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Thomas Waldstein

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I'm not blaming you. But, by Jove, I mean, you must acknowledge—I mean to say, I've been thinking pretty deeply these last few days, Jeeves, and I've come to the conclusion mine is an empty life. I'm lonely, Jeeves.

—P.G. Wodehouse, *Carry On, Jeeves*

*Thrice bless'd are they, who feel their loneliness [...]
Till, sick at heart, beyond the veil they fly,
Seeking His Presence, who alone can bless.*

—John Henry Newman, "Melchisedech"

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¹ Hilaire Belloc, *The Path to Rome*, 4th ed. (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1916), p. x.

² David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest* (New York: Back Bay Books / Little, Brown and Company, 2006 [1996]), p. 1040.

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INTRODUCTION

THE DOUBLE-BIND OF LONELINESS AND “GIVING ONESELF AWAY” IN WALLACE’S WORK

The writings of the American novelist David Foster Wallace (1962-2008) are full of double-binds. As he put it himself in one interview, “Interesting and true stuff in my life seems to involve double-binds, where there is a decision between two alternatives, but neither is acceptable.”¹ The double-bind is a situation in which one is caught between two intolerable options; a situation in which any attempt at a solution to the problem is itself a problem. Wallace makes the theme explicit in his 1996 novel *Infinite Jest* in the comic description of high school level elective course entitled “The Personal Is the Political Is the Psychopathological: The Politics of Contemporary Psychopathological Double-Binds.”² The midterm exam of the course asks students to imagine a person who is both a kleptomaniac and an agoraphobic. The person is caught in the double-bind between wanting to go out into the marketplace, the *agora*, of human civilization in order to steal things, and wanting to stay locked up at home away from the terrifying exposure of going out.³ This comic description hints at a deep-level double-bind that is explored in many different ways throughout Wallace’s work—from his first novel *The Broom of the System* (1987) to his final, unfinished novel *The Pale King* (posthumously published in 2011)—a double-bind rooted in loneliness or isolation on the one hand, and unacceptable attempts to undo loneliness on the other.

In one of his fictional *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men* Wallace shows an extreme example of the double-bind in a psychotic rapist and murderer. A man being interviewed tells the story of having been told the story of the rapist, and gives a long-distance psychological reading of the rapist’s behavior. The man’s reading is of course suspect, but it is meant to at

¹ Michael Silverblatt, “David Foster Wallace: Infinite Jest,” Radio Program, KCRW, April 11, 1996, cited in: Adam Kelly, “David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction,” in: David Hering (ed.), *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays* (Los Angeles: Sideshow Media, 2010), pp. 131-146, at p. 139.

² David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest* (New York: Back Bay Books / Little, Brown and Company, 2006 [1996]), pp. 306-308.

³ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, pp. 307-308.

least sound plausible. The murderer-rapist, he argues, murders and rapes in order to establish a connection with the victim without being obliterated. Such a connection is “a basic human need,” but it is also frightening. The fear is that such connection will involve the loss of the self:

[T]he terror that any conventional, soul-exposing connection with another human being will threaten him with engulfment and/or obliteration, in other words that he will become the victim. That in his cosmology it is either feed or be food—God how lonely, do you feel it?⁴

The case of the psychopath is an extreme one, but in the interview it becomes clear that the normal, apparently well-balanced man being interviewed has come to the realization that a similar double-bind can be found in his own life, preventing him from having the sort of deep connection to others that he craves.

“The great transcendent horror,” a character reflects in *Infinite Jest*, “is loneliness, excluded engagement in the self.”⁵ To be cut off from others, without connection, without love— this is unendurable pain. The pain of loneliness engenders an impulse to “give oneself away.” This can happen either consciously—as in the attempt to “give oneself” to some cause greater than the self—or (more often) unconsciously in the pursuit of pleasures or excitements to distract oneself from loneliness. Here the impulse is to take rather than to give (“kleptomania”), but paradoxically one ends up “giving oneself” to objects that one wants to take. One becomes “addicted” and devoted—whether to drugs or alcohol or the pursuit of fame or wealth. “A flight-from in the form of a plunging-into.”⁶ Giving oneself away is inevitable: “American experience seems to suggest that people are virtually unlimited in their need to give themselves away, on various levels.”⁷ Wallace sometimes calls this giving away of the self “worship.” But most forms of “worship” do not really help to overcome loneliness and isolation. On the contrary, each of them “bends back in on the self, makes you

⁴ David Foster Wallace, *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men* (New York: Little, Brown, 2007 [1999]), p. 303.

⁵ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 694.

⁶ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 900.

⁷ Wallace, *Infinite Jest* p. 53.

narrow.”⁸ They spiral back to an ever-deeper loneliness. They are self-destructive. Other forms of “worship” seem at first to help more against loneliness, albeit by opening up another horror: the horror of a loss of the self into totalitarian structures that rob one of freedom. And yet, this apparent loss of the self too, ends in a deep loneliness, since there is always a remainder that refuses to be absorbed. Hence the double-bind between loneliness and “worship” or “giving oneself away” that runs as a theme through so much of Wallace’s work can also be seen as simply the double-bind *of* loneliness; loneliness *as* a double-bind.

But Wallace was not content with describing the double-bind. He also wanted to explore ways of dealing with it, so to speak. In an often-cited interview, Larry McCaffery asked Wallace whether he thought that it was his job as a fiction writer to “provide the *solutions*” to the problems that he described. Wallace replies that it is not the job of fiction writers to propose “conventionally political or social-action-type solutions,” or to “make us good little Christians or Republicans,” but that it is the job of fiction to illuminate some possibility for living a real human life. Given the difficulty of living a really human life, and not being devoured by loneliness and self-alienated by giving oneself away, fiction should not only describe that difficulty, but also try to show ways in which “we as human beings still have the capacity for joy, charity, genuine connections, for stuff that doesn’t have a price.”⁹ On my reading, Wallace’s work suggests that there is no “solution” to the double-bind in the sense of a recipe or formula or insight or practice that would allow one to simply escape the double-bind and leave it behind. There are, however, ways of living with and confronting the double-bind that partially overcome it or transcend it from within.

The task that Wallace sets himself is thus not “conventionally” political or religious— it is not ordered to the ready-made answer of a political/religious/moral program such as that championed by the so-called “Christian right” in America. Nevertheless, *in another sense* the task that Wallace sets himself is both political and even religious. “The personal is the political is the psychopathological,” and it is also the *ethical*. As Wallace argued in an

⁸ Wallace, *Infinite Jest* p. 107.

⁹ Larry McCaffery, “An Expanded Interview with David Foster Wallace,” in: Stephen Burn (ed.), *Conversations with David Foster Wallace* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2012), pp. 21-52, at pp. 26-27.

interview with David Lipsky, the way in which the double-bind presented itself to his generation was connected to an absence of ethical values. In the 1960s and 70s Americans had quite rightly “rebelled” against the authoritarian ethical values of previous generations, but that this rebellion left them alienated, lonely, and with an unmet need to give themselves away, and that they therefore needed to find a way of making up their own ethical values: “we’re going to have to *make up* a lot of our own morality and our own values.”¹⁰

The task would be to “make up” livable ethical values, which would enable real connection between human beings. Values which would enable a “giving away” of the self that would paradoxically coincide with a finding of the true self. Values which would not trample on individuality and freedom, but which enable a more mature form of individuality and a different kind of freedom. Such ethical values would not simply overcome the double-bind of loneliness, but they would provide a way of living with it and accepting it, which would itself constitute a partial escape. The task is not an easy one. The great risk that Wallace sees is that the unbearable loneliness will lead American culture to tip backwards into an atavistic, totalitarian dictatorship that proclaims “easy” but ultimately inhuman values.¹¹ Wallace saw the American Christian right as movement towards just such a “Fascist” solution.¹²

As we shall see, however, this does not mean that Wallace had no interest in religion or even in Christianity. As the reference to the concept of “worship” suggests, Wallace saw the double-bind as raising religious or quasi-religious questions. In fact, in the Q&A to a public reading at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, Wallace once claimed that in a sense all of his work was about religion.¹³ Wallace’s exploration of the double-bind of loneliness thus has

¹⁰ David Lipsky, *Although of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself: a Road Trip with David Foster Wallace* (New York: Broadway Books, 2010), p. 159.

¹¹ See: Lipsky, *Although of Course*, p. 162.

¹² See: Judith Strasser, “To the Best of Our Knowledge: Interview with David Foster Wallace,” Wisconsin Public Radio, 1996, in: *David Foster Wallace In His Own Words* (New York: Hachette Audio, 2014), Audiobook, Disk 1.

¹³ “Hammer Readings: David Foster Wallace,” (Los Angeles: Armand Hammer Museum, January 15, 2006); cited in: Maria Bustillos, “Philosophy, Self-Help, and the Death of David Wallace,” in: Robert K. Bolger and Scott Korb

both ethical and religious dimensions. Indeed, my claim in this dissertation is that Wallace's work can be an aid to the reflections of theological ethics. How can theological ethics help address the human condition without becoming an "ideology"? In other words, how can it avoid serving as one more deceptive "easy way out" of the double-bind of the human condition? How can it, instead, help to face the human condition without blinking, and find a way of living with it that would help enable a truly human life?

THE DOUBLE-BIND AND THE RELATION OF ANTHROPOLOGY AND ETHICS

Wallace's understanding of the ethical task could be formulated thus: the search for a way of facing the double-bind that mitigates its intolerable pain. A way of being less lonely and less miserable, without falling into a self-defeating or reinforcing loop of a "flight-from" that ends up being a "plunging-into."¹⁴

In what sense is this an ethical task? At first it might seem to be a task of philosophical anthropology or of theoretical psychology. A work of understanding humanity that ethics might presuppose, insofar as not being caught in the double-bind might be a condition of ethical action, but which would not itself yet be ethics. Terms such as "ethical" and "moral" used to have a wider scope, based on Aristotelian, teleological conceptions of human nature. But, as virtue ethicist Alasdair MacIntyre has argued, in early modernity (from about 1630 to 1850) these terms have shown "a continual tendency to narrow its meaning."¹⁵ By the nineteenth century, when modern academic disciplines were forming, ethics was primarily understood as the study of right and wrong in human actions, the science of what "ought" to be done by human beings—whether "ought" is seen as a fundamental imperative of practical reason (Kant), or whether it is given a utilitarian justification. A high-point of the utilitarian tradition of ethics as the science of what ought to be done was the work of the Victorian ethicist Henry Sidgwick.¹⁶ Sidgwick defines ethics as "any rational procedure by

(eds.), *Gesturing Toward Reality: David Foster Wallace and Philosophy* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), pp. 121-139, at p. 137.

¹⁴ Cf. Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 900.

¹⁵ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2007), p. 38.

¹⁶ See: Bart Schultz, *Henry Sidgwick: The Eye of the Universe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

which we determine what individual human beings ‘ought’—or what it is ‘right’ for them—to do, or to seek to realise by voluntary action.”¹⁷ In practice, this leads to an understanding of ethics as primarily concerned with reflection on the duties of human beings toward each other, and the norms which express such duties.¹⁸ On such an account, the question of the double-bind would indeed be a pre-ethical question of anthropology or psychology.

But such a neat separation of anthropology and psychology on the one hand, and ethics on the other, came under criticism from many directions in the twentieth century, and few ethicists would defend it today. As MacIntyre argues, no one now shares the naïve encyclopædic view of science exemplified by Sidgwick.¹⁹ And yet, MacIntyre also argues, “ghosts” of such nineteenth-century conceptions of the compartmentalization of the sciences still persist in academic culture, and need to be “exorcised.”²⁰ My claim is that Wallace can help us to see *why* such conceptions were inadequate, and help us to exorcise them.

Wallace’s work can help us to see that the “understanding” of the human condition is not a “datum” that ethics can simply accept from another discipline as a foundation for building normative theories. Rather, it is a problem that ethics has to constantly face as it attempts to map out the journey of ethical life. Only by constantly facing that problem can ethics map out its journey without becoming an ideological system unmoored from its foundations. Conversely, philosophical anthropology cannot “understand” the double-bind of human loneliness in abstraction from ethics. It is only in relation to the attempt at mapping the ethical path that the nature of the double-bind begins to clarify. Following Wallace’s insights, then, I will attempt to sketch a view of ethics as the systematic reflection on the paths open to human beings in the attempt to live a truly human life—a life not rendered

¹⁷ Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, 7th ed. (London: Macmillan, 1907), p. 1.

¹⁸ See: Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, p. 495.

¹⁹ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopedia, Genealogy, and Tradition* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), p. 170. It should be noted that Sidgwick himself came up against the limits of his view, as witnessed by his agonizing over whether moral obligation, and hence ethics, could be grounded at all (See: Schultz, *Henry Sidgwick*).

²⁰ MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, p. 171.

intolerable by the double-bind of loneliness. While such an ethics would certainly include reflections on duties and norms towards others, it would not be limited to such reflections. It would also reflect on the forms or paths of life open to individuals that *enable* them to live according to such duties and norms. It would thus include reflections on the habits or virtues that enable human beings to have truly human connections to each other.

Daniel Turnbull has argued that Wallace's work can be fruitfully read in the light of the twentieth-century revival of virtue ethics. Turnbull discusses parallels between Wallace and Iris Murdoch, using Martha Nussbaum's approach to the relation of ethics and literature to illuminate them. Wallace, he argues, sees fiction as a way of forming habits of moral awareness and moral imagination. And, therefore, he argues, Wallace can help expand our notion of morality. It is worth quoting Turnbull at length:

Where morality is seen as purely about what we owe to others, what we are required to do and what we are forbidden to do, then it is natural to say that questions about the direction of attention do not fall within the domain of morality. However despite its widespread, albeit often unthinking, acceptance, this conception of morality is not the only one available. A wider conception of morality, of whom the standard-bearer is Aristotle, sees no sharp moral/non-moral distinction, but instead is concerned about how we can live in a way that allows us to flourish as whole people; this includes, but is by no means exhausted by, our actions that affect others. If we accept this wider conception of the domain of moral concern, questions about attention and conceptualization of situations will be seen as having moral relevance.²¹

Aristotle's "wider conception of morality" (or rather, of ethics) underwent a revival in twentieth-century "virtue ethics." This revival can be seen as having been inaugurated by Elizabeth Anscombe's famous 1958 essay "Modern Moral Philosophy." Anscombe criticized the role that moral obligation plays in the work of the Enlightenment philosophers, and the deontological and utilitarian traditions derived from them. She is especially critical of Sidgwick, whom she sees as marking the transition from classical utilitarianism to what she calls "consequentialism."²² Anscombe called for a recovery of the virtue ethics of ancient Greece as a means of overcoming the limitations that she identified. Anscombe was an

²¹ Daniel Turnbull, "This is Water and the Ethics of Attention: Wallace, Murdoch and Nussbaum," in: David Hering (ed.), *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays* (Los Angeles: Sideshow, 2010) pp. 209-217.

²² G. E. M. Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," in: *Philosophy* 33.124 (1958), pp. 1-19, especially at pp. 9-19.

important influence on other virtue ethicists such as Phillipa Foot and Alasdair MacIntyre, as well as on Iris Murdoch and Martha Nussbaum, the thinkers to whom Turnbull refers.²³

Wallace was certainly familiar with virtue ethics. Indeed, his own father, James Wallace, wrote a book on the virtues explicitly inspired by Anscombe.²⁴ And the ethical task toward which I take him to be pointing us resembles virtue ethics insofar as it includes in its considerations the form of human life. But there is a difference of emphasis. In virtue ethics, the concept of *happiness*, and the question of how to attain it, plays an important role. Whereas, in Wallace's work it is more *unhappiness*, the suffering of loneliness, and how to deal with it that is key.

In their interest in happiness, virtue ethicists are within the "eudaemonistic" tradition that goes back to Aristotle. Aristotle had understood ethics as being primarily concerned with the chief purpose or goal of human life. Aristotle maintained that most persons agree that this goal consists in what he calls "εὐδαιμονία," *eudaimonia* (from which we get the word "eudaemonism"), which is usually translated as "happiness," but can also be translated as "blessedness," or "flourishing." Moreover, he maintains that most agree and that happiness is the same as living well and doing well.²⁵ However, people differ about what living and doing well means. Aristotle argues that this disagreement is decisive for the whole of life; those who are mistaken about the goal of life will never be happy. Thus, Aristotle tries to determine exactly what living and doing well means for a human being by investigating what kind of "doing" is proper to human beings, that is, what is the "work of man" (τὸ ἔργον τοῦ ἀνθρώπου).²⁶ He argues that it consists in the action of the soul with reason. He then examines what qualities are needed to do this work well (the "virtues"), and how to obtain

²³ For overviews of the revival in virtue ethics see: Roger Crisp and Michael Slote (eds.), *Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Daniel C. Russell, *The Cambridge Companion to Virtue Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

²⁴ James D. Wallace, *Virtues and Vices* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978). The reference to Anscombe is on p. 9, note 1.

²⁵ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, I,2 1095a15.

²⁶ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, I,6 1097b25.

these qualities, since obtaining them promises to enable one to attain to happiness/flourishing.

I would suggest that Wallace sees the task of ethics as an *inverted* eudaemonism: ordered to the avoidance of misery rather than the pursuit of happiness. Wallace's understanding of the ethical task is an inversion of Aristotle's basic question—not how to obtain happiness, but rather how to be less miserable, how to come to terms with loneliness and sadness in a way that mitigates them. This inversion of eudaemonism is one way of seeing how Wallace's work raises religious and theological questions.

HOW DOES THE DOUBLE-BIND RAISE THEOLOGICAL ISSUES?

Wallace's inversion of eudaemonism makes the ethical task resemble certain religious traditions, which see the human condition as marked in general by suffering or estrangement, and point out a way of dealing with that suffering. It is therefore not surprising that Wallace was interested in religion. In the Q&A to a reading at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles in 2006, Wallace argued that the topic of religion is so "important or circumambient" to us that is very difficult to talk about explicitly.²⁷ Nevertheless, one occasion on which Wallace did speak in an explicit, straightforward way about religion was in his 2005 commencement speech at Kenyon College (sometimes referred to as *This is Water*). The "Kenyon Commencement Speech" explains in an explicit way some of the problems that in Wallace's fiction are explored much more obliquely. The Kenyon speech can therefore serve as an aid to interpretation of the fiction.

One of the religious traditions that Wallace mentions in the "Kenyon Commencement Speech" is Buddhism. Wallace mentions the "Four Noble Truths of Buddhism," although he does not explain what they are.²⁸ A few years before the speech, Wallace had taken part in a

²⁷ "Hammer Readings: David Foster Wallace," (Los Angeles: Armand Hammer Museum, January 15th, 2006); cited in: Maria Bustillos, "Philosophy, Self-Help, and the Death of David Wallace," in: Robert K. Bolger and Scott Korb (eds.), *Gesturing Toward Reality: David Foster Wallace and Philosophy* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), pp. 121-139, at p. 137.

²⁸ David Foster Wallace, "Kenyon Commencement Speech," in: Dave Eggers (ed.), *The Best American Nonrequired Reading* (Boston – New York: Mariner, 2006), pp. 355-364, at p. 362.

retreat with Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thích Nhất Hạnh. (Although he left before the retreat finished).²⁹ On Nhất Hạnh's account, the Four Noble Truths hold that human life is (1) marked by suffering, (2) caused by craving based on misunderstanding. But (3) this suffering can be overcome, and (4) the way to overcome it is through the Eightfold Path of "Right View, Right Thinking, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Diligence, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration."³⁰ The eightfold path is not a recipe for simply leaving craving, and the suffering it causes, behind, but a way of dealing with that suffering from within. One can see at once how this resembles the ethical task that Wallace portrays the double-bind of loneliness as giving us. The suffering of loneliness is only increased by cravings to flee from it, give oneself to pleasures or diversions or causes, based on the erroneous notion that this will overcome loneliness.³¹

Another Buddhist thinker who influenced Wallace was the English philosopher Alan Watts. Watts argued that the conscious self is itself a double-bind. Consciousness of the self *as self* requires a separation of the self from the greater whole of which it is a part. This causes the self to desire the overcoming of its separation from the greater whole. But that desire cannot but affirm the desiring self. "This is the familiar, everyday problem of the psychological 'double-bind,' of creating the problem by trying to solve it[.]"³²

But the inverted eudaemonism towards which Wallace points also resembles certain strands of the Christian tradition. In Christianity, the human condition is seen as marked by a deep-level estrangement from God, expressed in the idea of "original sin." This estrangement leads to setting up of substitute gods more accessible to man—"idols," which he worships. In

²⁹ See: D.T. Max, *Every Love Story is a Ghost Story: A Life of David Foster Wallace* (New York: Viking, 2012), pp. 262.

³⁰ Thích Nhất Hạnh, *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching: Transforming Suffering into Peace, Joy, and Liberation* (New York: Harmony, 1999), p. 9-11.

³¹ Cf. Krzysztof Piekarski, "Buddhist Philosophy in the Work of David Foster Wallace" (PhD diss., Austin: The University of Texas, 2013); Christopher Kocela, "The Zen of 'Good Old Neon': David Wallace, Alan Watts, and the Double-bind of Selfhood," in: Beatrice Pire and Pierre-Louis Patoine (eds.), *David Foster Wallace: Presences of the Other* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2017), pp. 57-72.

³² Alan W. Watts, *The Way of Zen* (New York: Vintage Books, 1957), p. 62. For Watts's influence on Wallace see: Kocela, "The Zen."

Christian monasticism, there is an emphasis on solitude and silence in order to feel the pain of estrangement from God, preparatory to a path of overcoming that estrangement through contemplative prayer and a life of virtue in community. In Christian theology, especially the strands of it influenced by St. Augustine of Hippo, there is a rethinking of classical Greek eudaemonism with more emphasis on the “brokenness” of the human condition, the restlessness of human hearts, the tendency of human beings to act in ways contrary to their happiness, and the necessity of “grace” for the overcoming of this tendency.

I will attempt to show that Wallace engaged these strands of the Christian tradition in various ways. One theme that often appears in Wallace is the theme of “worship.” As I have noted, this is one way that Wallace describes the “giving oneself away” side of the double-bind. Wallace’s use of this term bears a strong resemblance to the way it is used in the Christian tradition to talk about “idolatry.” In *Infinite Jest*, for example, the Quebecoise terrorist Rémy Marathe brings up “worship” in a conversation with an American secret agent, Steeply. The two of them are seated on a high ridge overlooking Tucson, Arizona, and their long conversation “overlooks” and comments on many of the main themes of the book. Divided into numerous sections interspersed throughout the novel, their conversation provides a kind of internal commentary on the work. When Steeply refers to Marathe as a “fanatic,” Marathe counters by pointing out that the word “fanatic” is derived from the Latin for “temple” (*fanum*), and means literally “worshiper at the temple.”³³ All of us, he argues, have a “temple,” something that we love, something that we “invest with faith.” It is thus of supreme importance what we choose as our temple: “For this choice determines all else. No? All other of our you say *free* choices follow from this.”³⁴ Worship so conceived is similar to the Aristotelian notion of the chief purpose and goal of human beings as being the main point of ethics. The object of worship is like the final purpose that is the object of human action for Aristotle. But to use the word “worship” is to imply that there is a religious—or quasi-religious—structure to our relation toward whatever we take as our purpose or goal.

³³ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 107.

³⁴ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 106-107.

Marathe argues that we are inclined to choose something unworthy, something that “bends back in on the self, makes you narrow,” as the object of worship. The American agent protests that there is perhaps no choice at all: What if you just *love?* without deciding?” Marathe sniffs disdainfully and answers as follows:

‘Then in such a case your temple is self and sentiment. Then in such an instance you are a fanatic of desire, a slave to your individual subjective, narrow self’s sentiments; a citizen of nothing. You become a citizen of nothing. You are by yourself and alone, kneeling to yourself.’ A silence ensued this.³⁵

Marathe’s terrorist group is planning to attack the United States by disseminating a film (also called *Infinite Jest*) that is so addictively entertaining that those who begin to view it can’t stop and are thus incapacitated. Marathe is pointing out that the apparent freedom of Americans is strangely paradoxical, since they are so afraid of an addictive film. This paradoxical freedom is connected to a false kind of worship—a worship that bends them in on themselves and renders them lonely.

Marathe’s description of “worship” has both a negative and a positive side. Viewed negatively, worship is one side of the unacceptable double-bind that human beings find themselves in (especially in contemporary America). The pain of deep-level loneliness leads to a flight from the self into diversion. This flight from the self (and its inner pain) into diversion has a kind of perverse religious structure; that is, one “gives oneself” ever more to diversion, one “worships” whatever promises to give one escape. Diversion, however, leads only to a multitude of new forms of loneliness and pain—such as addiction. But even the attempt to overcome loneliness through loving connection to others, when undertaken as part of the unconscious flight into diversion, can lead to new forms of loneliness. Much of the culture of late-capitalist society is aimed at exploiting these problems in materially profitable, but spiritually enslaving ways. This culture habituates people to practices that have a quasi-liturgical power—they are a kind of embodied worship. But Marathe’s description of worship also has a positive side. He thinks that one can habituate one’s self to another kind of worship. A counter-form of worship, as it were. One that might make it

³⁵ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 108.

possible to face one's inner loneliness, and then in some way overcome it, be reconciled to existence. Wallace portrays this claim of Marathe's in a highly ambivalent way. On the one hand, Marathe is a totalitarian political extremist, and Wallace portrays the "good" sort of worship that he proposes as being even worse than the bad. And yet, Wallace clearly sees Marathe as making an important point. Worship is inevitable, and you are therefore faced with the task of finding a form of worship that would not "eat you alive."³⁶

Wallace explores how finding some kind of deeper unity with God or the cosmos can ground habits of worship that then in turn enable one to overcome other kinds of loneliness; habits that enable one to live an other-directed ethical life, being "able truly to care about other people and to sacrifice for them over and over in myriad petty, unsexy ways every day."³⁷ What would an ethical embodiment of such worship would look like? How would it resist the commodification of human relations, and make possible relations grounded in gift? How it would enable a recovery of political "community" and care for the common good? These are some of the questions that Wallace brings up.

At the same time, Wallace is always second-guessing the theological interpretations of human experience. He had a deep mistrust of the tendency of religious ideas to become "ideological" in the sense of being a system of ideas unmoored from the human condition. Of being one more way of fleeing from the misery of human life into a totalitarian system. And despite his deep interest in religious questions, Wallace's skeptical bent kept him from fully committing to any religious tradition.

And this is precisely why I think that it is worth examining Wallace's work from a theological perspective. Wallace's work can be an aid to theology: to reflect on it can keep the double-bind of the human condition firmly in view, and prevent it from sliding into an ideological systematizing that leaves the reality of human life behind.

³⁶ Wallace, "Kenyon Commencement Speech," p. 362.

³⁷ Wallace, "Kenyon Commencement Speech," p. 363.

WHY SHOULD THEOLOGICAL ETHICS CONCERN ITSELF WITH DAVID FOSTER WALLACE?

Above I claimed that Wallace can help us see why ethics cannot be neatly separated from philosophical anthropology and psychology. And even though most ethicists today would agree, and would join in rejecting the Victorian encyclopedic approach to the sciences, nevertheless, the tendency to treat insights into the problem of the human condition not as “data” (which ethics could simply presuppose in its building of systems of norms) is a danger that ethics must continue to deal with. This is as true of theological ethics as it is of philosophical ethics. The history of theological ethics shows this danger returning again and again. St. Bernard of Clairvaux’s protests against the early scholasticism of Peter Abelard in the twelfth century can be understood in part as protest against the reduction of theological ethics to an intellectual game based on abstract definitions, rather than the drama of human life before God. In the seventeenth century, Blaise Pascal’s polemic against Jesuit casuistry in *The Provincial Letters* can be seen along similar lines. Despite its problematic aspects, it can be read as a protest against moral reductionism, unmoored from the anguish of the human longing that he was to describe in the *Pensées*. In more recent times, the Catholic moral theology manuals of the post-Tridentine period were criticized for a reductive and legalistic approach to human life. Since the Second Vatican Council, new styles of theological ethics have been developed that attempt to avoid these problems. And yet, in the subsequent decades, these new styles of moral theology have been criticized. On the one hand, for their own reductive tendencies,³⁸ and on the other hand, for keeping to much of the “cold bureaucratic morality” of earlier moral theology that does not take the actual complexity and difficulty of human life seriously enough, as has been lamented by Pope Francis.³⁹

In other words, theological ethics, or moral theology, has to be constantly on guard against the danger of sliding into “ideology.” This is a particular instance of a more general problem in academic disciplines. It is related to the problem that the philosopher Edmund Husserl

³⁸ See: Pope John Paul II, *Veritatis splendor*, in: *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* [Henceforth AAS] 85.12 (1993), pp. 1133-1228.

³⁹ Pope Francis, *Amoris laetitia*, in: AAS 108.4 (2016), pp. 311-446, at p. 440, §312.

called “sedimentation”— the problem of scientific terms losing their connection to the original evidence on which they were based, and being hidden beneath the “sediment” of meanings acquired by the role they have played in systems.⁴⁰ Now, it is my claim that it is Wallace’s idea of the ethical task as being the task of dealing with the double-bind of loneliness (without leaving it behind) which can be of help to theological ethics to guard against such sedimentation.

Moreover, reflection on Wallace’s work can also be of help to theological ethics in reflecting on its role in a secular age such as our own. The whole idea of theological ethics has become questionable in a time in which theological truth claims are no longer taken for granted.⁴¹ Questions naturally arise: What does ethics have to do with theology? Is the connection between ethics merely an arbitrary conjunction, yielding a sectarian discourse valid only for those who belong to certain religious communities? Or is there something intrinsic to ethical experience, ethical practice, and ethical reflection that raises theological questions? Can there be any discussion between theological ethics and secular, philosophical ethics? Can they learn anything from each other? Does the secular experience of the world have anything to teach theological ethics? Do religious traditions and experience have anything to teach philosophical ethics in a secular context? My claim is that an examination of Wallace’s double-bind of loneliness and worship can help Christian theological ethics to raise such questions fruitfully.

The *particularity* of Wallace literary approach, as opposed to an abstract, theoretical approach, is helpful in showing how the ethical quandaries arising in the concrete situations of contemporary life raise theological questions. Certain themes from the theological tradition can thus be made to appear in a new light, showing their relevance to new situations.

⁴⁰ See: Edmund Husserl, “Die Frage nach dem Ursprung der Geometrie als intentional-historisches Problem,” in: *Revue internationale de Philosophie* 1 (1939), pp. 203-225.

⁴¹ For a helpful discussion of the questionable status of theological ethics in a secular age from a Protestant perspective see: Helmut Thielicke, *Theologische Ethik*, 5th ed., vol. 1 (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1981), *Erster Teil: “Krisis und Verheißung der christlichen Ethik im Zeitalter des Säkularismus.”*

THE PERENNIAL AND THE CONTEMPORARY

The particular time and place in which Wallace saw the double-bind of loneliness taking on a peculiar form and urgency was America in the period following the end of the Cold War. The rejection of older religious and ethical systems coupled with the apparent triumph of neoliberal, egocentric capitalism and consumerism are the conditions for what Wallace sees as a uniquely lonely and distracted time. In a 1996 interview with David Streitfeld he hints at how he finds the double-bind in his own experience: "I'm a typical American [...] Half of me is dying to give myself away, and the other half is continually rebelling."⁴² And in a later essay, he writes of his feeling in going to mass tourist destinations of being "a pure late-date American: alien, ignorant, greedy for something you cannot ever have, disappointed in a way you can never admit."⁴³

Wallace's description of turn-of-the-millennium America as characterized the double-bind is certainly dark, but it has struck many readers as insightful. His work has been praised again and again for its insightfulness in portraying the particular feel of contemporary life. *Infinite Jest* caused a literary sensation when it was published in the late nineties. To many critics Wallace seemed to be the "voice of his generation," the author who captured, more than any other, the peculiar feel of living in the "total noise" of the emerging media age, and the new anxieties that were arising after the end of the cold war.⁴⁴ In the following years this impression was solidified: "It became a commonplace and then a cliché and then almost a taunt to call him the greatest writer of his generation," Jon Baskin wrote after his death.⁴⁵ And to Benjamin Kunkel and his friends in the early 2000s, *Infinite Jest* "possessed an incontrovertible anthropological authority about the country and time we lived in and, more

⁴² David Streitfeld, "The Wasteland," in: Burn (ed.), *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, pp. 66-69, at p. 69.

⁴³ David Foster Wallace, *Consider the Lobster and Other Essays* (New York: Little, Brown, 2006) p. 240, note 6.

⁴⁴ See: Max, *Every Love Story is a Ghost Story*, pp. 214-219; cf. Lee Konstantinou, "No Bull: David Foster Wallace and Postironic Belief," in: *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*, edited by Samuel Cohen and Lee Konstantinou (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2012), pp. 83-112, at pp. 83-85.

⁴⁵ John Baskin, "Death is not the End: David Foster Wallace: His Legacy and his Critics," in: *The Point* 1 (2009), pp. 33-45.

than that, the people we were.”⁴⁶ More recently, the philosophers Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly have argued that *Infinite Jest* offered “the most sensitive current account of the sadness and lostness of the present age.”⁴⁷ I think, therefore, that a theological ethics that wants to take the situation of contemporary man seriously can learn much from considering the double-bind of loneliness, which was for Wallace almost the definition of the “sadness and lostness” of contemporary life.

THE METHOD: HOW TO READ LITERARY FICTION FROM AN ETHICAL AND THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Reading Wallace’s literary fiction as an aid to the reflections of theological ethics is not a straightforward matter. Literary fiction is not ethics. It does not proceed in an argumentative mode. It does not begin with basic principles and draw conclusions from them, nor does it set up hypotheses about the ethical life and try to verify them. Literary fiction is a form of storytelling—it can tell about concrete characters and their actions, and evoke their motivations both conscious and unconscious. Such storytelling is in some ways more analogous to ethical experience than to ethical philosophy. But it is not merely a report of experience either. Literature distorts and exaggerates experience as much as it reflects it. But such exaggeration can have its own epistemological value. As Benjamin Kunkel put it, “The exaggerations in *Infinite Jest* felt particularly true.”⁴⁸ Exaggeration and distortion can make elements of experience noticeable that would escape bland description. Moreover, as I shall argue along with Wallace, such exaggeration enables fiction to describe things from the point of view of human consciousness. It can make explicit what is usually only implicitly grasped in first-person experience, and it can often do this better than first-person nonfiction accounts of experience, and *a fortiori*, better than the third-person descriptions of human life in sociological studies. This is thus one way in which literature can be a source for ethical reflection. As the philosopher Lars Svendsen put it, the study of literature

⁴⁶ Benjamin Kunkel, “DFW 1962-2008,” in: *N+1* (September 16, 2008), <https://nplusonemag.com/online-only/online-only/dfw-1962-2008/> (accessed: June 6, 2014).

⁴⁷ Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly, *All Things Shining: Reading the Western Classics to Find Meaning in a Secular Age* (New York: Free Press, 2011) p. 21.

⁴⁸ Kunkel, “DFW 1962-2008.”

provides “source-material” for the philosophical investigation of human life that is often “more illuminative than quantitative sociological or psychological studies,”⁴⁹ because literary fiction can describe how it feels to live in a certain society, and to make its vaguest and most circumambient features clear. Literary theorist Terry Eagleton describes literature as being “vitaly engaged with the living situations of men and women.” This engagement is possible because literature “is concrete rather than abstract,” and can therefore display “life in all its rich variousness.” Instead of “conceptual enquiry,” literature offers a mimetic sense of “the feel and taste of what it is to be alive.”⁵⁰ It is thus particularly helpful in describing the sort of deep-level loneliness that will be our concern here; a pervasive and mostly unconscious disease.⁵¹

This approach to literature from the perspective of ethics (that is, the use of literature as a source analogous to, but distinct from, ethical experience) is what the German theologian Dietmar Mieth called the “moral of the narration” (*Moral des Erzählten*). This is the first of three dimensions of the ethical analysis of literature that he distinguishes⁵² in the context of his “narrative ethics.”⁵³ The second dimension he calls the “moral of the narrating” (*Moral des Erzählens*). This is the ethos embodied in a given act of narration itself. Here the focus is on the ethics implied in narrative technique and praxis. This is particularly important to Mieth, since he sees ethical character as being formed by narration. As we shall see, this was a very important theme for Wallace too, one that continually recurs in his reflection on his own work.

Mieth’s first two dimensions have to do with the literary text *as text*. According to certain strands of twentieth-century literary theory they would therefore have a certain

⁴⁹ Lars Svendsen, *A Philosophy of Boredom* (London: Reaktion Books, 2005), p. 15.

⁵⁰ Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, [1983] 2008), p. 171.

⁵¹ Cf. Friederike Gösweiner, *Einsamkeit in der jungen deutschsprachigen Literatur der Gegenwart* (Innsbruck: Studienverlag, 2010) p. 281.

⁵² Dietmar Mieth, *Moral und Erfahrung I: Grundlagen einer theologisch-ethischen Hermeneutik*, 4th ed. (Freiburg, Schweiz: Universitätsverlag, 1999), pp. 90-95.

⁵³ See: Mieth, *Moral und Erfahrung I*, passim but especially ch. V. “Narrative Ethik: Die Beitrag der Dichtung zur Konstituierung ethischer Modelle.”

independence from the intentions of the author. As Roland Barthes famously put it, “the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author.”⁵⁴ Nevertheless, in my reading of these levels I will indeed be constantly adverting to Wallace as “author,” and to his own interpretation of his work in interviews, letters and similar documents. This is not only because I consider Wallace to be a subtle and insightful interpreter of his own work, but also because I think that while Barthes is right in part, there is also a sense in which the author is necessary to understanding a text.

Wallace himself was both fascinated and repelled by Barthes’s theory of the death of the author. He once wrote that readers not enamored of literary theory “know in our gut that writing is an act of communication between one human being and another.”⁵⁵ To put it another way, I think that the first two dimensions of the ethical analysis of literature discussed by Mieth are inseparable from the third. The third dimension is the one that is most directly tied to the intentions of the author or the narrator. Mieth calls this the “moral to be narrated” (*Moral zum Erzählen*). This is more or less what in English is called “the moral of the story.” It is the ethical teaching intended by the narrator. This is arguably the simplest form of narrative ethics. And, partly because of the reasons offered by Barthes’s “Death of the Author,” it has often been regarded as naïve. Nevertheless, certain strands of contemporary literary theory have moved beyond Barthes’s death-of-the-author textualism to an appreciation of the moral to be narrated. Already in 1983, Terry Eagleton criticized the failure of much literary theory to see the *rhetorical* character of literary texts. What is called “literature” is part of a wider field of discourses, through which power and persuasion are brought to bear on others. Such discourses always at least implicitly include a conception of the good life or the good society. By drawing attention to this political/ethical function of discourse, Eagleton sees himself as returning to ancient Greek conception of rhetoric. This form of rhetorical study, “examined the way discourses are constructed in order to achieve

⁵⁴ Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” in: *Image – Music – Text*, trans. and ed. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), p. 148.

⁵⁵ David Foster Wallace, “Greatly Exaggerated,” in: *A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again: Essays and Arguments* (New York: Little, Brown, 1997), pp. 138-145, at p. 144.

certain effects,” and “its particular interest lay in grasping such practices as forms of power and performance.”⁵⁶

In the Aristotelian tradition, power and performance are only intelligible in terms of some goal or end which is being pursued, and so such texts must of necessity imply some conception of an end or goal. Such ends or goals are always implicit in social activity and social life, and Eagleton sees this—rather than humanist study of the revelation of the soul of the artist, or formalist study of linguistic devices—as being the main theme of rhetorical study. But that is not to say that it neglected the study either of human emotional response nor of formal devices, but such things were seen in a wider context:

Rhetoric in its major phase[...] looked at [linguistic] devices in terms of concrete performance— they were means of pleading, persuading, inciting and so on— and at people’s responses to discourse in terms of linguistic structures and the material situations in which they functioned. It saw speaking and writing not merely as textual objects, to be aesthetically contemplated or endlessly deconstructed, but as forms of activity inseparable from the wider social relations between writers and readers, orators and audiences, and as largely unintelligible outside the social purposes and conditions in which they were embedded.⁵⁷

This does not mean that the persuasion intended by a text is always consciously intended by its author. Such persuasion can be a side-effect of the author’s social context. In this sense, Eagleton agrees with Barthes up to a point. But the author’s intention can indeed be one important factor in understanding the rhetorical intent of a text.

In more recent work, Eagleton has been even more insistent on the rhetorical/political/moral nature of literary works. He laments that in modernity, “questions of good and bad had been falsely abstracted from their social contexts,” in a “moralism” which holds that there are “a set of questions known as moral questions which are quite distinct from social or political ones.”⁵⁸ Eagleton insists that a deeper understanding of all cultural discourse must recover a sense that “exploring the texture and quality of human behaviour as richly and sensitively as you can” is a moral enterprise, and that this enterprise

⁵⁶ Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, p. 179.

⁵⁷ Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, p. 179.

⁵⁸ Terry Eagleton, *After Theory* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), p. 143.

cannot be accomplished by “abstracting men and women from their social surroundings.” And he sees this conception as being actually at work in great authors: “This is morality as, say, the novelist Henry James understood it, as opposed to those who believe you can reduce it to rules, prohibitions and obligations.”⁵⁹

In this conception of literary study, Eagleton has been deeply influenced by some of the neo-Aristotelian virtue ethicists whom I brought up above: particularly Alasdair MacIntyre. MacIntyre himself models the sort of rhetorical analysis of literature, as a moral/political discourse within a wider social context, to which Eagleton points. In *After Virtue*, MacIntyre argues that human actions are only ever intelligible within wider narratives, and therefore that narrative has an important role in rendering different ethical conceptions intelligible. That is, the “wider conception of morality” revived by virtue ethics, by its very nature leads us to take stories in general, and literary fiction in particular, seriously as ethical work. MacIntyre argues that as human beings we live our lives together “in the light of certain conceptions of a possible shared future,” which can either be good (in the sense of desirable) or bad (in the sense of undesirable). Hence we are always living toward “an image of the future,” which “presents itself in the form of a telos—or of a variety of ends or goals—towards which we are either moving or failing to move in the present.” We live thus live our lives as parts of stories, and hence the stories that we tell or write (both fictional and historical) have a key role in helping us to understand our lives: “man is in his actions and practice, as well as in his fictions, essentially a story-telling animal.” Stories help us to understand the role that we play in the story of our own society, and how to understand that role as contributing towards a good end. And therefore, “the telling of stories has a key part in educating us into the virtues.”⁶⁰

In accordance with this conception of the place of storytelling in the ethical life, MacIntyre continually adverts to epics, tragedies, and novels in his work. And he reads such works not just as “source-material” analogous to experience, but as exercises in ethical reflection on the

⁵⁹ Eagleton, *After Theory*, p. 143.

⁶⁰ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, pp. 215-216.

part of their authors. Thus, he calls Henry James's novel *The Portrait of a Lady* "an investigation" into the consequences within a particular social *milieu* of the obliteration of "the distinction between manipulative and non-manipulative social relationships."⁶¹ To call it "an investigation" means to read James as having been engaged in ethical thought in the writing of his novel. Similarly, he reads Jane Austen's novels as giving "a theory" of the virtues.⁶² Austen writes novels, on MacIntyre's account, in part in order to depict the threats to the life of virtue in her particular society, and to identify "that social sphere within which the practice of the virtues is able to continue" despite such threats.⁶³ In other words, MacIntyre's method of reading literature from the perspective of ethics is to examine the *telos* or end of human life implicit in the story, the challenges that the story portrays as arising in the attempt to realize that *telos*, and the resources towards which the story points as being a help in meeting those challenges.

A similar understanding of the method of reading literature as ethics has been developed by Martha Nussbaum. Nussbaum, however, emphasizes the idea that stories are uniquely suitable to portraying *various rival conceptions* of the *telos* of human life, and giving each rival conception its due in its tension with the others. Nussbaum thus sees narrative fictions as having a very important function in keeping ethical enquiry open to the variety of possible ethical stances. Such openness is essential to her understanding Aristotelian dialectical method of philosophical enquiry. It is worth considering her description of that method at length:

The Aristotelian procedure in ethics begins with a very broad and inclusive question: "How should a human being live?" This question presupposes no specific demarcation of the terrain of human life, and so, a fortiori, not its demarcation into separate moral and nonmoral realms. It does not, that is, assume that there is, among the many ends and activities that human beings cherish and pursue, some one domain, the domain of moral value, that is of special importance and dignity, apart from the rest of life. Nor does it assume, as do utility theorists, that there is a more or less unitary something that a good agent can be seen as maximizing in

⁶¹ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 24.

⁶² MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 185.

⁶³ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 239.

every act of choice. It does not assume the denial of these claims either; it holds them open for inquiry within the procedure[.]⁶⁴

For Nussbaum, literary fiction is essential to preserving the openness of such enquiry. It helps to give “a sufficiently rich and inclusive conception” of the various possibilities of ethical life. And particularly, it helps to remain open to certain aspects of moral life that tend to be elided by abstract conceptual analysis. Or, as Nussbaum puts it, the literary form expresses “commitments” to such aspects of moral life:

[T]he very choice to write a tragic drama—or, we can now say, a novel—expresses already certain evaluative commitments. Among these seem to be commitments to the ethical significance of uncontrolled events, to the epistemological value of emotion, to the variety and non-commensurability of the important things.⁶⁵

Nussbaum is careful to emphasize that she does *not* want to “*substitute* the study of novels for the study of the recognized great works of the various philosophical traditions in ethics”; rather, she wants to complement the study of philosophical texts with the study of novels.⁶⁶

That is the spirit in which I will approach Wallace’s novels. I will read them as rhetorical discourses, which “investigate” both the ways in which human lives can miss attaining a desirable goal through the misery of loneliness, and also the resources available for dealing with that misery. What holds for Wallace’s novels also holds for his “creative nonfiction.” The adjective “creative” suggests that these works are to be read as works of art. As Wallace put it in the syllabus to a class on the creative nonfiction genre that he taught at Pomona College, such artworks can have any combination of the following goals:

[T]o interest readers, or to instruct them, or to entertain them, to move or persuade, to edify, to redeem, to amuse, to get readers to look more closely at or think more deeply about something that’s worth their attention[.]⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Martha Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 25.

⁶⁵ Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge*, p. 26.

⁶⁶ Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge*, p. 27.

⁶⁷ David Foster Wallace, Syllabus to English 183d, Spring 2008, in: *The David Foster Wallace Reader*, ed. Michael Pietsch et al. (New York: Little, Brown, 2014), pp. 622-628, at p. 622.

That description gives us precisely the sort of “rhetorical” intent that Mieth, Eagleton, MacIntyre, and Nussbaum see in literary fiction. It is the intent that animates both Wallace’s fiction and his nonfiction.

Reading Wallace’s work in the manner suggested by thinkers such as Mieth, Eagleton, MacIntyre, and Nussbaum will allow me to mark out a path for the sort of inverse-eudaemonistic ethics towards which I take his work to point us. This will involve a certain amount of construction. To mark out that path is to construct at least the beginnings of an ethical model. But such an explicit ethical model must inevitably be more determinate than Wallace’s exquisitely ambivalent and ambiguous exploration of ethical themes in his work. One might well ask, therefore, whether the construction of such a model does not in fact constitute a betrayal of Wallace’s work. As we have seen, the form of literary works is essential to their ethical content. And this is particularly true of Wallace. Therefore, the attempt to construct a model of ethics from Wallace’s work must inevitably lose something of what Wallace was trying to do. Here Nussbaum and Mieth are particularly helpful. Nussbaum shows how explicit ethical work can remain in dialogue with literary fiction, and thus preserve as much as possible the ambivalence, openness, and recognition of “other sides” of which fiction is capable. And Mieth is helpful in providing the idea of ethical “models” (influenced by Adorno), which is precisely meant to allow for such openness.⁶⁸ The attempt here is to begin the sketching of a model suggested by Wallace’s work.

APPLYING THE METHOD: THE ORDER OF PROCEEDING

In marking out a path for a Wallace-inspired inverted eudaemonism, I will first examine the double-bind of loneliness in Wallace’s work (Part 1). I will use the method followed by the likes of MacIntyre and Nussbaum to tease out the portrayal of the human condition in terms of the challenges to living a truly human life. I will not work through Wallace’s works one by one, but will rather proceed thematically. I will consider the features of modern culture that Wallace describes as heightening the urgency of the double-bind. On the one hand, I will consider the aspect of what Mieth calls the “moral of the narration.” In order to do so I will

⁶⁸ See: Mieth, *Moral und Erfahrung I*, pp. 85-90.

make use of the growing field of “Wallace Studies,” which has developed sophisticated readings of his descriptions of loneliness. But this will automatically lead into a consideration of the “moral to be narrated”—that is, of Wallace’s own theoretical reflection insofar as they influence his work. Wallace was highly reflective writer, whose work bears the mark of his theoretical engagement with a great number of philosophers and thinkers. I will therefore be looking at the work of some of the philosophers, psychologists, and cultural critics who influenced Wallace’s narration of the double-bind in contemporary life.

But I will not stop at the thinkers with whom Wallace engaged. As the purpose is to see how Wallace can help us understand the real world, rather than merely to understand how Wallace’s work came about, I will also be making use of other cultural philosophers and sociologists to clarify the nature of some of the features of the modern world that Wallace describes. I will be using some of the classic insights of thinkers such as Karl Marx and Max Weber, as well as more recent scholarship by the likes of Charles Taylor. But the purpose of these apparent digressions is to arrive at a clearer understanding of the double-bind that Wallace presents, and to see to what extent Wallace’s account of it is defensible. I will constantly consider objections that could be brought against Wallace’s account of the double-bind, and how they might be met.

In Part 2 I will consider Wallace’s exploration of various paths to dealing with the problems laid out in Part 1. Here all three of Mieth’s dimensions will come into play, but I will give particular attention to the “moral of the narrating” and the “moral to be narrated.” The “moral of the narrating” I will explore with the help of Wallace’s own reflections on his work and those of his friend Jonathan Franzen, with whom he developed an account of the novel as an embodiment of an other-directed ethics of the gift that could overcome existential isolation by allowing “access” to another’s subjectivity. I will show how Wallace’s and Franzen’s understanding of this ethic diverged ever more, with Franzen returning to an early-modern understanding of literature, while Wallace pressed on to new understanding beyond postmodernism. The “moral to be narrated” will be constantly at play as I explore the ways in which Wallace used literature not only as one path of ethical response to the double-bind, but also as a means of exploring other paths. I will map out the various paths that

Wallace explored, and bring each path into dialogue with theological ethics. One path that I will consider will be his description of the attempt to unite to other persons through love. Another will be his engagement with “civics,” and the possibilities of forming larger communities of responsibility for the common good. This will in turn lead to a consideration of the need to confront the double-bind in oneself through ascetic practice— through mindfulness and the endurance of boredom. It is here that Wallace’s engagement with monastic traditions—both Buddhist and Christian—will come into play. This will in turn lead to a reconsideration of the problem of worship and the possibility of a kind of worship that would help mitigate the double-bind, rather than aggravating it. The community of the Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) will be key for this path. I will show that Wallace describes different kinds of worship, both public and private, and bring his insights into dialogue with thinkers such as James K.A. Smith, who has written on the relation of public worship or liturgy and ethics, and with others who have worked on the relation of private, solitary prayer, and the formation of ethical desire. I will also consider Adam S. Miller’s reading of Wallace on desire as a critique of traditional, Christian, eschatological eudaemonism aimed at the Beatific Vision. I will argue that Wallace’s account can actually help the reader to come to a deeper understanding of eschatological eudaemonism. In exploring these paths, I will make use of both of some of the authors that inspired Wallace, as well as of theologians who can illumine his work and be illumined by it. Slowly, a tentative model of a Wallace-inspired “inverted eudemonism” will emerge.

RELATED RESEARCH

Wallace’s work has been the subject of academic analysis since the early 1990s, but the volume of research on his work increased drastically after his death by suicide in 2008. As Adam Kelly has shown in his overviews *Wallace Studies*, early work on Wallace tended to focus on the aesthetic form of his works and how it interacted with theories of “information systems.”⁶⁹ A second wave of *Wallace Studies*, particularly relevant to my work, began

⁶⁹ Adam Kelly, “David Foster Wallace: The Death of the Author and the Birth of a Discipline,” in: *Irish Journal of American Studies* 2 (2010), pp. 47-59; “David Foster Wallace: The Critical Reception,” in: Philip Coleman (ed.), *Critical Insights: David Foster Wallace* (Ipswich: Salem, 2015), pp. 46-62.

already before Wallace's death, but reached a "crest" the year after his death. This wave examined Wallace's work in the light of goals which he himself stated in essays and interviews. It argued that Wallace's work should be read "not primarily in terms of aesthetic representation, but of ethical intervention."⁷⁰ Important works of the second wave include Marshall Boswell's 2003 monograph on Wallace,⁷¹ and Stephen Burn's guide to *Infinite Jest*.⁷²

Such studies contain a wealth of insight about Wallace's "ethical intervention": his analysis of the situation of contemporary man and the ways he explores of dealing with it. They do not, however, contain an explicit treatment of the double-bind of loneliness as a thread running through all his work. Double-binds have indeed been treated by the likes of Adam Kelly, who calls them "a basic structure in [Wallace's] work,"⁷³ and Paul Curtis who argues that the double-bind is "the hermeneutic crux" of Wallace's masterpiece *Infinite Jest*.⁷⁴ But neither of them has focused on loneliness as a double-bind.

Curtis's essay on the double-bind belongs already to a "third wave" of Wallace Studies, which, as Kelly has argued, is marked by "a turn to the political."⁷⁵ This wave has reached a preliminary crest in Jeffrey Severs's monograph *David Foster Wallace's Balancing Books: Fictions of Value*, which explores Wallace's engagement with political and economic questions, and shows how they are inseparable from the problem of "value" in its ethical sense.⁷⁶ Severs's book is of great relevance to the problem of the double-bind of loneliness in Wallace's, but there is a need for more work in applying his insights to that problem.

⁷⁰ Kelly, "The Death of the Author," p. 52; "The Critical Reception," p. 49.

⁷¹ Marshall Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2009 [2003]).

⁷² Stephen J. Burn, *David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest: A Reader's Guide*, 2nd ed., (London: Continuum, 2012 [1st ed. 2003]).

⁷³ Kelly, "David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity," p. 139.

⁷⁴ Paul M. Curtis, "Yo man so what's *your* story': The Double Bind and Addiction in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*," in: *Mosaic* 49.4 (2016), pp. 37-52.

⁷⁵ "The Critical Reception," p. 54.

⁷⁶ Jeffrey Severs, *David Foster Wallace's Balancing Books: Fictions of Value* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

Severs says rather little about Wallace and religious questions, but others in the second and third wave of Wallace Studies have touched on such questions. Of particular relevance to my work are the studies of Michael O'Connell,⁷⁷ David Laird,⁷⁸ and Matthew Mullins.⁷⁹ Lucas Thompson in a monograph that on how Wallace's work relates to a broader array of authors than the American avant-garde has also done important research in this area.⁸⁰ Adam S. Miller's enigmatic little book *The Gospel According to David Foster Wallace* provides some thought-provoking questions on Wallace and religion.⁸¹ These studies provide good overviews of Wallace's theological engagement. In my dissertation, however, I want to build on their work, using it to give a sustained reading of Wallace's whole corpus from the perspective of the double-bind of loneliness, and bring this into dialogue with recent work in theological ethics and moral theology. In a small way, this dialogue has already begun. James K.A. Smith and Samuel Kimbriel have both referred to Wallace in theological works,⁸² but in this dissertation I want to give a more extensive consideration to the ways in which theology can learn from Wallace.

⁷⁷ Michael J. O'Connell, "Your temple is self and sentiment': David Foster Wallace's Diagnostic Novels," in: *Christianity and Literature* 64.3 (2015), pp. 266-292.

⁷⁸ David Gordon Laird, "Saying God with a Straight Face': Towards an Understanding of Christian Soteriology in David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest" (master's thesis, Okanagan: The University of British Columbia, 2016).

⁷⁹ Matthew Mullins, "Wallace, Spirituality, and Religion," in: Ralph Clare (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to David Foster Wallace* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 190-202.

⁸⁰ Thompson, *Global Wallace*, especially chs. 3 and 5.

⁸¹ Adam S. Miller, *The Gospel According to David Foster Wallace: Boredom and Addiction in an Age of Distraction*, *New Directions in Religion and Literature* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016).

⁸² James K. A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works*, *Cultural Liturgies*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), pp. 22-27; *Awaiting the King: Reforming Public Theology*, *Cultural Liturgies*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2017), p. 11; Samuel Kimbriel, *Friendship as Sacred Knowing: Overcoming Isolation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 27.

1 THE HUMAN CONDITION AND THE DOUBLE-BIND OF LONELINESS

1.1 CONTENDING MODERNITIES

Wallace saw the double-bind between loneliness and “giving oneself away” as perennial and ubiquitous human problem, but he also saw it as having become particularly urgent by at his own time and place. Why is it that in a time and place of unprecedented prosperity, freedom from external constraints, and access to knowledge and other cultural goods, so many people end up driven by the sadness of loneliness into enslavement to addictive pleasures or irrational ideologies? What are the features of the contemporary world “that make it distinctively hard to be a real human being”?⁸³ This raises questions about what the defining features of Wallace’s time and place actually are. Is the world of post-Cold War America the modern world? Or has it become postmodern or hypermodern? And what to such terms mean? Before turning to the detailed interpretation of Wallace’s exploration of those features of contemporary life that he saw as heightening the urgency of the double-bind, it will be useful to sketch the outlines of a few attempts at describing the post-Cold War moment as modern or postmodern or hypermodern. Wallace, I will suggest in later sections, sees his moment as being all three. That is, he explores elements of the contemporary situation that might be termed classically modern as well as elements that could be termed postmodern and others that could be called hypermodern.

In a review-essay that Wallace published in 1990 (six years before the publication of *Infinite Jest*) he writes of,

the desacralized & paradoxical solipsism of U.S. persons in a cattle-herd culture that worships only the Transparent I, of guiltily passive solipsists & skeptics trying to warm soft hands at the computer-enhanced fire of data in an Information Age where received image & enforced eros replace active countenance or sacral mystery as ends, value, meaning.⁸⁴

⁸³ McAffrey, “An Expanded Interview,” p. 26.

⁸⁴ David Foster Wallace, “The Empty Plenum,” in: *Both Flesh and Not: Essays* (New York: Little, Brown, 2012), pp. 73-116, at pp. 107-108. Ampersands sic.

The term “desacralized” suggests the Weberian secularization theory that “modernity” leads to desacralization or “disenchantment” (*Entzauberung*).⁸⁵ In this context “modernity” refers to a period that began with the Enlightenment, and is marked by the “instrumental” understanding of reason, and the program of technological progress through mathematical-metrical science inaugurated by such thinkers as René Descartes, as well as by a program of liberation of the individual from “heteronomous” determination by paternalistic political or religious authorities.

Max Weber argued that the process of modernization itself leads to an evacuation of values; at its final stage it yields “specialists without spirit,” and “sensualists without heart”; that is, persons who are locked in the cage of a value-free rational/instrumental view of the world, and therefore have no guidance save for an irrational, heartless sensuality.⁸⁶ It is a disputed question to what extent contemporary life has followed the trajectory marked out by Weber’s early twentieth-century analysis. Some theorists have argued that a break has taken place with modernity, and that we now live in a “postmodern” or “hypermodern” age.

In the years immediately following World War II, some theorists were already suggesting that the “modern” age, with its ideal of technological progress and liberation of the individual, was coming to an end, and that a new as-yet-unnamed age was beginning. The German-Italian theologian and philosopher Romano Guardini, for example, gave a series of lectures in 1947-1948 in which he argued that bourgeois civilization was finished, and a new mass society was emerging with a different relation to technology and to the dynamics of

⁸⁵ See: Max Weber, “Science as a Vocation,” in: *From Max Weber: Essay in Sociology*, trans. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), pp. 129-156, especially pp. 139-143; original: “Wissenschaft als Beruf,” in: *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1922), pp. 524-555, especially pp. 535-540.

⁸⁶ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons, (London: Allen and Unwin, 1930), p. 182; *Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus* in: Max Weber, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie*, vol. 1, 9th ed. (Tübingen: Mohr, 1988), pp. 17-206, at p. 204.

individuality and community.⁸⁷ The second half of the twentieth century was full of such theories, and by the 1970s the new era was being called “postmodern.”

The term postmodern first gained currency in literary and architectural criticism, where it referred *not* to a new era of civilization following the modern era, but rather to the development of a new artistic avant-garde, which was thought to have moved beyond artistic modernism as represented by such figures as James Joyce, T.S. Eliot, Marcel Proust, and Thomas Mann in literature, and Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius, and Frank Lloyd Wright in architecture.⁸⁸ But theorists soon began to examine the social and intellectual conditions that allowed for the emergence of the new avant-garde. In 1976 Daniel Bell argued that society was entering a “post-industrial” age, marked by new means of communication and information.⁸⁹ And in 1979 Jean-François Lyotard published his influential book *The Postmodern Condition*, in which he argued that this new age could be called “postmodern” because it was marked by skepticism toward the “metanarratives” of modernity—the progress of technological knowledge correlated to progressive political liberation of individuals culminating in world peace.⁹⁰

In examining the disputes that followed the publication of Lyotard’s book one has to distinguish between “postmodernity” as a *description* of a society in which social conditions are actually such as to render modern metanarratives implausible, and “postmodernism” as philosophical opposition to those metanarratives, as a claim that such narratives *ought not* to be believed. The description of such thinkers as Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault as “postmodern” has to do with the latter— since their thought questions the objectivity of science, the progress of liberation, and other modern narratives and metanarratives.⁹¹

⁸⁷ Recent edition: Romano Guardini, *Das Ende der Neuzeit/ Die Macht*, ed. Franz Henrich (Mainz: Grünewald, 2006).

⁸⁸ See: Peter Engelmann, Einführung to *Postmoderne und Dekonstruktion: Texte französischer Philosophen der Gegenwart*, ed. Peter Engelmann (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1990).

⁸⁹ Daniel Bell, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society* (New York: Basic Books, 1999 [1973]).

⁹⁰ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984).

⁹¹ See: Claudius Strube, “Postmoderne I: philosophisch,” in: *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, vol. 27, ed. Gerhard Müller et al. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1997), s.v. “Postmoderne,” pp. 82-87.

Likewise, critiques of postmodernism from the likes of Jürgen Habermas have to be understood thus: as a defense of modernity as a “program,” rather than as an alternative description of social conditions.⁹²

On the other hand, the sense of “postmodern” in Marxist thinkers such as cultural critic Frederic Jameson and geographer David Harvey has more to do with postmodernity as an actual social condition. In accordance with the Marxist method of reducing ideological superstructure to economic infrastructure, Jameson and Harvey reduce postmodernist culture and thought to changes within industrial production.⁹³ Unlike Bell, however, both Jameson and Harvey argue that the postmodern economy is a new phase or variation in industrial production, rather than a radically new economic system. Thus for Jameson and Harvey “the modern age” has not yet come to an end.

Other theorists have seen more discontinuity at the level of the economic system. Already in 1941, during the Second World War, political theorist James Burnham had argued that the economic system of capitalism, based on the private ownership of the means of production by capitalists, was being replaced by a “managerial” system in which control of the economy would be in the hands not of owner-capitalists, but of salaried managers. The managers would become the new ruling class, capturing state institutions to consolidate their power. The bureaucracies of corporation and state would come more and more to resemble each other and to serve the interests of the same managerial class.⁹⁴ Anthropologist David Graeber has recently argued that something like Burnham’s predictions has indeed come true. Although he never mentions Burnham, Graeber’s analysis of what he calls “managerial feudalism” bears a strong resemblance to Burnham’s work. According to Graeber, a managerial class has imposed a layer of bureaucratic business over the real economy. These

⁹² See: Jürgen Habermas, “Die Moderne: ein unvollendetes Projekt,” in: Wolfgang Iser (ed.), *Wege aus der Moderne: Schlüsseltexte der Postmoderne-Diskussion* (Weinheim: VCH, 1988) pp. 177-192.

⁹³ See: Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991); David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Malden: Blackwell, 1990).

⁹⁴ James Burnham, *The Managerial Revolution; or What is Happening in the World Now* (London: Putnam, 1942 [1941]).

managerial bureaucracies do not serve any real purpose in producing goods or services, but act rather as a means of extracting value from those who do real work and re-distributing it into the managerial class.⁹⁵ According to Burnham and Graeber then, Weber's analysis no longer holds even at a merely economic level.

Francis Fukuyama, writing at the end of the Cold War, argued on the contrary, that the world had simply become ever more Weberian. His controversial book *The End of History and the Last Man*, based on a lecture given in 1989, argued that the victory of liberal democracy and the market economy, represented by the fall of the Soviet Union and its satellites, was the end of modernity as an historical process, and indeed the end of history itself.⁹⁶ With the end of really existing socialism Fukuyama argued, the ideals of classical modernity had become accepted globally, and the global economic system was so tied up with the mechanism of scientific and technological progress and with political liberty that this acceptance was practically irreversible. Thus modernity as a process, as a struggle toward this acceptance, was complete. Fukuyama's thesis is virtually the opposite of Lyotard's; far from modernity's narrative of liberation having become implausible, it has finally been accepted everywhere.

Fukuyama's book was, however, by no means naïvely optimistic; he argued that the end of history brought with it the danger of a crisis of meaning for the "last man." With no goal to struggle toward, would the last man be content to settle down to the comforts of consumerism, or would the absence of struggle itself make him miserable?⁹⁷ The Nietzschean term "last man," which Fukuyama uses, had also been used by Weber himself.⁹⁸ Fukuyama's analysis suggests that Weber's analysis was right, and that we have now reached the endpoint he predicted.

⁹⁵ David Graeber, *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2018).

⁹⁶ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, 2nd ed. (New York: Free Press, 2006).

⁹⁷ Fukuyama, *The End of History*, pp. 312, 328.

⁹⁸ Weber, *Die protestantische Ethik*, p. 204. Talcott Parsons unfortunately translated "die letzten Menschen" with "last stage," thus obscuring the Nietzschean reference: Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, p. 183.

Weber is also a key influence on the philosopher Charles Taylor. But, unlike Fukuyama, Taylor argues that modernity has not yet reached its endpoint. For Taylor, Weber's account of modernity's inevitable "disenchantment of the world" was too simplistic—he argues that instead it has had the effect of diversifying views of the sacred and disconnecting them from other social elements with which they used to be bundled.⁹⁹ He agrees that a certain disenchantment has taken place, but argues that it cannot be seen as a mere process of "subtracting" spiritual beliefs. Rather, he sees it as the process by which the "porous self" of pre-modern times, open to spiritual and cosmic influences, comes to be replaced by the "buffered self"—a self with defended from otherness by a clear boundary so that such forces do not "get to" the inner world of the self. Taylor argues that this typically modern sense of the self as buffered, and the typically modern "social imaginaries" connected to it are still very much with us, and that the modern age has the potential for further development through the recovery of its own resources.¹⁰⁰ An even more emphatic argument for the same thesis has recently been made by the historian Brad Gregory.¹⁰¹ Gregory tries to show that our time is still working out the implications of the epochal shift represented by the Protestant Reformation's rejection of the medieval synthesis.

If for Taylor and Gregory our time is not yet postmodern, then for Gilles Lipovetsky it is in a sense *no longer* postmodern. In the 1980s he described society as postmodern,¹⁰² but in recent publications he has argued that postmodernity was a transitional phase that has now been left behind.¹⁰³ The times in which we are now living, Lipovetsky argues, are "hypermodern." They are marked by typically modern characteristics that have emerged strengthened but modified from the phase of postmodernity. The typical modern

⁹⁹ See: Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2007).

¹⁰⁰ See: Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: the Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).

¹⁰¹ Brad S. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2012).

¹⁰² See: Gilles Lipovetsky, *L'Ère du vide: essais sur l'individualisme contemporain* (Paris: Gallimard, 1983).

¹⁰³ See: Gilles Lipovetsky with Sebastian Charles, *Hypermodern Times*, trans. Andrew Brown (Malden: Polity, 2005).

phenomena of individualism and capitalism, have become intensified in an era of radical pluralism, consumerism, turbo-capitalism, and so on.

I shall argue that Wallace describes various elements of contemporary life that could, in turn, lend support to each of the above theories. I shall now try to trace some of these elements: elements that are classically modern, and which Wallace problematizes with the help of early modern thinkers such as Pascal; elements that are better understood as postmodern; and elements in which the modern has been intensified into a hypermodern form.

1.2 "THE GHOST IN THE MACHINE": BOREDOM, DIVERSION, AND THE LONELINESS OF HUMAN FINITUDE

James Incandenza, the director of the addictively entertaining film *Infinite Jest* (within the novel *Infinite Jest*), is described as having been, in his late work, "desperate to make something that ordinary U.S. audiences might find entertaining and diverting and conducive to self-forgetting."¹⁰⁴ An endnote on "self-forgetting" reads: "As opposed to self-confronting, presumably."¹⁰⁵ Entertainment as "diversion," as a means of self-forgetting, a way to avoid self-confrontation, is one of the central problems that Wallace identifies with contemporary life. It is the "flight from" the pain of loneliness by means of "plunging into" whatever appears to allow that loneliness to be forgotten. In his unfinished final novel, *The Pale King*, he turns to early modernity to help understand the problem and alludes to the analysis of Blaise Pascal.

The Pale King is largely about a group of bureaucrats in a Midwestern American income tax office. Wallace emphasizes the dullness of their work and the boredom they suffer in consequence. Sometimes, when the boredom becomes particularly crushing, they are visited by the ghost of a bureaucrat who used to work in their office. At one point the ghost gives a disquisition on boredom, in which he points out that the word did not appear in English

¹⁰⁴ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 944.

¹⁰⁵ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 1078, note 378. (*Infinite Jest* is famous for its use of endnotes).

until the eighteenth century.¹⁰⁶ For the preceding five centuries English had no word for *boredom*—despite the presence of similar words in Christian Latin (such as the term *accidia*, which played such an important role in the monastic tradition).¹⁰⁷ The Renaissance had the notion of “melancholy,” but it was not until the age of the Enlightenment that the term *boredom* arose from its own “cultural necessity.”¹⁰⁸ “When the kind of experience that you’re getting a man-sized taste of becomes possible, the word invents itself,”¹⁰⁹ The ghost notes that the first uses of the term associate it with the French, and that the French had earlier developed the term *ennui*. For the explication of *ennui* the ghost refers to Pascal’s *Pensées*.¹¹⁰

For Pascal, *ennui* is the root of diversion. Persons seek diversion in order to escape the *ennui* that sets in when they have nothing to do:

Boredom [*ennui*]: Man finds nothing so intolerable as to be in a state of complete rest, without passions, without occupation, without diversion, without effort. Then he feels his nullity [*son néant*], loneliness, inadequacy, dependence, helplessness, emptiness. And at once there wells up from the depths of his soul boredom [*l’ennui*], gloom, depression, chagrin, resentment, despair.¹¹¹

Because this *ennui* is so intolerable, Pascal argues, men spend all of their time trying to escape it through the bustle of ambition, war, hunting, gambling, and so on, or the excitement of sensual pleasure. What men truly want is not the ostensible goal of their struggle—the security won by war, the animal killed in the hunt, the money won in gambling. What they really want is the distraction of the struggle: “That is why we prefer the

¹⁰⁶ Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 383.

¹⁰⁷ “No word for the Latin *accidia* made so much of by monks under Benedict. For the Greek *ἀκηδία*. Also the hermits of third-century Egypt, the so-called *daemon meridianus*, when their prayers were stultified by pointlessness and tedium and a longing for violent death.” (Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 383). See section 2.7.2 below.

¹⁰⁸ Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 384.

¹⁰⁹ Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 385.

¹¹⁰ Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 383.

¹¹¹ Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. A.J. Krailsheimer, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995 [1966]), p. 208; L 622; B 131. L and B refer to the numbering of the *Pensées* in the Lafuma and Brunschvicg editions respectively: Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, ed. Louis Lafuma (Paris: Éditions de Seuil, 1962); Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, 3 vols., ed. Léon Brunschvicg, (Paris: Hachette, 1904).

hunt to the capture."¹¹² Similarly, they require "novel" pleasures, since as soon as they get used to a pleasure it no longer absorbs the mind enough to occupy their thoughts.¹¹³

One of the tax-bureaucrats in *The Pale King*—significantly named "David Wallace"—uses very similar terms to speak of boredom:

Maybe dullness is associated with psychic pain because something that's dull or opaque fails to provide enough stimulation to distract people from some other, deeper type of pain that is always there, if only in an ambient low-level way, and which most of us (whether or not we're consciously aware of it) spend nearly all our time and energy trying to distract ourselves from feeling, or at least from feeling directly or with our full attention.¹¹⁴

He then argues that one of the main features of contemporary life, the constant buzz of information, really comes from the need for distraction rather than a desire to be informed, for,

surely something must lie behind not just Muzak in dull or tedious places anymore but now also actual TV in waiting rooms, supermarkets' checkouts, airports' gates, SUVs' backseats. Walkmen, iPods, BlackBerries, cell phones that attach to your head. This terror of silence with nothing diverting to do. I can't think anyone really believes that today's so-called 'information society' is just about information. Everyone knows it's about something else, way down.¹¹⁵

This of course raises the question of the cause of this "deeper type of pain," from which people try to distract themselves. Wallace describes the deeper pain both as being caused by the perennial problems of human existence, and as being aggravated by features of modernity.

These perennial problems are connected to the paradoxical relation of human beings to their own finitude. DeWitt Glendenning Jr., the director of the tax examination center in *The Pale King*, describes the problem as follows:

Maybe it's existential. I'm talking about the individual US citizen's deep fear, the same basic fear that you and I have and that everybody has except nobody ever talks about it except

¹¹² Pascal, *Pensées*, p. 38; L 136; B 139.

¹¹³ Pascal, *Pensées*, pp. 37-41, L 136; B 139.

¹¹⁴ Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 85.

¹¹⁵ Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 85.

existentialists in convoluted French prose. Or Pascal. Our smallness, our insignificance and mortality, yours and mine, the thing that we all spend all our time not thinking about directly, that we are tiny and at the mercy of large forces and that time is always passing and that every day we've lost one more day that will never come back and our childhoods are over and our adolescence and the vigor of youth and soon our adulthood, that everything we see around us all the time is decaying and passing, it's all passing away, and so are we, so am I[.]¹¹⁶

This has of course been a theme of literature since the beginning—Achilles's rage in Homer's *Iliad* can be read as rage against his own mortality.¹¹⁷ But this problem is nevertheless seen as becoming especially acute in modernity, beginning around the time of Pascal. Pascal delineates a whole group of problems connected to human finitude—the “nullity, loneliness, inadequacy, dependence, helplessness, emptiness” cited above are all connected to this problem. Pascal describes human consciousness as aware of its own temporal and spatial insignificance in comparison to the size and duration of the universe, but at the same time aware of its own greatness in being able to think of the whole world. Thereby it is aware of itself as isolated and alone in the face of a world that seems indifferent to it; as desiring to know all things and yet aware of its own ignorance and susceptibility to deception through the senses and the imagination:

When I see the blind and wretched state of man, when I survey the whole universe in its dumbness and man left to himself with no light, as though lost in this corner of the universe, without knowing who put him there, what he has come to, what will become of him when he dies, incapable of knowing anything, I am moved to terror, like a man transported in his sleep to some terrifying desert island, who wakes up quite lost and with no means of escape.¹¹⁸

The human person is a “thinking reed,”¹¹⁹ helpless and powerless in the face of the universe, but able through thought to encompass the universe. Thought opens human consciousness up to the whole of being, but at the same times it separates the thinking subject from the known object. The person is a part, but it does not see itself as a part:

¹¹⁶ Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 143.

¹¹⁷ See: Graham Zanker, *The Heart of Achilles: Characterization and Personal Ethics in the Iliad* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), ch. 3; Christiane Souvinou-Inwood, “To Die and Enter the House of Hades: Homer, Before and After,” in: *Mirrors of Mortality: Studies in the Social History of Death*, ed. Joachim Whaley, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2011), pp. 15-39.

¹¹⁸ Pascal, *Pensées*, p. 59; L 198; B 693.

¹¹⁹ Pascal, *Pensées*, p. 29; L 113; B 348.

The separated member, no longer seeing the body to which it belongs, [...] believes itself to be a whole, and, seeing no body on which it depends, believes itself to be dependent only on itself and tries to make itself its own centre and body.¹²⁰

One reason why *ennui* stemming from such problems grows in the modern world is the increase of certain kinds of leisure, and the decrease of variety in the work life of the individual caused by the division of labor that developed in early capitalism.¹²¹ The Jansenist movement, to which Pascal belonged, was strongly marked by the rise of a capitalist middle class in France.¹²² But it is at least as important to see that Pascal's formulation of the problem is thoroughly modern. The idea of the universe as silent and indifferent, and the idea of man as isolated and cut off from any greater whole, are both connected to what Charles Taylor calls modern "cosmic imaginaries," and "social imaginaries."¹²³

The medieval worldview had integrated the finite human being into an organic whole that included human society, nature, and supernatural forces. The universe was seen as a finite, ordered whole, created by God. It was not an empty, indifferent space, but one in which the different parts related to each other. The various heavenly spheres were not silent, but musical, and they influenced human life. The elite, intellectual version of this worldview, as demonstrated (for example) by Aquinas and expressed by Dante's *Commedia*, gives a

¹²⁰ Pacal, *Pensées*, pp. 108-109; L 372; B 483. From the context it is clear that Pascal is here thinking principally about being a member of the Church as Body of Christ, rather than the whole of being, but in his Pauline theology the distinction is by no means as sharp as one might think—see: Jacob Meskin, "Secular Self-Confidence, Postmodernism, and Beyond: Recovering the Religious Dimension of Pascal's *Pensées*," in: *Journal of Religion* 75 (1995), pp. 487–508.

¹²¹ This is the element emphasized by Ian Watt in his famous study of the social conditions of the rise of the novel as a literary form, which I treat below in section 2.2.1. See: Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1957), chs. 1-3.

¹²² See: Bernard Mulcahy, *Aquinas's Notion of Pure Nature and the Christian Integralism of Henry de Lubac: Not Everything is Grace* (New York: Peter Lang, 2011), ch. 5, and the literature cited on p. 145, notes 53-54, especially: Bernhard Groethuysen, *Die Entstehung der bürgerlichen Welt- und Lebensanschauung in Frankreich*, 2nd ed. (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1978).

¹²³ Taylor explains these two "imaginaries" as follows: "Just as the social imaginary consists of the understandings which make sense of our social practices, so the 'cosmic imaginary' makes sense of the ways in which the surrounding world figures in our lives: the ways, for instance, that it figures in our religious images and practices, including explicit cosmological doctrines; in the stories we tell about other lands and other ages; in our ways of marking the seasons and the passage of time; in the place of 'nature' in our moral and/or aesthetic sensibility; and in our attempts to develop a 'scientific' cosmology, if any." Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 323.

coherent picture of a world formed by Divine Reason, and reflecting that reason as an image. The order of the universe is described as formed by the Divine Reason (logos), and each creature mirrors some aspect of that logos.¹²⁴ Each creature has a principle of teleological action (a “nature”) that orders it to the whole. The order of the whole is seen as the greatest good of creation because it reflects the divine logos more perfectly than any particular part.¹²⁵ All of the parts of the universe are bound together by a hierarchical order of governance working for the benefit of the whole, though disturbed by sin. Human society is seen as part of this order, participating in this order. Human persons, on this view, could see themselves as playing a part in a communal cosmic project. Human persons were to subordinate themselves to this order, and thereby be “unalone.” The “nobility” of the human person in comparison to the rest of creation was seen as stemming from the human person’s ability to attain to the good of the whole through knowledge and love and consciously subordinate itself to that whole.¹²⁶ This was connected to a strong view of personal immortality, which Aquinas saw as following necessarily from the ability to know the universal. Human persons, however, seen as “fallen” through “original sin” from an unproblematic integration in the whole. Sin to some extent alienated human persons from the cosmos and its creator, and put them into a state of “dissimilitude” and sadness. Thus it was necessary for human persons to be healed and reconciled to God and His creation, and this was an important aspect of the redemptive work of Christ. To the extent that this view was internalized the problem of human finitude could not present itself *in the form articulated by Pascal*.

