstrup's work is both in passing, indirect (i.e. through Critchley)
and late, but this intensification of responsibility is both compelling and I think compatible with
the ethical project that I am attempting. I plan to engage more thoroughly with Løgstrup's
challenge to an already daunting Levinasian responsibility in future projects.
[318] This is at least the form of the relationship articulated in *Totality and Infinity*; in *Otherwise
than Being*, the self is condemned by, held hostage by, and persecuted by the Other. In this way,

between the self and the Other, an infinite difference between the self and the Other, and an infinite responsibility for the Other. Myers's reading of Levinas does not account for these infinities. Myers's self and other are simply different—there is no *alterity* in her read of Levinas, and because of this, she necessarily misattributes the implications of his work as mere charity.

We can also expand the notion of the infinite to play out in the nature of the ethical experience that Critchley develops in *Infinitely Demanding*. Not only is the infinite at play in the notion of the face (and its roots in the Cartesian working-through of "God"), in the distance between the self and the other, and the depth of the demand placed upon the self by the Other, but also (if Critchley is correct) in the infinite approval of that demand—an irresolvable, and unmeetable demand within each moment, but also across an infinite number of moments of approval and engagement. Again, this goes unaddressed in Myers's read. Myers's version of infinite responsibility not only fails to be infinite across time, but also is limited to bare life as exemplified in her notion of charity as concerning mere food, clothing, shelter transferred from a "have" to a "have-not." [319]

In spite of the shift away from previous phenomenologists' (i.e. Husserl and Heidegger) grounding of meaning and existence in the finite, there are interesting slippages between Levinas's approach to the infinite and those of his predecessors. There are those (Dominique Janicaud, among them) who argue that Levinas places himself in direct conflict with the phenomenological method by giving primacy to the infinite, and thus cannot claim to be one of its practitioners, and is instead a metaphysician or theologian. "In stark contrast [to the moderns], phenomenology insists that beings are not defined by how they may be complicit in some

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Levinas can be read as shifting more toward a Løgstrup-ian position of care for the foe, the aggressor, the oppressor.

[319] Myers, *Worldly Ethics*, 54-55.

presumed infinite movement, but precisely by how they break with such a movement. Beings, for the phenomenologist, are de-*fin*-ed by their limits and borders, by how they stand out on their own from the background horizon of the world. Beings are thus essentially finite and limited for the phenomenologist." [320] Even as Husserl privileges the finite through the transcendental ego's ability to organize sensory data into ontical things, there is still an element of the infinite in the ego's interaction with a worldly "thing." According to Drew Dalton's study of the infinite in phenomenology and Levinas, "There is no "view from nowhere" for Husserl, no apprehensive position from where the totality of noetic data could be received simultaneously. All phenomena are perceived from this or that perspective. It is precisely such a perspectival limitation that enables the perceiving subject to organize sense perceptions into synthetic ontic idealities." [321]

In other places, Husserl admits that the finitude of each sensory perception is but one of an infinite number of possible perspectives on the perceptual object. "What is more, no matter how much one may enrich or fill out the *idea* of a noetic object, the conceptual apprehension of it will *always* fall short of the actual givenness of the thing itself: hence, the *in-finito* of givenness. Thus, though according to Husserl, the thing is concretely apprehended in its finitude, conceived noetically, the thing represents not merely something incomplete, but something infinite, with the word '*infinity* really [signifying] the same thing as 'and so on'' of given experience." [322] We can see how Levinas's thought is again, not so much, anti-Husserlian or anti-Heideggerian, but rather post-, as both Husserl and Heidegger set the stage for a reversal of the primacy given to the finite, being-toward-death, and ontology, and instead Levinas places

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[320] Dalton, Drew M. "Phenomenology and the Infinite: Levinas, Husserl, and the Fragility of the Finite." *Levinas Studies*. Vol. 9, 2014. pp 23-51. (30-31).
[321] Dalton, "Phenomenology and the Infinite," 34.
[322] Dalton, "Phenomenology and the Infinite," 40.

emphasis on the infinite, being-toward-the-other, and ethics.[323] Husserl and Heidegger provide

the groundwork for their own theories' revision, if not refutation.

While Dalton's explanation of the roots of Levinas's deference to the infinite is both

studious and clear, he fails to glean the importance and potential of the (re)emergence of the

infinite. In his efforts to show continuity between orthodox phenomenology and Levinas, Dalton

blurs the lines between each thinker's use of "the infinite" such that he sees a threat of Levinas

slipping back into an ontological grasping of that which is infinite. If every worldly object is an

infinity (of ever more sensory data, of more perspectives), then (so Dalton seems to argue) there

is nothing special about the Other's infinite. Whereas Dalton sees this as a threat to neutralizing

and objectifying the face (of Levinas slipping back into ontology), I argue that the potential for

seeing more "things" as "faces" as a positive potentiality—to see faces where we have

previously seen only surfaces, aspects, details, sensory data is actually an intensification of

ethical responsibility, rather than a nullification of it. As Myers does in *Worldly Ethics*, Dalton

misattributes the value of the care for the Other as denuding a democratic ethics of meaningful

drive, rather than expanding and enhancing democratic values to encompass more people qua

people (as well as non-human things and beings as well), and require a deeper engagement with

them. Seeing the infinite in non-human things does not raise the threat of obsession, fascination,

totalization, as Dalton fears.[324]

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[323] Dalton studiously and clearly plots out the movement and priority of the notions of the finite and infinite through Husserl, Heidegger, and Levinas in the piece referenced here. His conclusions regarding the potentiality of the infinite in Levinas's thought stray from my own. Dalton is far more pessimistic about the slippage of the infinite into domination, obsession, and schizophrenia.

[324] See the concluding section of "Phenomenology and the Infinite" Dalton's piece (entitled "The Dangers of the Ambiguity of the Infinite") for his argument about the potential slippage of Levinas backward into ontology, and the dangers of exceeding rational limitations in pursuit of the ethical (Dalton, "Phenomenology and the Infinite,45-49).

We should welcome the challenge to see Others where we once saw only matter. This is, however, a challenge to even Levinas's own intense version of humanism. His humanism defends a notion of the Other that self-evidently emerges distinct from the environment—the problem is not simply that we fail to take responsibility for the Other even as they call to us, but that we fail to see the Other as such in the first place. Our failure to hear the demand of the Other as a demand is a problem humanism does not resolve, but rather doubles down upon. This is the trouble of our tendency to point out injustice by claiming that "we are human/men/people, too."[325] As Dalton articulates it:

> Given its anarchic nature, Levinas claims, "the relation with the Other," opened in the presentation of the face, "does not immediately have the structure of intentionality. It is not opening onto…, aiming at…, which is already an opening onto being and an aiming at being. The absolutely Other is not reflected in a consciousness; it resists the indiscretion of intentionality" (BPW 16). Indeed, quite to the contrary, the enigma of the face functions to put the intentionality of the perceiving ego into question. It is this 'putting in question' (*TI* 195) implied in the enigma of the face that Levinas thinks opens up the possibility of ethical consideration and responsibility.[326]

The Importance of Alterity

In addition to the importance of infinity in Levinas's model, alterity is another crucial part of the ethical that Levinas brings to bear as a challenge for us. There is the infinite distance between the self and the Other, there is the infinite *of* the other, and the infinite responsibility I have for the Other. This infinite *of* the other is their alterity, their radical height, their

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[325] See Derrida "Violence and Metaphysics," in *Writing and Difference*, 313, Note 21: "Here, we only wish to foreshadow that *within history*—but is it meaningful elsewhere?—every philosophy of nonviolence can only choose the lesser violence within an *economy of violence*." In the case of humanist appeals above, the option left to us is to make claims to humanity, which always requires that criteria and exclusion of (other) others be in place in order to for my status as "human" to have value. The problem of who gets to count as my (human) other is still left in question.
[326] Dalton, "Phenomenology and the Infinite," 24.

irreducibility to the same, their incomparability. As mentioned in the previous section, Myers

overlooks the importance of alterity for Levinas. Rather than merely in a relation of a "here" to a

"there" on a level plane of common existence, expressed in common terms, alterity precludes the

notion of charity to which Myers defers. [327] If the self and Other are in a relation of alterity, then

the point of their interaction cannot be reduced to the bare economic (i.e. "haves" and "have-

nots"), for this levels their being to mere positions on a common plane within which each party

becomes a coordinate, a measurement of what the self has in relation to the other, who by

relation, lacks. This conception of the Other becomes class reductionist. It reduces the other to

measurements of material possession always relative to the material possessions of the self.

Instead, Levinas describes alterity (or exteriority) thusly:

> Being is exteriority. This formula does not only mean to denounce the illusions of the
> subjective, and claim that objective forms alone, in opposition to the sands in which
> arbitrary thought is mired and lost, merit the name of being. Such a conception would in
> the end destroy exteriority, since subjectivity itself would be absorbed into exteriority,
> revealing itself to be a moment of a panoramic play. Exteriority would then no longer
> mean anything, since it would encompass the very interiority that justified this
> appellation… Exteriority, or, if one prefers, alterity, would be converted into the same…
> Exteriority is true not in a lateral view apperceiving it in its opposition to interiority; *it is
> true in a face to face that is no longer entirely vision, but goes further than vision. The
> face to face is established starting with a point separated from exteriority so radically
> that it maintains itself of itself, is me; every other relation that would not part from this
> separated and therefore arbitrary point… would miss the—necessarily subjective—field
> of truth. The true essence of man is presented in his face, in which he is infinitely other
> than a violence like unto mine, opposed to mine and hostile, already at grips with mine in
> a historical world where we participate in the same system.* He arrests and paralyzes my
> violence by his call, which does not do violence, and comes from on high.[328]

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[327] Myers, *Worldly Ethics*, 71-72. "First, the charitable relation is characterized by hierarchy;
there are benefactors and there are recipients… Ordinary understandings of charity also
presuppose inequality between those who give and those who receive. Whether one thinks of it
in terms of individual charitable acts (donated money or time, for example) or of the efforts of an
organization to provide services, hierarchy defines the relationship in which one party has access
to resources that the other does not."
[328] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 290-291.

It is an infinite separation, an irresolvable tension, an incomparability. But equally as important, there is the constitutive moment of the self that is the face-to-face interaction with the absolute alterity of the Other. The self becomes an I in this moment. The radical difference that is the Other is determinate of my own status as a "self." Without the alterity of the Other, I am not human, for Levinas's notion of humanity per se is dependent upon responsibility for-the-Other, and being-toward-the-Other.[329]

As Alphonso Lingis argues in the translator's introduction to *Otherwise than Being*,[330] for Levinas, "Responsibility is a fact. It is a fact prior to the facts assembled by coherent, that is, responsible, discourse. The theoretical attitude, the ontological logos which articulates Being, owes its energy to this given—or this imposed. Responsibility is a bond. It is a bond with an imperative order, a command. All subjective movements are under an order; subjectivity is this subjection. This bond does not only determine a being to act, but is constitutive of subjectivity as such, determines it to be."[331] It is the radical difference, the alterity of the other that allows for the self as subject to exist in the first place. Alterity is therefore the condition of the self's being called beyond mere being—its being as actually beyond mere being, "otherwise than being" and "beyond essence" as the title of the work suggests. The self does not exist without the alterity of

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[329] The interviews in Levinas, *Is It Righteous to Be?*, Part II: Ethics as First Philosophy, 105-236 are particularly instructive on this point.

[330] It is profoundly difficult to find one's footing, or even a point of entry when attempting to address Levinas's thought. Each piece of his argument is not only a refutation or challenge of common terms and discourses, but each theoretical move also props up (and contradicts) every other one. In the current section I attempt to tease out his use of the infinite, alterity, and subjectivity as if they were autonomous concepts only to show precisely how intertwined they are. This co-constitution is a central theme for Levinas. The way he thinks and writes is a challenge to linearity, causality, and time. One finds oneself settling for paraphrastic comments by those who work closely with Levinas (Lingis was a frequent translator) in order to fix even a tenuous jumping-off point.

[331] Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne Unviersity Press, 2002), xix.

the Other—the other is not merely another iteration of the genus *homo sapiens*, but something

irreducible to that demarcation. Continuing with Lingis's introduction:

> But—and this is the most distinctive and original feature of Levinas's ethical philosophy—the locus where this imperative is articulated is the other who faces—the face of the other. Facing, which is not turning a surface, but appealing and contesting, is the move by which alterity breaks into the sphere of phenomena. For Levinas responsibility is the response to the imperative addressed in the concrete act of facing. Responsibility is in fact a relationship with the other, it is very alterity. Then a relationship with alterity as such is constitutive of subjectivity. Responsibility is a form of recognition—acknowledgment of a claim, an order, which is even constitutive of subjectivity—a summons to arise to be and to present oneself. [332]

Through these two passages we get a sense of the weight that alterity has for Levinasian ethics.