Charles Taylor argues that this elite, intellectual account of the cosmos corresponded at the popular level to a “social imaginary” that was embedded in the life practice of pre-modern societies. In contrast to the “dis-encharned” world that Max Weber describes as being the

¹²⁴ See: Guardini, *Das Ende der Neuzeit*, ch. 1.

¹²⁵ See: Guardini, *Das Ende der Neuzeit*, ch. 1; idem, *Dantes Göttliche Komödie: Ihre philosophische und religiösen Grundgedanken*, ed. Hans Mercker and Martin Marschall (Mainz: Grünewald, 1998), pp. 110-168; St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* II,45.

¹²⁶ See: Sebastian Walshe, “The Primacy of the Common Good as the Root of Personal Dignity in the Doctrine of St. Thomas Aquinas” (PhD diss., Rome: Pontifical University of St. Thomas, 2006).

result of modernization, the pre-modern world was “enchanted.”¹²⁷ Taylor argues that the popular view of nature, embodied in agricultural practice and ritual and so on, saw the natural world saturated with meaning and spiritual agency. Human society was seen as reflecting the natural hierarchy, so that disturbances in the society caused disturbances in nature.¹²⁸ The order of things was supported by influence of all kinds of angels, saints, and other supernatural agencies subject to God, and was threatened by demons and other forces in opposition to God. For the medieval mind therefore, the problem was not so much finding meaning in life, but finding access to the patronage of good agents and protection from the influence of bad.

Both the intellectual account of this world-view and the cosmic and social imaginaries that corresponded to it began to disintegrate at the time of the Renaissance and the Reformation.¹²⁹ This was the beginning of the process that Weber called disenchantment and Wallace calls desacralization. By the time of Pascal, a radically new picture of the world begins to emerge. At the elite intellectual level, Pascal’s contemporary René Descartes gave a highly influential account of the emerging worldview. Wallace understood the “mechanization” of the view of nature that Descartes achieved through a new kind of scientific abstraction to be the very essence of modernity. I will consider Descartes’s conceptualization in detail below (1.6), but at this point it will suffice to indicate some general features of Descartes’s vision and the modern cosmic imaginary that it partly inspired, as mirrored in Pascal.

Descartes’s vision is famously marked by a sharp division between the subject and the object. The material world is seen as mere extension (*res extensa*), totally different in kind from the thinking subject (*res cogitans*).¹³⁰ Pascal adopts this division at least up to a point, arguing that earlier philosophers had attributed teleological action to matter although such action really belongs only to spirit:

¹²⁷ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, especially ch. 1.

¹²⁸ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, pp. 163-164.

¹²⁹ See: Taylor, *A Secular Age*, especially chs. 1-7; Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation*.

¹³⁰ See section 1.6 below for an analysis of this distinction.

[N]early all philosophers confuse their ideas of things, and speak spiritually of corporeal things and corporeally of spiritual ones, for they boldly assert that bodies tend to fall, that they aspire towards their centre, that they have inclinations, sympathies, antipathies, all things pertaining only to things spiritual.¹³¹

Thus natural things are no longer seen as acting toward a common cosmic end with human beings: they come to be seen as silent and indifferent. Hence the famous *pensée*: “The eternal silence of these empty spaces fills me with dread.”¹³² As Guardini argues, the human person becomes free of dependence on the cosmos, which now becomes the object of human domination, but at the same time a feeling of vulnerability and abandonment (*Preisgegebenheit*) can set in.¹³³

This feeling is intensified by the way in which the view of the world as a finite whole gives way to an idea of the world as extending infinitely in all directions. As Pascal puts it:

The whole visible world is only an imperceptible dot in nature’s ample bosom. No idea comes near it; it is no good inflating our conceptions beyond imaginable space, we only bring forth atoms compared to the reality of things. Nature is an infinite sphere whose center is everywhere and circumference nowhere.¹³⁴

Guardini points out that such ideas of space (and analogous ideas of time) give the modern world-view a character of openness and freedom of movement (*Bewegungsraum*). At the same time, they remove any objective localization of the human; human life loses its fixed place in things, it becomes “*ortlos*.”¹³⁵ In psychological terms, one could say that while the medieval imaginary had been prone to the anxieties of dependence and finality, the early modern imaginary became more prone to anxieties of isolation and insecurity.¹³⁶

The new cosmic imaginary goes hand in hand with a loss of certainty about many other things. The existence of God was so bound up in the medieval cosmic and social imaginary,

¹³¹ Pascal, *Pensées*, p. 65; L 199; B 72.

¹³² Pascal, *Pensées*, p. 66; L 201; B 206.

¹³³ Guardini, *Das Ende der Neuzeit*, p. 35.

¹³⁴ Pascal, *Pensées*, p. 60; L 199; B 72.

¹³⁵ Guardini, *Das Ende der Neuzeit*, p. 34.

¹³⁶ See: Fritz Riemann, *Grundformen der Angst*, 40th ed., (Munich: Reinhardt, 2011); *Anxiety*, trans. Greta Dunn (Munich: Reinhardt, 2009).

that as Taylor argues, it was “virtually impossible” for medieval persons not to believe in God.¹³⁷ But with the disintegration of those imaginaries it becomes a matter of doubt. Descartes himself was entirely certain of the existence of God, but many who adopted his view of nature were not. Thus Pascal's *Pensées* are in large measure an apologetic aimed at the growing number of those who doubted the existence of God and the truth of Christian revelation. This is “desacralization” in a literal sense.

Similarly, personal immortality, inextricably bound up with the medieval imaginary, became a matter of doubt. For Descartes himself, the conceptualization of the subject as *res cogitans* entirely established the immateriality and immortality of the soul. But to many who adopted his view of nature this became doubtful.¹³⁸ So Pascal can write, in the person of those to whom he addresses his apologetic in the *Pensées*: “All I know is that I must soon die, but what I know least about is this very death which I cannot evade.”¹³⁹ His adversaries do not know whence they come nor whither they are going, whether when they leave this world they will “fall into nothing” or into the hand of God.¹⁴⁰ Thus the problem of human finitude presented itself in a new way.

The *philosophes* of the later Enlightenment rejected Pascal's paradoxical view of the human condition as overly pessimistic.¹⁴¹ The “grand narrative” of progress that they developed gave man a definite place in the world, as the agent of that progress. Pascalian “misery” was seen largely as a function of the inherited illusions of “ignorance and superstition” that had to be shaken off. Nevertheless, the problems analyzed by Pascal proved unexpectedly intractable.

The sharpness of the distinction that Descartes had made between matter and spirit made it difficult to integrate the two in a coherent whole. The mathematical science of the *res extensa* progressed very quickly with Newton's mechanical account of the universe being

¹³⁷ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 25.

¹³⁸ See: Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, pp. 347-349.

¹³⁹ Pascal, *Pensées*, p. 130; L 427; B 194.

¹⁴⁰ Pascal, *Pensées*, p. 130; L 427; B 194.

¹⁴¹ See: Meskin, “Secular Self-Confidence.”

published 1687, a mere 37 years after Descartes's death. But the more the mechanical science of the material world progressed, the less the immaterial soul seemed to fit with it. George Berkeley attempted to reduce the *res extensa* to the *res cogitans*, claiming that nothing existed save minds and the ideas of minds. But attempts in the opposite direction, reducing the mind to an epiphenomenon of the *res extensa*, fit more with the mind-set encouraged by the progress of science. Thus in 1748 Julien Offray de La Mettrie published his *L'Homme Machine*, arguing for a consistent materialism, in which everything is reduced to the interaction of bodily parts.¹⁴²

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the "clockwork" cosmic imaginary was modified by a sense of organic development over vast spaces of time. In *D'Alembert's Dream* (1769) Denis Diderot evokes a sense of an infinite obscure past from which the human race emerged and an infinite future in which it will perhaps be succeeded by other kinds of animals.¹⁴³ This image was to be given a scientific coloring nearly a century later in Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859). A cosmic imaginary that had been dominated by turning wheels, instead became haunted by "dragons of the prime / that tare each other in their slime."¹⁴⁴ To the romantic sensibility there was a certain kinship between the world and the human subject; the sublime in nature awakened hidden depths within the subject.¹⁴⁵

But in the twentieth century the romantic imaginary faded to a large extent and a more mechanistic imaginary returned. This was in part due to the extraordinary progress of technology, urbanization, and commercialization throughout the twentieth century.¹⁴⁶ Thus Wallace once noted in an interview that the world in which he and his contemporaries lived

¹⁴² Julien Offray de La Mettrie, *Machine Man and Other Writings*, trans. and ed. Ann Thomson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

¹⁴³ See: Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 327.

¹⁴⁴ Alfred, Lord Tennyson, *In Memoriam A.H.H.* [1849], LVI.22-23, in: Christopher Ricks (ed.), *Tennyson: A Selected Edition*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2007) p. 400; cf. Ronald Knox, *God and the Atom* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1945), p. 31.

¹⁴⁵ See: Taylor, *A Secular Age*, ch. 9; idem, *Sources of the Self*, ch. 21.

¹⁴⁶ See: Romano Guardini, *Briefe vom Comer See* (Mainz: Matthias Grünewald, 1927), idem, *Das Ende der Neuzeit*, pp. 47-94.

consisted of industrial products, mass media and advertising, “the same way the Romantics’ world was trees and babbling brooks and mountains and blue skies.”¹⁴⁷

Attempts, more or less in the spirit of La Mettrie, to give reductive accounts of human consciousness abounded from the middle of the twentieth century on. In 1949 Gilbert Ryle published his *The Concept of Mind* in which he dismissed the Cartesian soul as a “ghost in the machine,”¹⁴⁸ arguing that the Cartesian account was based on a category mistake, that the mind was not in the same logical category as matter. This seemed give a means of avoiding both Descartes’s dualism on the one hand and Berkeley’s idealism or de La Mettrie’s materialism on the other hand. Throughout the second half of the twentieth century there was a conflict in the philosophy of mind between emergentists like Ryle and eliminative materialists in the spirit of de La Mettrie. Both sides, however, agreed that the fundamental reality was extended material substance.¹⁴⁹ The developments in neuroscience gave support to this view, and the development of computers seemed to offer the perfect model for understanding the relation of the mind to the body: the body was hardware; the mind was software.

Stephen Burn notes that while Wallace was writing *Infinite Jest* in the 1990s there was a veritable explosion of talk about neuroscience and its implications for human psychology.¹⁵⁰ When *Infinite Jest* describes an “old” TV documentary arguing that schizophrenia is an entirely bodily problem, a matter of a “dysfunctional brain” emitting positrons in an unusual way, it is describing the sort of thing that was ubiquitous at the time of the novel’s writing, and, indeed, remains ubiquitous today.

The neuroscientific explosion in the 1990s influenced a surge in chemical treatment of mental illness. This in turn led to what Elizabeth Freudenthal calls “the medical

¹⁴⁷ Steve Paulson, “To the Best of Our Knowledge: Interview with David Foster Wallace,” in: Burn, *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, pp. 127-135, at p. 130. Wallace doesn’t mention here that the Romantics’ interest in mountains etc. was already an attempt to escape an urbanizing world.

¹⁴⁸ Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*, 60th anniversary ed. (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 5.

¹⁴⁹ See: Edward Feser, *Philosophy of Mind: A Beginners Guide* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2005).

¹⁵⁰ Burn, *David Foster Wallace’s Infinite Jest: A Reader’s Guide*, pp. 50-51.

objectification of subjectivity.¹⁵¹ Millions of children in the 1990s were given medication for “attention deficit disorder” and similar maladies, and thousands of adults were prescribed drugs for a whole host of psychiatric disorders. Wallace himself had extensive firsthand experience of psychiatric medicine, and his first short story, “The Planet Trillaphon as It Stands in Relation to the Bad Thing,” deals with the effects of antidepressants.¹⁵² *Infinite Jest* itself is full of arcane references to pharmaceuticals.

Stephan Burn has noted that a careful attention to *Infinite Jest's* complicated internal chronology shows that the earliest and latest incidents described both refer to materialist explanations of the mind.¹⁵³ The earliest incident described in the novel is the child James Incandenza being given a tennis lesson by his father, James Incandenza, Sr. The lesson consists in a de La Mettrie-style explanation of the self as a machine:

Son, you're ten, and this is hard news for somebody ten, even if you're almost five-eleven, a possible pituitary freak. Son, you're a body, son. That quick little scientific-prodigy's mind she's so proud of and won't quit twittering about: son, it's just neural spasms, those thoughts in your mind are just the sound of your head revving, and head is still just body, Jim. Commit this to memory. Head is body. Jim, brace yourself against my shoulders here for this hard news, at ten: you're a machine a body an object, Jim, no less than this rutilant Montclair, this coil of hose here or that rake there for the front yard's gravel or sweet Jesus this nasty fat spider flexing in its web over there up next to the rake-handle, see it?¹⁵⁴

The purpose of this speech is to get James Jr. (“Jim”) to escape the self-doubt and hesitation of reflective consciousness and become as reliable on the tennis court as a machine. James's father holds up a tennis ball as the “ultimate body” entirely empty inside, it is “pure potential.”¹⁵⁵ James Sr. tells James Jr. to imagine that he is himself the ball:

¹⁵¹ Elizabeth Freudenthal, “Anti-Interiority: Compulsiveness, Objectification, and Identity in *Infinite Jest*,” in: *New Literary History* 41 (2010), pp. 191–211, at p. 193.

¹⁵² See: Max, *Every Love Story*, p. 34-37.

¹⁵³ Burn, *David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest*, p. 49-50.

¹⁵⁴ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 159.

¹⁵⁵ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 160.

Imagine what it feels like to be this ball, Jim. Total physicality. No revving head. Complete presence. [...] A body in commerce with bodies. A helmsman at your own vessel's tiller. A machine in the ghost, to quote a phrase.¹⁵⁶

James Sr.'s inversion of Ryle's "ghost in the machine" to "machine in the ghost" holds out the hope of an escape from the loneliness of the *res cogitans* in a *res extensa* world through an acceptance of reductionism. But its effect on James Jr. is precisely the opposite—he becomes all the more alienated, and by the time the main action of the novel takes place he has become quite literally a ghost in a machine. James grows up to become an expert in "applied-geometrical-optics"¹⁵⁷ (a science of great importance to Descartes¹⁵⁸), and a great technological innovator. He founds the Enfield Tennis Academy (E.T.A) for the systematic repetition of his father's lessons in tennis and mechanical selfhood. He becomes an experimental filmmaker, whose work on the one hand forms "an encyclopedic survey of efforts to understand the self,"¹⁵⁹ but on the other hand is concerned with "transcendence of self," with "[f]reedom from one's own head,"¹⁶⁰ and in his late work (as noted above) with "self-forgetting [...a]s opposed to self-confronting."¹⁶¹ He becomes an alcoholic, perhaps in the attempt to shut down the "revving head," and then decisively destroys his own head by putting it into a machine (a microwave oven), and exploding it.¹⁶² At that point he becomes a literal ghost, a "wraith" haunting the machine-like tunnels of the tennis academy he founded.¹⁶³ He thus becomes in his own person a symbol of the isolation and alienation of the modern subject.

¹⁵⁶ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 160.

¹⁵⁷ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p.63.

¹⁵⁸ See: Jeffrey McDonough, "Optics," in: *The Cambridge Descartes Lexicon*, ed. Larry Nolan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 50-60. For importance of the "visual" in Descartes's philosophy more generally see. Charles De Koninck, "Sedeo, Ergo Sum: Reflections on the Touchstone of Certitude," in: *Laval théologique et philosophique*, 6.2 (1950), p. 343-348.

¹⁵⁹ Burn, *David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest*, p. 49.

¹⁶⁰ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 742, cf. Burn, *David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest*, p. 48.

¹⁶¹ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 944, with p. 1078, note 378.

¹⁶² Indirectly described in: Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, pp. 248-256.

¹⁶³ John Timothy Jacobs argues that the ghost of James Incandenza can in fact be understood as "a machine in the ghost," in his father's phrase: "The entire narrative apparatus is so convoluted and confabulated that it represents in addition to a deformed body—a hulking machine of falsified language ('the machine language' of

The effects of the isolation of the modern subject on James Incandenza Jr.'s son, Hal, is one of the main themes of *Infinite Jest*. The novel opens with a scene which takes place in what is actually the latest point of the book's internal chronology, with an eighteen-year-old Hal Incandenza being interviewed for college admission. "I am in here," Hal tells us, "I'm not a machine. I feel and believe." And yet we soon learn that he is totally unable to speak his interior life to others. When he tries to speak the other people in the room hear only inarticulate bestial noises "like a drowning goat. A goat, drowning in something viscous."¹⁶⁴

Hal has been subjected to the rigorous training of his father's Enfield Tennis Academy, aimed at forming him into a machine. One of his fellow students at the E.T.A. describes how the program of the academy begins by inscribing certain functions into the students through endless repetition

[O]ver and over until the accretive weight of the reps sinks the movements themselves down under your like consciousness into the more nether regions, through repetition they sink and soak into the hardware, the C.P.S. The machine language. The autonomical part that makes you breathe and sweat. [...] These are autonomical. Accretive means accumulating, through sheer mindless repeated motions. The machine-language of the muscles. Until you can do it without thinking about it, play.¹⁶⁵

This means that later on the students will not be tripped up by the paralyzing hesitation and uncertainty of consciousness:

[S]elf-consciousness, the chattering head, the cackling voices, the choking issue, fear [...] self-image, doubts, reluctances, little tightlipped cold-footed men inside your mind, cackling about fear and doubt, chinks in the mental armor.¹⁶⁶

By the time of the opening scene, this regimen has been in some ways very successful for Hal. It has given him great power on the tennis court, where he plays with flawless

the mind) (117), the ghost's own telling. [...] The mediator/wraith first creates then inhabits his own text as 'complete presence,' a narratorial presence that is a 'machine in the ghost' [John Timothy Jacobs, "The Eschatological Imagination: Mediating David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*" (PhD diss., Hamilton: McMaster University, 2003), pp. 85-86]. I find Jacobs's argument ingenious, but perhaps a little *too* ingenious. It seems simpler to see James Incandenza Jr.'s ghost-existence as the ultimate failure of his father's attempt to invert Ryle's saying.

¹⁶⁴ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, pp. 3, 12, 14.

¹⁶⁵ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, pp. 117-118.

¹⁶⁶ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 118, cf. Burn, *David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest*, p. 51.

perfection, his “stats” “off the chart,” he plays without “a waggle or a noise.”¹⁶⁷ But there is something about him that resists this reduction, and this makes him feel more and more isolated. At an earlier point in the novel’s chronology he feels utterly empty inside, and he seems really to have become a machine:

Hal [...] finds terms like *joie* and *value* to be like so many variables in rarified equations, and he can manipulate them well enough to satisfy everyone but himself that he’s in there, inside his own hull, as a human being — but in fact he’s far more robotic than [the most machine-like of the academy’s star students].¹⁶⁸

Hal’s mother, Avril Incandenza, thinks that she knows him, and believes she hears him speaking to her from great inner depths, but to Hal it seems that really she is only hearing her own echoes, and, “this makes Hal feel the one thing he feels to the limit, lately: he is lonely.”¹⁶⁹ This loneliness only grows, but at the end (i.e., the beginning of the novel, but its chronological end) he is protesting against the idea that he has no interior life. Trying to contradict the implication made in the admissions interview that he could be reduced to his tennis ability, Hal tries to say that he does indeed have an interior life of experience and feeling: “But it transcends the mechanics. I’m not a machine. I feel and believe. I have opinions. [...] I’m not just a *creātus*, manufactured, conditioned, bred for a function.”¹⁷⁰ Like his father, Hal has become a ghost in a machine—inside the functioning machine of the tennis player is a lonely ghost unable to speak itself to anyone else.

Earlier Hal has universalized his condition, seeing it as typical for the lives of Americans at the turn of the millennium especially the young. On the cusp of adulthood they realize, “the fact that the great transcendent horror is loneliness, excluded encagement in the self.”¹⁷¹ He sees this loneliness as universal, and has having an elusive object—what exactly is the connection or relation that everyone senses they lack?

¹⁶⁷ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 14.

¹⁶⁸ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 694.

¹⁶⁹ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 694.

¹⁷⁰ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 12.

¹⁷¹ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 694.

This had been one of Hal's deepest and most pregnant abstractions [...] That we're all lonely for something we don't know we're lonely for. How else to explain the curious feeling that he goes around feeling like he misses somebody he's never even met? Without the universalizing abstraction, the feeling would make no sense.¹⁷²

And he sees it as typical of his time and place that he does not want to admit this loneliness, that he despises himself for it, and tries to hide it.¹⁷³

The ghost of Hal's father, James, claims that he made the film *Infinite Jest* to try to communicate with Hal, to get Hal to emerge from his isolation, to "bring him 'out of himself,' as they say."¹⁷⁴ It not entirely clear whether or not Hal ever watches the film,¹⁷⁵ but the effect on *other* people is of something so "entertaining and diverting and conducive to self-forgetting,"¹⁷⁶ that it provides the ultimate form of Pascalian diversion: a distraction so powerful that it drowns out the internal monologue, a drug so addictive that it can be used as a terrorist weapon.

1.3 ADDICTION AS WORSHIP

Addiction plays an important role in much of Wallace's work, a role closely related both to Pascalian diversion and to worship. The connection between diversion and addiction is indeed suggested by Pascal himself. Reflecting on the misery of mankind, Pascal is amazed that it does not drive them to despair. The reason for this, he finds, is that they do not think about their wretchedness: "Then these lost and wretched creatures look around and find some attractive objects to which they become *addicted* and attached."¹⁷⁷ The expression that A. J. Krailshaimer here translates with "addicted" is "*s'y sont donnés*": that is, they *give themselves* to the object of their attachment. The English word addiction in fact comes from

¹⁷² Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 1053, note 281.

¹⁷³ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 695.

¹⁷⁴ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, pp. 838-839.

¹⁷⁵ Greg Carlisle argues plausibly, but not entirely conclusively, that he does not: Greg Carlisle, *Elegant Complexity: A Study of David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest* (Austin: Sideshow Media, 2007), pp. 480-481.

¹⁷⁶ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 944.

¹⁷⁷ Pascal, *Pensées*, p. 59; L 198; B 693; emphasis added.

the Latin word *addico*, *addicere*, which can have this sense.¹⁷⁸ *Addico*—from *ad* (to) and *dico* (say)—had in judicial Latin the sense of “to award or adjudge any thing to one, to sentence.”¹⁷⁹ Of a debtor it meant that he had been given over to his creditor as a servant. Hence the substantive *addictus* (etymologically equivalent to the English “addict”) meant a debtor who had become the bondservant (almost the slave) of his creditor. *Addico* could then mean “to deliver, yield, or resign a thing to one,” either in the sense of devoting and consecrating to the gods,¹⁸⁰ or in the sense of giving up and abandoning. Thus Lewis and Short quote Cicero’s “*libidini cujusque nos addixit*” (“he has handed us over to each man’s arbitrary passion”). *Addico* could also mean to be bound or devoted to a way of thinking or a habit, hence “*certis quibusdam destinatisque sententiis quasi addicti et consecrati sunt*” (“as it were bound and dedicated to certain fixed opinions”).¹⁸¹

In English the word “addiction” was used in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to mean “a strong inclination toward, or a giving of oneself over to, any interest or pursuit to which one might have become strongly attached.”¹⁸² Although usually used pejoratively, addiction could also have a neutral or positive sense—one might say that someone was addicted to history or music. But with the advance of the industrial revolution, excessive alcohol consumption in the working class came to be recognized as a major social problem, and it was explained as a physical dependency.¹⁸³ Similarly, the spread of opium was enabled by expanding world trade, and this was readily explained in reductionist terms as a physical dependency. Opium’s strong habit-forming properties and the reductionist bent of Victorian science combined to enable this view.¹⁸⁴ Thus for much of the twentieth century addiction

¹⁷⁸ See: Ernest Klein, *A Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the English Language* (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 1966), s.v. “addict,” p. 22.

¹⁷⁹ Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, *A Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1879), s.v. “addico,” p. 30.

¹⁸⁰ As in “*agros omnes addixit deae.*”

¹⁸¹ Lewis and Short, *A Latin Dictionary*, s.v. “addico,” pp. 30-31.

¹⁸² Craig McAndrew, “On the Possibility of an Addiction-Free Mode of Being,” in: *Visions of Addiction: Major Contemporary Perspectives on Addiction and Alcoholism*, ed. Stanton Peele (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1988), pp. 163-182, at p. 165.

¹⁸³ McAndrew, “On the Possibility,” pp. 165-166.

¹⁸⁴ See: Louise Foxcroft, *The Making of Addiction: the ‘Use and Abuse’ of Opium in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007).

was used primarily to refer to dependency on alcohol or other drugs, and this dependency was understood as having a biochemical basis. In recent decades, with the expansion of neuroscience, “behavioral” addictions to such activities as gambling, sexual intercourse, pornography viewing, Internet use, and so on, have come to be viewed as addiction in the strict sense, based on neuro-physiological dependency, although most experts still distinguish between “substance addiction” and “behavioral addiction.”¹⁸⁵

Wallace’s extensive portrayal of addiction throughout his *oeuvre* makes use of many of the etymological associations of the word. In *Infinite Jest*, Hal Incandenza actually recounts having researched the etymology of addiction: “The original sense of addiction involved being bound over, dedicated, either legally or spiritually. To devote one’s life, plunge in. I had researched this.”¹⁸⁶ Hal sees this as the being connected to a very deep need:

We are all dying to give our lives away to something, maybe. God or Satan, politics or grammar, topology or philately—the object seemed incidental to this will to give oneself away, utterly. To games or needles, to some other person. Something pathetic about it. A flight-from in the form of a plunging-into. Flight from exactly what?¹⁸⁷

And again this problem is seen as having a particular urgency in turn-of-the-millennium America: “American experience seems to suggest that people are virtually unlimited in their need to give themselves away, on various levels.”¹⁸⁸

Thus Wallace sees addiction to drugs or alcohol as having a similar structure to giving oneself to some pursuit or even to “God”—that is, it has the same structure as worship in the strict sense. Wallace describes listening to the stories of addicts at Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, and describes them as all being “basically alike.”¹⁸⁹ At first “the Substance” (note the capitalization) is fun, then it becomes less fun and begins to cause unexpected problems.

¹⁸⁵ Marc Auriacombe, Fuschia Serre, Cécile Denis, and Mélina Fatséas, “Diagnosis of Addictions,” in: Hanna Pickard and Serge H. Ahmed (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy and Science of Addiction* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), pp. 132-144.

¹⁸⁶ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 900.

¹⁸⁷ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 900.

¹⁸⁸ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 53.

¹⁸⁹ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 345.

Then it is less and less fun, but using it becomes less voluntary and seems more like “physical need.”¹⁹⁰ It then begins to cause “losses,” causing one to lose relationships, jobs and so on. Such losses increase the inner misery and emptiness and cause one to depend even more on the “Substance”:

[T]hen more Losses, with the Substance seeming like the only consolation against the pain of the mounting Losses, and of course you're in Denial about it being the Substance that's causing the very Losses it's consoling you about[.]¹⁹¹

In an essay originally published in 1990, Wallace takes this property of “the Substance” (that is, that it presents itself as the solution to the very problems it causes) as being definitive of malignant addiction: “Something is malignantly addictive if (1) it causes real problems for the addict, and (2) it offers itself as relief from the very problems it causes.”¹⁹² And he adds that a malignant addiction spreads its problems outward, “creating difficulties for relationships, communities, and the addict’s very sense of self and soul.”¹⁹³

The losses increase ever more, but the “relief” the Substance gives from those losses is ever-decreasing. Wallace’s description of this process is worth quoting at length:

[T]hen unbelievable psychic pain, a kind of peritonitis of the soul, psychic agony, fear of impending insanity [...], appearances at hospital detoxes and rehabs, domestic strife, financial free-fall, eventual domestic Losses [...] then vocational ultimatums, unemployability, financial ruin, pancreatitis, overwhelming guilt, bloody vomiting, cirrhotic neuralgia, incontinence, neuropathy, nephritis, black depressions, searing pain, with the Substance affording increasingly brief periods of relief; then, finally, no relief available anywhere at all; finally it's impossible to get high enough to freeze what you feel like, being this way; and now you hate the Substance, hate it, but you still find yourself unable to stop doing it, the Substance, you find you finally want to stop more than anything on earth and it's no fun doing it anymore and you can't believe you ever liked doing it and but you still can't stop, it's like you're totally fucking bats, it's like there's two yous [...]¹⁹⁴

¹⁹⁰ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 345.

¹⁹¹ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 346.

¹⁹² David Foster Wallace, “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction,” in: *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again: Essays and Arguments* (New York: Little, Brown, 1997), pp. 21-82, at p. 38.

¹⁹³ Wallace, “E Unibus Pluram,” p. 38.

¹⁹⁴ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 346-347.

We can see here how addiction's etymological connection both with dedication to the gods and with servitude resonates with Wallace's description of the phenomena. In theological terms, the structure being described could be called "idolatry," and indeed, Wallace immediately introduces theological terms:

[A]nd then you're in serious trouble, very serious trouble, and you know it, finally, deadly serious trouble, because this Substance you thought was your one true friend, that you *gave up all for*, gladly, that for so long gave you relief from the pain of the Losses your love of that relief caused, your mother and lover and *god* and compadre, has finally removed its smily-face mask to reveal centerless eyes and a ravening maw [...] You see now that It's your enemy and your worst personal nightmare and the trouble It's gotten you into is undeniable and you still can't stop. Doing the Substance now is *like attending Black Mass* but you still can't stop, even though the Substance no longer gets you high. You are, as they say, Finished. You cannot get drunk and you cannot get sober; you cannot get high and you cannot get straight. You are behind bars; you are in a cage and can see only bars in every direction.¹⁹⁵

We can recognize here the structure described above in the words of the terrorist Rémy Marathe—a false worship that bends worshipers back on themselves and makes them lonely.¹⁹⁶

This connection is strengthened by many of Wallace's descriptions of addicts taking drugs. He describes how their approach to taking drugs becomes both highly ritualistic, and at the same time isolating, solitary, and secretive. Thus, one of the addicts in *Infinite Jest*, Ken Erdedy, is described early on as having a set pattern of actions every time he decides to indulge in marijuana "one last time."¹⁹⁷ He locks himself up in his apartment, with the shades pulled down, pretending he is not there, he eats certain foods, and moves in a set pattern between bathroom, refrigerator, and the bedroom, where he watches movies and smokes dope. Erdedy's ritual bears a perverse resemblance to so-called "prayer in secret" (cf. *Matthew* 6:6), but it is crucially different from *worship* in the sense of liturgical prayer, in that it is solitary and isolating rather than communal and unitive. Some of the other forms of Pascalian diversion that Wallace describes give more of an illusion of community, but he describes them too as being finally isolating.

¹⁹⁵ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 347; emphasis added.

¹⁹⁶ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, pp. 106-108.

¹⁹⁷ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, pp. 17-27.

In an interview given shortly after the publication of *Infinite Jest* Wallace claimed that the novel “isn’t supposed to be about drugs, getting off drugs.” The function of the extensive treatment of drugs is rather “kind of a metaphor for the sort of addictive continuum that I think has to do with how we as a culture relate to things that are alive.”¹⁹⁸ He sees the addictive continuum particularly in the relation of contemporary Americans to *entertainment*. In that case, the continuum is between, on the one hand, art that helps one confront oneself (“things that are alive”), and, on the other hand, entertainment which is a mere Pascalian flight into diversion. It is this latter entertainment that has the same function and structure as drugs:

So I think it's got something to do with, that we're just - we're absolutely dying to give ourselves away to something. To run, to escape, somehow. And there's some kinds of escape—in a sort of Flannery O'Connorish way—that end up, in a twist, making you confront yourself even more. And then there are other kinds that say, 'Give me seven dollars, and in return I will make you forget your name is David Wallace, that you have a pimple on your cheek, and that your gas bill is due.'¹⁹⁹

One could argue though that Wallace is being slightly disingenuous when he suggests that the drugs in *Infinite Jest* are merely a metaphor for entertainment. Certainly, entertainment is the central theme of the novel, but seems clear that Wallace is interested in many different forms of “giving oneself away,” and their common structure: “the object seemed incidental to this will to give oneself away.”²⁰⁰ Literal drug addiction—with which Wallace himself struggled—would be one of those forms.

In the Q&A to a reading at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles in 2006, Wallace argued that the topic of religion or worship is so “important or circumambient” to us that it is very difficult to talk about it explicitly.²⁰¹ Nevertheless, one occasion on which Wallace did speak in an explicit, straightforward way about worship was in his 2005 commencement speech at Kenyon College. “Kenyon Commencement Speech” explains in an explicit, didactic way

¹⁹⁸ Lipsky, *Although of Course*, p. 81.

¹⁹⁹ Lipsky, *Although of Course*, p. 81.

²⁰⁰ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 900.

²⁰¹ Bustillos, “Philosophy, Self-Help,” p. 137.

some of the problems that in Wallace's fiction are explored much more obliquely. "Kenyon Commencement Speech" can therefore serve as an aid to interpretation of the fiction. In a passage of the speech strongly reminiscent of Marathe's argument on fanaticism in *Infinite Jest*, in Wallace argues that in reality everyone worships something:

[I]n the day-to day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is *what* to worship. And the compelling reason for maybe choosing some sort of god or spiritual-type thing to worship — be it JC or Allah, bet it YHWH or the Wiccan Mother Goddess, or the Four Noble Truths, or some inviolable set of ethical principles — is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive.²⁰²

He then goes on to list a number of different objects of "worship." Drug addiction does not get a mention, and yet the structure of worship that he describes is recognizably the same as addiction:

If you worship money and things, if they are where you tap real meaning in life, then you will never have enough, never feel you have enough. [...] Worship power, you will end up feeling weak and afraid, and you will need ever more power over others to numb you to your own fear.²⁰³

Several of the forms of worship that he describes have to do with how one appears to others:

Worship your body and beauty and sexual *allure* and you will always feel ugly, and when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before they finally plant you. [...] Worship your intellect, being *seen* as smart—you will end up feeling stupid, afraid, always on the verge of being found out.²⁰⁴

This seems to be a special kind of worship—deriving meaning from how one is seen by others. In *Infinite Jest* the students at the tennis academy are particularly prone to this danger. They dream of becoming famous players, of having their pictures appear in magazines, and so on. The admiration of others is desirable not only as *distraction* from inner emptiness, but also as a kind of self-deception—they hope that by appearing "real" to

²⁰² Wallace, "Kenyon Commencement Speech," p. 362.

²⁰³ Wallace, "Kenyon Commencement Speech," p. 362.

²⁰⁴ Wallace, "Kenyon Commencement Speech," pp. 362-363.

others they will appear real to themselves. Of course, at some level they know that this is an illusion, but it is an illusion from which they are unable to free themselves:

The idea that achievement doesn't automatically confer interior worth is, to them, still, at this age, an abstraction, rather like the prospect of their own death—'Caius Is Mortal' and so on. Deep down, they all still view the competitive carrot as the grail. They're mostly going through the motions when they invoke anhedonia. [...] They all still worship the carrot. With the possible exception of the tormented LaMont Chu, they all still subscribe to the delusive idea that the continent's second-ranked fourteen-year-old feels exactly twice as worthwhile as the continent's #4.²⁰⁵

LaMont Chu, mentioned here as a possible exception, is initially a particular good example of how the worship of fame is structurally similar to drug addiction. He confesses to Lyle, the academy's resident Eastern mystic, that his burning desire for fame actually hampers his game, making it less likely that he will ever achieve fame. It is worth quoting the passage at length:

He wants to get to the Show so bad it feels like it's eating him alive. To have his picture in shiny magazines, to be a wunderkind, to have guys in blue I/SPN blazers describe his every on-court move and mood in hushed broadcast clichés. To have little patches with products' names sewn onto his clothes. To be soft-profiled. [...] He confesses it to Lyle: he *wants* the hype; he *wants* it. Sometimes he'll pretend a glowing up-at-net action shot he's clipping out of a shiny magazine is of him, LaMont Chu. But then he finds he can't eat or sleep or sometimes even pee, so horribly does he envy the adults in the Show who get to have up-at-net action shots of themselves in magazines. Sometimes, he says, lately, he won't take risks in tournament matches even when risks are OK or even called for, because he finds he's too scared of losing and hurting his chances for the Show and hype and fame, down the road. A couple times this year the cold clenched fear of losing has itself made him lose, he believes.²⁰⁶

The guru asks Chu *why* he so much wants this fame. Chu answers that he wants others to feel about him the way he feels about the players whose pictures he sees in shiny magazines. "Why?" Lyle asks again. "I guess to give my life some sort of kind of meaning, Lyle," Chu answers. "And how would this do this again?" Lyle asks.²⁰⁷ Lyle tries to get Chu to see that those who achieve fame are not thereby liberated from fear and isolation. They merely exchange one cage for another:

²⁰⁵ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 693.

²⁰⁶ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 388.

²⁰⁷ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 388.

After the first photograph has been in a magazine, the famous men do not enjoy their photographs in magazines so much as they fear that their photographs will cease to appear in magazines. They are trapped, just as you are. [...] There is much fear in fame.²⁰⁸

Wallace often returns to this theme of the destructive nature of fame, and he speaks of his own experience of it as a famous writer. In a 1998 essay on fiction writing he describes how a writer begins writing merely for the fun of it, but that if one is successful—and Wallace was unusually successful, with his first novel receiving prominent reviews in the *New York Times Book Review* and the *Washington Post Book World*, and its author a profile in the *Wall Street Journal*²⁰⁹—success begins to change one’s motivation for writing. One begins to find that one’s motive for writing now comes to be the approval of others: “having pretty people you don’t know like you and admire you and think you’re a good writer.”²¹⁰ But such a motive leads to inferior fiction, which the writer then does not want to publish so as not to lose the approval of the “pretty people.” So the writer has a kind of “double-bind”: he is desperate to write and yet unable to do so.²¹¹

Such double-binds—whether in writers or in tennis players—then lead to the affected person seeking to forget the double-bind through diversion. That is, they lead into the next double-bind, the basic one between loneliness and giving oneself away that is our theme. Thus the worship of fame feeds into other perverse kinds of worship. In the “Kenyon Commencement Speech,” Wallace claims that these forms of worship are not consciously chosen; they are “default settings” into which one falls only half-consciously.²¹² And the more one falls into them, the less one is free to escape.

1.4 CAPITALISM AND CONSUMERISM

1.4.1 Intellectual opposition to neoliberalism

²⁰⁸ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 389.

²⁰⁹ Max, *Every Love Story*, pp. 81-83.

²¹⁰ David Foster Wallace, “The Nature of the Fun,” in: *Both Flesh and Not*, pp. 193-199, at p. 197.

²¹¹ Wallace, “The Nature of the Fun,” p. 198.

²¹² Wallace, “Kenyon Commencement Speech,” p. 363.

If the default settings of contemporary life lead to ever-greater enslavement, Wallace nevertheless also thinks that contemporary culture has found a way of using these settings to produce its own simulacrum of freedom:

Our own present culture has harnessed these forces in ways that have yielded extraordinary wealth and comfort and personal freedom. The freedom all to be lords of our tiny skull-size kingdoms, alone at the center of all creation.²¹³

The main system by which the culture produces wealth, comfort, and a lonely kind of freedom is capitalist economics. Wallace describes capitalism as having a similar structure to addiction—presenting itself as the solution to problems that it causes. Moreover, he sees it as exploiting the tendency towards addiction, false worship, or “giving one’s self away” of the lonely consumer. Capitalism, however, depends not only on consumers, but also on the capitalist entrepreneurs and workers, and on what Max Weber called their “spirit” (*Geist*). The relation between the “spirit” of the capitalist and that of the consumer involves certain paradoxes to which (as we shall see) Wallace was highly attuned.

As Lee Konstantinou has argued,²¹⁴ the attitude that Wallace takes toward capitalism has to be understood in the context of the end of the Cold War, and the ascendancy of neoliberalism. Konstantinou points to Fukuyama’s concept of “the end of history.” As we saw above (1.1), Fukuyama thought that the extraordinary wealth and power and freedom brought about by neoliberal capitalism made it almost impossible for the world to abandon it. This idea of the inescapability of capitalism was widely shared in Wallace’s generation.²¹⁵ Among academics and artists like Wallace the response to this supposed instability often took the form of despondency. Optimistic promoters of neoliberalism found this exasperating. George Gilder, the author most quoted by Ronald Reagan, began his bestselling defense of neoliberalism, *Wealth and Poverty*, by claiming that while the most important event of the times was the demise of the socialist ideal,²¹⁶ the second most

²¹³ Wallace, “Kenyon Commencement Speech,” p. 363.

²¹⁴ Konstantinou, “No Bull,” pp. 83-85 and passim.

²¹⁵ Konstantinou, “No Bull,” p. 106.

²¹⁶ This was in 1981, eight years before the end of really existing socialism in central Europe, but many intellectuals had already begun to accept that socialism was a failure.

important was “the failure of capitalism to win a corresponding triumph.”²¹⁷ The reason that intellectuals who realized the failure of socialism did not become whole-hearted supporters of capitalism is that there were key elements of the Marxist critique of capitalism that (on their view) were falsified neither by the failures of really existing socialism, nor by the tremendous advances in material wealth achieved by Western capitalism—indeed, the latter actually confirmed elements of the critique.

I shall now consider in a general way some of the most prominent elements of Wallace’s description of capitalist economic activity— especially the ones that he depicts as being bad— and show how they are all explicable in terms of some of Marx’s foundational theses. I shall then take a closer look at Wallace’s description of the corporation, and its role in contemporary society. The consideration of the corporation will lead to an examination of the “spirit” which it encourages in employees and in consumers. I will use Max Weber’s celebrated analysis of the “spirit of capitalism” to help illuminate Wallace’s descriptions. And shall then show that Wallace sees a tension between the spirit of capitalism, which corporations encourage in the employees, and what I shall call “the spirit of consumerism,” which corporations encourage in their customers.

Wallace shared to a large extent the despondency of other intellectuals at the high-water mark of neoliberalism. But this means that, as Jeffrey Severs has persuasively argued, Wallace was not himself a Marxist.²¹⁸ He did not have hope for a time beyond capitalism. Moreover, his resistance to over-simplification, and to bracketing out “other sides” of difficult questions, mean that he was willing to find positive elements in a capitalist system as well as negative ones. Jeffrey Severs shows how Wallace was concerned with ways of recovering balance in a system with an inherent tendency towards unbalance and excess. In the second part of this dissertation (2.6) I will show how he saw particular potential in the bureaucratic structures of the welfare state as a way of bringing such balance. Thus, in arguing that Wallace’s descriptions of capitalism can be understood through the insights of

²¹⁷ George Gilder, *Wealth and Poverty*, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: Regnery, 2012), p. 3.

²¹⁸ Severs, *Balancing Books*, p. 25.

Marx and Weber, I am far from claiming that Wallace would endorse Marxist or even Weberian conclusions.

1.4.2 The general characteristics of capitalism: Use value and exchange value

Capitalist economic activity, as Wallace describes it, has a tendency to spread, and to overcome boundaries. It finds ways of making more and more aspects of life commercially profitable. And it tends to “hollow out” the things that it integrates into its system, making them fake and inauthentic (or at least apparently so). It is characterized by aggressive advertising through mass media (a form of communication that is itself experienced as fake). It isolates and atomizes consumers, but it presents itself as the solution to such isolation, promising inclusion in a group to those who buy its products. Its development causes internal tensions that are constantly threatening its stability, and it overcomes them by further developments that lead to further tensions.

All of these properties can be understood in the light of the distinction that Marx makes between “exchange value” and “use value” at the beginning of *Capital*, and his description of the way in which capitalism subordinates the former to the latter. I will therefore turn now to the Marxian understanding of this distinction, before applying it to Wallace’s work.

Marx’s theory of value is largely a development of the account of exchange offered by Aristotle.²¹⁹ Marx himself notes that Aristotle was the first thinker to distinguish between use value and exchange value.²²⁰ Although Aristotle did not use a word equivalent to “value,” he recognized that external (i.e. material) things possessed by human beings could be used in two different ways. The first and original way that they could be used, the reason why people first begin to take or to make things in the first place, was to fulfill some human need (*χρεια*).

²¹⁹ See: Scott Meikle, “Aristotle and Exchange Value,” in: D. Keyt and Fred D. Miller, Jr. (eds), *A Companion to Aristotle’s Politics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), pp. 156–81; I am grateful to David Pederson for pointing me to this essay.

²²⁰ Karl Marx, *Das Kapital: Kritik der politischen Ökonomie*, Bd. II (Köln: Anaconda Verlag, 2009 [nach der 2. Ausgabe, 1872]), Kap. 1, p. 71; *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1 (London: Penguin, 1990), trans. Ben Fowkes, ch. 1, p. 151.

Things have a value that comes from their ability to satisfy needs, and this is what Marx (following Adam Smith) calls “use value.”

While neither Aristotle nor Marx developed this point much, I think it important to note that the relevant kind of need here is “hypothetical necessity”: *if* persons are to *live* they require food and shelter, *if* they are to *live well* they will need certain kinds of things of a certain quality. The particular things they need will be determined by the hypothesis: that is, by the conception of the good life. If, for example, conviviality is a necessary element of the good life, then those who want to live well will require wine, pleasant-tasting food, musical instruments and other things useful for celebrating feasts. If the good life is conceived of as requiring the contemplation of beauty, then those seeking it will need statues, pictures, beautiful buildings, and so on. “Use value” is thus best understood as the ability of a certain thing to aid in achieving some conception of the good life. Wallace seems to me to have been more attuned to the dependence of usevalue on conceptions of the good life than Marx, who tended to use a somewhat “naturalistic” conception of usevalue, as though human needs could be simply given.²²¹

The second use of things that Aristotle distinguishes is their use in exchange. Aristotle uses the example of a shoe to explain this: a shoe can be worn, or it can be used for exchange. Both are uses of the shoe *as a shoe*, but the former is more basic, since if no one wore shoes no one would exchange for them.²²² The value that things have from their use in exchange is what Marx calls “exchange value.”

For an exchange to be just the things exchanged must be of equal value. But this raises a problem, because exchange comes about between people with different needs and with

²²¹ This criticism of Marx resembles that of theologians such as John Milbank and John Hughes. They have argued that Marx’s theory of value should be complemented by that of John Ruskin, who argued that value depends not only on the intrinsic usefulness of things for life, but also on the virtue (or “valour”) the persons using them. Only if a person has a good conception of the good life (this conception is of course heavily influenced by culture), and the virtues necessary to pursue it, can a thing have true value for her. See: John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), ch. 7; John Hughes, *The End of Work: Theological Critiques of Capitalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), chs. 3-4.

²²² Aristotle, *Politics* I.9 1257a6-13; cf. Meikle, “Aristotle and Exchange Value,” p. 158.

different things to exchange: “[I]t is not two doctors that associate for exchange, but a doctor and a farmer, or in general people who are different and unequal.”²²³ How can things as different as a farmer’s crops and a physician’s medicine and treatment be equal? What is the common measure between them in virtue of which they can be said to be equal?²²⁴

Aristotle tries different hypotheses for explaining exchange value. First, he proposes money, but this will not do, since one would still have to explain what makes money commensurable with other things. Then he examines need, but need is an accident of the persons exchanging, not of the things themselves, and therefore does not explain the ability of the things to be equated in an arbitrary way. Aristotle concludes that there is no scientifically satisfactory explanation for the commensurability of such widely different things, but that they must be assumed to be commensurable for practical reasons.²²⁵

The classical political economists Adam Smith and David Ricardo thought that there was indeed a common measure underlying the exchange value of all different products—namely, the labor (Smith), or, more precisely, labor *time* (Ricardo) needed for their production. Marx, however, showed that this is only really true in a fully capitalist economy, which Smith and Ricardo falsely naturalized and universalized. Marx shows that it is only in a capitalist economy that “*socially necessary* labor time” (note the important addition) is converted into value.²²⁶ What is socially necessary is determined by competition and can be changed by innovation, but the necessity is stable enough to enable commodities to be exchanged in non-arbitrary proportions.

²²³ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, V.5 1133a16-18, trans. W. D. Ross and J. O. Urmson, in: Barnes (ed.), *The Works of Aristotle*, vol. 2; cf. Meikle, “Aristotle and Exchange Value,” p. 159-160.

²²⁴ As Scott Meikle puts it (“Aristotle and Exchange Value,” p. 170): “The essence of Aristotle’s problem is to explain the capacity products have to exchange in non-arbitrary proportions; to discover the dimension in which products that are incommensurable by nature can become commensurable....”

²²⁵ *Nicomachean Ethics*, V.5 1133b 19—2.

²²⁶ Hence one can say that Marx has a “value theory of labor” rather than a “labor theory of value” in the Ricardean sense. See: Diane Elson, “The Value Theory of Labour,” in *Value: The Representation of Labour in Capitalism* (Exeter: CSE Books, 1979). I am grateful to David Pederson (once again) for pointing me to this work.

Aristotle argues that exchange arises naturally from the fact that some have too little and others too much of certain needed goods.²²⁷ The first form of exchange is simply one good for another. Marx represents this form C–C (C stands for “commodity”). Then money is interposed to make exchange easier, yielding the form C–M–C [(commodity)–(money)–(commodity)]. Historically, this view is almost certainly false, since as David Graeber has shown, early economies depended on distribution rather than exchange, and systems of impersonal exchange arose after the invention of money.²²⁸ Nevertheless, Marx and Aristotle are right about the way money functions in an already developed exchange market. Aristotle saw the form C–M–C as natural, and as being part of the art of managing a family or a city. Since the family and the city need certain external things to live, and to live well, there is a natural art of wealth-getting, which is concerned with satisfying those needs—that is, in Marxian terms, with the acquisition of use values.²²⁹

But, Aristotle argues, there is a second kind of wealth-getting that is not natural, because it is not ordered to acquiring necessary instruments (use values), but rather to acquiring as much money (i.e., as much exchange value) as possible.²³⁰ This second form of wealth-getting is most clearly seen in retail trade, in which someone takes money to the market rather than goods, buys goods with the money, and then exchanges them for more money. Marx would represent this form M–C–M′. This form of wealth-getting has no natural limit, since it is not ordered to getting certain needed goods, but just to increasing the quantity of money (that is, of the exchange value measured by money). Thus, there is no reason why M′ should not be again invested to yield M′′.

On Meikle’s Marxist reading, Aristotle thinks that this kind of wealth-getting can take over and corrupt almost any kind of human activity:

²²⁷ *Politics* I.9 1257a14.

²²⁸ See: David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5000 Years* (Brooklyn, NY: Melville House, 2011).

²²⁹ Meikle, “Aristotle and Exchange Value,” p. 163.

²³⁰ Meikle, “Aristotle and Exchange Value,” p. 163.

Aristotle's deeper criticism [...] is not primarily of *kapelike* [trade] at all, but of its aim, the getting of wealth as exchange-value, and this is a more general thing (1257b40–1258a 14). People may pursue that aim by means of *kapelike* [...] but they may pursue it by other means too, Aristotle instances the military and the medical arts, but he means that almost anything people do, and every faculty they have, can be put to the pursuit of exchange-value (1258a8—10). All these human activities, medicine, philosophy or sport, have a point for the sake of which they are pursued, and they can all be pursued for the sake of exchange-value as well or instead. When that happens, their own real point becomes a means to the end of exchange-value, which, being something quite different, transforms the activity and can threaten the real point and even destroy it. Aristotle is concerned, not only about the invasion by exchange-value of *chrematistike*, but about its invasion of ethical and political life as a whole.²³¹

One of the central points that Marx makes in his critique of capitalism is that, in capitalism, the form of wealth-getting that is ordered to increasing the quantity of exchange value has become dominant, subordinating the natural pursuit of use values to itself. Indeed, Meikle argues, that this is the most essential feature of a capitalist economy.²³² In such a system need is homogenized into “demand,” which is considered as an abstract force that has to be “stimulated” in order to enable the accumulation of capital. An inversion of means and ends takes place in which human need is seen as a means to the growth of capital rather than vice versa. As a result the concrete, useful labor naturally ordered to the creation of use-value, is subordinated to the abstract homogenous labor, which is the basis of exchange value.²³³

Marx had been most concerned with the exploitation of workers that this system brings about, as the cost of labor is driven down in the attempt to maximize profit. Wallace was concerned with the effect on workers, too—though he focused more on middle class (“white collar”) work, and the tedium to which the system reduced it. But he was arguably more concerned with the effect of the system on consumers. At the turn of the millennium the American middle class, to which Wallace belonged, was far more segregated from the most

²³¹ Meikle, “Aristotle and Exchange Value,” p. 178-179.

²³² Meikle, “Aristotle and Exchange Value,” p. 167: “In order to capture the difference between capitalist economy and pre-capitalist ‘economy’ the distinction required is that between use-value and exchange-value. The most fundamental question to be asked about a society is which of these predominates in it. A capitalist society is predominantly a system of exchange-value; economics is the study of the developed forms of exchange-value and of the regularities in its movement, or ‘actual market mechanisms,’ and it can come into being only with the appearance of full-blown market economy, that is, with markets in labour and capital. Antiquity was predominantly a system of use-value, partially administered, and if it had regularities, these were nothing like the cycles, laws, and trends which characterize a system of exchange-value.”

²³³ See: David Pederson, “Meditations on Marx’s Theory of Value,” unpublished paper.

exploited laborers of the global economy than was the European middle class at the time of Marx.²³⁴ Wallace thus had fewer opportunities to observe the effects of exploitation than many nineteenth century writers. But the effects of the subordination of use value to exchange value on Wallace's own class as *consumers* had only become more obvious.

1.4.3 "Subsidized Time" and the dominance of the corporation

In Wallace's portrayal the key institution in the system that subordinates use value to exchange value is the for-profit *corporation*. A corporation (in the relevant sense) is an institution, usually owned by stockholders, which has the status of a "legal person"; law can treat a corporation as a single agent. A corporation helps its stockholders not only by pooling their resources, but also (crucially) by removing much of their liability for economic actions. Thus, if a corporation becomes insolvent, only the resources legally owned by that corporation can be taken for the creditors; the private fortunes of the shareholders remain untouched. The idea of corporations is so familiar as to be banal, but in one scene of *The Pale King* Wallace de-familiarizes it by having his characters discuss its origin and character.

The scene is § 19 of *The Pale King*, the so-called "civics-debate §,"²³⁵ which takes place in an elevator in which a number of tax-bureaucrats are stuck. They begin a philosophical discussion of the ills of American society and their causes that reads almost like a Platonic dialogue. The corporation is one of several themes touched on. As they discuss it, the familiar institution begins to take on a strange, almost an ominous aura. One of them notes that the word "corporation" comes from the Latin *corpus*, body: "Doesn't the term corporation itself come from body, like 'made into a body'? These were artificial people being created."²³⁶ The characters begin to give more definite meaning to cliché complaints

²³⁴ Mostly due to the "outsourcing" of manufacturing to the so-called "Third World."

²³⁵ Cf. Marshall Boswell, "Trickle-Down Citizenship: Taxes and Civic Responsibility in David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King*," in: *Studies in the Novel*, vol. 44, no. 4 (2012), pp. 464-479, at p. 476.

²³⁶ Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 140.

about “damn soulless corporations who don’t give a shit about the state of the nation but only care about making a buck.”²³⁷

Earlier on in the conversation, one person protests that it doesn’t make any sense to blame corporations for caring only about profit, and not about the good of the country, since corporations are designed for a very specific purpose:

I don’t think of corporations as citizens, though. Corporations are machines for producing profit; that’s what they’re ingeniously designed to do. It’s ridiculous to ascribe civic obligations or moral responsibilities to corporations.²³⁸

But DeWitt Glendenning points out that the very concept of economic institutions designed for such a narrow purpose is problematic:

[The] whole dark genius of corporations is that they allow for individual reward without individual obligation. The workers’ obligations are to the executives, and the executives’ obligations are to the CEO, and the CEO’s obligation is to the Board of Directors, and the Board’s obligation is to the stockholders, who are also the same customers the corporation will screw over at the very earliest opportunity in the name of profit, which profits are distributed as dividends to the very stockholders-slash-customers they’ve been fucking over in their own name. It’s like a fugue of evaded responsibility.²³⁹

From the point of view of our Aristotelian-Marxian analysis in the last section we can see that what is being described here is the subordination of use value to exchange value. The corporation is set up as a system for maximizing the increase of exchange value. The corporation is not ordered to producing definite use values needed for families and the nation at large to fulfill a definite conception of the good life; rather, its production of use values is a mere means to making profit, i.e. obtaining more exchange value.

Of course, exchange value can never be fully separated from use value; a corporation’s products must be useful to their customers in some way, or the customers would not buy them. Corporations are designed for a twofold end, “to meet a demand and make as much

²³⁷ Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 138.

²³⁸ Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 136.

²³⁹ Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 136.

money as is legally possible.”²⁴⁰ But the point is that the meeting of a demand is wholly subordinate to making as much money as legally possible. Thus corporations try to bring demand for their products into being. “The corporate agenda,” as one bureaucrat puts it, is one of “maximizing profit by *creating* demand, and trying to make demand inelastic.”²⁴¹

The 1980s in America, in which the scene is set, were the beginning of the neo-liberal era that was to last till 2008. The dominant strand in neo-liberal economics, so-called “supply-side economics,” places a great deal of emphasis on the need in a capitalist system for the creation of demand. As George Gilder puts it, “supply creates demand.”²⁴² He argues that corporations and entrepreneurs must be given scope to invent new kinds of goods, which customers did know they wanted before their invention:

The problem is that demand, like public opinion, does not exist in any very definite and identifiable way; it is a flux of hungers and sentiments which assume particular forms chiefly in response to the flow of supplies.²⁴³

Gilder sees the creation of new demands in a wholly positive light. There are, however, reasons to question whether such a system really serves the flourishing of human beings. From Wallace’s perspective, persons have a tendency to seek diversion from deep level sadness in things that are not ultimately satisfying (section 1.2 above), and to give themselves away to objects of addiction or worship that are ultimately harmful (section 1.3); these are the “default settings” of humanity. And so the sort of “hungers and sentiments” that corporations most easily—and therefore most profitably—appeal to are the ones that flow from or encourage such harmful tendencies.

Another way of putting this is to say that to create demand for a product is to persuade persons that such a product is necessary for the good life. Now, most *explicit* conceptions of the good life, including those touched on by Wallace, recognize that one has to set priorities between different “hungers and sentiments,” to integrate them in such a way that they

²⁴⁰ Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 138.

²⁴¹ Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 142; emphasis added.

²⁴² Gilder, *Wealth and Poverty*, p. 65.

²⁴³ Gilder, *Wealth and Poverty*, p. 53.

contribute to a comprehensive fulfillment. Many of the most easily stimulated desires would become harmful and infantile if they were indulged to too great an extent. If someone, for example, were so dominated by the thirst for revenge that they lost all respect for justice, this could harm both that person and others. A person who is so dominated by the hunger for candy that he destroyed his health would fail according to most conceptions of the good life. And the very fact that such desires are easily stimulated means that they present themselves as convenient means of diversion, promising easy relief from the isolation, loneliness, insecurity, and sadness of the self.

But the ease of arousing infantile and harmful desires and cravings, means that corporations will have a special incentive for appealing precisely to those desires. In other words, it is not just that corporations are not ordered to fulfilling a certain conception of the good life; it is that they are structurally inclined to create demand for goods that are harmful to the good life. But since creating demand means persuading persons that something is necessary for the good life, corporations are structurally inclined to promote *false or harmful conceptions of the good life*. This is not to say that corporations present arguments for harmful conceptions of the good life against more benign conceptions. Rather, it is to say that the corporations try to bring the customers' attention to their product in such a way as to arouse desire for it, while at the same time subtly suggesting that buying it contributes to the good life. Even if the customers have no place in their explicit conception of the good life for the product in question, they can be influenced by the semiconscious suggestion of other conceptions of the good life.

Advertising is one of the main tools through corporations use to stimulate desire and suggest its fulfillment as necessary for the good life. Hence, advertising takes on tremendous importance in capitalist economies. And hence Wallace was fascinated by advertising, and continually described, parodied, and analyzed it in both his fiction and his nonfiction. A good example of the subtle suggestion that the indulgence of infantile desire contributes to the good life occurs in the story "Mister Squishy," arguably Wallace's fullest exploration of the manipulative nature of advertising. A fictional snack company, Mister Squishy, gives a new chocolate snack the name "*felonies!*". The name is meant to suggest that the good life

really consists in rebelling against the explicit notions of the good life current in society and imposed by the super-ego, conceptions that call for self-discipline and health-consciousness:

[A name] meant both to connote and to parody the modern health-conscious consumer's sense of vice/indulgence/transgression/sin vis à vis the consumption of a high-calorie corporate snack. The name's association matrix included as well the suggestion of adulthood and adult autonomy[...]²⁴⁴

The cleverness of the branding consists in the fact that while the cake is meant to stimulate an infantile desire for sweetness, a desire which at some level the consumer recognizes as infantile and wants to resist, it *simultaneously* overcomes that resistance by suggesting to the consumer (or the consumer's subconscious) that giving in to the desire would not be infantile, but in fact *adult*, a sign not of surrender to clever advertising, but rather of *autonomy*. Different corporations are of course playing both sides of the game. On the one hand, advertisers promote an ideal of physical fitness almost unattainable by office workers with sedentary jobs as the model of human life, and so some corporations can market all kinds of diets, diet friendly foods, exercise aids, and so on to attain that unrealistic goal. And then on the other hand corporations such as Mister Squishy can take the opposite tack and promote self-indulgence:

[Enterprises...] that said or sought to say to a consumer bludgeoned by herd-pressures to achieve, forbear, trim the fat, cut down, discipline, prioritize, be sensible, self-parent, that hey, you deserve it, reward yourself, brands that in essence said what's the use of living longer and healthier if there aren't those few precious moments in every day when you stopped, sat down, and took a few moments of hard-earned pleasure just for you? and various myriad other pitches that aimed to remind the consumer that he was at root an individual, one with individual tastes and preferences and freedom of individual choice, that he was not a mere herd animal who had no choice but to go go go on US life's digital-calorie-readout treadmill[...]²⁴⁵

Wallace's reference here to "freedom of choice" is ironic. This is the simulacrum of freedom of which he spoke in the "Kenyon Commencement Speech;" the freedom that comes from

²⁴⁴ David Foster Wallace, "Mister Squishy," in: *Oblivion: Stories* (New York: Little, Brown, 2004), pp. 3-66, at p. 5.

²⁴⁵ Wallace, "Mister Squishy," pp. 36-37.

the harnessing of the forces of the default settings, a freedom which is really un-freedom, slavery, isolation.²⁴⁶

We shall see below (1.10) that in “hypermodern” advertising the very irony of a corporation manipulating millions of consumers into buying into something by suggesting that it will make them individual and free of the herd, will itself become an element of advertising. The point here, though, is that the corporations have no interest in what actually leads to a happy and fulfilled life. And therefore the conceptions of the good-life that they promote are inherently fake, even though they must be plausible to some extent.

The bureaucrats in the elevator in § 19 of the *The Pale King* discuss the lack of social responsibility that corporate structure implies. One of them, probably DeWitt Glendenning,²⁴⁷ brings up the example of violence in movies, a form of entertainment that is very directly ordered to diversion:

Suppose it was determined that the increasing violence of US films correlated with a rise in violent-crime statistics. I mean, suppose the statistics weren't merely suggestive but actually demonstrated conclusively that the increasing number of graphically violent films like *Clockwork Orange* or *The Godfather* or *The Exorcist* had a causal correlation with the real-world rates of mayhem. [...] What would we expect the Hollywood corporations that make the movies to do? Would we really expect them to care about their films' effect on violence in the culture? We might posture and send nasty letters. But the corporations, underneath all the PR bullshit, reply that they're in business to make money for their stockholders, and that they'd give one fart in a stiff wind about what some statistics say about their products only if the government forced them to regulate the violence.²⁴⁸

Glendenning's reference to government is significant. In the decades following the Great Depression, an American “welfare state” was built up in which the government took an active role in regulating the economy, and redistributing its products, to ensure that everyone received certain use-values, thus partially moderating the subordination of use values to exchange value. This moderation of the capitalist mechanism (sometimes called

²⁴⁶ Wallace, “Kenyon Commencement Speech,” p. 363.

²⁴⁷ The dialogue is unattributed, but Wallace leaves enough clues to figure out who is speaking. See: Adam Kelly, “Development Through Dialogue: David Foster Wallace and the Novel of Ideas,” in: *Studies in the Novel*, volume 44, number 3 (Fall 2012), pp. 265-281, at p. 277.

²⁴⁸ Wallace, *The Pale King*, pp. 137-138.

“embedded liberalism”) was initially successful by its conventional economic standards, delivering high rates of economic growth in the postwar period. But moderation of market mechanisms had the long-term effect of destroying their effectiveness, and by the 1970s it became clear that the moderated capitalist economy of embedded liberalism was stagnating. This stagnation led to a backlash against government interference in market mechanisms from the late 1970s or early 1980s up to 2008. This backlash is conventionally referred to by the term “neoliberalism.”²⁴⁹

The neoliberal backlash is one of the main themes of *The Pale King*. DeWitt Glendenning sees himself as a “conservative” of sorts,²⁵⁰ who does not want to do away with corporations altogether, but would rather limit them through personal responsibility and government control. Or rather, personal responsibility partly exercised *through* government control. In the tradition of classical liberalism of the American founders, Glendenning sees the true role of government as being simply one of the means through which the citizens exercise their personal responsibility. “The government is the people, leaving aside various complications,”²⁵¹ he claims. But, Glendenning argues, for this to be really true rather than a fiction, citizens have to really see themselves as part of the nation, and as having a duty to take responsibility for the direction in which the nation is headed. They can do this by political action such as voting, canvassing, and persuasion; but also by acting in all realms as they would have others in the nation act, that is, by considering their responsibility to the nation in all their individual actions. Citizens in this classical sense, Glendenning says, consider themselves “parts of something larger to which [they] have profound responsibilities.”²⁵² I shall return to this conception again below (2.6). At this stage the important point is that Glendenning thinks this conception of things has been abandoned in America:

²⁴⁹ Cf. David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

²⁵⁰ Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 132. Glendenning is a “social conservative” rather than a “fiscal conservative” to put it in the somewhat misleading terms of contemporary American discourse, which identifies social conservatism with a certain strand of classical liberalism and fiscal conservatism with neoliberalism.

²⁵¹ Wallace, *The Pale King*, pp. 134-135.

²⁵² Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 130.

[We] split [the government] off and pretend it's not us; we pretend it's some threatening Other bent on taking our freedoms, taking our money and redistributing it, legislating our morality in drugs, driving, abortion, the environment—Big Brother, the Establishment [...]²⁵³

In other words, Glendenning thinks that in the neo-liberal moment, citizens have abdicated their responsibilities to the government—now considered as an alien entity. But then once they have abdicated their responsibility to that alien entity the alien entity comes to be seen as an adversary limiting their freedom. They come to see it the way the corporations see it: as a nuisance.

Corporations are getting better and better at seducing us into thinking the way they think—of profits as the *telos* and responsibility as something to be enshrined in symbol and evaded in reality.²⁵⁴

This gives an opening to populist neoliberal politicians, who run on a platform of “limited government” (i.e., a government that does not interfere with the goals of corporations). This is Wallace’s reading of Ronald Reagan’s politics: appealing to a rebellion against government authority in the name of freedom, but really for the sake of increasing the power of corporations.

[The] marvelous double irony of the Reduce Government candidate is that he's financed by the corporations that are the backs government tends to be the most oppressively on the back of. Corporations, as DeWitt pointed out, whose beady little brains are lit by nothing but net profit and expansion, and who we deep-down expect government to keep in check because we're not equipped to resist their consumerist seductions by the strength of our own character, and whose appeal to the faux rebel is the modern rhetoric that's going to get Bush-Reagan elected in the first place, and who are going to benefit enormously from the laissez-faire deregulation Bush-Reagan will enable the electorate to believe will be undertaken in their own populist interests—in other words we'll have for a president a symbolic Rebel against his own power whose election was underwritten by inhuman soulless profit-machines [...]²⁵⁵

One of the main themes of *The Pale King* is the attempted reorganization of the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) by the Reagan Administration. Reagan’s populist neoliberalism requires him to reduce taxes, on the assumption that this will increase revenue. In fact,

²⁵³ Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 135.

²⁵⁴ Wallace, *The Pale King*, pp. 130-131.

²⁵⁵ Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 149.

though, it reduces revenue, revenue of which Reagan has particular need on account of his expensive foreign policy. The solution is to increase revenue by running the IRS more like a for-profit corporation.

In *Infinite Jest* Reagan's brand of populist neoliberalism is represented by President Johnny Gentle. Gentle, like Reagan, was a B-movie star.²⁵⁶ Like Reagan, Gentle wants to reduce taxation, but is unable to fund his expensive foreign policy on the resulting reduced revenue. His solution, however, is "subsidized time"—a system whereby the government sells corporations the right to name years. Years are thus no longer named after their order from some turning point in history, but rather by the name of a corporate sponsor: "Year of the Whopper," "Year of the Trial-Size Dove Bar," "Year of Dairy Products from the American Heartland," "Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment," and so on.²⁵⁷ This is one of the most famous features of *Infinite Jest's* dystopian future, because it is the exaggerated continuation of a very real trend, in which more and more institutions are named for "corporate sponsors." It is a powerful symbol of the subordination of use value to exchange value. Time itself, the measure of human life, is named no longer from some great event that gives life meaning (e.g., the founding of Rome, the Incarnation of God), but rather from the engines of increasing exchange value.

1.4.4 The spirit of capitalism and the spirit of consumerism

There are a number of tensions inherent in a capitalist system. One of the most fundamental is the tension between the two ways in which capitalism regards the man: as worker and as consumer. Marx emphasizes what one might call the material aspect of this tension: in order to cut production costs, companies try to drive down the level of wages, but this reduces the amount of money that the mass of wage-earners have to buy products and thus reduces demand for the products being made. One might call this the tension (or "contradiction" in

²⁵⁶ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 381.

²⁵⁷ For a list of the subsidized years see: Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 223.

Marxian jargon) between production and realization.²⁵⁸ But this tension is also found in what is called the “spirit” of capitalism. In order to sell its products capitalism has to find or create “demand” for these products. And in order to do this it has to promote conceptions of the good life that see the consumption of a huge number and variety of goods as “necessary.” But in order to have effective workers and investors, it has to promote an opposite spirit: a spirit of frugality and self-denial for the sake of ever-greater gains. This second spirit was famously analyzed by Max Weber in his *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Weber is not only helpful in illuminating the structures that Wallace described, because they were both considering the same phenomenon, but also because Wallace was indirectly influenced by Weber through the American postmodern novelist Thomas Pynchon, who explicitly adverts to Weber in his works.²⁵⁹

Marx had held that the ‘material’ conditions of capitalism were of themselves sufficient to bring about a capitalist economy. That is to say, once there was a sufficiently elaborate division of labor, a division of labor *from* capital, and sufficiently developed exchange markets in capital, labor, and their products,²⁶⁰ the economy would tip decisively toward a system in which exchange value dominated.²⁶¹

But Max Weber’s *Protestant Ethic* argued that the “material” conditions of capitalism were not of themselves sufficient to bring about the capitalist system. An “ideal” condition was also necessary—the “spirit” (*Geist*) of capitalism.

Weber notes that in early modern Europe the systems of production for certain goods had all the material conditions of capitalism, but were nonetheless non-capitalist systems still

²⁵⁸ Marx treats the first movement in vol. 1 of *Capital* and the second in vol. 2. See: David Harvey, *A Companion to Marx’s Capital* (London: Verso, 2010), esp. pp. 326-329.

²⁵⁹ See: Severs, *Balancing Books*, p. 22.

²⁶⁰ Note that I say “developed” exchange markets, not “free” markets. Capitalist markets are not the automatic result of unregulated economic activity, but rather pre-suppose elaborate cultural institutions. This is particularly evident in the case of the markets for capital, which require the social construction of such institutions as limited liability corporations funded by the sale of shares, and fractional reserve banks offering loans at interest.

²⁶¹ He thought further that the capitalist system was a necessary stage toward a future communist system in which use value would again dominate us, but this fantasy need not detain us here.

dominated by use value. And when these systems were suddenly transformed into capitalist systems this often happened without any major “material” development, simply through the advent of a new spirit among entrepreneurs. Weber gives as an example the production of cloth by putters-out (*Verleger*) and peasants (*Bauern*). The putters out bought cloth from the peasants at traditional prices, and sold them again to their habitual customers. There was little attempt to improve the quality of the wares, or to expand the pool of customers beyond the natural expansion of the customers’ families. Working hours were short. Relations between the various putters-out were friendly, and there was little attempt at competition between them.²⁶²

All the material conditions of capitalism were present here: division of labor, division of labor from capital, and exchange markets in capital, labor, and cloth. However, the spirit in which the business was conducted was not capitalistic, but rather what Weber calls ‘traditionalistic.’ A traditionalistic spirit does not attempt to maximize the gains of economic activity, but rather merely to earn as much money as he is accustomed to by the methods to which he is accustomed. As Weber puts it, “a man does not ‘by nature’ wish to earn more and more money, but simply to live as he is accustomed to live and to earn as much money as is necessary for that purpose.”²⁶³ To put it in more Aristotelian terms, the “traditionalist” wants a definite number of useful goods necessary to live the good life as he conceives of it. The concrete conception of the good life is often (as in Weber’s example) determined by what is customary for a person of a certain “station” (*Stand*) in life.

Such a form of economic life does not exclude all innovation and growth, but innovation and growth are much slower and of a different kind than in a capitalist system. In a traditionalist economy emphasis is placed on handing down the traditions of excellence in a particular practice. ‘Practice’ can here be taken in its MacIntyrean sense; in the practicing and teaching of the practice, “human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends

²⁶² Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, pp. 66-67; *Die protestantische Ethik*, p. 51.

²⁶³ Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, p. 60; *Die protestantische Ethik*, p. 44.

and goods involved, are systematically extended.²⁶⁴ This extension refers mostly to the ideal goods internal to the practice itself, but of course it results also in certain innovations in the material goods produced as well. Capitalist innovation and growth on the other hand, proceed, by replacing traditional forms of economic practice with new ones, and at the same time by replacing old conceptions of the good life and the goods useful to it by new conceptions.²⁶⁵

Let us return to Weber's example of cloth production. The form of production changes when certain entrepreneurs go about things in a different spirit:

Now at some time this leisureliness was suddenly destroyed, and often entirely without any essential change in the form of organization, such as the transition to a unified factory, to mechanical weaving, etc. What happened was, on the contrary, often no more than this: some young man from one of the putting-out families went out into the country, carefully chose weavers for his employ, greatly increased the rigour of his supervision of their work, and thus turned them from peasants [*Bauern*] into labourers [*Arbeiter*]. On the other hand, he would begin to change his marketing methods by so far as possible going directly to the final consumer, would take the details into his own hands, would personally solicit customers, visiting them every year, and above all would adapt the quality of the product directly to their needs and wishes. At the same time he began to introduce the principle of low prices and large turnover. There was repeated what everywhere and always is the result of such a process of rationalization: those who would not follow suit had to go out of business. The idyllic state collapsed under the pressure of a bitter competitive struggle, respectable fortunes were made; and not lent out at interest, but always reinvested in the business. The old leisurely and comfortable attitude toward life gave way to a hard frugality in which some participated and came to the top, because they did not wish to consume but to earn, while others who wished to keep on with the old ways were forced to curtail their consumption.²⁶⁶

²⁶⁴ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 187; cf. Edmund Waldstein, O.Cist., "The Good, the Highest Good, and the Common Good," in: *The Josias* (February 3, 2015): <http://thejosias.com/2015/02/03/the-good-the-highest-good-and-the-common-good> § 31.

²⁶⁵ George Gilder celebrates this fact in many passages of *Wealth and Poverty*. For example, p. 319: "In every economy there is one crucial and definitive conflict [...] the struggle between past and future, between the existing configuration of industries that the industries that will someday replace them. It is a conflict between established factories, technologies, formations of capital, and the ventures that may soon make them worthless[.]" And (quoting Josef Schumpeter), pp. 320-321: "Creative destruction is the essential fact about capitalism...it is by nature a form or method of economic change, and not only never is, but never can be stationary...the fundamental impulse that sets and keeps the capitalist machine in motion comes from the new consumer goods, the new methods of production or transportation, the new markets, the new forms of industrial organization that capitalist enterprise creates." And (from the Prologue to the 2nd ed., 2012), p. xxxii: "Leading entrepreneurs—from Sam Walton to Mike Milken to Larry Page to Mark Zuckerberg—did not ascend a hierarchy; they created a new one."

²⁶⁶ Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, pp. 67-68; *Die protestantische Ethik*, p. 52.

Such innovators were nearly always opposed by “moral indignation” on the part of the traditionalists.²⁶⁷ Nevertheless, the innovators themselves were by no means merely greedy adventurers. On the contrary, in order to be successful they had to be men of strong self-discipline and ethical principle.²⁶⁸ They devoted their lives to the pursuit of an unlimited increase in money, and yet their eyes were free from the glint of avarice so evident in the eyes of ‘traditionalist’ Neapolitan street vendors. What really motivates such persons, Weber argues, is a distinct moral ideal— an ideal of conscientious labor in a worldly calling, and of the accumulation of wealth at the service of the material progress of society.

Weber argued that this ideal was related to the transformation of values brought about by the Protestant Reformation. There was first a rejection of the monastic ideal of contempt for the world, and a proportionately higher valuation of worldly activity.²⁶⁹ This was part of the complex process that Charles Taylor calls “the affirmation of ordinary life.”²⁷⁰ Ancient and medieval conceptions of a hierarchy in the goods of life saw the mundane activities of commercial and domestic life as subordinate to higher goals. Thus the aristocratic, warrior ethos had prized military virtue and political action above wealth-getting and family life. The aristocratic warrior or statesman was supposed to cultivate a certain disdain for mere material wealth; of Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus* it is said: “Our spoils he kick’d at; / And looked upon things precious as they were / The common muck of the world.”²⁷¹ Similarly, the Socratic, philosophical ideal of autotelic contemplation of the truth saw worldly possessions as a distraction from the higher activity of philosophy: “May I count him rich who is wise,” Socrates prays, “and as for gold, may I possess so much of it as only a temperate man might bear and carry with him.”²⁷² Christian monastic and mendicant ideals synthesized both ideals with the Christian conception of a life devoted to the love and worship of God and the

²⁶⁷ Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, p. 69; *Die protestantische Ethik*, p. 53.

²⁶⁸ Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, p. 69; *Die protestantische Ethik*, pp. 53-54.

²⁶⁹ Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, ch. 3; *Die protestantische Ethik*, I,3.

²⁷⁰ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, Part III.

²⁷¹ Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Coriolanus*, Act II, Scene II.

²⁷² Plato, *Phaedrus*, 279c; trans. R. Hackforth, in: Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (eds.), *The Collected Dialogues of Plato* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961).

service of fellow creatures. Disdain for material wealth was radicalized in the virtue of poverty.²⁷³ But under the influence of Protestantism—and later, deism—, such hierarchical views of the human good were abandoned, and the basic human activities of production and re-production, commercial and family life, came to be seen as the primary *loci* of human fulfillment.

On Luther's view, work in a worldly calling (*Beruf*) takes on a special importance. Luther's work ethic was, however, still "traditionalistic," and opposed to limitless pursuit of profit. But Calvinism put more emphasis on rational organization and domination of the world as serving the glory of God. Moreover, second generation Calvinists saw the increase of wealth as a sign of predestination.²⁷⁴ Later theorists have argued that Weber somewhat exaggerated the importance of this point, but even in Weber it is seen as only one factor in a complex process.²⁷⁵

Protestant influences helped shape the rise of "instrumental reason," and the new form of mathematical and technological science associated with the so-called "scientific revolution." According to Wallace, modern mathematical science is *the* key to understanding modernity, and we shall have to return to this point below (1.6). Technological science in turn helped bring about the industrial revolution, which ended traditionalist forms of economic life, and divided society into modern classes. In the new industrial economy forces of competition favored those capitalists who were imbued with the spirit of capitalism.

The spirit of capitalism, as Weber describes it, has an ascetic character; consumption is forgone for the sake of the accumulation of capital to be invested and re-invested in an endless spiral of economic growth. This spirit can be found in a number of forms: preeminently it is found in the entrepreneur willing to risk everything in uncertain

²⁷³ For the incorporation of Greek philosophical ideals in monastic life see: Jean Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1961); for the incorporation of ideals of military and political virtue see: Stratford Caldecott, *Not as the World Gives: The Way of Creative Justice* (Kettering: Angelico Press, 2014), pp. 145-148, 193-203.

²⁷⁴ Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, ch. 4; *Die protestantische Ethik*, II,1.

²⁷⁵ See: Hughes, *The End of Work*, ch. 2.

investments for the sake of growth. But in a modified form it is found in the “bureaucratic” spirit of the office workers, accountants, and technicians engaged in the management of the complex systems built by the entrepreneur, and even in the “blue-collar” worker committed to being a “hard-working” and “productive” member of society. The forces of competition and other social pressures perpetuate the spirit necessary for the running of the system, and make participation in it unavoidable. Weber famously describes the resulting world of work as an “iron cage” from which no one can escape.²⁷⁶

In Weber’s time, however, there were still influential vestiges of the pre-capitalist spirit that resisted the total dominance of the iron cage. But to Wallace, at the height of the neoliberal moment, it seemed that these vestiges had been finally swept away. As he argued in an interview with Russian journalist Ostap Karmodi:

America, as everybody knows, is a country of many contradictions, and a big contradiction for a long time has been between a very aggressive form of capitalism and consumerism against what might be called a kind of moral or civic impulse. For many years everybody knew that business was business and people needed to make money, but people were also a little embarrassed or ashamed of that. It was regarded as somewhat crass. Some of this contradiction comes out of England and old conflicts between the bourgeoisie and nobility. Sometime—I’m not sure whether it was the 1990s or 1980s in America—half of that conflict really sort of disappeared, and there’s now a celebration of commercialism and consumerism and marketing that is not really balanced by any kind of shame or embarrassment or reticence or sense that in fact consumerism and commercialism were really only a very small part of human life. I think that many peoples’ daily lives probably aren’t completely consumer-driven here in America, but they’re certainly much more so than they were twenty or thirty years ago.²⁷⁷

Here Wallace lumps capitalism together with “consumerism” in opposition to civic virtue. But his work actually shows a tension between capitalism and consumerism, or rather, between their spirits. Weber had famously ended his Essay with a reference to the Nietzschean “last man”:

²⁷⁶ Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, p. 181; *Die protestantische Ethik*, p. 203.

²⁷⁷ Ostap Karmodi, “A Frightening Time in America’: An Interview with David Foster Wallace,” in: *The New York Review of Books*, June 13, 2011, <http://www.nybooks.com/blogs/nyrblog/2011/jun/13/david-foster-wallace-russia-interview/> (accessed July 18, 2015).

For of the last stage of this cultural development [*die »letzten Menschen« dieser Kulturentwicklung*], it might well be truly said: “Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart [*Fachmenschen ohne Geist, Genußmenschen ohne Herz*]; this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of civilization never before achieved.”²⁷⁸

The “specialists without spirit” are clearly those imbued with the spirit of capitalism, but the “sensualists without heart” seem to be imbued with a somewhat different spirit: one that I call “the spirit of consumerism.” Capitalism’s need to stimulate demand leads it to appeal to sensual appetite. It develops products ever-better at making such an appeal, and markets them by conveying a conception of the good life as consisting in hedonistic consumption. But such a conception of the good life is the basis for a spirit quite different from the disciplined spirit of capitalism.²⁷⁹

In *The Pale King*, the tension between the disciplined spirit of capitalism and the hedonistic spirit of consumerism is portrayed as partly a conflict of generations. One of the main characters, Chris Fogle, compares himself to a piece of paper blown this way and that in the wind.²⁸⁰ His attitude is a sort of half-hearted hedonism, in which he allows himself to go with the winds of desire for distraction in the form of TV, drugs, orange Tang and such things, but without any expectation of great fulfillment. He sees this attitude as a sort of nihilism. He is, as he says, a “wastoid.”²⁸¹ “My essential response to everything was ‘Whatever.’” Fogle’s father, on the other hand, who grew up during the Great Depression, is a model of disciplined hard work and bourgeois conventionality. The father thinks that he understands “the technical realities of how the real world [works],” through “math and science.” Ultimately, however, the father has no more reason for doing what he does than the son. His father is “a cost

²⁷⁸ Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, p. 183; *Die protestantische Ethik*, p. 204.

²⁷⁹ Marxist thinkers have tended to reject Weber’s account of the “spirit” of capitalism, but their concept of “ideology” sometimes plays a similar role: a super-structural condition that makes individuals useful to the system. They do not, however, see much tension between what makes a good worker and what makes a good consumer: the good consumer is the one who consumes the sorts of easy comforts that enable him to be a good worker. See, for example: Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), especially pp. 94-136: “The Culture Industry.”

²⁸⁰ Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 154.

²⁸¹ Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 163.

systems supervisor for the City of Chicago.”²⁸² That is, he is technically working a government job, rather than in the “private sector” associated with capitalism. But essentially, he is part of the technical-bureaucratic machine of late-modern society, in which private and public bureaucracies are ever more similar. (Here Wallace’s description most resembles the analysis of “managerialism” by theorists such as James Burnham and David Graeber). Fogle’s father does not question the machine of which he is a part. “His attitude towards life was that there are certain things that have to be done and you simply have to do them—such as, for instance, going to work every day.”²⁸³ He sees his job as supporting his family in bourgeois comfort, and never questions the meaning of everything. Thus, his response toward life can also be summarized by the word “Whatever,” but in a different sense from that of his wastoid son. In the son “Whatever” is an expression of consumerist ennui and lack of motivation to action, in the father it is an expression of Weber’s Protestant work-ethic: a determination to fulfill a function in the system, without questioning whether that function is ultimately worthwhile. That is, even as a government bureaucrat, he instantiates the spirit of capitalism. Eventually Fogle senior dies a gruesomely appropriate death when his arm gets caught in the door of a subway car. He is literally destroyed by the machine.²⁸⁴ The conflict between the bureaucrat father and the consumerist son is therefore based on an underlying similarity, but this does not mitigate the reality of the conflict. Wallace was always attuned to “other sides” of complex issues, and—as I will argue below (2.6.1)— he did see some admirable aspects to Fogle’s father’s work ethic, which he shows by having Fogle eventually come to adopt something like it himself in a sort of conversion. But here the important point is to see the negative aspect of that work ethic, and its conflict with the consumerist nihilism of Fogle.

The tension between the spirit of consumerism and the spirit of capitalism is found not only between generations, but also within individual persons. Witness the marketing of

²⁸² Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 155.

²⁸³ Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 191.

²⁸⁴ Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 200-204.

Mr. Squishy's "*felonies!*" above, with its appeal to infantile sensual appetite in the name of rebellion against ascetic discipline.

In one of his most famous essays, "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again," Wallace describes taking a luxury cruise, and the effects that the cruises relentless appeals to sensual appetite have on him. He notices that his desire to be "pampered" is limitless, and that despite the extravagance of the luxury, he ends up always wanting more enjoyment:

[W]e're maybe now in a position to appreciate the falsehood at the dark heart of [the luxury cruise's] brochure. For this — the promise to sate the part of me that always and only WANTS — is the central fantasy the brochure is selling. The thing to notice is that the real fantasy here isn't that this promise will be kept but that such a promise is keepable at all. This is a big one, this lie. And of course I want to believe it — fuck the Buddha — I want to believe that maybe this Ultimate Fantasy Vacation will be *enough* pampering, that this time the luxury and pleasure will be so completely and faultlessly administered that my Infantile part will be sated at last.

But the Infantile part of me is insatiable — in fact its whole essence or *dasein* or whatever lies in its a priori insatiability. In response to any environment of extraordinary gratification and pampering, the Insatiable Infant part of me will simply adjust its desires upward until it once again levels out at its homeostasis of terrible dissatisfaction.²⁸⁵

In the novel *Infinite Jest* Wallace takes "pampering" (in the form of "entertainment") to its limit, and imagines what would happen if the infantile part of persons could really be sated. The film *Infinite Jest* does just that. It is no accident that the filming technique James Incandenza employs in making it is designed to imitate the view of an infant.²⁸⁶ This is the limit of capitalism's appeal to the most infantile part of the consumer, and its effect is a limit case of the spirit of consumerism — consumers entirely incapacitated by desire to consume.

²⁸⁵ Wallace, "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again," in: *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again: Essays and Arguments* (New York: Little, Brown, 1997), pp. 256-353, at pp. 316-317.

²⁸⁶ An actress involved in the film gives the following explanation of its imitation of an infantile point of view: "The point of view was from the crib, yes. A crib's-eye view. But that's not what I mean by driving the scene. The camera was fitted with a lens with something Jim called I think an auto-wobble. Ocular wobble, something like that. A ball-and-socket joint behind the mount that made the lens wobble a little bit. [...] I don't think there's much doubt the lens was supposed to reproduce an infantile visual field. That's what you could feel was driving the scene." Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 939.

At this limit the spirit of consumerism is incompatible with the continued existence of the capitalist system. And, as Rémy Marathe points out to Steeply, the conceivability of such a limit case shows that the spirit of consumerism has already progressed in America to a point at which it endangers the continued existence of the American economic and political order:

A U.S.A. that would die—and let its children die, each one— for the so-called perfect Entertainment, this film. Who would die for this chance to be fed this death of pleasure with spoons, in their warm homes, alone, unmoving: Hugh Steeply, in complete seriousness as a citizen of your neighbor I say to you: forget for a moment the Entertainment, and think instead about a U.S.A. where such a thing could be possible enough for your Office to fear: can such a U.S.A. hope to survive for a much longer time? To survive as a nation of peoples? To much less exercise dominion over other nations of other peoples?²⁸⁷

Marathe's implication is that the self-indulgent, "wastoid" spirit of consumerism undermines the very capitalist American order that engenders it.

1.5 INDIVIDUALISM AND TOTALITARIANISM

The picture of consumerist, individualist society that I have gleaned from Wallace's works is quite bleak. But there is an anxiety lying like a shadow on his work, especially *Infinite Jest*, that individualism will prove so unbearable that it will flip into something even worse: totalitarian tyranny. In the double-bind between loneliness and giving oneself away, the worst version of giving oneself away is giving oneself away to such tyranny.

Wallace imagines different ways in which this could happen. One way is represented the populist neoliberalism of President Johnny Gentle. Populist neoliberalism's version of tyranny comes about not by an explicit rejection of individualism, but by an almost imperceptible slide into its opposite. As we saw above (section 1.4.3), Gentle's politics are based on the neoliberalism of Ronald Reagan, and his successors on the right wing of American politics. Wallace sees this sort of politics as being profoundly paradoxical. The neoliberals oppose government power in the name of individualism in order to seize government power. They attempt to unite the country in individualistic anger against a government, whom they have cut off from themselves and empowered by their own refusal

²⁸⁷ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 318.

of responsibility. As one of the bureaucrats in *The Pale King* asks incredulously: “You’re saying the next president will be able to *continue* to define himself as an Outsider and Renegade when he’s actually *in* the White House?”²⁸⁸

Johnny Gentle’s version of totalitarianism can continue to portray itself as a form of neoliberalism because it exteriorizes the self-loathing of consumerist culture, and directs it against “the government.” Gentle comes to power by promising to “clean up government and trim fat.”²⁸⁹ Gentle’s campaign is portrayed in an amateur film by Hal Incandenza’s handicapped brother Mario. The film shows how Gentle’s neoliberalism actually resorts to classic authoritarian strategies. Gentle does not stop at blaming the government, he is on the lookout for an external group, whom he can blame for society’s ills:

The Johnny Gentle who stressed above all—simultaneously pleaded for and promised—an end to atomized Americans’ fractious blaming of one another for our terrible internal troubles. [...] The Johnny Gentle, Chief Executive who pounds a rubber-gloved fist on the podium so hard it knocks the Seal askew and declares that Dammit there just must be some people besides each other of us to blame. To unite in opposition to. And he promises to eat light and sleep very little until he finds them—in the Ukraine, or the Teutons, or the wacko Latins. [...] He swears he’ll find us some cohesion-renewing Other. And then make some tough choices.²⁹⁰

But there are other voices in *Infinite Jest* that are willing to directly and explicitly reject individualism, and make a plea for some kind of collectivism. There is, for instance, the voice of Gerhard Schtitt, a friend of James Incandenza’s, and the real mastermind behind the pedagogy of Incandenza’s tennis academy:

Schtitt: like most Europeans of his generation, anchored from infancy to certain permanent values which—yes, OK, granted—may, admittedly, have a whiff of proto-fascist potential about them, but which do, nevertheless (the values), anchor nicely the soul and course of a life—Old World patriarchal stuff like honor and discipline and fidelity to some larger unit. [...] Schtitt was educated in pre-Unification Gymnasium under the rather Kanto-Hegelian idea that jr. athletics was basically just training for citizenship, that jr. athletics was about learning to sacrifice the hot narrow imperatives of the Self—the needs, the desires, the fears, the

²⁸⁸ Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 148.

²⁸⁹ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 382.

²⁹⁰ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, pp. 383-384.

multiform cravings of the individual appetitive will—to the larger imperatives of a team (OK, the State) and a set of delimiting rules (OK, the Law).²⁹¹

This is a vision that is able to convince some of his highly intelligent and well-to-do students. One of those students, Ortho (“The Darkness”) Stice, instructs a group of even younger students as follows:

It’s about discipline and sacrifice and honor to something way bigger than your personal ass. He’ll mention America. He’ll talk patriotism and don’t think he won’t. He’ll talk about it’s patriotic play that’s the high road to the thing. He’s not American but I tell you straight out right here he makes me proud to be American. *Mein kinder*. He’ll say it’s how to learn to be a good American during a time, boys, when America isn’t good its own self.²⁹²

It seems clear that Wallace wants the reader to be both attracted and repelled by Schitt’s vision; to see the truth in his plea for the importance of the collective, but to reject the “fascist” implications.²⁹³

Another such voice is that of Rémy Marathe. Marathe and Steeply’s conversation can be read as an argument between individualism and totalitarianism. Steeply presents the liberal-individualist vision in which what ultimately matters is individual desire and its satisfaction. Marathe, on the other hand, presents an ideal of human life as consisting in giving oneself to a higher cause: a community of which one is a part. At one point they discuss the Trojan War, and Marathe disagrees with Steeply (and with Homer) about its causes:

‘The point is that what launches vessels of war is the state and community and its interests,’ Marathe said without heat, tiredly. ‘You only wish to enjoy to pretend for yourself that the love of one woman could do this, launch so many vessels of alliance.’²⁹⁴

²⁹¹ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 82.

²⁹² Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 120.

²⁹³ As David Dunning puts it: “Wallace’s discomfort with the fascist tones of Schitt’s thought arises from his desire to endorse them in a non-fascist way.” (David Dunning, “Virtually Unlimited’: The Elusiveness of Reality in *Infinite Jest*,” 2010-2011 Penn Humanities Forum on Virtuality: http://repository.upenn.edu/uhf_2011/2/ (accessed May 30, 2016), p. 14. In a marginal note on p. 228 in his copy of Lewis Hyde’s *The Gift*, kept in the Wallace Archive at the Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, Wallace writes: “A bit of the old Fascist in DFW.” The passage that he is annotating, describes Odysseus as “the Mussolini of the ancient world.” (I thank Rob Short for pointing me to this bit of marginalia). I would read that note as showing that Wallace saw certain Fascist tendencies in himself, and wanted to combat them. I will return to Wallace’s idea of a non-fascist way of endorsing Schitt’s insights below (2.6).

²⁹⁴ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 106.

But Steeply counters that one should not be so sure, individual passion can be so strong that one is willing to give all for it. The “fanatically patriotic Wheelchair Assassins of southern Quebec” underestimate the power of passion. Marathe latches on to the word “fanatic,” and gives his disquisition on “worship” that I discussed above (Introduction), in which he argues that everyone worships at some temple (*fanum*), and that it of supreme importance what we choose as our temple. But the immediate point that he makes is political— an argument for collectivism and against individualism:

Die for one person? This is a craziness. Persons change, leave, die, become ill. They leave, lie, go mad, have sickness, betray you, die. Your nation outlives you. A cause outlives you. [...] You U.S.A.'s do not seem to believe you may each choose what to die for. Love of a woman, the sexual, it bends back in on the self, makes you narrow, maybe crazy. Choose with care. Love of your nation, your country and people, it enlarges the heart. Something bigger than the self.²⁹⁵

Steeply questions whether the temple of worship is really a matter of deliberate choice, and Marathe counters with a passage that I already quoted above, but which is worth quoting again with the *political* issue in mind:

Then in such a case your temple is self and sentiment. Then in such an instance you are a fanatic of desire, a slave to your individual subjective narrow self's sentiments; a citizen of nothing. You become a citizen of nothing. You are by yourself and alone, kneeling to yourself. [...] In a case such as this you become the slave who believes he is free. The most pathetic of bondage. Not tragic. No songs. You believe you would die twice for another but in truth would die only for your alone self, its sentiment.²⁹⁶

Later on, Steeply will compare the totalitarian tendencies thought with Nazi Germany and Maoist China:

And this is why we shudder at what a separate Quebec would be like. Choose what we tell you, neglect your own wish and desires, sacrifice. For Quebec. For the State. [...] Does this sound a little familiar, Rémy? The National Socialist Neofascist State of Separate Quebec? You guys are worse than the worst Albertans. Totalitariness. Cuba with snow. Ski immediately to your nearest reeducation camp, for instructions on choosing. Moral eugenics. China. Cambodia. Chad. Unfree.²⁹⁷

²⁹⁵ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 107.

²⁹⁶ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 108.

²⁹⁷ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 320.

As in the case of Schtitt, I think that Wallace intends the reader to both feel the persuasiveness of Marathe's case, and to be repelled by its totalitarian implications. Marathe's critique of American individualism is borne out by the rest of the novel, but Wallace does not portray Marathe's terrorist sect, with its austere, Spartan spirit, as an attractive alternative. On my reading, Wallace thinks that America's consumerist individualism makes it ripe for a sudden turn to Fascist totalitarianism, and that this would be even worse than what they have. In the second part of this dissertation (2.6) we will return to these questions to see to what extent Wallace thought that a "third way" between individualism and totalitarianism was possible.

1.6 ABSTRACTION SCHIZOPHRENIA: THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF LONELINESS

1.6.1 Fatalism and symbolic systems

Above (1.1) I quoted Wallace on the "desacralized & paradoxical solipsism" of the "Information Age." We saw how this was connected to the new view of nature that came about in early modernity with thinkers such as Descartes (1.2). But now we will consider the kind of abstract thought pioneered by Descartes in more detail, because this kind of abstract thought is a key to understanding a great many of Wallace's account of the loneliness of the modern age. This kind of thought is not only important for understanding the modern cosmic imaginary and modern technology and capitalism, but also for understanding Wallace's fascination with epistemology, his struggles with Wittgenstein and with continental post-structuralism, and his ideas on the relation of epistemology and communication to ethics. Because of the importance of understanding the basic epistemological problems at stake, this discussion will be rather long and technical.

Wallace was both fascinated and repelled by the possibilities of abstract thought, and this tension was to prove extraordinarily fruitful for his work. His interest in the problems of modern conceptual abstraction began early. Wallace's father, James D. Wallace, was a

philosopher, and he introduced his son to the philosophical tradition early on.²⁹⁸ Wallace attended his father's alma mater, Amherst College, and began to study philosophy there.²⁹⁹ At Amherst Wallace was initially drawn to symbolic logic, fascinated by the clarity and power of its quasi-mathematical language. This was, however, a kind of philosophy that his father found rather arid, claiming that it replaced actual discussion of "important questions," such as free will and beauty, with "technical discussions about the language behind those questions."³⁰⁰

Wallace too became sensitive to the dangers of abstraction, as James Ryerson put it, "Wallace was also wary of ideas [...] on guard against the ways that abstract thinking [...] can draw you away from something more genuine and real."³⁰¹ The symbolic systems of modern mathematics, analytic philosophy, and mathematical physics seemed to pull the carpet out from under ordinary human assumptions about the self and the world; this can be liberating, but also alienating. As Wallace was to put it late in his life: "Never before have there been so many gaping chasms between what the world seems to be and what science tells us it is."³⁰²

Wallace explored a number of ways in which these chasms could be understood or closed. Some of them began to preoccupy him already as an undergraduate at Amherst. A first possibility, suggested by the power and elegance of mathematical-symbolic logic, was that our common experience of ourselves as consciously deliberating, freely choosing agents, making decisions based on our knowledge of the world around us, and the desires and fears inspired in us by it, was simply an illusion, and that we really part of an entirely determined system. A second possibility, suggested by the artificial character of symbols, and their

²⁹⁸ "When [Wallace] was about 14 years old, he asked his father, the University of Illinois philosophy professor James D. Wallace, to explain to him what philosophy is, so that when people would ask him exactly what it was that his father did, he could give them an answer. James had the two of them read Plato's *Phaedo* dialogue together, an experience that turned out to be pivotal in his understanding of his son." From James Ryerson's Introduction to: David Foster Wallace, *Fate, Time, and Language: an Essay on Free Will*, ed. Steven M. Cahn and Maureen Eckert (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011) p. 3.

²⁹⁹ D.T. Max, *Every Love Story is a Ghost Story* (New York: Viking, 2012), ch. 2.

³⁰⁰ Max, *Every Love Story*, p. 25.

³⁰¹ Ryerson, Introduction to: Wallace, *Fate, Time, and Language*, p. 1.

³⁰² David Foster Wallace, *Everything and More: A Compact History of ∞* (New York: Atlas Books, 2003), p. 22.

tenuous relation to “external” reality, was that our supposed “knowledge” of the world was in fact merely a fiction—a system that we constructed in our minds that corresponded to nothing. At its most radical this position amounted to solipsism. But Wallace’s philosophy thesis at Amherst is concerned with the first possibility: the way in which the gapless perfection of symbolic logic seemed to leave no room for human freedom in the ordinary sense.

Wallace’s thesis was concerned not with determinism (the idea that everything that we will do is the necessary outcome of pre-existing causes), but rather with the converse of determinism: fatalism. Fatalism, in the sense relevant here, is even more counter-intuitive than determinism: it is the idea that everything in the present is already set by the way things are in the future. Wallace became fascinated by an argument for fatalism by the analytic philosopher Richard Taylor. The elegance of Taylor’s argument is that it appeared to prove fatalism purely by appeal to abstract logical “laws” to which most analytic philosophers would assent, without any appeal to other sciences or to metaphysics.

It is worth taking a look at Taylor’s argument to get a clearer idea of the sort of thing that is going on here. Taylor begins by laying out six presuppositions, all of which are held by most logicians in the analytic tradition. The first and most important of these is that every proposition is either true or false (symbolized $p \vee \neg p$).³⁰³ Crucially, this principle is taken to hold of propositions about the future just as much as propositions about the past or the present.

Taylor gives the example of the proposition “a naval battle will occur tomorrow,” which he symbolizes with Q . By his principle this proposition is either true or false. If it is false, then its contradictory “a naval battle will not occur tomorrow” (symbolized $\neg Q$) is true. Now, Taylor invites us to imagine a naval commander about to give an order. Given the prevailing conditions, if he gives one order (O) the naval battle will occur, if he gives any other order (O') it will not. Is it up to the naval commander whether he give O or O' ? The naval

³⁰³ Richard Taylor, “Fatalism,” in: Wallace, *Fate, Time, and Language*, pp. 41-51, at p. 43.

commander *thinks* that he can give either order, but Taylor claims that this is mere illusion.

He gives the following argument:

1'. If Q is true, then it is not within my power to do O' (for in case Q is true, then there is, or will be, lacking a condition essential for my doing O' , the condition, namely, of there being no naval battle tomorrow).

2'. But if Q' is true, then it is not within my power to do O (for a similar reason).

3'. But either Q is true, or Q' is true.

∴ 4'. Either it is not within my power to do O , or it is not within my power to do O' .³⁰⁴

Thus, what order the naval commander gives is not up to him at all—he is “fated” to make the decision that accords with what will in fact happen. And of course Taylor generalizes this argument: we cannot affect the future any more than we can affect the past. Nothing that we do is really up to us.

This is a version of a very old argument. Aristotle uses something like it as a *reductio ad absurdum* to show that future contingent propositions are neither true nor false.³⁰⁵ What is new about Taylor’s version is primarily the mode of presentation.

Now, Wallace thought Taylor was here making what is sometimes called a “category mistake”—he was trying to draw metaphysical conclusions from premises which were not metaphysical, but logical. “How licit,” he asks, “is an argument from linguistic, semantic, and logical premises to a thoroughly metaphysical conclusion?”³⁰⁶ Wallace thinks this is not licit at all, but he thinks that it is not enough to merely assert this. Instead, he tries to grant all of Taylor’s premises, and then show how his conclusion does not follow. Wallace tries to do this by developing a symbolic system to express more senses of possible and impossible than Taylor’s system does. He then shows that in this new system, Taylor’s argument yields a much more modest conclusion. Finally, he shows that if Taylor’s defenders are to reject his

³⁰⁴ Taylor, “Fatalism,” pp. 46-47.

³⁰⁵ De Interpretatione, ch. 9.

³⁰⁶ Wallace, “Richard Taylor’s ‘Fatalism’ and the Semantics of Physical Modality,” in: *Fate, Time, and Language*, pp. 141-216, at p. 150.

(Wallace's) system, they will have to do so on properly metaphysical—not merely “semantic”—grounds.

Wallace argues that Taylor's symbolic system equivocates between different sorts of “modalities” (modalities in analytic logic refer to possibility/impossibility and necessity/contingency). Wallace points out that “impossible” can have different senses. On the one hand are things that are considered “logically impossible,” because they violate what analytic philosophy calls the “laws” of logic. For example: “It is logically impossible for me to be both a human being and a quartz crystal.”³⁰⁷ This violates the so-called “law” of non-contradiction. On the other hand there are things that are said to be “physically impossible” because they violate the so-called “laws” of physics.” For example: “it is physically impossible for me to fly unaided by flapping my arms wildly.”³⁰⁸ But, Wallace argues, there is another kind of “physical” impossibility: some things do not contradict the “laws” of physics per se, but are rendered impossible by the application of those “laws” to certain circumstances. Wallace, calls this kind of modality “situational,” and gives the following example:

[Three] weeks ago it was situationally physically possible for me, at 3:50 pm, to lay both hands on the front wall of Amherst College's Johnson Chapel. Today it is *not* now possible for me to lay both hands on the Chapel at 3:50, because it is now 3:49:30, and I am not even in Massachusetts.³⁰⁹

Wallace thought that the relevant kind of possibility in the case of a naval commander was this “situational” kind of possibility.

The longest part of Wallace's thesis is concerned with developing a symbolic system, with its own operations and “syntax,” to allow this distinction to be used in symbolic logic. He then shows that using this extended system the conclusion of Taylor's argument should *not* be:

- 1) The absence of a sea battle today entails that *yesterday* it was impossible to order the battle.

[In Wallace's symbolic notation: $t_2(\sim B) \rightarrow t_1(\sim \Diamond O)$ ']

³⁰⁷ Wallace, “Richard Taylor's ‘Fatalism,’” p. 148.

³⁰⁸ Wallace, “Richard Taylor's ‘Fatalism,’” p. 148.

³⁰⁹ Wallace, “Richard Taylor's ‘Fatalism,’” p. 148.

But rather:

- 2) The absence of a sea battle today entails that it was impossible *yesterday* to order the battle.
[‘ $t_2(\sim B) \rightarrow \sim \phi(t_1 O)$.’]³¹⁰

Wallace argues that these two conclusions are not equivalent, and that while the first would entail fatalism, the second does not. He notes that Taylor’s defenders could easily reject his proposed symbolic system and argue for the superiority of the system employed by Taylor, but to do so they would have to argue that Wallace’s system does not correctly represent empirical reality. To say *that*, however, would be to make an argument from “the nature of the physical universe and the causal relations that obtain between states of affairs therein,” that is, it would no longer be an argument from the “laws” of logic, but would be a properly metaphysical argument.³¹¹

What is important for my purposes are not the details of Wallace’s argument, but rather its implications for the relation of symbolic systems to “the physical universe.” The kind of symbolic system found in modern logic is typical of post-Enlightenment modernity, and the question of its relation to reality is one that remained central to Wallace.

1.6.2 Cartesian mathematics and the origins of abstraction schizophrenia

In the early 2000s Wallace accepted a commission to write a book on Georg Cantor’s work on the problem of the infinite in mathematics. *Everything and More: A Compact History of ∞* is hard to classify. The book lies somewhere between a popular history of the concept of quantitative infinity from the Greeks to Cantor, and an extended philosophical reflection on the nature of mathematical abstraction and the ontological status of mathematical objects. *Everything and More* is full of paradox, apparent inconsistency, and ambivalence. It received rather mixed reviews. Many professional mathematicians found it full of “crippling errors,”³¹²

³¹⁰ Wallace, “Richard Taylor’s ‘Fatalism,’” p. 164. Wallace gives only the symbolic expression. The natural language interpretation is given in: Maureen Eckert, “Renewing the Fatalist Conversation,” in: *Wallace, Fate, Time, and Language*, pp. 135-139, at p. 136.

³¹¹ Wallace, “Richard Taylor’s ‘Fatalism,’” pp. 211-213.

³¹² Max, *Every Love Story*, p. 276.

while many non-mathematicians found it too complicated to understand—as one reviewer put it, “one wonders exactly whom Wallace thinks he is writing for.”³¹³ In part Wallace was writing for himself, and the ambivalence in the book is connected to Wallace’s own ambivalence toward modern symbolic mathematics and the modern world it helped to bring about.

Wallace’s reflection begins with a nominal definition of abstraction: “Removed from or transcending concrete particularity, sensuous experience.”³¹⁴ Wallace points out that this removal from sense experience is the source of all kinds of paradoxes. On the one hand, “abstract thinking” can estrange us from the everyday world; it can have a paralyzing effect. Wallace evokes here the image of someone lying in bed unable to get out because he realizes how little justification he has for thinking that the ground will support him when he gets up. On the other hand, abstraction promises a deeper understanding of the world. Mathematics as it develops from a mere counting of concrete objects to “an abstract system,” “allows people not just to describe the concrete world but to account for its deepest patterns and laws.”³¹⁵ And the more mathematics is removed from the world of ordinary experience, the more it yields power over that world:

Math’s new [i.e. post 17th century] hyperabstractness turns out to work incredibly well in real-world applications. In science, engineering, physics, etc. Take, for one obvious example, calculus, which is exponentially more abstract than any sort of ‘practical’ math before (like, from what real-world observation does one dream up the idea that an object’s velocity and a curve’s subtending area have anything to do with each other?), and yet is unprecedentedly good for representing/explaining motion and acceleration, gravity, planetary movements, heat— everything science tells us is real about the real world.³¹⁶

The power of such mathematical science seems to suggest that it is in some way “truer” than the ordinary appearance of the world to our senses, and this leads to a “psychological, and very modern” problem. It is the problem (already mentioned above) of the “chasms” or

³¹³ David Papineau, cited in: Max, *Every Love Story*, p. 276.

³¹⁴ Wallace, *Everything and More*, p. 10.

³¹⁵ Wallace, *Everything and More*, pp. 29-30.

³¹⁶ Wallace, *Everything and More*, p. 107.

“gaps” between the world as it seems to us, and in which we have to live our lives, and the world as science suggests that it “really” is:

We ‘know’ a near infinity of truths that contradict our immediate commonsense experience of the world. And yet we have to live and function in the world. So we abstract, compartmentalize: there’s stuff we know and stuff we ‘know’. I ‘know’ my love for my child is a function of natural selection, but I know I love him, and I feel and act on what I know. Viewed objectively, the whole thing is deeply schizoid.³¹⁷

The first leap in mathematical abstraction was taken by the ancient Greeks in their move from practical counting to a universal account of mathematical truths. At first Wallace writes as though this initial leap was already enough to for the full problem of “abstraction schizophrenia.” He writes:

It was the Greeks who turned math into an abstract system, a special symbolic language that allows people not just to describe the concrete world but to account for its deepest patterns and laws. We owe them everything.³¹⁸

And in a footnote to this passage he adds, “including our abstraction-schizophrenia and slavery to technology and Scientific Reason, ultimately.”³¹⁹

But he goes on to argue that there is a great change in the meaning of abstraction at the beginning of the modern period, a change that is hardly less momentous. It is worth quoting Wallace’s summary of this change at length:

Pretty much all math from the Greeks to Galileo is empirically based: math concepts are straightforward abstractions from real-world experience. This is one reason why geometry (along with Aristotle) dominated mathematical reasoning for so long. The modern transition from geometric to algebraic reasoning was itself a symptom of a larger shift. By 1600, entities like zero, negative integers, and irrationals are used routinely. Now start adding in the subsequent decades’ introductions of complex numbers, Napierian logarithms, higher-degree polynomials and literal coefficients in algebra—plus of course eventually the 1st and 2nd derivative and the integral—and it’s clear that as of some pre-Enlightenment date math has gotten so remote from any sort of real-world observation that we and Saussure can say verily it is now, as a system of symbols, “independent of the objects designated,” i.e. that math is now concerned much more with the logical relations between abstract concepts than with any

³¹⁷ Wallace, *Everything and More*, pp. 22-23.

³¹⁸ Wallace, *Everything and More*, p. 30.

³¹⁹ Wallace, *Everything and More*, p. 30, note 18.

particular correspondence between those concepts and physical reality. The point: It's in the seventeenth century that math becomes primarily a system of abstractions from other abstractions instead of from the world.³²⁰

I shall unfold that summary presently, but first it is important to note just how crucial this change is in Wallace's understanding of modernity. This greater abstraction of mathematics is paradoxically what allows for a greater application, as in the example of calculus cited above. And it is this that really brings about the modern "slavery to technology and Scientific Reason."

Because what the modern world's about, what it *is*, is science. And it's in the seventeenth century that the marriage of math and science is consummated, the Scientific Revolution both causing and caused by the Math Explosion because science [...] becomes now essentially a mathematical enterprise.³²¹

Wallace argues that this transformation implies a change in ontology: "Implicit in all mathematical theories, in fact, is some sort of metaphysical position."³²²

Wallace's thesis about the connection between changes in mathematical abstraction and the rise of the modern world is similar to that defended by the philosopher and historian of mathematics Jacob Klein in his seminal study *Greek Mathematical Thought and the Origin of Algebra*.³²³ Klein studied under Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, and was a major influence on twentieth-century philosophy through his friends Hans Georg Gadamer,³²⁴ and Leo Strauss.³²⁵ His work has recently been enjoying something of a renaissance, with scholars

³²⁰ Wallace, *Everything and More*, pp. 106-107.

³²¹ Wallace, *Everything and More*, p. 107.

³²² Wallace, *Everything and More*, p. 10.

³²³ Jacob Klein, *Greek Mathematical Thought and the Origin of Algebra*, trans. Eva Brann (New York: Dover, [1968] 1992); originally published as: Jacob Klein, "Die griechische Logistik und die Entstehung der Algebra," in: *Quellen und Studien zur Geschichte der Mathematik, Astronomie und Physik, Abteilung B: Studien*, vol. 3, fasc. 1 (Berlin, 1934), pp. 18-105; fasc. 2 (1936), pp. 122-235.

³²⁴ See: Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Die Lektion des Jahrhunderts: Ein philosophischer Dialog mit Riccardo Dottori* (Münster: Lit, 2002), pp. 72-73.

³²⁵ See: Leo Strauss, "An Unspoken Prologue," in: *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity: Essays and Lectures in Modern Jewish Thought*, ed. Kenneth Hart Green (New York: State University of New York Press, 1997) pp. 449-452.

bringing it to bear on contemporary debates in phenomenology,³²⁶ deconstruction,³²⁷ and even Aristotelian-Thomism.³²⁸ Klein's work can help to understand in what sense Wallace can write "pretty much all math from the Greeks to Galileo is empirically based" despite writing before that the Greeks had turned math into an "abstract system," and despite the deep differences that he (Wallace) points out between pre-Socratic, Platonic and Aristotelian theories of mathematics.³²⁹

Klein argues that despite the many differences between ancient mathematical theorists (which he describes in minute detail), they share a common mode of mathematical conceptualization that distinguishes them sharply from modern mathematical theorists. This commonality is partly due to a common context in which ancient theorists worked, a common social imaginary in which the practice of "science" was embedded, and which gave them a common understanding of what "science" was. For the ancient Greeks, science (*episteme*) was seen as a contemplative activity that was done for its own sake; a "looking" at the truth without ulterior motive.³³⁰ "Science" was here contrasted with ordinary, pre-conceptual experience of the world, but it nevertheless saw itself as rooted in that experience, as making clear and explaining the reality already given (in an indistinct way) in that ordinary experience. As Klein writes: "The task of philosophy, according to the Greeks, is

³²⁶ See: Burt C. Hopkins, *The Origin of the Logic of Symbolic Mathematics: Edmund Husserl and Jacob Klein* (Indiana University Press, 2011).

³²⁷ See: Joshua Kates, *Fielding Derrida: Philosophy, Literary Criticism, History, and the Work of Deconstruction* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), esp. chs. 5-6.

³²⁸ See: Sean Collins, "The Heritage of Analytic Philosophy," in: *The Aquinas Review* 10 (2003), pp. 51-88; John Brungardt, "Why Explain Things with Words?" The Catholic University of America Graduate Philosophy Conference, *Causality and Explanation*, 21-22 February 2014, <http://johnofstthomas.files.wordpress.com/2014/02/why-explain-things-with-words-full-version-2-19-14.pdf> (Accessed June 3, 2014).

³²⁹ See: Wallace, *Everything and More*, esp. pp. 43-87.

³³⁰ "In Greek *episteme* the life of "cognition" and "knowledge" was recognized for the first time as an ultimate human possibility, one which enables men to disregard all the ends they might otherwise pursue, to devote themselves to contemplation in complete freedom and leisure, and to find their happiness in this very activity. This possibility is contrasted with the bondage imposed by the affairs of the day. Here science stands in original and immediate opposition to a nonscientific attitude which yet is its soil and in which it recognizes its own roots." Klein, *Greek Mathematical Thought*, p. 118. "In der *επιστήμη* der Griechen wird erstmalig die Möglichkeit „er kennenden“ und „wissenden“ Verhaltens erfaßt, nämlich die Möglichkeit des Menschen, von allen Zielen abzusehen, die sonst sein Tun bestimmen mögen, sich frei von allem Zwang, in völliger Muße der Betrachtung hinzugeben und in der Betrachtung selbst sein Glück zu finden." Klein, *Die griechische Logistik*, p. 123.

to make the speaking [*logos*] which is common to everyone perfectly clear.”³³¹ This implies that there is no strict separation between mind and world: “mind is very emphatically the receiving of the world and nothing but that.”³³² The means of this reception is *logos*, speaking; to speak something is to understand it. This vague and confused understanding is at the same time very certain, and it is the task of philosophy/science to make distinct and clear what is always contained in the *logos*: “In Greek science, concepts are formed in continual dependence on ‘natural,’ prescientific experience, from which the scientific concept is ‘abstracted.’”³³³ The nature of this “abstraction” is of course conceived of quite differently by different thinkers—for Platonists what is really going on is a kind of “reminder” of the eternal forms, whereas for Aristotle forms present in concrete things are literally “abstracted” and received into the mind. But the important point is that for all of them “scientific concepts” are something “received” from reality. This is the meaning of Wallace’s statement that all pre-Enlightenment mathematics are “empirically based,” and “straightforward abstractions from real-world experience.”³³⁴

But, as Klein argues, the context of modern mathematical theoreticians was fundamentally different. The pioneers of early modern science such as Simon Stevin (1548-1620), Francis Bacon (1561-1626), Galileo Galilei (1564-1642), and Descartes (1596-1650) were interested in science not primarily as an autotelic, contemplative activity, but as a means of answering practical questions—questions of “applied mechanics and applied optics,” questions of how to improve artillery, bridge building, perspective painting, and new optical instruments such as the telescope.³³⁵ Science was for them not primarily a contemplation of the truth, but a

³³¹ Jacob Klein, “Modern Rationalism,” in: *Lectures and Essays*, ed. Robert B. Williamson and Elliott Zuckerman (Annapolis: St. John’s College Press, 1985), p. 58.

³³² Klein, “Modern Rationalism,” p. 58.

³³³ Klein, *Greek Mathematical Thought*, p. 120. “Die Gewinnung eines Begriffs vollzieht sich in der griechischen Wissenschaft in steter Anlehnung an die „natürliche“ vor-wissenschaftliche Erfahrung, von der der wissenschaftliche Begriff abgehoben wird.” (Klein, *Die griechische Logistik*, p. 125).

³³⁴ Wallace, *Everything and More*, p. 106.

³³⁵ Klein, *Greek Mathematical Thought*, p. 119.

*method or art of finding useful truths: “[M]odern science is not so much the understanding of nature as the art of mastering nature.”*³³⁶

The background against which this science defined itself was not, for the ancients, pre-scientific experience, but rather the already existing “cholastic” science against which the “new science” was *reacting*. Klein argues that late scholastic science, while it considered itself to merely continuing the science of Aristotle, had in fact replaced the Aristotelian method of rooting concepts in pre-scientific experience with a conceptual system in which concepts derived meaning not from their pre-scientific roots, but rather from their relation to the rest of the system. Even in reacting against “scholasticism,” the new science retained this feature. The new science obtains its concepts by means of a polemic against scholastic science, and therefore the meaning of its concepts is from the start determined by the role they are to play in a system.

The new science sees itself as “natural,” but the sense of natural is fundamentally different from that found in Greek science:

Whereas the “naturalness” of Greek science is determined precisely by the fact that it arises out of “natural” foundations, so that it is defined at the same time in terms of its distinction from, and its origin in, those foundations, the “naturalness” of modern science is an expression of its polemical attitude toward school science. This special posture of the “new” science fundamentally defines its horizon, delimits its methods, its general structure, and, most important, determines the conceptual character of its concepts.³³⁷

Klein does not give much detail about the anti-scholastic polemic of the new science—where exactly did they think that the “scholastic” science fell short? But this is implied in what he says about the new science’s practical concerns: the chief point of the anti-scholastic polemic of Bacon, Descartes et al. is that scholastic science is of so little practical use.

A few famous passages are sufficient to illustrate this point. Francis Bacon in his programmatic treatise *The Great Instauration* writes:

³³⁶ Klein, “Modern Rationalism,” p. 60.

³³⁷ Klein, *Greek Mathematical Thought*, p. 120.

And as for its utility, I must openly declare that this wisdom, derived mainly from the Greeks, is what might be called the boyhood of science and, as with boys, it is all prattle and no procreation. For productive of controversies, it is barren in works.³³⁸

Similarly, Descartes, in his *Discourse on the Method* writes:

For [new conceptions in physics] opened my eyes to the possibility of gaining knowledge which would be very useful in life, and of discovering a practical philosophy which might replace the speculative philosophy taught in the schools. Through this philosophy we could know the power and action of fire, water, air, the stars, the heavens and all the other bodies in our environment, as distinctly as we know the various crafts of our artisans; and we could use this knowledge — as the artisans use theirs — for all the purposes for which it is appropriate, and thus make ourselves, as it were, the lords and masters of nature.³³⁹

Of course this practical orientation of early modern science has to be seen in a wider context. As Charles Taylor has argued, the achievements of social discipline in bringing “civility” to the general population in the period following the Reformation (for example in Calvinist Geneva), and the increased military power and economic productivity that resulted from this achievement, brought about a new sense that man’s state could be progressively bettered—this is the beginning of the modern idea of progress.³⁴⁰ But in the present context what is important is how this orientation brought about a new form of mathematical conceptualization.

One of the things that strikes one most when one works through ancient geometrical texts such as Euclid’s *Elements* and Apollonius of Perga’s *Conics* is that problem solving and calculation play little role in them. In keeping with the contemplative orientation of Greek science, Greek mathematics is concerned mainly with the synthetic demonstration of theorems. Thus the famous proof of the Pythagorean Theorem in *Elements* I,47 begins by stating the conclusion to be proved, and then proves the conclusion by constructing actual squares on the sides of a right triangle, and proving their relation syllogistically. The argument makes no use of number-calculation at all. And this manifests another striking

³³⁸ Francis Bacon, *Great Instauration*, Preface, in: *The Oxford Francis Bacon*, Vol XI, ed. Graham Rees with Maria Wakely, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), p. 11.

³³⁹ René Descartes, *Discourse on the Method*, Part 6, AT 6.61-62, in: *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. 1, trans. John Cottingham et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 142-143.

³⁴⁰ See: Taylor, *A Secular Age*, ch. 2.

feature of ancient mathematics: the strict separation between multitude (number) and magnitude (extension), and therefore between arithmetic and geometry. Greek geometry is concerned with the continuous shapes reflected in visible things (on the Platonic account), or shapes of continuous things abstracted from the things of which they are accidents (on the Aristotelian account). Greek arithmetic, on the other hand, is concerned with multitude: with numbers as the definite, countable “how many” of definite things.³⁴¹ According to Wallace, “There is no real difference, for the Greeks, between arithmetical entities and geometric figures, between e.g. the number 5 and a line five units long.”³⁴² *But this is actually the opposite of the truth.* The Greeks make a very sharp distinction between number and figure. One can see this particularly clearly in the theory of proportions. In *Elements V* Euclid develops a theory of proportions for magnitude (geometric quantity), and then in *Elements VII* he develops a similar theory of proportion for numbers. To modern readers it seems that *Elements VII* proves many of the theorems of *Elements V* all over again; it seems like totally useless repetition. But this is because modern readers are accustomed to a different conceptualization of quantity.

Wallace is, however, right to note that geometry had pride of place in Greek mathematics.³⁴³ As Klein’s student Harvey Flaumenhaft puts it, Greek geometry is concerned with the mind’s “visualizing of form and its insight into what informs the act of vision.”³⁴⁴ Greek arithmetic is simpler than Greek geometry, since there is no problem of incommensurability among numbers,³⁴⁵ but it is studied partly by analogy to geometry: the “species” of numbers are classified by their likeness to geometrical figures. Neither in the arithmetic books of Euclid’s

³⁴¹ See: Klein, *Greek Mathematical Thought*, ch. 2.

³⁴² Wallace, *Everything and More*, p. 44.

³⁴³ Wallace, *Everything and More*, p. 106.

³⁴⁴ Harvey Flaumenhaft, Introduction to Apollonius of Perga, *Conics Books I-III*, trans. R. Catesby Taliaferro, 2nd ed. (Santa Fe: Green Lion Press, 2000) p. xxiii.

³⁴⁵ The lack of so-called “irrational” numbers in Greek arithmetic is a straightforward consequence of the idea of number as a definite multitude of countable things. Cf. Harvey Flaumenhaft, “Why We Won’t Let You Speak of the Square Root of Two,” in: *The St. John’s Review* 48,1 (2004) pp. 7-41.

Elements (VII-IX) nor in Nichomachus of Gerasa's *Introduction to Arithmetic* will one find much calculation.³⁴⁶

Of course the Greeks knew how to calculate with numbers as well. But calculation, which was called "logistic," was considered to be an *applied* mathematics and therefore inferior to purely speculative arithmetic. The arts of applied mathematics, which included, in addition to logistic, geodics (the art of measurement), mechanics, and optics were not considered science in the strict sense, because they are practical, and because (on the Platonic account) they deal with changeable things rather than eternal forms.³⁴⁷ Music (harmonics) and astronomy, although they include an application of mathematics, were considered to be more noble than other applied mathematics because they are less practical and their objects are conceived of as eternal.

The ancient conceptualization was overturned by such early modern thinkers as François Viète (1540-1603), Stevin, and (most radically and influentially) Descartes. The difference between ancient and modern conceptualization is often obscured by the "translation" of ancient mathematical texts into modern symbolic notation, since the modern symbolic "language" of mathematics *is* the new conceptualization. In Greek mathematics there are no symbols in the modern sense, as Sabetai Unguru put it:

There are no true symbols in a Greek mathematical text. What looks like symbols to the untrained modern eye are actually proper names for identifying mathematical objects. They are not symbols, and cannot be manipulated, as algebraic symbols are.³⁴⁸

Klein's book on the origin of algebra is largely concerned with showing wherein that difference consists, and how it arose.

In the early modern period there was a revival of interest in the arts of applied mathematics—particularly in logistics, geodics, optics, and mechanics. A number of ancient

³⁴⁶ See: Mortimer J. Adler (ed.), *Great Books of the Western World*, vol. 10, *Euclid, Archimedes, Nichomachus* (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, [1952] 1994).

³⁴⁷ See: Klein, *Greek Mathematical Thought*, p. 11.

³⁴⁸ Sabetai Unguru, "Words, Diagrams, and Symbols: Greek and Modern Mathematics or 'On the Need To Rewrite The History of Greek Mathematics' Revisited," in: *The St. John's Review* 48,1 (2004) pp. 71-90, at p. 72.

texts on these arts were rediscovered and reinterpreted. Klein focuses his investigations on logistics, since it is in a re-interpretation of ancient logistics that the new symbolic conceptualization is actually formed, but in order to contextualize that re-interpretation one must look to the rediscovery of ancient mechanics.

A Peripatetic treatise on mechanics, attributed to Aristotle, but probably written by one of his students, known as *Questions on Mechanics*, or *Mechanical Problems*, or simply *Mechanica*, which had been unknown in medieval Europe, was rediscovered in the Renaissance. It was published as part of the works of Aristotle in 1495-1498, and first translated into Latin multiple times between 1517 and 1547.³⁴⁹ This text had a great influence on Galileo, who quotes it in his *Discourses on Two New Sciences*, and it was of decisive importance to Francis Bacon. Bacon found in the *Mechanica* the path to be followed in order to find a new science that would give power over nature. “Aristotle has well remarked,” he writes, “that Physic and Mathematic produce Practice or Mechanic.”³⁵⁰ He is referring here to the proemium of the *Mechanica* in which pseudo-Aristotle writes the following:

One wonders about...what comes to be by technology [διὰ τέχνην] contrary to nature for the benefit of human beings. Nature often does the contrary of what is useful for us. [...] When, therefore, we have to do something contrary to nature, the difficulty of it causes us perplexity and we need technology. For this reason we call the technology that helps us in such perplexities mechanics. [...] Instances of this are those cases in which the less has power over the greater, and where what has small weight moves great weights—in fact, practically all the problems which we call mechanical problems. They are not quite identical nor yet entirely unconnected with physical problems. They have something in common both with mathematical and with physical theorems; for while mathematics shows ‘the how,’ physics shows ‘the concerning what.’³⁵¹

³⁴⁹ See: Lawrence Rose and Stillman Drake, “The Pseudo-Aristotelian Questions of Mechanics in Renaissance Culture,” *Studies in the Renaissance* 18 (1971), pp. 65-104, at pp. 66-68. I am indebted to Michael Waldstein for pointing me to this text, and for sharing with me the manuscript of his forthcoming book on different conceptions of the body, *Glory of the Logos in the Flesh: Saint John Paul’s Theology of the Body* (Ave Maria, FL: Sapientia Press, forthcoming), in which he discusses the influence of the *Mechanica* on Francis Bacon, and the modern understanding of nature.

³⁵⁰ Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Knowledge*, 3.6, in: *The Works of Francis Bacon*, ed. James Spedding et al., vol. 4, (London: Longman, 1858) p. 369; Cf. Waldstein, *Glory of the Logos*, p. 14.

³⁵¹ Aristotle, *Mechanics*, 847a10-28; trans. Waldstein, *Glory of the Logos*, p. 263.

Bacon's new science was thus conceived of as a revival of a neglected aspect of ancient science. But there were a number of problems with ancient mechanics that had to be overcome in order to make it more effective. The most obvious of these was that ancient mechanics merely applied the theorems of speculative geometry to practical problems. This was a cumbersome method, since speculative geometry was not very suitable to application. As we have seen, it proceeded synthetically, and did not provide an easy method of solving problems. So, ancient mathematics had to be transformed. If one compares the laboriousness of the mechanical demonstrations in Galileo's *Discourses on Two New Sciences* (1638) with the simplicity of those in Newton's *Principia* (1687), one can see that a great transformation in mathematics has taken place. Between these two works lies Descartes's *Geometry* (1637). The *Geometry* is a short work that Descartes published as an appendix to the *Discourse on the Method*, but it had tremendous influence. According to John Stuart Mill, Descartes's *Geometry* "constitutes the greatest single step ever made in the progress of the exact sciences."³⁵² Descartes's aim was to homogenize the object of mathematics by uniting geometry and arithmetic, and to revolutionize the method of mathematics "by making the central activity the manipulative working of the mind rather than its visualizing of form."³⁵³

Descartes found the means to this transformation in a re-interpretation of ancient logic. Descartes was inspired by passages of Pappus of Alexandria that he thought suggested that there was a general science of quantity, and he thought he found evidence for this general science in Diophantus of Alexandria's *Arithmetica*. Diophantus tries to raise logic to a theoretical science, to a kind of arithmetic (hence the title). Rather than merely applying the theorems of theoretical arithmetic to problems of calculation, Diophantus developed new ways of finding unknown quantities in proportions. However, in Diophantus the "unknown"

³⁵² John Stuart Mill, *An Examination of William Hamilton's Philosophy and of the Principal Philosophical Questions Discussed in his Writings* (London: Longmans, 1865), p. 531; cf. I. Bernard Cohen, *Revolution in Science* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1985), p. 156.

³⁵³ Flaumenhaft, "Why We Won't," pp. 40-41.

quantities are always *determinate* quantities, not “variables,” hence Diophantus does not provide a general method for solving problems.³⁵⁴

Diophantus’s *Arithmetica* was first translated into Latin in 1575. Already Simon Stevin in 1585 and François Viète in 1591 began to “transcribe” Diophantus into a form of symbolism partially inspired by Arabic “algebra” (a kind of mystical cryptography).³⁵⁵ But it was Descartes who developed brought this development to completion.

Klein illustrates Descartes’s new conceptualization by contrasting the following examples:

1. Five horses and six horses make eleven horses.
2. Five unknown quantities and the number six equal sixteen.
3. $ax + b = c$.³⁵⁶

The transition from the first to second of these examples, Klein argues, is a matter of going from concrete to abstract numbers. But the transition from the second example, which is taken from Diophantus’s *Arithmetica*, to the third is not a matter of abstraction in the Greek sense. The “ a ” in the third example is a “variable,” it does not intend a determinate number. One might say that it intends a class of numbers, but it is not treated as class; in the equation it is treated as though it is a determinate number. This allows for the great convenience of algebraic calculation—the symbols can be manipulated as though they were themselves the objects of study, and can then be applied to any specific instance by “plugging in” particular numerical “values.” In this way algebraic symbols are somewhat like the beads on an abacus. The beads of an abacus allow one to count without thinking about what one is counting, but the application is much broader, because the beads of an abacus are determinate in a way in which algebraic symbols are not. Bertrand Russell’s famous quip, “mathematics may be defined as the subject in which we never know what we are talking about, nor whether what

³⁵⁴ Klein, *Greek Mathematical Thought*, pp. 126-146.

³⁵⁵ Klein, *Greek Mathematical Thought*, p. 148-197.

³⁵⁶ Cf. Klein, “Modern Rationalism,” p. 61.

we are saying is true,³⁵⁷ is perfectly applicable to this kind of calculation. Its great advantage is that it allows for a simple method to be applied to any problem, a method that requires no thought in the Greek sense, but can easily be done by a machine such as a computer.

Klein uses the scholastic distinction between first and second intentions to explain what is going on here. A first intention is a concept that is abstracted directly from external things: thus “man” is abstracted from men and can be said of them—one can say, “Socrates is a man.” Second intentions, however, are concepts that are abstracted from and apply to first intentions. Thus if one says, “man is a *species*,” “species” is abstracted from first intentions such as “man” and “dog” etc. and can be said of them. But it cannot be said of any external thing; one cannot say, “Socrates is a species.” Klein argues that a variable such as a is really a second intention that *is being treated as a first intention*.³⁵⁸

The philosopher Sean Collins has argued that another scholastic distinction might be better invoked here. He argues that reason has different kinds of intentionality depending on whether it is apprehending the objective order of being; or the order that it makes in its own act (the order of second intentions); or the order that it makes in the moral acts of the will; or in the order that it produces in the artifacts (external things of which it is itself the cause). These different kinds of intentionality are expressed by different ways or modes of signifying. So, for example, the order that reason finds in being is expressed in declarative sentences: *You are not killing Socrates*. The order that it makes in the will is expressed in imperative or jussive sentences: *Do not kill Socrates*.³⁵⁹ Note, that those two sentences do not differ in *what* they signify, but only in *how* they signify. Collins argues that algebraic symbols signify in a mode that expresses the intentionality of reason toward the order that it produces in mental

³⁵⁷ Bertrand Russell, “Mathematics and the Metaphysicians,” in: *Mysticism and Logic and Other Essays*, 11th ed. (London: Allen and Unwin, [1917] 1952), pp. 74-96, at p. 75.

³⁵⁸ Klein, *Greek Mathematical Thought*, pp. 174-175; “Modern Rationalism,” pp. 60-63.

³⁵⁹ Cf. Collins, “The Heritage of Analytic Philosophy,” pp. 64-66.

construction: “Symbolic representation [...] signifies that which has existence through the very act of symbolizing.”³⁶⁰

Using such symbols in mathematics allows for much greater practical application, because one can mark off as an object of calculation any set of quantities that one wants to connect to any other set: “Thus, for example, the symbol “x” may be set down to distinguish certain numerical elements from others – not formally because we find them to be distinct, but because we want them to be.”³⁶¹ Descartes’s *Geometry* is full of such “arbitrary” acts of symbolization that allow him to solve problems very simply. For example:³⁶²

To shorten the work let us write $2m$ instead of $\frac{cflgz - dekz^2}{ez^3 - cgz^2}$

Wallace calls it “paradoxical” that the “hyperabstractness” of post-Cartesian mathematics “turns out to work incredibly well in real-world applications.”³⁶³ But the reason for this is that the kind of abstraction with which we are dealing is a kind that is specifically designed to “shorten the work;” it “abstracts” from the heterogeneity of things because this heterogeneity hampers manipulation.

“Any problem in geometry,” Descartes writes, “can easily be reduced to such terms that the knowledge of the lengths of certain straight lines is sufficient for its construction.”³⁶⁴ He does this by the introduction of what later came to be known as the “Cartesian coordinate system,” a system that unites geometry and arithmetic by expressing all geometric constructions as algebraic equations. Thus a parabola in Cartesian geometry is not considered as the curve formed by a plane cutting a cone in a certain way (as it was for Apollonius), but rather by an equation: $y = x^2$. Already in his early work *Rules for the Direction of the Mind* (c. 1628) Descartes argues that this kind of homogenization can be extended to

³⁶⁰ Collins, “The Heritage of Analytic Philosophy,” p. 71.

³⁶¹ Collins, “The Heritage of Analytic Philosophy,” p. 70.

³⁶² René Descartes, *The Geometry of René Descartes*, trans. David Eugene Smith and Marcia L. Latham (New York: Dover, 1954), p.63; emphasis added.

³⁶³ Wallace, *Everything and More*, p. 107.

³⁶⁴ Descartes, *The Geometry*, p. 2.

all sciences to form a *mathesis universalis*, a universal science.³⁶⁵ Thus in mechanics, distance, time, and “force” are defined by operational definitions—that is, by definitions that allow one to find a measure-number (e.g., distance is defined as the *number* of times that a standard unit of measurement is applied in such-and-such a way). The relations of these are then expressed as equations with variables, tested by experiment, which can then be applied to particular cases by “plugging in” a number.

Descartes took the first steps in bringing about such a science of mechanics, but, as Wallace notes, it was Isaac Newton, who by his development of calculus, and skill in formulating operational definitions, made decisive progress in turning mechanics into modern mathematical physics, “in which force, motion, mass, and law-as-formula compose the new template for understanding how reality works.”³⁶⁶ The key notion here is “law-as-formula.” Newton’s laws are equations of operationally defined measurement numbers. So, for example, the second law, can be expressed as an equation (formula): $f = ma$, with f , m , and a standing for force, mass, and acceleration respectively. This formula is so useful *precisely because it abstracts from the heterogeneity of the physical foundations for its terms*. Joseph Cosgrove points out how this equation confirms Klein’s account of the nature of Cartesian symbols:

I challenge the reader to attach a coherent physical sense to “multiplying” a number of, say, kilograms, by a number of “meters per second-squared.” After all, how do I take seven kilograms five meters per second-squared times? Instead, what we really do is multiply two symbolic dimensionless numbers together (7×5) and then “plug” the result into the units of force.³⁶⁷

Newton’s laws are not “causes” in the Aristotelian sense: they do not tell us *why* certain quantitative regularities hold, or *how* they flow from the nature of existing things. Instead they merely show *that* such regularities hold. And this is enough to construct a working

³⁶⁵ René Descartes, Rules for the Direction of the Mind, Rule IV, AT 10.378, in: The Philosophical Writings of Descartes, vol. 1, p. 19.

³⁶⁶ Wallace, *Everything and More*, p. 107-108.

³⁶⁷ Joseph K. Cosgrove, Review of Hopkins, *The Origin of the Logic*, in: *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*, October 21, 2012, <http://ndpr.nd.edu/news/34683-the-origin-of-the-logic-of-symbolic-mathematics-edmund-husserl-and-jacob-klein/> (accessed June 11, 2014).

model of the universe. The model of the world, constructed by the progressive finding of such laws, is one of an assembly of “processes,” understood as connected variations of quantities. And this leads to the “abstraction schizophrenia” mentioned by Wallace; the assembly of quantitative relations constructed by mathematical physics seems to have nothing to do with the world of the pre-scientific experience of objects with differentiated qualities, colors, and so on.³⁶⁸

Klein notes that modern mathematical physics is not intelligible apart from the symbolic formulae by which it is expressed, and that any “popular” presentation of it that tries to use ordinary language inevitably fails.³⁶⁹ This is because it is the symbols themselves that construct the objects of this science. This is what is meant by Klein’s contention that “modern science is not so much the understanding of nature as the art of mastering nature.”³⁷⁰ That is, it is the art of constructing symbols that mark out certain quantitative relations, not because those relations are actually distinct realities in nature, “but because we want them to be”³⁷¹ distinct. It is useful *for us* to distinguish them in this way. The essential role of reason in modern science is not to understand, but to construct.³⁷²

Theoretically it would be possible for such an art to exist *alongside* a science of nature in the Greek mode, which would be interested in *what* things are in themselves, rather than in the quantitative relations that can be constructed and confirmed through measurement. But Descartes (following Bacon) rejects the “sterile” truths of ancient philosophy. The early modern polemic against “substantial forms” and “final causes” can be understood in this way. The Aristotelian study of nature was not mathematical, because for Aristotle mathematics does not consider the being of things *as things*, but only the “how much” of things in

³⁶⁸ Wallace, *Everything and More*, pp. 22-23.

³⁶⁹ Klein, *Greek Mathematical Thought*, pp. 3-4.

³⁷⁰ Klein, “Modern Rationalism,” p. 60.

³⁷¹ Collins, “The Heritage of Analytic Philosophy,” p. 70.

³⁷² Cf. David R. Lachterman, *The Ethics of Geometry: A Genealogy of Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 1989), especially ch. 1: “Construction as the Mark of the Modern.”

abstraction from those things.³⁷³ The contemplation of mathematical form in Greek mathematics was rather thought of as propaedeutic to a contemplation of the “substantial form” the “what it was to be” considered in natural philosophy. Unlike mathematical form, substantial form was studied in relation to the *why*, the *for the sake of what*, the final cause of a thing. This whole mode of study is rejected by Descartes. In order to show that his quantitative/algebraic mode of inquiry is truly the *mathesis universalis*, the universal science, Descartes develops a new theory of natural being that makes claims that it *is ontologically* nothing more than homogenous quantity. As Klein puts it:

Descartes' great idea now consists of identifying, by means of “methodological” considerations, the “general” object of this *mathesis universalis* which can be represented and conceived only symbolically — with the “substance” of the world, with corporeality as “extensio.” Only by virtue of this identification did symbolic mathematics gain that fundamental position in the system of knowledge which it has never since lost.³⁷⁴

And in a note he adds:

This was the issue which compelled Descartes to develop his metaphysics, a metaphysics in which, to be sure, the actual points of departure of his “system” came to be increasingly consigned to oblivion.³⁷⁵

Of course, there were other motives that lead Descartes to formulate his new metaphysics (including the desire to refute Montaigne’s skepticism³⁷⁶), but the *main* purpose was to justify the place of his new method as *the* universal science.³⁷⁷

Already, in his early correspondence with Isaac Beeckman, Descartes had begun to formulate a metaphysics that would homogenize all of corporeal reality. In this he was influenced by the late medieval nominalist philosopher and mathematician Nicolas

³⁷³ See: *Physics*, II,2: 193b 22.

³⁷⁴ Klein, *Greek Mathematical Thought*, p. 197.

³⁷⁵ Klein, *Greek Mathematical Thought*, p. 294, note 308; emphasis in original.

³⁷⁶ See: Alasdair MacIntyre, *God, Philosophy, Universities: A Selective History of the Catholic Philosophical Tradition* (Plymouth: Rowman and Littlefield, 2009) chs. 13-14.

³⁷⁷ Cf. Richard Kennington, *On Modern Origins: Essays in Early Modern Philosophy*, ed. Pamela Krauss and Frank Hunt (Lanham: Lexington, 2004), esp. chs. 6-7.

d'Oresme (1320-1382).³⁷⁸ But it was not until he hit upon the famous method of universal doubt inaugurated in the *Discourse on the Method* and perfected in the *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641), that he found a satisfactory rhetorical basis for this system. By doubting everything except the existence of the thinking subject Descartes neatly divides reality into the *res cogitans* and the *res extensa*—the entire physical world conceived of as the homogenous object of *mathesis universalis*.

The details of Descartes's metaphysics were soon rejected by later philosophers and scientists, but they preserved some fundamental features of his approach. Mathematical physics progressed by leaps and bounds using his symbolic-algebraic approach, leading to what Wallace terms "abstraction schizophrenia."

1.6.3 The early Wittgenstein and the implications of symbolic abstraction

Above we saw how Wallace saw some of the effects on human subjectivity that the "emptying" of the world by mathematics brought, but in his earliest work he explored a related effect of Cartesian *mathesis universalis*: the way in which language and thought itself began to be conceived of as a "system of symbols...independent of the objects designated," to use a formulation of Ferdinand de Saussure that Wallace repeatedly quotes.³⁷⁹ Both rationalism and empiricism, the two main schools of philosophy in the period following Descartes, thought of language and thought itself as symbolic systems. Thus Hobbes writes, "words are wise men's counters, they do but reckon by them,"³⁸⁰ and Leibniz conceived of a "philosophical calculus" or "characteristic," by which all philosophical problems could be

³⁷⁸ See: Jacob Klein, "Phenomenology and the History of Science," in: *Lectures and Essays*, pp. 65-84, at p. 83.

³⁷⁹ Wallace, *Everything and More*, pp. 10, 30, 107; The quotation is from posthumous notes of Saussure's published in the second volume of Engler's critical edition of the *Course in General Linguistics*: Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de linguistique generale*, ed. R. Engler, vol. 2, (Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz, 1974), p. 23. The translation appears to be Wallace's own, although it is quite close to a translation given in: Manfred Frank, *What is Neostructuralism?*, trans. Sabine Wilke and Richard Gray (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1989), p. 426.

³⁸⁰ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Part I, ch. IV; quoted in: Collins, "The Heritage of Analytic Philosophy," p. 81, fn 32.

solved.³⁸¹ As we have seen, Wallace saw the “independence” that symbolic systems have from their references as the key to refuting Taylor’s fatalism, but such independence leads to puzzles of its own. Already in Descartes this way of conceiving thought leads to epistemological problems: how does one know that thought corresponds to any external reality? Descartes proposes one answer to this problem, various other answers were later proposed from George Berkeley’s subjective idealism on the empiricist side to Kant’s transcendental idealism on the rationalist side. In the twentieth century this problem is posed in the “linguistic” turn both in analytic philosophy, and in continental structuralism and post-structuralism. If language is a symbolic system, in which the symbols always “stand for” and therefore in a sense “supplant” that of which they are symbols, then how can one even speak of a correspondence between language and reality? For any speech *about* the symbolic character of language will itself be symbolic and will therefore itself supplant what it signifies. In continental philosophy this problem was raised by Saussure’s lectures on structural linguistics (published posthumously in 1916), and then, much more radically and powerfully, by the “post-structuralist” philosopher Jacques Derrida. In analytic philosophy it was raised by Ludwig Wittgenstein in his early work *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921).

Wallace had an enduring fascination with Wittgenstein, and his first novel *The Broom of the System* is largely concerned with issues arising from Wittgenstein’s late, posthumously published *Philosophical Investigations* (1951),³⁸² and the themes raised there continue to inform much of his later work. Although the *Investigations* were the work of Wittgenstein’s that seem to have interested Wallace most, the *Tractatus* also had importance as raising problems to which Wallace thought the *Investigations* were in some sense an answer. Wallace had a very particular reading of the development of Wittgenstein’s thought from the *Tractatus* to the *Investigations*—seeing the *Investigations* as a sort of “resetting” of Wittgenstein’s philosophy that came out of dissatisfaction with the implications of the *Tractatus*. In a famous interview with Larry McCaffery, Wallace argued that Wittgenstein’s

³⁸¹ See: Jacob Klein, “Leibniz, an Introduction,” in: *Lectures and Essays*, pp. 197-217, at p. 215.

³⁸² See: Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, ch. 2.

account of language as a symbolic system in the *Tractatus* made it ultimately impossible to establish any connection between language and an “external” world:

The Tractatus's picture theory of meaning presumes that the only possible relation between language and the world is denotative, referential. In order for language both to be meaningful and to have some connection to reality, words like *tree* and *house* have to be like little pictures, representations of little trees and houses. Mimesis. But nothing more. Which means we can know and speak of nothing more than little mimetic pictures. Which divides us, metaphysically and forever, from the external world. If you buy such a metaphysical schism, you're left with only two options. One is that the individual person with her language is trapped in here, with the world out there, and never the twain shall meet. Which, even if you think language's pictures really are mimetic, is an awful lonely proposition. And there's no iron guarantee the pictures truly *are* mimetic, which means you're looking at solipsism. [...] The other option is to expand the linguistic subject. Expand the self.³⁸³

Wallace's account of Wittgenstein's “picture theory” of language is imprecise. Wittgenstein writes of *propositions* picturing states of affairs in the world; a picture is the correspondence of the relation of names in a proposition to the relation of objects in a state of affairs.³⁸⁴ It is hard to see why the *word* “tree” would be called a picture of a tree, or the word “house” a picture of a house. But it is easy to see why one might think that a proposition such as “the tree is next to the house” is a picture of a tree next to a house. Like a painting or drawing of a house with a tree next to it, the proposition *represents* the relation of the objects in the world. But despite this imprecision, Wallace's basic point is still defensible. In the light of the last section I would argue that the Wallace is understanding the “picture theory of meaning” as a system of symbolic abstraction. A picture does not *signify* its subject, but rather represents it. That is to say the *Tractatus*, on Wallace's reading, sees language as a system that *stands in for*, and therefore *supplants* reality, rather than naming or describing reality.

Wallace's reading, even if one corrects its imprecisions, is still problematic. It is not my intention here to defend Wallace's reading of Wittgenstein, as a reading of Wittgenstein, but rather to explicate it as a way of describing the human predicament in modern/postmodern times. Wallace did not think that the dilemma that he saw as arising out of the *Tractatus* was

³⁸³ Larry McCaffery, “An Expanded Interview,” p. 44.

³⁸⁴ “We make to ourselves pictures of facts.” (Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London: Routledge, 2005 [1922]), 2.1. Cf. A.C. Grayling, *Wittgenstein* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 30.

the first subject of that work. Rather he saw the main plan of the *Tractatus* as the carrying over to the world of the properties of the symbolic system of an abstract logical “language.” Wallace thus sees Wittgenstein as making a move similar to Taylor. In a long review of David Markson’s novel *Wittgenstein’s Mistress*, Wallace describes “the *Tractatus’s* project” as follows:

[W]hat must the world be like if language is even to be possible? The early Wittgenstein, much under the spell of Russell and the *Principia Mathematica* that revolutionized modern logic, saw language, like math, as logic-based, and viewed the paradigmatic function of language as mirroring or “picturing” the world. From this latter belief everything in the *Tractatus* follows[...]³⁸⁵

Wallace’s interpretation of the *Tractatus* agrees with that of Bertrand Russell, nominally a teacher of Wittgenstein, in his introduction to the first English edition:

Starting from the principles of Symbolism and the relations which are necessary between words and things in any language, it applies the result of this inquiry to various departments of traditional philosophy, showing in each case how traditional philosophy and traditional solutions arise out of ignorance of the principles of Symbolism and out of misuse of language.³⁸⁶

Wallace goes on to point out that the symbolic “language” in terms of which Wittgenstein is to interpret the world is “the truth-functional logic” developed by Russell himself along with Alfred North Whitehead in their *Principia Mathematica*—that is, a logical “language” directly modeled on the symbolic system of algebra.

In analyzing propositions (i.e., statements), Russell (and Whitehead) argued that most propositions are really compounded from more simple propositions, and the truth or falsity of the compound statements depends on (is a *function* of) their components. For example, the statement “the present King of France is bald” appears to be false, since there is no present King of France, and yet the contradiction of that statement “the present King of France is not bald,” also appears to be false, since there is no King of France who is *not* bald. This appears strange, since it seems to be an exception to the “law of contradiction,” by

³⁸⁵ Wallace, “The Empty Plenum,” p. 86.

³⁸⁶ Bertrand Russell, Introduction to Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, p. 7.

which the direct contradiction of a false statement would be true.³⁸⁷ And so Russell argues that the statement must really be a compound of several statements: 1) There is a King of France, 2) there is only *one* King of France 3) the person who is the one King of France is bald. Expressed in symbolic notation we get: $(\exists x) ((Kx \ \& \ (y) (Ky \rightarrow y=x)) \ \& \ Bx)$ which would be interpreted as follows: there is some x, such that x is King of France; and for any y, if y is King of France then y and x are identical; and x is bald.³⁸⁸ The truth or falsity (“truth value”) of the compound proposition “The King of France is Bald” is thus seen as a *function* of the simpler propositions into which it is analyzed: if any of the simpler propositions is false, the compound is also false.

This way of analyzing language leads Wittgenstein to claim that there must be some entirely simple propositions to which all other propositions ultimately reduce, and of which the truth value all other propositions are ultimately functions.³⁸⁹ These are the famous “atomic propositions”—the basic “building blocks” of the symbolic language that Wittgenstein discusses in the *Tractatus*. These propositions are entirely simple, and therefore their truth value cannot depend on the truth values of any other statements. As Wallace puts it: “The atomic propositions that are language’s building blocks are ‘logically independent’ of one another: they do not affect one another’s truth values.”³⁹⁰ If one changes the truth value of one of these atomic propositions, none of the other atomic propositions are affected. These atomic propositions can be combined to form complex propositions, and the truth or falsity of the complex propositions depends entirely on the truth or falsity of the atomic statements of which they are made up. Thus, in applying the properties of this “language” to the world, Wittgenstein concludes that the world consists entirely of “atomic facts”: simple relations among objects. To quote Wallace again:

³⁸⁷ Bertrand Russell, “On Denotation,” in: *Mind* 14.56 (1905), pp. 479-493, at p. 485.

³⁸⁸ For typographical reasons, I am using a somewhat modified form of Russell’s notation as proposed in: Grayling, *Wittgenstein*, p. 27.

³⁸⁹ For the importance of Russell’s analysis of propositions for the *Tractatus* see: Grayling, *Wittgenstein*, ch. 2; G. E. M. Anscombe, *An Introduction to Wittgenstein’s Tractatus*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), ch. 2.

³⁹⁰ Wallace, “The Empty Plenum,” p. 87.

Except here's the kicker: since language is & must be the world's mirror, the world is metaphysically composed only & entirely of those "facts" that statements stand for. In other words—the words of the *Tractatus*'s first & foremost line—the world is everything that is the case; the world is nothing but a huge mass of data, of logically discrete facts that have no intrinsic connection to one another. C.f. the *Tractatus* 1.2: "The world falls apart into facts..." 1.21: "Any one [fact] can either be the case, or not be the case, and everything else remains the same."³⁹¹

In other words, the question as to how the world must be if language is to function in the logically atomistic way that the *Tractatus* claims, is that it must ultimately be composed of simple, unconnected facts, which can be mirrored by the atomic propositions. Wallace sees the implications of this view of the world as terrible—nothing belongs to a greater whole; each thing is completely alone. This worldview is a "Pynchonian contraparanoida," "the conviction that nothing is connected to anything else & that nothing has anything intrinsically to do with you."³⁹²

Moreover, the mechanical atomism of symbolic logic, if carried over to the world, empties the world of all the qualities that such a symbolic system lacks—such as goodness, value, beauty, and humanity. For Wittgenstein, the atomic facts that are pictured by the atomic propositions underlie the facts of (mathematical-metrical) natural science: "The totality of true propositions is the total natural science (or the totality of the natural sciences)."³⁹³ This does not mean (as has sometimes been supposed) that the actual facts obtained through scientific observation are atomic facts,³⁹⁴ but rather that if the atomic facts could be ascertained, the facts of natural science would be truth functions of them. Statements that cannot be reduced to pictures of such facts are therefore senseless. "Hence also there can be no ethical propositions."³⁹⁵

Wallace thought this was one reason for Wittgenstein's ultimate dissatisfaction with the *Tractatus*:

³⁹¹ Wallace, "The Empty Plenum," p. 88.

³⁹² Wallace, "The Empty Plenum," p. 88.

³⁹³ Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 4.11.

³⁹⁴ See: Anscombe, *An Introduction to Wittgenstein's Tractatus*, ch. 1.