Without the a priori radical alterity and irreducibility of the singularity of the other—their

uniqueness, their transcendence—there is no subject. The subjectivity of the self depends upon—

and is responsible to and for—the alterity presented by the face of the other. This is the radical

break that Levinas attempts to make from Western egoism, the same, and totality.[333] The subject

always comes after the other; this is an outright rejection of the self-contained and self-sufficient

ego of Cartesian thought and its shifts and adaptations in Husserl and Heidegger, manifest in the

transcendental ego and *Dasein*, respectively.

Neither the infinite, nor alterity, in/of/through the other enter into Myers's examination of

the subject in *Worldly Ethics*. The subject is taken as straightforward and given, and Levinas's

work simply does not abide such treatment.

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[332] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, xix

[333] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 43. "Western philosophy has most often been an ontology: a reduction of the other to the same by interposition of a middle and neutral term that ensures the comprehension of being."

Recall Heidegger's *Dasein* and its concern/obsession (by nature) with its being. *Dasein* is

the being for whom its being is a concern, and its concern for its being *is* its being. [334] For

Heidegger, what is important is being itself, and therefore, for *Dasein*, the central concern is *its

being itself*. Everything is used in service of *Dasein*'s being, which is being-toward-death—its

thrownness toward death, an awareness of its limit(s) and therefore its possibilities.[335] *Dasein* is

defined by its relationship to its own death. Levinas's "ethics as first philosophy" is an overt

attempt to upset the centrality of the self's death; instead of being-toward-death, the self's being

should be understood as being-toward-the-Other, and the prevention of the Other's death.

Levinas conceives of Heideggerian obsession with being and maintenance thereof as a

common violence at the core of Western philosophy since Parmenides. [336] For Levinas, ontology

is our foundational violence, upon which all other violences are built. Reframing and reorienting

our philosophical foundations, proclivities, and primacies is the first step to a less violent

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[334] *Totality and Infinity*, 45. "To affirm the priority of *Being* over *existents* is to already decide
the essence of philosophy; it is to subordinate the relation with *someone*, who is an existent, (the
ethical relation) to a relation with the *Being of existents*, which, impersonal, permits the
apprehension, the domination of existents (a relationship of knowing), subordinates justice to
freedom. If freedom denotes the mode of remaining the same in the midst of the other,
knowledge, where an existent is given by interposition of impersonal Being, contains the
ultimate sense of freedom. It would be opposed to justice, which involves obligations with regard
to an existent that refuses to give itself, the Other, who in this sense would be an existent par
excellence. In subordinating every relation with existents to the relation with Being the
Heideggerian ontology affirms the primacy of freedom over ethics. […] Freedom comes from an
obedience to Being: it is not man who possesses freedom; it is freedom that possesses man"
(emphasis in original).
[335] See the excerpt from "Time and the Other" in Levinas, *The Levinas Reader* (Hoboken: Wiley-
Blackwell, 1989), 40. "Being toward death, in Heidegger's authentic existence, is a supreme
lucidity and hence a supreme virility. It is *Dasein*'s assumption of the uttermost possibility of
existence, which precisely makes possible other possibilities, and consequently makes possible
the very feat of grasping a possibility—that is, it makes possible activity and freedom. Death in
Heidegger is an event of freedom, whereas for me the subject seems to reach the limit of the
possible in suffering. It finds itself enchained, overwhelmed, and in some way passive. Death is
in this sense the limit of idealism."
[336] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 102.

world.[337] The temptation to condense the relationship between the self and other into a mere economic dyad is precisely such a violence that we must contest if we are to truly engage in the project of opening-up new possibilities for ethical engagement.

In fact, it is precisely this "opening-up" that the other brings to the table in the first place. "[The] relationship with the other is an a priori fact preceding the a priori forms or conditions for the possibility of experience. Somewhat as in Kant, where the subjection to law—the fact of the categorical imperative—precedes and makes possible the legislative activity of autonomous subjectivity, precedes even its intrinsic forms."[338] As I have mentioned in previous chapters, much of what guides my project is what I see as a profound need to reframe and ground responsibility and care for others in a philosophical approach that neither collapses into ego-centric instrumentality or utilitarianism, nor universalizing, normative deontological dictates. On my view, Levinas begins an engagement with the ethical that binds the self and Other together without reducing one party to the terms of the other party. We remain ourselves within Levinas's framework, but the self does not exist in any meaningful way without the other. Whereas a dialectical approach appears at first glance to maintain the integrity of the self and the other, ultimately negation of negation neutralizes both the self and other (or master and bondsman, whatever the case may be) into a totalized iteration of "spirit." Within a relation to alterity,

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[337] It occurs to me that much of my time has been spent laying the groundwork for a particular form of ethical engagement with the problem of race, rather than actually sustaining an engagement with specific practices of race. This obviously opens the work at hand up to considerable and warranted criticism of its value. I need to articulate the ways that ontology lies at one of the cores of the problem of race—I see it as having multiple, contradictory, and shifting cores. If the exercise at hand can help undermine even part of this problem, I will be simultaneously delighted, yet, ultimately, dissatisfied. In Critchley's terms, this theoretical project is but one moment of my infinite approval of the infinite demand placed upon me by the Other.

[338] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, xxiii.

however, that which is irreducible to the self (the alterity of the other, rather than the "not-I"

frame of the other in which the other is merely that which is the negation of, and in terms of, the

"I") actually makes the subject possible by demanding of it that it answer for the other's

destitution, pain, suffering, nakedness.

The subject is actually formed in its passive exposedness to the other's exposure. Its

subjectivity is thus its response to being subjected to demand imposed upon it by the other.

Lingis again adroitly channels Levinas:

> The approach of the other is an initiative I undergo. I am passive with regard to it… Here
> no form, no capacity preexisted in me to espouse the imperative and make it my own. Not
> being able to treat the law as a law I myself have given myself is just in what the sense of
> alterity consists. Not being able to arise by my own forces here is just in what the sense
> of an appeal made to me, an invocation or a provocation, consists. Not being able to take
> up the order put to me and appropriate it, and make it into my own principle, is just in
> what the sense of being contested consists.[339]

What happens after this subjectivation is, of course, where the complication comes in.

Not only does each attempt to answer the appeal pull me deeper and deeper into my

responsibility, since each attempt will fail to compensate for my infinite responsibility, but I can

just as easily fail to acknowledge the demand in the first place—this is the problem of grounding

being in a sense of freedom rather than responsibility (or beyond/otherwise than being). The

former is purportedly Heidegger's stance, where one's responsibility is only to Being itself, to

being authentically, to authentic Being. Levinas shows us what is at stake in our comportment

toward and deference to ontology over ethics.[340]

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[339] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, xxiii.

[340] See Hartelius, Johanna. (2013). Face-ing Immigration: *Prosopopeia* and the "Muslim-Arab-Middle Eastern" Other. *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, 43:4, 311-334. Hartelius poignantly engages the specific ways we ontologize away the face of the Middle Eastern immigrant and attempt to totalize their alterity by working through Levinas's notion of the Face and Paul de Man's notions of apostrophe and *prosopopeia*.

On Subjectivity

In addition to Levinas's employment of the infinite and alterity, a new worldly ethics

must also bear in mind the subjectivity that emerges from Levinas's engagement with the ethical.

Levinas's subjectivity cannot be reduced to the notion of the citizen so prevalent in *Worldly*

Ethics. To be a citizen is to participate in a specific set of relationships to the state or nation and

it presumes certain rights, privileges, and duties institutionally protected and required by the

state—the subject is not such a narrow (or late) existent.[341] By the time we begin giving primacy

to the citizen, it is already too late—the ethical already devolves into a calculated "justice"

couched in terms of caring for one's "own people," viz. fellow citizens, even at the expense of

everyone else. A real democratic ethics capable of sustaining and fostering "democratic

associative action," such as I join Myers in seeking out, should endeavor to upend such lines of

demarcation and limitations on expanding responsibility. Myers describes her own project

thusly:

> The argument offered here aims to reveal unacknowledged costs of the turn to ethics. I
> demonstrate that Foucauldian and Levinasian approaches, each focused on a different
> dyadic relation of care, are inclined to enervate rather than enrich associative action by
> democratic *citizens*. My critique does not conclude with a call to abandon the quest for a
> democratic ethos, however. Instead, I conceptualize and defend an alternative ethical
> orientation, one focused on inciting *citizens'* collective care for worldly things. And I

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[341] See Homi Bhabha's Preface to Frantz Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 2005) on this point of difference between the citizen and the subject. "It is difficult to do justice to Fanon's views on violence, or to appreciate his passionate approach to the phenomenology of decolonization, without acknowledging a profound internal dissonance, in French colonial thought, between the free standing of the *citizen* and the segregated status of the person—the double political destiny of the same colonized person" (xxi). Also: "French colonial policy acknowledges the naked right of the colonized *as individual*—divested of cultural differences— to be identified as a citizen of the republic. But there exists, at the same time, a discriminatory denial or disavowal of the colonized citizen's right to be represented and recognized as a culturally clothed *subject* [my emphasis] who may not conform to the norms and practices of French civil society. Without the rights of representation and participation, in the *public* sphere, can the subject ever be a citizen in the true sense of the term?" (xxiv).

argue that worldly ethics, implicit in certain collective *citizen* efforts, is a promising resource for democratic action today.[342]

As we have seen up to this point, Levinas's engagement with the ethical is altogether differently oriented from how Myers characterizes it, but it is not as opposed to the goal of a worldly as we may at first assume. The grounds of Levinas's approach emerge from a different theoretical genealogy. First, Levinas's notion of the subject is not the same as the atomistic individual, which seems to be how Myers reads him. Simon Critchley describes the Levinasian subject as a "split subject."

> Levinas's claim is that responsibility precedes freedom, that is, prior to the free activity of the subject bringing all of reality within its comprehensive epistemic grasp, there is the experience of a heteronomous demand that calls me into question and calls me to respond… What must be acknowledged is the heteronomous constitution of autonomy, that the ethical demand is refractory to our cognitive powers and the other person can always resist whatever concept under which we may try to subsume them.[343]

So before I even cognize the other as being before me in the first place, the other demands of me that I approve (Critchley's term)[344] of the demand that they call out to me. The other is always before the self—the other precedes and interrupts my boundless freedom of *jouissance*, of consumption of the world, of grasping/seizing/knowing. Again, I turn to Critchley:

> In my view, the basic operation of Levinas's entire work is the experience of the exorbitant demand which heteronomously determines the ethical subject. This demand is the imperative *'tu ne tueras point'*, 'you shall not kill', which is expressed in the resistance of the other's face. The demand provokes an act of approval on the part of the subject, the words *'me voici'*, 'here I am', the Hebrew *'hinneni'* of Abraham's response to the demand of God in Genesis 22. Levinas insists that the subject discovers itself as an object, in the accusative case as he puts it, as interlocuted by the demand of the other. But the Levinas subject is constituted through an act of approval to a demand to which it is fundamentally *inadequate*.[345]

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[342] Myers, *Wordly Ethics*, 11. My emphasis.
[343] Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding*, 57.
[344] Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding*, 63.
[345] Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding*, 57.

A subject only becomes a subject by taking on the demand that the other imposes upon it. It is by and through being subjected to a demand, and approving/accepting that infinite demand that one becomes a subject. One becomes subject through the asymmetrical relation with the other instigated through the demand experienced in the face-to-face with the other. [346]

Critchley also points out that as Levinas's thought evolves and he responds to criticisms of his work, this extreme demand changes from a simple plea from the nude and exposed other (albeit in their radical height) to a demand placed upon the self by one who persecutes them, but what remains consistent is that the demand itself is traumatic.

> Levinas makes the extreme claim that my relation to the other is not some benign benevolence, compassionate care or respect for the other's autonomy, but is the obsessive experience of a responsibility that persecutes me with its sheer weight. I am the other's hostage, taken by them and prepared to substitute myself for any suffering and humiliation that they may undergo. I am responsible for the persecution I undergo and even for my persecutor…[347]

The subject is thus a product of trauma at multiple levels: of being called into question and interrupted by the arrival of the other, of approving of a demand that one can never fulfill, and that demand even comes from ones who persecute and condemn. The core of subjectivity is exposure to the other or "exposedness to otherness".[348] The subject does not constitute itself, nor is it given entirely from without as whole, complete, or readymade. Instead, Critchley argues that

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[346] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 79-81. See also 215: "To hear his destitution which cries out for justice is not to represent an image to oneself, but to posit oneself as responsible, both as more and as less than the being that presents itself in the face. Less, for the face summons me to my obligations and judges me. The being that presents himself in the face comes from a dimension of height, a dimension of transcendence whereby he can present himself as a stranger without opposing me as obstacle or enemy. More, for my position as *I* consists in being able to respond to this essential destitution of the Other, finding resources for myself. The Other who dominates me in his transcendence is thus the stranger, the widow, the orphan, to whom I am obligated."
[347] Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding*, 61.
[348] Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding*, 61.

the subject is *divided*. "[It] is constitutively *split* between itself and a demand that it cannot meet, but which is that by virtue of which it becomes a subject. The ethical subject is a split subject."[349] This overwhelming demand, approval, and responsibility comprises the subject as always existing for-the-other, rather than merely alongside or *mitsein* (being-with).