³⁹⁵ Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 6.42.

One of the things that putatively so tortured Wittgenstein in the twenty years between the *Tractatus* and the *Investigations* was that a logically atomistic metaphysics admits exactly nothing of ethics or moral value or questions about what it is to be human. It's history that Wittgenstein the person cared deeply about what made things good or right or worthwhile. [...] The fact that the metaphysics of the *Tractatus* not only couldn't take account of but pretty much denied the coherent possibility of things like ethics, values, spirituality, & responsibility had the result that "Wittgenstein, this clearheaded & intellectually honest man, was hopelessly at odds with himself."³⁹⁶

From one point of view, Wallace's account of Wittgenstein's dissatisfaction with the *Tractatus* is unconvincing. It is not as though Wittgenstein worked out his symbolic system, and then discovered to his dismay that it had no room for ethics. On the contrary, in a 1919 letter to a Ludwig von Ficker, whom he was trying to persuade to publish the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein wrote that ethics was the whole point of the work.³⁹⁷ That there are no ethical propositions, and that ethics is therefore not in the world, does not mean for the early Wittgenstein that ethics is humbug that can be debunked. Rather, as he puts it in the *Tractatus*, "Ethics is transcendental."³⁹⁸ Ethics does not have to do with something in the world that can be clearly said, but rather with something that cannot be spoken because it transcends the world, or concerns our relation to the world as a whole. In his 1929 lecture on ethics, in which he still defends the basic *Tractatus* view, Wittgenstein argues that talk about ethics appears to consist of similes. So, for example, when one says that something is ethically "right" one appears to be comparing it to the sense of "right" found in common expressions such as "this is the *right* road to Granchester." But in the second case "right" has a relative or hypothetical sense, and can be reduced to facts: "This is the way you have to go if you want to get to Granchester in the shortest time."³⁹⁹ But no such reduction to facts is possible for the *absolute* or *categorical* sense of "good" in its ethical use. Therefore,

³⁹⁶ Wallace, "The Empty Plenum," pp. 95-96. The quotation that Wallace gives is from a conversation with his philosopher father.

³⁹⁷ Ludwig Wittgenstein to Ludwig von Ficker, end of October or beginning of November 1919, in: Ludwig von Ficker, *Briefwechsel, 1914-1923*, Brenner Studien, vol. 8, ed. Ignaz Zangerle, Walter Methlagl, Franz Seyr, and Anton Unterkircher (Innsbruck: Haymon Verlag, 1988), p. 196.

³⁹⁸ Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 6.421.

³⁹⁹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Lecture on Ethics*, ed. Edoardo Zamuner, Ermelinda Valentina Di Lascio, and D. K. Levy (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), pp. 44-45.

Wittgenstein concludes that ethics (as well as religion) goes “beyond the world” and is “supernatural.”⁴⁰⁰

But again, the importance of Wallace’s reading of Wittgenstein and the problem of ethics does not lie in its plausibility (or the contrary) as a reading of Wittgenstein, but rather in its character as a reflection on a world heavily influenced by the kind of symbolic abstraction that the *Tractatus* exemplifies. The cultural effect of such systems is not necessarily to engender the sort of mystical reverence for ethics exemplified by Wittgenstein himself.

But perhaps the biggest problem that Wallace sees as arising from enterprises such as the *Tractatus* is that there is no way of speaking about the relation between the symbolic system of language and the facts that it supposedly mirrors. In the famous penultimate section of the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein denies that the statements of the *Tractatus* itself can have sense, since they are not, after all, pictures of atomic facts of the world:

My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as senseless, when he has climbed out through them, on them, over them. (He must so to speak throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it.) He must surmount these propositions; then he sees the world rightly.⁴⁰¹

But, Wallace suggests, Wittgenstein does not go far enough here. How can even the atomic propositions of natural science have sense? How can we know that they picture any external facts? As Wallace puts it:

Because, again, whence and wherefore the all-important “facts” which [...] the world “falls apart into” but does *NOT* comprise? Are facts—genuine existents—intrinsic to the Exterior? Admitting of countenance only via the frailties of sense-data & induction? Or, way worse, are they not perhaps perversely *deductive*, products of the very head that countenances them as Exterior facts & as such genuinely ontic? This latter possibility—if internalized, really believed—is a track that makes stops at skepticism & then solipsism before heading straight into insanity. It’s the latter possibility that informs the neurasthenia of Descartes’s *Meditations* & so births modern philosophy (and with it the distinctively modern ‘alienation’ of the individual from all wholes both natural & social).⁴⁰²

⁴⁰⁰ Wittgenstein, *Lecture on Ethics*, pp. 51, 46.

⁴⁰¹ Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 6.54.

⁴⁰² Wallace, “The Empty Plenum,” pp. 92-93.

It is notable that Wallace here writes of Cartesian doubt with its epistemological *aporia* as giving rise to the modern alienation of the individual from natural and social wholes. One could also argue (in Marxist terms) that modern philosophy is merely an ideological superstructure reflecting the alienation of man under capitalism, or (along Weberian lines) that there is back-and-forth between the ideal and the material levels.

In any case, Wallace sees the world as described by the *Tractatus* as in some way fitting the *experience* of a consumerist culture. We can now appreciate more fully a passage from his review of Markson that I already quoted above (1.1), but which is worth quoting again with a bit more of its context:

[T]o the extent that Kate [the heroin of David Markson's novel, *Wittgenstein's Mistress*] is not motivationally unique, she can be all of us, and the empty diffraction of Kate's world can map or picture the desacralized & paradoxical solipsism of U.S. persons in a cattle-herd culture that worships only the Transparent I, of guiltily passive solipsists & skeptics trying to warm soft hands at the computer-enhanced fire of data in an Information Age where received image & enforced eros replace active countenance or sacral mystery as ends, value, meaning. Etc. [...] For Mr. Markson has in this book [...] fleshed the abstract sketches of Wittgensteinian doctrine into the concrete theater of human loneliness. In so doing he's captured far better than pseudobiography what made Wittgenstein a tragic figure & a victim of the very diffracted modernity he helped inaugurate.⁴⁰³

Perhaps it is this apparent fit between Wittgenstein and the experience of life in "diffracted modernity" that explains why Wallace does not dismiss his arguments in the way that he dismissed Taylor's argument for fatalism. For, one might have expected Wallace to escape from the problems that his reading of the *Tractatus* sets up in the same way that he escaped from Taylor's fatalism: by denying that one can apply the properties of a symbolic system to the actual world. But this is not exactly the tack that Wallace takes. Rather, he follows (his reading of) Wittgenstein in arguing that one has to abandon the algebraic/symbolic understanding of language, and come to understand it in terms of its use in human social interaction:

One of the things that makes Wittgenstein a real artist to me is that he realized that no conclusion could be more horrible than solipsism. And so he trashed everything he'd been lauded for in the *Tractatus* and wrote the *Investigations*, which is the single most

⁴⁰³ Wallace, "The Empty Plenum," pp. 107-108.

comprehensive and beautiful argument against solipsism that's ever been made. Wittgenstein argues that for language even to be possible, it must always be a function of relationships between persons (that's why he spends so much time arguing against the possibility of a "private language").⁴⁰⁴

Again, it is immaterial whether Wallace is right about the reasons behind Wittgenstein's change of positions (probably not). The important point is the use that Wallace himself makes of Wittgenstein's work for understanding the predicament of contemporary life. Wallace accepts the "solution" of the *Investigations* to the problems of the *Tractatus*, but he sees the solution as itself entailing certain problems, problems that he characterizes as *postmodern*:

So [Wittgenstein] makes language dependent on human community, but unfortunately we're still stuck with the idea that there is this world of referents out there that we can never really join or know because we're stuck in here, in language, even if we're at least all in here together.⁴⁰⁵

The *Investigations* thus does not really escape the problem of the reference of language to a real world, although it does escape the absolute loneliness of solipsism:

This was Wittgenstein's double-bind: you can either treat language as an infinitely small dense dot, or you let it become the world—the exterior and everything in it. The former banishes you from the Garden. The latter seems more promising. If the world is itself a linguistic construct, there's nothing "outside" language for language to have to picture or refer to. This lets you avoid solipsism, but it leads right to the postmodern, post-structural dilemma of having to deny yourself an existence independent of language. Heidegger's the guy most people think got us into this bind, but when I was working on "Broom of the System" I saw Wittgenstein as the real architect of the postmodern trap. He died right on the edge of explicitly treating reality as linguistic instead of ontological. This eliminated solipsism, but not the horror. Because we're still stuck. The *Investigation[s]*'s line is that the fundamental problem of language is, quote, "I don't know my way about."⁴⁰⁶

We shall have to return to Wallace's appreciation of Wittgenstein's social theory of language, and its ethical implications, below (2.2), but now it is important to note that even though Wallace thinks that Wittgenstein's conclusions are "completely sound,"⁴⁰⁷ he nevertheless

⁴⁰⁴ McCaffery, "An Expanded Interview," p. 44.

⁴⁰⁵ McCaffery, "An Expanded Interview," p. 44.

⁴⁰⁶ McCaffery, "An Expanded Interview," p. 45.

⁴⁰⁷ McCaffery, "An Expanded Interview," p. 45.

sees them as setting up “the postmodern trap.” This trap was, however, to be more completely sprung in the later half of the twentieth century by French “post-structuralism.”

1.7 THE DIALECTIC OF SELF AND OTHER: HEGEL IN WALLACE

As we discussed in the previous section, Wallace’s first novel, *The Broom of the System*, was largely concerned with “the postmodern trap” of “treating reality as linguistic instead of ontological.” In a letter to Gerry Howard, his editor on *Broom*, Wallace explains that the novel is part a sort of “dialogue” on the distinction between self and other:

[A] big subplot of the book [...] is essentially a dialogue between Hegel and Wittgenstein on one hand and Heidegger and a contemporary French thinker-duo named Paul DeMan and Jacques Derrida on the other, said debate having its root in an essential self-other distinction that is perceived by both camps as less ontological/metaphysical than essentially (for Hegel and Witt) historical and cultural or (for Heidegger and DeMan and Derrida) linguistic, literary, aesthetic, and fundamentally super or metacultural.⁴⁰⁸

Derrida and (late) Wittgenstein and are certainly the more important of members of each of the two groups, and I shall discuss their role below.⁴⁰⁹ But Hegel too is an important figure for understanding Wallace’s work, and one who has been somewhat underrated. Moreover, the way in which Hegel raises the question of the isolation of the modern subject—and his way of overcoming—is essential for understanding Wallace’s reading of Derrida. In considering Hegel I will delve a bit into Hegel’s background—retracing the development of modern philosophy from Descartes to Hegel. The account is a rather conventional one, but it is necessary to remind ourselves of it in order to understand what Wallace saw in Hegel. That is, in order to see how Hegel can be read as a response to the loneliness of the modern subject.

The conjunction of Hegel and Wittgenstein on one side of the “dialogue” that Wallace sets up might seem surprising at first. Hegel, after all, is famous for claiming the possibility of a sort of divine omniscience for philosophy, whereas Wittgenstein is famous for his epistemological modesty. But Wallace sees a commonality in that for both Hegel and (late)

⁴⁰⁸ David Foster Wallace to Gerry Howard, January 19-20, 1986, cited in: Max, *Every Love Story*, p. 69.

⁴⁰⁹ Derrida in the following section (1.8), and late Wittgenstein in section 2.2.

Wittgenstein an encounter with the other (or others) is key to self-consciousness (Hegel) or language (Wittgenstein). For both of them, therefore, solipsism is incoherent, since all knowledge (or language) depends essentially on other subjects.

The Broom of the System tells the story of Lenore Stonecipher Beadsman, whose grandmother (also called Lenore Beadsman) studied under Wittgenstein at Cambridge. Lenore (the granddaughter) is heavily influenced by her grandmother's Wittgensteinian philosophy. Her brother, however, who is known as "the Antichrist" or "LaVache" (although his given name is Stonecipher), completely rejects their grandmother's influence. It is the Antichrist who makes the only explicit mentions of Hegel in the novel. The Antichrist is living at Amherst College, which Wallace attended, but instead of attending classes, he does other student's homework for them in exchange for drugs. During the novel he makes repeated mention of the fact that he is helping another student with an assignment on Hegel. The assignment is (apparently) "The Obliteration of Nature by Spirit."⁴¹⁰ The Antichrist immediately asks for his *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

While the Antichrist is the only one who makes explicit reference to Hegel's work, other characters—such as Norman Bombardini, owner of the building in which Lenore works—reflect (in distorted fashion) various phases of the dialectical movement between self and other described in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*.

But how did Wallace understand the dialectic of self and other that Hegel describes? Wallace took a class on epistemology as an undergraduate at Amherst College in the early 1980s.⁴¹¹ His professor, Willem deVries, who was later to direct Wallace's philosophy thesis, was working at the time on a monograph on Hegel's philosophy of mind.⁴¹² From deVries, Wallace would have learned an approach to Hegel from the point of view of Anglo-American

⁴¹⁰ David Foster Wallace, *The Broom of the System* (London: Abacus, 1997 [1987]), p. 222.

⁴¹¹ Max, *Every Love Story*, pp. 18-19.

⁴¹² Willem deVries, *Hegel's Theory of Mental Activity* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988). In the acknowledgements (p. xv) deVries mentions that he was working on the book during his time as an assistant professor at Amherst in the early 1980s.

philosophy of mind and epistemology. (Rather than, say, from the point of view of the American transcendentalism of Emerson).

This approach sees Hegel's philosophy of spirit/mind (*Geist*) as a response to the problems posed by the Cartesian split between the subject and the object of knowledge. As we saw above, Descartes's view of the subject was meant in part as a refutation of skepticism, but ended up supplying new plausibility to skepticism and solipsism. If the subject is radically separate from the "outside" world, and knows it only through ideas (or even symbols) that are conceived of as being "inside" the subject, then questions arise as to whether ideas correspond to any actual objects, or whether the outside world of objects (and even other supposed subjects) are merely a projection of the subject itself. As deVries puts it:

Hegel is well aware of the pressures within any representational theory, pressures that tend to cut the mind off from external reality, keeping it trapped behind a veil of ideas. Whatever semantic relation is supposed to exist between our representations and their objects, its veridicality must remain forever beyond our ken. If this worry is taken seriously, even our self-knowledge is threatened. Epistemological skepticism and the problem of the thing-in-itself are vitally linked for Hegel. Both are often motivated by entirely separating the subjective from the objective world to be cognized, by adopting a picture of the mind as an inner space populated with merely subjective representations. But then, since we have access only to our representations, we cannot independently ascertain whether they are indeed veridical representations or whether there is any relation at all between our representations and any other reality.⁴⁴³

Descartes of course had an answer to this question, but it was an answer that were not always satisfactory to his successors. Post-Cartesian thought is haunted by the threat of radical skepticism. Hegel wanted *both* to solve the epistemological quandaries that Descartes's philosophy had brought about,⁴⁴⁴ *and* to overcome the sense of alienation from the world that had been the result of Cartesian dualism (cf. 1.2 above).⁴⁴⁵

⁴⁴³ deVries, *Hegel's Theory*, p. 170.

⁴⁴⁴ Cf. Italo Testa, "Scepsis and Scepticism," in: Allegra de Laurentiis and Jeffrey Edwards (eds.), *The Bloomsbury Companion to Hegel* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 273-278.

⁴⁴⁵ Cf. Charles Taylor, *Hegel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), *passim*, but especially p. 148; Peter Kalkavage, *The Logic of Desire: An Introduction to Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit* (Philadelphia: Paul Dry Books, 2007), ch. 10, especially p. 140.

DeVries's reading of Hegel's relation to his philosophical predecessors fits with that of the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor, who also approaches Hegel from the Anglo-American tradition, and whom deVries cites in his bibliography. But he also cites the German scholar Dieter Henrich, who approaches Hegel from the perspective of questions arising from a close study of Fichte. In the following summary of Hegel's dialectic I will therefore depend on scholars such as Taylor and Henrich.

Hegel was living at the time of the Romantic reaction against Cartesian dualism, and he was in many respects sympathetic to the Romantics. But he thought that the Romantic reaction went too far into absorbing the subject into a "dark" (not fully intelligible) current underlying nature. Hegel wanted to preserve the Cartesian tradition of the rationally free subject, as it had been further developed in the century and a half since Descartes's death by figures such as Kant and Fichte. Hegel's task is thus to find a synthesis between Romanticism and rationalism.

Philosophy after Descartes had forked into two paths: a rationalist path (Spinoza, Leibniz) and an empiricist path (Locke, Hume). The two paths were joined again in the "critical" philosophy of Kant. In defending the rationality of Cartesian science against Hume's arguments against the idea of causality, Kant argues that the *phenomena*, the appearances that appear to consciousness, are structured by consciousness. The Cartesian *res extensa* is thus intelligible because its extension is a form given to it by the *res cogitans*. Pure reason (i.e. speculative reason) is limited to the explication of the phenomena; it has no access to the *noumena*, the things in themselves. Even self-knowledge does not attain to a thing in itself. The *ego* of Descartes's *cogito ergo sum* is not a thing, but merely a condition of objects appearing; it is an act of thinking that gives unity to the objects of thought.⁴¹⁶

Kant's limiting of pure reason is, however, all for the sake of giving scope to practical reason. Practical reason is devoid of any information about reality, but in its realm the subject discovers absolute autonomous freedom in the universal moral law that it gives to itself.

⁴¹⁶ Kant, who had a liking for ponderous technical vocabulary, calls it the "original synthetic unity of apperception." [*Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1996), B 131-136].

Kant's moral freedom is totally autonomous: not determined or motivated by anything, not even by a desired good, or a natural goal of perfection, or a divine lawgiver. Practical reason gives itself its own law, whose form is the mere rational form of law. Kant's philosophy is suffused with a wondering reverence for this autonomous freedom.⁴¹⁷

Kant's philosophy was developed and revised (or "corrected") by Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762-1814), and Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling (1775-1854). Fichte was enchanted by Kant's vision of moral autonomy, but was not satisfied with split between the practical and pure reason. Fichte saw a flaw in the account of self-knowledge on which Descartes had built his system, a flaw that Kant had not overcome, and that compromised the Kantian account of pure reason. If to know something is to make it the object of knowledge through an idea that stands for it, then to know oneself is to make the subject into an object. But how can the subject be identified with an object? If I am to recognize an object as myself, then I must have *already* known myself in a non-objective way.⁴¹⁸ Fichte tries to escape from this circle by saying that the self *posits* itself. That is, it does not *recognize* an already-known self in an object of consciousness, but rather brings itself into being all at once by willful identification of subject and object: "The self is that *which* it posits itself to be; and it posits itself as *that* which it is."⁴¹⁹

Fichte then makes the self-positing self the first principle of all knowledge. He rejects the Kantian idea of unknowable noumena. The phenomenal world is projected by the subject in

⁴¹⁷ See: Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft* [*Critique of Practical Reason*], Gesammelte Schriften, vol. 5 (Berlin: Königlich-Preußische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1913).

⁴¹⁸ "We become ... conscious of the consciousness of our consciousness only by making the latter a second time into an object, thereby obtaining consciousness of our consciousness, and so on *ad infinitum*. In this way, however, our consciousness is not explained, or there is consequently no consciousness at all, if one assumes it to be a state of mind or an object and thus always presupposes a subject, but never finds it. This sophistry lies at the heart of all systems hitherto, including the Kantian." [J. G. Fichte, *Schriften aus den Jahren 1790-1800*, ed. Hans Jacob (Berlin, 1937), p. 356, quoted in: Dieter Henrich, "Fichte's Original Insight," trans. David Lachterman, in: *Contemporary German Philosophy* 1 (1982), pp. 15-53, at p. 22]. Cf. Johannes Hoff, *The Analogical Turn: Rethinking Modernity with Nicholas of Cusa* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), pp. 125-126

⁴¹⁹ J.G. Fichte, *Science of Knowledge*, trans. Peter Heath and John Lachs, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 99; cf. Henrich, "Fichte's Original Insight," pp. 24-25.

order that it might have an object on which to exercise its will.⁴²⁰ He thus unifies the autonomous freedom of practical reason with the life of pure reason. Fichte thereby attempted to heal the Cartesian rift between subject and nature. But his attempt fails, because it intensifies the Cartesian emptying of nature in to mere material for domination. The physical world is produced by the subject, for Fichte, and for that very reason the subject is not at home in it.⁴²¹

Schelling was not satisfied with Fichte's attempt to escape the circle of self-knowledge by having the self posit itself all at once as the identity of subject and object. Why not say that the self as subject and as object are grounded in something beyond subjectivity and objectivity? This is what Schelling calls the Absolute. Something beyond all distinctions, an "indifference point." This absolute is the ground of all knowledge: it is what holds together the self-as-subject and the self-as-object, thus enabling all knowledge. It is not, however, itself knowable. It is, as it were, by definition unknowable, since to be known is to become an object of knowledge, and the Absolute transcends objectivity.⁴²² Nevertheless, Schelling holds that there are two ways of *approaching* this Absolute. One is by the sort of reflection on the ground of the self that I have just rehearsed. But the other is by looking into nature and discovering subjectivity arising in it. The philosophy of nature sees nature as a struggle for expression that culminates in subjectivity.⁴²³ The two approaches are united in the

⁴²⁰ See: Eva Brann, *Un-Willing: an Inquiry into the Rise of the Will's Power and an Attempt to Undo it* (Philadelphia: Paul Dry, 2014), pp. 103-110; Glenn Alexander Magee, *The Hegel Dictionary* (New York: Continuum, 2010), s.v. "Fichte, J.G."; Taylor, *Hegel*, pp. 36-37.

⁴²¹ As Hans Urs von Balthasar put it: "Fichte [is] a father of the modern technical work ethos and of 'domination over the world'. For such an external world is no longer one that God created and thus is in no way theophanous any longer, but is only the inner dimension of the self (as it were its entrails) and consequently stands utterly at its disposal: in order to be dominated and subjected." [Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, Vol. V, trans. Oliver Davies et al. (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1991) pp. 550-551].

⁴²² See: Magee, *The Hegel Dictionary*, s.v. "Schelling, F.W.J.," especially p. 209; cf. Hoff, *The Analogical Turn*, pp. 126-128 (Hoff does not there mention Schelling by name, but it is clear that he is thinking of him in addition to other critics of Fichte).

⁴²³ As Magee puts it: "...[N]ature for Fichte is really nothing more than raw material for human use. By contrast, Schelling looks at nature and asks if we might somehow discover ourselves within it—not by changing nature, per se, but by understanding it. Indeed, we find ourselves in nature everywhere. This is most obvious in the things we have in common with animals. But Schelling makes a stronger point: we must understand nature teleologically, as a great chain of being leading up to mankind and to human self-consciousness. For Schelling, transcendental idealism begins with subjectivity and asks how an object comes to be for it. In other words, it

philosophy of art, because in art exterior matter is refashioned to become an *expression* of subjectivity; this expression is, however, not arbitrary, but rather follows an inner necessity. The realization of this necessity is an intuition of the absolute that lies beyond subject and object—not theoretically but in concrete reality.⁴²⁴ Schelling thus moves in the direction of the “Romantic” reaction against rationalism.⁴²⁵

The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw the rise of a powerful reaction against Cartesian rationalism: Romanticism.⁴²⁶ The Romantics rejected the Cartesian model of cool, disengaged reason, confronted with neutral meaningless extension. But Romanticism did not return to a pre-Cartesian, teleological view of the cosmos. Rather it conceived of an inchoate “current of life” that expresses itself through living things, striving for ever-higher expression. Man’s spirit is stirred by the sublime in nature, and this allows him to “create” new expressions of spirit that articulate and bring into being what was only potential before. A crucial representative of this anti-rationalist reaction was Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744-1803). Herder developed a theory of expression as partially creative of that which it expresses. And this allowed him to reject the fundamental principles of Cartesian epistemology: the view of meaning as the correspondence of atomic mental tokens with discrete bits of reality. Rather, for Herder, knowledge is formed through expression in

follows Kant in asking in virtue of what are things given to us as objects: what are the structures of subjectivity which can make this possible? The difference is that for Schelling and for Fichte there is no thing-in-itself, which means that in some sense objects are understood to be wholly an expression of subjectivity. Philosophy of nature, on the other hand, begins from the side of the object, from nature, and asks how subjectivity comes to be within it. In other words, in philosophy of nature, Schelling begins with the recognition that human subjects show up as natural objects, and as members of a hierarchical, developmental order. He then argues that the end or goal of nature is subjectivity itself: all of nature constitutes a kind of approximation to human subjectivity, which is characterized principally by the capacity for self-reflection. Thus, we may say that for Schelling the end of nature is nature’s coming to consciousness of itself through humanity.” (Magee, *The Hegel Dictionary*, pp. 209-210.)

⁴²⁴ Magee, *The Hegel Dictionary*, pp. 210-211.

⁴²⁵ See: Taylor, *Hegel*, pp. 41-42.

⁴²⁶ Strictly speaking “Romanticism” was only one strand of this reaction, but for convenience’ sake I shall call the whole movement “Romantic,” including the pre-Romantics of the *Sturm und Drang* period, and even elements of Weimar Classicism. Charles Taylor calls the wider movement “The Expressivist Turn.” See: Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, ch. 21.

language. Language reflects on, makes explicit, and in a sense makes real, some feature of our pre-linguistic engagement with the real world.⁴²⁷

Romanticism tended toward a form of pantheism in which man was united to nature because they were both parts of the same divine current that was expressing itself. Man had a special role, however, since only in him could this expression come to perfection. As Charles Taylor shows, the emphasis on the special role given to man in the expression of spirit was connected to the felt need among many German thinkers to find a form of Romanticism that would not give up on the dignity of Kantian autonomy. The unity between man and the spirit could not be found “in some transcendent realm beyond man,” for then man would have to subordinate his will to a higher being and give up his Kantian autonomy. Rather, the spirit would come to awareness through man. “And hence men can achieve at once the greatest unity with nature, i.e., with the spirit which unfolds itself in nature, and the fullest autonomous self-expression.”⁴²⁸

Hegel shared this goal of finding at once the greatest unity with nature and the greatest autonomy, but he thought that none of the Romantic thinkers—not even the semi-Romantic Schelling—were able to achieve it. As long as “the Absolute” beyond subjectivity and objectivity was merely “intuited,” and not actually comprehended with full rational clarity, as for example in Schelling’s account or art, then the synthesis has not been achieved. The highest autonomy of self-determining freedom requires the full clarity of reason, and thus giving “intuition” the highest role amounts to a surrender of autonomy.⁴²⁹

Hegel thus set himself the task of showing how it was through the work of *reason* that the spirit came to self-consciousness in man. This coming to self-consciousness is an arduous labor. There can be no shortcut along the lines of the sort of abstract, transcendental consideration that led Schelling to speak of the “Absolute.” As Hegel argued in his famous

⁴²⁷ See: Charles Taylor, “The Importance of Herder,” in: *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp. 79-99.

⁴²⁸ Taylor, *Hegel*, p. 44.

⁴²⁹ Cf. Taylor, *Hegel*, p. 47.

put-down of Schelling's Absolute as "the night in which all cows are black,"⁴³⁰ Schelling's Absolute is a mere abstraction. This abstraction has to be realized through the "seriousness, the suffering, the patience, and the labour of the negative."⁴³¹

Applied to the individual self-consciousness, Hegel's argument can be summarized by saying that subjective self-consciousness is dependent on interaction with the world and with other subjects. To be conscious of other things I have to be able to refer them to my self, but in order to refer them to myself I must be self-conscious, and self-consciousness in the full sense depends on mutual recognition between self and others.⁴³² But this process only repeats itself in a cursory way in any human subject that comes to self-consciousness.⁴³³ The "patient labour" of which Hegel writes refers primarily to the struggle toward full self-consciousness in various historical epochs, which are interpreted as being determined by different "shapes" of self-consciousness. Initially, however, this is not clear, and the first sections of the *Phenomenology* appear to be describing the different phases of consciousness in a single subject.

The first point is that mere sensual openness to the infinite flux of nature is not sufficient for knowledge; knowledge requires the knower to distinguish herself/himself from the thing known:

⁴³⁰ Georg Wilhelm Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977) ¶16, p. 9: "Dealing with something from the perspective of the Absolute consists merely in declaring that, although one has been speaking of it just now as something definite, yet in the Absolute, the A = A, there is nothing of the kind, for there all is one. To pit this single insight, that in the Absolute everything is the same, against the full body of articulated cognition, which at least seeks and demands such fulfillment, to palm off its Absolute as the night in which, as the saying goes, all cows are black—this is cognition naïvely reduced to vacuity." *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, ed. Hans-Friedrich Wessels and Heinrich Clairmont (Hamburg: Meiner Verlag, 1988), p. 13: »Irgendein Dasein, wie es im Absoluten ist, betrachten, besteht hier in nichts anderem, als daß davon gesagt wird, es sei zwar jetzt von ihm gesprochen worden, als von einem Etwas, im Absoluten, dem A = A, jedoch gebe es dergleichen gar nicht, sondern darin sei alles eins. Dies eine Wissen, daß im Absoluten alles gleich ist, der unterscheidenden und erfüllten oder Erfüllung suchenden und fodernden Erkenntnis entgegensetzen, – oder sein Absolutes für die Nacht auszugeben, worin, wie man zu sagen pflegt, alle Kühe schwarz sind, ist die Naivität der Leere an Erkenntnis.«

⁴³¹ Hegel, *Phenomenology*, ¶19, p. 10.

⁴³² Cf. Testa, "Scepsis and Scepticism," p. 273.

⁴³³ See: Hegel, *Phenomenology*, ¶28, p. 16.

Consciousness simultaneously *distinguishes* itself from something, and at the same time *relates* itself to it, or, as it is said, this something exists *for* consciousness; and the determinate aspect of this relating, or of the *being* of something for a consciousness, is *knowing*.⁴³⁴

But the more important point is that for me to distinguish myself from what is known I must be conscious of myself, and this self-consciousness is only fully realized through a process of recognition. It is the process of realizing self-consciousness through recognition that gives the *Phenomenology* its dramatic power.

Self-consciousness is only *fully* realized through a process of recognition, because without mutual recognition the distinction between self and other is unstable and contradictory. Hegel describes how the distinction between self and other (or world) sets up two negatives: the other is the negation of the self (not-I), but the self has no positive interior content apart from the other—“behind the so-called curtain which is supposed to conceal the inner world, there is nothing to be seen.”⁴³⁵ The beginnings of self-consciousness lie in the attempt to overcome the external negative by filling the internal negative—this is what Hegel calls “desire” (*Begierde*).⁴³⁶ Desire for Hegel is not the attractive pull of a good other, but rather struggle against negativity. Desire is the will to destroy the other in order to affirm the self:

[S]elf-consciousness is [...] certain of itself only by superseding this other that presents itself to self-consciousness as an independent life; self-consciousness is Desire. Certain of the nothingness of this other, it explicitly affirms that this nothingness is *for it* the truth of the other; it destroys the independent object and thereby gives itself the certainty of itself[.]⁴³⁷

⁴³⁴ Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶82; p. 52; *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, ed. Hans-Friedrich Wessels and Heinrich Clairmont (Hamburg: Meiner Verlag, 1988), 58; p. 64: “Dieses unterscheidet nämlich etwas von sich, worauf es sich zugleich bezieht; oder wie dies ausgedrückt wird, es ist etwas für dasselbe; und die bestimmte Seite dieses Beziehens, oder des Seins von etwas für ein Bewußtsein ist das Wissen.”

⁴³⁵ Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶165; p. 103; *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, 102; p. 118.

⁴³⁶ “[T]he unity of self-consciousness with itself [...] must become essential to self-consciousness, i.e. self-consciousness is *Desire* in general. Consciousness, as self-consciousness, henceforth has a double object: one is the immediate object, that of sense-certainty and perception, which however *for self-consciousness* has the character of a *negative*; and the second, viz. *itself*, which is the true *essence*, and is present in the first instance only as opposed to the first object.” (Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶167; p. 105; *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, 104; pp. 121-122).

⁴³⁷ Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶174; p. 109.

As Peter Kalkavage has argued,⁴³⁸ Hegel is here radicalizing a fundamental break that modern philosophy made with ancient and medieval thought. For ancient philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle, and for medieval writers such as Dante, desire was seen as being called into being by the goodness of the things desired—things are desired because they are good. But in modern times a shift is made: desire is primary, and things are called good only because they are its objects. In Dante's cosmos human beings are seen as related to all things, and their desire is for the attainment of goods much higher than themselves—ultimately God as the highest good. But in the modern cosmos man is a stranger and the external world is his negation. Hence desire is for overcoming strangeness. Hegel thus sees incipient self-consciousness as initially *egocentric*. As Kalkavage puts it:

The nothing I “see” when I look within, the nothing of self-intuition, is my infinite restlessness or anxiety. This is the core of my selfhood, which feels its difference from all objects and longs to destroy them in order to make itself the only reality. Desire is subjectivity in its raw, most immediate form. It is not a being *drawn out* by an object's apparent goodness, much less its beauty, but a being *driven from within* by a dynamic nothingness that compels me to fill the void that is myself and transform it into a something. This understanding of desire makes it clear that the self for Hegel is its own end.⁴³⁹

Wallace parodies this initial phase of the coming-to-be of self-consciousness in the figure of Norman Bombardini, the owner of the building in which Lenore Beadsman works in *The Broom of the System*. Bombardini is a clownish figure, who conceives of the absurd plan of eating the entire universe. The universe, he argues in typical post-Cartesian terms, is neatly divided between the subject and the object, the self and the other:

[F]or each of us the universe is deeply and sharply and completely divided into for example in my case, me, on one side, and everything else, on the other. This for each of us exhaustively defines the whole universe, Vigorous. The whole universe. Self and Other.⁴⁴⁰

And Bombardini sees the potential for a “Great Horror” here: the horror of loneliness, “an empty, rattling personal universe” in which one is alone with oneself, divided by “vast empty lonely spaces” from others. And he sees two solutions to this problem. The first, represented

⁴³⁸ Kalkavage, *Logic of Desire*, pp. 102-104.

⁴³⁹ Kalkavage, *The Logic of Desire*, p. 103.

⁴⁴⁰ Wallace, *The Broom of the System*, p. 90.

by “dieting,” is to diminish the self in order to invite others into one’s own proximity. But the second is to increase the self by ingesting the other. As he puts it in a conversation with Lenore and her lover:

“What should I do with these mints, here?”

“I’ll just take the bowl, thank you. Rather than diminishing Self to entice Other to fill our universe, we may also of course obviously choose to fill the universe with Self.”

“You mean ... ?”

“Yes. I plan to grow to infinite size.”⁴⁴¹

Bradley J. Fest has suggested reading Bombardini as being on the Derrida side of the “dialogue” in *The Broom of the System*,⁴⁴² and gives good reasons for doing so. I would suggest, however, that the Derridean and Heglian/Wittgensteinian sides of the dialogue of *Broom* ought not to be neatly distributed among the characters. Rather, both sides of the dialogue pull at each of the characters. I think that the parallels between Bombardini’s absurd project and Hegel’s description of *desire* sufficiently show that there is a Hegelian pull on Bombardini.

The initial stage of Hegelian desire that Bombardini has reached is obviously unstable. Destroying the other does not give satisfaction to desire. Even if Bombardini were to ingest the whole world, he would not thereby fill up the emptiness of the self. He would still be lonely—only more imperially alone than before. Hence Hegel describes desire as turning into a desire to be recognized as absolute by another consciousness. Desire wishes to be known by the other not as a mere object, but as a subject.

But this desire leads in the first place to a struggle with the other. In the other one sees oneself (the subject, the center of the world) apart from oneself. This leads to anxiety, envy, and anger. From this arises a struggle to the death, but this struggle is fruitless, since killing the other means that the other cannot recognize the self. In the most famous section of the

⁴⁴¹ Wallace, *The Broom of the System*, p. 91.

⁴⁴² See: Bradley J. Fest, “‘Then Out of the Rubble’: The Apocalypse in David Foster Wallace’s Early Fiction,” in: *Studies in the Novel* 44.3 (2012), pp. 284-303.

Phenomenology “Lordship and Bondage” (or “Master and Slave”), Hegel describes how consciousness moves beyond this fruitless struggle when the other gives up the struggle and becomes a slave. Hegel is thinking here on the one hand of historical slaves, who generally became slaves after surrendering in war. But, on the other hand, he is also thinking of the psychological process of self-realization in individuals, where something like that historical dynamic must be repeated at a microcosmic level. For the master (both literal and figurative), the surrender of the slave is still relatively fruitless, since the recognition that the master receives from the slave is worthless. Paradoxically, it is the slave that makes the most progress in this movement. The slave knows subjectivity positively in the master, but he knows it also negatively in himself. Through the fear that has forced him to give up all external independence, the slave realizes that he is a being for himself, and thus attains to a certain paradoxical independence:

But this pure universal movement, the absolute melting-away of everything stable, is the simple, essential nature of self-consciousness, absolute negativity, *pure being-for-self* which consequently is *implicit* in this consciousness.⁴⁴³

In working for the master, the slave produces external artifacts, which give an objective expression to his internal being: “in fashioning the thing, he becomes aware that being-for-self belongs to *him*, that he himself exists essentially and actually in his own right.”⁴⁴⁴

Clare Hayes-Brady has shown that Wallace made use of Hegel’s master-slave dialectic in describing relationships throughout his work: especially the relationships between men and women.⁴⁴⁵ She argues this dialectic is present in the early part of *Broom of the System* in the relation between Lenore and her lover Rick Vigorous. Vigorous tries to dominate Lenore, but she is the one who ends up taking control and becoming independent.⁴⁴⁶

⁴⁴³ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶194; p. 117.

⁴⁴⁴ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶196; p. 118.

⁴⁴⁵ Clare Hayes-Brady, “. . .’: Language, Gender, and Modes of Power in the Work of David Foster Wallace,” in: Marshall Boswell and Stephen J. Burn (eds.), *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), pp. 131-150.

⁴⁴⁶ Hayes-Brady, “. . .’,” p. 144.

The Antichrist in *Broom of the System* seems to be at a later stage of Hegel's story, the stage that he calls "stoicism," after such historical stoics as Epictetus. The stoic is the cultured slave, who realizes the independence of his own thought. He withdraws mentally from the constraints of the external world, and finds freedom in his own abstract thinking.⁴⁴⁷ This freedom is, however, empty and tedious, since it lacks engagement with reality. In *Broom of the System* the Antichrist has withdrawn from engagement with his family, since he feels unfree in relation to them, but his life as a drug addict and ghostwriter of other people's homework and has no positive relation to the world. He is *alienated*, estranged from reality. Hence the Hegel assignment that he agrees to write, "The Obliteration of Nature by Spirit," is a *challenge* to his position.⁴⁴⁸

For nature to be *obliterated* by spirit means for the objective world to cease being strange, for it to be taken up by subjectivity, for it to become an expression of the subject's "spirit." Not in the absurd manner of Bombardini's ingestion of the world, but by a rational process. As Charles Taylor puts it:

What is aimed at is integral expression, a consummation where the external reality which embodies us and on which we depend is fully expressive of us and contains nothing alien. This goal, which we can call a state of total integrity, is identified by Hegel with his conception of infinity, a condition in which the subject is not limited by anything outside. It is this longing for total integrity which for Hegel underlies the striving of self-consciousness, at first after crude and unrealizable versions of the goal, then when man has been educated and elevated by conflict and contradiction, after the real thing.⁴⁴⁹

For Hegel, a key step towards this total integrity comes through Christianity. In monotheistic religion, the alienation of man from reality is heightened by the complete transcendence of God as the other. But in Christianity, God "emptied himself, taking the form of a slave"

⁴⁴⁷ See: Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶¶197-201; pp. 119-122.

⁴⁴⁸ As Jeffrey Severs points out, the Antichrist seems to have misunderstood the assignment which should actually be "The *Observation* of Nature by Spirit"—a heading which would be much less of a challenge to the Antichrist. [Severs, *David Foster Wallace's Balancing Books*, pp. 54-56]. *Obliteration* has a sinister ring to it, but it does capture something about Hegel's project.

⁴⁴⁹ Taylor, *Hegel*, p. 148.

(Phillipians 2:7). This in turn allows man to become one with God, to be fully recognized.⁴⁵⁰

Thus the alienation is overcome.

But in Christianity the recognition of humanity is still expressed in metaphors. The true goal comes about at the final stage of the dialectic of self and other, in the rationalized version of Christianity that is the liberal society with its ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity. In a liberal society different subjects mutually recognize each other as subjects possessing rights. Only such mutual recognition allows for a stable self-consciousness, and therefore also the ability properly to distinguish the self from other selves and from nature—consciousness of the world. And in such mutuality other selves are no longer strangers, but sharers in the same rationality, and the objective world itself as seen as rational. Only in Hegel's own philosophy is this possibility, opened up by liberal society, fully realized. His philosophy is "absolute knowing" (*Das absolute Wissen*), in which alienation of modern persons, expressed in the Cartesian split between subject and object, is overcome, and total integrity is achieved. (Note that integrity is not *restored*—one does not return to a naïve, pre-modern, organic social unity—but *achieved*).

Predictably, Wallace was somewhat ambivalent towards Hegel's audacious claim of having solved the problem of human loneliness through an engaged, dialectical process of coming to absolute knowledge. On the one hand, he was fascinated by the idea of a true sense of self involving the recognition of others. (A point to which I will return in the context of considering Wallace's engagement with Jacques Lacan). But on the other hand, he recoiled from Hegel's totalizing claims.

In *Broom of the System* Lenore's relation to her second lover, Andrew Lang, seems in part to hint at a positive achievement of the integrity-through-dialectic sought by Hegel. But such a reading must be complicated both by the Wittgensteinian element in their relation, and by the ambiguous end of the novel in which it is not really clear whether Lenore has arrived at a stable sense of self.

⁴⁵⁰ See: Taylor, *Hegel*, ch. 7; cf. Nicholas Adams, *Eclipse of Grace: Divine and Human Action in Hegel* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2013) pp. 39-44.

In *Infinite Jest*, as I have already noted (1.5), Gerhard Schtitt's ethic is described as "Kantian-Hegelian." The reference to Hegel comes in the context of a conversation between Schtitt and Mario Incandenza, the handicapped son of the founder of the tennis academy. Mario is puzzled by Schtitt's insistence on the subordination of the individual to a greater whole, and wants to know how it *works* in a game like tennis, which (apparently) consists merely of two individuals competing against each other. The narrator paraphrases Schtitt's explanation in the following highly Hegelian terms:

The true opponent, the enfolding boundary, is the player himself. Always and only the self out there, on court, to be met, fought, brought to the table to hammer out terms. The competing boy on the net's other side: he is not the foe: he is more the partner in the dance. He is the what is the word *excuse* or *occasion* for meeting the self. As you are his occasion. Tennis's beauty's infinite roots are self-competitive. You compete with your own limits to transcend the self in imagination and execution. Disappear inside the game: break through limits: transcend: improve: win. Which is why tennis is an essentially tragic enterprise, to improve and grow as a serious junior, with ambitions. You seek to vanquish and transcend the limited self whose limits make the game possible in the first place. It is tragic and sad and chaotic and lovely. All life is the same, as citizens of the human State: the animating limits are within, to be killed and mourned, over and over again.⁴⁵¹

In Schtitt's student Hal Incandenza this pedagogy does not appear to be successful. Hal (as we shall see in section 1.8.2 below Jacques Lacan's Hegel-influenced psychology) appears to be stuck in the phase of consciousness that Hegel calls "the beautiful soul," cut off from the world. But even if Schtitt's pedagogy *were* successful, there is something that should give us pause. Hegel's philosophy was intended to be a *liberal*, but in Schtitt (as in so many Hegelians both of the right and of the left), its totalizing claims led into a totalitarian politics. Hence Wallace's wariness of such Hegelian solutions to the problem of modern loneliness. Schtitt's values do indeed "anchor nicely the soul and course of a life,"⁴⁵² but they do so at a certain cost. Hegel, in other words, does not really escape the double-bind of loneliness and giving away the self.

The double-bind means that there will be an oscillation between the two alternatives. By trying to escape loneliness in a manner that comes to close to totalitarianism, Hegel ensures

⁴⁵¹ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 84.

⁴⁵² Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 82.

that lonely will reappear in a new way. As Adam Kelly has argued, the totalizing integrity envisioned by Hegel prevents the other from being respected as other. Everything is subsumed under a universalizing *Geist*, so that Hegel is closer to the solipsism that his dialectic is supposed to overcome than one might think. As Kelly puts it:

Schmitt's neo-Hegelian understanding of the relationship between self and other also denies the true existence of another who is not simply the occasion for meeting the self; this position is uncomfortably close to what Wallace will elsewhere say he most fears, the trap of solipsism.⁴⁵³

This denial of the true existence of the other, this comprehension of the other in total understanding of the world was one of the strands of high-modern philosophy that so-called postmodern philosophers protested against with great passion. To Wallace, however, their protest led into another sort of trap.

1.8 "THAT DANGEROUS SUPPLEMENT:" WALLACE'S USE OF JACQUES DERRIDA

1.8.1 Difference and the violence of reason

As we saw in the previous section, Wallace described his first novel to its editor as being largely the expression, through fiction, of a dialogue on the meaning of the distinction between self and other with Hegel and Wittgenstein on one side of the dialogue, and Martin Heidegger, Paul DeMan and the Algerian-French philosopher Jacques Derrida on the other. Derrida is probably the most important voice in the second group. Summarizing his description of the dialogue in a later interview with David Lipsky for *Rolling Stone*, Wallace omits all the names save Wittgenstein on the one hand and Derrida on the other: "[T]he entire book is a conversation between Wittgenstein and Derrida, and presence versus absence."⁴⁵⁴

⁴⁵³ Adam Kelly, "The Map and the Territory: Infinite Boston," in: *The Millions*, August 13, 2013: <http://www.themillions.com/2013/08/the-map-and-the-territory-infinite-boston.html> (accessed October 29, 2016).

⁴⁵⁴ Lipsky, *Although of Course*, p. 35.

In a letter written near the end of his life to William Kennick, who had taught him philosophy at Amherst, Wallace expresses a nuanced view of Derrida and his reception in American literary theory. He says that he finds elements of “early Derrida” (and Derrida’s friend Paul DeMan) “interesting,” but expressed frustration with the superficial understanding of Derrida typical of American humanities students, and the way in which they teach certain supposed theses of Derrida’s as dogma: “I cannot tell you how dispiriting it is to have grad students spout theory dogma as revealed truth, or to pretend to ‘understand’ Derrida without having read Heidegger or Husserl.”⁴⁵⁵ Wallace, it seems, was convinced that Derrida had important things to say, but found the use that was often made of Derrida pernicious.

Derrida’s work had “enormous influence” in American universities during Wallace’s student years, and Wallace’s reading of Derrida owes much to the particular American interpretations of Derrida fashionable at the time.⁴⁵⁶ The first two “waves” of American interpretations of Derrida by literary theorists and philosophers read him as a radical skeptic focusing one aspect of Derrida’s thought, and not giving much attention to the ethical element. Whereas the third “wave” focused on the ethical dimension of his work.⁴⁵⁷ It is important to note that the “waves” should not be taken to refer to distinct periods in Derrida’s own thought, but rather to distinct periods in Derrida’s reception in the United States. The waves sometimes have been taken to refer to a development in Derrida from early language-focused works to the “late” Derrida of the so-called “ethical turn.” But such an interpretation cannot really be sustained. As Joshua Kates has argued, the first “wave” of American interpretations of Derrida that associated Derrida with the terms “deconstruction” (which Derrida himself used) and post-structuralism (which he did not) was not entirely

⁴⁵⁵ David Foster Wallace to William Kennick, 20 February 2002. MS, William E. Kennick Papers, Amherst College Library, Amherst. Cited in: Marshall Boswell and Stephen J. Burn (eds.), *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. ix.

⁴⁵⁶ See: Allard den Dulk, *Existentialist Engagement in Wallace, Eggers, and Foer: a Philosophical Analysis of American Literature* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 89.

⁴⁵⁷ See: Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas*, 3rd ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), pp. 1-3.

wrong, but it was partial.⁴⁵⁸ Indeed, any interpretation of Derrida will be partial, since Derrida's work consciously resists "final" interpretations—it embodies Derrida's view of language as a chain of signs in which meaning is always shifting, moving, and being deferred. But Derrida's whole project had strongly ethical character from the first.

The so-called "deconstruction" of the philosophical tradition that Derrida undertook can be read in part as an *ethical* protest against the totalizing tendency of Hegelian philosophy discussed in the last section. Already in 1964 Derrida published an essay on the thought of Emmanuel Levinas, in which he outlines his main concern with reference to Hegel. He does this through a critical examination of Emmanuel Levinas's radically ethical critique of Hegel and the philosophical tradition. Derrida summarizes Levinas's concept of desire, in a way that shows his partial sympathy for its critique of Hegel:

This concept of desire is as anti-Hegelian as it can possibly be. It does not designate a movement of negation and assimilation, the negation of alterity first necessary in order to become "self-consciousness" "certain of itself" (*Phenomenology of the Mind* and *Encyclopedia*). For Levinas, on the contrary, desire is the respect and knowledge of the other as other, the ethico-metaphysical moment whose transgression consciousness must forbid itself.⁴⁵⁹

For Levinas the truly ethical stance is not to overcome the strangeness of the other assimilating the other into a shared totality, but rather to respect the other as other—to accept, in other words, that the other is always different from me and never entirely comprehensible to my knowledge. Many interpreters of Derrida have read him as in basic agreement with Levinas on this point. And they can point to a much later work, in which Derrida was to coin the famous expression "*tout autre est tout autre*," "every other (one) is

⁴⁵⁸ Kates, *Fielding Derrida*, ch. 1; Cf. Martin Hägglund, *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), p. 77: "A recurrent topos in contemporary discourse is to locate a 'turn' toward the ethical in Derrida's later texts. Such a narrative is misleading not only because it fails to consider that ethical questions have been a major concern for Derrida ever since his first books, but also because it disregards how the logic of deconstruction transforms the fundamental axioms that inform the discussion of ethics." The last point is key. Derrida's work has, in a sense, always been ethical, but it has never been ethical in the sense in which those who think he took an "ethical turn" think.

⁴⁵⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 1978), ch. 4, "Violence and Metaphysics," at pp. 114-115. This essay was originally published as: "*Violence et métaphysique: Essai sur la pensée d'Emmanuel Levinas*," in: *Revue de métaphysique et de morale*, 3-4 (1964).

every (bit) other.”⁴⁶⁰ The other is completely, wholly other, and the self must regard the other with the reverence with which Abraham revered the unknowable God, not trying to assimilate him to the self. But, as Martin Hägglund has argued, Derrida did not agree with Levinas that a wholly non-violent, non-transgressive relation to others was possible. Finitude, vulnerability, temporality, mark every encounter with the other, and therefore we are always violating and being violated “excluding and being excluded.”⁴⁶¹ Thus, Derrida notes, “every philosophy of nonviolence can only choose the lesser violence within an *economy of violence*.”⁴⁶²

Nevertheless, Derrida’s pursuit of the “lesser violence” does make him converge with Levinas in wanting to undo the greater violence that he saw in the claims to knowing the other which he found in the Western philosophical tradition, and especially in Hegel. Derrida’s relation to Hegel is complicated by the fact that he thinks that Hegel has routinely been misread. To Derrida, Hegel’s work itself deconstructs its own claims.⁴⁶³ Nevertheless, Derrida does attack the claims to total knowledge apparently made by Hegel. And he does so by reviving and radicalizing the sort of skeptical unravelings of Cartesian epistemology that Hegel had attempted to refute. In doing so he develops his own theory of language. I will attempt the main features of Derrida’s account of language (especially as interpreted in the first wave of American interpretation). I will show that the description of language that Derrida develops, and the skeptical conclusions that he draws from it relate closely to the problems of symbolic abstraction that Wallace found so fascinating (cf. section 1.6 above). I shall go into a certain amount of detail in this explanation, before turning to the use that Wallace makes of Derrida’s work. A consideration of the details is necessary, since it is precisely the details of Derrida’s work to which Wallace responds, and which show why he thinks that a “dialogue” could be imagined between Derrida on one side and Wittgenstein and Hegel on the other.

⁴⁶⁰ Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 82.

⁴⁶¹ Hägglund, *Radical Atheism*, p. 82.

⁴⁶² Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 400, note 21.

⁴⁶³ See: Stuart Barnett (ed.), *Hegel After Derrida* (London: Routledge, 1998).

In America, Derrida was known as a “post-structuralist” because he was seen as both radicalizing and in some sense moving “beyond” the structural linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure, and the structuralist anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauss. At a famous conference in Baltimore in 1966 at Johns Hopkins University, Derrida delivered a lecture entitled “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” which is often taken as the beginning of “post-structuralism.”⁴⁶⁴

From Saussure’s structural linguistics Derrida had taken the idea that the meaning of signs is not atomic and representational, but systemic and differential. What does that mean? Saussure had been critical of all representational accounts of the meaning of signs. That is, accounts, based on a one-to-one correspondence of a sign to something signified. He was thus critical of accounts such as that given by the early Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus*, in which “atomic” propositions have meaning from a one-to-one correspondence with “atomic facts,” which they picture, or of earlier accounts in which individual words have their meaning from one-to-one correspondence with ideas, conceived of as picturing objects in the world. As I have pointed out above (1.6.2 and 1.7), Descartes’s theory of meaning had been such a “representational” account, and at least partly through Descartes’s influence such theories came to be dominant in Western thought. John Locke’s highly influential account in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* diverged from Descartes’s in a number of ways, but retained the basic structure: an idea pictures/represents/responds to a definite object, and then a word corresponds to that idea. The *Tractatus* again diverges from Locke in that propositions representing facts take the place of words representing definite objects. But all such accounts share an “atomic” structure: the meaning of a sign can be determined entirely with respect to its referent, without recourse to a wider system of signs.⁴⁶⁵

⁴⁶⁴ See: Benoît Peeters, *Jacques Derrida: A Biography*, trans. Andrew Brown (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), pp.166-169.

⁴⁶⁵ Cf. Hubert Dreyfus and Charles Taylor, *Retrieving Realism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), especially ch. 1.

Derrida attributes such an atomic account of meaning to pre-Cartesian thinkers such as Plato and Aristotle, but as Joshua Kates and others have suggested, Derrida's account only really fits the form of conceptualization initiated by Descartes.⁴⁶⁶ Charles Taylor and Hubert Dreyfus have recently sketched out the differences between the atomic, representational account of meaning found in modern philosophy (after Descartes) with that of ancient thinkers. Aristotle's account of meaning (for example) is neither representational nor atomic. On his account, the intellect is directly united to the substantial form of the thing known.⁴⁶⁷ The form is thus directly known, not pictured. Moreover, as Taylor and Dreyfus point out, the modern atomic theory of meaning requires the concepts signified (or rather symbolized) to be "clearly defined, explicit elements."⁴⁶⁸ But for Aristotle the form is grasped and expressed in a confused way, so that words express confused wholes and not clear and distinct concepts.

Cartesian and post-Cartesian atomic/representational accounts of meaning are thus intimately related to Cartesian symbolic abstraction (cf. section 1.6.2 above); one-to-one correspondence between symbol and distinct, conceptual element allows symbols to stand in for their referents. Saussure, however, saw that the logic of symbolic conceptualization has not been fully worked out in atomic/representational accounts of meaning. Recall Sean Collins's point about symbolic abstraction to which I alluded above: the Cartesian symbol signifies that which has existence, or which is marked off as a unity, by the very act of symbolizing. Thus Saussure argues that a sign is produced by the arbitrary union of a "signifier" (think: symbol) and a "signified," meaning a concept that is marked out and constituted in its unity by the very act of being joined to a signifier. As Saussure writes:

⁴⁶⁶ Kates, *Fielding Derrida*, p. 111: "[M]ay not some part of the symptomology that Derrida assigns to the totality of thought and knowledge, to philosophy both ancient and modern, better be seen as a result of the modern formation in its specificity?" The theologians John Milbank and Catherine Pickstock make a similar point: "[T]he Derridean sign [...] substitutes an universalized, autonomous and impersonal *mathesis* for language as such [...] grammatically-speaking, the Derridean sign, in privileging absence, which becomes after all the superlative present object, is cast in the indicative mood of the present tense, which is the very prototype of all language, only for a specifically Cartesian linguistics." [John Milbank and Catherine Pickstock, *Truth in Aquinas* (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 78]. One can of course qualify this by noting that Descartes's conceptualization was in some ways anticipated by medieval nominalism.

⁴⁶⁷ Dreyfus and Taylor, *Retrieving Realism*, pp. 17-18.

⁴⁶⁸ Dreyfus and Taylor, *Retrieving Realism*, p. 11.

Psychologically our thought—apart from its expression in words—is only a shapeless and indistinct mass. Philosophers and linguists have always agreed in recognizing that without the help of signs we would be unable to make a clear-cut, consistent distinction between two ideas. Without language, thought is a vague, uncharted nebula. There are no pre-existing ideas, and nothing is distinct before the appearance of language.⁴⁶⁹

This chaotic conceptual material is cut up and divided by the joining of arbitrary sections of sound to arbitrary sections of thought. A “sign” in Saussure’s sense is thus the imposition of a sensible signifier on a conceptual signified, in such a way that each gives unity and determination to the other:

The characteristic role of language with respect to thought is not to create a material phonic means for expressing ideas but to serve as a link between thought and sound, under conditions that of necessity bring about the reciprocal delimitations of units. [...] Language works out its units while taking shape between two shapeless masses.⁴⁷⁰

If words stood for pre-existing concepts, Saussure argues, one would find words with exactly equivalent concepts across all languages. But this is not what we find—as all translators know. Different languages cut up the conceptual material differently. Signs are thus arbitrary in a double sense: it is arbitrary that the sound “mutton” refer to the concept of sheep’s meat, but it is also arbitrary that the *meat* of the sheep should be marked out as its own concept; other languages call a sheep and its meat by the same name. Given this double arbitrariness of signs, an atomic theory of meaning—in which the meaning of a sign is entirely determined by its referent—of signs, does not make sense. The signifier marks out what it signifies, and the signified marks out the signifier—there is no pre-determinate element on which one can rest the meaning. Saussure therefore rejects the atomic account of meaning. He argues that signs have meaning from their place in a *system* of signs—specifically, from their *difference* from other signs in the system. “*Arbitrary* and *differential* are two correlative

⁴⁶⁹ Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, ed. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, trans. Wade Baskin (New York: Philosophical Library, 1959), pp. 111-112.

⁴⁷⁰ Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, p. 112.

qualities.⁴⁷¹ It is only by looking at how a particular sign differs from other signs that are near it in a system—whether by similarity or opposition—that one can determine its meaning.⁴⁷²

The doubly arbitrary nature of signs is what allows Saussure to say that they are independent of the objects designated, in the passage that (as we noted above) Wallace repeatedly quoted. It is worth looking at the passage with a bit of context:

By independent symbol, we mean those categories of symbols which have the crucial characteristic of lacking *any type of visible* link with the designated object, and hence of being incapable of depending on it, even indirectly, for their own evolution. [...] What philosophers and logicians have missed here is that *with the action of time* a system of symbols *independent* of the designated objects is itself bound to undergo shifts which *the logician cannot calculate*[...] ⁴⁷³

The independence of the sign from the object designated, and the consequent tendency of semiotic systems to “shift” are points that Derrida presses much further than Saussure. Derrida argues that Saussure, and structuralists such as Lévy-Strauss who applied his analysis of semiotic systems to all forms of human culture, could never quite escape the referential picture of meaning that they sought to supersede.

Derrida argues that all of thought, from antiquity to the present, has proposed a “metaphysics of presence,” in which things “give themselves” to consciousness as fully present in which “to be” is to be present: “The history of metaphysics [...] is the determination of Being as presence in all senses of this word.”⁴⁷⁴ This metaphysics of presence has been expressed in an idea of signs as words, which speak a content that is thus fully present in them. Moreover, Derrida argues, the metaphysics of presence sees the world as a fully present and complete structure, which insofar as it is present is regarded as static. The world is “the book of nature” and science consists in re-saying what has already been said by the eternal *logos*. Hence, Derrida thinks that the “metaphysics of presence” is

⁴⁷¹ Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, p. 118.

⁴⁷² I am abstracting here from Saussure’s distinction between meaning and value.

⁴⁷³ Ferdinand de Saussure, *Writings in General Linguistics*, ed. Simon Bouquet and Rudolf Engler, trans. Carol Sanders and Matthew Pires (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 145. (Note that the translation differs slightly from Wallace’s).

⁴⁷⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 353.

logocentric in a double sense: first because it privileges the spoken word (*logos*) in its immediacy and simultaneity with what it speaks over the written word as a perduring, material thing that can outlast and supplant what it signifies; and second, it is logocentric because it sees an ordering reason (*logos*) to the total structure of the world that orders all truth, and makes the world comprehensible. We can see that second sense of logocentric very clearly in Hegel. As we saw (1.7), Hegel sees the whole of reality as the expression of *Geist* or *logos*.

Derrida uses Saussure's differential theory of meaning to critique the metaphysics of presence, but he also tries to show that Saussure and his followers have not really escaped from it. For one thing, Derrida shows that the joining of signifier and signified in Saussure is questionable. Derrida sees here a remnant of the atomic theory of meaning, and the metaphysics of presence that cannot be justified. For how is the signifier present in the signified? Is it not rather absent? As Terry Eagleton puts it in a popular presentation of the first wave of Derrida interpretation: "If structuralism divided the sign from the referent [...] post-structuralism [...] divides the signifier from the signified."⁴⁷⁵ If meaning is *differential* then it is also *differed*. That is, to grasp the meaning of one sign one has to look at other signs from which it differs, and to which it is related as similar or dissimilar or opposed or synonymous, but that means that the meaning of one sign is not *present* in that sign: "Since the meaning of a sign is a matter of what the sign is *not*, its meaning is always in some sense absent from it too."⁴⁷⁶ Meaning leads to a kind of chain of *differences* that are at the same time *deferrals*, putting-offs, delays of the meaning. Derrida invented the word "*différance*" to express this double function.⁴⁷⁷ But where could such a system end? Derrida argues that structuralists have no warrant for supposing that there is an end. Structuralism tends to suppose that a whole semiotic structure is "given" as a totality in the present. But Derrida counters that the structure is in fact always being brought into being, always incomplete, and always being extended by what he calls "writing." Writing means the production of

⁴⁷⁵ Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, p. 111.

⁴⁷⁶ Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, p. 111.

⁴⁷⁷ See: Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1982), p. 2.

material signifiers, whose meaning shifts as one looks from them toward the endless chain of signifiers from which they differ. The meaning is contextual, but the context is never complete it is always being extended or erased. There is a sort of “play” of shifting meaning in the structure of signs that is never brought to rest.

In his famous 1966 lecture at John Hopkins University, Derrida argues that structuralists such as Lévy-Strauss have always tended to understand structure in terms of a fixed point, a “center” around which everything is ordered. But such a center could be not be a part of the system, because then it would itself be subject to the shifting of meaning. Could it be outside the structure? Derrida argues that to posit a center that transcends the structure would be to fall back into a logocentric metaphysics of presence—whether that center is seen as an origin (*archē*) or goal (*telos*), whether it is seen as God or man or substance or consciousness or transcendent essence, it is always “an invariable presence.”⁴⁷⁸

Instead, Derrida seems to argue, one must accept that the center is always absent, and so there is no closure to the play of meaning, no meaning can be fully determined:

There are thus two interpretations of interpretation, of structure, of sign, of play. The one seeks to decipher, dreams of deciphering a truth or an origin which escapes play and the order of the sign, and which lives the necessity of interpretation as an exile. The other, which is no longer turned toward the origin, affirms play and tries to pass beyond man and humanism, the name of man being the name of that being who, throughout the history of metaphysics or of ontotheology—in other words, throughout his entire history—has dreamed of full presence, the reassuring foundation, the origin and the end of play.⁴⁷⁹

Derrida’s point here was often understood in a relativistic and nihilistic sense: there is no subject and no object of knowledge, there is only an endless indeterminate play of differed meaning. This interpretation seemed to be confirmed by his important 1967 book *Of Grammatology*. *Of Grammatology* contains the most famous and/or infamous line of Derrida’s work: “there is nothing outside the text.”⁴⁸⁰ This line occurs in two slightly different

⁴⁷⁸ Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 353.

⁴⁷⁹ Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, pp. 369-370.

⁴⁸⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1997), pp. 158, 163.

versions in the French, although they are both given the same rendering in English. The first, “*il n’y a pas de hors-texte*,”⁴⁸¹ is more often cited, and is sometimes rendered “there is no outside-text.” But for my purposes the more interesting occurrence comes six pages later: “*il n’y a rien hors du texte*.”⁴⁸² What does this mean? One way of understanding it is to say that the being of the world “gives”⁴⁸³ itself to us only as carved up by a chain of difference, never as simply present, always as dependent on a context, a context that is not complete and static, but rather incomplete and shifting. By “text” Derrida means not only words printed on pages, but any human cultural structure. Such systems can be analyzed as semiotic structures, as Lévy Strauss did. For example, if one finds a coin on the street, one sees the coin not simply as a present object, but as an object given meaning by the differential semiotic structure known as “the economy.”

The first wave interpretation of “there is nothing outside the text” shows why Wallace thought it was important to bring Derrida into debate with Wittgenstein. Recall Wallace’s characterization of “the postmodern trap” as treating the world as “a linguistic construct,” which would mean denying oneself “an existence independent of language,” treating “reality as linguistic instead of ontological.”⁴⁸⁴ This is precisely how first wave interpreters read Derrida. It is important to note that Derrida, like Wittgenstein, was deeply influenced by modern mathematical symbolism. In *Of Grammatology* he writes:

Within cultures practicing so-called phonetic writing, mathematics is not just an enclave. [...] This enclave is also the place where the practice of scientific language challenges intrinsically and with increasing profundity the ideal of phonetic writing and all its implicit metaphysics (metaphysics *itself*) [.]⁴⁸⁵

⁴⁸¹ Jacques Derrida, *De la grammatologie* (Paris: Minuit, 1967) p. 227.

⁴⁸² Derrida, *De la grammatologie*, p. 233.

⁴⁸³ The Heideggerian resonances here are intentional. Derrida’s phrase is actually more intelligible in German translation: “*daß es [...] nichts außerhalb des Textes gibt*” [Jacques Derrida, *Grammatologie*, trans. Hans-Jörg Rheinberger and Hanns Zischler (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1974), p. 281.] The German idiom *es gibt*, is usually translated “it is,” but literally means “it gives.”

⁴⁸⁴ McCaffery, “An Expanded Interview,” p. 45.

⁴⁸⁵ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 10.

It is thus for Derrida precisely the symbolic abstraction of mathematic structures that enables him to challenge the atomic/representational theory of meaning. As Joshua Kates argues, Derrida's idea of "writing" (*écriture*) is a response to the "eruption of the radically symbolic" initiated by Viète and Descartes, and described by Jacob Klein, a "dissolution and reconfiguration of referents, itself stemming from a form of technique." Derridean *écriture* is thus a way of following to its conclusions the symbolic conception of language:

Derridean *écriture*, that is, grasps in its most comprehensive dimensions the ability of representation to produce the represented that signally emerges at this crossroads in the history of mathematics that Klein uniquely identifies.⁴⁸⁶

First wave interpretations of Derrida tended to see his idea of writing and text as relativizing all truth claims. But Derrida himself denied that he was a relativist. He was deeply influenced by Husserl's analysis of relativism as a self-refuting position,⁴⁸⁷ and thus he never claimed to have himself fully escaped the logocentric metaphysics of presence. As he once put it: "[I]t is not a question of 'rejecting' these notions [logocentrism]; they are necessary and, at least at present, nothing is conceivable for us without them."⁴⁸⁸ Rather, Derrida's strategy is to play two related but irreconcilable movements of thought against each other: the atomistic/representational theory of meaning, and the semiotic structure of symbols independent from the things designated, showing that each is always tainted and undermined by the other. As Vladimir Tasić has argued, Derrida proceeds by borrowing from both an "idealist intuitionism" and a "naïve formalism," which would both end up confirming the logocentrism they think they are denying.⁴⁸⁹

The fact that nothing is outside the text, and the referent is always absent, does not therefore mean that the symbolic game of language is self-sufficient. For it is precisely the absence of what is signified that drives the play of *différance*, "the other which is beyond language" "summons language." Derrida can thus not be accused of inconsistency when he says in an

⁴⁸⁶ Kates, *Fielding Derrida*, p. 119.

⁴⁸⁷ See: Kates, *Fielding Derrida*, pp. 24-25.

⁴⁸⁸ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 13.

⁴⁸⁹ Vladimir Tasić, *Mathematics and the Roots of Postmodern Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 142.

interview, “I never cease to be surprised by critics who see my work as a declaration that there is nothing beyond language, that we are imprisoned in language; it is, in fact, saying the exact opposite.”⁴⁹⁰

Nevertheless, first wave interpretations are not wholly wrong to see Derrida as considering us to be “imprisoned language”—since “the other beyond language” remains unspeakable and unknowable present only by being absent, “completely other” from the language that always fails to catch it; “*tout autre est tout autre*.” We are thus brought back to the ethical imperative driving Derrida’s thought.

The first wave interpretations did not put so much emphasis on the ethical dimension of Derrida, but they did not wholly ignore it either. They did not see his (supposed) linguistic view of reality as a trap or prison, but rather as an emancipatory and liberating disarming of the trap of “objective” reason. They noted that Derrida himself suggests that the “violence” that his work does to the structures that it deconstructs is a necessary response to the violence implicit in such structures. It is worth quoting him on this point at length:

The idea of the book is the idea of a totality, finite or infinite, of the signifier; this totality of the signifier cannot be a totality, unless a totality constituted by the signified preexists it, supervises its inscriptions and its signs, and is independent of it in its ideality. The idea of the book, which always refers to a natural totality, is profoundly alien to the sense of writing. It is the encyclopedic protection of theology and of logocentrism against the disruption of writing, against its aphoristic energy, and, as I shall specify later, against difference in general. If I distinguish the text from the book, I shall say that the destruction of the book, as it is now under way in all domains, denudes the surface of the text. That necessary violence responds to a violence that was no less necessary.⁴⁹¹

Given Kates’s insight into the relation of Derrida’s work to the project of modern science initiated by Descartes, Derrida’s deconstruction of “the book” can be read as a protest not only against the violence of Hegelian philosophy, but also against the “necessary violence” of Cartesian science (i.e., modern science from Descartes to the present), in which the

⁴⁹⁰ Jacques Derrida, “Deconstruction and the Other,” in: Richard Kearney, *States of Mind: Dialogues with Contemporary Thinkers* (New York, New York University Press, 1995), pp. 172– 3; cited in: Tasić, *Mathematics and the Roots of Postmodern Thought*, p. 134.

⁴⁹¹ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 18.

heterogeneity and alterity of reality is homogenized, and then “carved up” into units useful for human projects. Derrida’s classmate and friend Michel Serres makes this explicit in an interpretation of a fable in which a wolf gives excuses to a lamb to justify eating it: “The reason of the strongest is always the best.”⁴⁹² The wolf’s “reason” masquerades as an objective description of order, but is really the violent making of an order that allows him to destroy the lamb. And Serres associates this kind of knowledge with Descartes: “Descartes, after Bacon, picks up the precept: he calls for us to become the masters and possessors of nature.”⁴⁹³ Like that of his friend Serres, Derrida’s work can thus be understood as a protest against the violence of all of modern Western thought—not only the violence of the totalizing philosophies of German idealism, but also and even more against the technocratic violence of modern natural science. Insofar as modernity “is” the project of mathematical-experimental science (cf. section 1.6 above), it makes sense to call Derrida’s protest against that form of rationality *postmodern*.

But Derrida himself did not see his protest as being aimed at a particularly modern form of thought. He sees violence in all of Western thought—from ancient Attic philosophy to the present. In all of philosophy he sees the tension between claims to the presence of what is said (in the word), and play of ever-deferred meaning in the system of signs. In *Of Grammatology* he mentions three “landmarks” in which this conflict is made visible: the critique of writing in Plato’s *Phaedrus*, the critique of writing in Rousseau’s *Confessions*, and the critique of Leibnizian universal characteristic (philosophical calculus) in Hegel’s *Encyclopedia*.⁴⁹⁴ These three critiques are revelatory, because they show the faulty foundations on which logocentrism is built—they are ultimately failed defenses of their positions. A close reading of them therefore “deconstructs” the structures they were trying to sustain.

⁴⁹² Michel Serres, “The Algebra of Literature: The Wolf’s Game,” in: Josue V. Harari (ed.), *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1979), pp. 260-276, at p. 260.

⁴⁹³ Serres, “The Algebra of Literature,” p. 268; cf. Michel Serres, *The Natural Contract*, trans. Elizabeth McArthur and William Paulson (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), p. 32.

⁴⁹⁴ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, pp. 97-99.

Derrida does indeed see an “internal modification” of the motif of presence between Plato and Rousseau in “the moment of certitude in the Cartesian cogito,”⁴⁹⁵ but ultimately he sees a deep similarity between all forms of logocentrism. They all posit a center beyond play, an origin or telos that is simply present, and therefore anchors a closed system. Derrida sees this way of thinking as peculiarly *male*. In later works he speaks of the “phallogocentrism,” rather than merely logocentrism. This is an allusion to the structuralist psychology of Jacques Lacan. As I have already noted, structuralists such as Lévy-Strauss understood structure in terms of a fixed point or center. On Derrida’s reading, Lacan, despite seeing the phallus as a symbol of the desire for a lack (i.e., as an absence), nevertheless end up giving it precisely such a function.⁴⁹⁶

Phallogocentrism erects a structure through pairs of opposed terms in which one term is meant to be prior to other, and to dominate the other. Pairs such as male/female, form/matter, spirit/body, intellect/sensation, reason/passion, presence/absence, life/death, and above all (for the purposes of *Of Grammatology*) speech/writing. But the domination is always violent. And this violence becomes evident when we look closely, and see that the claim of priority for the dominant term can not be fully sustained. In the play of *différance* the meaning of one term is always deferred to the other, and therefore the dominant term is always *contaminated* by the other subordinate term. That is, the apparently clear opposition between the two terms breaks down, each one turns into the other. In the case of speech and writing Derrida shows this by his interpretation of the terms that Plato and Rousseau use for the relation of writing to speech: Plato calls writing a *pharmakon*, or a remedy, but also a poison, and Rousseau calls it a *supplement* to speech, something that makes up for a deficiency, but also something that ends up supplanting speech. Writing is associated with death, because in contrast to the apparent presence of the speaker in speech, the writer is absent, the letter is dead. And yet, writing is also thought to supply and

⁴⁹⁵ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 97.

⁴⁹⁶ See: Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Translator’s Preface to Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, pp. lxii-lxvii; cf. section 1.9 below.

remedy the mortality of passing speech, immortalizing presence.⁴⁹⁷ Plato and Rousseau want to deny the ambivalence of writing by clearly affirming the priority of speech, and banishing writing to a dead exteriority, but their terms betray them, and deconstruct their attempts at dominance.

In his essay “The Double Session” Derrida sees Mallarmé’s term “hymen” as having a similar function to the pharmakon and the supplement. The hymen is literarily the membrane that is broken or punctured when a woman loses her virginity. It is thus a symbol of the separateness, the inviolateness of the virgin. But it is also used (in ancient Greek as well as in modern languages) to signify marriage itself, i.e., union. Moreover, it is related to the result of *weaving*, that is the *textile* or *text*. That is, hymen too is a word for writing which is both presence and absence.⁴⁹⁸

Derrida himself was a passionate writer. And writing seems to have for him a deeply ethical meaning. A form of writing that draws attention to the play of signs, that does not attempt to dominate the play by appeal to a fixed center, that does not claim to be under the control of an “author,” a form of writing that effaces the self, and does not claim to understand the other, such a form of writing is finally an act of reverence and “lesser violence” in the face of another who/which is wholly other. Perhaps one could describe the sort of writing that Derrida wanted to practice as an act of love, a “giving away of the self” that would not be a “giving in” to any totalitarian structure of domination. Perhaps one can read the following passage of as a description of what Derrida was always attempting in writing:

To surrender to the other, and this is the impossible, would amount to giving oneself over in going toward the other, to coming toward the other but without crossing the threshold, and to respecting, to loving even the invisibility that keeps the other inaccessible. [...] To give oneself up [*se rendre*] and to surrender one’s weapons [*rendre les armes*] without defeat, without memory or plan of war: that this renunciation not be another ruse of seduction or an added

⁴⁹⁷ See section 1.8.3 below.

⁴⁹⁸ Derrida, “The Double Session,” in: *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (London: The Atholone Press, 1981).

stratagem of jealousy. And everything would remain intact—love, too, a love without jealousy
[...]⁴⁹⁹

But here I am getting ahead of myself, because this reading of Derrida belongs more to the third wave of Derrida interpretation, with its ethical focus, than to the first wave that was crucial to Wallace. We will see, however, that Wallace's reading of Derrida already has some premonitions of the third wave.

1.8.2 Phallogocentrism in *The Broom of the System*

In his groundbreaking monograph on Wallace, originally published in 2003, Marshall Boswell already interpreted *The Broom of the System* as a debate between Wittgenstein and Derrida, in which Wallace comes down on the side of Wittgenstein (although Wallace's own interpretation of his work in those terms had not yet been made public). On Boswell's account, which has been followed by other interpreters such as Allard den Dulk, the debate consists in this: whereas for the (late) Wittgenstein language is a game played by multiple players, based on the shared context of living life in a world with its practical necessities, for Derrida language is a game of signs that plays itself. "A language-game in Wittgenstein must be played by more than one participant, whereas 'play' for Derrida is a dynamic property of language itself."⁵⁰⁰ Moreover, whereas Derrida argues that the play of *différance* is driven by an unavoidable but unfulfillable drive to refer signifiers to signified-concepts, Wittgenstein, on the other hand, argues that the wish to refer signs to something that they represent is avoidable, once we realize that the meaning of words comes their use in human life, rather than (merely) from reference to something signified by them. As Allard den Dulk puts it:

Derrida regards [the] referential view as an illusion that, at the same time, is indestructible and indispensable for language to function. However, [...] Wittgenstein shows that this 'illusion' of a connection between language and world or thought is a fallacy resulting from the reflective misperception of how words are actually used, and therefore *irrelevant* for the meaningful functioning of language.⁵⁰¹

⁴⁹⁹ Jacques Derrida, "*Sauf le nom (Post-Scriptum)*," trans. John P. Leavey, in: *On the Name*, ed. Thomas Dutoit, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), p. 74.

⁵⁰⁰ Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, p. 29.

⁵⁰¹ Dulk, *Existentialist Engagement*, p. 133.

Boswell points us to the figure of Rick Vigorous, Lenore Beadsman's lover in *The Broom of the System*, as showing Wallace's critique of Derrida: a critique of the idea of language as a game that plays itself, but also a critique of the inescapable illusion of reference. In critiquing the illusion Wallace makes use of Derrida's own critique of logocentrism, but, by the contrast of Rick Vigorous with another character (Wang-Dang Lang), rejects the inescapability of such a drive for reference. Vigorous is thus meant to, as it were, dramatize both the undecidable play of signifiers, and the violence and failure of logocentrism. And he is particularly meant to show how the illusion of reference has the opposite effect to the one intended. Characters in *Broom* who try to "invest meaning in things," Boswell argues, "inevitably succumb to loneliness and solipsism."⁵⁰² For Rick the attempt always has the opposite effect to what he intends. Instead of helping him to escape loneliness, it ends up cutting him off from real connection with others.⁵⁰³ In essence I agree with this reading, but I think it is worth looking at the Derridean problems in Vigorous again, and particularly at the role of *writing* in his character to get a fuller understanding of the sort of loneliness that he instantiates.