If we take seriously Levinas's formulation of the subject's being-toward-and-for-the-other, then we can hardly say that "charitable" is an adequate characterization. Charity does not begin to describe it. One can only be charitable toward an other whom one is merely alongside, or whom one incidentally encounters. The Levinasian subject is exposed to the exposedness, the nudity, of the other by definition—it is not something that occurs for a moment and then ceases once the subject walks away. This, I think, is an issue at the heart of Myers's attempts to build a novel ethical engagement: *Worldly Ethics* unintentionally invokes formulations of Being that Levinas is attempting to challenge in the first place. This slipping-in of quasi-Heideggerian formulations into a Myers's citizen-centric model precludes appreciation of the contributions of Levinas's radical project.

Critchley adeptly and succinctly conveys the value of resituating the ethical experience of the subject at the center of our pursuits of new theorizations of ethical responsibility and possibility.

> On my view, ethics is the experience of an infinite demand at the heart of my subjectivity, a demand that undoes me and requires me to do more, not in the name of some sovereign authority, but in the namelessness of a powerless exposure, a vulnerability, a responsive responsibility, a humorous self-division. Politics is not the naked operation of power or an ethics-free agonism, it is an ethical practice that is driven by a response to situated injustices and wrongs.[350]

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[349] Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding*, 62-63.
[350] Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding*, 132.

Instead of falling back into models dependent upon fraught concepts of causal determinacy of an ethics that necessarily yields "democratic associative action," or "the citizen" who participates in the "public sphere," we need new ways of conceiving our relation to the other. Levinasian arguments for responsiveness, exposure, and passivity at the core of subjectivity forces us to shift away from thinking of ourselves as atomistic, fully formed, and self-evident knowers, and can thus lead to different ways of being-toward-the-other to and for whom we are infinitely responsible. Such arguments lack the compulsive force of a set of dictates, restraints or duties normatively imposed from without, precisely because exposure to the exposedness of the other lies at the heart of the subject in the first place. The other cannot force or punish the self into approving of the demand precisely because the demand is part of the subject's formation in the first place. Therefore, Levinasian ethics rightly understood and considered in conjunction to concerns with "worldly things and conditions" can yield a new and productive democratic ethos that deepens, rather than opposes, the worldly ethics toward which this chapter's interlocutor Ella Myers calls us.

CHAPTER 5: THE POLITICS OF ESCAPE IN SAMUEL DELANY'S *THE STAR* PIT
AND LEVINAS'S *DE L'EVASION*: A RESPONSE TO NEIL ROBERTS'S
FREEDOM AS MARRONAGE

The chapter ahead will place Emmanuel Levinas's 1935 essay *On Escape*[351] into

conversation with Samuel R. Delany's 1967 novella *The Star Pit*.[352] Given the recent revival of

interest in the political action of flight from slavery exemplified in Neil Roberts's *Freedom as*

Marronage,[353] it is important to delve into the theoretical value of framing our criticisms of the

practices of race in terms of the urge/drive/compulsion to escape/evade one's state of being-

riveted or riveted-ness (Levinas), to journey past one's given limitations (Delany), and fleeing

slavery and establishing new dwellings in marooned, derelict, unknown, forgotten, or isolated

locales (Roberts). Each of these thinkers share common concerns, while also diverging in how

they frame and respond to them.

The value of Emmanuel Levinas's early work is the way in which he frames escape as a

response to boundedness and oppression by being itself. Even as early as 1935, Levinas is

responding to problems he sees in Heidegger's argument for fundamental ontology at the basis of

Western philosophical tradition. Levinas sees Heidegger as both a fascinating thinker, as well as

an example of a deeply concerning problem for philosophical thought since Parmenides. Being is

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[351] Emmanuel Levinas, *On Escape: De l'évasion*. trans. Bettina Bergo. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

[352] Samuel R. Delany, *The Star Pit* (New York: Tor, 1989). (Originally published by Galaxy Publishing Corp. in 1966)

[353] Roberts creates a taxonomy of four forms of marronage that broadens the term to account for political actions aimed at gaining freedom that lie outside the usual conception of marroonage as fleeing and establishing small marooned communities: petit, grande, sociogenic, and sovereign.

(as framed by Heidegger) defined by limitation, by borders, by finitude, by necessarily restricted possibility.[354] Levinas, on the other hand, is more interested in beings, rather than with being— with existents, rather than existence—and is engaged in opening up possibilities rather than foreclosing them. To be primarily concerned with being (this is Heidegger's definition of *Dasein*—a being whose very being is concerned with knowing and achieving its essential being), is to at best, relegate the other to a mere iteration of being, and at worst to deem the other an impediment/obstacle to my own authentic being—my own obtainment of the fullest being within my bounded possibilities.

De l'evasion is Levinas's early attempt to articulate an alternative to Heideggerian Being, and so begins theorizing a compelling force present in humanity which pushes us to surpass our obsession with being, and instead (as we eventually see in his 1974 book *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*) see ourselves differently within the relationship between the self and the other. By critiquing our theoretical assumptions about the relationship of beings to being, we can reconstitute a new engagement with the ethical in the relationship between the self and the other. This is where Levinas begins his theoretical trajectory at least—*Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being* expand his first articulations in productive and compelling ways. (It is important to note that this is not a linear causal relationship. Levinas complicates our notion of time, as well, so the relationship to the other is actually inseparable from our relationship to being. One does not resolve the problem of being, and *then* resolve the relationship to the other. These are co-constituative moments. We don't exist first and then enter into a relationship with

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[354] See Drew Dalton's "Phenomenology and the Infinite: Levinas, Husserl, and the Fragility of the Finite" in *Levinas Studies*, Vol. 9 (2014) 23-51 for a discussion of the underlying role of the infinite in Husserl's phenomenology and Heidegger's iteration of the relationship between the finite and being.

the other secondarily—our relationship to the other is a complex constitutive moment of exposedness to exposedness—more passive than passivity, but let us proceed to the problem at hand).

Roberts's *Freedom as Marronage*

Neil Roberts's 2015 work *Freedom as Marronage* is an extensive engagement with the history of forms of resistance exercised by enslaved peoples in the Americas and the Caribbean, and a theoretical development of those forms of resistance into a model based upon particular understandings of the concepts of flight and freedom. The upcoming section will address some of Roberts's central arguments regarding flight and freedom with respect to our earlier discussions of Levinas's and Delany's respective articulations of the problem of escape. In particular, I will work through the implications of Roberts's formulation and deployment of the concept of marronage, as well as the problem of escape, per se.

Roberts's *Freedom as Marronage* is best understood as an iteration of the history of political thought with a revisionist bent. Roberts argues that we should reevaluate the source of our ideas of freedom within the Western canon as stemming from the experiences, psyches, resistances and ambitions of the enslaved, rather than the immortalized (White, male, European and American) authors of the Western canon such as Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Montesquieu, Jefferson, and Madison. Roberts's argues that the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804) is the large-scale historical culmination of four forms of marronage that he places at the center of his understanding of freedom as the antithesis of enslavement. These four forms of marronage are petit, grand, sovereign, and sociogenic. Petit marronage is the momentary flight of the enslaved away from the plantation, or truancy, that allows for a few moments of respite from surveillance and toil. Grand marronage corresponds to the most ordinary usage of the term, in which enslaved

people run away from the plantation and establish permanent or semi-permanent settlements far enough away from patrols and slave owners to evade capture and survive with other runaway slaves. "Sovereign marronage is the mass flight from slavery in which the sociopolitical goal of independence is achieved through the agency and vision of the lawgiver, not the people. Sociogenic marronage classifies the supreme ideal of freedom. It denotes a revolutionary process of naming and attaining individual and collective agency, non-sovereignty, liberation, constitutionalism, and the cultivation of a community that aligns civil society with political society."[355]

For Roberts, the concept of freedom is still conceptually valuable, though it is difficult to determine whether his book is a successful argument for preserving "freedom" as useful for contemporary political debate, or whether it is simply important insofar as it gives us access to the ways that Western (liberal) theory has historically used and interpreted it. My suspicion is that its value is strictly retrospective rather than prospective given the history of its deployment through the justification of the American, French, and Haitian revolutions and the subsequent attempts at democracy. It is useful in that it allows us to get a better sense of how European expansionists of the 18th and 19th centuries saw the world, themselves, and the possibilities for both.

Roberts broadly defines marronage as the flight from slavery. This is a shift from the term's ordinary usage. "Marronage (marronnage, maroonage, maronage) conventionally refers to a group of persons isolating themselves from a surrounding society in order to create a fully autonomous community, and for centuries it has been integral to interpreting the idea of freedom in Haiti as well as other Caribbean islands and Latin American countries including the

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[355] Roberts, *Freedom as Marronage*, 11.

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Dominican Republic, Jamaica, Suriname, Venezuela, Brazil, Cuba, Colombia, and Mexico."[356] For Roberts (inspired by Césaire), though, marronage means something more. "*Marronage* means 'flight,' and the terms *maroon* and *marronage* are each nouns. While flight evokes in one's mind movement from one state or location to another, it still remains a noun in lexicon. Césaire, therefore, invents a verb to denote the action and collective agency against slavery entailed in marronage… Césaire uses the verb marroner to articulate a create, conceptual marronage."[357] What at first seems innocuous about Roberts statement is theoretically troublesome if we take the choice of words seriously—the idea that anything can be "isolated" or "fully autonomous" comes with the very baggage that Roberts intends to resolve. This isolation or autonomy comes questionably close to the atomistic individualism of Enlightenment thought. One could argue that one always brings the discourse with you—one cannot flee race without simultaneously bringing it with you, or rather, having it always already there before one arrives in the "wilderness" or the "frontier." Likewise, no one can be said to flee, unless someone or something is left behind—the runaway slave leaves behind other enslaved people often to bear the punishment, increased work burden, and future threats to life and family. Moreover, one does not flee without being in relation to both the captor/slave owner as well as others who have fled, perhaps giving one the hope (if not concrete destination) of marooned community.

Roberts spends the majority of the text expanding the notion of flight it to refer to more and more behaviors. Flight is taken for granted, rather than fleshed out. "Flight" is being used to describe "freedom," but we never work through what theoretical ground allows for such flight in the first place. To where would one flee? What is the place from which one flees? As Jane Anna

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[356] Roberts, *Freedom as Marronage*, 4.
[357] Roberts, *Freedom as Marronage*, 6.

Gordon argues in her contribution to the symposium dedicated to Roberts's *Freedom as Marronage* in 20th Anniversary Issue of *Theory & Event*,[358] we need a theory of stasis and flux in order to fully flesh out whether flight can be applied to both spatial models as well as models of time, psychology, and change of material conditions. What is the "state of mind" from which one flees? Is the spatial framework compatible with the psychological? What about the notion of change? All of these terms and frames are deployed to describe the various forms of marronage but we still lack the groundwork needed to undergird such arguments. Needless to say, this line of questioning does not destroy Roberts's objectives or even arguments, but rather points to areas of potential work and the expansion of possibilities.

Even if Roberts wants to expand marronage beyond its ordinary use, perhaps it would be most beneficial to resolve the internal contradictions and ambiguities of the typical usage before expanding the term to apply to more circumstances and actions. One could argue, for instance, that the act of marronage has a very specific set of conditions and consequences, and that to expand the use of the term depletes, rather than enhances, its value. By taking *marronage* out of its specific narrower historical contexts, we potentially run the risk of the kinds of totalization that Levinas warns us about. If slowing work, back-talking, truancy, fisticuffs, poisonings, sabotage, theft, running away, establishing settlements, mutiny, raiding, highway robbery, toppling governments, establishing new governments, and sweeping linguistic, social, and cultural changes are all "flight," we must ask whether flight loses rather thans gain meaning? Cedric Robinson's 1997 book *Black Movements in America* engages in much of the same type of rigorous historical and archival work as Roberts does, but while Robinson's investigations reach

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[358] Gordon, Jane Anna. "The Limitations and Possibilities of Freedom as Flight: Engaging Neil Roberts's *Freedom as Marronage*." *Theory & Event.* Vol. 20, No. 1, 182-187.

across a variety of the forms of resistance that Blacks and Native Americans implemented (marronage, mutiny-at-sea, raids, sabotage, espionage, defection to other armies and military units, large scale revolts, the Underground Railroad, etc.) he does so without taking any of the specific moments as representative of the whole of Black resistance. That Robinson resists the consolidation of these specific actions into one notion of "freedom" is also noteworthy. He is careful to maintain the complexity of these actions and the often tragic consequences of the various forms of resistance.