Rick Vigorous is a middle-aged, divorced man, much older than his lover Lenore. And he runs the publishing company for which Lenore works. He is a deeply lonely man. He recalls at one point having felt homesick while at home: "I can remember being young and feeling a thing and identifying it as homesickness, and then thinking well now that's odd, isn't it, because I was home, all the time."⁵⁰⁴ He is at home and yet not at home, present and yet absent. He also misses persons who seem to be present, including Lenore: "I miss Lenore, sometimes. I miss everyone." He misses everyone because he is present to no one, and no one is present to him. On his business card, which Lenore apparently carries around with her, Rick is described as an "All-Around Literary Presence,"⁵⁰⁵ but his literary presence is a poor substitute for a real presence—he is really absent.

⁵⁰² Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, p. 40.

⁵⁰³ Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, ch. 2.

⁵⁰⁴ Wallace, *The Broom of the System*, p. 78.

⁵⁰⁵ Wallace, *The Broom of the System*, p. 43.

Vigorous's literary presence is a substitute for another sort of presence that he is unable to have. As Boswell points out,⁵⁰⁶ his very name is a comic contradiction. It clearly means potent phallus (Rick Vigorous=vigorous dick), but his actual phallus is so small that he is unable to achieve sexual union with Lenore. "I have a freakishly small penis. [...] I don't have her. I can't. I never will."⁵⁰⁷ Rick is thus a cartoonishly literal example of the failure of phallogocentrism. He wants to be the dominant term in a Derridean pair of opposed terms. But he can't, and this fills him with sadness and anger:

That I must in the final analysis remain part of the world that is external to and other from Lenore Beadsman is to me a source of profound grief. That others may dwell deep, deep within the ones they love, drink from the soft cup at the creamy lake at the center of the Object of Passion, while I am fated forever only to intuit the presence of deep recesses while I poke my nose, as it were, merely into the foyer of the Great House of Love, agitate briefly, and make a small mess on the doormat, pisses me off to no small degree.⁵⁰⁸

The "small mess" on the doormat is important. Rick, as it were, contaminates, and dirties Lenore. His (and Lenore's) psychotherapist, Dr. Curtis Jay, explains all of Rick's problems in terms of the theories of a certain "Olaf Blendtner" (who turns out to be an invention) about "the membrane" and "hygiene anxiety." The "membrane" signifies the boundary between the self and the other. A healthy membrane allows a connection to the other on the self's terms, but an unhealthy membrane is dirtied by the outside world. As Dr. Jay tells Rick:

What does the Outside do? It makes you unclean. It coats Self with Other. It pokes at the membrane. And if the membrane is what makes you you and the not-you not you, what does that say about you, when the not-you begins to poke through the membrane? [...] It makes you insecure, is what it does. It makes you, the "you," nonsecure, not tightly fastened into your side of the membrane. So what happens? Communications break down.⁵⁰⁹

Being dirtied and contaminated by the other, Rick also dirties and contaminates the other:

⁵⁰⁶ Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, p. 37.

⁵⁰⁷ Wallace, *The Broom of the System*, p. 137.

⁵⁰⁸ Wallace, *The Broom of the System*, p. 60.

⁵⁰⁹ Wallace, *The Broom of the System*, p. 136.

The disturbance of your security on your interior side of the Self-Other membrane makes you an erratic and dangerous component of everyone else's Other-set. Your insecurity bleeds out into and contaminates the identities and hygiene networks of Others.⁵¹⁰

Dr. Jay argues that Rick wants to use his phallus "to put what's inside [of him] inside an Other, to tear down distinctions the way you want them torn down."⁵¹¹ But he can't.

One of the metaphors that Rick uses for his relation to Lenore is a screen door: "The Screen Door of Union," or the "The Screen Door of the Great House of Love." Houses in the United States often have screen doors in front of their exterior doors so that the heavy main door can be left open to circulate air without insects entering the house. The screen door lets in air but keeps insects out—it does, in other words, what Dr. Jay says the membrane should do. Now at first Rick speaks as though he were only just able to enter the door,⁵¹² but later speaks of it as though he remained outside, as it were in the space between the outer door and the screen door. As he says to Lenore: "The Screen Door of Union is for me unenterable. All I can do is flail frantically at your outside. Only at your outside."⁵¹³

On one level the screen door seems signify the hymen,⁵¹⁴ and as it happens, "screen" is one of the meanings that Derrida gives to hymen in "The Double Session," an essay that delighted Wallace as a student.⁵¹⁵ Consider the following passage of Derrida's essay:

[...] [T]he hymen as protective screen, the jewel box of virginity, the vaginal partition, the fine, invisible veil which, in front of the hystera, stands *between* the inside and the outside of a woman, and consequently between desire and fulfillment. It is neither desire nor pleasure but in between the two. Neither future nor present, but between the two. It is the hymen that desire dreams of piercing, of bursting, in an act of violence that is (at the same time or

⁵¹⁰ Wallace, *The Broom of the System*, p. 137.

⁵¹¹ Wallace, *The Broom of the System*, pp. 137-138.

⁵¹² Wallace, *The Broom of the System*, p. 60.

⁵¹³ Wallace, *The Broom of the System*, p. 286.

⁵¹⁴ I am indebted for my view of how Derrida's hymen is present in *The Broom of the System* to: Anna Maria Jarosz, Henry Chase Richards, Rachel Tatum, and Anne Fabricius, "Deconstructing The Broom of the System," class paper, Roskilde University, 2016: <http://rudar.ruc.dk/bitstream/1800/27687/1/The%20Broom%20of%20the%20System%20102,921.pdf> (accessed February 16, 2017). Although Jarosz et al. do not associate the hymen with the screen door.

⁵¹⁵ Max, *Every Love Story*, p. 38.

somewhere between) love and murder. If either one *did* take place, there would be no hymen.⁵¹⁶

For Derrida, the hymen seems to be preventing connection, but it in fact is what allows anything remotely like connection to take place. The violent desire to puncture the hymen would destroy the distance that is necessary for the play of signs. The result would not be union, but death. The hymen is, in other words, another name for *writing*, it is a text.

Rick Vigorous's relation to Lenore seems both to show this textual nature of the hymen/screen door/membrane and to critique it. Rick is constantly telling stories to Lenore. Rick pretends that the stories are submissions to the literary review that he edits, but in fact they are stories that he has *written* himself. All of the stories seem to be thinly veiled allegories for his relation to Lenore.⁵¹⁷ At the beginning it is Lenore who asks Rick for stories. Lying in bed with him she says, "A story, please."⁵¹⁸ But as the book progresses, and Lenore and Rick's relationship becomes ever more strained, he starts forcing them on her. At the end, when he is desperately trying to save their relationship, he asks her to ask him to tell a story. She refuses, but he tells her one anyway.⁵¹⁹ She keeps on interrupting to say, "We need to talk"—a paradox, since of course they *are* talking. But Rick's talk is not spontaneous speech, but rather the re-telling of something written, it has the character of text. To Lenore the text that Rick interposes between them prevents him from being present to her, and really talking with her. Rick, the "All-Around Literary Presence,"⁵²⁰ is rendered absent by the literary screen that he interposes between himself and Lenore.

Rick is finally supplanted in Lenore's affections by Andrew Sealander Lang, known as "Wang-Dang Lang." It is Rick himself who brings Wang-Dang Lang and Lenore together by hiring Lang. He feels as though he had no choice in the matter, as he explains to Dr. Jay: "I felt I had little choice. It was as though a context was created in which it would have been

⁵¹⁶ Derrida, *Dissemination*, pp. 212-213.

⁵¹⁷ Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, pp. 37-39.

⁵¹⁸ Wallace, *The Broom of the System*, p. 22.

⁵¹⁹ Wallace, *The Broom of the System*, pp. 422-432.

⁵²⁰ Wallace, *The Broom of the System*, p. 43.

inappropriate not to bring him inside.”⁵²¹ Rick wants to be the one controlling, but is himself controlled by context. Lang appears to be the exact opposite of Rick. His (nick-) name has the same meaning as Rick’s, but is literally true, rather than ironic.

At first it seems as though Lang embodies a crudely successful phallogocentrism (without the logos) over against Rick’s unsuccessful phallogocentrism. Lang, “a virile blond bestower of validity,”⁵²² the strong, self-confident he-man, who begins the novel by terrifying the young Lenore with something very close to sexual assault, seems set up to succeed where Rick failed. But this is not in fact what happens. In a turn that critics have found unconvincing,⁵²³ Lang, in his relation to Lenore, allows a distance between them. Their only love scene does not progress beyond a “cuddling” eerily similar to the first love scene described between Lenore and Rick.⁵²⁴ This is because Lenore wants to talk with Rick before having relations with another man. And so Lang and Lenore lie in bed, talk, and “play,” but it is a game with two players, rather unlike the stories told by Rick.

But at this point I am not so much interested in Lang’s unconvincing Wittgensteinianism as I am in Rick’s loneliness. To Rick, Lang is a “horny, silky-smooth, lecherous yuppie, one who just happens to have a large organ where I do not.”⁵²⁵ And Rick thinks that Lang has “had” Lenore in precisely the sense that he desired for himself. And Dr. Jay confirms him in this suspicion. Rick recounts to Dr. Jay a dream that he has had that involves Lenore grasping Lang’s member, and asks Jay whether the member is the symbol of “membrane-penetration.” And Dr. Jay answers by arguing that it is more than a mere symbol:

JAY: No symbol is merely a symbol, Rick. A symbol is valid and appropriate because its reference is real. You should know that, being a man of letters yourself.

⁵²¹ Wallace, *The Broom of the System*, p. 341.

⁵²² Wallace, *The Broom of the System*, p. 346.

⁵²³ Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, p. 48; Mary K. Holland, “‘By Hirsute Author’: Gender and Communication in the Work and Study of David Foster Wallace,” in: *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 58.1 (2017), pp. 64-77, at p. 71.

⁵²⁴ Wallace, *The Broom of the System*, compare p. 408 with p. 22.

⁵²⁵ Wallace, *The Broom of the System*, p. 347.

RICK: Lang has had her.

JAY: Would that make you uncomfortable in this context?⁵²⁶

Jay's point about the reality of reference is of course belied by much of the book, but Rick mistakenly thinks that it is fulfilled in Lang. Rick's unsuccessful attempts to dominate Lenore have led to a sort of reversal in his relation to her. He calls her his "complete reference and telos."⁵²⁷ Not being able to dominate and define her, he is himself dominated and defined, and his reaction has been to want to "possess" her in an opposite way:

My inability to be truly inside of and surrounded by Lenore Beadsman arouses in me the purely natural reactive desire to have her inside of and contained by me. I am possessive. I want to own her, sometimes.⁵²⁸

He asks whether he should eat her as "Norman Bombardini apparently proposes to do."⁵²⁹ But realizing that this is impossible he tries instead to chain her to himself—literally. In a climatic scene in an artificial desert of black sand (known as the G.O.D.), Rick chains himself to Lenore with a pair of handcuffs purchased from a sado-masochistic brothel, and tells her that the connection thus established promises transcendence:

We'll be joined in the light of the sky, Lenore. See the light of the sky? The dawn and sunset will be fed from our veins. We'll be spread all over. We'll be everything. We'll be gigantic.⁵³⁰

Rick is giving crude vent to what Derrida describes as the "the exigent, powerful, systematic, and irrepressible desire" of logocentrism for a "transcendental signified, which, [...] would place a reassuring end to the reference from sign to sign."⁵³¹ That is, by forcibly binding himself to his "reference" Rick is trying to put an end to the endless play of signifiers. Rick, however, fails. His nemesis Lang shows up in the desert and breaks the chains.

⁵²⁶ Wallace, *The Broom of the System*, p. 346.

⁵²⁷ Wallace, *The Broom of the System*, p. 347.

⁵²⁸ Wallace, *The Broom of the System*, p. 72.

⁵²⁹ Wallace, *The Broom of the System*, p. 347.

⁵³⁰ Wallace, *The Broom of the System*, p. 441.

⁵³¹ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 49.

Rick is not a particularly sympathetic character, and yet he is caught in a double-bind with which Wallace surely wants the reader to sympathize. It is the double-bind of someone who is caught between an infinite semiotic system that cuts him off from others, and attempts to transcend that system that are harmful and counterproductive. Rick wants desperately to be connected to others, and yet finds all of his attempts at connection driving him further away. He is an intelligent, articulate man, of linguistic/literary talent, who is seemingly able to dominate language. But language ends up being interposed between him and others, rendering him isolated. The hymen of the text separates rather than uniting. And this leads him to a violence which is even more isolating.

In part, Wallace is adopting Derrida's own critique of phallogocentrism here. But he is not adopting an ethic of apophatic renunciation as a solution. Much less is he adopting the ironic distance from the world that he sees in the smart American graduate students who "pretend to 'understand' Derrida."⁵³²

1.8.3 The *Pharmakon* and the Supplement in *Infinite Jest*

As we saw above (1.2), the ghost of James Incandenza in the novel *Infinite Jest* claims that he made the film *Infinite Jest* to try to communicate with his son Hal. He sees Hal as having become "inbent" and "silent," and wants desperately to be able to pierce that silence and connect with Hal. The resulting film can be seen to function as what Derrida called a *pharmakon* or a *supplement*. It is worth quoting the wraith's explanation at length:

The wraith feels along his long jaw and says he spent the whole sober last ninety days of his animate life working tirelessly to contrive a medium via which he and the muted son could simply *converse*. To concoct something the gifted boy couldn't simply master and move on from to a new plateau. Something the boy would love enough to induce him to open his mouth and come *out*—even if it was only to ask for more. Games hadn't done it, professionals hadn't done it, impersonation of professionals hadn't done it. His last resort: entertainment. Make something so bloody compelling it would reverse thrust on a young self's fall into the womb of solipsism, anhedonia, death in life. A magically entertaining toy to dangle at the infant still somewhere alive in the boy, to make its eyes light and toothless mouth open

⁵³² Wallace to Kennick, 20 February 2002.

unconsciously, to laugh. To bring him 'out of himself,' as they say. The womb could be used both ways. A way to say I AM SO VERY, VERY SORRY and have it heard.⁵³³

This description warrants careful consideration. The first thing to notice is that James had apparently felt for a long time that his son has become "muted," unable to be *present* through speech. Everyone else, including Hal himself, thinks that is a delusion of James's. But the delusion points to the reality that father and son are somehow isolated from one another, unable to communicate.

That second thing to notice is an apparent contrast between this film and James Incandenza's previous films. Many of the previous films seem to have been consciously informed by poststructuralist concerns—particularly by the idea of the films as signs that replaced that which they were meant to signify.⁵³⁴ Hal draws explicit attention to this feature of one of his father's films, entitled *Accomplice!*, while watching it after James's death. *Accomplice!* is about a young "inarticulate" male prostitute who is hired by a dissolute old man. The young prostitute insists that the old man wear a condom, and this insults the old man, who thinks that the young man suspects him of having HIV. The dissolute old man, therefore, in the act of sodomizing the young man, holds a razor blade so that it "slices into both condom and erect phallus on each outthrust."⁵³⁵ It is then, however, shown that the prostitute has HIV, and had insisted that his client wear protection for the client's sake, not his own. When the prostitute realizes what is going on he begins shouting at the dissolute man "*Murderer!*"—meaning that the old man has turned him, the young man, into a murderer. The previously inarticulate prostitute repeats his shout over and over again for so long that the repetition of that one word takes up almost one third of the whole film. This prompts Hal to give the following critique:

⁵³³ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, pp. 838-839.

⁵³⁴ See the exhaustive filmography: Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, pp. 985-993.

⁵³⁵ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 946.

As I see it, even though the cartridge's⁵³⁶ end has both characters emoting out of every pore, *Accomplice!*'s essential project remains abstract and self-reflexive; we end up feeling and thinking not about the characters but about the cartridge itself.⁵³⁷

This is a contrast that Wallace would often make about art informed by Derridean terms: that it is “so occluded and conscious of itself as text or hall of mirrors that its only appeal is intellectual and cerebral.”⁵³⁸

Not only does Hal not end up connecting to the characters in this film, he also does not see its director as present in it. In watching the film Hal finds it “impossible to reconcile” his memory of his father “with the sensibility of something like *Accomplice!*”⁵³⁹ The director seems absent from his work. In fact, one can see the film itself as James’s tortured reflection on his inability to communicate with Hal. The “hall of mirrors” of signs is unable to connect them. The inarticulate prostitute can be interpreted as a representation of the “mute” Hal, and his becoming suddenly articulate⁵⁴⁰ and repeating the word *Murderer!* as expressing a thoroughly Derridean point about the necessity of absence for the play of signs to function.

In Derrida’s essay “Plato’s Pharmacy,” which Wallace studied as an undergraduate,⁵⁴¹ Derrida associates the figure of the father with logocentrism. It is worth considering a passage from Derrida with Hal and his father in mind:

Logos is a son, then, a son that would be destroyed in his *very presence* without the present *attendance* of his father. His father who answers. His father who speaks for him and answers for him. Without his father, he would be nothing but, in fact, writing. At least that is what is said by the one who says: it is the father’s thesis. The specificity of writing would thus be intimately bound to the absence of the father.⁵⁴²

⁵³⁶ “Cartridge” is the name in *Infinite Jest* for the physical means of reproducing film (similar to a VHS tape or DVD).

⁵³⁷ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 946.

⁵³⁸ Mark Shechner, “Behind the Watchful Eyes of Author David Foster Wallace,” in Burn (ed.), *Conversations*, pp. 104-109, at p. 108.

⁵³⁹ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 951.

⁵⁴⁰ See: Carlisle, *Elegant Complexity*, location 7008

⁵⁴¹ Max, *Every Love Story*, p. 38.

⁵⁴² Derrida, *Dissemination*, p. 77.

The illusion of logocentrism is that the speaker, the father, can ever really be present. In fact, on Derrida's view, language is always *writing*—a system of signs that is independent both of the things signified and the one signifying. Derrida argues that Plato—who always “assigns the origin and power of speech, precisely of *logos*, to the paternal position”⁵⁴³—nevertheless undermines his own position by the ambiguity of the term *pharmakon* that he gives to speech. *Pharmakon* means both remedy and poison, and the “father” in Plato's myth of the origin of language rejects writing as a poison that will destroy memory. But, Derrida argues, he in fact has to use it as a *remedy* for the impossibility of pure presence. Only in the absence of the father is a sign able to function.

Returning to the film *Infinite Jest*, we see that the ghost describes it as a *medium* by which he could converse with his son. In other words, it is a *remedy* for the inability that he experiences of conversing directly with his son. Through this remedy he wants to ask his son's forgiveness—“A way to say I AM SO VERY, VERY SORRY.” Sorry, perhaps, for his own absence. But crucially, we gather, the representation by which he attempts to convey this message is not a direct representation of a father, but rather a *mother*. It is suggested at several points in the novel that a key scene of the film *Infinite Jest* shows a mother shot from the perspective of an infant in a crib, with a special lens that is meant to imitate an infant's vision. The mother is leaning over the crib and saying, “I'm so terribly sorry.”⁵⁴⁴

Why does James Incandenza use a mother to speak the apology that he claims to want to convey to Hal himself? We can perhaps find a clue in Derrida's notion of the *supplement*. In *Of Grammatology* Derrida reads the eighteenth-century philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau's notion of the supplement in a way similar to his reading of Plato's *pharmakon*. “Supplement” is the word that Rousseau uses in his *Confessions* to refer to his habit of masturbation. But it is also the word that he uses for writing. And Derrida connects these two uses. The supplement means something that at first seems to be a merely external addition to what it

⁵⁴³ Derrida, *Dissemination*, p. 76.

⁵⁴⁴ See especially: Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, pp. 938-940.

supplements, but then it is seen to be something that makes up for a lack in what it supplements, and finally it is seen as *replacing* the thing that it supplements.

Rousseau uses masturbation as a supplement for his lover Thérèse Levasseur, but Derrida argues that Thérèse herself is already a supplement, in a chain of supplements that includes Madame de Warens (whom Rousseau called *Mamma*), and Rousseau's *mother* who died in childbirth:

Jean-Jacques could thus look for a supplement to Thérèse only on one condition: that the system of supplementarity in general be already open in its possibility, that the play of substitutions be already operative for a long time and that *in a certain way Thérèse herself be already a supplement*. As Mamma was already the supplement of an unknown mother, and as the "true mother" herself [...] was also in a certain way a supplement, from the first trace, and even if she had not "truly" died in giving birth.⁵⁴⁵

Already Rousseau's "true" mother, who died in childbirth, is in a certain sense a supplement. A child is unable to live by itself and therefore needs the mother to "supplement" what nature has not furnished it with. Derrida sees this as a paradox: "How can Nature ask for forces that it does not furnish?"⁵⁴⁶ But the mother is apparently an adequate supplement to nature. Except that the mother inevitably separates herself from the child. At times Rousseau sees this separation as the root of all evil: "[A]ll evil comes from the fact that 'women have ceased to be mothers [...]'"⁵⁴⁷

Derrida thus reads Rousseau as seeking, in sexual union with women, his lost union with his mother. And masturbation is the supplement for that supplement. Rousseau despises this vice, but is unable to give it up, and Derrida argues that the reason for this is that supplementarity is necessary, and "true" union with the other is impossible:

Rousseau will never stop having recourse to, and accusing himself of, this onanism that permits one to be himself affected by providing himself with presences [...] it will remain the model of vice and perversion. Affecting oneself by another presence, one *corrupts* oneself (makes oneself other) by oneself (*on s'altère soi-même*). Rousseau neither wishes to think nor can think that this alteration does not simply happen to the self, that it is the self's very origin.

⁵⁴⁵ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 156.

⁵⁴⁶ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 146.

⁵⁴⁷ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 152, citing Rousseau's *Emile*.

He must consider it a contingent evil coming from without to affect the integrity of the subject. But he cannot give up what immediately restores to him the other desired presence; no more than one can give up language.⁵⁴⁸

For Derrida the separation and loneliness of the self is necessary; in fact the “self” is something generated by the chain of supplementarity. The desire for true “union” with the other is thus a desire for the destruction of the self. That is how Derrida reads the following text that he quotes from Rousseau:

Enjoyment! Is such a thing made for man? Ah! If I had ever in my life tasted the delights of love even once in their plenitude, I do not imagine that my frail existence would have been sufficient for them, I would have been dead in the act.⁵⁴⁹

And this is of course what happens to those who watch the film *Infinite Jest*—the enjoyment is so extreme that they die. *Infinite Jest* is thus a supplement that is too successful. It gives to the viewer a vision of the mother apologizing for the original separation, and thus an experience of the longed for and lost union. It is a remedy (*pharmakon*) for the absence of the mother, that is also a poison (*pharmakon* again) that kills the self.

In choosing to represent a mother in the film, James is apologizing to his son for bringing him into an existence that is inevitably lonely. And his hope is that this apology will be so enticing that it will lead to genuine connection between himself, its director, and his viewing son. But James’s suicide can perhaps be read as the recognition that this final supplement cannot work as *word* in which he himself is present, but only finally as *writing* from which he has to be absent.

It would be too simple to say that Wallace was either simply for or against Derrida’s notion of the supplement. In one interview he gave the following apparently positive view:

This is the way Barthian and Derridean post-structuralism’s helped me the most as a fiction writer: once I’m done with the thing, I’m basically dead, and probably the text’s dead; it becomes simply language, and language lives not just in but *through* the reader.⁵⁵⁰

⁵⁴⁸ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 253 (I have replaced the square brackets in the original with round brackets to show that the crucial bracketed words “makes oneself other,” are in the original).

⁵⁴⁹ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 153, quoting Rousseau, *Confessions*, Book VIII.

In other words, a certain distance is necessary for signs to work. Or in Roland Barthes's words, "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author."⁵⁵¹ On this reading, the novel *Infinite Jest* would have the same function as the film *Infinite Jest* was meant to have for Hal; it would be a supplement that would help the reader be born as a self.

Such a reading would stretch the idea of a supplement beyond what Derrida meant by it. Derrida is usually read as dissolving the very notion of the self. The self is as unknowable and inaccessible to "someone" as is other. The self is an onanistic illusion that arises from the desire to dominate the play of signs, and find a stable supplement for elusive presence. Hence, in the famous passage already quoted above, Derrida speaks of affirming play in order to "pass beyond man and humanism, the name of man being the name of that being who, [...] throughout his entire history—has dreamed of full presence."⁵⁵² But immediately after that very passage, Derrida says that it is not a matter of "choosing" between the affirmation of play that goes beyond humanism, and the choice of making a humanistic stand. Humanism and post-humanism depend on each other.

This would explain the divergences between various interpretations that scholars have given to what happens to Hal in *Infinite Jest*. On the one hand are those such as Allard den Dulk who see Hal as moving towards the formation of authentic selfhood at the end of the novel. Dulk sees Hal as making an existentialist stand by which he begins to form a self.⁵⁵³ And on the other hand are those such as Mary Holland, who see Hal as slipping away into the infantile solipsism that his father feared for him, detached from the external world.⁵⁵⁴

On my reading, Wallace finds in Derrida a particularly clear formulation of the double-bind between loneliness and giving oneself away. Derrida formulates the double-bind in a way in which it is apt to present itself in a "postmodern" culture in which the development of

⁵⁵⁰ McCaffery, "An Expanded Interview," p. 40.

⁵⁵¹ Barthes, "The Death of the Author," p. 148.

⁵⁵² Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, pp. 370.

⁵⁵³ Dulk, *Existentialist Engagement*, pp. 189-194.

⁵⁵⁴ Mary K. Holland, *Succeeding Postmodernism: Language and Humanism in Contemporary American Literature* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), ch. 2.

abstract systems of signs has undermined naïve conceptions about signification. The double-bind presents itself as a bind between an affirmation of an endless play of *différance*, which opens up an unbridgeable distance between the between self and world (and even between the self and itself), and an infantile and self-destructive urge to overcome that loneliness by addictive pleasure.

As numerous scholars have concluded, Wallace sees the primary *effect* of Derridean poststructuralism on American culture as encouraging an attitude of ironic distance from the world.⁵⁵⁵ Poststructuralist culture “sees through” the illusions of presence. It thus can only speak of connection between persons, of love, of transcendence, or meaning, in an “ironic” mode that is meant to show that these ideas are seen to be shams hiding logocentric attempts at domination. Mario Incandenza, Hal’s special-needs brother, completely lacks this ironic distance from the world, and he is disturbed by seeing it in others. He is puzzled that people cannot talk about deep emotions, or about suffering or loneliness, or God. “It’s like there’s some rule that real stuff can only get mentioned if everybody rolls their eyes or laughs in a way that isn’t happy.”⁵⁵⁶ His brother Hal is no exception to the problem:

Hal seemed even more uncomfortable and embarrassed [the other E.T.A. students], and when Mario brought up real stuff Hal called him Booboo and acted like he’d wet himself and Hal was going to be very patient about helping him change.⁵⁵⁷

This culture of ironic distance makes its practitioners deeply lonely. Hence the one emotion that Hal sees himself being able to really feel to the limit is loneliness.⁵⁵⁸

1.9 “A LACANIAN CRY IN THE INFANTILE UNCONSCIOUS”

1.9.1 Lacan and the double-bind of lack and smothering

⁵⁵⁵ For a good synthesis that overcomes some of the problems with previous readings see: Dulk, *Existentialist Engagement*, Part 1.

⁵⁵⁶ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 592.

⁵⁵⁷ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 592.

⁵⁵⁸ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 694.

Marshall Boswell has argued that the novel *Infinite Jest*, and especially through the film *Infinite Jest*, depicts and critiques the poststructural psychology of the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (1901-1981).⁵⁵⁹

Just as *The Broom of the System* addresses the alienating trap of Derridean deconstruction, *Infinite Jest* takes on Lacan's bewilderingly difficult theories about desire, pleasure, subjectivity, and infantile preoccupations with mothers.⁵⁶⁰

We have already seen that Derridean deconstruction, and *its* approach to "desire, pleasure, subjectivity, and infantile preoccupations with mothers" is very much a theme at work in *Infinite Jest*, but Lacan is present as well. Boswell argues that while Wallace sees many insights in the Lacanian model of subjectivity, he nevertheless depicts it as a "trap" that can lead deeper into infantile solipsism rather than out of it.⁵⁶¹

Wallace uses Lacan's insights to help describe the narcissism and infantilism that he sees in much of American culture, but he thinks that Lacan does not really provide cure for the problems that he recognizes. John Baskin has convincingly argued that Wallace saw the trap as this: that while Lacan is able to provide an insightful diagnosis into infantile solipsism, he is mistaken to think this diagnosis is a cure. Knowing what is wrong does not end up providing a way of escaping it.⁵⁶² But in Wallace's late story "The Suffering Channel," this slightly unfair reading of Lacan is complicated by a hint at an appropriation of Lacan's notion of the "*sinthome*," and the practice of coming to terms with it as a kind of healing. The "art" in "The Suffering Channel" seems to play a role similar to that which Wallace often claimed for his own art of writing. This fits with Calvin Thomas's Lacanian-influenced reading of "The Suffering Channel."⁵⁶³ It also fits with a provocative Lacanian reading of Wallace by Franz Kaltenbeck. Without referencing "The Suffering Channel," Kaltenbeck

⁵⁵⁹ Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, pp. 127-132.

⁵⁶⁰ Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, p. 128.

⁵⁶¹ Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, p. 130.

⁵⁶² John Baskin, "Untrendy Problems: *The Pale King's* Philosophical Inspirations," in: Bolger and Korb (eds.), *Gesturing Toward Reality*, pp. 141-156, at p. 145; idem, "Death is Not the End," pp. 33-45.

⁵⁶³ Calvin Thomas, "Art is on the way: From the Abject Opening of *Underworld* to the Shitty Ending of *Oblivion*," in: Rina Arya and Nicholas Chare (eds.), *Abject Visions: Powers of Horror in Art and Visual Culture*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), pp. 160-188.

shows the similarity of Wallace's own account of his practice of writing with Lacan's description of the *sinthome*.⁵⁶⁴

But Wallace's approach to something like the *sinthome* is still quite different from Lacan in that Wallace is not ready to accept Lacan's relentlessly debunking view of human interiority and subjectivity. Wallace holds on to the possibility of interior depths that are not reducible to drives or appetites or *horror vacui*. Lacan would dismiss such ideas of interior depths as Romantic illusion, but Wallace was not so sure.

Finally, Wallace seems to be concerned most with the *effect* of Lacan on American culture than with Lacan's own thought. Lacan's reception in culture inevitably distorted his thought, and Wallace describes its effects as largely playing into the dynamic of poststructuralist ironic distance that we already saw with the influence of Derrida.

I would argue that at the time of the writing of *Infinite Jest* Wallace had studied Derrida more closely than he studied Lacan. One can see an indication of this in the fact that Max's biography tells of Wallace reading Derrida in classes both as an undergraduate and as a graduate student, but never mentions him reading Lacan. In *Infinite Jest*, therefore, the treatment of desire, subjectivity and mothers probably owes more to Derrida than to Lacan. Later, perhaps through his encounter with the work of Calvin Thomas, his engagement with Lacan deepened, and his late short story collection *Oblivion* is replete with complex allusions to Lacan.⁵⁶⁵

⁵⁶⁴ Franz Kaltenbeck, "La violence de la mélancolie selon David Foster Wallace ou les limites du chiffre," in: *Savoirs et clinique*, 20.1 (2016), pp. 12-20. An authorized German translation of Kaltenbeck's essay appeared even before the French original: "Die Gewalt der Melancholie nach David Foster Wallace oder Die Grenzen der Verschlüsselung," trans. Rolf Nemitz, in: LACANIANA, June 19th, 2015; <http://lacan-entziffern.de/reales/franz-kaltenbeck-die-gewalt-der-melancholie-nach-david-foster-wallace-oder-die-grenzen-der-verschluesselung> (accessed February 23, 2017).

⁵⁶⁵ Cf. Thomas, "Art is on the way."

In any case, a good point of entry into Wallace's reading of Lacan is to contrast Lacan with Derrida. In her "Translator's Preface" to *Of Grammatology*, a work that we know Wallace read,⁵⁶⁶ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak contrasts Derrida and Lacan as follows:

Derrida would see in Lacan's idiom of "good and bad faith," of "authenticity," of "truth," the remnants of a postwar "existentialist" ethic. [...] Lacan does abundantly present himself as the prophet who is energetically unveiling the "true" Freud. Such a vocation offends Derrida the deconstructor, for whom the critic's selfhood is as vulnerable with textuality as the text itself.⁵⁶⁷

That is, whereas for Derrida the human subject is an illusion that is dissolved in the affirmation of play that goes "beyond humanism," for Lacan the subject (which he rigorously distinguishes from the *self*) is something for which one must assume responsibility in a quasi-existentialist gesture. Lacan's English translator and interpreter Bruce Fink makes a somewhat similar point:

Unlike most poststructuralists, who seek to deconstruct and dispel the very notion of the human subject, Lacan the psychoanalyst finds the concept of subjectivity indispensable and explores what it means to be a subject, how one comes to be a subject, the conditions responsible for the failure to become a subject (leading to psychosis), and the tools at the analyst's disposal to induce a "precipitation of subjectivity."⁵⁶⁸

Lacan was of course an anti-existentialist in important respects, since he saw the "self" as essentially imaginary and fraudulent, and the "subject" as essentially split and non self-present, but he certainly shared existentialism's impulse toward taking responsibility.⁵⁶⁹

Lacan (or at least the early Lacan of the 1950s) wanted to synthesize the existentialist idea of being-towards-death with the Hegelian account of desire as a being driven by the inner nothingness towards the overcoming of otherness (cf. 1.7).⁵⁷⁰ He achieves this through a structuralist re-reading of Freudian psychology. On Lacan's complex reading of Freud's

⁵⁶⁶ See: Max, *Every Love Story*, p. 56.

⁵⁶⁷ Spivak, "Translator's Preface," p. lxvii.

⁵⁶⁸ Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. xi.

⁵⁶⁹ See: Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, pp. 46, 68.

⁵⁷⁰ Slavoj Žižek, *Less than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2012), ch. 8.

account of human development, the driving force of development is an original and unacknowledged trauma of separation, which I will characterize as loneliness. This original trauma is worked out through a dialectic of other separations and unions that can, however, never overcome or heal the original loneliness or lack of unity.

Lacan understands the birth of a child as a violent, traumatic event, through which it begins to be separated from the rest of reality. The first thing that a child does on coming out into the world is to cry or scream. This scream is a response to a loss, a lack that the infant cannot know or understand. It is not the loss of an object, nor the loss of the subject, because the baby has not yet distinguished subject and object; it is pure loss, pure lack. A void that makes the baby scream.⁵⁷¹ The mother interprets the infant's cry as an expression of need, and gives it the breast as the means of satisfying that need. But it is crucial to understand that for Lacan the mother's breast is already a stop-gap that cannot fill the void at the heart of the infant. As Lacanian analyst Bice Benvenuto puts it:

The baby cries and a breast comes in the way of its want, offering itself as an external object in the place of the enveloping object. [...] By losing its envelope and source of life so far it has lost a part of itself, and it is demanding this missing part to make itself whole again; but what it is faced with is an external object other than itself. Wholeness is lost for man from that point on, and he will desire it and strive to regain it for ever. This corresponds to what Lacan calls desire as the pure desire for something unattainable.⁵⁷²

The pleasure that comes from the satisfaction of needs can never fill up the infant's essential lack, and this is how Lacan explains the excessiveness of libido that is manifested, for example, in an infant's desiring to suck even when it is not hungry. Benvenuto quotes a young mother, whom he analyzed, who said to her crying infant: "You think it is hunger, but it isn't."⁵⁷³ The mother gives the infant her love, but she is aware that she cannot give it what it wants—the love of the mother is stop-gap for an irrevocably lost unity.

⁵⁷¹ See: Bice Benvenuto, "Once Upon a Time: The Infant in Lacanian Theory," in: Bernard Burgoyne and Mary Sullivan (eds.), *The Klein-Lacan Dialogues* (London: Karnac Books, 2016), pp. 19-32.

⁵⁷² Benvenuto, "Once Upon a Time," pp. 20-21.

⁵⁷³ Benvenuto, "Once Upon a Time," p. 23.

The mother's love is therefore always either too little or too much for the infant—or rather both at once. It is too little, because while it satisfies the infant's needs, it does not heal the infant's essential misery. But it quickly becomes too much, because the infant in trying to take ever more exceeds what it needs and feels smothered by the mother.

The double-bind of lack and smothering is a condition for the infant's beginning to distinguish itself from the mother and the world at large. This takes place in what Lacan called "the mirror stage"—his most famous contribution to psychoanalytic theory. In the mirror (which need not be taken literally) the child sees an image, an illusion. But it learns to identify itself with this illusion. The illusion with which the child identifies is what Lacan calls the ego or the self. The identification with this illusion is thus paradoxical; it engenders a sense of self, but it also alienates the self, since the image is an image and *not* the child. The "self" formed in the mirror stage is essentially a fraud. And it is an *object* rather than a *subject*. The child is a signifier, and it sees in its image its signified or meaning, but the coincidence of signifier and signified is illusory. There is a split between signifier and signified in the formation of the self.⁵⁷⁴ This introduces an additional split or void into the psyche of the child; the split between the "real" infant, and its imaginary/fraudulent self.

An important role in the infant's identification with its image is played by the mother and her desire (again, "mother" need not be taken literally). For example, the child's mother might look into the mirror while holding the child and say, "That's you!"⁵⁷⁵ The child is still an uncoordinated plurality at this stage, but in the mirror he (and Lacan as a good Freudian does seem to be thinking in the first place of a *he*) sees a unified image.⁵⁷⁶ Initially this delights the child; he sees a promise of unity that he has not yet really attained. Moreover, he sees that the mother makes much of this beautiful unity: "That's you!" He sees that he is *desirable* for the mother. And he understands that this allows him to control the presence and absence of the mother, to control the pleasures that she gives him so that he will feel

⁵⁷⁴ Cf. Bowsell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, p. 128.

⁵⁷⁵ Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, p. 36.

⁵⁷⁶ Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," in: *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 2006), pp. 75-81.

neither the pain of lack nor the smothering of excess (an essentially impossible goal). Thus, his directionless desire becomes directed at himself; he desires the desire of the mother first in this sense: he desires *what* the mother desires— his own fraudulently unified self. But soon the infant notices that “he” is not the only thing the mother desires—the mother has to attend to other matters as well. Thus he desires the desire of the mother in a second sense: he desires to be desired by the mother, he desires to monopolize the desire of the mother.⁵⁷⁷

This stage of obsession with the desire of the mother leads to an escalating cycle of frustration. Paradoxically, this cycle is broken by a new trauma: the Oedipus complex, which Lacan re-interprets in structuralist terms. The interposition of the “father” (again, not necessarily a literal father), who competes with the child, defeats the child, and thereby redirects the desire of the child, is interpreted as the entrance of the child into the “symbolic” register—that is, into language. Signs allow fixated desire to become mobile, and to be transferred to something else. The system of signs begins with a fixed signifier in which it is anchored: the “Name of the Father” or the “phallus.” The phallus signifies the lack of the mother’s desire. It signifies, in other words, that which draws the mother’s desire away and controls it. This sign enables the child to separate itself from the mother, and transfer its desire to Other things. Fixated desire can now exit the closed loop of escalating frustration, and slip along a chain of supplements, thus becoming more endurable.

When the child enters the symbolic the desire for the desire of the mother becomes the desire for the approbation (desire) of what Lacan calls the Big Other (capitalized) of the symbolic world of “the law,” or society. The subject now wants to be approved of by “authority figures,” by friends and peers, and so on. It therefore cultivates its imaginary self in order to make it acceptable or attractive to the Big Other. All social encounters between “selves” in the symbolic world, are really encounters between frauds who are putting up fraudulent, imaginary fronts to impress each other. The way in which desire slips from one object to another in such a social system is implicated by this desire for the desire of the Big Other. Every enjoyment of an apparently enjoyable object is, as it were, a theatrical act put

⁵⁷⁷ Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, ch. 5.

on for the benefit of the virtual presence of the Big Other constituted by the symbolic social system.⁵⁷⁸

The symbolic is therefore not enough for the emergence of the subject. A subject too much in thrall to the symbolic is not a subject at all, but a plaything of social forces, unable to have any joy in life. The symbolic is conceived of by Lacan as a Saussurian system of signs independent of the things designated. The symbolic carves up what Lacan calls “the real” into units, but at the same time it begins to replace the real. The “real” can be thought of in a preliminary way as the chaos of instinctive needs, ambiguous drives, inarticulate sensations, and uncoordinated movements that characterize the infant’s body, and the body of its (m)other.⁵⁷⁹ The symbolic “kills” the real. That is, each bit of the real that is symbolized is thereby replaced and as it were annihilated by the symbol. The real cannot, however, ever be entirely killed by the symbolic. And thus we come to a second sense of the real: the remnant of the original real that resists symbolization. This remnant cannot be thought, since thought is essentially symbolic.⁵⁸⁰ The influence of the real can, however, be detected in its indirect influence.

The infant’s primal cry of lack is “repressed” by the entry into the symbolic, but it is indirectly knowable through attending to the “unconscious.” Lacan conceives of the unconscious as a play of signifiers—a thinking that is not being thought by any thinking subject. It does not need a thinking subject, because it works automatically by the metonymic shifts of a structural system (think of Derrida’s play of *différance*). The unconscious speaks through dreams and slips of the tongue, and it speaks of something that cannot be spoken directly: the lack and void at the center; the broken unity from which one has come, and to which one will return through death. This is like the “being-towards-death” of existentialism, except that it is always unconscious. A true subject only emerges when it acknowledges the lack and void at its center, its split from its imaginary self, and its alienation in the world of

⁵⁷⁸ See: Slavoj Žižek, *How to Read Lacan* (New York: Norton, 2007).

⁵⁷⁹ Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, p. 24.

⁵⁸⁰ Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, ch. 3.

the symbolic. When a subject recognizes this lack at its heart, and takes responsibility for its insatiable desire away from both the (m)other and the Big Other—assuming the burden of that responsibility itself—then subjectivity has emerged.⁵⁸¹

Lacan therefore sees the real and the symbolic as two registers, which must be balanced both among each other, and with the “imaginary” register of the self. The balance means that the symbolic and the imaginary do not erase all traces of the real. Some fragment of the real must be allowed to shine through. People usually come to a psychoanalyst to be cured of “symptoms,” which Lacan interprets as usually caused by a blockage of desire, where desire is not able to slip further along a chain of signifiers, but gets caught in a repetitive cycle of frustration. But Lacan does not think it either possible or desirable to remove all symptoms. Because that would mean allowing the symbolic to obliterate the real. The “talking cure” of psychoanalysis can perhaps shift the symptom into another, more endurable form, by symbolizing certain areas of the real. But finally the goal of analysis is for the analysand to accept a more endurable symptom, which Lacan calls the *sinthome*, as a way of confronting, and as it were *expressing* the primal trauma of the void at the heart of the psyche.⁵⁸² A privileged form of the *sinthome* is art, which can be precisely such an expression.⁵⁸³

1.9.2 From Avril and Hal to Good Old Neon

In *Infinite Jest*, Hal Incandenza’s older brother, Orin, is trapped in a cycle in which he compulsively seduces mothers with young children. He seems to be acting out both desire and hatred for his mother, Avril Incandenza. Avril Incandenza is abnormally concerned about not appearing “intrusive or smothering”⁵⁸⁴ to her children, but “smothering” is exactly

⁵⁸¹ See: Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, especially chs. 5-6.

⁵⁸² See: Paul Verhaeghe and Frédéric Declercq, “Lacan’s analytical goal: *Le Sinthome* or the feminine way,” in: L. Thurston (ed.), *Essays on the final Lacan: Re-inventing the Symptom* (New York: The Other Press, 2002), pp. 59-83. As Verhaeghe and Declercq explain, the word *sinthome* is an obsolete French spelling of *symptôme* (symptom), which Lacan chooses in order to be able to play on three French words that are all pronounced the same way: *symptôme* (symptom), *saint homme* (holy man, saint), and *Saint Thomas* (the Apostle who doubted the identity of the Risen Jesus).

⁵⁸³ See Lacan’s reading of James Joyce in: Jacques Lacan, *The Sinthome: The Seminar of Jaques Lacan, Bk. XXIII*, ed. Jaques-Alain Miller, trans. A.R. Price (Cambridge: Polity, 2016), pp. 3-86.

⁵⁸⁴ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 761.

how Orin has experienced her love. Orin's friend Marlon Bain recounts Orin's "impression" of Avril as follows:

[W]hat he will do is assume an enormous warm and loving smile and move steadily toward you until he is in so close that his face is spread up flat against your own face and your breaths mingle. If you can get to experience it—the impression—which will seem worse to you: the smothering proximity, or the unimpeachable warmth and love with which it's effected?⁵⁸⁵

Avril herself acts out disturbing fantasies of incest with Orin.⁵⁸⁶ "Orin described his childhood's mother as his emotional sun,"⁵⁸⁷ and even in his adult attempts to escape her influence she continues to define him.

Orin interprets his brother Hal as having a similarly unhealthy dependence on his mother: "The kid's still obsessed with her approval. He lives for applause from exactly two hands."⁵⁸⁸ On Orin's reading Hal is stuck in the Lacanian phase of obsession with the desire of the mother. Hal is constantly performing in order to try to monopolize his mother's desire. He is constantly trying to present his imaginary self in a way that will be desirable to his mother.

Hal himself confirms Orin's interpretation in reflecting on the emptiness of his interior life. He is unable to feel any real joy or sorrow, because (he thinks) all of his emotions are just shams put up to fulfill his mother's expectations. They are finally narcissistic projections of his mother herself, who sees in her children a mirror of her own virtues:

Hal himself hasn't had a bona fide intensity-of-interior-life-type emotion since he was tiny; he finds terms like *joie* and *value* to be like so many variables in rarified equations, and he can manipulate them well enough to satisfy everyone but himself that he's in there, inside his own hull, as a human being—but in fact he's far more robotic than John Wayne. One of his troubles with his Moms is the fact that Avril Incandenza believes she knows him inside and out as a human being, and an internally worthy one at that, when in fact inside Hal there's pretty much nothing at all, he knows. His Moms Avril hears her own echoes inside him and

⁵⁸⁵ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 1052, note 269.

⁵⁸⁶ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, pp. 552-553.

⁵⁸⁷ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 738.

⁵⁸⁸ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 1040, note 234.

thinks what she hears is him, and this makes Hal feel the one thing he feels to the limit, lately: he is lonely.⁵⁸⁹

Thus James Incandenza's attempt to pierce the inert solipsism that he sees in his son can be seen as an attempt to break up the dyadic relationship with the mother, and bring Hal into the symbolic order. As Mary K. Holland puts it:

Incandenza's attempt to move his son out of "anhedonia" and into the symbolic order indicates his hope that Lacanian growth out of the preverbal imaginary and into language, the "Law of the Father," can save him.⁵⁹⁰

The means that he chooses end up being remarkably unsuited to his end, however, since the phantasy that his film offers is so alluring that it ends up killing its users, allowing them through to re-enter the original unity with mother earth that their birth severed.⁵⁹¹

As Marshall Boswell has argued, Wallace's employment of Lacan in *Infinite Jest* is meant to capture something about a whole culture obsessed with the pursuit of pleasures that can never satisfy desire, because there is something self-contradictory about their desire.⁵⁹²

If Hal is still stuck in the desire for the desire of the mother, many of the characters in the short story collections *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men* (1999) and *Oblivion* (2004) are obsessed with the approval of the social Big Other. *Brief Interviews* opens with a four-sentence story called "A Radically Condensed History of Postindustrial Life." A man and a woman are introduced, and each is so intent on gaining the other's approval that no real encounter takes place. They end up each driving alone to their respective homes "with the very same twist to their faces." The man who introduced them didn't really like either of them, but he pretends to like them because he is anxious to "preserve good relations at all

⁵⁸⁹ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 694.

⁵⁹⁰ Holland, *Succeeding Postmodernism*, p. 84.

⁵⁹¹ Holland, *Succeeding Postmodernism*, p. 81.

⁵⁹² Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, p. 128.

times.”⁵⁹³ To preserve good relations at all times is to constantly receive the approval of the Big Other.

The relations in the following stories in *Brief Interviews* are anything but good— variations on the theme of a failure to connect. Often the characters are quite conscious of their problems, but the consciousness does help them towards a solution. At times the Lacanian analysis of desire is used to plan the manipulation of others. Thus in one story two graduate students discuss their strategy for exploiting women, and explicitly reference “a Lacanian cry in the infantile unconscious.”⁵⁹⁴ The graduate students are emblematic of a culture which uses the insights of psychoanalysis not for healing, but for misogynistic exploitation.

The central story in *Oblivion*, “Good Old Neon,” deals with a character who is entirely dominated by a compulsive need to present his imaginary self in such a way as to receive the approval of the Big Other. The ostensible narrator of the story, Neil, is an orphan who was raised by apparently excellent adoptive parents. He seems to have successfully escaped the dyadic relation with the primary care giver, but he has come to be so dominated by need to present an image of himself to the Big Other that he has no contact with the real. “Pretty much all I’ve ever done all the time is try to create a certain impression of me in other people.”⁵⁹⁵ This desire makes him work hard to succeed by the standards of the society around him, but his success brings him no pleasure. Excellence in school, the experience of playing sports, being with a beautiful woman—he is not able to enjoy any of these things, because he there is always, as it were, a presence looking over his shoulder for whom he is putting on a performance. Even alone, writing a suicide note to his sister, Neil cannot help putting on an act: “At an early age I’d somehow chosen to cast my lot with my life’s drama’s supposed audience instead of with the drama itself.”⁵⁹⁶

⁵⁹³ Wallace, *Brief Interviews*, p. 0 (sic).

⁵⁹⁴ Wallace, *Brief Interviews*, p. 231.

⁵⁹⁵ Wallace, *Oblivion*, p. 141.

⁵⁹⁶ Wallace, *Oblivion*, p. 176.

Neil tries various ways of escaping from his “fraudulent” life—including charismatic Christianity, Buddhist meditation, numerous relationships with women— but none of them work. In all of them he is merely putting on a show and is unable to achieve a connection with the divine, or a mindful escape from illusion, or a genuine connection to other persons. He recognizes that his fraudulence is “a vicious infinite regress that ultimately resulted in being frightened, lonely, alienated, etc.,”⁵⁹⁷ but he cannot escape.

Finally, he tries psychoanalysis with an analyst named Dr. Gustafson. In analysis as well, he puts on an act, trying to appear to the analyst as an unusually intelligent patient, who already knows what his problem is. He has little hope that the analyst will be able to help him, since he thinks he is smarter than the analyst. “I knew what my problem was. I just couldn’t seem to stop.”⁵⁹⁸ Predictably the analyst is not able to help him stop. The analyst does, however, serve as the catalyst for him to realize how ordinary his problem of fraudulence, and the resulting loneliness, is:

The fact is that we’re all lonely, of course. Everyone knows this, it’s almost a cliché. So yet another layer of my essential fraudulence is that I pretended to myself that my loneliness was special, that it was uniquely my fault because I was somehow especially fraudulent and hollow. It’s not special at all, we’ve all got it. In spades. [...] Dr. Gustafson knew more about all this than I[.]⁵⁹⁹

Through working with Gustafson, Neil comes to theorize his fraudulence as equivalent to “a basic inability to really love.”⁶⁰⁰ But when he sees this problem mocked as yuppie cliché in a rerun of sitcom he is plunged in to such despair by the banality of his predicament that he decides to commit suicide.

For Neil, the insight into the cause of his psychological problems is so far from being therapeutic that it drives him ever further into despair. Neil exposes, in other words, what a

⁵⁹⁷ Wallace, *Oblivion*, p. 147.

⁵⁹⁸ Wallace, *Oblivion*, p. 143.

⁵⁹⁹ Wallace, *Oblivion*, p. 153.

⁶⁰⁰ Wallace, *Oblivion*, p. 165.

character in *The Pale King* calls “the big lie” that “diagnosis was the same as cure.”⁶⁰¹ John Baskin reads this as a rejection of the whole Freudian project of therapy through analysis.⁶⁰²

“Good Old Neon” also shows another, related divergence from the Freudian/Lacanian approach to human subjectivity. The “real” narrator of the story turns out to be a certain “David Wallace” who is imagining Neil appearing as a ghost and explaining why he committed suicide, despite apparently having everything in order. And Neil’s ghost describes consciousness as an infinite plenitude of thought, only a tiny, laughably inadequate piece of which can be expressed through the clumsy, sequential sign-system of language:

As though inside you is this enormous room full of what seems like everything in the whole universe at one time or another and yet the only parts that get out have to somehow squeeze out through one of those tiny keyholes you see under the knob in older doors. As if we are all trying to see each other through these tiny keyholes. [...] [T]he universes inside you, all the endless inbent fractals of connection and symphonies of different voices, the infinities you can never show another soul. And you think it makes you a fraud, the tiny fraction anyone else ever sees?⁶⁰³

At first this interior plenitude might seem something like what Lacan calls the “real” that resists symbolization. But for Lacan the real could not be thought; thought was essentially symbolic. For Wallace, on the other hand, this plenitude is consciously apprehended, but never expressible. Marshall Boswell sees here an influence of Steven Pinker’s notion of “mentalese” in Neil’s description of the interior landscape.⁶⁰⁴ In *The Pale King* one of the characters describes depths his inner depths, not in Pinker’s dry analytic terms, but in almost mystical ones:

I think that deep down I knew that there was more to my life and to myself than just the ordinary psychological impulses for pleasure and vanity that I let drive me. That there were depths in me that were not bullshit or childish but profound, and were not abstract but much realer than my clothes or self-image, and that blazed in an almost sacred way — I’m being

⁶⁰¹ Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 486.

⁶⁰² Baskin, “Untrendy Problems,” p. 145; idem, “Death is Not the End.”

⁶⁰³ Wallace, *Oblivion*, pp. 178-179.

⁶⁰⁴ Marshall Boswell, “‘The Constant Monologue Inside Your Head’: *Oblivion* and the Nightmare of Consciousness,” in: Marshall Boswell and Stephen J. Burn (eds.), *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), pp. 151-170, at pp. 168-170.

serious; I'm not just trying to make it more dramatic than it was — and that these realest, most profound parts of me involved not drives or appetites but simple attention, awareness.⁶⁰⁵

These depths that are “more” than the drives and impulses are a far indeed from Lacan's Freudian reductionism.

And yet, in “The Suffering Channel,” another story from *Oblivion*, Wallace comes closer to Lacan than one might think. The story is suffused with anxiety about human waste described in classically Lacanian terms, perhaps influenced by Calvin Thomas's book *Male Matters*, which had been sent to Wallace by its author.⁶⁰⁶ “The Suffering Channel” is about a reporter reporting on a shy Midwestern man who discharges faeces shaped like sculptures from his bowels. The reporter claims to the man's wife that he finds the man's literally shitty “art” genuinely moving:

The truth was he'd been moved, and he said he'd understood then for the first time, despite some prior exposure to the world of art through a course or two in college, how people of discernment could say they felt moved and redeemed by serious art.⁶⁰⁷

The reporter comes to see the faeces-artist as being caught in a universal human double-bind:

[...] [T]he conflict between Moltke's extreme personal shyness and need for privacy on the one hand versus his involuntary need to express what lay inside him through some type of personal expression or art. Everyone experienced this conflict on some level.⁶⁰⁸

This comes very close to Wallace's descriptions of his own art of writing. For example, in his essay “The Nature of the Fun,” Wallace describes the writer as caught in a double-bind of expression. His art seems to him like a “hideously damaged infant,” and the damaged infant is really an expression of the writers own damaged interior: “[I]ts deformity is *your* deformity.”⁶⁰⁹ The artist wants to communicate with others in such a way as to make them

⁶⁰⁵ Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 187.

⁶⁰⁶ See: Thomas, “Art is on the way.”

⁶⁰⁷ Wallace, *Oblivion*, pp. 281-282.

⁶⁰⁸ Wallace, *Oblivion*, p. 271.

⁶⁰⁹ David Foster Wallace, “The Nature of the Fun,” in: *Both Flesh and Not: Essays* (New York: Little, Brown, 2012), pp. 193-199, at pp. 193, 194.

like him, but the hideousness of the infant seems to ensure that they will despise him. He is thus in a double-bind—expression would be necessary for a real communication with others, but expression would seem to repel rather than attracting others. Art's way out of this double-bind is to find a means of expressing interior horrors that becomes attractive through its very "artfulness" at portraying universal problems of human nature. The expression of interior loneliness and desolation can thus be transformed into a means by which that loneliness is not only confronted, but also in some way overcome. In other words, writing was for Wallace what Lacan would have called a *sinthome*.⁶¹⁰

1.10 HYPERMODERNITY

In 1993 Wallace published a long essay on the relation of fiction writing in the United States to the dominant form of popular entertainment: television. "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction"⁶¹¹ inverts the traditional motto of the United States, *e pluribus unum*: not out of many one, but out of one many.⁶¹² Early scholarship of Wallace took this essay, with its focus on the themes of irony and sincerity, as an interpretive key for reading Wallace's work, as a sort of manifesto of his artistic intentions, and while more recent scholarship has put less emphasis on it, it is still considered important.⁶¹³

"E Unibus Pluram" contains one of the clearest statements of the double-bind of loneliness and giving oneself away in Wallace's work:

For lonely people are usually lonely not because of hideous deformity or odor or obnoxiousness—in fact there exist today social and support groups for persons with precisely these features. Lonely people tend rather to be lonely because they decline to bear the

⁶¹⁰ Kaltenbeck, "Die Gewalt der Melancholie."

⁶¹¹ Originally published in: *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13.2 (1993), pp. 151-194; later collected in: Wallace, *A Supposedly Fun Thing*, pp. 21-82.

⁶¹² The inversion is, of course, grammatically incorrect (*ex uno plures* would be the proper form). Wallace took the incorrect form from an essay by Michael Sorkin ["Faking It," in: Todd Gitlin (ed.), *Watching Television* (New York: Pantheon, 1987), pp. 162-182, at p. 179]. Sorkin likely chose the incorrect form for its *acoustic* inversion of the original phrase.

⁶¹³ Cf. Severs, *David Foster Wallace's Balancing Books*.

emotional costs associated with being around other humans. They are allergic to people. People affect them too strongly.⁶¹⁴

Wallace initially formulates this problem as one of a specific class of people, but it soon becomes clear that he means it as the pervasive cultural problem that we have already been considering for so long. He asks the reader to imagine “Joe Briefcase,” initially as “the average U.S. lonely person,” but later in the essay we are invited to imagine him as “just average, relatively unlonely.” Joe Briefcase is supposed to be an entirely ordinary specimen of the America of his time, and many Americans of his time are lonely, inhabiting as they do a “world that shifts ever more starkly from some community of relationships to networks of strangers connected by self-interest and contest and image.” It is the capitalist world that Wallace was to describe in *Infinite Jest*.

Wallace discusses the statistically huge amount of time that “average” Americans spent watching television in the early 1990s: an astonishing six hours per day.⁶¹⁵ For Joe Briefcase, six hours of television per day is a welcome escape from the strains of late-capitalist America. But how, Wallace asks, does Joe Briefcase reconcile himself to spending so much time passively watching images on a screen? The answer, Wallace suggests, has to do with the ancient rhetorical device of irony:

Joe Briefcase might be happy enough *when* watching, but it was hard to think he could be too terribly happy *about* watching so much. Surely, deep down, Joe was uncomfortable with being one part of the biggest crowd in human history watching images that suggest that life's meaning consists in standing visibly apart from the crowd. TV's guilt/indulgence/reassurance cycle addresses these concerns on one level. But might there not be some deeper way to keep Joe Briefcase firmly in the crowd of watchers by somehow associating his very viewership with transcendence of watching crowds? But that would be absurd. Enter irony.⁶¹⁶

How does irony resolve the conflict? Irony could be dangerous for television, because irony is a device often used to show up the kind of illusions on which television thrives. But, Wallace argues, late 1980s/early 1990s television had found a way to use irony to its own advantage. Television used irony to make fun of itself and the capitalist society of strangers

⁶¹⁴ Wallace, *A Supposedly Fun Thing*, pp. 22-23.

⁶¹⁵ Wallace, *A Supposedly Fun Thing*, p. 22.

⁶¹⁶ Wallace, *A Supposedly Fun Thing*, p. 58.

that it fosters, and flattered the viewer for understanding that making-fun. Wallace illustrates the point with a description of an advertisement for Pepsi that was running on TV at the time:

It's that Pepsi commercial where a Pepsi sound van pulls up to a packed sweltering beach and the impish young guy in the van activates a lavish PA system and opens up a Pepsi and pours it into a cup up next to the microphone. And the dense glittered sound of much carbonation goes out over the beach's heat-wrinkled air, and heads turn vanward as if pulled with strings as his gulp and refreshed, spiranty sounds are broadcast; and the final shot reveals that the sound van is also a concession truck, and the whole beach's pretty population has collapsed to a clamoring mass around the truck, everybody hopping up and down and pleading to be served first, as the camera's view retreats to overhead and the slogan is flatly intoned: "Pepsi: the Choice of a New Generation." Really a stunning commercial. But need one point out [...] that the final slogan is here tongue-in-cheek? There's about as much "choice" at work in this commercial as there was in Pavlov's bell kennel. In fact the whole thirty-second spot is tongue-in-cheek, ironic, self-mocking. [...] An ad about ads, it uses self-reference to seem too hip to hate. It protects itself from the scorn today's viewing cognoscente feels for both the fast-talking hard-sell ads Dan Akroyd parodied into oblivion on Saturday Night Live and the quixotic associative ads that linked soda-drinking with romance, prettiness, and group inclusion— ads today's jaded viewer finds old-fashioned and "manipulative." In contrast to a blatant Buy This Thing, this Pepsi commercial pitches parody. The ad's utterly up-front about what TV ads are popularly despised for doing: using primal, flim-flam appeals to sell sugary crud to people whose identity is nothing but mass consumption. This ad manages simultaneously to make fun of itself, Pepsi, advertising, advertisers, and the great U.S. watching/consuming crowd. In fact the ad's uxorious in its flattery of only one person: the lone viewer, Joe B., who even with an average brain can't help but discern the ironic contradiction between the "choice" slogan (sound) and the Pavlovian orgy (sight). The commercial invites Joe to "see through" the manipulation the beach's horde is rabidly buying. The commercial invites complicity between its own witty irony and veteran-viewer Joe's cynical, nobody's-fool appreciation of that irony. It invites Joe into an in-joke the Audience is the butt of. It congratulates Joe Briefcase, in other words, on transcending the very crowd that defines him. And entire crowds of Joe B's responded: the ad boosted Pepsi's market share through three sales quarters.⁶¹⁷

Through television, therefore, latecapitalism had found a way of *coopting* critiques of capitalist culture. Wallace argues that postmodern art (and by extension postmodern critical theory) were still trying to unmask the problems of a capitalist culture by "seeing through" it, but their attempt was not having any beneficial effect, since the culture was using that very critical act of "seeing through" to its own advantage:

⁶¹⁷ Wallace, *A Supposedly Fun Thing*, pp. 60-61.

I've said, so far without support, that what makes television's hegemony so resistant to critique by the new fiction of image is that TV has co-opted the distinctive forms of the same cynical, irreverent, ironic, absurdist post-WWII literature that the imagists use as touchstones. TV's own reuse of postmodern cool has actually evolved as a grimly inspired solution to the keep-Joe-at-once-alienated-from-and-part-of-the-million-eyed-crowd problem. The solution entailed a gradual shift from oversincerity to a kind of bad-boy irreverence in the big face TV shows us. This in turn reflected a wider shift in U.S. perceptions of how art was supposed to work, a transition from art's being a creative instantiation of real values to art's being a creative instantiation of deviance from bogus values. And this wider shift in its turn paralleled both the development of the postmodern aesthetic and some deep philosophic change in how Americans chose to view concepts like authority, sincerity, and passion in terms of our willingness to be pleased. Not only are sincerity and passion now "out," TV-wise, but the very idea of pleasure has been undercut.⁶¹⁸

In his famous interview with Larry McCaffery, originally published in the very same issue of the *Review of Contemporary Fiction* as his essay on television, Wallace argued that postmodern irony had become part of the problem it was trying to solve:

Irony and cynicism were just what the U.S. hypocrisy of the fifties and sixties called for. That's what made the early postmodernists great artists. The great thing about irony is that it splits things apart, gets up above them so we can see the flaws and hypocrisies and duplicates. [...] The problem is that once the rules of art are debunked, and once the unpleasant realities the irony diagnoses are revealed and diagnosed, "then" what do we do? Irony's useful for debunking illusions, but most of the illusion-debunking in the U.S. has now been done and redone. Once everybody knows that equality of opportunity is bunk and Mike Brady's bunk and Just Say No is bunk, now what do we do? All we seem to want to do is keep ridiculing the stuff. Postmodern irony and cynicism's become an end in itself, a measure of hip sophistication and literary savvy. Few artists dare to try to talk about ways of working toward redeeming what's wrong, because they'll look sentimental and naive to all the weary ironists. Irony's gone from liberating to enslaving. There's some great essay somewhere that has a line about irony being the song of the prisoner who's come to love his cage.⁶¹⁹

The "great essay" to which Wallace is referring is an essay on poetry and alcoholism by Lewis Hyde. Hyde's original use of the metaphor runs as follows:

Irony has only emergency use. Carried over time it is the voice of the trapped who have come to enjoy their cage. This is why it is so tiresome. People who have found a route to power based on their misery—who don't want to give it up though it would free them—they become ironic.⁶²⁰

⁶¹⁸ Wallace, *A Supposedly Fun Thing*, p. 5

⁶¹⁹ McCaffery, "An Expanded Interview," pp. 48-49.

⁶²⁰ Lewis Hyde, "Alcohol and Poetry: John Berryman and the Booze Talking," in: *The American Poetry Review* 4.4 (1975), pp. 7-12, at p. 11.

In *Infinite Jest* it is above all the intelligent and talented students at the tennis academy who have this kind of malignant addiction to irony. The phenomenally talented Hal Incandenza is unable to allow the deep questions raised by his handicapped brother Mario to really become live questions for him, because he shields himself with his irony. At one point, Mario asks Hal whether Hal believes in God. It is worth considering the passage at length. Mario is the first speaker, Hal the second:

'When I asked if you were asleep I was going to ask if you felt like you believed in God, today, out there, when you were so on, making that guy look sick.'

'This again?'

'...'

'Really don't think midnight in a totally dark room with me so tired my hair hurts and drills in six short hours is the time and place to get into this, Mario.'

'...'

'You ask me this once a week.'

'You never say, is why.'

'So tonight to shush you how about if I say I have administrative bones to pick with God, Boo. I'll say God seems to have a kind of laid-back management style I'm not crazy about. I'm pretty much anti-death. God looks by all accounts to be pro-death. I'm not seeing how we can get together on this issue, he and I, Boo.'⁶²¹

Hal here is the embodiment of hypermodernity, ever distancing himself through clever irony from the vital question that his naïve brother Mario poses. For Hal there is no way out of the double-bind. Fittingly it is Hal, who in the novel's opening scene, the latest point of its internal chronology, Hal giving us one of the most terrifying displays of lonely isolation. Attempting to speak his well-thought-out thoughts to the college admissions committee around him, he cannot. They hear only inarticulate bestial noises: "A goat, drowning in something viscous."⁶²²

⁶²¹ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 40.

⁶²² Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 14.

2 WAYS OUT OF THE DOUBLE-BIND

2.1 THE FRAUDULENCE PARADOX: IN WHAT SENSE ARE THERE WAYS OUT OF THE DOUBLE-BIND OF LONELINESS?

During the publicity tour for *Infinite Jest*, Wallace gave an interview to Gerald Howard (who had edited his previous novel, *The Broom of the System*). In the interview, Howard asks Wallace why he wrote such a long book in a time when no one seems to have the attention span to read long books. Wallace gives an answer that is worth quoting at length:

(a) Stories let us talk to one another about stuff that just can't be talked about any other way; no semantic model could explain why Cynthia Ozick's image of floating Jews in "Levitation" means as much as it does; (b) I'm pretty lonely most of the time, and fiction's one of the few experiences where loneliness can be both confronted and relieved. Drugs, movies where stuff blows up, loud parties—all these chase away loneliness by making me forget my name's Dave and I live in a one-by-one box of bone no other party can penetrate or know. Fiction, poetry, music, really deep serious sex, and, in various ways, religion—these are the places (for me) where loneliness is countenanced, stared down, transfigured, treated.⁶²³

Wallace's cute division of his answer into (a) and (b) corresponds to the two important parts of his literary project. In (a) he claims that fiction can allow us to speak things indirectly that are not directly speakable. The example that he gives is of an eerie scene by a Jewish writer, in which a convert to Judaism is at a party listening to a Holocaust survivor speak of the unspeakable things that he witnessed. As she listens, the convert sees the room float upwards like an ark, leaving her alone at the bottom.⁶²⁴ One thing that the image communicates is a terrible sense of loneliness. A loneliness that could not be described to the same effect directly. A first important part of Wallace's literary project was to communicate such loneliness through the indirect means of stories.

But a second part of his project was to explore ways of somehow mitigating that loneliness, without falling into the typical structures of flight/diversion/addiction. In (b), Wallace gives a kind of list of such ways. The role of literature here is a double one. On the one hand,

⁶²³ Gerald Howard, "Infinite Jester: David Foster Wallace and his 1,079 Mystical, Brilliant Pages," in: *Elle* 11.6 (1996), p. 58.

⁶²⁴ Cynthia Ozick, *Levitation* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1982), pp. 13-16.

literature is one among many ways of confronting and mitigating loneliness. On the other hand, it was also the means by which Wallace explored the other ways. After examining the double-bind of loneliness in the first part of this dissertation, I will now turn to an analysis of those ways of confronting and mitigating loneliness. In each case, I will bring these ways into dialogue with theological ethics.

But before turning to an analysis of the ways in particular, it is important to note in what sense these are ways out of the double-bind. Wallace contrasts these ways with diversions (drugs, action movies, etc.) that make one “forget” loneliness, ways of fleeing from one side of the double-bind to the other. As we have already seen, such diversions are an essential part of the double-bind, and only end up intensifying loneliness. In contrast, literature, music, “deep” sexual relations, and religion (and this is not, as we shall see, an exhaustive list), are not attempts to try to flee from loneliness; rather, they “confront,” “countenance,” and “stare down” loneliness. They acknowledge the pain for what it is and pay attention to it. And by that very means they “relieve,” “transfigure,” and “treat” loneliness.

It is essential to note that this confrontation with loneliness is not something easy or assured. All of the ways of confronting and treating loneliness can be taken in the wrong way—a way that turns them into merely more sophisticated forms of flight into diversion or totalitarianism. Wallace shows this very clearly in the character of Neil in “Good Old Neon.” As I discussed above (1.9.2), Neil is a brilliantly talented, handsome, and popular young man, who seems to his admiring acquaintances almost to glow like a neon-light so perfect does his life seem, and so at home does he appear in the world. But to Neil himself, he appears to himself to be a fraud. Everything that he does, he does for the sake of appearing admirable to other persons: “[A]t an early age I’d somehow chosen to cast my lot with my life’s drama’s supposed audience instead of with the drama itself.”⁶²⁵ Everything he does is therefore experienced by him as a fake and a pretense. He is kind to others, not because he has real benevolence towards them, but because he wants to appear kind. He is good at school not because he is interested in learning, but because he wants to impress others, and so on. Soon

⁶²⁵ Wallace, *Oblivion*, p. 176.

Neil notices a paradox about his behavior: the more he tries to appear attractive and good to others, the more fraudulent and therefore unattractive he feels inside. This renders him more and more lonely. He calls this the “fraudulence paradox”:

The fraudulence paradox was that the more time and effort you put into trying to appear impressive or attractive to other people, the less impressive or attractive you felt inside—you were a fraud. And the more of a fraud you felt like, the harder you tried to convey an impressive or likable image of yourself so that other people wouldn't find out what a hollow, fraudulent person you really were.⁶²⁶

Understanding this paradox does not, however, help Neil escape it. On the contrary, it merely intensifies it in a second paradox; the knowledge of the paradox merely increases the feeling of being a fraud and a fake, and therefore un-attractive and not lovable, and therefore leads to even greater attempts to appear attractive and lovable to others. The spiral merely accelerates:

Logically, you would think that the moment a supposedly intelligent nineteen-year-old became aware of this paradox, he'd stop being a fraud and just settle for being himself (whatever that was) because he'd figured out that being a fraud was a vicious infinite regress that ultimately resulted in being frightened, lonely, alienated, etc. But here was the other, higher-order paradox, which didn't even have a form or name — I didn't, I couldn't. Discovering the first paradox at age nineteen just brought home to me in spades what an empty, fraudulent person I'd basically been[.]⁶²⁷

Understanding that he is caught in a kind of double-bind, Neil tries all sorts of things to escape. He gives the following list:

EST,⁶²⁸ riding a ten-speed to Nova Scotia and back, hypnosis, cocaine, sacro-cervical chiropractic, joining a charismatic church, jogging, pro bono work for the Ad Council, meditation classes, the Masons, analysis, the Landmark Forum, the Course in Miracles, a right-brain drawing workshop, celibacy, collecting and restoring vintage Corvettes, and trying to sleep with a different girl every night for two straight months[.]⁶²⁹

As noted above, he also tries psychoanalysis. Note that some of the things on his list fall on the diversion side of the dichotomy that Wallace sets up in the Gerald Howard interview,

⁶²⁶ Wallace, *Oblivion*, p. 147.

⁶²⁷ Wallace, *Oblivion*, p. 147.

⁶²⁸ That is, Erhard Seminars Training.

⁶²⁹ Wallace, *Oblivion*, pp. 142-143.

while others fall on the side of ways of really confronting and treating loneliness. But for Neil all of them fail. Even the apparently promising ones ending up intensifying the spiral of fraudulence in which he is caught. When he tries meditation, for example, he is so anxious to impress his master and the other teachers with how he can hold his position that his mind does not come to rest, it is always popping outside of him, as it were, and observing himself from the perspective of others. Or when he tries the charismatic church, he is always performing for the other churchgoers so that he is unable to open his heart to be touched. And even when he undergoes psychoanalysis, and apparently confronts his problem head on, he is so anxious to give the analyst an impression of his own intelligence and insight into the problem that he only intensifies the problem rather than mitigating it.

At the end of the story, when it appears that the entire narrative has been a certain “David Wallace” imagining Neil’s ghost talking to him—as a way of making sense of the fact that his classmate Neil, who had seemed so perfect and happy and content, had ended up killing himself—Wallace imagines Neil’s ghost trying to persuade him, Wallace, not to go the same route, and arguing that given the infinite plenitude of interior life, and the extremely limited means that we have of communicating it to others, there is not really anything fraudulent about trying to control to some extent what others see of our interior room through the keyhole of human communication. In other words, it was vain for Neil to think that he could find a “solution” to his problem that would solve it completely. Or even to find a way of confronting it, as in analysis, that would completely rob it of its power. Like all of us, Neil lives in the box of his skull, which “no other party can penetrate or know,” and is therefore essentially alone. The best he can expect from the “solutions” is that they help him accept this fact, and mitigate it by helping him to communicate a little more through the keyhole, and understand a little better that all others are in the same situation, and thereby arrive a certain solidarity with them.

This insight bears some resemblance to the idea of the “absurd” in Camus’s existentialism. For Camus, the absurd results from the confrontation of human freedom, with its demand for meaning, with a world that does not give that meaning. There is no “solution” to the absurd in the sense of something that overcomes it once and for all, and yet there are ways of

mitigating the absurd in shared acceptance. As Allard den Dulk has shown, Wallace made use of Camus's insights in his own approach to the problem of what den Dulk calls "hyperreflexivity" (which I would see as an element of the double-bind of loneliness).⁶³⁰ But, on my reading, there is a difference between Camus's "absurd" and Wallace's "fraudulence paradox." Wallace does not see the fraudulence as arising from the encounter of human freedom with an essentially meaningless world. Wallace does not pre-judge the question of whether "the world" can in fact offer meaning to human freedom or not. Indeed, as we shall see, he is open to the possibility that it might be suffused with a deep level meaning uniting all things. Instead, the fraudulence paradox arises from the desire of humans for a deep connection to others, which is partly frustrated by the means of gaining recognition that they are prone to choose. Whether there is a deep meaning to all being, or a Buddhist-style "subsurface unity of all things"⁶³¹ that would ground all other connections, is a question that remains open, and is an impulse behind Wallace's interest in religion as a possible means of confronting loneliness.

In the following sections, we will try to analyze the various paths that Wallace marks out for confronting and healing loneliness—showing how all of them have a both a "religious" and an "ethical" dimension. But we must do so with great attention to the danger that he sees that such paths can be taken in the wrong way—that they be reduced to just so many more structures of flying-from as plunging-into that accelerates the spiral of fraudulence and loneliness. By doing so, we will already be reflecting on the task of theological ethics. How can theological ethics mark out a path for a human life that mitigates misery and loneliness? How can it face the human condition in an honest way, and avoid providing a facile ideological superstructure that would conceal rather than treat the human condition? How can it understand moral action virtue as a lived response to the human condition that help both to understand it and to transcend it from within, rather than as quick-fixes for forgetting the self? These are the questions that will be with us on our way.

⁶³⁰ Dulk, *Existentialist Engagement*, ch. 8.

⁶³¹ Wallace, "Kenyon Commencement Speech," p. 362.

2.2 LITERATURE AS CONNECTION

2.2.1 Wallace and Jonathan Franzen on the novel and loneliness⁶³²

As noted above, Wallace saw literature as a means of saying things that are difficult to say directly, and therefore as a privileged means of exploring both the double-bind of loneliness and the ways of confronting and treating it. Moreover, he also saw literature itself as one of those ways of confronting and treating the double-bind. In this section I want to explore his understanding and practice of literature's second role. How is literature itself a means of confronting and treating the double-bind of human loneliness?

In 1992 Wallace drove from Syracuse, New York to Swarthmore, Pennsylvania with another young American writer of his generation, Jonathan Franzen. Wallace and Franzen were to have a long and fruitful relationship marked both by friendship and by rivalry. In the car on that 1992 trip, they spent nearly the whole time discussing the purpose of literature. Wallace argued that its purpose was "to alleviate loneliness and give comfort, to break through what he characterized in *Infinite Jest* is each person's 'excluded engagement in the self.'"⁶³³ Franzen apparently agreed with Wallace's argument, but divergences were soon to appear.

At first glance, it seems surprising that Wallace, who was so influenced by postmodern literature, would argue for this view of literature's purpose. It seems like a return to an apparently outdated view of literature characteristic of the novels of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Those novels were developed as a literary form particularly suited to the anthropology typical of early-modern philosophy. The Cartesian anthropology that I discussed above (1.2 and 1.6.2), makes a very sharp distinction between the inner, psychic reality and the outer, corporeal reality; between the *res cogitans* and the *res extensa*; between interiority and exteriority; between the subject and the object; between the world of "the first-person" and that of the "third person." This anthropology saw human beings as having a

⁶³² Parts of this and the following section (2.2.2) appeared in an earlier form in my essay "The Soul in the Novel: From Daniel Defoe to David Foster Wallace," in: *The Resounding Soul: Reflections on the Metaphysics and Vivacity of the Human Person*, ed. Eric Austin Lee and Samuel Kimbriel (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2015), pp. 199-210.