Another problem that we face when working through the implications of making *marronage* the cornerstone of our central theoretical investigation is that even those maroon communities that survived, for however long, in the mountains, valleys, marshes, or forests of the Americas and the Caribbean were not "free" from slavery, but survived alongside it—nay, still within it. Their status shifted from "slave" to "runaway/fugitive slave." This new status is certainly preferable to life on the plantation in many ways, but it also brings with it new challenges, consequences, and limitations: family and friends left behind; torture, branding, or death if discovered; starvation, dehydration, and illness; risk of being outed if even other enslaved people see or hear about where you hide. The maroons who managed to get away geographically from the plantation, the farm, or the mine still lived in constant threat of being found out and resold into slavery, branded for daring to flee, or killed as to make an example for any enslaved people who may have thought about running. Race and slavery were still there with them, even in the relative safety of the maroon community. They did not escape, but were differently positioned within the same racialized, legal, and economic field. Race and slavery are still there because the subjects who are formed (at least partially) by and through race and

slavery are there. This is precisely why conversations about the persistent effects of slavery in American society are still necessary (though not sufficient) aspects of a critical approach to race.

But Roberts expands marronage to encompass more than just those isolated communities. But one must ask whether this notion of flight (even if it is apt for a limited set of circumstances) remains bound up in ways of thinking that still assumes a wilderness, a frontier, and expansion thereinto. If we take seriously anti-colonial and postcolonial thought regarding the "New World," we have to wrestle with the fact that even if one flees the plantation, one is not outside of civilization, let alone society.

We must not take these potential snags of Roberts's marronage-centered approach as siding with his read of Orlando Patterson's "social death," though. Roberts reads Orlando Patterson as saying that "social death" is Black enslaved people's ontological position. Jane Anna Gordon argues that this is a misapplication of Patterson's term.

> However, as I read him, Patterson was not arguing that slaves *were socially dead* but instead that they were *treated and expected to behave as if they were socially dead*. In other words, the project of turning a human being into a slave was *to make that person socially dead* through an entire political economic edifice of law, social sanction, and disenfranchisement. The maroons were key, through their *marronage*, for turning the conflation of the aim with its actualization into a site of vulnerability for those who relied on the achievement of enslavement. I raise this not only because there is a line of scholarship that I think is based on a fundamental misreading but also because the mistake is at the core of many arguments of Afro-pessimist scholarship which collapse the project of making human beings abject with the achievement of their abjection (which the authoring of such arguments themselves appears to contradict).[359]

Under this reading of "social death," we get a better sense of the capacity for resistance that I think Roberts taps into via his *marronage* model.

Whereas I differ with Roberts on the issue of the centrality (if not primacy) of *marronage* for the possibility of resistance, I appreciate and support his search for alternative sources and

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[359] Gordon, "Limitations and Possibilities," 184-185.

trajectories of anti-racist imagination. The pervasiveness and variety of attempts to leave behind the cruel life of the plantation is yet another indication of the creativity, hope, and resolve of those who should have been (according to White discourse and social ontology) ill-equipped and incapable of perceiving of a different world. But flight neither accounts for all possibilities, nor does it provide a political impetus in the face of practices of race. Flight must be supplemented if it is to contribute to the task of combatting the practices of race.

For instance, I think that James Baldwin serves as an example of flight as a temporary, though crucial, form of resistance to conditions and practices of race. At twenty-four years old, Baldwin leaves Harlem and settles in Paris where he finishes his novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. Just prior to his father's funeral and Baldwin's subsequent exodus from Harlem to Paris was the famous Trenton, New Jersey, restaurant incident where Baldwin is very nearly arrested for shattering the mirror behind the bar when the waitress who refuses to serve him.[360] He only manages to avoid arrest (or worse) because his friend stays behind and misdirects the police as to Baldwin's whereabouts. This is of course to say that flight is absolutely critical to survival here; had he simply stuck around and confronted the racism of the restaurant owner, the waitress, and the police, Baldwin surely would have died, either between the restaurant and the jail, or in the prison system itself.

In the autobiographical notes section of "Notes of a Native Son" in the collection of his essays (edited by Toni Morrison) Baldwin seems to corroborate the inescapability of race:

> I don't think that the Negro problem in America can be even discussed coherently without bearing in mind its context; its context being the history, traditions, customs, the moral assumptions and preoccupations of the country; in short, the general social fabric. Appearances to the contrary, no one in America escapes its effect and everyone in

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[360] James Baldwin, "Notes of a Native Son," in *James Baldwin: Collected Essays,* ed. Toni Morrison (New York: The Library of America, 1998), 71-72.

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America bears some responsibility for it. I believe this the more firmly because it is the overwhelming tendency to speak of this problem as though it were a thing apart.[361]

In spite of the inescapability of practices of race (at least in the long-term), Baldwin can only write and serve as the epistolary, parrhesiastic friend precisely because he flees to Paris. This is not to say that Paris is a perfect safe haven either, but it nonetheless provides him a space to recover enough that he can later return to the United States. In Emersonian terms, Paris serves as a space where Baldwin can practice avoidance, such that he can eventually turn back and re-engage with practices of race in America. In the later sections of *Notes of a Native Son*, (particularly "Encounter on the Seine: Black Meets Brown," "A Question of Identity," and "Equal in Paris,"[362]) Baldwin analyzes the ways that race is practiced differently in Paris than it is in America, but it is nonetheless imperative that he avoid the particular American forms of race violence in order to for him to be able to turn back and address them.

Levinas's *On Escape* is less positive about the potential to be found in escape. Levinas gives us a glimpse of a phenomenology of riveted-ness and the urge to escape that condition. Levinas shows us how the condition of being riveted is not something that comes to us from without, but is a part of our very experience of being, and that any "escape" we may experience is fleeting and illusory. So even though Levinas discusses escape in terms stemming from Heidegger's fundamental ontology, I argue that his diagnoses of the impulse to escape are equally applicable to the problem of social ontology, i.e. race. The point is not to shrug one's shoulders and accept one's status, but rather that the "way out" must be sought elsewhere, or, better yet, otherwise. I again refer to Jane Anna Gordon's engagement with Roberts: "But while

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[361] Baldwin, "Notes of a Native Son," 8-9.
[362] Baldwin, "Notes of a Native Son," 85-116.

flight may be ubiquitous, I remain reluctant to treat it as a normative ideal."[363] There is no escape from being; according to Levinas, there is only being otherwise, that is, for-the-other.

This sentiment is echoed in Samuel R. Delany's novella *The Star Pit.* Vyme and the ordinary (non-Golden) humans wrestle with being restricted to living in humanity's home galaxy, whereas Golden are free to travel between galaxies at will. Only late in the novella does Vyme learn from An the Golden that even the "freest" are constrained, bound to this universe. And yet other beings which have been portrayed as the weakest and most limited in the story (the tiny, black sloth-like pets) are unbound by this universe, and yet simultaneously easily confined to terrariums. Even those who manage to escape are confined, albeit confined in different terms. Much like the marooned who flee spatially from the plantation, the Golden still find themselves bound up by this racialized universe, unable to surpass the practices, institutions, and relations that comprise the "dimension" of racialization.

Levinas's *On Escape*

Levinas's early essay *On Escape* attempts to get at the problem of being by way of untangling the problem of escape (as well as nausea, need, and pleasure). Though his name appears nowhere in the text itself, Heidegger's conception of being as it is articulated in *Being and Time* lies at the center of Levinas's essay. Levinas is struggling with the implications of Heideggerian *Dasein* ("being-there") and *Geworfenheit* ("thrown-ness" esp. toward death). *Mitsein* ("being-with") is less present but if one is familiar with Levinas's later work, you can see the seeds of his thought as regards this concept as well.

Levinas wants to contest the ways that Western philosophy has heretofore addressed what he considers the central problem of philosophy, the problem of being. Levinas opens the essay

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[363] Gordon, "Limitations and Possibilities," 186.

with the following diagnosis, "The revolt of traditional philosophy against the idea of being

originates in the discord between human freedom and the brutal fact of being that assaults this

freedom."[364] He is diagnosing not only a problem of how we have philosophized to this point,

but he also addresses the issue of being as an assault, an imposition, a thing forced upon us. It is

this notion of being as the "there is," the facticity of being, which will guide his interest in

escape. By working backward from escape, he hopes to better theorize being. It is from the

imposition of being, its neutrality and incontestability that we are compelled to escape.

> Yet this category of sufficiency is conceived in the image of *being* such as things offer it
> to us. They *are*. Their essence and their properties can be imperfect; the very fact of
> being is placed beyond the distinction between the perfect and the imperfect. The
> brutality of its assertion [that of the fact of being] is absolutely sufficient and refers to
> nothing else. Being is: there is nothing to add to this assertion as long as we envision in
> being only its existence. This reference to oneself is precisely what one states when one
> speaks of the identity of being. Identity is not a property of being, and it could not consist
> in the resemblance of properties that, in themselves, suppose identity. Rather, it expresses
> the sufficiency of the fact of being, whose absolute and definitive character no one, it
> seems, could place in doubt.[365]

The original text of *On Escape* is but twenty-five pages, but its scope is daring. Levinas

shifts between the topics of escape, need, malaise, pleasure, shame, to nausea—all in the effort to

wrestle with the problem of being. In the first two sections, escape is explicitly at the center of

Levinas's working-through of the problem of being. These sections meander in typical

Levinasian style, but clarity peaks through. Instead of the romanticized notion of escape as a

"vital urge" driving us from "this worldly existence," he argues for escape in a different sense:

> With the vital urge we are going toward the unknown, but we are going somewhere,
> whereas with escape we aspire only to get out [*sortir*]. It is this category of getting out,
> assimilable neither to renovation nor to creation, that we must grasp in all its purity. It is
> an inimitable theme that invites us to get out of being. A quest for the way out, this is in
> no sense a nostalgia for death because death is not an exit, just as it is not a solution. The

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[364] Levinas, *On Escape*, 49.
[365] Levinas, *On Escape*, 50-51.

ground of this theme is constituted—if one will pardon the neologism—by the need for *excendence*.[366]

This notion of escape is not a mere conquering of limitations or of achieving an essential possibility or a reaching of one's fate, but rather a flight from being as an "imprisonment from which one must get out."[367] It is being in all of its granted-ness, its given-ness, its inflicted-ness, and ultimately its enchainment from which we need to escape. "Existence is an absolute that is asserted without reference to anything else. It is identity. […] In the identity of the I [*moi*], the identity of being reveals its nature as enchainment, for it appears in the form of suffering and invites us to escape. Thus, escape is the need to get out of oneself, that is, *to break that most radical and unalterably binding of chains, the fact that the I [moi] is oneself [soi-même].*[368] It is important to realize that Levinas does not figure being as rejected in favor of an alternative like death, or non-being, but rather as something that must be framed and dealt with differently—not something to be rejected, but escaped. I must escape that I am me—the fact that I am myself and no one/nothing else. I am bound to being myself. "Escape, on the contrary, puts in question precisely this alleged peace-with-self, since it aspires to break the chains of the I to the self [*du moi à soi*]. It is being itself or the "one-self" from which escape flees, and in no wise being's limitation.*"[369]

This may seem nonsensical at first glance, but it is here that we must remind ourselves that even in his challenge to Heideggerian thought and frames of being, Levinas realizes that we can never go "back" to a pre-Heideggerian time, we can only be post-Heideggerian. Levinas does not think that Heidegger is "wrong" in the sense that his formulations of being are

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[366] Levinas, *On Escape*, 54.
[367] Levinas, *On Escape*, 55.
[368] Levinas, *On Escape*, 55.
[369] Levinas, *On Escape*, 55. Emphasis is mine.

inconsistent, but rather that the implications of *Dasein, Geworfenheit*, and *Mitsein* are wrong-headed in that this model denies the centrality of the Other in being. Heidegger's being is at best a "*mitsein*" (being-with) or even a "marching-alongside,"[370] whereas Levinas spends his career attempting to theorize being in terms of a being-for-the-other. In other words, Levinas sees being in the former sense as something to be "escaped" in the sense of "getting out of being by a new path," being "otherwise than being." "It is a matter of getting out of being by a new path, at the risk of overturning certain notions that to common sense and the wisdom of the nations seemed the most evident."[371] Levinas does not know it at the time he wrote *On Escape*, but the early seeds of the infinite responsibility he articulates in *Totality and Infinity* (1961) and subsequently *Otherwise than Being* (1974)—these works articulate what it means to "get out by a new path," that path is by, through, and for the Other. Through infinite responsibility for the Other in all their irreducible alterity.