⁶³³ Max, *Every Love Story*, p. 164.

stable inner reality, and the problem was to communicate that reality to others. This was accomplished by a new literary form and style that concentrated on the inner thoughts and emotions of the characters in the ordinary pursuits of human life. As we have seen (1.8 and 1.9), however, postmodern philosophy had abandoned Cartesian dualism, and with it the idea of a coherent interior self that could communicate itself via referential signs to others. Postmodern literature is therefore concerned with ironizing the self, and exposing it as an illusory effect of power structures and the uncontrollable play of systems of signification.

Indeed, I claim that in Franzen the idea of literature as salve for loneliness does indeed represent a return to something like Cartesian modernity, focused on giving imagined access to the inner depths of characters. But in Wallace it is rather the attempt to push beyond postmodernity to a new form of connection between writer and reader.

In a long 2011 essay Franzen describes how, after Wallace committed suicide, he (Franzen) went to Selkirk Island in the Pacific, where Alexander Selkirk, an inspiration for the title character of Daniel Defoe's archetypal modern novel *Robinson Crusoe*, was once stranded. Franzen camped out alone on the island for a while, read *Robinson Crusoe*, reflected on novel writing, and tried to come to terms with his friend Wallace's death. Franzen recalls the "many discussions" in which Wallace and he had discussed the purpose of literature, and in which Wallace had argued that fiction is "a solution, the *best* solution, to the problem of existential solitude."⁶³⁴ In Franzen's account it is not at first entirely clear whether the overcoming of loneliness takes place through imaginative access to consciousness of the *characters* or the *author*. In discussing Wallace, Franzen suggests that it is the author, but in discussing Defoe and other novelists he seems to suggest that it is rather the characters. This is a highly significant difference, and Franzen seems not to realize just how significant.

Franzen argues that Daniel Defoe was one of the first to write novels in the modern sense, and to use them as a way of overcoming the solitude of the modern subject, by portraying that very solitude. He understands Wallace as working in the same tradition. (A claim that

⁶³⁴ Jonathan Franzen, *Farther Away* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012), p. 44.

we shall soon see to be problematic). Franzen sees *himself*, however, as working within a variant of that tradition—one inaugurated by Samuel Richardson, the pioneer of the courtship-marriage plot in the novel. Franzen argues that while novelists such as Defoe and Wallace tried merely to portray the existential isolation of the modern subject, and thus overcome it, Richardson and Franzen try also to *depict the overcoming of that loneliness* through a certain kind of love-relationship between men and women. (We shall have return to that point in section 2.4). Franzen is right to see a difference between his approach and Wallace’s understanding of the way in which literature overcomes ought to try to overcome solitude, but his initial account of where that difference lies is wrong.

For Franzen the novel is essentially a genre of literature that began with Defoe and Richardson in the eighteenth century, and which is concerned with giving the reader a peephole (as it were) into the consciousness of other subjects. It is instructive to consider a recent critique of Franzen’s view by Steven Moore, a devotee of postmodern fiction, whose recent multi-volume history of the novel, defines the genre so broadly as to include ancient epics and the historical books of the Bible. Moore argues that the best novels are not concerned with “access” to hidden interiority at all:

[We] don’t read such novels ‘to sustain a sense of connectedness, to resist existential loneliness.’ We read them for the same reason we might go to the opera or the ballet: to be dazzled by a performance.⁶³⁵

Moore’s championship of ‘performance’ over peep-hole-ism is, I think, the reason why he rejects the traditional view of the novel as a modern genre, and it is a symptom of the postmodern collapse of the view of the relation between soul and body on which the “modern novel” was based. “Performance” is actually more typical of a certain pre-modern view of the relation between soul and body, of the exterior and the interior. A view that sees the external as immediately expressing the internal; that sees the soul as not foreign to the body, but as forming with it a microcosm that mirrors the macrocosm—a macrocosm which is itself no Cartesian *res extensa*, but rather an ordered whole, full of intrinsic teleology and form. Recall my discussion of Dante’s *Commedia* in which the visible is the immediate

⁶³⁵ Steven Moore, *The Novel: An Alternative History*, Vol. 1 (New York: Continuum, 2010), p. 9.

expression of a deeper order above (1.2). Performance on that premodern view of things is the best way of expressing the truth, because the truth itself is primarily public.

But in modernity performance is problematic, because the relation between the inner and the outer is problematic. Truth is not public, but private, a matter (above all) of the interior monologue within the hidden depths of the *res cogitans*. The novel thus tries to avoid the impression of performance, of artificiality. Even if it is in fact a work of very careful art, it tries to give the impression of merely peering into another mind. Daniel Defoe was the first great master of this technique. To understand how Wallace's approach to literature differs from Defoe's it will be useful to briefly consider Defoe's masterpiece on its own merits.

2.2.2 The early modern loneliness of Robinson Crusoe

Defoe's great literary innovation was what Ian Watt in his classic study of the early novel calls "formal realism": a style marked by a great many details, many of them unremarkable, and which therefore stresses the particularities of its characters rather than their universal characteristics.⁶³⁶ To call such a style "realism" is somewhat question-begging—it assumes, in typically modern fashion, that the individual is more real than the universal.

But *Robinson Crusoe* is not only important because of its formal innovation, but also because of the peculiar character of its hero. Crusoe's character has two sharply distinguished parts: the first what we might call the economic or technological, and the second the spiritual.⁶³⁷ The first part of his character is, I'm afraid, more interesting, and is the part that appeals to children: Robinson's tireless and inventive labour, by which he produces everything that he needs. (Note however, that this labour is only rendered so interesting by a Utopian feature: it is wholly un-alienated, and there is neither division of labour nor separation of labour and capital.)⁶³⁸ Robinson is the exemplary representative of the project of the domination of

⁶³⁶ See: Watt, *Rise of the Novel*, especially pp. 32-34.

⁶³⁷ For the following analysis I am much indebted to: Eva Brann, "The Unexpurgated Robinson Crusoe," in: *American Dialectic* 1.1 (2011), pp. 90-111.

⁶³⁸ Marx points this out in his discussion of Crusoe: Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin Books, 1990), pp. 169-172.

nature through the application of mathematics to the physical world, inaugurated by Francis Bacon, and carried forward by Descartes (discussed above in sections 1.2, 1.4, and 1.6). As Robinson himself notes:

So I went to work; and here I must needs observe, that as Reason is the Substance and Original of the Mathematicks, so by stating and squaring every thing by Reason, and by making the most rational Judgment of things, every Man may be in time Master of every mechanick Art.⁶³⁹

As we have seen, the Baconian-Cartesian project of dominating nature is of course a key element in the “disenchantment” of the world in modernity. Descartes’s method of universal doubt can be seen as a method of stripping the world of all features that are not relevant to the Baconian programme. The intrinsic teleology of things is of course irrelevant to such a project, since domination involves substituting one’s own end for the natural end of the thing. And therefore the teleologically determined substantial forms of things (in the Aristotelian sense) are irrelevant. The only form that is left in the world is the most extrinsic and accidental sort of form: mathematically metrical figure. In the capitalist economic system, that Baconian-Cartesian science helped to bring about, the mechanization of nature is extended to a mechanization of human relations. And this leads to the peculiar form in which the double-bind of loneliness presents itself in the modern world. The modern subject is not at home in the mechanized world it has brought about. The more the subject advances in reductive, mechanical knowledge of the world of objects, the more it becomes a riddle to itself. Robinson Crusoe’s solitude on the island can be taken as an unconscious symbol of the isolation of the modern subject. Defoe gives this remarkably eerie expression in a scene in which Robinson Crusoe is awakened by the voice of his parrot:

But judge you, if you can, that read my Story, what a Surprise I must be in, when I was wak’d out of my Sleep by a Voice calling me by my Name several times, *Robin, Robin, Robin Crusoe*, poor *Robin Crusoe*, where are you *Robin Crusoe*? Where are you? Where have you been?⁶⁴⁰

These are of course questions that the parrot has heard Crusoe pose to himself, and they bring us to the second part of Crusoe’s character—the spiritual part.

⁶³⁹ Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, ed. Thomas Keymer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 59.

⁶⁴⁰ Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, p. 121.

Robinson Crusoe is largely concerned with Crusoe's religious journey, with his growing recognition of God in his life. The long spiritual introspections in *Crusoe* are often left out in children's versions of the novel as being too boring, but for our purposes they are of crucial importance. Crusoe's religion largely functions as a means of giving his life *meaning*. This is a very modern sort of religion. Pre-modern Christians tended to see the world about them as saturated with meaning, and intentional agency, much of it dangerous; they did not pray to God for meaning but for salvation.⁶⁴¹ But Crusoe's relation to God above all gives him the comfort of the sense that his life has meaning, despite the emptiness and solitude about him. Ian Watt has noted that Crusoe's religion has little effect on his actions; it remains in the subjective sphere, and does not influence his treatment of objects.⁶⁴²

It is of course true that Crusoe sees even the external events of his life as guided by divine providence. Crusoe is not a twentieth-century liberal Protestant—his religion is not *merely* subjective. And yet, one can see in Crusoe tendencies that already tend in the direction of reducing religion to the subjective. In a passage where Crusoe speaks of praying for deliverance from cannibals, he notes his dissatisfaction with his prayer, since prayer ought really to be a matter of finding internal comfort rather than facing objective threats:

I must observe with Grief too, that the Discomposure of my Mind had too great Impressions also upon the religious Part of my Thoughts, for the Dread and Terror of falling into the Hands of Savages and Canibals, lay so upon my Spirits, that I seldom found my self in a due Temper for Application to my Maker, at least not with the sedate Calmness and Resignation of Soul which I was wont to do [...] For these Discomposures affect the Mind as the others do the Body; and the Discomposure of the Mind must necessarily be as great a Disability as that of the Body, and much greater, Praying to God being properly an Act of the Mind, not of the Body.⁶⁴³

Given this subjective view of religion it is not surprising that when Crusoe's solitude has been relieved, near the end of his stay, and his island has become a political society in miniature, he decides to tolerate various religions:

⁶⁴¹ Cf. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, ch. 1.

⁶⁴² Watt, *The Rise of the Novel*, p. 81.

⁶⁴³ Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, p. 138-139.

It was remarkable too, we had but three Subjects, and they were of three different Religions. My Man *Friday* was a Protestant, his Father was a *Pagan* and a *Cannibal*, and the *Spaniard* was a Papist: However, I allow'd Liberty of Conscience throughout my Dominions.⁶⁴⁴

Politics for Crusoe belongs to the external, objective world—it is a matter of managing external affairs. Religion is primarily a matter of the subjective, interior, and thus essentially private. This is a typically modern view that would have seemed strange to the ancients and medieval, for whom politics was the art of governing souls, and for whom religion was as much a public as a private matter.

2.2.3 From Robinson Crusoe to Postmodern Metafiction

Defoe provided the model for the novel formally, but not thematically. Samuel Richardson was to provide the novel with its principle theme; namely the overcoming of the isolation of the individual through freely chosen personal relations. Capitalism having destroyed the interpersonal ties of more organic societies and replaced them with cold contractualism, freely chosen relationships took on a great importance: especially the relationship of husband and wife, which, disengaged from other areas of life, becomes a matter of personal choice.⁶⁴⁵

As the novel develops after Defoe and Richardson one sees a great many complications of the picture that I have been drawing. The Cartesian view of the subject is very soon questioned in philosophy—first by the so-called empiricists. This has an effect on the novel, but it does not change the fundamental separation of the inner and outer that I have been describing. Indeed I would argue that it aggravates it. Laurence Sterne writes in his highly philosophical novel *Tristram Shandy* written in the 1760s: “our minds shine not through the body, but are wrapt up here in a dark covering of uncrystalized flesh and blood.”⁶⁴⁶

⁶⁴⁴ Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, p. 203.

⁶⁴⁵ See: Watt, *The Rise of the Novel*, ch. 5; cf. Charles Taylor's discussion of 'affirming ordinary life': Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, ch. 13.

⁶⁴⁶ Laurence Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, vol. 1 [1760], ed. Ian Cambell Ross (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 60.

In the nineteenth century the novel is further complicated by various reactions against Enlightenment rationalism. Goethe's hylozoism, for instance, is an expression of a yearning for a pre-modern, organic-holistic world, but it remains something toward which he strives rather than the background picture of his work.⁶⁴⁷ Later still come epic social novels such as Tolstoy's *War and Peace* in which Enlightenment individualism is tempered by a sense of the action of social "forces." But again: such novels are more similar to Defoe than they are to classical or medieval literature. Their very form continues to embody an Enlightenment picture of the subject. Thus, Tolstoy is one of the great masters of the art of giving the reader the impression of a view into the subjective depths of his characters.⁶⁴⁸

The twentieth century sees a more radical change in the form of the novel—Joyce's late-modern stream of consciousness novels began to unravel the idea of a coherent inner life that could be narrated. But it is the postmodern novels and "metafiction" of the late twentieth century that question this most radically. The work of writers such as John Barth, William Gaddis et al. question both the idea of narratable human life and the very idea of communication through signs.

At the level of literary form, metafiction draws attention to its own status as fiction; it does not invite the reader to "suspend disbelief" and enter into an illusion, but rather to keep the illusory character of the narrative in the foreground. Thematically, postmodern novels are concerned with portraying human subjects as mere epiphenomena of material and economic reality, or linguistic constructs that mask the irrational imposition of power. The centrality of the human subject was however the *raison d'être* of the novelistic form, and thus postmodern novels are deeply ironic—they are novels about the impossibility of novels. The pleasure of the most brilliant postmodernists is the pleasure of, as it were, *being*

⁶⁴⁷ See for example his 1809 novella: Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Die Wahlverwandschaften* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1986), with its attempt to portray an analogy between human and chemical interaction.

⁶⁴⁸ Tolstoy in fact uses the technique of directly reported thought, which was already falling out of fashion in his day (to be replaced by "free indirect speech"). See: Roy Pascal, *The Dual Voice: Free Indirect Speech and its Functioning in the Nineteenth-Century European Novel* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1977), pp. 123-124.

in the know—of getting the ironic nihilism that sees through all pretenses to the meaningless chaos that pretense hides.

2.2.4 The game between reader and writer

Wallace's thesis in his discussions with Franzen shows that he thought the postmodern project rather empty. He thought he knew "in his gut" that the great literature of the past was more than mere illusion, that it involved a real communication between human beings, and that it was able to show the possibility of really being human.⁶⁴⁹ But it did not represent a return to the early-modern literature of Defoe or Richardson, concerned primarily with offering a peep-hole into the inner life of the *characters*. Rather, Wallace thought that the portrayal of the loneliness of the subject, and even of the incoherence of the subject as exposed by the postmodern writers, would enable a new form of literature that would enable a kind of communication between the reader and the *author*.

Franzen, who had begun his career making use of postmodern techniques, developed in his later novels to an ever more straightforward nineteenth-century style realism, fitting his basically nineteenth- or eighteenth-century understanding of his role as novelist. Wallace, on the contrary continued to use the many of the literary techniques of postmodern metafiction. But he used them to very different ends than the postmodernists had. While metafiction drew attention to its own status as text in order to ironize and debunk itself, Wallace used its techniques to get the reader to enter into a communicative relationship with the author. Unlike the classical modern novel, which tries to be entirely transparent to the reader, so that the reader has the impression of an unmediated look into other subjects, Wallace wanted his readers to have to *work* on his works. What he once said of his story "Little Expressionless Animals" applies to all of his work:

[I]t's trying to prohibit the reader from forgetting that she's receiving heavily mediated data, that this process is a relationship between the writer's consciousness and her own, and that in

⁶⁴⁹ Wallace, *A Supposedly Fun Thing*, p. 144.

order for it to be anything like a full human relationship, she's going to have to put in her share of the linguistic work.⁶⁵⁰

The novelist and critic Lee Konstantinou has argued that while postmodern metafiction tries to get readers to become conscious of the questionable activity in which they are themselves engaged, “revealing that what the reader reads ought to be disbelieved,” the literary form that Wallace developed opens the reader rather to the activity of the writer and asks the reader to *believe* to enter a “full human relationship” with the writer, a relationship of trust.⁶⁵¹ Konstantinou borrows a term from Raoul Eshelman to describe this sort of literary technique as “performatist.”⁶⁵²

I argued above that “performance” is a literary style typical of a pre-modern view of the human being. And in this respect Wallace’s work is closer to pre-modern literature than to the classical novel—since it is consciously artificial. But Wallace’s performatism differs from pre-modern literary performance. For Wallace, there is no unproblematic sense of the visible as the immediate expression of a deeper order, as for pre-modern literature. Rather, for Wallace the performance of the author sets up a game with the reader which is capable of building meanings, and therefore connection. In this Wallace was influenced by Wittgenstein’s idea of language games in the *Philosophical Investigations*.

In an interview with Laura Miller, Wallace explained what he meant in way that makes his difference from Franzen (and Franzen’s reading of him) clear. Miller asks him what is so uniquely special about literature, and he answers:

Well, the first line of attack for that question is that there is this existential loneliness in the real world. I don’t know what you’re thinking or what it’s like inside you and you don’t know what it’s like inside me. In fiction I think we can leap over that wall itself in a certain way. But that’s just the first level, because the idea of mental or emotional intimacy with a character is a delusion or a contrivance that’s set up through art by the writer. There’s another level that a piece of fiction is a conversation. There’s a relationship set up between the reader and the writer that’s very strange and very complicated and hard to talk about. A piece of fiction for me may or may not take me away and make me forget that I’m sitting in a chair. There’s real

⁶⁵⁰ McCaffery, “An Expanded Interview,” p. 34.

⁶⁵¹ Konstantinou, “No Bull,” p. 97.

⁶⁵² Konstantinou, “No Bull,” p. 96.

commercial stuff can do that, and a riveting plot can do that, but it doesn't make me feel less lonely. There's a kind of Ah-ha! Somebody at least for a moment feels about something or sees something the way that I do.⁶⁵³

The leaping over the wall into the interior of characters so dear to Franzen is only the first level. The deeper level, which really addresses loneliness, is the relationship with the author. At one point, Franzen is perceptive enough to uncover this difference, significantly modifying his initial account of his difference to Wallace in terms of Defoe vs. Richardson. In a remarkable passage, he claims that the darkness of Wallace's portrayal of the human condition has a paradoxical effect:

The curious thing about David's fiction, though, is how recognized and comforted, how loved, his most devoted readers feel when reading it. [...] At the level of content, he gave us the worst of himself: he laid out, with an intensity of self-scrutiny worthy of comparison to Kafka and Kierkegaard and Dostoyevsky, the extremes of his own narcissism, misogyny, compulsiveness, self-deception, dehumanizing moralism and theologizing, doubt in the possibility of love, and entrapment in footnotes-within-footnotes self-consciousness. At the level of form and intention, however, this very cataloguing of despair about his own authentic goodness is received by the reader as a gift of authentic goodness: we feel the love in the fact of his art, and we love him for it.⁶⁵⁴

This passage deserves a good deal of unpacking. Franzen recognizes that many readers feel a connection with Wallace as author, and that this is brought about by Wallace's exploration of extreme darkness in human life, a darkness which Franzen reads as something that Wallace found within his own psyche. He is indeed right to see Wallace's attempt at establishing a connection between reader and writer as depending on the depiction of the brokenness and darkness of human life. And this has to do with Wallace's idea of the human self as being not the relatively stable interior reality depicted by Defoe, but rather the result of struggle.

Wallace's conception of the connection between author and reader builds on (and in some ways distorts) Wittgenstein's idea of language games. For the Wittgenstein of the *Philosophical Investigations*, language does not work in a single way. In the *Tractatus* he had

⁶⁵³ Laura Miller, "Something Real American: and Interview with David Foster Wallace," in: David Foster Wallace, *The Last Interview and other Conversations* (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2012), pp. 3-16, at pp. 11-12.

⁶⁵⁴ Franzen, *Farther Away*, p. 39.

attempted to describe a single underlying logic of language: the correspondence of propositions with facts. But in the *Investigations* he describes language a multiplicity of related practices, with no single underlying logic to them, but with resemblances, similar to the resemblances between different games. These “language games” also resemble games in functioning through socially accepted rules. The meaning of words is not reducible to the picturing of facts, in which words stand for things, and propositions picture states of affairs by picturing the relation of things in the relation of words. Rather, meaning depends on the use of words in a social practice. The use of words to indicate objects, and the use of propositions to picture the relations of objects, might be aspects of many such social practices, but even there the meaning is more than that correspondence. For example, Wittgenstein describes a hypothetical language developed among house builders with only four words: “block,” “pillar,” “slab,” and “beam.” When one builder calls out “slab,” the other gives him a slab. Even in this simple case, the word “slab” is being used not simply to refer to the object, but rather to elicit a certain action with respect to the slab. For the other builder to understand the use correctly, is for him to understand not only that a certain object is meant, but that he is to bring that object.⁶⁵⁵ To be able to use and understand a language is an essentially social activity. It consists in following socially agreed practices, like the rules of a game. It is impossible for a single person to follow such rules by themselves, since without a social context it is impossible to distinguish between following a rule, and merely thinking that one is following a rule, when one is not in fact. A “private language” is therefore impossible.⁶⁵⁶

This is one way of seeing why Wallace’s project does *not* result in a return to classical modern literary forms. Such forms presupposed a picture in which there was a stable inner reality of a self, thinking in (as it were) the “private language” of its own thoughts, which, given enough literary skill, could then be communicated to other selves via direct report of thought, or devices such as free indirect speech. For Wallace, however—and for

⁶⁵⁵ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, 4th ed. (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 2-20.

⁶⁵⁶ Grayling, *Wittgenstein*, ch. 3; cf. Wallace, “Authority and American Usage,” in: *Consider the Lobster*, pp. 66-127.

Wittgenstein as Wallace reads him—thought is forged (so to speak) in its expression. And not only thought: the thinking subject itself comes to be through expression. Wallace takes Wittgenstein's later account of language in what one might term an existentialist direction.⁶⁵⁷ The self is not a stable given that goes out to meet others, rather the self comes to be through engaging in social practices and language games.

Wallace combines the Wittgensteinian account with the rather un-Wittgensteinian idea of a quasi-infinite, chaotic, raw material of consciousness, which can be actualized by expression. Such expression involves a struggle, and it is in this struggle that the self is forged. But the way in which it is expressed is by a game that develops between the one expressing (the writer) and the one receiving the expression (the reader). In "The Nature of the Fun" Wallace describes the temptation that authors have to project a false perfection in their work, and thereby a false perfection in themselves. They begin to write in order to have people like their writing and admire them as writers, and as persons. But the kind of writing that results from such vanity ends up being no good, and therefore not suitable to the end of getting them liked. The way out of this double-bind is found in a certain kind of forgetfulness of the reader, and an attempt to merely express one's own struggle. And paradoxically, this forgetfulness of the reader is what enables true communication with the reader, because the reader too is not a perfect, stable self, but rather a self struggling into existence, racked by loneliness and pain, and is therefore able to sympathize with the honest writer:

[F]iction becomes a way to go deep inside yourself and illuminate precisely the stuff you don't want to see or let anyone else see, and this stuff usually turns out (paradoxically) to be precisely the stuff all writers and readers share and respond to, feel. Fiction becomes a weird way to countenance yourself and to tell the truth instead of being a way to escape yourself or present yourself in a way you figure you will be maximally likable.⁶⁵⁸

The resulting fiction is dark and convoluted, lacking in superficial coherence. To read it is to enter into a game with the writer in which one slowly learns the rules, and in which (in the best case) one recognizes the author's struggle in the portrayal of the characters, and sees

⁶⁵⁷ See: Dulk, *Existentialist Engagement*, ch. 5.

⁶⁵⁸ Wallace, "The Nature of the Fun," pp. 198-199.

that it is similar to one's own. This is the essence of the communication between writer and reader for which Wallace strove.

There is a kind of dark humor to this game. The funniness of recognizing the absurdity of human life. In an essay on such humor in Kafka, Wallace writes that this dark humor is in a certain sense religious. It is worth quoting the passage at length:

What Kafka's stories have [...] is a grotesque, gorgeous, and thoroughly modern complexity, an ambivalence that becomes the multivalent Both/And logic of the, quote, "unconscious," which I personally think is just a fancy word for soul. Kafka's humor—not only not neurotic but anti-neurotic, heroically sane—is, finally, a religious humor, but religious in the manner of Kierkegaard and Rilke and the Psalms, a harrowing spirituality against which even Ms. O'Connor's bloody grace seems a little bit easy, the souls at stake pre-made. And it is this, I think, that makes Kafka's wit inaccessible to children whom our culture has trained to see jokes as entertainment and entertainment as reassurance. It's not that students don't "get" Kafka's humor but that we've taught them to see humor as something you get—the same way we've taught them that a self is something you just have. No wonder they cannot appreciate the really central Kafka joke: that the horrific struggle to establish a human self results in a self whose humanity is inseparable from that horrific struggle.⁶⁵⁹

The idea of a struggle to become a self has of course existentialist resonances, and can be fruitfully brought into dialogue with existentialist writers such as Sartre and Camus. Allard den Dulk has done this with admirable clarity and thoroughness.⁶⁶⁰ There is no need for me to cover the same ground. Instead I want to focus on why Wallace sees this struggle as religious. In order to do so I will now bring Wallace into dialogue with one of the great figures of the theological tradition: St. Augustine of Hippo (354-430).

2.2.5 Augustine and/or Wittgenstein and the struggle for the self

Wittgenstein famously begins the *Philosophical Investigations* with a quotation from Augustine's *Confessions*. The quotation contains Augustine's account of how he learned language, and expresses the sort of naïvely referential view of language as based on pointing and naming that Wittgenstein goes on to try to refute. But why does Wittgenstein begin with Augustine's *Confessions*? Yaniv Iczkovits points out that there are surely other thinkers who

⁶⁵⁹ David Foster Wallace, "Some Remarks on Kafka's Funniness from Which Probably Not Enough Has Been Removed," in: *Consider the Lobster*, pp. 60-65, at p. 64; emphasis added.

⁶⁶⁰ Dulk, *Existentialist Engagement*. For Dulk's reading of the passage just quoted see especially p. 40.

give fuller account of such theories, and even Augustine himself has other texts in which he gives more extended accounts of the nature of language.⁶⁶¹ Iczkovits refers to a reason that Wittgenstein once gave to Norman Malcolm. Namely, that the idea of meaning “*must* be important if so great a mind held it.”⁶⁶² Iczkovits argues that while Wittgenstein rejected Augustine’s explicit theory of language, he thought that Augustine’s *Confessions* as a whole exemplified a serious and worthwhile way of talking about language.

The later Wittgenstein had modified his *Tractatus*-era view of religious and ethical matters as being literarily unspeakable and talk about religion and ethics as being therefore without meaning. In his later view, Wittgenstein saw ethical and religious language as being coherent language games based in a form of life.⁶⁶³ But religious and ethical language is rendered incoherent when it is interpreted in a narrowly referential sense. Already in 1931, in the transitional period of his thought leading up to the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein expounded this view in notes on James George Frazer’s famous nineteenth-century anthropological work on magic and religion. Wittgenstein was unsatisfied with Frazer’s reading of religion and magic as erroneous attempts at a “scientific” explanation of facts. To illustrate that Frazer’s approach is wrong, he brings up Augustine:

Was Augustine in error, then, when he called upon God on every page of the *Confessions*? But—one might say—if he was not in error, surely the Buddhist holy man was—or anyone else—whose religion gives expression to completely different views. But *none* of them was in error, except when he set forth a theory.⁶⁶⁴

The idea seems to be that Augustine’s speaking to God in the *Confessions* is not simply nonsensical speech to an imaginary friend, but rather an expression of a deeply serious life-form. Not a static life-form, but a life-form coming about through struggle. In the

⁶⁶¹ Yaniv Iczkovits, *Wittgenstein’s Ethical Thought* (Basingstoke: Pallgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 52.

⁶⁶² Iczkovits, *Wittgenstein’s Ethical Thought*, p. 53; Norman Malcolm, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), p. 60.

⁶⁶³ See: Grayling, *Wittgenstein*, pp. 103-104.

⁶⁶⁴ Ludwig Wittgenstein, “Remarks on Frazer’s *Golden Bough*,” in: *Philosophical Occasions 1912-1951*, ed. James Klagge and Alfred Nordmann (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993), pp. 115-155, at p. 119; cf. Iczkovits, *Wittgenstein’s Ethical Thought*, pp. 51-52.

introductory editorial to an issue of *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, Wallace made a point in precisely similar terms:

To me, religion is incredibly fascinating as a general abstract object of thought—it might be the most interesting thing there is. But when it gets to the point of trying to communicate specific or persuasive stuff about religion, I find I always get frustrated and bored. I think this is because the stuff that's truly interesting about religion is inarticulable.⁶⁶⁵ Plus the truth is that there's nothing about it I really *know*, and nothing about it that anybody, I don't think, really *knows*; and so when I hear some person try to articulate or persuade me of some specific point about religious stuff I find myself looking at my watch or shifting my feet, immediately and deeply bored. But—each time—this boredom always lasts exactly as long as it takes me to realize that what this person who's trying to talk about religion is really talking about is herself. This happens each time. I'm glazed and scanning for the exit until I get the real gist: though these heartfelt utterances present themselves as assuasive or argumentative, what they really are—truly, deeply—*expressive*—expressive of a self's heart's special tangle, of a knowing and verbal self's particular tortured relation to what is unknow- and -sayable. Then it gets interesting again.⁶⁶⁶

The tortured relation to what is unsayable harkens back to the *Tractatus* era Wittgenstein's account of religion and ethics as being unsayable. But the idea of religious language as an expression of that relation is similar to the passage just quoted from Wittgenstein's transitional period, in which religion is seen as having a use in a certain practice, which is not aimed at a referential picturing of facts in the world, but rather at something else.

Both Wallace and Wittgenstein are more cautious about the possibility of theoretical content to religious language than Augustine himself. Though even in Augustine himself, the account of that theoretical content is more subtle than might at first appear. For Augustine, God is not an object like objects in the world, and speech about him will always contain an element of the unknowable and the unsayable.⁶⁶⁷ Nevertheless, Augustine certainly devotes a great deal of his writings to what Wallace dismissively refers to as “specific or persuasive stuff about religion.” In the *Confessions*, Augustine shows how that kind of speech emerges out of reflection on his own relation to the “unspeakable,” and yet he would presumably reject the idea that such speech was *merely* expressive of a knowing self's relation to what

⁶⁶⁵ In a footnote he adds: “(Which of course paradoxically is a big part of what makes it so interesting, so it all gets really tangled.)” (p. 8).

⁶⁶⁶ David Foster Wallace, “Quo Vadis—Introduction,” in: *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 16.1 (1996), pp. 7–8.

⁶⁶⁷ See: Rowan Williams, *On Augustine* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), especially chs. 3-4.

can in no way be known. Wallace and Wittgenstein have a caution here born of the Kantian and post-Kantian critique of metaphysics. (Although, Wallace was not always so apodictic about the impossibility of metaphysics as in the passage just cited). But even in their caution it might seem that Wallace and Wittgenstein are still open to some of the criticisms that have been made of Augustine. Namely, that the turn to a transcendent “other” issues in an ideological alienation of the human self. It thus raises a question that I see as going to the heart of the project of theological anthropology and theological ethics: does the theological help or hinder human life?

In an early letter to Franzen, Wallace had written the following:

Fiction for me is a conversation for me between me and something that May Not Be Named—God, the Cosmos, the Unified Field, my own psychoanalytic cathexes, Roqoq’oqu, whomever. I do not feel even the hint of an Obligation to an entity called READER—do not regard it as his favor, rather as his choice, that, duly warned, he is expended capital/time/retinal energy on what I’ve done.⁶⁶⁸

At first glance, this might seem to contradict Wallace’s idea of writing as Wittgensteinian language game between reader and writer. But really it is meant to show what the game must be based on—namely the writer’s own struggle with the unspeakable. It is precisely in “conversing,” as it were, with the unspeakable that the writer opens up a space for the reader to recognize his or her own struggle. But is this appeal to the unnamable something, the horizon, one might say, of the life of a being engaged in the practice of language really helpful? After Wallace’s death, Franzen was to write of a “dehumanizing moralism and theologizing” that he saw in Wallace.⁶⁶⁹ The focus on the relation to the unsayable, so Franzen suggests, carries Wallace away from the concrete reality of human life.

A precisely similar criticism has been made of St. Augustine. As Rowan Williams summarizes this criticism, preparatory to defending Augustine from it, it takes the vantage point of a certain reading of Hegelian unhappy consciousness, in order to see talk of God as an escapist projection of desire into a fictitious transcendence that prevents a true attainment of

⁶⁶⁸ David Foster Wallace to Jonathan Franzen, August 13-14, 1989, quoted in: Max, *Every Love Story*, p. 145.

⁶⁶⁹ Franzen, *Farther Away*, p. 39.

selfhood. The self “is never at our disposal” is always “defined by its relation to the fictive otherness of God.” And this opens up a gap that prevents the taking of responsibility for oneself. Williams rhetorically:

Do we have to say that the superficially modern or even postmodern self evoked in the *Confessions* collapses back into the crudely self-alienated subjectivity of a faith that uses thinking about God to *prevent* thinking about itself or owning itself?⁶⁷⁰

Note that Williams speaks of the self as evoked by the *Confessions* as appearing modern “or even postmodern.” It is the difference between those two that is the key to understanding how one might defend Augustine from the charge. And it is also the key to seeing how Wallace’s “theologizing” can be an aid to theology in a reflecting on how it can avoid alienating ideological reductions.

Augustine has often been seen as originating a sort of proto-Cartesian philosophy of the self.⁶⁷¹ But more recent work by the likes of John Cavadini and Rowan Williams has argued that in Augustine does not actually have a concept of “the self” in the modern sense. Augustine was deeply influenced by neo-Platonic theories of the soul, but, Cavadini and Williams argue, he significantly modified them with his ideas of human life as distended in time and marked by lack, mourning and incomplete identity. As Cavadini puts it:

[T]he closer one examines the imagery which Augustine uses to express the content of self-awareness, the more one becomes convinced that he does not use it to describe a stable reality called “the self” that becomes more and more clearly visible the purer one’s interior vision becomes, but rather something that defies reification. The content of self-awareness, for those truly self-aware, is much more disturbing and mysterious, more exciting and hopeful, more treacherous and full of risk. Someone who is self-aware is aware not of “a self” but of a struggle, a brokenness, a gift, a process of healing, a resistance to healing, an emptiness, a reference that impels one not to concentrate on oneself, in the end, but on that to which one’s self-awareness propels one, to God.⁶⁷²

From the consideration of mourning the death of a friend in Book IV of the *Confessions* to the hesitation over conversion in Book VIII to the paradoxes of temporality described in

⁶⁷⁰ Williams, *On Augustine*, p. 7.

⁶⁷¹ See, for example: Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, ch. 7.

⁶⁷² John Cavadini, “The Darkest Enigma: Reconsidering the Self in Augustine’s Thought,” in: *Augustinian Studies* 38.1 (2007) pp. 119–132, at p. 123.

Book XI, Augustine is describing that struggle. The struggle has to do with an absence—the absence of the self, and the absence of any object of the self's desires that could fully establish the self. As Rowan Williams puts it, “I know myself as an act of questioning, a lack and a search.”⁶⁷³ “*Factus eram ipse mihi magna quaestio*,” Augustine writes in *Confessions* IV, “I became a great enigma to myself.”⁶⁷⁴

In Augustine's telling, the truly alienating flight from the self is found not in the turn to an unspeakable God everywhere present and yet always hidden, but rather the attempt to bring the struggle to a false end or closure, by an illusion of self-possession, or by the illusion of self-coincidence induced by pleasure or diversion. To quote Williams again, “the real self-alienation [...] lies in the idea of a finite self-coincidence, a state of satisfied desire in which the awareness of incompleteness was set aside.”⁶⁷⁵

A similar defense could be offered for Wallace against Franzen's charge of “dehumanizing moralism and theologizing.” To the extent that Wallace “theologizes” his theologizing is in an Augustinian spirit that attempts to do justice to the struggle of human beings to establish a self. The appeal to “something that May Not Be Named” is typical of human life as the life of a being engaged in signification, and in coming to terms with its own finitude. An author whom Wallace saw as being particularly exemplary in this regard was the American Catholic novelist Walker Percy.⁶⁷⁶ In his essays, Percy had argued that human language cannot be reduced to dyadic relations of interaction (stimulus-response), but must rather be described in terms of a triadic process of signification. This leads human beings to be the only beings in this world who can question the world as a whole and their own finite place within it. The role of the novelist, as Percy sees it, is to raise such questions, and thus aid the

⁶⁷³ Williams, *On Augustine*, p. 5.

⁶⁷⁴ *Confessiones* IV.iv.9; St. Augustine of Hippo, *The Confessions*, trans. Frank Sheed, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2006), p. 59

⁶⁷⁵ Williams, *On Augustine*, p. 10.

⁶⁷⁶ For Wallace's engagement with Percy, as evidenced by the copies of Percy's books that he carefully annotated, see: Lucas Thompson, *Global Wallace: David Foster Wallace and World Literature*, David Foster Wallace Studies, vol. 1 (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), pp. 170-180.

reader in coming to terms with their own paradoxical, unfinished self.⁶⁷⁷ As Thompson argues, Wallace saw his own task in similar terms: “Following Percy’s lead, Wallace’s response to postmodernism’s spiritual deracination was to imagine the kinds of catalysts that might provoke a deeper existential reckoning.”⁶⁷⁸

The connection between author and reader that Wallace hopes to establish through his fiction is therefore not the connection of two stable Cartesian subjects, but rather the connection of one struggling, emerging self with another whom she or he recognizes. By narrating the “horrific struggle” of human subjectivity, the author is thus in a way giving an aid to the formation of a self.

2.2.6 The broken self, moral identity, and narrative ethics

Wallace’s descriptions of the struggle of human selves coming into being (or failing to do so) can provide a helpful way of approaching recent work in theological ethics on “narrative identity.” Inspired by the philosophers such as Alasdair MacIntyre and Paul Ricœur, theological ethicists have in the past few decades given careful attention to the role of narrative in forming human moral character, and even in forming one’s “identity” as a moral agent.

In *After Virtue*, MacIntyre argued that a moral self requires a narrative unity. The self in search of the good can narrate its own life in terms of that good, and measure itself in terms of the continuity of that narrative and fidelity to its aims.⁶⁷⁹ Partly inspired by MacIntyre, theologian Stanley Hauerwas has offered a range of reflections on such unity. Hauerwas emphasizes the need of membership of a community with its own narrative in which one’s personal narrative can be integrated, and reflects on how the Christian Church can play such

⁶⁷⁷ See: Walker Percy, *The Message in the Bottle* (New York: Picador, 1975); cf. Rowan Williams, *The Edge of Words: God and the Habits of Language* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), pp. 51-62.

⁶⁷⁸ Thompson, *Global Wallace*, p. 180.

⁶⁷⁹ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, ch. 15..

a role.⁶⁸⁰ More recently, Hauerwas has reflected on the aporia that arise from his account, involving the dangers of cultural separatism, and of totalitarianism. As he put it in a 2016 interview:

First, community for community's sake is not a good idea. Sartre is right: hell is other people! Community by itself cannot overwhelm the loneliness of our lives. I think we are a culture that produces extreme loneliness. Loneliness creates a hunger—and hunger is the right word, indicating as it does the physical character of the desire and need to touch another human being. But such desperate loneliness is very dangerous. Look at NFL football. Suddenly you're in a stadium with a hundred thousand people and they are jumping up and down. Their bodies are painted red, like the bodies that surround them. They now think their loneliness has been overcome. I used to give a lecture in my basic Christian Ethics class that I called "The Fascism of College Basketball." You take alienated upper-middle-class kids who are extremely unsure of who they are—and suddenly they are Duke Basketball. I call it Duke Basketball Fascism because fascism has a deep commitment to turning the modern nation-state into a community. But to make the modern state into a kind of community—for the state to become the primary source of identity through loose talk about community—is very dangerous. It is not community for its own sake that we seek. Rather, we should try to be a definite *kind* of community.⁶⁸¹

Wallace's work can be a help to developing Hauerwas's point here. As we shall see below, his examination of AA provides a way of looking at communal narratives in terms of the brokenness of individual selves, and what it takes to form a community that avoids the kind of totalitarian temptation to which Hauerwas alludes. Like Wallace, Hauerwas was deeply interested in Wittgenstein, and his work is a constant struggle to prevent his reflections on the Christian narrative becoming a "theory" in Wittgenstein's sense.⁶⁸²

On the continent, MacIntyre's work was responded to by Paul Ricœur, who in his Gifford lectures *Oneself as Another* developed his own highly original narrative theory of the self. MacIntyre is only one of many authors with whom Ricœur engages in *The Self as Another*. If MacIntyre's work is some sense an attempt to revise an Aristotelian ethics of virtue, and the good, Ricœur's is an attempt to synthesize an Aristotelian ethics of the good with a Kantian

⁶⁸⁰ See, for example: Stanley Hauerwas, *Character and the Christian Life: A Study in Theological Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994).

⁶⁸¹ See: Peter Mommsen, "Why Community is Dangerous: An Interview with Stanley Hauerwas," in: *Plough Quarterly* 9 (2016), pp. 32-39, at p. 34.

⁶⁸² See: Brad J. Kallenberg, *Ethics as Grammar: Changing the Postmodern Subject* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), especially pp. 238-245.

morality of obligation. As Ricoeur's reflections unfold, the concepts of the *promise* and of *attestation* take on an ever-greater importance. The moral self is formed in a sense by the promises it makes to others. In promising, the self attests to its own stability and identity as a self. This stability can only be expressed in the form of narrative, in which the self (*ipse*) is the same (*idem*). There is, however, always an element of instability and otherness in this self to which the self attests. Ricoeur's reflections have been taken up in continental theological ethics, especially by Dietmar Mieth⁶⁸³ and his student Hille Haker. Haker emphasizes the role of brokenness in Ricoeur's reflections, and shows how contemporary literature in particular is helpful for bringing this element to the fore:

[Ricoeur's] concept of narrative identity comes up against at least two limits. On the one hand, the tendency of modern literature to construct the acting subject in an aporetic manner, in which the constitutive dialectic between identity and ipseity slides toward the later, so that the possibility of self-identification dissolves. On other hand, the demonstration of the differences between fictitious narrative identity and the biographical-existential identity. The first limit renders the ethical perspective problematic, since a fragmentary self cannot develop any continuous ethical stance, and its stability in time and autonomy (*Selbst-Ständigkeit*) are therefore threatened. The second limit shows that the 'play' of art has to be transformed into the 'seriousness' of existence.⁶⁸⁴

In other words, the instability of the self in contemporary literature can be a help to the reader to reflect on the fragility of moral identity, and the necessity of taking responsibility for one's own moral life through attestation. The 'playful' unreality of fiction can thus be a spur to taking the reality of life seriously.

Haker uses these Ricoeurian insights in an insightful and original reading of Uwe Johnson's novel *Jahrestage*. Johnson's novel is a medium of moral reflection in double sense: it helps the reader to reflect on his or her *own* identity, and it helps to reflect on the contexts of ethical orientation, and, as it were, to 'test' their normative content.⁶⁸⁵

⁶⁸³ Mieth, *Moral und Erfahrung*, vols. 1-2.

⁶⁸⁴ Hille Haker, *Moralische Identität: Literarische Lebensgeschichten als Medium ethischer Reflexion* [*Moral Identity: Literary Life-Stories as Media of Ethical Reflection*] (Tübingen: Francke, 1999), p. 155 (translation my own).

⁶⁸⁵ Haker, *Moralische Identität*, p. 163.

Haker's work suggests an analogous way of reading Wallace as a medium of moral reflection. The brokenness of the moral subjects in Wallace's novels can be a medium through which readers reflect on their own moral identity, and on the contexts in which such identity has to be formed.

2.3 MUSIC AND THE PAIN OF LONGING

Wallace's own *métier* being literature, it is natural enough that he should have thought more about literature than about other arts. In the *Elle* magazine interview with Gerald Howard quoted above (2.1), however, Wallace also mentions poetry and music as having a similar role in confronting loneliness. In his early nonfiction work *Signifying Rappers*, written together with his friend Mark Costello six years before *Infinite Jest*, Wallace writes of love songs as oblique, musical expressions of a longing that could scarcely be expressed directly:

The love song's traditional fixation on the Other—charms of, quest for, union with, loss of—has long been acknowledged as token for a more basic human urge toward some kind of completion, a fulfillment-in-being that we intuit's been damaged or lost. The Fall, Plato's leaky sieve, T. S. Eliot's Arthurian infertility, etc., on and on: Quest, *Romance*. In terms of deprivation, the traditional love-singer is both lucky and un-: feeling, with an intensity we don't have to, just how incomplete he really is; but at the same time getting to *believe*, as we rarely can, that he's figured out what's missing, and has only to acquire the love object for her/it to become for him *tessera*, the fixative that'll let him be, glue him together, whole. That his belief in completion-via-object is ultimately stupid we never have to hear about in the love songs themselves, since quests *ex officio* end with Acquisition or Honeymoon at the very outside.⁶⁸⁶

The passage already anticipates many of the themes of Wallace's later work. Six years later, on the promotional tour for *Infinite Jest*, Wallace was to speak of the love songs of American "country music" to the journalist David Lipsky, in similar terms:

Like living in Bloomington: one of the things that I do, I mean, you have to listen to a lot of shitty country music. 'Cause that's like pretty much all there is on the radio, when you're tired of like, listening to Green Day on the one college station. And these country musics that are just so—you know, 'Baby since you've left I can't live, I'm drinking all the time' and stuff. And I remember just being real impatient with it. Until I'd been living here about a year. And all of a sudden I realized that, what if you just imagined that this absent lover they're singing to is just a metaphor? And what they're really singing is to themselves, or to God, you know? 'Since

⁶⁸⁶ Mark Costello and David Foster Wallace, *Signifying Rappers* (London: Penguin, 2013), p. 139. The quotation is from one of the sections marked "D," meaning that it was written by Wallace rather than Costello.

you've left I'm so empty I can't live, my life has no meaning.' That in a weird way, I mean they're incredibly existentialist songs. That have the patina of the absent, of the romantic shit on it just to make it salable. But that all the pathos and heart that comes out of them, is they're singing about something much more elemental being missing, and their being incomplete without it. Than just, you know, some girl in *tight jeans* or something. And it's so weird. It's like you live immersed in this stuff, it's very Flannery O'Connorish. And then every once in a while you realize that it's all the same, and it's all about the really profound shit.⁶⁸⁷

There is something about music that seems especially suited to adumbrating the deep pain of existential loneliness and longing. Just as in literature, the expression of the deepest and darkest loneliness can create a sense of communion with the author, so in music the expression can cause a sort of communion with the composer or performer. As Wallace put it in the same interview with Lipsky:

There's a thing in Lester Bangs's *Psychotic Reactions and Carburetor Dung*, about certain music giving you an erection of the heart. And that term really resonates for me. "The Balloon" gave me an erection of the heart. [...] For me a fair amount of aesthetic experience is—is erotic. And I think a certain amount of it has to do with this weird kind of intimacy with the person who made it.⁶⁸⁸

For the artists themselves, however, the danger is that the attempt to give others such experiences will degrade into manipulation, which will only make them more lonely. It has to be done "in the right spirit and with the right head."⁶⁸⁹ Otherwise, the artist is like a skilled but manipulative lover, who makes the beloved feel truly loved and un-alone, but remains himself alone.

When they are done in the right a spirit, however, arts such as music can bring a sense of true transcendence that brings a kind of forgetfulness of the self. Great music can be "so transcendently beautiful that you forget who and where you are."⁶⁹⁰ And (although Wallace makes this less explicit) this is true not only of the listener, but also of the performer. And it is true not only in the performance of art, but also, in an analogous way of sports: "Really

⁶⁸⁷ Lipsky, *Although of Course*, p. 198.

⁶⁸⁸ Lipsky, *Although of Course*, p. 72.

⁶⁸⁹ Lipsky, *Although of Course*, p. 294.

⁶⁹⁰ Lipsky, *Although of Course*, p. 294.

hard exercise, where you learn all over again what it is to be a body.”⁶⁹¹ Again, this is a point not made fully explicit in the Lipsky interview, but it is made very explicit indeed in Wallace’s writings on tennis.

2.4 TENNIS AS TRANSCENDENCE AND RECONCILIATION⁶⁹²

Tennis held a lifelong fascination for Wallace. Apart from the long passages on the game in *Infinite Jest*, Wallace devoted five essays to it, recently collected in the volume *String Theory*.⁶⁹³ The most famous of these is “Both Flesh and Not,” originally published in the August 20, 2006 *New York Times* as “Roger Federer as Religious Experience.” In his introduction to *String Theory*, John Jeremiah Sullivan points out an analogy between Wallace’s own achievements as a writer and the achievements of Roger Federer as a tennis player that Wallace described in “Federer Both Flesh and Not.” Just as Roger Federer had the genius to overcome the apparently “final” form of tennis in the “power baseline” style, and recover “an all-court style” and “art,” so Wallace “working in a form that is also (perpetually?) said to be at the end of its evolution [...] when at his best, showed new ways forward.”⁶⁹⁴

I think that Sullivan is right about that analogy, but I think he misses another, deeper analogy that Wallace sees between art and tennis. In discussing Wallace’s argument in another one of his tennis essays, “How Tracy Austin Broke My Heart,” that the inability of great athletes to describe what it feels like to have such greatness follows immediately from the essence of their greatness, which is a lack of self-consciousness allowing them to be entirely present in the moment, Sullivan writes “The writer, existing only in reflection, is of all beings most excluded from the highest realms.”⁶⁹⁵ This seems to me not quite right. The writer’s gift is more analogous to the athlete’s than Sullivan lets on. At first glance it seems

⁶⁹¹ Lipsky, *Although of Course*, p. 294.

⁶⁹² An earlier version of this section appeared on my blog: “A Commanding Rhythm,” in: *Sanrucensis* (blog), April 25, 2016: <https://sanrucensis.wordpress.com/2016/04/25/a-commanding-rhythm/> (accessed April 28, 2017).

⁶⁹³ *String Theory: David Foster Wallace on Tennis* (New York: Library of America, 2016).

⁶⁹⁴ John Jeremiah Sullivan, Introduction to *String Theory*, p. xiv.

⁶⁹⁵ Sullivan, Introduction, *String Theory*, p. xiii.

true that literary art necessarily involves the sort of self-consciousness, the lack of which is essential to great tennis. But, on the other hand, when his writing went well, Wallace remarked, “I can’t feel my ass in the chair.” As D. T. Max says about that remark, writing “released [Wallace] from some of the pain of being himself.”⁶⁹⁶ Certainly, for Wallace, these moments were rare, and one of the burdens of his life was that his writing was often impeded by the “Iago-like voice of the self” that he saw great athletes as being able to “shut off.”⁶⁹⁷ In describing his own self-consciousness while playing tennis in front of spectators, Wallace might as well have been describing the struggles that so often destroyed the fun of writing for him:

I would drive myself crazy: “. . . but what if I double-fault here and go down a break with all these folks watching? . . . don’t think about it . . . yeah but except if I’m consciously not thinking about it then doesn’t part of me have to think about it in order for me to remember what I’m not supposed to think about? . . . shut *up*, quit thinking about it and serve the god-damn ball . . . except how can I even be talking to myself about not thinking about it unless I’m still aware of what it is I’m talking about not thinking about?” and so on. I’d get divided, paralyzed. As most ungreat athletes do. Freeze up, choke. Lose our focus. Become self-conscious. Cease to be wholly present in our wills and choices and movements.⁶⁹⁸

For a truly great athlete, Wallace suggests, being at one with oneself, and therefore forgetful of the self, comes naturally.

If “Federer Both Flesh and Not” is the most famous of Wallace’s tennis essays, it seems to me that “How Tracy Austin Broke my Heart” is the most helpful for understanding how Wallace thought sport could illuminate the human condition. “How Tracy Austin Broke my Heart” was originally published in the August 30, 1992 *Philadelphia Inquirer* under the inane headline “Tracy Austin serves up a bubbly life story,” and is a review of *Beyond Central Court*, the autobiography of Tracy Austin, a professional tennis player who was ranked world number one at the age of seventeen, but whose career was cut short by injury.

⁶⁹⁶ Max, *Every Love Story*, p. 49.

⁶⁹⁷ Wallace, *Consider the Lobster*, p. 154.

⁶⁹⁸ Wallace, *Consider the Lobster*, pp. 153-154.

What exactly is it about Tracy Austin or her memoir that breaks Wallace's heart? Wallace describes Tracy Austin's art, her "*technē*," as "that state in which Austin's mastery of craft facilitated a communion with the gods themselves."⁶⁹⁹ On the court, he argues, Austen shared "the particular divinity she's given her life for" and allows her spectators a kind of transcendence, a view of "transient instantiations of a grace that for most of us remains abstract and immanent."⁷⁰⁰ It is highly significant that Wallace speaks of this transcendence as "a communion." There is something about this transcendence that overcomes—at least for a fleeting moment—the loneliness of being a human self. The heartbreak is, at least initially, the disappointment of finding that the book is a collection of dead clichés that fail to communicate any of the profundity that Austin shows on the court. But on a deeper level, I think, the heartbreak is that very profundity itself in its archetypically human combination of fragile mortality with intimations of eternity. There is something about the aesthetic transcendence of a great tennis player's art that seems to demand eternity and immortality, and yet it is thoroughly passing and mortal: "[T]he seductive immortality of competitive success and the less seductive but way more significant fragility and impermanence of all the competitive venues in which mortal humans chase immortality."⁷⁰¹

Wallace's insight here can be illuminated by the work on theological aesthetics of the Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar. Balthasar writes of the relation of eternity and mortality in aesthetic transcendence:

In the experience of worldly beauty the moment is eternity. The form, containing eternity, of the beautiful object communicates something of its supratemporality to the condition of the person who experiences it in contemplation. Nevertheless, the 'sorrow of the gods' (*Göttertrauer*) wafts about the beautiful form, for it must die, and the state of being blissfully enraptured always includes a knowledge of its tragic contradiction: both the act and the object contain within themselves the death that contradicts their very content.⁷⁰²

⁶⁹⁹ Wallace, *Consider the Lobster*, p. 150.

⁷⁰⁰ Wallace, *Consider the Lobster*, pp. 150-151.

⁷⁰¹ Wallace, *Consider the Lobster*, p. 150.

⁷⁰² Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 1: *Seeing the Form*, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1982), p. 237.

The fragility of a great athlete's achievement can thus be seen as intrinsic to the kind of transcendence that they are able to achieve. Thus, the dark part of the Austin story is intrinsic to its power. Balthasar connects this paradox to the Christian idea of the violent death of Christ on the cross as the revelation within time and mortality of the eternal and immortal beauty of divine life:

If the Cross radically puts an end to all worldly aesthetics, then precisely this end marks the decisive emergence of the divine aesthetic, but in saying this we must not forget that even worldly aesthetics cannot exclude the element of the ugly, of the tragically fragmented, of the demonic, but must come to terms with these. Every aesthetic which simply seeks to ignore these nocturnal sides of existence can itself from the outset be ignored as a sort of aestheticism. It is not only the limitation and precariousness of all beautiful form which intimately belongs to the phenomenon of beauty, but also fragmentation itself, because it is only through being fragmented that the beautiful really reveals the meaning of the eschatological promise it contains.⁷⁰³

The eschatological promise is for Balthasar the pointing towards a salvation beyond the fragmentation of the present. In Wallace it is less clear whether such salvation can be hoped for or not. But what is clear is the way in which fragmentation is bound up at least aesthetically with transcendence.

Such moments of transcendence are for now just moments. They are helpful in helping us to be "reconciled" with our human condition. As Wallace puts it in "Federer Both Flesh and Not," the "kinetic beauty" of great athletes has to do with "human beings' reconciliation with the fact of having a body."⁷⁰⁴ The body is what makes us temporal, mortal, vulnerable, and yet it is also our means of enacting and experiencing a beauty which seems to transcend all that: "[E]ven just to see, close up, power and aggression made vulnerable to beauty is to feel inspired and (in a fleeting, mortal way) reconciled."⁷⁰⁵

Such fleeting reconciliation cannot suffice as a means of dealing with the double-bind of human loneliness. But it can perhaps contribute by way of encouragement to life of habitual practice aimed at dealing with the double-bind.

⁷⁰³ Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord*, vol. 1, p. 460.

⁷⁰⁴ David Foster Wallace, *Both Flesh and Not: Essays* (New York, Little, Brown, 2012), p. 8.

⁷⁰⁵ Wallace, *Both Flesh and Not*, p. 33.

2.5 THE DOUBLE-BIND IN LOVE AND SEXUAL RELATIONSHIPS

2.5.1 Part of the solution or part of the problem?

In the *Elle* interview, Wallace counts “really deep serious sex” among the “experiences where loneliness can be both confronted and relieved.”⁷⁰⁶ Certainly many persons find sexual relations—not only in the narrow sense of the act of sexual intercourse, but also in the wider sense of “romantic” relationships—a primary locus of relief from loneliness. Love between men and women is of course one of the main themes of the tradition of the novel, but in Wallace’s work the experience of a deep connection that really helps to both confront and relieve loneliness in such relations is surprisingly rare. Clare Hayes Brady has noted that romantic and sexual relationships in Wallace’s work are almost always failures, from Lenore and Rick, and Mindy and Andrew in *The Broom of the System* to the Incandenza parents in *Infinite Jest* to the myriad of unsuccessful relationships of *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men*.⁷⁰⁷

There are occasional hints of relationships that might be considered more successful. In *Infinite Jest*, Wallace describes the clinically depressed Kate Gompert as meeting a fellow patient in a psych-ward who became depressed after a head injury. Gompert is amazed that the other patient has been able to endure what she sees as “a level of psychic pain wholly incompatible with human life as we know it”⁷⁰⁸ for full seventeen years without trying to commit suicide. Gompert guesses that one of the last things “still gave the man’s life enough meaning for him to hang onto the windowsill by his fingernails” was his love for his wife: “[H]e seemed genuinely to love his wife, and she him. He went to bed every night at home holding her, weeping for it to be over, while she prayed or did that devout thing with beads.”⁷⁰⁹ Here we glimpse for a moment a loving relationship that does seem like a paradigm of what Wallace was searching for: it does not take away the patient’s pain, but it

⁷⁰⁶ Howard, “Infinite Jester.”

⁷⁰⁷ Clare Hayes-Brady, *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace: Language, Identity, and Resistance* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), pp. 180-181.

⁷⁰⁸ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 695.

⁷⁰⁹ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 698.

enables him to bear it year after year. The closest to an ordinary novelistic “romance” in *Infinite Jest* is perhaps the relationship of Don Gately and Joelle, but we do not get to see the ultimate issue of that romance. Will they develop the kind of deep relationship that Gompert saw in her fellow patient and his wife? The question remains open. In *The Pale King* we have elements of the story of how Lane Dean struggles through to the realization that he loves his girlfriend Sheri Fisher, and wants to take responsibility for her unborn child. And in this case we see a little of what happens to their love in the struggles that follow—despite tensions and difficulties, their case does not seem to be hopeless.

But in Wallace’s work, “romantic” and sexual relationships are far more often described as *loci* of the double-bind of loneliness than as means of dealing with it. This relative lack of loving relationships in Wallace’s fiction was one of the main points of criticism that his friend and rival Jonathan Franzen brought against him. As Franzen writes in *Farther Away*:

Close loving relationships, which for most of us are a foundational source of meaning, have no standing in the Wallace fictional universe. What we get, instead, are characters keeping their heartless compulsions secret from those who love them; characters scheming to *appear* loving or to prove to themselves that what feels like love is really just disguised self-interest; or, at most, characters directing an abstract or spiritual love toward somebody profoundly repellent—the cranial-fluid-dripping wife in *Infinite Jest*, the psychopath in the last of the interviews with hideous men.⁷¹⁰

As I mentioned above (2.2.1), Jonathan Franzen saw Wallace and himself as having followed different strands of the tradition of the novel. Whereas Wallace followed the tradition of Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* in seeing the novel as depicting the existential solitude of the modern subject, and by that very fact somehow overcoming it, Franzen saw himself as following the tradition of Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela* (1740), which not only describes the loneliness of the subject, but also recounts the overcoming of that loneliness through a certain kind of loving relationship between the female protagonist and a man. To quote Franzen again:

Defoe had staked out the territory of radical individualism, which has remained a fruitful subject for novelists as late as Beckett and Wallace, but it was Richardson who first granted

⁷¹⁰ Franzen, *Farther Away*, p. 39.

full fictional access to the hearts and minds of individuals whose solitude has been overwhelmed by love for someone else.⁷¹¹

As I argued above, Franzen's view of Wallace's work as being squarely within the tradition of Defoe is simplistic and misleading. And his characterization of Wallace on love is also too simplistic. Nevertheless, it does help to understand aspects of Wallace on love.

Franzen's critique of Wallace on love seems to have two complementary parts. The first has to do with a "doubt" that he sees in Wallace about "the possibility of love" springing from "despair about his own authentic goodness."⁷¹² The lack of love in Wallace's work, Franzen argues, stems from Wallace's feeling that "he never quite felt that he deserved to receive it."⁷¹³ It is from this despair that Franzen sees the "heartless compulsions" and dishonest "scheming" of Wallace's characters arising. Moreover, he sees these characters as reflecting something in Wallace's own life "his own narcissism, misogyny, compulsiveness, self-deception."⁷¹⁴ The second part of Franzen's critique has to do with the "abstract or spiritual" character of love "toward somebody profoundly repellent" that Franzen finds in Wallace. Franzen's thought seems to be that it is doubt about his own worthiness to receive love that makes Wallace speak of love in terms of a pure benevolence towards those who do not, in fact, deserve love.

2.5.2 Paradoxes of objectification

To begin with the first part of Franzen's critique, the "heartless compulsions" of which he speaks are indeed omnipresent in Wallace. Wallace often frames the problems of sexual intercourse in conventional terms of "objectification." And his account tends to bring out the paradoxes latent in those terms. Orin Incandenza calls the series of young mothers whom he seduces in *Infinite Jest* "Subjects" (with a capital "S"). His well-read younger brother Hal points out the oddity of this description. In a telephone conversation in which Orin is

⁷¹¹ Franzen, *Farther Away*, p. 51.

⁷¹² Franzen, *Farther Away*, pp. 39-40.

⁷¹³ Franzen, *Farther Away*, p. 40.

⁷¹⁴ Franzen, *Farther Away*, p. 39.

describing one of his many techniques for seducing his “Subjects,” Hal interrupts him with the following remark: “It’s poignant somehow that you always use the word Subject when you mean the exact obverse.”⁷¹⁵ Hal is appealing to a highly influential account of sexual immorality, according to which it consists in men treating women as “objects” rather than as “subjects.” It is an account derived ultimately from Immanuel Kant, but developed in highly influential ways by “second wave” feminists such as Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon.⁷¹⁶ Hal takes the account too literally, ignoring the latent paradoxes that would make sense of Orin’s poignantly inappropriate use of the term “Subject.”

For Immanuel Kant, sexual intercourse was inherently degrading.⁷¹⁷ On his account, one must always treat other human beings in a way that respects their autonomy as rational subjects, and this means to treat them as ends rather than as means. Kant is often misunderstood as meaning that one should treat the other as *having* an end, that is of being a rational subject with his or her own goals or “interests” that need to be respected. But this does not suffice on Kant’s account. Rather, for him, each rational subject is itself the end of all things—autonomous subjectivity is itself the end. To consider human beings as merely *having* ends is to consider them as non-autonomous, as being determined by their relation to their ends, whereas to consider them as *end-in-themselves* is to respect their absolute autonomy.⁷¹⁸ The misunderstanding is, however, understandable, since the practical *result* of treating someone *as an end* is generally the same as treating them as *having ends which ought to be respected*. The form of “love” that adequately respects the other as an end is benevolence—intending the good of the other. As Kant puts it in his posthumously published *Lectures on Ethics*: “Love, as human affection, is the love that wishes well, is amicably disposed, promotes the happiness of others and rejoices in it.”⁷¹⁹ But sexual

⁷¹⁵ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 1008.

⁷¹⁶ See: Martha Nussbaum, “Objectification,” in: *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 24.4 (1995) pp. 249-291.

⁷¹⁷ See: Barbara Herman, “Could It Be Worth Thinking About Kant on Sex and Marriage?” in: Louise Antony and Charlotte Witt (eds.), *A Mind of One’s Own: Feminist Essays on Reason and Objectivity* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993), pp. 49-67.

⁷¹⁸ Cf. My discussion of Kant on autonomy in section 1.7 above.

⁷¹⁹ Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, ed. and trans. Peter Heath (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 157 [*Akademieausgabe*, vol. 27, p. 384].

appetite, Kant argues, treats the other precisely as a means for one's own sexual gratification. It is directed at the other not as an autonomous personal subject, but as a sex-object. It is worth quoting Kant at length here:

But now it is plain that those who merely have sexual inclination love the person from none of the foregoing motives of true human affection, are quite unconcerned for their happiness, and will even plunge them into the greatest unhappiness, simply to satisfy their own inclination and appetite. In loving from sexual inclination, they make the person into an object of their appetite. As soon as the person is possessed, and the appetite sated, they are thrown away, as one throws away a lemon after sucking the juice from it. The sexual impulse can admittedly be combined [*verbunden*] with human affection, and then it also carries with it the aims of the latter, but if it is taken in and by itself, it is nothing more than appetite. But, so considered, there lies in this inclination a degradation of man; for as soon as anyone becomes an object of another's appetite, all motives of moral relationship fall away; as object of the other's appetite, that person is in fact a thing, whereby the other's appetite is sated, and can be misused as such a thing by anybody[...] Since the sexual impulse is not an inclination that one human has for another, *qua* human, but an inclination for their sex, it is therefore a *principium* of the debasement of humanity, a source for the preference of one sex over the other, and the dishonouring of that sex by satisfying the inclination. The desire of a man for a woman is not directed to her as a human being; on the contrary, the woman's humanity is of no concern to him, and the only object of his desire is her sex.⁷²⁰

The extremely negative view of sexuality that Kant holds is open to all kinds of objections. From the perspective of Aristotelian virtue ethics, one could question the sharp distinction between the sub-rational nature and human autonomy that Kant is presupposing. It seems to be this sharp distinction that leads Kant to think that while sexual inclination can indeed be “combined” with human benevolence, the combination is conceived of as merely external. A more teleological understanding of nature, would see more continuity between sub-rational and rational nature. It would see natural inclinations as being themselves in some sense “rational,” and therefore would be open to the possibility of a real synthesis between sexual appetite and benevolence—rather than a mere “combination.”⁷²¹

Nevertheless, Kant's stark depiction of objectivity does seem to correspond to certain experiences. Feminist theorists such as Dworkin and MacKinnon therefore made use of Kant's language of “objectification,” while rejecting some of its presuppositions. Dworkin

⁷²⁰ Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, pp. 155-156 [*Akademieausgabe*, vol. 27, pp. 384-385].

⁷²¹ Cf. Michael Waldstein, “Three Kinds of Personalism: Kant, Scheler and John Paul II,” in: *Forum Teologiczne* 10 (2009), pp. 151-171.

and MacKinnon agree with Kant in seeing the treatment} of the other in sexual relations as an object as opposed to a subject as the main problem. They do not, however, see the root problem in the essential nature of bodily desire, but rather in the way that desire is formed by oppressive social relations. In a patriarchal society, they argue, sexual desire is formed in such a way as to perpetually enact the subordination of women to men. This is the reason why men see women as objects, rather than subjects.⁷²²

But what exactly does it mean for men to see women as objects rather than as subjects? Martha Nussbaum distinguishes seven ways in which the objectifying (or “objectifier”) can treat the other as an object:

1. *Instrumentality*: The objectifier treats the object as a tool of his or her purposes.
2. *Denial of autonomy*: The objectifier treats the object as lacking in autonomy and self-determination.
3. *Inertness*: The objectifier treats the object as lacking in agency, and perhaps also in activity.
4. *Fungibility*: The objectifier treats the object as interchangeable (a) with other objects of the same type, and/or (b) with objects of other types.
5. *Violability*: The objectifier treats the object as lacking in boundary-integrity, as something that it is permissible to break up, smash, break into.
6. *Ownership*: The objectifier treats the object as something that is owned by another, can be bought or sold, etc.
7. *Denial of subjectivity*: The objectifier treats the object as something whose experience and feelings (if any) need not be taken into account.⁷²³

Nussbaum points out that while these various forms of objectification can be connected in various complex ways, they do not necessarily entail each other. Moreover, while all of these forms of objectification certainly can be experienced as evil, they need not be depending on circumstances. For example, a person using her beloved as a pillow is certainly treating him as a tool of her purposes (propping up her head), but in the context of relationship of loving mutuality this is not a problem. In other words, it is necessary to look at the whole context of

⁷²² See: Nussbaum, “Objectification,” pp. 265-271.

⁷²³ Nussbaum, “Objectification,” p. 257.

a relationship to see whether behavior that could be described as objectification is really objectification in the objectionable sense.⁷²⁴

But the key insight that is necessary to see how Hal misunderstands Orin is the sense in which *objectification* in the fullest sense implies at one level a recognition of subjectivity which is then willfully disregarded. Dworkin and MacKinnon's refinement of the Kantian account is important here. It is not merely that the objectifier is blind to the other's subjectivity. Rather, it is that the objectifier is at some level aware of that subjectivity, but *chooses* to disregard and disrespect it. This becomes very clear in Wallace's descriptions of Orin. For Orin it is indeed important that the "subjects" whom he seduces have subjectivity, that they are not mere inert toys, but thinking, feeling beings. The whole point, for Orin, is to manipulate their subjectivity. To get them to desire him, so that he can then assert his power, and revenge himself by proxy on his own mother, by abandoning them. Consider the following passage:

Orin can only give, not receive, pleasure, and this makes a contemptible number of them think he is a wonderful lover, almost a dream-type lover; and this fuels the contempt. But he cannot show the contempt, since this would pretty clearly detract from the Subject's pleasure. Because the Subject's pleasure in him has become his food, he is conscientious in the consideration and gentleness he shows after coitus, making clear his desire to stay right there very close and be intimate, when so many other male lovers, the Subjects say, seem afterward to become uneasy, contemptuous, or distant, rolling over to stare at the wall or tamping down a smoke before they've even stopped twitching.⁷²⁵

Clearly, the subjectivity of the Subject is the main point for Orin. He wants to manipulate the Subjects into feeling pleasure, so that they will regard him as a great lover and feel (perhaps) a sense of deep connection to him. But this manipulation of the subjectivity of the other still falls under the seventh kind of objectification identified by Nussbaum; Orin does not really think that the "experience and feelings" of his Subjects needs to be "taken into account," in the sense of having any claim to respect for their own sake. He takes them into account only as an instrument to his own satisfaction and emotional release through vicarious revenge on his Lacanian mother with her double-bind of smothering and abandoning.

⁷²⁴ Nussbaum, "Objectification," p. 265.

⁷²⁵ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 596.

In a 1999 interview with literary critic and editor Lorin Stein (who was many years later to resign as editor of *The Paris Review* on account of his own objectification of women), Wallace admitted that he was “unsatisfied” with his depiction of Orin, and that the elements of Orin’s sexual pathology “never coalesced.”⁷²⁶ One reason, perhaps, is that Orin seems too deliberate and self-aware about his actions. His mother, Avril, had been unfaithful to his father on numerous occasions. It is suggested that she drove his father, James Incandenza, to his suicide. The name of James’s film company, “*Latrodectus Mactans* Productions,” is a rather crude reference to Avril—*Latrodectus Mactans* is the scientific name for the black widow spider. Hence, Orin’s serial abandonment of young mothers seems like a conscious strategy of proxy-revenge against Avril. Perhaps Wallace felt that these peculiarities of Orin’s character lessened his ability to instantiate more general problems of sexuality in contemporary American culture. Compare Wallace’s criticism of David Markson’s over-determination of Kate, the protagonist of *Wittgenstein’s Mistress*:

It’s when Kate is least particular, least ‘motivated’ by some artfully presented but standardly digestible Evian/Valentinian/post-Freudian trauma, that her character & plight are most e- & affecting. For (obvious tho [sic] this seems) to the extent that Kate is not motivationally unique, she can be all of us[...]⁷²⁷

The same things apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to Orin. The specificity of Orin’s predicament, stemming from his uniquely horrible mother, make his pathology too particular and thus it fails to illuminate the problem of sexuality in contemporary life more generally.

Wallace did think that sexual problems often stemmed from psychological problems that were related to the mother-relation, but that these had less to do with specifically horrible traits of mothers, and more to do with systematic social structures. Wallace heavily annotated his copy of Christopher Lasch’s book *The Culture of Narcissism*.⁷²⁸ Mary K. Holland has shown how Lasch’s description of how the peculiar structures of permissive,

⁷²⁶ Lorin Stein, “David Foster Wallace: In the Company of Creeps,” in: Burn (ed.), *Conversations With David Foster Wallace*, pp. 89-93, at pp. 90-91.

⁷²⁷ Wallace, “The Empty Plenum,” p. 107.

⁷²⁸ Wallace’s copy can now be seen at the Wallace Archive at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas in Austin.

consumerist, late-capitalist society foster narcissistic psychological disorders resonated deeply with Wallace.⁷²⁹ Lasch had argued that the late-modern cult of experts, and the anxiety about good parenting partly caused by the marketing of such experts, caused mothers to be over-solicitous towards their offspring. Moreover, the permissive and anti-authoritarian culture of the late-modern American family, driven in part by fear of psychologically harming children, had the paradoxical effect of hampering their development, and thus allowed them to be dominated by irrational sub-conscious fantasies. To quote Lasch:

Outside experts have taken over many of [the mother's] practical functions, and she often discharges those that remain in a mechanical manner that conforms not to the child's needs but to a preconceived ideal of motherhood. In view of the suffocating yet emotionally distant care they receive from narcissistic mothers, it is not surprising that so many young people [...] describe their mothers as both seductive and aloof, devouring and indifferent. Nor is it surprising that so many narcissistic patients experience maternal seductiveness as a form of sexual assault. Their unconscious impressions of the mother are so overblown and so heavily influenced by aggressive impulses, and the quality of her care so little attuned to the child's needs, that she appears in the child's fantasies as a devouring bird, a vagina full of teeth.⁷³⁰

The problem with Orin as a character is that these irrational fantasies are rendered as rational, since Avril is the devouring, incestuous monster of his narcissistic fantasies.

In *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men*, Wallace claims that he was in part trying to give a more adequate treatment of the problems inadequately portrayed in Orin.⁷³¹ *Brief Interviews* is a carefully devised and ordered collection of short stories of various forms and lengths, connected in complex ways by internal references. The back-bone of the collection is formed by four sections each called "Brief Interviews With Hideous Men" in the table of contents, and each containing several fictional interviews (or, in the case of the fourth section, a single interview). Most of the interviews are structured in a Q & A format, but with the interviewer's questions omitted, and marked only by the initial "Q." In the Stein interview, Wallace was to reveal that Q was meant to be read as a single character, a woman, whose

⁷²⁹ Holland, *Succeeding Postmodernism*, ch. 2.

⁷³⁰ Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism* (New York: Norton, 1991 [orig. 1979]), pp. 175-176.

⁷³¹ See: Stein, "David Foster Wallace," p. 91.

development can be traced indirectly through the interactions of the hideous men who answer her questions.⁷³² The individual interviews are all numbered and dated, but, while the order of the numbers matches that of the dates, they are presented in the collection out of chronological and numerical order, and with large gaps in the numbering. Only 18 interviews are presented, but the numbers run from #2 to #72. If one looks at all the interviews in chronological order (see the table in the Appendix), even the ones in which “Q” does not explicitly appear can be read as part of her story. A picture emerges of Q as a woman who has personally experienced objectification and abandonment by men (interviews 2, 3, and 11), and who then begins to investigate the systemic issues behind the mistreatment of women by men by traveling around the country, interviewing various men. The interviews not only investigate the men’s treatment of other women, but also dramatize men’s treatment of Q herself, and the psychological dynamics behind it. In the chronologically last interview (#72), “something *really* bad”⁷³³ seems to happen to her, as the man she interviews, cries out “[O]h no not again behind you *look out*.”⁷³⁴

Various forms of objectification are explored in the interviews, and in all of them the paradoxical role of the subjectivity of the woman being objectified is brought to the fore. This is true even of “B.I. #59,” in which an institutionalized man recounts the fantasy of objectification that overthrew his mind—a fantasy of being able to render the entire universe *inert* (to use Nussbaum’s term)—even this man imagines that the actual women after whom he lusts will be an exception to the inert state in which he has cast the entire world. She will be awake for the sexual intercourse that they are to have in the inert world. He fantasizes about fixating her with a piercing stare, which she experiences as having overwhelming erotic attraction. Then he waves his hand, freezing the entire universe in time, and in the frozen world he silently but passionately copulates with the woman. “[T]he attractive, bewitched, overpowered woman of my choice and myself only remain animated

⁷³² Stein, “David Foster Wallace,” p. 90.

⁷³³ Stein, “David Foster Wallace,” p. 90.

⁷³⁴ Wallace, *Brief Interviews*, p. 226.

and aware.”⁷³⁵ Mary Holland is indeed right to say that this fantasy is an “onanism of self-absorption—power-hungry, pathetic, and objectifying everything the self desires.”⁷³⁶ But the paradox is that even in this global objectification, the woman has to be endowed with an enchanted subjectivity, totally controlled by the objectifier, and yet bestowing something upon him. In the fantasy, as the enchanted woman hurriedly undresses, the man undresses more slowly, “forcing her to wait in an agony of erotic need.”⁷³⁷ The woman’s real interior subjectivity and best interests are irrelevant, but she has to be endowed with false consciousness in order to enable the fantasy. The pathetic agony of need that the man feels for the real women whom he sees, a need which arouses in him an anxiety of dependence on those distant objects “so highly concentrated” on their own activities as to “appear unfriendly,” must be reversed so that it is the woman who suffers the anxiety of need, and it is he who looks down on them with “controlled and amused deliberation.”⁷³⁸

As Wallace once opined in a radio interview “a certain amount of misogyny...is rooted in fear.”⁷³⁹ And yet, as Clare Hayes-Brady has argued, the fear is not the most basic cause here. It is not merely a Jordan Peterson-style fear of the feminine as unknown/chaotic otherness⁷⁴⁰ that motivates the hideous men. Rather, their fear is a secondary phenomenon rooted in “the compulsive need for an Other.”⁷⁴¹ It is, in other words, the pain of loneliness. This need for the Other, however, turns to anxiety and fear of the other. Fear of rejection and contempt—these are an even more terrible loneliness than mere isolation. The other stands, as it were, in judgement over the self. This is expressed in pithily symbolic form by the man interviewed in “B.I. #51,” who explains his anxiety about sexual potency before every hookup:

⁷³⁵ Wallace, *Brief Interviews*, p. 217.

⁷³⁶ Mary K. Holland, “Mediated Immediacy in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*,” in: Boswell and Burn (eds.), *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies*, pp. 107-130, at p. 118.

⁷³⁷ Wallace, *Brief Interviews*, p. 217.

⁷³⁸ Wallace, *Brief Interviews*, pp. 215, 217.

⁷³⁹ Michael Silverblatt, Interview with David Foster Wallace, KCRW., August 12, 1999, quoted in: Hayes-Brady, “. . .,” p. 133.