But we're getting ahead of ourselves a bit. Let's trace the trajectory of the essay itself. Following his preliminary framing of the issue of escape, he dives into the problem of need. "In reality, need is intimately tied to being, but not in the quality of privation. On the contrary, need will allow us to discover, not a limitation of that being that desires to surpass its limits in order to enrich and fulfill itself, but rather the purity of the fact of being, which already looks like an

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[370] See Levinas, "Being-for-the-Other," in *Is It Righteous to Be?*, 114. Levinas frames Heidegger's *being* in the militarized language of "marching alongside." It is a disturbing militarization of ontology and the violent political implications should not be overlooked. "Being always has to be, being is *conatus essendi*. In life being is immediately war… *Dasein* is distinguished by the fact that, in its very being, that being is an issue for it. He meant then, 'being is an issue' which is 'an issue of the understanding of being.' But in *Being and Time*, it is almost formulated in a Darwinian manner: 'Being is an issue for *itself*'" (Levinas, "Intention, Event, and the Other," 145).
[371] Levinas, *On Escape*, 73; this is the final sentence of *On Escape*.

escape."[372] But where Bergo translates Levinas in terms of "need," Simon Critchley actually

argues that "desire" would be closer to Levinas's meaning.[373] "Desire," rather than "need" better

captures the sense of presence, rather than lack that is at the core of being—recall that being

(oneself) is a burden, an imposition, and enchainment rather than a void.

This need/desire is only a problem when it becomes painful. "[Desire] becomes

imperious only when it becomes suffering. And the specific mode of suffering that characterizes

[desire] is malaise, or disquiet. Malaise is not a purely passive state, resting upon itself. The fact

of being ill at ease [*mal à son aise*] is essentially dynamic.[374] This malaise is an inability to stand

still, a discomfort, a compulsion to move out, to escape. But the satisfaction of obtaining what

one desires, i.e. the pleasure of this obtainment, is problematic. Pleasure is ultimately cruelly

dissatisfying. Satisfaction cannot satisfy the desire to escape. The moment that pleasure ebbs, the

reality of one's enchainment, one's riveted-ness to oneself comes crashing back in. Pleasure is a

fleeting leap out of oneself, only to be snatched back and have the fact of one's identity made all

the more painfully obvious. As Critchley says, "Desire desires desire. Desire is not satisfied, it

just deepens. Desire is that thing that hollows itself out."[375]

This is where Levinas shifts to the emergence of shame. "The instant is not recaptured

until the moment when pleasure is broken, after the supreme break, when the [human] being

believed in complete ecstasy but was completely disappointed, and is entirely disappointed and

ashamed to find himself again existing."[376] Shame is founded "on the very being of our being, on

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[372] Levinas, *On Escape*, 57.
[373] Simon Critchley, *The Problem with Levinas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 51.
[374] Levinas, *On Escape*, 58. I have replaced Bergo's translation "need" with "desire" a la
Critchley's suggestion.
[375] Critchley, *The Problem with Levinas*, 52.
[376] Levinas, *On Escape*, 61.

its incapacity to break with itself. Shame is founded on the solidarity of our being, which obliges us to claim responsibility for ourselves."[377] Shame is the crashing in of the feeling of being riveted to oneself after the promise inherent in pleasure reveals itself as false exit—shame is the enchainment of the I to itself.

To review the path we have just taken: Levinas takes us from escape, to the desire for escape, to malaise, to obtaining pleasure, to the shame after pleasure fails to yield escape. Levinas takes it one step further to nausea, "a case in which the nature of malaise appears in all its purity and to which the word 'malaise' applies par excellence."[378] The analogy of nausea is Levinas's phenomenological model for the experience of enchainment to being as such. Unlike other insurmountable obstacles imposed on us from without, we cannot turn away from nausea.

> Nausea, on the contrary, sticks to us. Yet it would not be correct to say that nausea is an obstacle that we cannot dodge. That would again be to maintain a duality between us and it… There is in nausea a refusal to remain there, an effort to get out. Yet this effort is always already characterized as desperate: in any case, it is so for any attempt to act or to think. And this despair, this fact of being riveted, constitutes all the anxiety of nausea. In nausea—which amounts to an impossibility of being what one is—we are at the same time riveted to ourselves, enclosed in a tight circle that smothers. We are there, and there is nothing more to be done, or anything to add to this face that we have been entirely delivered up, that everything is consumed: *this is the very experience of our pure being*, which we have promised from the beginning of this work.[379]

The rivet-ness to oneself is shown as an obstacle from within, to which one cannot but be bound. Nausea itself constitutes the relationship between nausea and us. "Nausea posits itself not only as something absolute, but as the very act of self-positing; it is the affirmation itself of being. It refers only to itself, is closed to all the rest, without window onto other things."[380]

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[377] Levinas, *On Escape*, 63.
[378] Levinas, *On Escape*, 66.
[379] Levinas, *On Escape*, 66-67.
[380] Levinas, *On Escape*, 68.

This feeling of riveted-ness to oneself, to one's place within being and in relation to being finds brilliant demonstration in the relationship of characters to the limitations of the social ontology built in Sam Delany's *The Star Pit*. The feeling of being trapped, but not by anything other than being itself and authenticity. Vyme wrestles of course with limitations of his ability to travel, but more importantly he wrestles with himself within those limitations, as we will see.[381]

Delany's *The Star Pit*

Samuel Delany's 1967 science fiction novella *The Star Pit* is likewise a theoretical engagement with the problem of limitation and being bound (although in narrative form). There is a particular social ontology that structures the lives of subjects within the world that Delany builds in *The Star Pit*. Set in the distant future, humans have created technologies that enable interstellar travel, colonization, and trade. Humanity has expanded so far for so long that Earth is considered a regressive backwater, a provincial place long since abandoned and outgrown in terms of both technological advancement, and social structural progress. Race no longer exists in any form familiar to our contemporary practices—racial phenotype no longer explicitly or implicitly determines one's social, economic, or political status. White/non-White frameworks no longer exist, although colonialist, nationalist and trade federation wars between planets or solar systems do persist. The nuclear family structure has been abandoned and replaced with non-heteronormative procreative groups with all adults sharing in raising the children, and in which all adults consider each other their potential romantic, sexual, and platonic partners.

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[381] Also, the literal presence of bouts of nausea is telling as well. Vyme struggles with alcoholism in the early episodes of the novella, but later on, Delany describes Vyme as periodically suffering from dyspepsia and reflux from coffee. Golden tend be shown in states of heavy intoxication, as well. In future editions of this paper, I will flesh out the implications of these references.

The primary social ontology articulated in the novella is based around one's ability to travel outside of humanity's home galaxy, The Milky Way. Whereas interstellar travel has become as commonplace as train, plane, or automotive travel is for us today, the ability to travel outside of the Milky Way is reserved for those called "golden." For the vast majority of humanity, travel beyond the edges of our galaxy is impossible. Something happens to humans (as well as computers and artificial intelligence) just beyond a few lightyears from the edges. Humans experience profound mental breakdown, developing into full-blown psychosis, and ultimately physical death. All computer programming begins to glitch, corrupt and fail. Only golden can break the bonds that the Milky Way has on us and survive to continue our inter-galactic expansion.[382]

Acute psychological and emotional trauma somehow changes the physiology such that golden survive the shifts in the laws of physics that bind the rest of us to our home galaxy. These select few have the inborn bodily constitution that can be molded by intense trauma that then allows them to go where the rest of us cannot—this experience of trauma precipitates a hormonal change that allows them to withstand inter-galactic changes in physics. The only visible marker of golden-ness is a golden belt worn around the waist—these are lost, stolen, or misplaced easily enough in the narrative. This is ultimately the downfall of one of the supporting characters, Ratlit, who after lifting a belt from a drunken golden in a bar, uses it to make his way onto a ship with a golden woman he meets.

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[382] There is no explicit discussion of this in the text, but presumably, it is only inter-galactic *travel* that is exclusive to the golden, not life in other galaxies. One assumes that once you are born into a given galaxy, you are tied to that place and bound by its edges/gravitational pull. The narrative explains the ongoing social role of the golden as basically instrumental to the expansion and continuation of trade. This trade assumes that there are other humans (or other sentient beings) with whom these golden trade and then transport goods across inter-galactic space.

The analogies Delany builds to contemporary Western race politics are provocative. Golden-ness provides privileges, opportunities, and possibilities that set some people apart and above the rest of humanity—this is a clear gesture toward the contemporary problem of Whiteness. Delany adeptly shows how goldenness/Whiteness also limits even the privileged, but we will postpone our discussion of this refinement of our understanding of racial politics until later on in the paper. Under the social ontology of *The Star Pit*, golden Whiteness is a side-effect of mental illness and divergence from the (present) norm. Golden-ness is only obtained through trauma. Whereas we tend to highlight the ways that Whiteness harms those deemed non-White, Delany's narrative frames Whiteness as only begotten through suffering inflicted upon those who will then wield that Whiteness against others. The liberal notion of expanding full humanity (i.e. "Whiteness") to include more people—for more people to count as human—is shown to be flawed from the start under this framing of Whiteness in terms of a foundational trauma. Whiteness only comes from trauma imposed upon the self and is perpetuated by trauma imposed upon others.

Near the end of the narrative, Vyme encounters a golden who discloses the processes by which ever more golden are manufactured. Even though the first golden were discovered by accident (viz. those who discovered golden could travel farther than others did not inflict trauma upon the first golden as part of scientific experimental procedures or anything like that), once those in power discovered that it was trauma that facilitated the emergence of golden-ness, they began to intentionally traumatize and experiment on potential golden candidates in order to use them for the purposes of expanding commerce, and presumably, territorial control. The powers that be foisted new roles on people—they imposed new forms of being, and demanded that these golden live up to their inherent golden-ness. Their essence was hidden until the powerful

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disclosed it through the violence of trauma. They dug up their golden-ness using the tools of trauma—the procedures for "(un)earthing" golden-ness is like strip-mining. Discovery of being is violent, traumatic, scarring, grasping, seizing.[383]

What is also interesting is how race as we now practice it (as a hierarchy largely dependent upon visual phenotype and ideas of heritability of physical, emotional, and psychological characteristics) is no longer the modus operandi. Instead, the hierarchy is centered around the benefits of travel that accompany the otherwise harmful (to others) psychoses of the privileged—an intentional, aggressive, predatory domination or a thoughtless, clumsy, self-centered negligence. Both pigmentally "Black" and "White" people are golden, and as such characters in the story easily pass as "golden" merely by stealing the status marker (a gold belt) from drunken golden, although the true test of "golden-ness" cannot be cheated—anyone who is not golden will have a full mental and physical breakdown should they venture beyond the edge of the galaxy. Eventually, if you go "too far" in trying to "pass" you will be "found out" by the universe and die for (or be killed by) your audacity. In this moment of the depiction of the social ontology and one's being in it, Delany is riffing on the Heideggerian theme of limitation and potentiality.

We must remember, though, that Delany is not a writer of futility or despair. Delany is a critic, a thinker and writer of discontent.[384] *The Star Pit* in particular, is a challenge to our ordinary social ontologies. And we can see Delany attempting this same project across much of his work—and the issue of escape and flight from domination and even agency within forms of

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[383] This is precisely Levinas's criticism of Western ontology in the opening sections of *Totality and Infinity*.
[384] In the introduction to *Infinite Responsibility*, Simon Critchley argues that philosophy begins precisely with such dissatisfaction, disappointment. Not with awe or wonder, but with frustration.

domination takes center stage in his *Return to Nevèrÿon* series. (The third and fourth books of the series are entitled *Flight from Nevèrÿon* and *Return to Nevèrÿon*, respectively—flight and return are placed center stage for his audience.) In *Tales of Nevèrÿon,* Gorgik (later known as Gorgik the Liberator) shakes up social and political convention through his relationship to BDSM, his sexual partnerships, and his reappropriation of the means of his domination (particularly the slave collar) in order to lull slaveholders into a false sense of security before he and Small Sarg kill them and free the enslaved. But even in his earlier work, *The Star Pit*, Delany sophisticatedly frames the problem of subjects' relationships to social ontology and being. He articulates Vyme's and Ratlit's nausea and disquiet at the limitations imposed upon them by the Milky Way—they peer out into space and pace anxiously around the star pit at the edge of the galaxy as if imprisoned, as if enchained by and to their being—while golden fly off whenever and wherever they please (or so it seems). Golden stomp around within the galaxy as superior beings. They either stomp aggressively and cruelly, or they do so blissfully ignorant of anyone and everyone around them, but the effect is the same nonetheless: they run (or walk) over anyone unlucky enough to get in their path.[385]

There are numerous levels to Delany's analyses. First, there is the problem of being itself—one's status as golden or ordinary human has very real consequences—you go insane and die at the limits of the galaxy, or you survive to travel to other galaxies. Here, there is an imposition of difference and limitations by the universe itself—being is affixed to beings without their decision or agency. One's status is judged by the universe, independent of subjects.

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[385] See Delany, *Star Pit*, 9-10 where Vyme's ship is ruined when a golden cuts him off outside the space station. The Star Pit is essentially the last truck stop at the edge of the galaxy. The golden "slum it" and get intoxicated at the Star Pit while they wait on their ships to be repaired before they enter or leave the Milky Way.

Secondly, there is the social component—the simple difference of immunity to the physics shift at the edge of the galaxy has profound social implications. You get the golden belt and all the freedoms thereunto appertaining, or you do not. Third, there is the concern of how one becomes golden in the first place. Golden-ness is a product of profound psychic and emotional trauma. Golden-ness is an aberration. It is a deviation, an anomaly. Or perhaps more appropriately, we should describe golden as exceptional rather than as aberrant.[386] But it is also a status that is imposed from without through violence. Golden are first discovered among the victims of trauma, abuse, and neglect, but this discovery was accidental. At the end of the novella, we realize that golden are now being manufactured intentionally through meticulous programs of systematic physical and psychic torture in order to trigger goldenness in more and more people, as a means of facilitating more rapid trade expansion and colonization.

The majority of the narrative follows Vyme's attempts to survive under a golden-dominated system of intergalactic travel. We see him struggle to find work, the effects that has on his family life in the procreation group, and his own sense of being riveted to and trapped in the Milky Way. Once he settles into his position as mechanic at the Star Pit, we likewise see Ratlit's struggles with his position as non-golden as well as his interaction with various golden at the cantina in the Star Pit. The audience gets to see ordinary, non-golden life from Vyme's first person perspective. For most of the narrative, golden are simply background conditions—never full characters, but rather more like environmental hazards or one-dimensional predatory beasts. Only near the end of the novella does one golden, An, become a character in any meaningful sense. An reveals to Vyme the hitherto unknown truth behind the golden and the limitations

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[386] It is difficult to accurately characterize golden-ness. I want to avoid the pitfalls of mid-career Foucauldian analysis of normalization, discursive practices, and the disciplined society. I am more interested in exploding possibilities rather than cataloging limitations.

imposed by being under this social ontology—that not only are golden being manufactured through torture, trauma, and inflicted psychoses, but they are also limited in ways hidden from the rest of humanity. Golden are actually not as free as most of us think; golden may be able to travel to other galaxies, but they are trapped in this universe just as the rest of us are trapped in the Milky Way. There is only one known being able to escape the confines of this galaxy: the small, black, sloth-like pets that children commonly keep in terrariums. These fragile, environmentally vulnerable creatures are in some ways more free than even the golden—they can spontaneously "pop" between universes, even though they can be captured by children and kept in small glass antfarm-esque containers.

This new information problematizes the social ontology that we have seen through most of the narrative. People are treated cruelly so that they *become* golden—there would be no golden but for this cruelty and trauma, which then produces beings who perpetrate hierarchical violence and exploitation on others. Not only that, but we are reminded of the fact that domination and freedom are not opposites, but always exist in tandem.[387] There is always agency within forms of domination, and we are never fully outside of modes of control.

The Ecologarium in *The Star Pit*

In connection with the explicit social ontology built around "golden-ness" and the ability to traverse intergalactic space, as well as the limitations placed upon even the golden to be trapped in this universe as well as within certain exploitative economic relations, and to have golden-ness forced upon them through violence and trauma, it is also important to reflect upon the ecologarium/ant-farm motif that makes repeated appearances in *The Star Pit*. Delany builds a

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[387] This is a significant point of departure from Roberts's *Freedom as Marronage*. He explicitly argues that freedom and slavery are opposites in a dialectic—a problematic model that is shown to be insufficient if we take Delany and Levinas seriously.

system of nested social ontologies that only become obvious after he has spent the majority of the narrative arc focusing on the lives on non-golden (Vyme, specifically). The most familiar form of domination (to contemporary audiences) analogized in the novella is that of golden (i.e. White) and non-golden (i.e. non-White) and the openness of possibilities available to golden, but denied (as if naturally) to everyone else. But there is another obvious human/non-human animal dichotomy present in the repetitive appearance of the "ecologarium" (akin to a six-foot tall ant-farm or narrow terrarium) filled with tiny animals running up against the walls of their glass cages "peering out across impassable sands" as they would certainly die if they are exposed to the light of Sigma-Prime, one of the twin-stars around which Vyme's plural marriage community's (procreative group, or "proke group" for short) planet orbits. Humans are separated into golden and non-golden, with both being seemingly superior to the small, sloth-like animals that children keep as pets.

When An comes to the Star Pit, he reveals to Vyme in an angry, disjointed rant the truth behind the propagation of the golden population through manufactured psychoses, with the purpose of continuing the expansion of trade routes and colonization (golden are basically cogs in the military industrial complex). Vyme first chastises An for his typical reckless, rage-filled golden behavior, "I try to get used to you, behaving like something that isn't even savage. But, boy-kid, can your kind really mess up a guy's picture of the universe." An then reveals to Vyme the nature of the relationship between golden and non-golden:

> "And what the hell do you expect us [golden]to act like?" An shot back. Spittle glittered on his lips again. "What would *you* do if you were trapped like *us*?"
> "Huh?" I said questioningly. "*You*, trapped?"
> "Look." A spasm passed over his shoulders. "The psycho-technician who made sure I was properly psychotic *wasn't* a golden, *brother*! You *pay* us to bring back the weapons, dad! *We* don't fight your damn wars, *grampa*! *You're* the ones who take us

away from our groups, say we're too valuable to submit to *your* laws, then deny us our heredity because we don't *breed* true, no-relative-of-*mine*![388]

An's revelation to Vyme shows explodes the complexity of the social ontology in which the subjects find themselves. Even the domination of the non-golden by the golden is not as straight forward as we have been lead to believe. The threat is of course that this analogy ultimately implicates non-golden in their own dominated status, but I think Delany is attempting something else in this passage. He is showing that there is nothing "outside" except more insides.

In a later conversation with Vyme, An returns to explain his comment about being trapped. Vyme begins by saying,

> First and last bit of alcoholic advice for the evening, kid-boy. Even if you are crazy, don't go around telling people who are not golden how they've trapped you. That's like going to Earth and complimenting [an n-word] on how well he sings and dances and his great sense of rhythm. He may be able to tap seven with one hand against thirteen with the other while whistling a tone row. It still shows a remarkable naïveté about the way things are." That's one of the other things known throughout the galaxy about the world I come from. When I say primitive, I mean primitive.[389]

The sudden appearance of a racial slur in Vyme's comment to An is strange. There is no other occurrence of this kind of language or invocation of contemporary racial practices or stereotypes anywhere else in the novella. While it may at first seem out of place, Delany is gesturing toward a profound point. Even though humanity long ago "escaped" the bounds of Earthly life, both physically in terms of space travel, as well as socially and racially (since people no longer live in bourgeois nuclear families with monogamous partnerships, and "race" as we currently practice it no longer determines one's social, political, or legal status or relationships), this racial epithet still means something to a humanity separated by centuries and light-years from Earth as we now know it. Race is still there. It has shifted modes, and the centrality of its value has changed, but

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[388] Delany, *Star Pit,* 65.
[389] Delany, *Star Pit,* 78-79.

that Vyme can still make a reference that makes sense to him and An highlights the problem of

"escape" that this paper seeks to address. An shoots back saying:

> …"I didn't say you trapped us"
> "You said we treated you lousy and exploited you, which we may, and that this trapped you—"
> "I said you exploited us, which you do, *and* that we were trapped. I *didn't* say by what."[390]

There is an overwhelming entrapment, and yet it exists beyond even the roles of exploiter and exploited. Here the ecologarium makes another appearance.

Not only are the golden trapped in similar ways as non-golden (except in a bigger cage, i.e. *this* universe), but only the smallest, most seemingly insignificant creature can actually break the bonds of this universe and blink out of this universe and into another one, never to return.[391] The tiny, fuzz-ball, sloths with clusters of protruding eyes are simultaneously the least and most "free" beings in the novella. They often live their short lives trapped between panes of glass, destined only to reproduce, stare out at places they will never visit, and be gawked at by children. But in moments of sudden fear, they can "pop" out of this universe, transported to another of the billions upon billions of other universes that humans could never even imagine.[392]

For most of the narrative, one gets the impression that the golden simply live above the rest of humanity and walk about as detached or brutish (or both). But Delany complicates this model. His novella builds in details to highlight how even the seeming dominators are harmed by the system upon which they appear as straightforward beneficiaries. Even those thought to be free are not without constraint and entanglement. The temptation is to think that Delany is building a system where no tier of the social hierarchy is truly "better off," neither the

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[390] Delany, *Star Pit*, 79.
[391] Delany, *Star Pit*, 81.
[392] Delany, *Star Pit*, 80-82 for An's description of the sloths' universe jumping ability.

golden/Whites, nor the non-golden/non-Whites and that therefore this undermines any culpability or sense of wrongdoing—we must resist this. For obviously the golden have more options for travel relative to non-golden; but this elevated capacity to travel through physical space comes at an incredible cost (and a cost that is foisted on even the golden)—they may be able to travel to other galaxies, but their connection to others (both non-golden and golden) has been frayed, and for some, severed. This relative "freedom" comes at the expense of care for and by others—and what is worse, they are denied this very humanity by actions, practices, decisions, values, and rules imposed on them by others. They are not born golden—they are made golden.[393] This is the power of Delany's critique—he shows the violence inflicted upon whites/golden such that they then perpetuate this violence on others, both golden and non-golden.

In Delany's social ontology, we see the violence at the core of travel itself, of limitation, of expansion, of colonization, of trade, of fear. Violence holds together the sloth/non-golden/golden loop. The question is how we lessen this violence, even if we can never eliminate it. Delany shows us that there is nothing outside to which we can ultimately satisfactorily escape—there is always more.

Reading Levinas in *The Star Pit*

Escape is not itself an endpoint at all, but rather wrestling with the being that is foisted upon us to which we are riveted. When Levinas writes in De l'evasion that our relation to being is akin to our relationship to nausea, he is arguing that our experience of nausea is nausea itself—it is a limitation, an imposition but one that rises from within. Nausea is that experience that traps

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[393] This point echoes sentiments made by Simone de Beauvoir and Frantz Fanon regarding women and black men in *Second Sex* and *Black Skin, White Masks*, respectively.

us but comes from nowhere. It is the feeling of being riveted to this feeling that is part of oneself. It is oneself that one cannot escape—it is being itself to which we are riveted. As we have mentioned earlier, this is Levinas's first published attempt to wrestle with being (a la Heidegger). Responding to Heideggerian ontology will ultimately be Levinas's career-long project, which takes its most groundbreaking forms in *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being*.

The title of the latter will help us retrospectively flesh out the central problem of *De L'evasion*. Levinas's goal, as I see it, is to challenge the centrality of being, and to gesture toward that which is most human as "otherwise than being," rather than being-itself which is the central concern of *Dasein* according to Heidegger. *Dasein*'s central characteristic is that its concern with and knowledge of being is itself that which defines its being. For Heidegger (and his teacher Husserl), what defines a being is its limits, its edges, its boundaries. Levinas wants something more for us. Levinas is more concerned about expanding possibility beyond mere being, beyond our state of riveted-ness to being in *Geworfenheit* (thrown-ness).

Levinas argues that in Dasein (i.e. "being-there") we have being imposed upon us as we are thrown out into the world with particular sets of limitations and possibilities—that under Heideggerian ontology, it is the nature of *Dasein* to find the range of possibilities within its being and to live up to those possibilities, i.e. to be authentically. But Levinas says that this obsession with *being* restricts us from concern for other *beings*. For Heidegger, beings become an afterthought in the pursuit of being. While Levinas argues that we can never go back to pre-Heideggerian thought, we must move past him. Instead of defining being as wrapped up in being-itself, we must reframe being as being-for-the-other.

Now if we can return to Delany's example, we can see how Levinas's approach to riveted-ness to being can be fruitfully fleshed out. In the novella, Vyme and his friend Ratlit are

constantly wracked with the pain of the limitations placed on them as they are bound to the

Milky Way like much of the rest of humanity. Early on in *Star Pit*, Vyme talks to his son Antoni

about the death of one of the aforementioned sloths.