⁷⁴⁰ Cf. Jordan Peterson’s pop-psychology self-help book *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos* (London: Penguin, 2018), which sees the basic psychological fear as being of the unknown, which symbolically feminine.

⁷⁴¹ Hayes-Brady, “. . .,” p. 133.

“What if I can’t.” But then it occurs to him that he would not even be worrying if the woman in front of him were not there, “expecting it and wondering, and, like, evaluating.”⁷⁴² Then this thought of the woman’s evaluation makes him angry, and in his anger the anxiety disappears and all goes well: “OK, bitch, you asked for it.”⁷⁴³ He is here portraying his objectification of women as a defense mechanism against the power of her subjectivity to judge man and find him wanting. Only once he has objectified her is he able to enjoy sexual relations with her. This story resonates powerfully with the following passage from a suggestive reading of Tolstoy that Andrea Dworkin gives in her influential feminist work *Intercourse*:

The woman must be reduced to being this sexual object to be pleasing to men who will then, and only then, want to fuck her; once she is made inferior in this way, she is sensual to men and attracts them to her, and a man’s desire for her—to use her—is experienced by him as her power over him.⁷⁴⁴

If Dworkin were reading Wallace’s story (rather than Tolstoy) she might invert the order of the ideas. It is *because* the man experiences his desire for the woman as the woman’s power over himself that he needs to objectify her in order to enjoy her. Dworkin would insist, however, that the fear that the men have of the women’s potency is irrational. The men are in fact in a position of power over the women.

In “B.I. #31” Wallace describes one of the interviewees classifying various types of lovers for the benefit of Q. The first type is the “basic pig” who doesn’t care at all about how the woman feels during intercourse. The basic pig just rolls on and then off, as though the woman were a mere doll. This is straightforward objectification of the sort that led Hal to question why Orin would call his victims “subjects.” But then the next type is one which is only concerned with causing pleasure in the woman, for the sake of receiving her approval. The problem with this second type, he argues, is: “They want to be the only Great Lover in the bed. They forget a lady’s got feelings too.”⁷⁴⁵ That is, this type, too, lacks all true benevolence toward the

⁷⁴² Wallace, *Brief Interviews*, p. 115.

⁷⁴³ Wallace, *Brief Interviews*, p. 115.

⁷⁴⁴ Andrea Dworkin, *Intercourse* (New York: Basic Books, 2006 [1987]), pp. 19-20.

⁷⁴⁵ Wallace, *Brief Interviews*, p. 32.

beloved. “Their trip is different, but it’s still only just their own trip they’re on, in bed, and the little lady deep down’s going to feel like she’s just getting used just the same.”⁷⁴⁶ Then he explains that the way one *ought* to do it is to give *and* take, to establish mutuality. Not only to give pleasure, but also to give the pleasure of giving pleasure: “Then you really and truly got her.”⁷⁴⁷ The irony in this last answer is surely not lost one Q; the man’s solution is every bit as objectifying as the problems that he identifies. All along, the man is explaining to Q how to smoke some drug that he has given her, and his careful instructions in drug use mirror the strategies of lovemaking that he is recounting.

It is above all in the linguistic strategies that the hideous men employ that the double-bind of their loneliness-founded anxiety of dependence manifests itself. The best example of this is in “B.I. #20,” by far the longest of the brief interviews. The articulate, self-aware graduate student in “B.I. #20”—whom I will call Eric for convenience, despite the ambiguous way in which the name is introduced⁷⁴⁸—recounts to Q how he fell in love with a young “granola cruncher—a sentimental, sandals-and-long-skirt-wearing, New Age-spirituality typenamed Sarah,⁷⁴⁹ whom he initially despises for her naïveté, while desiring her beautiful body. He tells Q the story of how he got her into what he had planned as a one-night stand, after which he had planned to give her a fake phone number. And then he tells the story of Sarah telling him the story of how she had been brutally raped by a psychotic rapist and murderer. And how she had prevented the rapist from murdering her by establishing a “connection” with him through focus that made it impossible for him to murder her. A sex criminal, according to Eric, murders and rapes in order to escape his solitude, and establish some kind of connection with the victim. But he desires a connection in which he is totally in control, and in which his desire for the victim does not give the victim any power over him. His terror is that he will be “obliterated” or “engulfed” by the victim, and the extreme fear that he

⁷⁴⁶ Wallace, *Brief Interviews*, p. 30.

⁷⁴⁷ Wallace, *Brief Interviews*, p. 33.

⁷⁴⁸ The man being interviewed only uses the name “Eric” once, and the way he uses it makes it unclear whether “Eric” is actually his own name, or merely a generic example of a male name: Wallace, *Brief Interviews*, p. 313.

⁷⁴⁹ The same caveat that applies to Eric’s name applies to Sarah’s as well.

engenders in the victim is (according to Eric) a perverse defense mechanism. “God how lonely, do you feel it?”⁷⁵⁰

Eric describes how the granola cruncher tries to save her life by focusing so much love and care and attention on the psychotic sex killer that her “focus” penetrates the veil of his psychosis, and makes it impossible for him to maintain the level of objectification necessary to kill her:

[S]ince sexual psychopaths are well known to depersonalize their victims and liken them to objects or dolls, Its and not Thous so to speak, which is often their explanation for how they are able to inflict such unimaginable brutality on a human being...⁷⁵¹

And he claims that this tactic is successful. The sex offender ends up killing himself after the rape, leaving the granola cruncher alive. Moreover, he makes the provocative and offensive claim that the granola cruncher has thereby somehow transcended the rape. By “giving herself” in love and care to the sex offender as he rapes her the granola cruncher transforms the rape into something else.⁷⁵²

Eric points out the similarity between the psychotic sex offender’s objectification of women, and his own, so much more benign, and apparently so different approach to them. His intention to seduce the granola cruncher for a one-night stand, and then give her a false number was itself “maybe somewhat victimizing.” And he self-diagnoses it as proceeding from a similar source: “[T]he potential profundity of the very connection he has worked so hard to make her feel terrifies him.”⁷⁵³

And, in Eric’s telling, the granola cruncher ends up doing to him something analogous to what she claimed to have done to the rapist. By telling her story she pierces through his defenses, making it harder and harder for him to objectify her. By the end of the story, he

⁷⁵⁰ Wallace, *Brief Interviews*, p. 303.

⁷⁵¹ Wallace, *Brief Interviews*, p. 301.

⁷⁵² Wallace, *Brief Interviews*, p. 310.

⁷⁵³ Wallace, *Brief Interviews*, p. 304.

claims, she has got him to fall in love with her. “She had all my attention. I’d fallen in love with her. I believed she could save me.”⁷⁵⁴

Eric is very aware of how problematic this all sounds to Q. He is constantly interrupting himself to comment on how he thinks Q is reacting and judging him. “I know I’m not telling you anything you haven’t already decided you know. With your slim chilly smile.”⁷⁵⁵ As the story rises to its conclusion, Eric’s rage against Q increases, so that the epiphany of his revelation of his love for the granola cruncher coincides with an extraordinary tirade of misogynistic abuse against Q. On Clare Hayes Brady’s reading, Eric’s rage against Q comes from his failure to control Sarah. That is, he feels threatened by the power of Sarah’s voice, which takes over his own as he recounts her story, and then he transfers this rage to Q.⁷⁵⁶ Rachel Haley Himmelheber has suggested that his rage has to do with his inability to excuse his treatment of Sarah toward Q. His “rape culture” rationalization of his behavior do not work on Q, leaving him exposed and enraged.⁷⁵⁷ Christoforos Diakoulakis, on the other hand, has argued that Eric really does “love” Sarah, taking love in a Derridean sense of surrendering to the impossible.⁷⁵⁸ As Himmelheber notes, Diakoulakis elides Eric’s violent ranting against Q,⁷⁵⁹ but reading between the lines, one can see his rage on Diakoulakis’s reading as being caused by the anguish of having his surrender to the impossibility of “love” judged as a mere fake. I think that all three readings are plausible. Taking them all together, one gets a picture that intensifies the impression one can gather from the interviews. The hideous men are deeply lonely. Their desire for sex is not limited to a desire for pleasure, but also proceeds from that deep loneliness which they are trying to overcome. But in approaching women their desire to overcome loneliness is tempered by a fear of the deeper loneliness of rejection and exposure. They therefore objectify and manipulate the women whom they desire. But

⁷⁵⁴ Wallace, *Brief Interviews*, p. 317-318.

⁷⁵⁵ Wallace, *Brief Interviews*, p. 304.

⁷⁵⁶ Hayes-Brady, *The Unspeakable Failures*, p. 151.

⁷⁵⁷ Rachel Haley Himmelheber, “I Believed She Could Save Me’: Rape Culture in David Foster Wallace’s “Brief Interviews with Hideous Men #20,” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 55.5 (2014), pp. 522-535.

⁷⁵⁸ Christoforos Diakoulakis, “Quote unquote love . . . a Type of scotopia’: David Foster Wallace’s *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*,” in: Hering (ed.), *Consider David Foster Wallace*, pp. 147-155.

⁷⁵⁹ Himmelheber, “I Believed She Could Save Me,’” p. 527.

this objectification precludes the sort of connection that they desire, thus intensifying their loneliness. Their fixation on objectifying women is therefore a “malignant addiction” in Wallace’s sense; it “offers itself as relief from the very problems it causes.”⁷⁶⁰

2.5.3 Franzen’s critique of “abstract or spiritual” love in Wallace

The double-bind of addiction that we have seen in *Brief Interviews* seems to be what Franzen meant by the “heartless compulsions” which Wallace’s characters as keeping secret from those who love them.⁷⁶¹ About a month after the original publication of “Farther Away,” Franzen went to Kenyon College to deliver the 2011 commencement address. Wallace had famously given his own commencement address there a mere six years previously. Although Franzen does not mention Wallace in his speech, given the fame of Wallace’s speech, and the fact that “Farther Away” had been published a month earlier, it is *prima facie* probable that Franzen saw his speech as continuing a “dialogue” with Wallace.⁷⁶² In the speech Franzen distinguishes between liking and loving. Liking something, Franzen suggests, means finding the thing agreeable to oneself. Finding a kind of correspondence between oneself and an object. Hence, when one wants to be liked, one has to do away with the parts of oneself that others might find repellent. He asks his hearers to imagine someone desperate to be liked. What will they see?

You see a person without integrity, without a center. In more pathological cases, you see a narcissist—a person who can’t tolerate the tarnishing of his or her self-image that not being liked represents, and who therefore either withdraws from human contact or goes to extreme, integrity-sacrificing lengths to be likable. If you dedicate your existence to being likable, however, and if you adopt whatever cool persona is necessary to make it happen, it suggests that you’ve despaired of being loved for who you really are. And if you succeed in manipulating other people into liking you, it will be hard not to feel, at some level, contempt for those people, because they’ve fallen for your shtick.⁷⁶³

⁷⁶⁰ Wallace, “E Unibus Pluram,” p. 38.

⁷⁶¹ Franzen, *Farther Away*, p. 39.

⁷⁶² Cf. Ian Crouch, “Oh the Places You’ll Go: Jonathan Franzen at Kenyon,” in: *The New Yorker* (blog), June 10, 2011: <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/oh-the-places-youll-go-jonathan-franzen-at-kenyon> (accessed May 1, 2018).

⁷⁶³ Jonathan Franzen, “Pain Won’t Kill You,” Commencement Address, Kenyon College, May 2011, in: *Farther Away*, pp. 5-15, at p. 7.

The suggestion that such a person has “despaired of being loved” is strongly reminiscent of what Franzen says about Wallace’s characters in “Farther Away.” We have now seen that it does accurately describe the dynamics of the *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*.

Unlike liking, Franzen goes on to argue, love does not require complete agreeableness in the object. Rather, it demands that the lover recognize the reality of the beloved. Even the disagreeable qualities can then be accepted, since they are a sign of the beloved’s reality and distinction from the lover:

What love is really about is a bottomless empathy, born out of the heart’s revelation that another person is every bit as real as you are. And this is why love, as I understand it, is always specific. Trying to love all of humanity may be a worthy endeavor, but, in a funny way, it keeps the focus on the self, on the self’s own moral or spiritual well-being. Whereas, to love a specific person, and to identify with their struggles and joys as if they were your own, you have to surrender some of your self.⁷⁶⁴

Franzen describes this process of love as a painful one: one must reveal even the unlikeable depths of one’s character to the beloved and have the other’s depths revealed in return, but it is a pain that is worth it. Franzen does not think that Wallace’ characters are able to break through to such a love. The only alternative that Wallace gives to heartless compulsion is “characters directing an abstract or spiritual love toward somebody profoundly repellent.” As an example here he gives the granola cruncher’s abstract “love” for her rapist.

Franzen’s critique seems to me to miss certain important subtleties in Wallace’s descriptions of love. His counter-solution to Wallace’s seems inadequate to addressing part of the double-bind that Wallace describes. And its critique of “abstract spiritual love” is therefore too facile.⁷⁶⁵ To have empathy with a beloved, as Franzen defines it, is “to identify with their struggles and joys.” But this raises a problem as to what those struggles and joys even are. In his 2010 novel *Freedom*, Franzen shows how problematic struggles and joys become in a

⁷⁶⁴ Franzen, *Farther Away*, p. 9.

⁷⁶⁵ The following paragraphs are partly based on my blogpost: “Freedom is Overrated: Jonathan Franzen and David Foster Wallace,” *Sancrucensis*, October 12, 2012, <https://sancrucensis.wordpress.com/2012/10/12/freedom-is-overrated-jonathan-franzen-and-david-foster-wallace> (accessed May 1, 2018).

world of bourgeois freedom. The protagonist of the novel, Patty Berglund, reflects on her predicament as follows:

By almost any standard, she led a luxurious life. She had all day every day to figure out some decent and satisfying way to live, and yet all she ever seemed to get for all her choices and all her freedom was more miserable.⁷⁶⁶

The heirs of the “empty” freedom of moral and economic liberalism, Franzen’s characters have the *Bewegungsraum*, the room for movement, typical of modernity,⁷⁶⁷ but their freedom *from* is unsatisfying, because it does not give any focus to their struggles, any concrete end in which to find their joys. This problem led some reviewers of *Freedom* to suggest that this problem makes Franzen’s characters so contemptibly bourgeois that they are not really worth writing about: “[T]hey never display enough redeeming qualities to justify the investment that Franzen convinces us to make in them.”⁷⁶⁸

On my reading, Franzen does want his characters to show redeeming qualities that justify our investment in them. Their surfeit of freedom comes from a kind of necessity that love engenders. In a decisive scene near the end Patty is reconciled to her husband when she sits outside his door until she begins to freeze to death, and he sees the necessity of helping her.⁷⁶⁹ Her dying compels him, and in that necessity the emptiness both of his freedom and of hers is relieved; their lives suddenly have purpose.

The kind of necessity that Franzen sees as the way out of the paradox of empty freedom has been insightfully analyzed by the American philosopher Annette Langley. Langley argues that life imposes a certain kind of necessity—one must do what sustains life. If a child is buried alive in an earthquake one must attempt a rescue. But she then goes on to show how

⁷⁶⁶ Jonathan Franzen, *Freedom* (London: Fourth Estate, 2010), p. 181.

⁷⁶⁷ See section 1.2 above.

⁷⁶⁸ Ross Douthat, “The Girl With the Franzen Tatoo: A Review of *Freedom* by Jonathan Franzen,” in: *First Things* (November 2010), <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2010/11/the-girl-with-the-franzen-tattoo> (accessed May 2, 2018).

⁷⁶⁹ Franzen, *Freedom*, pp. 557-559.

necessity extends beyond sustaining mere life, it extends to sustaining and bringing about human integrity more broadly understood, it is the human good that obligates:

The utility of necessity to mankind goes beyond the animal and somatic sustenance. Its value to the human being resides in the fact that 'tribulation is a necessary element in redemption.' Redemption simply means freeing through the satisfaction of an encumbering obligation; only by accepting and meeting necessity do we free ourselves and restore our integrity every moment. First, in discharging it, we are released, liberated from the oppression that weighed on us, and second we are then freer and closer to self-actualization and the realization of human integrity. The core of human integrity is freedom.⁷⁷⁰

The freedom to which Langley refers here is not a negative freedom, opposed to moral necessity, but a positive freedom that consists in attaining integrity:

[R]esponding to need is obliged; an obedience, a responsibility, but duty to integrity. We are compelled. Therefore in answering necessity, in taking responsibility, we attain no merit, we exercise no virtue. The feelings we know of pride and of accomplishment when any of us do what we should is not virtue, but only the satisfaction of integrity, and the exhilaration of freedom.⁷⁷¹

For Franzen, the positive freedom of necessity is found above all in a concrete love's realization of the reality of the beloved. The other's good becomes my necessity. This insight into the reality of the other is what makes the other's good my necessity. But the problem with Franzen's view here is this: how do I know what the good of the other is? It's all very well for Patty's husband, Walter, when Patty is sitting there freezing, but what about after she recovers, what then? If Patty and Walter's problem is that their "animal and somatic sustenance" has been met, but they don't know where the next level of their good is to be found, then their recognition of each other's reality and need just moves the problem back a bit. In bourgeois hypermodern society the basic necessities of life are met, but there is no guidance on where the next stage of human perfection is to be found; one is supposed to decide 'freely' for oneself. This leads to the miserable freedom so well described by Patty.

Wallace was much more attuned to this problem than Franzen. As we saw in the section on addiction above (1.3), Wallace shows that the misery of empty, negative freedom, leads to a

⁷⁷⁰ Annette Langley, "In Praise of Necessity," *Metanexus* (September 1, 2010), <http://www.metanexus.net/essay/praise-necessity> (accessed May 2, 2018).

⁷⁷¹ Langley, "In Praise of Necessity."

flight into a kind of false necessity: a false worship that enslaves to the object of worship. *Brief Interviews* shows many ways how this dynamic can play out in relationships. For example, in “B.I. #28” Wallace writes about two cynical, postmodernist graduate students discussing “what women really want.” The students allege that modern women are pulled in contrary directions by incoherent cultural expectations. On the one hand, there is the traditional cultural expectation that a “good girl” should be chaste, and on the other hand, a post-sexual revolution expectation that girls should be “sexual agents” who have promiscuous sexual intercourse: “Do but don’t. A double-bind.”⁷⁷² The solution, the cynical grad students argue, is that what these women really want is to be overwhelmed by passion in such a way as simply to bypass the intellectual double-bind:

The more these logically incompatible responsibilities are forced on today’s females, the stronger their unconscious desire for an overwhelmingly powerful, passionate male who can render the whole double-bind irrelevant by so totally over-whelming them with passion that they can allow themselves to believe they couldn’t help it, that the sex wasn’t a matter of conscious choice [...]⁷⁷³

We have here yet another variation on the familiar theme: the flight from in the form of plunging into.

In *Infinite Jest*, Wallace describes one of the hesitations that Don Gateley has in thinking of his love for recovering addict Joelle van Dyne as being the recommendation of Alcoholics Anonymous that those in the program wait at least a year before dating:

Newcomers come in so whacked out, clueless and scared, their nervous systems still on the outside of their bodies and throbbing from detox, and so desperate to escape their own interior, to lay responsibility for themselves at the feet of something as seductive and consuming as their former friend the Substance. To avoid the mirror AA hauls out in front of them. To avoid acknowledging their old dear friend the Substance’s betrayal, and grieving it. [...] One of Boston AA’s stronger suggestions is that newcomers avoid all romantic relationships for at least a year. So somebody with some sober time predating and trying to seduce a newcomer is almost tantamount to rape, is the Boston consensus.⁷⁷⁴

⁷⁷² Wallace, *Brief Interviews*, p. 227.

⁷⁷³ Wallace, *Brief Interviews*, p. 231.

⁷⁷⁴ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 863.

The year-long wait before dating is supposed to help them have a relationship that is not a mere flight-from, but which is then grounded in mutual commitment to the program and to sobriety.

Here, it is helpful to recall Wallace's suggestion in the "Kenyon College Commencement Speech" that the best hope for dealing with the double-bind is in "some sort of god or spiritual-type thing." I note that in some of his more positive portrayals of relationships a role for such a principle as a uniting common factor is hinted at. Thus, the wife of Kate Gompert's fellow patient does "that devout thing with beads."⁷⁷⁵ In *The Pale King* he describes the love of Lane Dean and his girlfriend Sheri Fisher, two evangelical Christians. When Dean finds out that Sheri is pregnant they make an appointment for an abortion. But on the day of the appointment Sheri comes early to his house and they go to a lake and sit on a picnic table to talk it over again. Lane is frozen. He knows at some level that Sheri does not want the abortion, and he should commit to her and their baby, but he is afraid to do so. He is not sure whether he can. Eventually, and rather surprisingly, he does muster the courage to commit to her.⁷⁷⁶ Here the faith that he shares with Sheri gives him the strength to do the benevolent thing and make her good and the good of the child his necessity. But, of course, this is not a recipe to end all problems. His decision forces Dean into a terribly boring job with the Internal Revenue Service. Trying to struggle through the pain of that boredom, the thought of his and Sheri's child is one of the only things that keeps him going. In a note, Wallace writes: "Dean has become less fervently Christian since starting at REC, while Sheri has gotten more so."⁷⁷⁷ Religion can be a help in uniting two persons, but it is not a get-out-of-jail-free card.

It is notable that in his novels and memoirs, contrary in a way to his explicit theory, Franzen does hint that realizing the reality of the other is necessary for a flourishing relationship. Implicitly, he shows that some common orientation toward a greater goal is necessary to

⁷⁷⁵ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 698.

⁷⁷⁶ Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 43.

⁷⁷⁷ Wallace, *The Pale King*, pp. 541-542.

avoid various forms of objectification. In *Freedom*, as in his memoir *The Discomfort Zone*, a key role is played by birdwatching. In *The Discomfort Zone*, Franzen speculates that he might have saved his marriage if he had discovered his love of birds earlier.⁷⁷⁸ But the “necessity” of the birdwatcher leads to an interesting conflict that is one of the main themes of *Freedom*. The “necessity” of a certain kind of love leads people to want to have and raise children, and yet the “necessity” of a certain kind of bird-loving environmentalism leads to them wanting mankind to stop having children.

The paradox helps to show that birdwatching is not quite able to carry the weight that Franzen wants it to carry. As we saw, Franzen had accused Wallace of “dehumanizing moralism and theologizing.”⁷⁷⁹ But is Franzen himself able to escape that charge? The character of Walter in *Freedom* loves birds a great deal, but when one reads his rants against the growth of the human population of the earth, it is hard not to think of his love as “dehumanizing.” When Franzen’s essay “Farther Away” came out, the journalist Maria Bustillos made the following point in an email devoted to Wallace:

The part that struck me most was the contrast between Franzen’s love of nature in the form of birds, and Wallace’s love of dogs. Franzen sees beauty and hope in a reality from which human beings are excluded, where Wallace was the kind of guy who would take in the most difficult and unsociable dogs. Franzen’s is a worldview that essentially condemns humanity, and Wallace’s despite all the fear and horror is one that still embraces, despite everything.⁷⁸⁰

Franzen is perhaps right that one cannot love “all humanity” absolutely considered, but surely one can avoid condemning it? Is there a way of loving a particular other person that opens up towards all of humanity rather than closing off? Wallace hints at a way forward in finding a common goal, a common good. Thus his view of the possibilities of sexual and romantic relationships as a way of facing the double-bind lead toward a consideration of a society united by common goods, which I will take up in section 2.6 below.

⁷⁷⁸ Jonathan Franzen, *The Discomfort Zone: A Personal History* (New York, Picador, 2006), pp. 181-182.

⁷⁷⁹ Franzen, *Farther Away*, p. 39.

⁷⁸⁰ Wallace-I (quoted with permission).

2.5.4 *Fruendum* and *Utendum*: Wallace and the recovery of Augustine

Wallace's treatment of the double-bind in sexual and romantic relationships can be a spur to moral theology to reconsider certain aspects of the theological tradition and how they might be made fruitful for our own day. For many centuries Christian theology was deeply suspicious of the dangers of sexual lust, and therefore to a large extent also of sexual pleasure. St. Augustine of Hippo was the key figure here. His account of sexual "concupiscence," irrational desiring passion, as being a highly dangerous locus of temptation in the human heart: both a result and an occasion of sin, had a profound influence on subsequent Christian theology. More recent work on sexual intercourse and sexual relationships in theological ethics, however, has tended rather to emphasize the goodness of the body and physical pleasure. It has been, to use the colloquial expression, "sex-positive." This is true (in quite different ways) both of theological work that might be considered "liberal," such as Margaret Farley's *Just Love*,⁷⁸¹ and of more "conservative" work such as Pope John Paul II's *Theology of the Body*.⁷⁸² They come to quite different conclusions on specific questions in theological ethics, but they are at one in emphasizing the goodness of the sexual pleasure. Theologically there is certainly much to be said for this emphasis, which has arguably enriched theological understandings of the ways in which sexual pleasure can strengthen marriages, and enhance the ability to be an icon of divine love. But Wallace's work can help us to see that older strands of the theological tradition, such as St. Augustine's, which have fallen out of fashion in recent decades, can still be a source of important insights—insights which are perhaps complementary to those of modern theologians.

As we have seen, Wallace shows how the loneliness of the "broken self" can be compounded rather than mitigated in sexual relations, when those relations are being used as an escape and diversion from personal misery. Such relations involve a dissembling of the self and objectification of the other. The overcoming of such difficulties is not easy, and it seems to

⁷⁸¹ Margaret A. Farley, *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* (London: Continuum, 2006).

⁷⁸² John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, trans. Michael Waldstein (Boston: Pauline Books, 2006).

require some kind of common goal or end for lovers that is in some sense greater than themselves. This resonates deeply with Augustine's perspective.

In his great work *The City of God*,⁷⁸³ Augustine describes the wedding night of a Roman bride. As John Cavadini has argued, the passage shows Augustine's attentiveness to the ways in which male lust tends to objectify women: "[T]his lawful wedded intercourse sounds much more like a rape, with its talk of subduing, pressing and penetrating someone who is reluctant and fearful."⁷⁸⁴ The reluctance and fearfulness of the bride are overcome by strategies no less elaborate than those employed by the hideous men, but in this case the strategies involve the invocation of numerous gods, each tasked with an element of the submission of the bride. Cavadini explicitly compares Augustine's description to the descriptions of intercourse in a patriarchal society offered by feminist writers such as Andrea Dworkin.⁷⁸⁵

For Augustine, the deepest root of such objectification lies in a faculty of the soul: the *will*, rather than in the nature of bodily pleasure itself.⁷⁸⁶ Augustine is, in fact, the first great theorist of "free will," as a faculty or power that the soul has for choosing.⁷⁸⁷ This faculty chooses which of our inclinations to follow. But it is naturally inclined to happiness; it chooses to follow inclinations, only because they seem to lead to happiness. All men want to be happy. The will is not "free" to desire unhappiness. Happiness is found in *wisdom*, which is the attainment of God as the highest good, and no one can be prevented from attaining

⁷⁸³ Augustine of Hippo, *City of God*, VI,9

⁷⁸⁴ John Cavadini, "Feeling Right: Augustine on the Passions and Sexual Desire," in: *Augustinian Studies* 36.1 (2005), pp. 195–217, at p. 208.

⁷⁸⁵ Cavadini, "Feeling Right."

⁷⁸⁶ Cf. Cavadini, "Feeling Right," pp. 195–196.

⁷⁸⁷ See my paper: "Contrasting Concepts of Freedom," presented at the conference *Heute gerecht leben: Impulse zu Ordnungskonzeptionen aus katholischer, orthodoxer und schiitischer Tradition*, ViQo Circle, Vienna, September 19, 2016: <https://viqocircle.org/2016/11/11/waldstein-on-freedom/> (accessed July 24, 2017), on which the following paragraphs are based. Cf. Johannes Brachtendorf, *Einleitung* to Augustinus, *De libero arbitrio – Der freie Wille*, vol. 9 of *Augustinus Opera – Werke* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2006), p. 45; Eva Brann, *Un-Willing*, pp. 22–37. Brachtendorf and Brann go slightly too far in saying that Augustine *invented* the will—the denial of the term "will" to ancient concepts such as the Aristotelian *boulesis* seems to me to be based on a too-narrow, modern concept of will. As Brann herself admits, Thomas Aquinas's account of *voluntas* (will) corresponds to Aristotle's account of *boulesis*—if one can call the one "will," why not the other?

God against his will. Therefore, no one can be made unhappy against his will. But everyone *wills* happiness. So why is it that so many persons are not happy? How is that possible? How can one both will to be happy and choose not to be happy? “How does anyone suffer an unhappy life by his will, since absolutely no one wills to live unhappily?”⁷⁸⁸ Augustine’s answer is that the will is able to err by choosing things that are incompatible with happiness, even while continuing to will happiness: “[P]eople are in error to the extent that they stray from the road of life that leads to happiness, even if they profess and protest that they only want to attain happiness.”⁷⁸⁹ Here Augustine is arguing that those who err are deceived by a false appearance of good. But how does such deception arise? Augustine argues that the true good that everyone really desires is God, but people are deceived by the appearance of good in less universal, less interior, or less exalted goods, goods that are easier for them to comprehend.⁷⁹⁰ But this turning towards a more private, more exterior, and lower good is not merely an error in the sense of a mistake. For Augustine it includes a kind of pride, a wanting to be self-sufficient in a way that only God could be self-sufficient. In the *Confessions*, Augustine famously considers why he stole some pears as an adolescent. It wasn’t because he particularly wanted to eat them. Rather, it was because it gave an apparent freedom: “[G]etting a deceptive sense of omnipotence from doing something forbidden without immediate punishment.”⁷⁹¹ Since Augustine teaches that it is natural for the will to be turned toward God, where true happiness is to be found,⁷⁹² a mystery always remains about the origin of such pride. The turning away is a defect, a weakness, a sort of nothingness, a failure to be what we are: “We admit that this movement is sin, since it is a defective movement, and every defect is from nothing.”⁷⁹³

⁷⁸⁸ *De libero arbitrio*, 1.14.30.100; in: *On the Free Choice of the Will, On Grace and Free Choice, and Other Writings*, trans. Peter King (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 25.

⁷⁸⁹ *De libero arbitrio*, 2.9.26.100-101; trans. King, p. 50.

⁷⁹⁰ *De libero arbitrio*, 2.19.53.199; trans. King, p. 70.

⁷⁹¹ *Confessiones*, II,6; *The Confessions*, trans. Frank Sheed, , p. 32.

⁷⁹² See: William R. O'Connor, *The Natural Desire for God* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1948), pp. 18-25.

⁷⁹³ *De libero qrbitrio*, 2.19.53.200-2.20.54.204; trans. King, pp. 70-71.

In *The City of God* Augustine argues that the turning of the will away from God as the final end results in a disintegration of the various parts of human nature. Since the will turns away from its natural object, it is no longer able to control the other impulses of the soul, and they take on a sort of life of their own. Augustine sees this as particularly true of sexual lust, which is so vehement that it not only eludes the control of higher faculties, but impedes their exercise:

[T]his lust not only takes possession of the whole body and outward members, but also makes itself felt within, and moves the whole man with a passion in which mental emotion is mingled with bodily appetite, so that the pleasure which results is the greatest of all bodily pleasures. So possessing indeed is this pleasure, that at the moment of time in which it is consummated, all mental activity is suspended.⁷⁹⁴

The intense pleasure then becomes an escape from the nothingness which the will has found in turning away from God, so that lust not only moves without the consent of the will, but it compels the will to consent to it. Because the origins of this disintegration are bound up with pride, uncontrolled lust tends toward domination—that is, towards what we would call objectification. Instead of being a means of connecting human beings, it becomes a means of estranging them. As Peter Brown puts it in his classic study of early Christian views of sex:

With Adam's Fall, the soul lost the ability to summon up all of itself, in an undivided act of will, to love and praise God in all created things. Concupiscence was a dark drive to control, to appropriate, and to turn to one's private ends, all the good things that had been created by God to be accepted with gratitude and shared with others.⁷⁹⁵

“Concupiscence” here has a wider meaning than sexual lust, but sexual lust is a paradigmatic case. The domination and manipulation of the Roman bride in *The City of God* VI,9 shows the kind of objectification to which this dark drive leads.

Augustine himself did not, however, use the language of objectification. In fact, one of his most famous early treatments of how we ought to relate to “all the good things that had been created by God to be accepted with gratitude,” seems at first reading to contradict the sort of

⁷⁹⁴ Augustine, *Civ. Dei*, XIV,16; *The City of God*, vol. 2, trans. Marcus Dods (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1871), p. 31.

⁷⁹⁵ Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (London: Faber and Faber, 1989), p. 418.

Kantian analysis of objectification to which Wallace was indebted. In *De doctrina christiana*, his treatise on Christian teaching, Augustine distinguishes between things that are to be used and things that are to be enjoyed:

There are some things which are to be enjoyed [*fruendum*], some which are to be used [*utendum*], and some whose function is both to enjoy and use. Those which are to be enjoyed make us happy; those which are to be used assist us and give us a boost, so to speak, as we press on towards our happiness, so that we may reach and hold fast to the things which make us happy. [...] To enjoy something is to hold fast to it in love for its own sake. To use something is to apply whatever it may be to the purpose of obtaining what you love.⁷⁹⁶

Ultimately, Augustine concludes, God alone is to be enjoyed, and everything else to be used for his sake.⁷⁹⁷ To a modern reader this seems like a recipe for objectification—if all things, including other persons, are to be “used” then it seems that they are to be objectified, to be treated not as ends but as means. But, as Rowan Williams has eloquently argued, this is to miss the point of what Augustine was saying. The distinction between using and enjoying has to be read in the light of the distinction between things and signs that Augustine makes in the same place. Everything that is not God is a sign of God, pointing towards its creator. To “use” something in Augustine’s sense is to see it as a sign of its source. To “enjoy,” conversely, is to ignore the real ontological depth of the thing. It is worth quoting Williams at length on this point:

[O]ur last end is the contemplation of that which in no way depends on us or is defined in terms of us (we, rather, are defined in terms of it); and so we cannot for this end use other objects of love in a self-interested way. To ‘use’ the love of neighbour or the love we have for our own bodies (a favourite example of Augustine’s) is simply to allow the capacity for gratuitous or self-forgetful *dilectio* opened up in these and other such loves to be opened still further. The language of *uti* is designed to warn against an attitude towards any finite person or object that terminates their meaning in their capacity to satisfy my desire, that treats them as the end of desire, conceiving my meaning in terms of them and theirs in terms of me.⁷⁹⁸

Conceiving the other’s meaning in terms of me, shows how it is really the Augustinian *frui* that is equivalent to Kantian objectification. To love others as signs of God is to leave them their openness towards their own greatest fulfillment. To quote Williams once more:

⁷⁹⁶ Augustine, *De doctrina christiana*, I,3; trans. R.P.H. Green (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p. 15.

⁷⁹⁷ Augustine, *De doctrina christiana*, I,3; trans. Green, p. 17.

⁷⁹⁸ Williams, *On Augustine*, p. 44.

[W]hen Augustine says, in a much-misunderstood passage, that we must ‘use’ those we love for the sake of God, not love them as ends in themselves, he is not saying that all our special human loves are just instruments to be left behind. He is warning us against two distortions of love. We can love another person because they serve our private purposes, we can ‘use’ them for our own gratification; or we can make them an idol, we can tie ourselves up in them completely, invest all our expectations and fantasies in them. Both are destructive. I must learn to love in freedom: to love the other person without struggling to swallow them up or longing to *be* swallowed up in them. And only the love of God makes this possible. Each man and woman is defined by relation to God, finally; I can’t lay down for you your everlasting destiny, nor you lay down mine— that is the sense in which no human being can be an ‘end’ for another human being. So we must love each other as creatures on the way to God: I must love you as one who is being called and shaped by God, I must leave you free for God. If I can do this, I shall be growing in Godlike love, a love that loves what is really other than itself and has no thought of absorbing everything into its own needs.⁷⁹⁹

This doesn’t exactly correspond to Kant’s account of treating others as an end, since, as I noted above, for Kant it is not enough to treat others as *having* ends, one actually has to treat each person as the final end of all. But it does correspond to theological modifications of the Kantian doctrine, such as Karol Wojtyła’s.⁸⁰⁰ Wallace himself would not go as far as theologians are willing to go. He would not—“*only* the love of God makes this possible”—but his work can help contemporary theologians to see how an Augustinian perspective can enrich their accounts. It can show the obstacles that can be overcome in order to arrive at such love. He can thus help to add depth and shading to such statements as the following from Spanish theologian Julián Carrón:

[T]wo infinite needs to be loved meet two fragile and limited capacities to love. Only in the ambit of a greater love do they not consume themselves in pretension and not resign themselves, but walk together, each towards a fullness of which the other is sign.⁸⁰¹

2.6 CIVICS, VALUE, AND COMMONWEALTH

2.6.1 The common good and the virtues of bureaucrats

In a scathing review of John Updike’s novel *Toward the End of Time*, Wallace claims that Updike’s characters are “always incorrigibly narcissistic, philandering, self-contemptuous,

⁷⁹⁹ Williams, *On Augustine*, pp. 210-211.

⁸⁰⁰ Cf. Waldstein, “Three Kinds of Personalism.”

⁸⁰¹ Julián Carrón, *Disarming Beauty: Essays on Faith, Truth, and Freedom* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015), p. 180.

self-pitying.” They are, in other words, much like Wallace’s own hideous men. They are also “deeply alone, alone the way only an emotional solipsist can be alone.” And this loneliness is not only a function of their objectifying relation to particular other persons, it also has to do with their lack of a relation to larger communities of persons: “They never seem to belong to any sort of larger unit or community or cause.”⁸⁰² The reference to belonging to a “larger unit or community or cause” suggests a key way in which Wallace thought the double-bind of loneliness could be addressed. Although in his interview with Gerald Howard in *Elle*, Wallace does not mention politics as one of “the places [...] where loneliness is countenanced, stared down, transfigured, treated,”⁸⁰³ nevertheless, politics was indeed for Wallace a paradigmatic case of belonging to a larger unit, one to which Wallace kept returning throughout his career. Above (1.5) we saw how Wallace believed the loneliness of contemporary culture to be partly caused by political individualism. And he saw a great danger in totalitarian movements that would exploit that loneliness to recruit members. Gerhard Schtitt, who wants his pupils “to sacrifice the hot narrow imperatives of the Self—the needs, the desires, the fears, the multiform cravings [...]—to the larger imperatives of [...] the State.”⁸⁰⁴ America, as Schtitt sees his adopted country, lacks a culture of such sacrifice, and has therefore “[n]othing to contain and give the meaning,” and is therefore “[l]onely.”⁸⁰⁵ Similarly, Rémy Marathe urges the necessity of love of “[s]omething bigger than the self.”⁸⁰⁶ A devotion to “your nation, your country and people, it enlarges the heart.”⁸⁰⁷ Both Schtitt and Marathe are totalitarians from whom we are meant to recoil. And yet, Wallace nevertheless meant us to see something compelling in their ideas, which “anchor nicely the soul and course of a life.”⁸⁰⁸ He was, as David Dunning argues, looking for a way to

⁸⁰² David Foster Wallace, “Certainly the End of Something or Other, One Would Sort of Have to Think,” in: *Consider the Lobster*, pp. 51-59, at p. 53.

⁸⁰³ Howard, “Infinite Jester.”

⁸⁰⁴ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 82.

⁸⁰⁵ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 83.

⁸⁰⁶ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 107.

⁸⁰⁷ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 107.

⁸⁰⁸ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 82.

“endorse” something in Schtitt’s thought in “a non-fascist way.”⁸⁰⁹ For Wallace the search for a way out of the double-bind of loneliness and loss of the self was inextricably linked with a wider political question. Namely, as Adam Kelly puts it: “[W]hat has gone wrong with America?” and—particularly in his final unfinished novel, *The Pale King*—“[W]hat can we do to make it better?”⁸¹⁰

Jeffrey Severs’s monograph *David Foster Wallace’s Balancing Books: Fictions of Value* marked an important new step in Wallace studies. Shifting from the focus on literary style and “voice” that many studies of Wallace have focused on up to now, Severs turns directly to the question of Wallace’s career-long inquiry into the political questions raised by the problems of American culture. Severs makes use of Wallace’s love of etymology and wordplay to trace the development of his most serious concerns. He shows how Wallace plays with words such as part, whole, balance, weight, ground, cost, value, and valence (among others), and literalizes etymologies in his works, in order to think through his concerns.

One important instance is the etymology of “axiology.” Wallace once made a note on that word, defining it as “the study of values and value judgments.”⁸¹¹ Axiology derives from the Greek *axiōō*, to find something worthy, which in turn derives from *axis*, weight.⁸¹² Severs draws attention to Martin Heidegger here, and suggests that Wallace’s approach to etymology might have been influenced by the German philosopher.⁸¹³ In *The Principle of Reason* (*Der Satz vom Grund*, which literally translates to *The Sentence of Ground*), Heidegger argues that while in modernity things are considered to have value because they are *valued*—that is, their value derives from the attitudes of those who value them—for the ancient Greeks things were considered “worthy” because of their intrinsic worth, which was able, as it were, to shine forth. Thus an “axiom” was not merely a first principle of thought, it was a truth which made itself evident through its own worthiness. Severs cites a text of John

⁸⁰⁹ Dunning, “Virtually Unlimited,” p. 14.

⁸¹⁰ Kelly, “Development Through Dialogue,” p. 280.

⁸¹¹ Wallace, *Both Flesh and Not*, pp. 34-35; cited in: Severs, *Balancing Books*, p. 14.

⁸¹² Cf. Severs, *Balancing Books*, p. 15.

⁸¹³ Severs, *Balancing Books*, pp. 15, 43-44.

Caputo's explicating Heidegger on this point.⁸¹⁴ It is, however, worth going back to Heidegger's own words, and quoting them at length:

The Greek *ἀξίωμα* comes from *ἀξίωω*, 'I find something worthy.' But what does 'find something worthy' mean? We contemporaries are quick to the draw and say: 'to find worthy,' that means 'to value something,' 'to esteem its value.' But we would like to know what *ἀξιοῦν* means when understood in the Greek sense of 'to find worthy.' We must contemplate what 'finding worthy' could mean when thought in a Greek way, for the Greeks were not familiar with the idea of valuing and the concept of value. What does 'to find something worthy' mean, especially in the sense of the original Greek relation of humans to what is? 'To find worthy' means 'to bring something to shine forth in that countenance [*Ansehen*] in which it finds its repose, and to preserve it therein.' An axiom shows what has the most noble countenance, and has this not as a consequence of an evaluation emanating from humans and conferred by them. What has the most noble countenance composes this regard on its own. This countenance is based in its own particular look [*Aussehen*]. That which enjoys having the most noble countenance opens the lookout towards that stature from whose look everything else always receives its look and possesses its countenance.⁸¹⁵

This somewhat dense passage shows Heidegger's concern with bringing abstract philosophical concepts back to their foundations in ordinary experience, showing how sedimented abstractions (to use Husserl's term) have not only lost their original meaning, but in some cases reversed their meaning. Thus, the modern abstract notion of value is almost the opposite in its subjectivist connotations than the Greek notions derived from *axióō*. In modernity value is conceived of as being an effect of subjective evaluation, whereas for the Greeks it was the intrinsic nobility of the object itself that gave it value.

Severs argues that Wallace was engaged in a similar attempt. He was trying to show how modern culture had lost its grounding and balance, and any sense of intrinsic value, and to illumine was of recovering value. As Severs demonstrates, Wallace's characters are always in danger of losing the ground beneath their feet and floating off into the weightless detachment of postmodern irony. Such irony unmask the emptiness of a culture in which value is seen as determined entirely by subjective evaluation, and which therefore lacks any access to the intrinsic worth and weightiness of things. Wallace often takes "value" in its

⁸¹⁴ Severs, *Balancing Books*, p. 15, citing: John D. Caputo, *The Mystical Element in Heidegger's Thought* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986), p. 53.

⁸¹⁵ Martin Heidegger, *The Principle of Reason*, trans. Reginald Lilly (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991), pp. 15-16; *Der Satz vom Grund* (Pfullingen: Gunther Neske, 1957), pp. 34-35.

economic sense of exchange value, and Severs adeptly shows how the crashes of the American economy provide a key background to much of Wallace's work—puncturing again and again the illusory inflation of bogus value. Wallace, Severs writes, “not only satirized the deforming effects of money but threw into question the logic of the monetary system, often acting as a historian of financial markets, the Great Depression, and the precarious fate of the social-welfare achievements of the New Deal.”⁸¹⁶ Economic crashes manifest the problem with subjective understandings of value, but such problems go far beyond the economic sphere. This is not to say that Wallace thought we could simply abandon modern understandings of value, and return to ancient understandings of seeing the intrinsic worth of things as explicated by Heidegger. Severs rightly warns against seeing Wallace as “consistently a Heideggerian in his depictions of ground and groundless subjects.”⁸¹⁷ Indeed, as we have already seen, Wallace was convinced that in postmodernity it was indeed necessary to “to *make up* a lot of our own morality and our own values.”⁸¹⁸ If values can be made up then they are not given in the sense that Heidegger means. But he was trying to find a way in which such values could be made up that avoided both the nihilism of reducing everything to subjective “evaluation” on the one hand, and the totalitarianism of imposed objectivity of value on the other.

Severs shows how the term “commonwealth” becomes central to Wallace's search for such a solution. Commonwealth is an “unhoardable” good that can only be had in sharing with others.⁸¹⁹ For Wallace, a paradigm of such commonwealth was language, which depends on its being shared for its very existence. Severs shows how the theme of commonwealth runs through all of Wallace's work, taken up especially playfully in *Infinite Jest*, in which the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and Commonwealth Avenue in Boston play an important role. But this theme becomes most “manifest” in Wallace's final novel *The Pale King*.⁸²⁰

⁸¹⁶ Severs, *Balancing Books*, p. 2.

⁸¹⁷ Severs, *Balancing Books*, p. 15.

⁸¹⁸ Lipsky, *Although of Course*, p. 159.

⁸¹⁹ Severs, *Balancing Books*, p. 24.

⁸²⁰ Severs, *Balancing Books*, p. 238.

§ 19 of *The Pale King* is the so-called “civics-debate §,” which, as I mentioned above (1.4.3) describes a group of tax bureaucrats stuck in an elevator.⁸²¹ They are talking about the changes in the IRS brought about by the Reagan administration—changes aimed at running the IRS like a capitalist corporation. As we have already seen, they are highly critical of capitalist corporations both in themselves, and especially as models for government. To be more precise, it is one of them, DeWitt Glendenning, director of the regional tax office in which they work, who is highly critical. The conversation involves four or five characters: DeWitt Glendenning, Stuart Nichols, someone identified as Gaines, someone named X, and the narrator himself, identified by the first person singular pronoun “I” (assuming that “I” is not one of the other four, or simply a sign of the unfinished state of the scene⁸²²). Glendenning argues that the corporate model sees it as useless to treat the US citizen as a *citizen* as a part of a larger community with responsibility for the common good (or commonwealth) of that community; instead he has to be treated as a *customer* who receives certain services from the government and is required to pay for them. Glendenning sees this as a pernicious change, but as one that has only become possible because of a wider cultural shift in the way that American citizens have in fact come to see themselves:

We’ve changed the way we think of ourselves as citizens. We don’t think of ourselves as citizens in the old sense of being small parts of something larger and infinitely more important to which we have serious responsibilities. [...] Something has happened where we’ve decided on a personal level that it’s all right to abdicate our individual responsibility to the common good and let government worry about the common good while we all go about our individual self-interested business and struggle to gratify our various appetites.⁸²³

Glendenning contrasts this with what he sees as the attitude of the American founding fathers, of whom he is an admirer:

And—and now I’m speaking of Jefferson, Madison, Adams, Franklin, the real church Fathers—what raised the American experiment beyond great imagination and made it very nearly work was not just these men’s intelligence but their profound moral enlightenment—

⁸²¹ The following paragraphs are adapted from my blogpost “The Only Thing Worth Writing About,” in: *Sancrucensis*, July 29, 2011: <https://sancrucensis.wordpress.com/2011/07/29/the-only-thing-worth-writing-about/> (accessed May 20, 2016).

⁸²² See: Kelly, “Development Through Dialogue,” p. 277 for the identification of the various voices.

⁸²³ David Foster Wallace, *The Pale King* (New York: Little, Brown, 2011), p. 136.

their sense of civics. The fact is that they cared more about the nation and the citizens than about themselves. They could have just set America up as an oligarchy where powerful eastern industrialists and southern landowners controlled all the power and ruled with an iron hand in a glove of liberal rhetoric. [...]

They believed in rationality—they believed that persons of privilege, literacy, education, and moral sophistication would be able to emulate them, to make judicious and self-disciplined decisions for the good of the nation and not just to advance their own interests. They assumed their descendants would be like them—rational, honorable, civic-minded. Men with at least as much concern for the common good as for personal advantage.⁸²⁴

But Glendenning sees a certain irony to the attempt to find a solution to individualism within the liberal tradition of the American founding, for that tradition was itself one of the roots of individualism:

[I]t was 1840 or '41 that de Tocqueville published his book about Americans, and he says somewhere that one thing about democracies and their individualism is that they by their very nature corrode the citizen's sense of true community, of having real true fellow citizens whose interests and concerns were the same as his. This is a kind of ghastly irony, if you think about it, since a form of government engineered to produce equality makes its citizens so individualistic and self-absorbed they end up as solipsists, navel-gazers.⁸²⁵

Critics of Enlightenment liberalism would see this less as irony and more as logical working out of principles.⁸²⁶ Indeed, Glendenning's interlocutor "X" challenges him from a more leftist perspective. Weren't the American founding fathers merely rationalizing the interests of their own class of rich, white, slave-owning men: "It's certainly an imaginative and ingenious rationalization of racism and male chauvinism, that's for sure."⁸²⁷ As Kelly argues, Wallace surely expected many readers to agree with X, but in his portrayal of Glendenning he shows that nevertheless the vision of the founding fathers is not to be dismissed so easily:

If the expressed ideals of the American founding fathers can be so easily dismissed on the grounds of their less than ideal behavior, then where are later generations to receive their moral education from? While fully acknowledging the difficulties with the proposition—by reminding us through X and Gaines that hypocrisy should rightfully suffer exposure and interrogation—Wallace is nonetheless allowing space here for a more generous evaluation of

⁸²⁴ Wallace, *The Pale King*, pp. 133-134

⁸²⁵ Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 141.

⁸²⁶ See, for example: Patrick Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018).

⁸²⁷ Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 134.

both the role of moral ideas in the course of history, and the personal flaws of those who espouse such ideas.⁸²⁸

In Glendenning, Wallace gives us an alternative model to that of Schtitt and Schtitt and Marathe—a man who tries to unite genuine concern with the common good with a respect for individual liberty. And, as Kelly argues, a man who instantiates his conception of politics in his very approach to political conversation. In debating X and Gaines, Glendenning trusts in rationality, and does not try to impose his power:

Glendenning in this scene seems unconcerned to wield power over others. Instead, his interest is focused on what he and others are saying; he is dialogically responsive [...] and his tone is generally a humble one, admitting confusion about the accuracy and tightness of his arguments.⁸²⁹

Wallace portrays the kind of dialogical practice of politics that Glendenning instantiates as itself a commonwealth, an unhoardable good. This commonwealth enables citizens to relate to their country as parts to a whole, but without being absorbed by that whole; to feel that “the common good was in fact made up of a whole lot of individuals just like them, that they were in fact *part* of Everything, and that they had to hold up their end.”⁸³⁰

Glendenning sees the role of the Internal Revenue Service as being to help citizens develop a civic spirit. Hence his opposition to the Reagan administration’s attempt to re-make the “Service” into the image of for-profit corporations that appeal only to self-interest. Another bureaucrat at the center, David Wallace, recalls years later that the struggle at the time was between “officials who saw tax and its administration as an arena of social justice and civic virtue,” and those “who prized the market model, efficiency, and a maximum return on the investment of the Service’s annual budget.”⁸³¹ In this struggle, Glendenning is the main proponent of social justice and civic virtue.

⁸²⁸ Kelly, “Development Through Dialogue,” p. 279.

⁸²⁹ Kelly, “Development Through Dialogue,” p. 278.

⁸³⁰ Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 139.

⁸³¹ Wallace, *The Pale King*, pp. 82-83.

In what sense can Glendenning's civic spirit be seen as a way of dealing with the double-bind of loneliness? Once his spirit has been attained it is surely a help, but in order to attain that spirit it seems that one already has to have loosened the grip of the double-bind on oneself. Glendenning himself seems to have attained a remarkable level reconciliation with the human condition. According to David Wallace, the character, "Nobody ever felt that Mr. Glendenning was putting on any kind of act."⁸³² He is neither the sort of boss who tyrannizes his employees, but nor is he the kind that tries to be friends with everyone, and then becomes emotionally tied up and obligated, and has to pretend to be angry with them when he has to do something that they won't like. Wallace the character hypothesizes that both tyrannical bosses and fake friend bosses are the way they are because of their own insecurity and their need to prop up that security either by the feeling of power over others, or by the approval of others. Glendenning, on the other hand, suffers from no such insecurity. Consider the following description:

His self-possession allowed him to be and act precisely as he was. What he was was a taciturn, slightly unapproachable man who took his job very seriously and required his subordinates to do the same, but he took them seriously as well, and listened to them, and thought about them both as human beings and as parts of a larger mechanism whose efficient function was his responsibility. That is, if you had a suggestion or a concern [...] he would pay attention to what you said, but whether and how he would *act* on what you said would depend on reflection, input from other sources, and larger considerations he was required to balance. In other words, Mr. Glendenning *could* listen to you because he did not suffer from the insecure belief that listening to you and taking you seriously obligated him to you in any way—whereas someone in thrall to the martinet-picture would have to treat you as unworthy of attention, and someone in thrall to the peer-picture would feel that he needed either to take your suggestion to avoid offending you, or give an exhausting explanation about why your suggestion wasn't implementable or maybe even enter into some kind of debate about it—to avoid offending you or violating his picture of himself as the sort of administrator who would never treat a subordinate's suggestion as unworthy of serious consideration—or get angry as a way of anesthetizing his discomfort at not welcoming the suggestion of someone he feels obligated to see as a friend and equal in every way.⁸³³

One of the main themes of *The Pale King* is that attaining Glendenning's level of self-possession requires habituation and training, and a process of self-discipline. In a note to himself Wallace describes the two main "arcs" that he wants to realize in *The Pale King*: the

⁸³² Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 433.

⁸³³ Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 434.

first has to do with attention and boredom, the second with “being an individual vs. being part of larger things.”⁸³⁴ The two arcs are closely related. In order to be a part of a larger thing without losing one’s individuality, as Glendenning is, one must be able to pay attention to boring things. And this means that one has to be able to resist the flight from one’s own loneliness and misery into diversion. Much of *The Pale King* is concerned with examining how various characters struggle toward attaining something of what Glendenning has.

A notable example is that of Chris Fogle. As I explained above (1.4.4), Fogle starts out in the grips of a sort of nihilist consumerism. “I was like a piece of paper on the street in the wind, thinking, ‘Now I think I’ll blow this way, now I think I’ll blow that way.’”⁸³⁵ He allows himself to be blown by the winds of desire for distraction in the form of TV, drugs, alcohol, and so on, but without any high expectation of fulfillment. He attends college classes, and learns postmodern cynicism about modern consumerist capitalism, but this cynicism is no help to escaping the structures he analyses. Instead, they make him surrender to them.

I took a lot of psychology and political science, literature. Classes where everything was fuzzy and abstract and open to interpretation and then those interpretations were open to still more interpretations. [...] The whole thing was just going through the motions; it didn’t mean anything—even the whole point of the classes themselves was that nothing meant anything, that everything was abstract and endlessly interpretable.⁸³⁶

Fogle’s father, in sharp contrast, is a model of the Protestant work ethic as described by Max Weber. Wallace is realistic about the horrors of such a stance as well (as demonstrated by the father’s gruesomely appropriate death), but there is also something admirable in the father’s self-discipline and hard work. And this is the aspect to which Chris Fogle eventually converts. I use the word “converts” with reason. As Marshall Boswell has shown, Fogle’s transition from wastoid student to hard-working bureaucrat is described as a kind of

⁸³⁴ Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 545.

⁸³⁵ Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 154.

⁸³⁶ Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 155.

religious conversion, using terminology and ideas taken from the American pragmatist William James's psychology of religion.⁸³⁷

Fogle's conversion comes when he is studying in a desultory way at DePaul University in Chicago. DePaul is the largest Catholic university in the United States. Run by the Vincentians, it is named for their founder, St. Vincent DePaul. Fogle, however, mistakenly identifies the religious who run DePaul as Jesuits. The moment of his conversion comes when he accidentally goes into the wrong classroom, and audits what turns out to be a final review for an advanced course on taxation accounting, "a famously difficult course at DePaul."⁸³⁸ The Advanced Tax class is apparently being taught by a substitute lecturer, whom Fogle calls "the substitute Jesuit," "the Catholic father," and "the substitute father."⁸³⁹ This stand-in for a religious father-figure closes his review of the course with a "hortation" on the heroism of accounting as a profession. "True heroism is you, alone, in a designated work space," he says. "True heroism is minutes, hours, weeks, year upon year of the quiet, precise, judicious exercise of probity and care—with no one there to see or cheer."⁸⁴⁰ The substitute may be a stand-in for a Jesuit, but his take on the heroism of work sounds suspiciously like the Protestant ethic as expounded by Max Weber. The accountant's vocation is service, but what exactly is he serving? He is caring for other people's wealth:

To attend fully to the interests of the client and to balance those interests against the high ethical standards of FASB and extant law—yea, to serve those who care not for service but only for results—this is heroism. This may be the first time you've heard the truth put plainly, starkly. Effacement. Sacrifice. Service. To give oneself to the care of others' money—this is effacement, perdurance, sacrifice, honor, doughtiness, valor.⁸⁴¹

Somewhat disappointingly, the substitute here doesn't bring up Glendenning's theme of relating as a part to a larger whole. But perhaps it is precisely the long habituation to the sort

⁸³⁷ Boswell, "Trickle-Down Citizenship," pp. 464-479.

⁸³⁸ Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 190.

⁸³⁹ Wallace, *The Pale King*, pp. 176, 220, 230.

⁸⁴⁰ Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 230.

⁸⁴¹ Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 231.

of unselfish service that he is extolling here that is prerequisite to a proper attitude towards the common good.

This is a heroism that no one will write stories or make films about, because no one finds it interesting, but this is part of its essence: “True heroism is *a priori* incompatible with audience or applause or even the bare notice of the common run of man.”⁸⁴² The substitute lecturer is himself, like Glendenning, remarkably unconcerned with the notice of others. And like Glendenning this enables him to be a benign authority. In a remarkable passage for someone with Fogle’s training in postmodern cynicism, Fogle describes the substitute’s authority as follows:

[T]his substitute was actually the first instructor I’d seen at any of the schools I’d drifted in and out of who seemed a hundred percent indifferent about being liked or seen as cool or likable by the students, and realized—I did, once I’d entered the Service—what a powerful quality this sort of indifference could be in an authority figure. Actually, in hindsight, the substitute may have been the first genuine authority figure I ever met, meaning a figure with genuine ‘authority’ instead of just the power to judge you or squeeze your shoes from their side of the generation gap, and I became aware for the first time that ‘authority’ was actually something real and authentic, that a real authority was not the same as a friend or someone who cared about you, but nevertheless could be good for you, and that the authority relation was not a ‘democratic’ or equal one and yet could have value for both sides, both people in the relation.⁸⁴³

This is a surprisingly “conservative” view of authority to take. But it is one that can make sense in the context of shared pursuit of a common good, understood as an unhoardable commonwealth. For in that case authority need not be in competition with subordinates.

Heroism is generally thought to involve conflict, and the substitute’s account is no exception here. But the conflict here is not an exciting clash of knights in shining armor with dragons. Rather, the adversaries of the patient labor of accountants are the monotony and boredom that try the soul:

⁸⁴² Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 230.

⁸⁴³ Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 227.

Routine, repetition, tedium, monotony, ephemeracy, inconsequence, abstraction, disorder, boredom, angst, ennui—these are the true hero's enemies, and make no mistake, they are fearsome indeed. For they are real.⁸⁴⁴

The substitute ends his lecture with an apparently trivial pun: "Gentlemen, you are called to account."⁸⁴⁵ They are called to account for themselves as human beings, as well as being called to the activity of accounting. This what Weber described as the Protestant understanding of "calling," "vocation," "*Beruf*" in its purest form. And Fogle is primed to accept this as his vocation. At any other time he might have simply said "whatever" and gone on with his wastoid life. But a chain of other experiences leading up to this moment has prepared him to be converted. There has been a scene where his father's disappointment in him became especially evident, and then his father's grisly death. And then there is an apparently trivial moment when he is sitting, spinning a soccer ball, and watching *As the World Turns* on television. When he hears the announcer's oft-repeated phrase, "*You're watching As the World Turns*," he suddenly hears it as a kind of judgment on his life.⁸⁴⁶ As Boswell argues, these moments prepare him for his moment of truth in ways strongly reminiscent of William James's account of what leads to religious conversion.⁸⁴⁷

But the conversion is just the start. Now Fogle will have to go through the long, patient work of facing the routine and boredom of his calling. It is only by habituating himself to that routine, by acquiring the "virtues" of an accountant, that he will attain to the kind of self-possession that the substitute Jesuit and DeWitt Glendenning have, and then to the sense of contribution to a greater whole that gives Glendenning's life meaning. And this is terribly difficult. It is the true challenge explored in *The Pale King* through many characters. Take for instance the struggles of Lane Dean, the Evangelical Christian whom I discussed above (2.5.3). After committing to Sheri and their child, Dean is now examining tax forms at the I.R.S. In §33 Dean examines tax form after monotonous tax form, and tries to visualize a sunny beach to keep from going mad. But he is unable to control his visualization, which

⁸⁴⁴ Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 231.

⁸⁴⁵ Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 233.

⁸⁴⁶ Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 222.

⁸⁴⁷ Boswell, "Trickle-Down Citizenship," pp. 474-475.

seems to have a gravitational pull towards darkness: “After just an hour the beach was a winter beach, cold and gray and the dead kelp like the hair of the drowned, and it stayed that way despite all attempts.”⁸⁴⁸ He looks up at the clock, expecting another hour to have gone by, and sees that it has only been minutes. “Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me a poor sinner,” he prays.⁸⁴⁹ He is trying to acquire the necessary strength of character through habit, but he is still in a phase where it is extremely hard going. Soon he has thoughts of suicide. He tries to think of his infant son. He imagines him with his wife. It works better than the beach, but this image too keeps eluding his control: “He liked to watch her with the baby; for half a file it helped to have them in mind because they were why, they were what made this worthwhile and the right thing and he had to remember it but it kept slipping away down the hole that fell through him.”⁸⁵⁰

The hope for Dean is that he will persevere, and that through the boredom he will discover the joy of the kind of heroism of which the substitute Jesuit speaks: “[A] denomination of joy unequaled by any you men can yet imagine.”⁸⁵¹ It was partly in exploring the way in which patient perseverance through boredom might lead to that joy that Wallace was led to consider the tradition of monastic asceticism in both its Buddhist and its Christian forms—the theme that I will take up in 2.7. But here the important point is to see how the patient work of contributing to a larger whole, through bureaucratic paper work, done with fairness and concern for justice—can be a means of dealing with the double-bind of loneliness, of reconciling oneself to the human condition.

2.6.2 The double-bind of electoral politics

It is significant that Wallace takes the unglamorous work of bureaucrats as a paradigm of service to the common good. The superficially more exciting work of political activists, and of democratic politicians themselves, can too easily become just one more drug and

⁸⁴⁸ Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 376.

⁸⁴⁹ Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 377.

⁸⁵⁰ Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 380.

⁸⁵¹ Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 230.

diversion to deaden the pain of the double-bind. An instance of what Glendenning describes as “the manic US obsession with production, produce, produce, impact the world, contribute, shape things, to help distract us from how little and totally insignificant and temporary we are.”⁸⁵²

In an article for *Rolling Stone* about Arizona Senator John McCain, written in 2000 when McCain was making his first run for the Republican nomination for president, Wallace reflects on how the dynamic of electoral politics has a tendency to corrupt even politicians who begin with genuine devotion to the common good. McCain claims that his purpose is “to inspire young Americans to devote themselves to causes greater than their own self-interest.”⁸⁵³ And there are some grounds for thinking that McCain is sincere. This is, after all, a man who was willing to suffer torture at the hands of the North Vietnamese when he could have arranged his release, because he refused “to violate a Code.”⁸⁵⁴ He is also willing to tell certain hard truths about how corporations corrupt American politics through campaign donations, that other candidates are not willing to speak.⁸⁵⁵ But Wallace shows how the intoxicating effect of the adulation of the masses, the sense that it might be possible to actually win the primary and then become the President of the United States, “the most powerful, important, and talked-about human being on earth,”⁸⁵⁶ puts enormous pressure on a politician's psyche to lose its integrity. When McCain wins the New Hampshire primary, Wallace sees a terrible conflict in his eyes: “It's because now he might possibly win.” Suddenly it becomes complicated for McCain to be as frank in telling the truth as he was before:

Now there's something to lose, or to win. Now it gets complicated, the campaign and the chances and the strategy; and complication is dangerous, because the truth is rarely complicated. Complication usually has more to do with mixed motives, gray areas,

⁸⁵² Wallace, *The Pale King*, pp. 143-144.

⁸⁵³ David Foster Wallace, “Up, Simba: Seven Days on the Trail of an Anticandidate,” in: *Consider the Lobster*, pp. 156-234, at p. 162.

⁸⁵⁴ Wallace, “Up, Simba,” p. 233.

⁸⁵⁵ Wallace, “Up, Simba,” p. 162.

⁸⁵⁶ Wallace, “Up, Simba,” p. 162.

compromise. On the news, the first ominous rumble of this new complication was McCain's bobbing and weaving around questions about South Carolina's Confederate flag.⁸⁵⁷

Can McCain's devotion to the common good survive such complications? Wallace is ambivalent:

But the point is that with McCain it feels like we *know*, for a proven fact, that he is capable of devotion to something other, more, than his own self-interest. So that when he says the line in speeches now you can feel like maybe it's not just more candidate bullshit, that with this guy it's maybe the truth. Or maybe both the truth *and* bullshit—the man does want your vote, after all.

Can something be both truth and bullshit? It's hard to know. At any rate, it seems that one has more chance of preserving devotion to the common good as tax bureaucrat than as a politician. But here is another double-bind: *The Pale King* argues that it is the actions of populist politicians (such as Ronald Reagan) that are destroying the nature of the I.R.S., changing it from a locus of civic virtue, ordered to the common good and the civic education of citizens, into a for-profit enterprise concerned only with maximizing revenue. In other words, in order to preserve bureaucratic loci of civic virtue it is necessary that there be politicians who are able to preserve their own civic virtue enough to defend them. There is no easy way out.

2.6.3 Theological eudaemonism and the common good

In a 1996 review-essay of Joseph Frank's biography of Dostoevsky, Wallace interrupts the main body of the discussion with paragraphs marked off by double asterisks that raise theological and philosophical questions. He gives no explanation of what these paragraphs are till near the end of the essay, when he mentions them, as it were *en passant*: contemporary high-brow culture requires "an ironic distance from deep convictions or desperate questions," and that contemporary novelists therefore have to work such questions in "under cover of some formal trick" such as "sticking the really urgent stuff inside

⁸⁵⁷ Wallace, "Up, Simba," p. 190.

asterisks as part of some multivalent defamiliarization-flourish.⁸⁵⁸ In one of these asterisk-marked interpolations, Wallace raises the following question:

Is it possible really to love other people? If I'm lonely and in pain, everyone outside me is potential relief—I need them. But can you really love what you need so badly? Isn't a big part of love caring more about what the other person needs? How am I supposed to subordinate my own overwhelming need to somebody else's needs that I can't even feel directly? And yet if I can't do this, I'm damned to loneliness, which I definitely don't want...so I'm back at trying to overcome my selfishness for self-interested reasons. Is there any way out of this bind?⁸⁵⁹

The double-bind that Wallace is raising here is one that has long been the focus of Christian theological attention. It has been the subject of theological classics in both the Catholic and Protestant traditions. Catholic theologian Pierre Rousselot addressed it in his 1908 book *The Problem of Love in the Middle Ages*. And Protestant Anders Nygren followed in 1930-1936 with *Agape and Eros*. Rousselot asks, "Is a love that is not egoistic possible?"⁸⁶⁰ Rousselot distinguishes between two ways of looking at love in the Middle Ages. First, a natural or "physical" understanding of love as "the necessary propensity of natural beings to seek their own good—where "good" is understood as the goal or purpose of a being.⁸⁶¹ Rousselot identifies this love with Aristotle's idea of the necessary desire for happiness.⁸⁶² Second, he discusses an ecstatic understanding of love, in which love is purely for the other without thought of the self, and without any foundation in the desires and appetites of the one loving. This is a self-sacrificial love: "[E]verything in the human being is sacrificed for its sake, including happiness and reason."⁸⁶³ Rousselot rejects ecstatic love as ultimately inhuman. But he argues that certain writers (especially St. Thomas Aquinas), were able to develop an understanding of physical love that was not egoistic. By seeing each thing's desire for its own perfection in the context of each thing's participation in God, as though in a

⁸⁵⁸ David Foster Wallace, "Joseph Frank's Dostoevsky," in: *Consider the Lobster*, pp. 255-274, at p. 271.

⁸⁵⁹ Wallace, "Joseph Frank's Dostoevsky," p. 266.

⁸⁶⁰ Pierre Rousselot, *The Problem of Love in the Middle Ages: A Historical Contribution*, trans, Alan Vincelette (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2001 [1908]), p. 76.

⁸⁶¹ Rousselot, *The Problem of Love*, p. 78.

⁸⁶² Rousselot, *The Problem of Love*, p. 77.

⁸⁶³ Rousselot, *The Problem of Love*, p. 79.

greater whole, and the harmony between self-love and love of God that follows from the ultimate identity of the good of created things and the divine good.

Nygren never mentions Rousselot, but he would certainly have rejected Rousselot's solution. Nygren distinguishes between *eros* (which corresponds more or less to Rousselot's physical love), and *agape* (which resembles Rousselot's ecstatic love). And for Nygren the opposition between these two is unbridgeable. The various attempts by Christian thinkers to understand Christian *agape* love with the help of pagan (Platonic or Aristotelian) accounts of the desire for happiness all end up corrupting the true nature of Christian love. On Nygren's reading, even St. Augustine and St. Thomas were not able to escape this corruption: "For Thomas, as for Augustine, all love is fundamentally acquisitive love; love corresponds to the acquisitive will, and this latter to the natural quest for happiness."⁸⁶⁴ According to Nygren, it was Martin Luther who recovered the true understanding of Christian love. Luther understood that a love that seeks the happiness of the one loving is "a devilish perversion," and that in all of creation "[i]t is only man and the devil who in everything seek their own."⁸⁶⁵ Christian love is entirely self-sacrificial, like the love of Christ on the cross. Human beings become capable of that love by becoming conduits of it, when they accept Christ in faith:

[W]hen through faith man becomes open to God, the love from on high obtains a free course to and through him. He becomes a "tube," which by faith receives everything from God's love and then allows the Divine love to stream out over the world.⁸⁶⁶

Nygren's position is a fundamental challenge to any theological ethicist who sees value in the Aristotelian tradition of eudaemonism.

Nygren's challenge is related to a challenge that any eudaemonistic ethics will have to face. Kant's influential philosophical critique of eudaemonism makes an analogous to Nygren's but without appeal to theology. Above (1.7), I mentioned that Kant thought moral freedom had to be totally autonomous: not determined or motivated by anything, not even by a

⁸⁶⁴ Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, trans. Philip S. Watson (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1953), p. 642.

⁸⁶⁵ Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, p. 740.

⁸⁶⁶ Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, pp. 740-741.

desired good, or a natural end or goal, or even a divine lawgiver. For any such extrinsic motive would, in Kant's eyes, take away the absolute nature of moral obligation, making it depend on something else. In particular, Kant argues that desire for happiness could only ever provide a "hypothetical imperative," rather than the "categorical imperative" of morality. *If you want to be happy* you must be honest (hypothetical). Rather than *you must be honest* (categorical). Although all rational agents will indeed want to be happy, nevertheless, Kant sees something arbitrary in any particular person's conception of happiness. In the last book that Kant published during his lifetime, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, he argues that being arbitrary, the desire for happiness is also selfish:

Finally, the *moral egoist* limits all ends to himself, sees no use in anything except that which is useful to himself, and as a eudaemonist puts the supreme determining ground of his will simply in utility and his own happiness, not in the thought of duty. For, since every other human being also forms his own different concept of what he counts as happiness, it is precisely egoism which drives him to have no touchstone at all of the genuine concept of duty, which absolutely must be a universally valid principle. That is why all eudaemonists are practical egoists.⁸⁶⁷

A response to such charges of egoism is thus of vital importance to any eudaemonistic ethics, whether theological or philosophical. For Christian theological ethics, however, the challenge is particularly urgent—given the Christian imperative to selfless love.

I think that what I have called Wallace's "inverse eudaemonism" can be a help to addressing that challenge. By framing the question in terms of the desire to overcome loneliness, and, more particularly, by framing that desire in terms of belonging to a larger whole, Wallace can help open up the question in new ways. Particularly, I think he can help us understand one aspect of Roussetot's defense of physical love in a way that softens the contrast to ecstatic love, and thereby addresses some of Nygren's concerns. His problematization of the concept

⁸⁶⁷ Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, trans. Robert B. Loudon and Manfred Kuehn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 18. ["Endlich ist der moralische Egoist der, welcher alle Zwecke auf sich selbst einschränkt, der keinen Nutzen worin sieht, als in dem, was ihm nützt, auch wohl als Eudämonist bloß im Nutzen und der eigenen Glückseligkeit, nicht in der Pflichtvorstellung den obersten Bestimmungsgrund seines Willens setzt. Denn weil jeder andere Mensch sich auch andere Begriffe von dem macht, was er zur Glückseligkeit rechnet, so ist gerade der Egoism, der es so weit bringt, gar keinen Proberstein des ächten Pflichtbegriffs zu haben, als welcher durchaus ein allgemein geltendes Princip sein muß. — Alle Eudämonisten sind daher praktische Egoisten." *Anthropologie in Pragmatischer Hinsicht*, Akademieausgabe 7.130].

of “value” can also be helpful here. In the remainder of this section I want to sketch out a way of approaching the question. Obviously, such an important question would merit a much fuller treatment than is possible within the limits of this dissertation, but I hope that the following sketch can be a spur to further work.

Both Nygren’s theological critique of eudaemonism and (arguably) Kant’s philosophical critique have their roots in Martin Luther’s critique of the use of Aristotelian eudaemonism in scholastic theology.⁸⁶⁸ It is worth going back to Luther to see the original form of the critique. An important influence on Nygren’s reading of Luther was Karl Holl. Already in 1919, over a decade before Nygren, Holl published his classic study of Luther’s ethics, *The Reconstruction of Morality*, in which he argued that Luther had freed Christian ethics from the Hellenizing influence of the Church Fathers and scholastic theologians, who had corrupted the pure ideal of Christian *agape*, which “does not seek its own,” through a self-centered, pagan idea of love as desire for one’s own happiness. “No one before Luther,” Holl wrote, “had so worked out the contrast between morality and the quest for happiness.”⁸⁶⁹ And after Luther, Holl suggests, few have been able to preserve that insight. Holl finds even Kant guilty of a “concealed” recourse to a “more refined” “eudaemonism,” since Kant grounds moral obligation in the dignity of the rational subject, “but this means that in acting morally, one enjoys oneself in one’s dignity.”⁸⁷⁰

The early Luther developed his critique of eudaemonism with explicit, polemical reference to Aristotle. In 1518, with the controversy over his critique of indulgences already spreading waves far and wide, the Augustinian Eremites of Germany held their triennial general

⁸⁶⁸ For the following exposition I am much indebted to the treatments of the Lutheran critique of eudaemonism in: Rochus Leonhardt, *Glück als Vollendung des Menschseins: Die beatitudo-Lehre des Thomas von Aquin im Horizont des Eudämonismus-Problems* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1998); and in Johannes Brachtendorf’s Introduction to his translation of Thomas Aquinas’s *Treatise on Happiness: Thomas von Aquin, Über das Glück – de Beatitudo*, trans. Johannes Brachtendorf (Hamburg: Meiner, 2012), pp. lvii-lx. Cf. My paper “Martin Luther’s Critique of Eudaemonism,” in: Joshua Madden and Taylor O’Neill (eds.), *She Orders All Things Sweetly: Sacra Doctrina and the Sapiential Unity of Theology* (Steubenville: Emmaus Academic, forthcoming) is in part the basis for the following paragraphs.

⁸⁶⁹ Karl Holl, *The Reconstruction of Morality*, ed. James Luther Martin and Walter F. Bense, trans. Fred W. Meuser and Walter R. Wietzke (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1979), p. 69.

⁸⁷⁰ Holl, *The Reconstruction of Morality*, p. 143, note 2.

chapter in Heidelberg. Various events were organized in the city to mark the occasion, including a public disputation at the arts faculty of the University. Luther was chosen to propose the theses to be disputed, and to preside over the disputation. (Perhaps he was chosen because his notoriety over the indulgences controversy ensured a full house).⁸⁷¹ Luther proposed 28 theological theses, and 12 philosophical ones that represented a systematic rejection of scholastic theology, and *especially* those parts of it that were based on Aristotle. Luther later had the theses published with brief summaries of his proofs for the theological ones. The last of the theological theses contrasts human and divine love. Whereas human love comes into being through that which is pleasing to it, the Divine love is not caused by what pleases it, but rather *makes* that which it loves pleasing. In his proof, Luther gives the following account of human love:

The object of love is its cause, assuming, according to Aristotle, that all power of the soul is passive and material and active only in receiving something. Thus it is also demonstrated that Aristotle's philosophy is contrary to theology since in all things *it seeks those things which are its own* and receives rather than gives something good.⁸⁷²

"It seeks those things which are its own"—this is for Luther the very definition of sin. Luther is not disagreeing with "Aristotle" (as he interprets him), about how human beings *actually act* apart from grace—they do indeed seek their own in all things. But he thinks that Aristotle is describing man as corrupted by original sin, rather than man as originally intended by God.⁸⁷³ The year before, in his *Disputation Against Scholastic Theology*, Luther had written, "Man is by nature unable to want God to be God. Indeed, he himself wants to be God, and does not want God to be God."⁸⁷⁴ If everything that man does, he does in order to perfect himself, in order to *receive* some good perfective of the faculties of his soul, then

⁸⁷¹ For the historical context see the Introduction to the Heidelberg Disputation in the *Weimarer Ausgabe*: WA 1, pp. 350-352; see also: Bernhard Lohse, *Luthers Theologie in ihrer historischen Entwicklung und in ihrem systematischen Zusammenhang* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1995), pp. 122-123.

⁸⁷² Martin Luther, *The Heidelberg Disputation*, probatio ad 28, in: *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, ed. Timothy F. Lull (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989) p. 48; WA 1, p. 365.

⁸⁷³ Cf. Theodor Dieter, *Der junge Luther und Aristoteles: Eine historisch-systematische Untersuchung zum Verhältnis von Theologie und Philosophie* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2001), especially ch. 1.