> "Why it go crazy? Why it die when it go outside, Da?"
> "Can't take the light," I said as we reached the jungle. "They're animals that live in shadow most of the time. The plastic [of the ecologarium] cuts out the ultraviolet rays, just like the leaves that shade them when they run loose in the jungle […] Under the ultra-violet, the enzymes break down so quickly that—does this mean anything to you at all?"
> "Uh-uh." Antoni shook his head. Then he came out with, "Wouldn't it be nice, Da... if some of them could go outside, just a few?"
> That stopped me [….] "I don't know about that, kid-boy."
> "Why not?"
> "It might be pretty bad for the ones who had to stay inside," I told him. "I mean after a while."[394]

Vyme is articulating the first half of a meditation on the problem of being and—this is

important—doing so with his son in mind and with the help of his son. It is not simply a problem

of breaking through limitations (of the glass of the ecologarium or the psychic/physiological

boundaries of the galaxy), but rather what the impact is on those who are left behind. This is a

post-Heideggerian reflection on the problem of potentialities and limitations. Remember, Delany

shows us that there is nothing outside of limitations (except more limitations), but that does not

mean that that is the end of our concern with being. It is about more than reaching one's utmost

limitations (i.e. one's authentic self), but rather that being means nothing if it is not articulated

in/through/for (other) beings.[395]

The second half of Vyme's meditation with his son on the problem of being follows a

couple of paragraphs later.

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[394] Delany, *Star Pit*, 6-7.
[395] See Levinas, *Existence and Existents* (Pittburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2001) for a fuller discussion of this point.

"Grow up," Antoni chirped with nose and fists against the plastic [of the ecologarium]. "Everything grow up, and up."

"That's right."

He grinned at me. "I grow!"

"You sure as hell do."

[…] "You don't grow. You don't get any bigger. Why don't you grow?"

"I do too," I said indignantly. "Just very slowly."

[…] "You have to grow all the time," I said. "Not necessarily get any bigger. But inside your head you have to grow, kid-boy. For us human-type people that's what's important. And that kind of growing never stops. At least it shouldn't. You can grow, kid-boy, or you can die. That's the choice you've got, and it goes on all of your life."

He looked back over his shoulder. "Grow up, all the time, even if they can't get out."

"Yeah," I said.

Like Levinas, Delany struggles with the centrality of limitations as it relates to being. His response (again like Levinas) is neither to accept limitations as all there is,[396] but rather to "grow" as much as one can given the ubiquity of limitations—for even as one surmounts one limitation, one is always enclosed in another.[397]

Oddly enough, the implications of this "growth" are less explicitly discussed by Delany than Levinas. One assumes that this growth is concerned with care for the other, or at least life with the other for Delany since this discussion takes place while Vyme is caring for the wound his young son has just sustained having been nipped by his small sloth-like pet. Vyme is

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[396] Levinas dedicates several pieces to the problem of the "there is." He refers to it as the "*il y a*" the anonymity of being. One of Levinas's central concerns with *Dasein* ("being there") is not so much "being" as the "there." As a predetermined and imposing "there," Levinas sees dasein as part of Western thought's obsession with grasping, imposition, seizure, determination. There is too much to say on this topic to be included here. Again, see *Existence and Existents* for more on this.

[397] In this way, I would argue that neither Levinas nor Delany is anti-Heideggerian, but rather post-Heideggerian. Levinas (and I assume Delany), do not contest the problem of the limitations of being, but rather contest the limitations of thinking of being as simply limitation. Levinas wrestles with this through the problem of escape from riveted-ness to being, while Delany does so through escape from the circularity or nested-ness of limitations.

acknowledging and treating the pain of an other,[398] and while doing so, he is discussing the problems of boundaries and limitations, as well as how one should live given them. It is interesting that Delany frames this discussion around a father/son relationship when the "proke-groups" are situated so differently from the contemporary nuclear family. The effect would have been far greater had Antoni been someone else's genetic offspring, so that the relationship of responsibility for others could have been less conventionally and overtly paternal. But years later when Vyme is at the Star Pit at the edge of the galaxy, he befriends a younger non-golden with whom he discusses limitations and relationships with golden.

Future Research Direction and Implications

It is with Delany's and Levinas's engagements with escape in mind that I challenge the model that Neil Roberts proposes in his 2015 monograph *Freedom as Marronage*. Roberts argues that freedom and slavery are opposites in dialectical relationship and that Western political thought has neglected the space between these two polar opposites, namely, the escape into marronage (or maroonage), that is, flight from slavery into secluded marooned communities. Roberts even goes as far as to argue that not only is marronage neglected as fertile ground for thinking about freedom, but marronage should be taken as *the* paradigmatic model by which we

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[398] Inherent in the problem of race is the question of to whom we are responsible in the first place. Practices of race seem to imply that we owe more to those who share the same racial classification as us, or at least those who are "closer" to our race than another person. Levinas's modelling of the ethical and the political fails to adequately resolve this problem. Once "the third" enters the scene, the face-to-face relation of the ethical seems to become more complicated. The problem is that there are always "thirds" and so the issue of reason, law, rules, and the political problem of "justice" enters in. We must find a way to enact justice such that race/lineage/heredity does not get replicated in Levinas's otherwise radical theory of infinite responsibility.

should understand freedom in all realms of political, social, and economic domination.[399] Is it really adequate to think of "freedom as marronage" as the title suggests? Is the argument that freedom is a subset of marronage? Isn't marronage rather a historical form of resistance, instead of emblematic of all modes of resistance?

I wholeheartedly agree that we as a discipline have given far too little attention to the agency exercised by enslaved peoples within their particular historical, social, and personal circumstances. But to equate marronage with freedom is problematic and triggers more questions than answers. The person who has escaped captivity and/or the plantation, mine, workhouse, factory, mill, or railroad is still pursued, hunted, by Whites. The threat of re-capture and punishment is always there, even for the most secluded marooned community.[400] I do not think there is much doubt that those who successfully escape are able to exercise agency in ways previously denied them by specific forms of violence, the threat of violence, surveillance, and the deprivation of resources. But to equate the fugitive position of even those successfully marooned to freedom is I think a problem. What is subjectivity such that there was no "freedom" under slavery and no slavery under freedom? A problem of our relation to domination and time

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[399] Charles Mills points out over-extension of the marronage analogy in his review of *Freedom as Marronage* in *Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy*, Vol XXIII, No. 2 (2015) pp 145-149. Pgs 148-149.

[400] Indeed, if there is one thing the rise of Donald Trump has made clear, it is that this vulnerability is present even for the most exceptional political, social, and economic climbers. It is no coincidence that the first Black president has his legitimacy, nay legal status, questioned— by none other than his successor. The way America fell for this racialized political maneuver is precisely what spring boarded Trump into the presidency—but Trump merely exploited the racism that has never been far from the surface, if in fact we can say that America ever even tried to hide its racial politics. One of the most qualified (politically, academically, intellectually) presidents in history is followed by the least qualified—a fact facilitated by something as base as challenging the citizenship status of our only Black president, a demanding of papers, of proof, that could never suffice to quell the skepticism of White America. See Stanley Cavell's *The Claim of Reason* for a fascinating engagement with the problem of skepticism and the problem of other minds.

emerges under such thinking. Is one un-free at one moment and free at another? Is there no continuity from one moment to the next? Is it not merely a shift of the mode of control or threat from one moment to another? Is the model of being perpetually on the run *from* something the best way in which to frame our thinking of freedom? Ultimately, what value does the concept of freedom have for us today when it is so bound up with the liberal project and the mythical "independent atomistic individual" who self-creates? That is an empty formulation. How are we not still products of not only legal, chattel slavery, but also the "slaveries by other names" and "social deaths" articulated by Douglas Blackmon, Michelle Alexander, Orlando Patterson, Lisa Guenther, Andrew Dilts, and many other critics of racial practices?

To be clear: my point is not to show that one is enslaved whether one has the legal status of "slave" or not. The point is not to respond to Roberts's formulation by showing how even marooned people are still limited, but rather by showing how his formulation of possibility fails to think big enough—how it fails to free itself from the liberal, white, imperialist conception of freedom in the first place.

I think of subjectivity rather differently in terms of how one subjects oneself to the responsibility for and to another, rather than as one's relationship to "freedom" and instead responsibility for an other taken on in response to the other's cry. I choose to focus less on the flight away from, but rather in terms of taking upon oneself the obligation of care for the other. To my mind, within the marronage milieu, it is more productive to think of the ways that one facilitated an other's escape, how one hid the other, cared for the other, fed the other and smuggled the other, obstructed the search for the other, rather than how one hides oneself, keeps oneself safe, avoids the patrols for one's own self-protection.

Conversation between Levinas, Delany, and Roberts on the Act of Escape

Levinas thinks of escape as escape from being riveted to being itself—this being is like nausea: bound to itself from within itself—inability to escape oneself; this escape eventually transforms into escape from the *conatus essendi* that Spinoza saw at the core of being, and Levinas shifts us instead to being-for-the-other, rather than being-with (*mitsein)*, or being-there (*Dasein*).

Delany shows us a similar concern for how we are trying to escape, but he shows how the discursive practices always catch you… even the golden are trapped, and the weakest (the sloths) have the capacity to flee that surpass even the dominant group; but he also shows how the golden/whites are harmed by the very situation that they allegedly benefit from; Whites are harmfully raced as well, albeit in different ways, and in spite of their relative privileges—we must show how the dominant themselves are harmed so that they have a stake in exercising the potential for revolution which is spontaneous and ever-present.

We must not simply celebrate the marooned community and the escape of the formerly enslaved.[401] Survivalism is not the best we can hope for, nor should it be taken as the normative force of the ethical. This is precisely why we are better served by focusing on my responsibility for you, rather than the desperate lengths you will go to survive. The challenge is to cultivate a subjectivity that allows for even the victimizer to both revolt against the harm we do to others and also go beyond that liberal "non-harm"/non-interference to facilitate self-originated care for the other.

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[401] This is akin to what Alexander Weheliye does in *Habeus Viscus* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 116-124; by celebrating Harriet Jacobs's time in the attic and the musselman's unflinching stare in the face of abuse and punishment, I think we miss the point. Do we look for ever more diminished agencies and celebrate just how far down we can be beaten? Where is the liberatory practice in celebrating the depths that people have always gone to merely survive?

CONCLUSION

The primary objective of this dissertation has been to theorize new models of subjectivity that can adequately equip and encourage White subjects to do the difficult self-work and care for the other that I argue are at the heart of moral perfectionism. I single out the White subject, in particular, since extensive efforts to describe and convince Whites that people of color are harmed physically, economically, psychologically, politically and economically by the myriad practices of race have either fallen on deaf White ears or have been met with indifference or even attempts at justifying the outcomes of racial differentiation. Ultimately, we must find alternative ways of living that are sensitive and responsive to the ways that race harms all of us, including White subjects. Detailing the differences in life expectancy, wealth and income, psychological health, voting rights, air and water quality, and housing conditions are of course valuable, but up until now these details have failed to stimulate the kind of changes so desperately needed at the interpersonal, economic, and state politics levels. We must dig down deep to unearth the kinds of ethical harm that practices of race impose on even those who otherwise reap benefits in the realms of economics, political influence, and social authority.

I have taken my first steps toward this new subjectivity by bringing together the contributions of Ralph Waldo Emerson, David Walker, Maria W. Stewart, Stanley Cavell, Michel Foucault, and Emmanuel Levinas under a loose category of moral perfectionist thought. I take inspiration from David Owen[402] in connecting Cavell's Emersonian perfectionism with

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[402] See Owen's "Perfectionism, Parrhesia, and Care of the Self" (2006) as discussed in Chapter 2.

Foucault's studies of ethics, especially as regards the function of the parrhesiast in ethical work on the self. I also follow Simon Critchley in drawing connections between Levinas's work on the ethical and Cavell's various engagements with the problem of Other minds and our acknowledgement of the other's pain.[403] Therefore, in addition to the primary objective of a new subjectivity that is inseparable from responsibility, I have taken cues from thinkers like Owen and Critchley, and have drawn important links between the distinct conceptual approaches of these four key theorists of the ethical. Whereas Emerson, Cavell, and Foucault begin their investigations of the ethical with the responsibility to the self and self-work, Levinas assumes the primacy of the irreducible other, the self's responsibility to the other, and Being reframed as being-for-the-other. These different starting points are nonetheless crucial to building a subjectivity that is always already inter-subjective, and I argue that their respective contributions and trajectories share a common gravitational center, that is, ethical (inter)subjectivity.

I have also placed the respective positions of Cavell and Levinas into conversations with thinkers whose primary subject matter is specifically the mechanisms, practices, and discourses that comprise race and racial differentiation. I have done so to contextualize the problem of ethical subjectivity within what I argue is one of the most powerful and toxic political and social forces we face as ethical subjects. David Walker's *Appeal to the Colored People of the World* and Maria W. Stewarts lectures and writings are, I argue, both representative of a moral perfectionist approach as well as challenges to the practices and discourses of race present during their time. Johnathan Havercroft's and David Owen's article opens the door to critiquing the unnoticed structures and norms that dictate appropriate forms, avenues, and content of political

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[403] See Critchley's introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 28.

protests and appeals to justice. Octavia Butler's post-apocalyptic fiction illustrates the stakes of reframing our relationship to others and their pain in the face of racialized (and thus, selective) other-mind skepticism. Samuel R. Delany's speculative fiction and Neil Roberts's work on the history of political thought surrounding *marronage* provide avenues of working through the value and limitations of the concepts of flight and escape within our struggles against racial differentiation and domination.

Chapter 1, "On Emersonian Moral Perfectionism and Its Relation to the Problem of Race" proceeds under the assumption that Ralph Waldo Emerson's core pillars of moral perfectionism provide valuable, though limited, contributions to ethical theorizing in the face of practices of race. The concepts most central to the moral perfectionist outlook of responsibility for and to the state of the self and the state of society that I seek to develop are self-trust, Emerson's unique perspective on the relation between ethics and power (which is distinct from norms and rules-based morality), the concomitance of self-reliance and genius, and the importance of the role of the agonistic friend. When we engage with Emerson's contemporaries, David Walker and Maria W. Stewart, whose writings more intensely targeted the problem of race than Emerson did, we see not only new manifestations of the moral perfectionist project, but we also see articulations of the ethical and political implications of practices of race as articulated by (as yet unacknowledged) moral perfectionist friends. By pushing Emerson into conversation with Walker and Stewart, I hope to have problematized the notion of self-sufficient, isolationist self-work often associated with Emerson and thereby highlighted the always already inter-subjective relationship at the core of self-work and the potential for ethical development.

Chapter 2, "Skepticism, Acknowledgment, and Racial Others," focuses on the work of Stanley Cavell on the persistence of the temptation and threat of skepticism as constitutive of

particular ethico-epistemic dilemmas. I engage with Cavell's exploration of two forms of skepticism, external world skepticism and other-mind skepticism, in order to approach the problem of race from a new trajectory. Like the previous chapter's mode of engaging Emerson's contributions to theorizing the ethical, I attempt to plumb Cavell's approach to lift out the most productive elements for re-framing the ethical and the problem that race poses to such ethical work, while also attempt to bridge gaps between largely deracialized approach and the real world of racialized subjects.

I argue that Cavell's other-mind skeptic is representative of a generalized form of what I think is more accurately categorized as a skepticism selectively applied to racialized others. The real world other-mind skeptic does not, I argue, doubt the sincerity or possession of pain of *all* others, but reserves their skepticism for others who do not share their racial classification. I also argue that the issues of pain and trauma are central concerns within racial politics, especially in instances in which racial others attempt to make claims about personal and collective experiences of injustice. The final section engages with Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* as a depiction of the problem of other minds and their pain, in addition to its depiction of an acknowledgement of an other's pain when (and in spite of the fact that) the self is in the best case scenario to "know" the other's pain. Lauren Olamina's hyper-empathy and her Earthseed religion are provocative demonstrations of attempts to refigure acknowledgement in a violent, racialized, and desperate world.

Chapter 3, "Foucault and the Call for a Worldly Ethics," contributes to Ella Myers's analysis of Michel Foucault's studies of ethics. I utilize Myers's *Worldly Ethics* as a springboard from which to begin theorizing a democratic ethos, while simultaneously posing counter-readings of Foucault's work to show the importance of Foucault's conceptualization of the

ethical as a means of developing an ethos that extends beyond absorption in the self as a project, and rather emphasizes that self-work is only possible because of the other. The particular role that the other serves in Foucault's last lecture series is as parrhesiast. The risky truth-telling of the parrhesiast is crucial to making the listener aware of their own ethical shortcomings, and thus opening up space for self-work and betterment. I rely on James Baldwin's "My Dungeon Shook," as support for the notion of parrhesia within race-politics, as Baldwin explains to his nephew that the problem of race in America is a product of Whites' reliance upon conceptually positioning Blacks as a static star used Whites to navigate their own identity and also Whites' unwillingness to address the history of race, cruelty, and violence in America. Ultimately, I argue that Foucault's studies of the ethical (and ethical "problematiques") are part of a broader moral perfectionist outlook that centralizes the other (as truth-teller) as inextricably linked to the self's work on itself, in spite of the persistence of forces and discourses that shape the self from without.

Chapter 4, "Worldly Ethics Part II: Levinas and Care for the Other," again utilizes Ella Myers's objective of a democratic ethos and her reading of a prominent theorist of the ethical (in this case, Emmanuel Levinas) as a point of departure and grounds for development. Here I pose alternative readings of Emmanuel Levinas that open up his comportment of infinite responsibility as a grounds for democratic ethos, beyond Myers's characterization of his thinking as "charitable." I engage with Levinas's work as a way of approaching moral perfectionism from an assumption of the primacy of the Other, rather than the primacy of the self with the other as secondary. Levinas's being-for-the-other refigures subjectivity as always dependent upon the other in that the self only exists as such in its acceptance of responsibility for the demands placed upon it by the destitution of the other. I make this point to buttress the claim that practices of race

constitute ethical harm to all subjects insofar as such practices delimit, constrain, and settle in advance the terms of the self's exposure to and relation with the Other, as well as who gets to count as an "Other" in relation to whom my subjectivity can be constituted. Levinas's model of the ethical and subjectivity allows me to emphasize the ways that even seemingly non-violent practices of race enact harm on all subjects and their capacity for ethical subjectivity.Chapter 5, "The Politics of Escape in Samuel Delany's *The Star Pit* and Levinas's *De l'evasion*: A Response to Neil Roberts's *Freedom as Marronage*," returns to Levinas's theoretical work on the problem of ethics and being in order to contribute to the work put forth by Neil Roberts in *Freedom as Marronage* which places flight and escape (in particular, the historical phenomena of marooned communities) at the center of his framework for contesting the political manifestations of race. Whereas Roberts builds a strategic political model upon the notion of geographic, social, and cognitive "flight," Levinas's *On Escape* problematizes the notion of escape and points to only rare and fleeting moments of "escape" from which subjects are snatched back into the modes of Being to which they are riveted. I then introduce Samuel R. Delany's *The Star Pit* to problematize the impasse between Roberts's optimism and Levinas's misgivings about the potential for escape. The model of intergalactic travel and the selective capacities to engage in among ordinary humans and "golden" allows me to redirect our attention to the pervasiveness of race, even as the practices that constitute it differ over time, contexts, and geographies. Here again, James Baldwin serves as an illuminating example for why even momentary escape (in his case to Paris) is a necessary strategy if we are to reenergize, formulate, organize, and return to challenge the modes injustice that emerge through practices of race. Whereas escape may never be permanent, it is nonetheless a necessary component of counter-racist strategy. The works of Delany, Roberts, and Baldwin, together with Levinas, ultimately

allow us to begin reimagining how to be otherwise and contest race from within the practices of race, rather than how to escape racialized being all together.

By bringing moral perfectionist thought into conversation with critical race thought, I hope to have contributed to the groundwork for a new, deeper notion of subjectivity that can aid in the ongoing fight against racialized state and interpersonal violence in all its forms. In order to better combat these forms of violence, we must cultivate a self-motivated White subject capable of simultaneous self-work and care for the other.

Future developments of this project will begin to address the ways that the practices and discourses of gender, sexuality, class, humanism, and physical ability coalesce to complicate the possibilities and power dynamics within racialized society. I must also continue to refine the key concepts that I have deployed in the present project. Jacques Derrida's work on friendship and hospitality would certainly deepen and complicate our understanding of the role of the friend within moral perfectionism. Samuel Delany's literary essays and interviews also provide great accounts of how we can relate marginal statuses of speculative fiction and "para-literature" with the problem of marginalized groups in our societies. The present project did not address Levinas's later work *Otherwise than Being* and the ways that it highlights the importance and difficulty of addressing the inescapability of the violence at the core of our language and interaction with Being (these are criticisms levelled by Derrida which Levinas seems to have taken to heart in developing *Otherwise than Being*). Future developments of my project will also work through the details self-work and care for the self within particular contexts, since the dissertation above has primarily spoken of such concepts in abstract (if not meta-theoretical) terms.

Despite the shortcomings and theoretical omissions, this dissertation has pursued strategies of bringing White subjects into new ways of approaching politics by discussing the ways that race harms them and limits the kinds of subjects they can be. Practices of race limit our exposure to people to particular contexts and power dynamics (e.g. only seeing people of color in contexts of particular roles, locales, and relationships), limit who we consider as deserving of care (e.g. who deserves to have less wealth or poor health, deserves to be treated with force or violence under the law, etc.) and determine who is allowed to be the friend (e.g. not just who one counts as a friend, but also the ways that race interferes and sets the limits within the friendships that one manages to sustain, and the ways that race obstructs and pollutes relationships with those who share our racial classification), and race ultimately limits how we can think of our next attainable, but unattained selves by pre-establishing the ways we can conceive of the good life. We must realize what is at stake for those deemed White if we are to meaningfully and continually resist racial domination and differentiation—the broader form of moral perfectionism that I have presented above is one mode of ethical comportment that I argue is a necessary but always insufficient impetus for Whites to consider and construct themselves as more than "allies" to people of color, and, indeed, equal stakeholders within the dynamics, practices, and discourses of race. For this reason, I have attempted to build an argument for why White subjects should care about race even as they benefit from it in myriad ways.

Looking back upon the framing of my project and the works I have brought to bear upon it, it is clear that it is entangled in precisely the kind of politics I have sought to critique and resist; that is, I have placed Whites at the center. In attempting to act as the parrhesiastic, agonistic friend to other White subjects by highlighting the deformation of their ethical subjectivity, I have problematically placed the focus yet again on those who think themselves

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White. The early stages of the project began under the assumption that race is a primarily White problem, (or, better put: a problem arising from Whites), based largely upon the simple fact of the overrepresentation of so much physical, economic, and psychological violence perpetrated against people of color, for the (seeming) benefit of White political control and the assuagement of White fear of people of color.[404] Whereas I still contend that the preponderance of the violence done via practices of race is directed at people of color, in order to strategize against practices of race, all subjects must see that they have a stake in contesting race's persistent effects on us all; in order to induce White subjects' investment in singular and collective harms done through practices of race, I have problematically placed Whites again at the center of the discussion. This is a harm in itself, both to White subjects and subjects of color, insofar as I have doubled-down on the prioritization of Whites.

Whereas I stand by the attempt to make theories produced by White ethical thinkers do race-critical work (even if it means disfiguring them, retrofitting them with new perspectives, or shaping them into new contexts), I now recognize the problem of giving their work primacy, even if that primacy is aimed at criticism. This bespeaks a persistent and egregious moral and academic transgression of behaving as if (even if racist practice is a manifestation of corruption of Whites' ethical subjectivity) the solution to White racism is to be found in the theories of Whites, themselves. This is a concern I have barely begun to articulate in this dissertation, but it is a crucial issue: while we must do self-work, we cannot do so without the Other; simultaneously, though, the Other should not be expected to provide the solutions that we then apply to ourselves. If we look back at chapter one, for instance, it is clear in retrospect that I have

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[404] Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* and James Baldwin's *Notes of a Native Son* and *The Fire Next Time* were early and profound influences for me in my graduate work.

harnessed David Walker and Maria W. Stewart as correctives to Emerson's own race politics, but this dynamic still centralizes Emerson, despite his theoretical shortcomings. This tricky relationship is analogous to the circumstances that Havercroft and Owen highlight when they explain the rejection of Black Lives Matter by White Americans as an example of soul-blindness facilitated by Rancièrian police orders of race. The difficulty that Havercroft and Owen's diagnosis reveals is that such forms of soul-blindness still leave people of color in the unfortunate position of continually attempting to draw such blindness to the attention of those who do not yet know they are blind. This ultimately leaves the question unanswered of how we can discover our own deformations of our subjectivity. Neither our subjectivity, nor our self-work, can exist without the Other, but race prefigures who gets to count as our others on the one hand, and then demands that these unacknowledged (other) Others show us how we fail to see them as Others.

I have attempted to approach the problem of race from within an ethical perspective grounded in cross-disciplinary approaches (American transcendentalism, ordinary language philosophy, post-structuralism, speculative fiction, etc.) under the awareness that the thinkers I engage are conscriptable less for producing solutions, and more for generating problematiques.[405] The success of attempts to problematize the ways that we conceptualize the harms enacted through practices of race, in the end, lies in the kinds of behaviors, counter-practices, and theoretical innovations that they facilitate and foster. I hope to have contributed to new ways of engaging manifestations of race that pervade our lives.

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[405] See Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics," 256.

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