⁸⁷⁴ Martin Luther, *Disputation Against Scholastic Theology*, proposition 17, in: *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, p. 14.

he is himself the final end of all that he seeks. In a later sermon (1521), Luther argues that if man seeks *reward* from God, and flees pain, then he is not really seeking God for God's own sake: "For *why* a man does something—that is his God."⁸⁷⁵ If the *why*, the final cause, of a man's action is the reward of eternal happiness that he wants for himself, then his final goal is really *himself*—he is his own god. Therefore, Luther sees any attempt to seek salvation through meritorious works as necessarily idolatrous. Scholastic theology, insofar as it understood the grace of God as elevating and perfecting man's natural desire for happiness, by enabling man to hope for the beatific vision of God, falsified the Gospel. As Rochus Leonhardt summarizes the Lutheran position, "God's grace [...] does not correct the direction of our striving for perfection; it unmasks the sinfulness of that striving."⁸⁷⁶

Already before the beginning of the Reformation, in his lectures on Romans (1515-1516), Luther had interpreted St. Paul's saying that he could have wished even to be cut off from Christ himself for the sake of his brothers (Romans 9:3) to mean that the true love of God implies "utter self-hatred" with no thought of one's own advantage "neither here nor in the life to come."⁸⁷⁷ And in explicating Paul's contrast between the prudence of the flesh and the prudence of the spirit (Romans 8:6), he explains this opposition by a reference to the common good. The prudence of the flesh seeks its own happiness, its private good, but the prudence of the spirit seeks the common good. It is worth quoting Luther at length:

The "prudence of the flesh" chooses what is good for oneself and avoids what is disadvantageous for oneself, it rejects *the common good* and chooses what is harmful to community. This is a prudence which directs the flesh, that is, our concupiscence and self-will, which enjoys itself and uses everyone else, including God Himself; in all matters it looks out for itself and its own interests. This prudence makes man feel that he himself is the final and ultimate object in life, an idol, on whose account he does, suffers, attempts, plans, and says all things. He considers good only those things which are for his own personal good, and those things only as evils which are bad for him. [...] "Prudence of the spirit" is the choice of *the common good* and the avoidance of the common evil, the rejection of one's own personal good

⁸⁷⁵ "Den warumb der mensch etwas thut, das ist sein got." Martin Luther, *Ein Sermon von dreierlei gutem Leben, das Gewissen zu unter richten*, in WA 7, p. 801; cf. Leonhardt, *Glück als Vollendung des Menschseins*, p. 27.

⁸⁷⁶ Leonhardt, *Glück als Vollendung*, p. 38. Leonhardt is summarizing Jörg Baur's Lutheran critique of Thomas Aquinas.

⁸⁷⁷ Martin Luther, *Lectures on Romans*, trans. William Pauck (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961), pp. 261-262.

and the choosing of one's personal evil. For this prudence directs the love which seeks "not its own" (1 Cor. 13:5) but the things of God and of all creatures. And it regards as good only those things which are good in the eyes of God and for the benefit of all and as evil only those things which are evil in God's sight and for all men.⁸⁷⁸

Luther, in other words, sees a strong opposition between seeking one's *own* good, and seeking the *common good*. And to seek happiness is to seek *one's own good*, and subordinate the *common good*, and even God Himself, to oneself.

Now, to an Aristotelian, this argument subordinating the common good to individual striving after happiness appears somewhat strange. If Luther's reading of the Aristotelian teaching on happiness as the final end were accurate, what would this mean for Aristotelian politics? If politics is concerned with *happiness*, as the final end of man, then this would mean that politics would *not* be concerned with one end to which all the citizens would strive together as a common project. Rather, politics would be concerned with pursuing as many ends, as many "happinesses," as there are citizens. The common good would be merely a means to the private ends of the citizens. But that is of course not what Aristotelian politics is like at all. That is much more like the liberal, individualistic politics that was not to arise until a century and a half after Luther. There seems to be something not quite right about Luther's reading of Aristotle.

Here, two of the issues raised by Wallace are helpful. The first is the multivalent meaning of "value." Above (2.6.1) we saw how Jeffrey Severs argued that a text of Heidegger was important for Wallace's elaborate wordplays on value and its etymology. Heidegger had pointed out that the modern idea of value depended on "an evaluation emanating from humans and conferred by them," whereas in ancient thought a thing's "worth" depended on its intrinsic nobility.⁸⁷⁹ Here is where I think a key distinction can be found between Aristotle and Luther's reading of Aristotle. Corresponding to these different senses of "value" are different senses of the "good" in its Aristotelian sense, meaning the end toward which something is striving. There are two ways of understanding the good as an end or final cause:

⁸⁷⁸ Martin Luther, *Lectures on Romans*, in: Luther's Works, Vol. 25, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999), pp. 350-352.

⁸⁷⁹ Heidegger, *The Principle of Reason*, p. 16.

either one thinks the intrinsic goodness (worthiness, nobility) of an object is primary, and the desire that subjects have for it is secondary, or, on the other hand, one can understand subjective desires, needs, or “drives” as primary, and see the “goodness” of a thing as an indirect way of saying that it is desired. The second way would be the modern way of looking at things. Wallace loves to play between the two ways of looking at things, and there is a certain ambivalence in him towards the two ways. But there are passages where he suggests that making desire or appetite primary will close one off from the true goodness of things, and make one lonely. Thus in his cruise ship essay, he warns about “the part of me that always and only WANTS,” and the futility of basing life on the attempt to satisfy it.⁸⁸⁰ And Chris Fogle, in *The Pale King*, comes to the realization “that realest, most profound parts of me involved not drives or appetites but simple attention, awareness.”⁸⁸¹ If attention and awareness to a greater reality is the most profound part of the subject, then perhaps a striving for that reality can be thought that does not simply order everything to itself.

The second issue raised by Wallace that is helpful in thinking through Luther’s reading of Aristotle is the idea of the overcoming of loneliness through seeing oneself as part of a greater whole. This is, in a way, Pierre Rousselot’s solution to the problem of love. If one’s “own good” is the good of a greater whole of which one is the part, then to love that good is not selfish. But this idea has to be seen in the light of the previous one of the primacy of intrinsic worth over evaluation or desire, in order to avoid the sharp division between physical and ecstatic love that Rousselot preserves. If it is not the desire for one’s own perfection that is primary, but rather the goodness of the greater whole in which one partakes, then that desire can take on many of the properties of Rousselot’s “ecstatic” love, without ceasing to be natural.

With regard to the issue of the two ways in which “value” and “the good” can be understood, Luther was already partially a “modern” in Heidegger’s sense, in conceiving of striving and desire as forming the primary pole in the relation toward happiness as an end. In this he was

⁸⁸⁰ Wallace, *A Supposedly Fun Thing*, p. 316.

⁸⁸¹ Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 187.

influenced by nominalist philosophers such as William of Ockham (1288-1347/48) and Gabriel Biel (1420-1495).⁸⁸² Thomist theologians have long made a bogeyman of the Franciscan theologian William of Ockham. He has been made responsible for everything that they don't like about modernity, and has even been accused of having thought of God as an arbitrary, irrational power. Recent scholarship has defended Ockham against such charges, emphasizing the primacy of love and freedom in his thought, and his deep moral sensitivity which anticipated positive as well as negative aspects of modernity.⁸⁸³ It is, nevertheless, true that Ockham's notion of the good gives more emphasis to the subject desiring than the intrinsic nobility of the object. And he can thus be seen as an important figure in the transvaluation of which Heidegger wrote. Aristotle had identified the good with the "final cause" in his scheme of four modes of causality.⁸⁸⁴ The end and the good are the same thing, but considered differently. The end is "that for the sake of which," while the good is "that which all desire." Ockham interprets the end as follows: "The causality of the end is nothing other than its being effectively loved and desired, so that what is loved is effected."⁸⁸⁵ At first sight this seems to agree with Aristotle. The end is "that for the sake of which" an agent does something, so of course its causality depends on an agent effectively desiring it. But for Aristotle, the more fundamental notion is "good"; the *causality* of the end is derived from the attractive power of the good, which moves desire. That is to say, when I define the good as "that which all desire," I am defining it not (on the Aristotelian account) by what makes it to be good, as though something were called good merely because it was desired, but rather by an *effect* of its goodness. The intrinsic goodness of a thing causes desire; desire is not the cause of a thing's goodness.

⁸⁸² For the influence of Ockham and Biel on Luther's reading of Aristotle see: Theodor Dieter, *Der junge Luther und Aristoteles: Eine historisch-systematische Untersuchung zum Verhältnis von Theologie und Philosophie* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2001).

⁸⁸³ See: Sigrid Müller and Cornelia Schweiger, "Wilhelm von Ockham (ca. 1288-1347/48)," in: Konrad Hilpert (ed.), *Christliche Ethik im Porträt: Leben und Werk bedeutender Moralthologen* (Freiburg: Herder, 2012), pp. 261-283.

⁸⁸⁴ See, for example: *Physics* II,3 1095a; *Parts of Animals* I,1 639a-640a; *Metaphysics* I,2 982a-b.

⁸⁸⁵ "Circa primum dico quod causalitas finis non est aliud nisi esse amatum et desideratum ab agente efficaciter, propter quod amatum fit effectus." Quodlibet IV, q. 1, a. 1; *Venerabilis Inceptoris Guillelmi De Ockham: Quodlibeta Septem*, vol. 9 of *Opera Theologica*, ed. Joseph C. Wey (St. Bonaventure New York: St. Bonaventure University, 1980), p. 293. I am grateful to Michael Waldstein for pointing out this text to me.

Wallace was sensitive to the plausibility of both ways of looking at the relation of desire and goodness. This seems, in fact, to be one of the points at issue in the dialogue between Marathe and Steeply. Marathe is arguing for a version of the Aristotelian view, where you have to cultivate an awareness of what is really worthy of choice, whereas Steeply argues for the modern view where desire itself is primary:

[*Steeply*:] 'But you assume it's always choice, conscious, decision. This isn't just a little naïve, Rémy? You sit down with your little accountant's ledger and soberly decide what to love? Always?'

[*Marathe*:] 'The alternatives are—'

[*Steeply*:] 'What if sometimes there *is* no choice about what to love? [...] What if you just *love*? without deciding?'⁸⁸⁶

Both positions have a certain plausibility. One thing the Aristotelian position has going for it, however, is that most people have had the experience of desiring something which they afterwards admitted was not good for them. Many of the alcoholics and drug addicts whom Wallace describes at AA meetings and at Ennet House, the half-way house for addicts in *Infinite Jest*, have had the experience of certainly *wanting* something which they then admit was not good for them. They want with a fierce intensity to go back to taking the "Substance" to which they are addicted: "[Y]ou can all of a sudden out of nowhere want to get high with your Substance so bad that you think you will surely die if you don't[.]"⁸⁸⁷ But if they give in to this desire, they *invariably* regret having done so; they admit that what they desired was not good for them:

[N]obody who's ever gotten sufficiently addictively enslaved by a Substance to need to quit the Substance and has successfully quit it for a while and been straight and but then has for whatever reason gone back and picked up the Substance again has *ever* reported being glad that they did it, used the Substance again and gotten re-enslaved; not ever.⁸⁸⁸

But if wanting or desiring something *made* it good, then their wanting to return to the Substance would have *made* it good for them. Their regret is a sign that desire is a secondary reality.

⁸⁸⁶ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 108.

⁸⁸⁷ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, pp. 202-203.

⁸⁸⁸ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 204.

Aristotle argues in *Metaphysics* VI that unlike truth and falsity, which are primarily in the mind, good and bad are *in things* (1027b). This is a crucial point for defending the Aristotelian position. If things were in themselves neutral, and were only called good because of something external to them, namely the desire of desiring subjects, then to desire a thing would really be to make it a means to one's own activity or pleasure. But since the good is *in things*, the goodness of things is what makes our desires and activities good. It is because *food is good* that hunger is good. And it is because food is good that our digestive faculty, which is ordered to food, is good. Food is the actuality and perfection that makes the faculty of digesting good. Of course, food is ultimately ordered to the conservation of my *own* substance; it is ordered to me, I am not ordered to it. Food is what Aristotle calls an "advantageous good"—that is, it is advantageous for me to eat—and it is also a what he calls the "pleasant," causing pleasure in me. While the advantageous and pleasant have priority with respect to a specific faculty of a substance (e.g., digestion), they are ultimately ordered to my substance. But there are higher goods, which Aristotle calls "the noble" (*to kalon*)—goods such as friendship, wisdom, and justice that are willed *for their own sake*. Even if knowledge and virtue did not produce any pleasure in us, we would still desire them.⁸⁸⁹

Thomas Aquinas used the Aristotelian account, and synthesised it with Neoplatonic teachings on participation to arrive at the account of love which Rousselot was to attempt to defend. Aquinas universalizes Aristotle's account of the three kinds of good. In every case, when we consider a desired good, we can distinguish three objects of desire: the means used for attaining the thing, the thing itself, and the pleasure or delight that arises from the attainment of the thing.⁸⁹⁰ If the good being sought is really a good in the full sense, what Aristotle calls the noble and Thomas calls *bonum honestum* (the honourable good), then it is the primary object of desire among the three. The means are chosen only for its sake, and the pleasure that follows from it is entirely secondary with respect to the real end that is the good itself. But Thomas in another place distinguishes a fourth object of desire. Looking at

⁸⁸⁹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1174a.

⁸⁹⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, q. 5, a. 6. The translations from the *Summa* throughout are based on Laurence Shapcote, O.P.'s translation, available online (<http://dhspriority.org/thomas/summa/index.html>), but the translation has been modified when necessary with a view to the Latin.

the good itself, he distinguishes between that good, and the activity whereby I attain to that good.⁸⁹¹ For example, he would distinguish between a known truth and my activity of knowing that truth; between a friend and the activities of friendship with a friend. Here again, since the good is *in things*, the primary object of desire and love is the good object itself, and only secondarily the activity of attaining to that object. The real end is the object. Nevertheless, the attainment of the end can (analogously) be called the end. Thus, Aquinas writes, “happiness is called man’s supreme good, because it is the attainment or enjoyment of the supreme good.”⁸⁹²

But is Thomas being consistent here? He would certainly agree with the Aristotelian teaching on the passive nature of the soul as summarized by Luther: “[T]he object of love is its cause,” and “[A]ll power of the soul is passive and material and active only in receiving something.” Doesn’t it follow that all the talk of desiring the highest good *for its own sake* is a penultimate consideration? Doesn’t the soul finally desire everything as a means to its own perfection and happiness? After all, Thomas himself defines the good as that which is *perfective of another* in the manner of an end. And says that all things desire the good, because they desire *their own perfection*. But Thomas is able to defend his own consistency by an appeal to the common good, and to the metaphysics of participation.

In a question on whether man is bound to love God more than himself, Thomas raises an objection that reads like an anticipation of Luther:

One loves a thing in so far as it is *one’s own good*. Now the reason for loving a thing is more loved than the thing itself which is loved for that reason [...] Therefore man loves himself more than any other good loved by him. Therefore he does not love God more than himself.⁸⁹³

In his reply to the objection Thomas refers to the relation of part and whole: “The part does indeed love the good of the whole, as becomes a part, not however so as to order the good of the whole to itself, but rather so as to order itself to the good of the whole.”⁸⁹⁴ Why does

⁸⁹¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia-IIae, q. 1, a. 3, c.

⁸⁹² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia-IIae, q. 3, a. 1, ad 2; cf. Ia, q. 26, a. 3, ad 1.

⁸⁹³ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, IIa-IIae q. 26, a. 3, arg. 2.

⁸⁹⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, IIa-IIae q. 26, a. 3, ad 2.

Thomas refer to part and whole here? Is God a whole of which man is a part? No, not exactly, but God is the common good of His creatures. In the body of the article Thomas writes:

The fellowship of natural goods bestowed on us by God is the foundation of natural love, in virtue of which not only man, so long as his nature remains unimpaired, loves God above all things and more than himself, but also every single creature, each in its own way, i.e. either by an intellectual, or by a rational, or by an animal, or at least by a natural love, as stones do, for instance, and other things bereft of knowledge, *because each part naturally loves the common good of the whole more than its own particular good*. This is evidenced by its operation, since the principal inclination of each part is towards common action conducive to the good of the whole. It may also be seen *in civic virtues whereby sometimes the citizens suffer damage even to their own property and persons for the sake of the common good*. Wherefore much more is this realized with regard to the friendship of charity which is based on the fellowship of the gifts of grace. Therefore man ought, out of charity, to love God, *Who is the common good of all*, more than himself: since happiness is in God as in the universal and fountain principle of all who are able to have a share of that happiness.⁸⁹⁵

Pierre Rousselot argues from this and similar texts that for Aquinas the love of benevolence of friendship (wishing the other well) grows out of the love of concupiscence (desiring something for oneself). This happens when the “indeterminate appetite for the good,” which initially regards the perfection of the individual as an individual, is “translated, by a natural and imperceptible change” when the rational agents “can imagine other wholes where they themselves play the role, either of the subordinate part, or of the equal partner[.]”⁸⁹⁶

The Belgian-Canadian philosopher Charles De Koninck (1906-1965) gave an even clearer account of the same dynamic in his classic interpretation of Thomas, *On the Primacy of the Common Good: Against the Personalists*. The good is that which each thing seeks, insofar as it seeks its own perfection. But “its own perfection” does not mean only a thing’s perfection *as an individual*, but rather a more universal perfection to which it is ordered. De Koninck shows that Thomas distinguishes four levels of a thing’s “own perfection.” The first level is the good of the individual as individual. This is the good that an animal seeks when it seeks nourishment.

⁸⁹⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, IIa-IIae q. 26, a. 3, c.

⁸⁹⁶ Pierre Rousselot, *The Problem of Love*, especially pp. 97-98.

The second level is the good of a thing that belongs to it on account of its species. This is the good that animals seek in reproduction. Is this really a thing's "own perfection"? Is it not the perfection of another? No, says De Koninck:

The singular animal prefers 'naturally', that is to say, in virtue of the inclination which is in it by nature (*ratio indita rebus ab arte divina*), the good of its species to its singular good. 'Every singular naturally loves the good of its species more than its singular good.' [Ia, q. 60, a. 5, ad 1]. For the good of the species is a greater good for the singular than its singular good. Therefore, this is not a species which abstracts from individuals and desires its proper good against the natural desire of the individual; it is the singular itself which, by nature, desires the good of the species rather than its singular good. This desire for the common good is in the singular itself.⁸⁹⁷

The context of the text to which De Koninck is here referring is a passage where Thomas argues that a natural part always loves the whole more than itself. In natural things, Thomas argues, everything that *belongs* to something greater loves that greater to which it *belongs*. Thus, a part of the body naturally exposes itself for the sake of the whole body. Without deliberating, by natural instinct, a hand is raised to protect the body from a blow. And similarly, a virtuous citizen is willing to suffer death for the sake of his city.⁸⁹⁸

In other words, a part should always prefer the good of the whole to which it belongs to its good as a part. But "part" seems to have several meanings here. A hand is not a substance, it exists *only* as a part; a citizen, on the other hand, is not only a part— but also a whole substance with a good that is his own apart from the city. "Part" seems to have yet a third meaning when applied to an individual with respect to a species. And yet Thomas claims that in *all of these cases* of "part" the good of the whole is more desirable for the part itself. The deepest reason for this only becomes clear when one considers the next two levels of a thing's "own perfection."

The third level is the perfection that belongs to a thing *ratione generis* (on account of its genus). What is meant is the good of "equivocal causes"—that is, of causes that cause something of a different species from themselves. The perfection of an effect is found in its

⁸⁹⁷ Charles De Koninck, *On the Primacy of the Common Good: Against the Personalists*, trans. Sean Collins, in: *The Aquinas Review* 4 (1997), pp. 10-71, at p. 18.

⁸⁹⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, q. 60, a. 5, c.

equivocal cause. In Aristotelian natural science, for example, the heavenly bodies are the equivocal causes of natural forms. The highest equivocal cause is where the fourth level of a thing's "own perfection" is found: namely, God Himself, who causes all things, but is entirely other. God is each creature's "own" perfection, the creature's "own" good on account of the likeness that exists between the effects and their cause. Every perfection found in created things is a *reflection* of the perfection of God, and therefore there is an "analogy" and similitude between God and creatures. De Koninck argues that this is the true key to understanding why a thing's "own perfection" is found more in the common good than in its private good.⁸⁹⁹

Creatures, on this account, are not parts of their Creator, and yet they are ordered to their Creator the way parts are ordered to a whole. The perfection that they have is a *participation* in His perfection. To participate is to take part in something without *removing* a part from it. My reflection in a mirror partakes of my form, without depriving me of any part of my form. But the relation of that which participates to that in which it participates is still *like* that of a part to a whole. Therefore, Aquinas can consider the love of creatures for the Creator as the love of parts for a whole:

Consequently, since God is the universal good, and this contains the good of man and angel and all creatures, because every creature in regard to its entire being naturally belongs to God, it follows that from natural love angel and man alike love God before themselves and with a greater love. Otherwise, if either of them loved self more than God, it would follow that natural love would be perverse, and that it would not be perfected but destroyed by charity.⁹⁰⁰

Each creature "belongs to" God on account of what it is. That means that each creature is for the sake of God the way a part of a substance is for the sake of the whole substance. For Aquinas, created perfection just *is* a participation in and imitation of the Divine Perfection. As he puts it:

The perfection of each and every effect consists in this, that it is made like to its cause, for that which according to its nature is something generated is then perfect, when it reaches the

⁸⁹⁹ De Koninck, *On the Primacy of the Common Good*, p. 19.

⁹⁰⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, q. 60, a. 5, ad 1.

likeness of its generator. Artifacts are likewise made perfect when they achieve the form of the art.⁹⁰¹

The perfection that each creature desires consists in an ever-greater likeness to the Creator. But that means that the perfection that they desire only ever exists in a secondary way in themselves. It exists fully only in God. Thus to love one's "own" perfection means to love God more than oneself. This is a "self-centered" love only in the sense that it is centered on the good in whom one participates—God is, as it were, the "true self" of His creatures. But, in another sense, this is a thoroughly ecstatic love, in which one transcends oneself toward a good infinitely better than one's individuality, a beloved to whom one can give oneself without reserve.⁹⁰²

It is here that one might argue that the limits of Rousselot's solution become evident. As Michael Waldstein has pointed out, Rousselot "does not begin with the good, with its power to cause love [...] but with the naked fact of appetite as self-interest rooted in the unity of a being with itself."⁹⁰³ For Rousselot, "'the good' can be described in no other way than as the object of natural desires."⁹⁰⁴ And the "principle of direct and true love" is "unity," that is, the unity of a thing with itself. In other words, on Rousselot's account natural love can never escape a certain self-centeredness. It is therefore forever opposed to ecstatic love. But if one begins with the intrinsic worthiness of the good, then this opposition can be softened. This would address what is most convincing in Lutheran critique of eudaemonism (both in Luther himself and in more recent writers such as Nygren), because it would show that a eudaemonistic understanding of human love need not be a selfish understanding.

⁹⁰¹ Thomas Aquinas, *De substantiis separatis*, c. 12; *Treatise on Separate Substances*, trans. Francis J. Lescoe (Hartford: Saint Joseph College, 1959), available online: <https://dhsprory.org/thomas/SubstSepar.htm> (accessed August 3, 2018).

⁹⁰² For Thomas's teaching on the ecstatic nature of the love of God see: Peter Kwasniewski, "St. Thomas, *Extasis*, and Union with the Beloved," *The Thomist* 61.4 (1997), pp. 587–603; "The Ecstasy of Love in Aquinas's *Commentary on the Sentences*," *Angelicum* 83 (2006), pp. 51–93; cf. Leonhardt, *Glück als Vollendung des Menschseins*, section 2.4.3.

⁹⁰³ Waldstein, *The Glory of the Logos*, p. 329.

⁹⁰⁴ Rousselot, *The Problem of Love*, p. 87.

Wallace's work has been helpful to me in attempting to see "the problem of love" in a new light. But Wallace himself, trained as he was in the postmodern skepticism of metaphysics, would have serious hesitations toward the sketch that I have laid out, with its Platonically influenced Christian metaphysics of participation in a transcendent source of all being. Presumably, in reading this account, he would "find [himself] looking at [his] watch or shifting [his] feet, immediately and deeply bored," as he always was "when it gets to the point of trying to communicate specific or persuasive stuff about religion."⁹⁰⁵

There were times, however, when Wallace himself came close to the sort of vision that I sketched out. In an email to Catholic theologian and philosopher Robert Bolger, whom he knew through Alcoholics Anonymous, Wallace wrote the following:

I think this is it; I think you've got it. It's not overcoming the in[d]ividual ego's terror of annihilation. It is somehow cathecting enough other people and enough of the world that we identify, less and less, with the individual ego—that we literally care more about the universe than about our own flesh-sac and its needs. Cathexis of and identification with God yiel[d]s "immortality," since the part of us that is or is-in God can clearl[y] not be a[n]ihilated the way the individual ego can.⁹⁰⁶

This passage could be read as suggesting something like the account of participation that I have given, where God is our true self, and to identify with him as our true self is to "identify, less and less, with the individual ego." It is, however, even more suggestive of a somewhat different way of dealing with the question, one that does not make use of the typically Western/Platonic tradition of the metaphysics of participation, but rather of the tradition of Zen Buddhism, which solves the problem by, in a sense, dissolving the distinction between the self and the rest of reality. That is, by realizing what Wallace called the "subsurface unity of all things."⁹⁰⁷ In the next section I will consider Wallace's engagement with Buddhism, as well as his engagement with the monastic tradition of Christianity, as themselves important ways of coming to terms with the double-bind of loneliness.

⁹⁰⁵ Wallace, "Quo Vadis—Introduction," pp. 7–8.

⁹⁰⁶ David Foster Wallace to Robert K. Bolger, October 22, 2005, quoted in: Robert K. Bolger, "A Less 'Bullshitty' Way to Live: The Pragmatic Spirituality of David Foster Wallace," in: Bolger and Korb, *Gesturing Towards Reality*, pp. 31-51, at p. 45.

⁹⁰⁷ Wallace, "Kenyon Commencement Speech," p. 362.

2.7 MINDFULNESS AND ASCETICISM: MONASTIC SOLITUDE AND EUDAEMONISM

2.7.1 Buddhism and the subsurface unity of all things

One of Wallace's starkest formulations of the bind of loneliness came in his interview with Larry McCaffery: "We all suffer alone in the real world," he said, "true empathy's impossible."⁹⁰⁸ The incommunicability of the first-person point of view that seems, to Western minds, to be constitutive of conscious subjectivity, appears most lonely in suffering. No one else can feel my suffering. As we saw above (1.11), Wallace saw this loneliness especially manifest in the suffering of depression: "It is also lonely on a level that cannot be conveyed. There is no way Kate Gompert could ever even begin to make someone else understand what clinical depression feels like[.]"⁹⁰⁹ This way of looking at the problem of loneliness—the loneliness of suffering and the suffering of loneliness—helps us to understand Wallace's sustained interest in Buddhism. Buddhism is a practice that is notoriously resistant to conceptualization. But, as Christopher Kocela has argued, one approach to Buddhism that was highly influential on Wallace sees an important aspect of it that practice in a "proclamation of 'no-self' (in Sanskrit *anatman*) as an antidote to the suffering that inevitably arises from self-attachment."⁹¹⁰ No-self is an antidote to the suffering of loneliness in particular, since it can be seen as a denial of the separation of the self from the rest of reality. As Krzysztof Piekarski argues, this dissolves the apparent impossibility of empathy that so horrified Wallace:

[B]eing alone is impossible thereby rendering 'empathy' somewhat moot; it's merely our delusion of a 'Self' that is separate from the world that makes us feel like we're alone and separated from everything else in the universe and if that's the case, then there's no need to empathize when you realize that you are that other person who is suffering.⁹¹¹

⁹⁰⁸ McCaffery, "An Expanded Interview," p. 22.

⁹⁰⁹ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 696.

⁹¹⁰ Kocela, "The Zen," p. 58.

⁹¹¹ Piekarski, "Buddhist Philosophy," p. 178.

Piekarski argues that unlike Western thought, which rests on a dualism of subject and object, the tradition of Mahāyāna Buddhism (of which Zen, the tradition that Wallace was particularly interested, is part), sees the separation of subject and object as illusory:

Empathy seems to be possible only from a dualistic standpoint. If there's a separation between subjects and objects, then empathy is what makes a connection between them possible. But from the non-dualistic philosophy of Mahayana Buddhism, there is no separation to begin with, so something like 'empathy' is less like a bridge between two subjects and more like an acknowledgement that the two subjects are indeed, one.⁹¹²

Wallace's interest in Buddhism was longstanding, going back at least as far as 1992 or 1993, when he was writing *Infinite Jest*. "He had become interested in Buddhism through a woman he met in Syracuse and gave [his girlfriend] works on the religion that had been suggested to him[.]"⁹¹³ Krzysztof Piekarski speculates that his interest may have begun even earlier, when he was writing his philosophy undergraduate thesis on fatalism at Amherst.⁹¹⁴ His thesis advisor, Willem deVries, put him in touch with a professor at nearby Hampshire College, Jay Garfield. Garfield met with Wallace "once, and often twice weekly" for the second part of the fall semester and the first part of the spring, to tutor him in modal logic.⁹¹⁵ Garfield is an expert on Buddhist philosophy, especially on the Mahāyāna philosopher Nāgārjuna.⁹¹⁶ Wallace worked with Garfield in the 1984-1985 academic year, which was the year that Hampshire College adopted its "Third World Expectation" program that Garfield has said was the catalyst for him to begin systematic research in Buddhist philosophy.⁹¹⁷ Whether or not the theory of Garfield's influence is correct, Piekarski is able to show significant parallels

⁹¹² Piekarski, "Buddhist Philosophy," p. 178, footnote 63.

⁹¹³ Max, *Every Love Story*, p. 181.

⁹¹⁴ Piekarski, "Buddhist Philosophy," pp. 32, 131.

⁹¹⁵ Jay Garfield, "David Foster Wallace as a Student: A Memoir," in: Wallace, *Fate, Time, and Language*, pp. 219-221, at p. 220.

⁹¹⁶ See, for example, his translation of Nāgārjuna's best known work: *Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way: Nāgārjuna's Mūlamadhyamakārikā* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), which includes an extensive commentary.

⁹¹⁷ Daniel Aitken, "Jay Garfield: Engaging Buddhist Philosophy," *The Wisdom Podcast*, Audio, September 8, 2016: <https://learn.wisdompubs.org/podcast/jay-garfield/> (accessed August 4, 2018). For the date of Hampshire's "Third World Expectation," see: Susan Dayall, *A Documentary History of Hampshire College*, vol. 2: 1975-1985, ch. 3: <https://dspace.hampshire.edu/bitstream/10009/561/4/DAcademic%6201982.pdf> (accessed August 4, 2018).

between Wallace's pre-*Infinite Jest* work and Buddhist philosophy.⁹¹⁸ Wallace's interest in Buddhism certainly grew over time, however, and it is in *Infinite Jest*,⁹¹⁹ *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*,⁹²⁰ *Oblivion*,⁹²¹ and above all *The Pale King* that he makes the most use of Buddhism.

In correspondence with Zen practitioner Christopher Hamacher, Wallace wrote that he was especially interested in the Episcopalian-priest-turned-Buddhist philosopher Alan Watts (1915-1973).⁹²² Watts's early work *The Way of Zen* (1957) was "one of the most widely-read and influential texts on Buddhism in English."⁹²³ Watts is typical of "Western" Buddhists in that he discarded aspects of the Buddhist tradition that he did not find helpful. Watts tried to show how the mere insight into the illusory character of the distinction of the self from the world or the thinking subject from the known object was useless in the attempt to overcome the suffering of the subject, because insight only intensified the felt alienation of the subject from the world. This is a double-bind in which any attempt to cure oneself of illusion only intensifies the illusion and its attendant suffering. To seek to blot out the distinction only affirms the distinction. To grasp for the state of liberation from suffering and futility, *nirvana*, is to close oneself off from nirvana: "[T]o try not to grasp is the same thing as to grasp."⁹²⁴

But how is it possible to stop trying? One answer has to do with becoming quiet—with, as it were, sinking below the level of the desires and worries and being simply mindful of existence without thinking of distinct things as objects. How is this possible? How do you turn off what Wallace called the "Iago-like voice of the self"?⁹²⁵

⁹¹⁸ Piekarski, "Buddhist Philosophy," chs. 2-4.

⁹¹⁹ Piekarski, "Buddhist Philosophy," ch. 5.

⁹²⁰ Mary K. Holland, "David Foster Wallace's 'Octet' and the 'Atthakavagga,'" in: *Critique* 74.3 (2016), pp. 165-69.

⁹²¹ Kocela, "The Zen."

⁹²² Kocela, "The Zen," p. 59.

⁹²³ Kocela, "The Zen," p. 59.

⁹²⁴ Watts, *The Way of Zen*, p. 62.

⁹²⁵ Wallace, *Consider the Lobster*, p. 154.

Another key influence on Wallace's view of Buddhism was the Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thích Nhất Hạnh, who runs a retreat center in France. In 2001, when he was working on *The Pale King*, Wallace attended one of Nhất Hạnh's retreats although he left before the retreat finished).⁹²⁶ Nhất Hạnh explains the difficulty of meditation in terms of an interior loneliness from which we are always trying to distract ourselves. Consider the following passage from Nhất Hạnh, which I quote at length, on account of its striking similarities to passages in *The Pale King*:

We can feel lonely even when we're surrounded by many people. We are lonely together. There is a vacuum inside us. We don't feel comfortable with that vacuum, so we try to fill it up or make it go away. Technology supplies us with many devices that allow us to "stay connected." These days, we are always "connected," but we continue to feel lonely. We check incoming e-mail and social media sites multiple times a day. We e-mail or post one message after another. We want to share; we want to receive. We busy ourselves all day long in an effort to connect. What are we so afraid of? We may feel an inner void, a sense of isolation, of sorrow, of restlessness. We may feel desolate and unloved. We may feel that we lack something important. Some of these feelings are very old and have been with us always, underneath all our doing and our thinking. Having plenty of stimuli makes it easy for us to distract ourselves from what we're feeling. But when there is silence, all these things present themselves clearly.⁹²⁷

Compare that passage to the following passage from *The Pale King*, in which the character "David Wallace" is trying to explain why the boredom of tax work is such an obstacle to paying attention. It is a passage that I have already quoted in part (1.2), but I quote it here at greater length, to show the parallels:

To me, at least in retrospect, the really interesting question is why dullness proves to be such a powerful impediment to attention. Why we recoil from the dull. Maybe it's because dullness is intrinsically painful; maybe that's where phrases like 'deadly dull' or 'excruciatingly dull' come from. But there might be more to it. Maybe dullness is associated with psychic pain because something that's dull or opaque fails to provide enough stimulation to distract people from some other, deeper type of pain that is always there, if only in an ambient low-level way, and which most of us spend nearly all our time and energy trying to distract ourselves from feeling, or at least from feeling directly or with our full attention. Admittedly, the whole thing's pretty confusing, and hard to talk about abstractly...but surely something must lie behind not just Muzak in dull or tedious places anymore but now also actual TV in waiting rooms, supermarkets' checkouts, airports' gates, SUVs' backseats. Walkmen, iPods, BlackBerries, cell phones that attach to your head. This terror of silence with nothing diverting to do. I can't

⁹²⁶ Max, *Every Love Story*, p. 262.

⁹²⁷ Thích Nhất Hạnh, *Silence: The Power of Quiet in a World Full of Noise* (London: Rider, 2015), p. 24.

think anyone really believes that today's so-called 'information society' is just about information. Everyone knows it's about something else, way down.⁹²⁸

In both passages the "inner void" or pain leads to a Pascalian flight into diversion. The first step, therefore, is having patience with silence. One must become aware of the inner void, without fleeing into distractions or the imagined future or past. One must "abide in the moment," to use a phrase common to Buddhist philosophy and Alcoholics Anonymous.

In *Infinite Jest*, Don Gately, lying on a hospital bed in great pain, reflects on abiding in the moment as follows: "[E]verything unendurable was in the head, was the head not Abiding in the Present but hopping the wall and doing a recon and then returning with unendurable news you then somehow believed."⁹²⁹ Something analogous to the task of abiding in the present under the extreme physical pain that Gately is undergoing needs to be taken on for the "deeper type of pain" that boredom allows people to feel.

In one of his notes for *The Pale King* Wallace wrote the following:

It turns out that bliss—a second-by-second joy + gratitude at the gift of being alive, conscious—lies on the other side of crushing, crushing boredom. Pay close attention to the most tedious thing you can find (tax returns, televised golf), and, in waves, a boredom like you've never known will wash over you and just about kill you. Ride these out, and it's like stepping from black and white into color. Like water after days in the desert. Constant bliss in every atom.⁹³⁰

In the Buddhist authors who influenced Wallace the "constant bliss" is seen not merely as a passing state found in meditation, but in actual liberation from the splitting off of subject and object, "a quiet awareness, without comment, of whatever happens to be here and now [...] attended by the most vivid sensation of 'nondifference' between oneself and the external world, between the mind and its contents[.]"⁹³¹

⁹²⁸ Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 85.

⁹²⁹ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 861.

⁹³⁰ Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 546.

⁹³¹ Watts, *The Way of Zen*, pp. 155-156.

Wallace sometimes discusses this as a discovery of hidden depths within the subject itself, which seems slightly different from the Buddhist view. Chris Fogle, in *The Pale King*, speaks of “depths in me” that were more than the selfish “impulses for pleasure and vanity” that had driven him as a wastoid, depths which were “not abstract.” He claims that these “realest, most profound parts” of himself “blazed in an almost sacred way,” and that they consisted in “simple attention, awareness.”⁹³² But one can read this as one way of interpreting Zen Buddhism that is common in the West. Thomas Merton—a Christian monk who had a sustained interest in Buddhism, and who was a personal friend of Thích Nhất Hạnh—interpreted the “insight” of Zen as being that the “liberation from the limitations of the individual ego” is in fact the “discovery of one’s ‘original nature’ and ‘true face’,” and that this true self is awareness: “not our awareness, but Being’s awareness of itself in us.”⁹³³ One can read Fogle’s description of the profound depths that consist in attention and awareness as blazing “in an almost sacred way,” *because* the awareness in question is Being’s awareness of itself in him.

Be that as it may, Wallace struggled deeply with the difficulty in coming to such a liberation from the ego. In “Good Old Neon,” Neil makes a comic attempt at learning meditation. He is able to sit still during classes, because he is so intent at impressing his teacher, Master Gurpreet, and the other students. But behind his façade of calm he is suffering agonies: “I had what felt like swarms of insects crawling all over my arms and shooting out of the top of my head.”⁹³⁴ And when he tries to meditate alone he fails utterly: “I couldn’t seem to sit still and follow my breath for more than even a few minutes before I felt like crawling out of my skin and had to stop.”⁹³⁵ Wallace had personal experience of these difficulties, as he details in one of his letters to Christopher Hamacher:

Mostly what I've observed are wild fluctuations in my own willingness. Some days I sit enthusiastically, enjoy it, am sorry when time's up. Other days I feel a visceral distaste for it,

⁹³² Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 187.

⁹³³ Thomas Merton, *Thoughts on the East* (Tunbridge Wells: Burns & Oates, 1996), p. 41.

⁹³⁴ Wallace, *Oblivion*, p. 159.

⁹³⁵ Wallace, *Oblivion*, p. 159.

extreme reluctance—I wish could say that I always sit on these days, too, but often I blow it off. Other days I blow it off in a more juvenile way—wake up late, don't have time, put it off, 'I'll do it tonight instead' and then don't, etc.⁹³⁶

And in *The Pale King*, he details at great length the difficulties that many tax-bureaucrats have in suffering through boredom in similar terms.

But the payoff is more than blissful states enjoyed during meditation. The overcoming of the opposition of the subject and the object is supposed to then allow the practitioner to see others in a new way, and to live a decent, ethical life, in which loneliness is overcome in a serene solidarity with others. In the “Kenyon College Commencement Speech,” Wallace describes someone suffering the petty annoyances of adult life in a world of traffic jams and inconsiderate fellow shoppers in supermarkets and so on. And he describes the automatic unconsidered reaction of the alienated self-centred subject, “the certainty that situations like this are really all about *me*, about my hungriness and my fatigue and my desire to just get home.” From this perspective everyone else seems like an obstacle and hindrance to my life: “[E]verybody else is just *in my way*.” And this of course leads to anger and aggression: “[L]ook at how repulsive most of them are and how stupid and cow-like and dead-eyed and nonhuman they seem.”⁹³⁷ But mindful awareness allows the subject to see the suffering of others and to care for them. This is the Buddhist practice of *karuṇā*, often translated as “compassion,” but better rendered as “care” (since it signifies something active rather than something passive). The insight into the unity of all things should make the suffering of others just as real as my own. Ultimately, suffering itself is conventional and rooted in craving, but it does not follow that one ought to be indifferent to suffering. On the contrary, one ought to universalize the commitment to mitigating suffering. As Wallace’s onetime philosophy tutor Jay Garfield was to put it (after Wallace’s death), the insight into the conventional nature of the distinction of myself and others is “not a reason not to take

⁹³⁶ David Foster Wallace to Christopher Hamacher, February 22, 2006, cited in: Piekarski, “Buddhist Philosophy,” p. 34.

⁹³⁷ Wallace, “Kenyon Commencement Speech,” p. 360.

suffering seriously.” Rather, all suffering has “precisely the same claim on us,” and, “Karuṇā, or care, is therefore the only appropriate reaction” to any suffering.⁹³⁸

Wallace shows how one can practice karuṇā by imaginatively identifying with the perspective of other persons. Maybe the person who just cut me off in traffic has actually got even more urgent reasons for hurry than I have, and “it is actually I who am in his way,” and maybe the other persons in the checkout line at the supermarket are not only just as frustrated by unnecessary delays, but actually “have much harder, more tedious or painful lives than I do, overall.”⁹³⁹

Christopher Kocela shows how Wallace’s suggestions for practicing karuṇā in daily life parallel those of Thích Nhất Hạnh in *The Miracle of Mindfulness*. He refers particularly to an example that Nhất Hạnh brings up of looking at photographs of orphans, whose application for help he is translating. It is worth quoting Nhất Hạnh at length:

When reality is perceived in its nature of ultimate perfection, the practitioner has reached a level of wisdom called non-discrimination mind—a wondrous communion in which there is no longer any distinction made between subject and object. This isn't some far-off, unattainable state. Any one of us—by persisting in practicing even a little—can at least taste of it. I have a pile of orphan applications for sponsorship on my desk. I translate a few each day. Before I begin to translate a sheet, I look into the eyes of the child in the photograph, and look at the child's expression and features closely. I feel a deep link between myself and each child, which allows me to enter a special communion with them. While writing this to you, I see that during those moments and hours, the communion I have experienced while translating the simple lines in the applications has been a kind of non-discrimination mind. I no longer see an ‘I’ who translates the sheets to help each child, I no longer see a child who received love and help. The child and I are one: no one pities; no one asks for help; no one helps.⁹⁴⁰

As Kocela argues, Wallace’s version of this “non-discrimination mind” involves a kind of fiction, an imagining of a “backstory” for others. One must, in Wallace’s version, “*imagine*

⁹³⁸ Jay L. Garfield, “Buddhist Ethics in the Context of Conventional Truth: Path and Transformation,” in: *The Cowherds, Moonpaths: Ethics and Emptiness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 77-95, at p. 89.

⁹³⁹ Wallace, “Kenyon Commencement Speech,” p. 361.

⁹⁴⁰ Thích Nhất Hạnh, *The Miracle of Mindfulness: An Introduction to the Practice of Meditation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1975), p. 57; cf. Kocela, “The Zen,” p. 68.

oneself as another,” “in order to circumvent self-centeredness.”⁹⁴¹ But the result of this kind of fiction is the same “communion in which there is no longer any distinction made between subject and object” of which Nhất Hạnh [?]. As Wallace puts it in one of his most oft-quoted passages:

It will actually be within your power to experience a crowded, loud, slow, consumer-hell-type situation as not only meaningful but sacred, on fire with the same force that lit the stars—compassion, love, the sub-surface unity of all things.⁹⁴²

This is basically Wallace’s understanding of the Buddhist path of escaping the double-bind of loneliness. That is, by experiencing the unity of all things, not through a withdrawal from the world, but through an engaged and caring life in the world, rooted in silent awareness. Wallace was clearly highly attracted to this path. But, as always, he also tempered his enthusiasm with elements of ironic distance. The figure of Lyle, the Eastern guru in *Infinite Jest*, is on the whole sympathetic, but there is something grotesque and exaggerated about the spandex-clad figure sitting cross-legged on a towel-dispenser in a weight room, and literally living off the sweat of the brows of the weight room’s users, which he licks off of them with his “little and rough” tongue, which feels “like a kitty’s.”⁹⁴³

When Wallace went to France to attend a two-week retreat with Thích Nhất Hạnh in 2001, he left early, claiming that the reason was that he didn’t like the food.⁹⁴⁴ In the letter on his struggles with practicing meditation to Zen Christopher Hamacher, quoted above, he used “Y.I.C.” (Yours in Christ) as the valediction.⁹⁴⁵ The reference to Christ was presumably meant to maintain some ironic distance from Buddhism. But it also shows his continuing interest in other religious traditions—in this case, Christianity.

2.7.2 Monks, Nuns, and Jesuits: Wallace and the voluntary solitude of Christian asceticism

⁹⁴¹ Kocela, “The Zen,” p. 69.

⁹⁴² Wallace, “Kenyon Commencement Speech,” p. 362.

⁹⁴³ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 128.

⁹⁴⁴ Max, *Every Love Story*, p. 262.

⁹⁴⁵ Piekarski, “Buddhist Philosophy,” p. 35.

Among Wallace's private books kept at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas is a copy of Indian Jesuit priest Anthony De Mello's *Awareness*, in which Wallace marked the following passage:

Think of the loneliness that is yours. Would human company ever take it away? It will only serve as a distraction. There's an emptiness inside, isn't there? And when the emptiness surfaces, what do you do? You run away, turn on the television, turn on the radio, read a book, search for human company, seek entertainment, seek distraction. Everybody does that. It's big business nowadays, an organized industry to distract us and entertain us.⁹⁴⁶

The passage is strikingly reminiscent of many passages of Wallace's own. De Mello's book is most influenced by the traditions of Indian wisdom, including Buddhism, but as a Jesuit De Mello was also familiar with the traditions of Christian asceticism—monasticism, and the various active religious orders with roots in monasticism, especially his own Jesuit order. These were traditions that also interested Wallace. In his treatment of boredom and its importance, in *The Pale King*, Wallace made use not only of Buddhism, but also of ideas rooted in Christian asceticism. At a certain point in his struggles with boredom, Lane Dean sees the ghost of a former bureaucrat, who used to work in his office (see 1.2 above). The ghost gives a disquisition in which he claims that the English language had no word for *boredom* prior to the eighteenth century. In this context he makes the following reference to ancient Christian monasticism, the oldest ascetic movement in Christianity:

No word for the Latin *accidia* made so much of by monks under Benedict. For the Greek ἀκηδία. Also the hermits of third-century Egypt, the so-called *daemon meridianus*, when their prayers were stultified by pointlessness and tedium and a longing for violent death.⁹⁴⁷

The Christian ascetic tradition, especially in its monastic form, has many similarities to Buddhism, and Buddhist monasticism. One can understand both paths as seeing humanity as marked by a deep loneliness afflicting humanity—what Nhất Hạnh calls “an inner void, a sense of isolation,” and what the Catholic nun Mary Ward called “the long loneliness.”⁹⁴⁸ And

⁹⁴⁶ Anthony De Mello, S.J., *Awareness: The Perils and Opportunities of Reality* (New York: Doubleday, 1990), p. 55.

⁹⁴⁷ Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 383.

⁹⁴⁸ Mary Ward to Winefrid Campian, October 27, 1624, in: Mary Catherine Elizabeth Chambers, *The Life of Mary Ward (1585-1645)*, ed. Henry James Chambers, vol. 2 (London: Burns and Oates, 1885) p. 138. The Catholic political activist and ascetic Dorothy Day (1897-1980) took this phrase of Ward's as the title of her autobiography [*The Long Loneliness: The Autobiography of Dorothy Day* (New York: Curtis Books, 1952)].

both paths recognize the failure of diversion as a means for overcoming that loneliness. Both paths therefore seek the intentional loneliness of solitude and silence in order to face that inner loneliness head-on, as a prelude to overcoming it. This has led to similar practices, structures, and institutions of silence and of solitude. German scholar Udo Tworuschka, in his thorough study of the phenomenology of loneliness in the world religions, shows how both Buddhism and Christianity developed hermits and anchorites who lived all by themselves, hermits who lived in colonies with a certain amount of controlled contact between the various and finally cenobitic communities in which a common life was lived, but the encounter with interior loneliness was encouraged through the observation of silence and other ascetic practices.⁹⁴⁹ Indeed, the word “monk” is derived from the Greek *μοναχός*, which is in turn derived from *μόνος*, which means alone or solitary—a sign of the importance of solitude to the monastic movement.⁹⁵⁰ Thus, even in cenobitic communities there was a strict separation of the community from other people. In Christianity, however, so-called “active religious orders” later developed, which spent some time on the ascetic practices of the monastic tradition, but were also actively engaged in the wider society.

Despite the similarities, there are subtle differences in the ways in which the traditions of Christian and Buddhist monasticism approach loneliness. These differences stem from different approaches to the ultimate questions. Unlike Buddhism, Christianity is not primarily concerned with seeing the distinction between subject and object as illusory, and becoming mindful of the immanent unity of all things. Rather, Christianity is concerned with the relation to a transcendent God, who is the source and ground of all things, and yet completely other than them. Human persons are conceived of as being “fallen,” estranged from God, and full of a deep longing for him. God Himself grants them the gift of overcoming that estrangement through grace. This grace is given through Jesus Christ, a man in whom the transcendent God has become immanent without losing His transcendence. One

Wallace had a copy of *The Long Loneliness* in his personal library, which can now be viewed at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas, Austin.

⁹⁴⁹ Udo Tworuschka, *Die Einsamkeit: Eine religionsphänomenologische Untersuchung* (Bonn: Ludwig Röhrscheid Verlag, 1974), ch. 6.

⁹⁵⁰ Tworuschka, *Die Einsamkeit*, p. 230.

Christian writer who was an important influence on Wallace, the Catholic novelist Walker Percy,⁹⁵¹ expressed the Christian point of view as follows:

The self becomes itself by recognizing God as a spirit, creator of the Cosmos and therefore of one's self as a creature, a wounded creature but a creature nonetheless, who shares with a community of like creatures the belief that God transcends the entire Cosmos and has actually entered human history [...] in order to redeem man from the catastrophe which has overtaken his self.⁹⁵²

And again:

The self sees itself as a creature, created by God, estranged from God by an aboriginal catastrophe, and now reconciled with him. Before the reconciliation, the self is, as Paul told the Ephesians, a stranger to every covenant, with no promise to hope for, with the world about you and no God. But now the self becomes a son of God, a member of a family of selves, and is conscious of itself as a creature of God embarked upon a pilgrimage in this life and destined for happiness and reunion with God in a later life.⁹⁵³

For Christianity, therefore, the solution to the double-bind of loneliness has to do with a unity that does not preclude personal distinction. The Ulster Protestant writer C.S. Lewis—another important influence on Wallace⁹⁵⁴—put it like this: “[H]uman souls can be taken into the life of God and yet remain themselves—in fact, be very much more themselves than they were before.”⁹⁵⁵ Indeed, God Himself is seen as a Trinity of persons constituted by their relations to each other.

The difference between such a Christian conception and the Buddhist conception can be difficult to spell out, since, as I indicated above (2.6.3), classical formulations of Christian metaphysics have seen God as, in a certain sense, the “true self” of creatures, whose being is a “participation” in Him. And therefore, as Thomas Merton put it, “the distinction between Creator and creature does not alter the fact that there is also a basic unity within ourselves at

⁹⁵¹ For Percy's influence on Wallace see section 2.2.5 above.

⁹⁵² Walker Percy, *Lost in the Cosmos: The Last Self-Help Book* (New York: Picador, 1983) p. 112.

⁹⁵³ Percy, *Lost in the Cosmos*, p. 11.

⁹⁵⁴ For C.S. Lewis's influence on Wallace see: Stephen J. Burn, “A Paradigm for the Life of Consciousness: *The Pale King*,” in: *Studies in the Novel* 44.4 (2012), pp. 371-388.

⁹⁵⁵ C.S. Lewis, *Beyond Personality: The Christian Idea of God* (New York: Macmillan, 1945), p. 9.

the summit of our being where we are ‘one with God.’⁹⁵⁶ Or as St. Paul put it, God is not far off, “for in him we live and move and are” (Acts 17:28). Recall Wallace’s reference to “the part of us that is or is-in God.”⁹⁵⁷ Expressions of Christian mysticism can therefore often sound very similar to Buddhist expressions of the awareness of unity. Nevertheless, Christian soteriology does give a particular coloring to the way in which Christian monasticism approaches loneliness.

David Laird has shown how deeply Wallace engaged with the Christian soteriological story of estrangement from God, and redemption through grace.⁹⁵⁸ And Michael O’Connell and Lucas Thompson have shown how Catholicism had a particular interest for him.⁹⁵⁹ There are references to Catholic religious orders throughout his work, especially to the Jesuits, who, while not strictly speaking a monastic order, do incorporate many ascetic practices derived from monasticism into a more active life of engagement in the world. As we have seen, Wallace read and annotated at least one Jesuit author. At one point, Wallace even attended a several-day Jesuit retreat with some of his friends.⁹⁶⁰ The passage quoted above from the ghost in *The Pale King* on *accidia* or *acedia* is, however, the primary reference that he makes to early Christian monasticism. It may seem like a throwaway passage, but if we examine it more closely, we can see some important indications about Christian asceticism as a resource in addressing the double-bind.

The Latin word *accidia*, which Wallace associates with the monks who follow the rule of St. Benedict of Nursia (c. 480-557), is, as he notes, a translation of the Greek ἀκηδία. In English it is usually translated as “acedia.” Christian monasticism began in the Greek-speaking Eastern part of the Roman Empire, especially in Egypt and Palestine, and then spread to the

⁹⁵⁶ Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions, 1968), pp. 11-12.

⁹⁵⁷ Bolger, “A Less ‘Bullshitty’ Way,” p. 45.

⁹⁵⁸ Laird, “Saying God with a Straight Face.”

⁹⁵⁹ O’Connell, “Your temple,”; Thompson, *Global Wallace*, pp. 184-186.

⁹⁶⁰ Max, *Every Love Story*, pp. 231-232.

Western, Latin-speaking part, where St. Benedict was the most influential early figure.⁹⁶¹ Michael O'Connell rightly points out that the classic expression of the concept of acedia comes in the writings of Evagrius Ponticus (345-399), who lived as a hermit in the Egyptian desert, at a time when monasticism had already become an established tradition there. O'Connell cites part of a famous passage of Evagrius, and shows its parallels to Wallace. Evagrius describes how "the demon of acedia" or "the noonday demon" attacks the monks in the late morning and early afternoon. The time seems long, the sun seems to remain fixed in the sky, "the day seems to be fifty hours long." The monk begins to be disgusted with the monastic life and he begins to think "love has disappeared from among the brothers and there is no one to console him," and in this loneliness he begins to think of the pleasures that he enjoyed before leaving the world to become a hermit, "the memory of his close relations and of his former life," and this tempts the monk to give up and leave his cell. But if the monk perseveres, and resists the temptation, "a state of peace and ineffable joy ensues in the soul after this struggle."⁹⁶²

As O'Connell remarks, the "state of peace and ineffable joy" after resisting acedia is strongly reminiscent of Wallace's "[c]onstant bliss in every atom," after enduring boredom.⁹⁶³ For Evagrius, standing firm and resisting acedia purifies the soul, allowing it to commune with God. The voluntary solitude and silence of the desert hermitage allow the monk to become aware of the deeper loneliness that is his estrangement from God, and then if he waits patiently that deeper loneliness will be healed in contemplative prayer, in which he becomes actually united to God: "For what is more sublime than conversing with God and being drawn into communion with him?"⁹⁶⁴ The ascetic practices are necessary first to let the

⁹⁶¹ For a thorough treatment of Christian monastic history see: Adalbert de Vogüé, *Histoire littéraire du mouvement monastique dans l'antiquité, Première partie: Le monachisme latin*, (Paris : Éditions du Cerf, 12 vols., 1991-2012) ; *Deuxième partie: le monachisme grec* (Roma : Studia Anselmiana, 3 vols., 2015). For a popular overview of monastic history see: Thomas Merton, *The Waters of Siloe* (New York: Harcourt and Brace, 1949), ch. 1.

⁹⁶² Evagrius Ponticus, *Praktikos*, ch. 12; Robert E. Sinkewicz (ed. and trans.), *Evagrius of Pontus: The Greek Ascetic Corpus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 99; cf. O'Connell, "Your Temple is Self and Sentiment," pp. 281, 283.

⁹⁶³ Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 546; O'Connell, "Your temple is self and sentiment," p. 283.

⁹⁶⁴ Evagrius Ponticus, *Chapters on Prayer*, ch. 34; Sinkewicz, *Evagrius*, p. 196.

monk feel the interior loneliness, and then to purify the mind of the distractions of sensual passion, so that it is ready to receive communion with God: “[H]ow can you, who wish to see and commune with the one who is beyond all representation and sense perception, not free yourself from every mental representation tied to the passions?”⁹⁶⁵ Like Chris Fogle, the monk has to see that there is something deeper than “drives or appetites.”⁹⁶⁶

The “monks under Benedict,”⁹⁶⁷ of which the *The Pale King’s* ghost speaks, continued the tradition of Evagrius and the desert fathers, but with a typically Roman and Latin concern for orderly procedures and accountability. St. Benedict wrote a “rule” of life for his monks that explains how they are to follow the ideals of the desert fathers in a highly organized community, in which the monks hold each other accountable in their struggle against acedia, keeping them on the path until “with heart enlarged and in ineffable sweetness of love, one runs in the way of God’s commandments.”⁹⁶⁸

Benedictine monasticism became the dominant form of monasticism in the West. It was reformed many times. One particularly significant reform was that of the Cistercians that began at the end of eleventh century and reached its full flower in the twelfth century. The Cistercians were an important influence on subsequent Catholic movements—including the Jesuits, who were of such importance to Wallace. Moreover, the Cistercian tradition became particularly important in America through the influence of Thomas Merton (1915–1968), a Cistercian monk of the strict “Trappist” observance, and a writer. It is not clear whether Wallace read Merton directly, but he would certainly have encountered his influence through such writers as Lewis Hyde, Dorothy Day, and Walker Percy. There are a few references to Trappists in *Infinite Jest*, but they appear only as stereotypical figures in James

⁹⁶⁵ Evagrius, *Chapters on Prayer*, ch. 4; Sinkewicz, *Evagrius*, p. 193.

⁹⁶⁶ Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 187.

⁹⁶⁷ Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 383.

⁹⁶⁸ Benedict of Nursia, *Regula*, prologus; *The Rule of St. Benedict*, trans. W.K. Lowther Clarke (London: S.P.C.K., 1931), p. 6.

Incandenza films.⁹⁶⁹ In any case, the early Cistercian writers, in whose thought Merton was formed, developed an approach to loneliness that resonated strongly with Wallace.⁹⁷⁰

The most famous of the early Cistercians, St. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153), reflects on the Biblical love-poetry of the Song of Songs, and sees therein the whole of the Christian life. The soul of a Christian is like the bride in the Song of Songs: her bridegroom, Christ, is absent, and so she is full of “the weariness of eager and unsatisfied longing.”⁹⁷¹ Bernard sees three stages that the soul goes through on the way to union with Christ. First, the soul realizes the source of her loneliness in her sin, which she atones for, then she begins to habituate herself to good works, and finally she rises to union with the beloved. Bernard sees these three stages as expressed in three kisses: the soul kisses Christ’s feet (repentance), then his hand (habituation to good works), and finally His mouth (union).⁹⁷² The second phase involves ascetic exercises, including silence and solitude, which dispose the soul for the third phase: “[S]it alone and keep silence [...] remain alone, so as to preserve thyself for Him alone.”⁹⁷³ The greatest obstacle in this threefold way is pride, which leads the soul to deceive itself about its true state, deceiving itself and others through fictitious descriptions of itself that allow it to avoid facing its true misery, in ways reminiscent of the rationalizing addicts in *Infinite Jest*.⁹⁷⁴

Bernard’s friend Abbot William of St. Thierry (d. 1148) sees the same process even more explicitly in terms of loneliness. He reflects on his own existential situation in the light of the story of Adam and Eve’s fall from the Garden of Eden in the book of Genesis. Just as Adam, after becoming estranged from God through eating the forbidden fruit, becomes ashamed of

⁹⁶⁹ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, pp. 705, 992, 1054.

⁹⁷⁰ In the interests of what might be called “full disclosure,” I note that I am myself a Cistercian monk.

⁹⁷¹ Bernard of Clairvaux, *In Cantica Cantorum*, 51,3; *Life and Works of Saint Bernard, Abbot of Clairvaux*, vol. 4, *Eighty-Six Sermons on the Song of Songs*, trans. Samuel J. Eales (London: John Hodges, 1896) p. 309.

⁹⁷² Bernard, *In Cantica Cantorum*, 3,5; trans. Eales, p. 20.

⁹⁷³ Bernard, *In Cantica Cantorum*, 40,4; trans. Eales, p. 254.

⁹⁷⁴ Bernard of Clairvaux, *The Steps of Humility and Pride*, trans. M. Ambrose Conway OCSO (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1973); Cf. Peter Godman, *Paradoxes of Conscience in the High Middle Ages: Abelard, Heloise, and the Archpoet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), especially pp. 4-9.

his nakedness and hides from God (Genesis 3), so William became estranged from God through his sins: “I was found shameful in my inward parts and found in them no refuge from myself, nor yet from you.”⁹⁷⁵ Therefore he hides among his thoughts. But then he decides to hide not *from* God, but with God. In solitude and silence he comes to understand his true condition: “I sit alone and do not speak [...] I thus have leisure to attend to myself and I ask: ‘Who am I’ and ‘Whence have I come.’”⁹⁷⁶ He comes to realize that God is what his soul desires, and he ends by imploring God to come to him, and alleviate his loneliness:

O Lord, the comfort of my wilderness—a solitary heart and frequent communing with you. As long as you are with me, O my God, I shall not be alone; but, if you leave me, woe to him that is alone; for, if I fall asleep, there will be none to keep me warm; if I fall down, there will be nobody to pick me up.⁹⁷⁷

The same pattern of loneliness caused by sin, followed by voluntary solitude that allows the monk to feel that loneliness, culminating in communion with God who alleviates it, is found in Abbot Isaac of Stella (died c. 1169), who founded a monastery on the Île de Ré, off the coast of France, in order to have the greatest possible solitude. In a sermon to his monks he remarks on the suffering that such solitude entails:

Filled with a great desire to flee and thirsting after solitude, I finally fetched up one day in this remote and empty waste, where some of my—if I may term them so— confederates in this venture left me and very few held fast, and even these have a dread of the very horror of solitude, a dread that I confess I feel at times myself. Solitude was heaped on solitude, O Lord, and silence upon silence. For in order to be more fluent and at ease with you alone, we forced and forced ourselves again to keep silence with each other.⁹⁷⁸

The horror of solitude is worth suffering through, because of the fluency in prayer that it enables.

Voluntary solitude allows the monk to come into union with God, but this union then allows them to have a new kind of communion with each other. That is, the alleviation of loneliness

⁹⁷⁵ William of St. Thierry, *Meditativae Orationes*, IV; *On Contemplating God, Prayer, Meditations*, trans. Penelope Lawson, CSMV (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1970), p. 112.

⁹⁷⁶ *Meditativae Orationes*, IV; trans. Lawson, p. 112.

⁹⁷⁷ *Meditativae Orationes*, IV; trans. Lawson, p. 115.

⁹⁷⁸ Isaac of Stella, Second Sermon for the Fourth Sunday after Epiphany, in: Pauline Matarasso (ed. and trans.), *The Cistercian World: Monastic Writings of the Twelfth Century* (London: Penguin, 1993), pp. 203-207, at p. 206.

through union with God, allows its further alleviation through friendship with one another. This is the argument of the most famous medieval treatise on friendship, *On Spiritual Friendship* by the English Cistercian Ælred of Rievaulx (1110-1167). For Ælred, God becomes the ultimate unhoardable commonwealth, in the common enjoyment of which friends are friends:

This is that extraordinary and great happiness which we await, with God himself acting and diffusing, between himself and his creatures [...] so much friendship and charity, that thus each loves another as he does himself; and that, by this means, just as each one rejoices in his own, so does he rejoice in the good fortune of another, and thus the happiness of each one individually is the happiness of all, and the universality of all happiness is the possession of each individual.⁹⁷⁹

Cistercian abbeys maintain a high level of separation from the world in order to devote themselves to silence and contemplation. But other religious orders devoted more time to compassionate action in the world, serving the poor and preaching the message of divine love. This was true of the orders of mendicant friars such as the Franciscans and Dominicans, both founded in the thirteenth century. These orders were no longer monastic in the full sense, but still retained many elements of the monastic tradition. This was even more true of the active religious orders founded in the early modern period, the most famous of which was the Jesuits, founded in 1534 by St. Ignatius Loyola.

Ignatius developed a concentrated method of meditation that could be practiced for short sessions of only one hour, leaving his Jesuits time for their activity in the world. And at important junctions in their lives Jesuits take 30-day retreats using a set of meditations called *The Spiritual Exercises*. The exercises owe much to the monastic tradition. They follow the three-stage pattern we have already seen in St. Bernard: 1) repentance from sin, 2) growth in good, and 3) union with God.⁹⁸⁰ The Canadian Jesuit Jean-Marc Laporte has argued that one can also read the *Spiritual Exercises* as including a fourth stage of “return to the

⁹⁷⁹ Ælred of Rievaulx, *De spirituali Amicitia*, 3,79; *Spiritual Friendship*, trans. Eugenia Laker, SSND (Washington, D.C.: Consortium Press, 1974), p. 111.

⁹⁸⁰ See: Javier Melloni, S.J., *The Exercises of St Ignatius Loyola in the Western Tradition*, trans. Michael Ivens, S.J. (Leominster: Gracewing, 2000), section 3.3.

world with God-like compassion.”⁹⁸¹ Compassionate concern for others was always an element in monastic spirituality, but it takes on a new urgency in for the Jesuits, who do not remain in monasteries, but go out “into the hurly burly of daily existence.”⁹⁸²

The *Spiritual Exercises* are largely concerned with two movements of the soul which Ignatius calls “spiritual desolation” (Spanish *desolación espiritual*; Latin *spiritualis desolatio*) and “spiritual consolation” (Spanish *consolación espiritual*; Latin *spiritualis consolatio*). Desolation is derived from the Latin word for being alone (*solus*), and means being left alone, abandoned. Here Ignatius means the inner experience of being left alone by God. Consolation, although etymologically not as closely related to desolation as it might look, is used by Ignatius to mean the inner experience of the presence of God.⁹⁸³ Consolation and desolation are used by Ignatius as signs of progress and regress in the spiritual life. Desolation is caused by inordinate attachment of the soul to earthly goods such as health, riches, honor, and long life.⁹⁸⁴

Robert Bolger has indicated the similarity of this Ignatian path to the account of how to live in Wallace’s “Kenyon College Commencement Speech,” which can be read as sketching out a threefold path of realization of selfishness, acquiring of habits that mitigate that selfishness, and finally “suggestions on how we can begin to see the divine presence in the mundane stuff of the world—including in the other people.”⁹⁸⁵ Although Bolger notes that Wallace’s account was probably more directly influenced by Alcoholics Anonymous,⁹⁸⁶ Bolger does not mention that the founder of Alcoholics Anonymous, Bill Wilson, had a Jesuit priest, Fr.

⁹⁸¹ Jean-Marc Laporte, S. J., “Understanding the Spiritual Journey: from the Classical Tradition to the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius” (Halifax: Jesuit Centre of Spirituality, 2009), online: <http://orientations.jesuits.ca/stages%20in%20the%20spiritual%20journey.pdf> (accessed August 11, 2018), p. 1.

⁹⁸² Laporte, “Understanding the Spiritual Journey,” p. 12.

⁹⁸³ Ignatius of Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius Loyola: Study Edition. The Spanish Autograph and the Latin Vulgate with Translations in English*, ed. Eric Jensen, (Guelph: Loyola House, 2018) https://ignatiusguelph.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/The_Spiritual_Exercises_Eric_Jensen_SJ_2018.pdf (Accessed August 13, 2018), §§ 316-317.

⁹⁸⁴ Ignatius, *The Spiritual Exercises*, especially ¶ 23.

⁹⁸⁵ Bolger, “A Less ‘Bullshitty’ Way,” p. 33.

⁹⁸⁶ Bolger, “A Less ‘Bullshitty’ Way,” p. 33.

Edward Dowling, S.J., as a spiritual advisor. In 1953 Fr. Dowling gave a lecture in which he offered a detailed comparison of Ignatius's *Spiritual Exercises* with the twelve steps of Alcoholics Anonymous.⁹⁸⁷

In any case, as we saw above (1.3), the “Kenyon College Commencement Speech” is concerned with a path of abandoning the “worship” of things such as money, beauty, power, and intellect, and instead finding one’s way toward the worship of “some sort of god or spiritual-type thing.”⁹⁸⁸ This path is shown perhaps most completely in Don Gately in *Infinite Jest*. Gately’s path can be seen as having four stages: 1) he reaches the deepest misery in his addiction; 2) he begins following the instructions of Alcoholics Anonymous in a desperate desire for help; 3) this includes kneeling to a “higher power,” who is the water to Gately’s fish; and 4) he devotes himself to serving other addicts, helping them to find the same path of liberation. As David Laird has argued, Wallace makes use of Christian notions of soteriology. Fallen human beings realize their need of redemption, open themselves up to grace, find communion with God, and then turn to others in compassion.⁹⁸⁹ Perhaps Gately’s path resembles the Ignatian path, only because Ignatian spirituality is simply one of many methods of following the general Christian soteriological path.

But the Ignatian way is one that Wallace seems to have found particularly helpful. It addresses the the double-bind by beginning with practices of silence and solitary meditation, adopted from monasticism, but adapted to make them compatible with a life of engagement in human society, which offers great scope for compassionate generosity toward others.

⁹⁸⁷ See: Glen F. Chesnut, *Father Ed Dowling: Bill Wilson's Sponsor* (Bloomington: iUniverse Publishing, 2015), ch. 34.

⁹⁸⁸ Wallace, “Kenyon Commencement Speech,” p. 362.

⁹⁸⁹ Laird, “Saying God with a Straight Face,” ch. 3.

The journalist David Lipsky noted that Wallace had a copy of a prayer attributed to St. Ignatius hanging in his bathroom.⁹⁹⁰ The prayer is almost certainly not by Ignatius,⁹⁹¹ but arguably it does express the Ignatian fourth phase of the spiritual life:

Lord, teach me to be generous. / Teach me to serve you as you deserve. / To give, and not to count the cost. / To fight, and not to heed the wounds. / To toil, and not to [seek] for rest. / To labor, and to ask for no reward, / Save that of knowing that I am doing your will.⁹⁹²

This prayer can be read as expressing the state to which Don Gately comes at the moment when he sacrifices himself for the sake of fellow resident Randy Lentz.

As ever, though, Wallace was also sure to put a certain amount of ironic distance between himself and the Christian ascetic tradition. Two of the most extended appearances of members of Catholic religious orders in *Infinite Jest* are, like most of the representations of organized religion in the novel, “too grotesque to be taken seriously.”⁹⁹³ The first is the story of Barry Loach, who is later to be head trainer at the tennis academy, and his Jesuit seminarian brother. Loach grows up in Boston as the youngest son of “an enormous Catholic family, the parents of which were staunch Catholics of the old school of extremely staunch Catholicism.”⁹⁹⁴ His mother desperately wants one of her many children to become a priest, or a religious brother, or a nun. Loach has no such desire for himself. As his older brothers and sisters all end up not entering the seminary/monastery/convent, Loach gets worried that the burden of fulfilling his mother’s wish will fall on him. To Loach’s relief, the second youngest son, “always a pious and contemplative and big-hearted kid, brimming over with abstract love and an innate faith in the indwelling goodness of all men’s souls,” experiences

⁹⁹⁰ Lipsky, *Although of Course*, p. 302.

⁹⁹¹ See: Barton T. Geger, S.J., “Ten Things That St. Ignatius Never Said or Did,” in: *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* 50.1 (2018), pp. 1-44, at pp. 19-24.

⁹⁹² Geger, “Ten Things,” p. 19; cf. Lipsky, *Although of Course*, p. 302.

⁹⁹³ Evans, “The Chains of Not Choosing: Free Will and Faith in William James and David Foster Wallace,” in: Marshall Boswell and Stephen J. Burn (eds.), *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), p. 185.

⁹⁹⁴ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 967.

what he takes to be a religious vocation, and enters a “Jesuit seminary.”⁹⁹⁵ Unfortunately, the Jesuit seminarian soon has a crisis of faith, after a practicum in which he serves the poor of downtown Boston, in which “the ingratitude of the low-life homeless addicted and mentally ill” persons whom he serves, as well as “the utter lack of compassion and basic help from the citizenry at large in all Jesuitical endeavors” destroys his hope in the perfectibility of human beings.⁹⁹⁶

Loach and his brother have a dialogue, which Wallace compares to the famous conversation between the novice monk Alyosha and his skeptical brother Ivan in Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*.⁹⁹⁷ But here the roles are reversed. It is the novice religious who is the skeptic and his worldly brother is the one pleading for the faith. The result of their dialogue is a kind of social experiment:

The spiritually despondent brother basically challenges Barry Loach to not shower or change clothes for a while and make himself look homeless and disreputable and louse-ridden and clearly in need of basic human charity, and to stand out in front of the Park Street T-station on the edge of the Boston Common, right alongside the rest of the downtown community’s lumpen dregs, who all usually stood there outside the T-station stemming change, and for Barry Loach to hold out his unclean hand and instead of stemming change simply ask passersby to touch him. Just to touch him. Viz. extend some basic human warmth and contact.⁹⁹⁸

Predictably, no one wants to touch Barry Loach standing outside the T station. And now it is he who has a crisis of faith, as he endures “weeks and then months of personal spiritual crisis as passerby after passerby interpreted his appeal for contact as a request for cash and substituted abstract loose change for genuine fleshly contact.” And his “soul began to sprout little fungal patches of necrotic rot, and his upbeat view of the so-called normal and

⁹⁹⁵ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 967. The seminary is later revealed to be St. John’s, the Archdiocesan seminary in Boston (p. 968), which doesn’t actually make any sense—as a Jesuit, Loach’s brother would have studied at Weston School of Theology—but it helps the plot along, since St. John’s is near to the (fictional) location of the tennis academy.

⁹⁹⁶ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 968.

⁹⁹⁷ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 969; Cf. Timothy Jacobs, “The Brothers Incandenza: Translating Ideology in Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov* and David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*” in: *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 49 (2007), pp. 265-292.

⁹⁹⁸ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 969.

respectable human race began to undergo dark revision.⁹⁹⁹ Eventually, however, his faith in humanity is restored by Mario Incandenza, who in his naïve goodness shakes Loach's hand with real warmth.¹⁰⁰⁰

As Timothy Jacobs has argued,¹⁰⁰¹ this experiment echoes a story of a saint told by Ivan Karamazov, who, "when a hungry, frozen beggar came to him, he took him into his bed, held him in his arms, and began breathing into his mouth, which was putrid and loathsome from some awful disease."¹⁰⁰² Here Mario plays the role of the saint. This "eruptive and redeeming [moment] of grace"¹⁰⁰³ transcends its grotesque setting. But, significantly, the ultimate fate of the Jesuit seminarian is never made clear. His brother Barry has his faith restored, but what of the young Jesuit? The path of Christian asceticism, Wallace seems to be suggesting, has its promise, but also its risks. There is no guarantee of success.

The other extended representation of a Catholic religious order in *Infinite Jest* is even more grotesque. It comes in one of James Incandenza's films: *Blood Sister: One Tough Nun*. *Blood Sister* is an "ironic metacinematic" parody of the revenge-flick genre "so grotesquely exaggerated" that it becomes a "sub/inversion" of the genre. It is, according to the director's son Hal, "gratuitously nasty and overwrought."¹⁰⁰⁴ Set in Canada, *Blood Sister* shows the story of "tough biker-chick-type girl" who, after overdosing on drugs, has been raped and robbed, and is then discovered by an order of nuns. She is "rescued, nursed, befriended, spiritually guided, and converted"¹⁰⁰⁵ by an older nun, herself a former tough girl drug addict, who was converted by an even older nun, who was herself saved by an even older nun in a long chain of saved tough-girls going all the way back to the order's foundress in seventeenth century New France, who converted a tough Huron girl, who had used a tomahawk to "decapitate

⁹⁹⁹ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 970.

¹⁰⁰⁰ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 971.

¹⁰⁰¹ Jacobs, "The Brothers Incandenza," p. 273.

¹⁰⁰² Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Constance Garnett, vol. 1 (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1957), p. 241.

¹⁰⁰³ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 185.

¹⁰⁰⁴ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, pp. 703, 689.

¹⁰⁰⁵ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 704.

Jesuit missionaries.¹⁰⁰⁶ The biker girl herself becomes a nun in the same order, nicknamed “Blood Sister,” and becomes obsessed with saving her own tough-girl. She eventually finds a cocaine addict, whom she guides towards salvation, locking the addict in a sacristy to get her to withdraw from cocaine. The addict is at first full of mischief, trying to trick the Trappists who are (implausibly) hanging around the urban convent into breaking their vow of silence, “farting on purpose during matins and vespers,” and so on.¹⁰⁰⁷ But she eventually comes around and enters the novitiate. Unfortunately, she is then “found blueely dead in her novitiate’s cot, her habit’s interior pockets stuffed with all kinds of substances and paraphernalia and her arm a veritable forest of syringes.”¹⁰⁰⁸ Blood Sister can’t believe that her convert has relapsed into cocaine and killed herself by overdose. She investigates the death, and it turns out that the girl was actually killed by the Mother Superior of the order, who killed her in order to protect the Vice-Mother Superior. This Vice-Mother Superior is the very nun who originally converted Blood Sister, but she has since suffered “hidden degenerative recidivist soul-rot” and gone back to taking drugs, and then to dealing drugs through the order’s charitable works in order to finance her addiction. In the film’s climactic fight scene, the Mother Superior and Vice-Mother Superior are beating up Blood Sister. The Mother Superior raises the tomahawk of the Huron girl saved by the order’s founder (which has been preserved as a second-class relic) to decapitate Blood Sister. But then the Vice-Mother Superior “has a moment of epiphanic anti-recidivist spiritual clarity,” and saves Blood Sister by hitting the Mother Superior in the head, apparently with a wooden crucifix snatched from the wall. Then Blood Sister picks up the tomahawk and stands facing the Vice-Mother Superior, who still holds the crucifix. They stare at her for a while, and then Blood Sister drops the tomahawk (accidentally hitting the Mother Superior who is still lying on the ground), and walks out of the convent.¹⁰⁰⁹

¹⁰⁰⁶ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 713.

¹⁰⁰⁷ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 705.

¹⁰⁰⁸ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 711.

¹⁰⁰⁹ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, pp. 711-713.

One of the students at E.T.A. interprets *Blood Sister* as having an “ironic anti-Catholic subthesis”: she exchanges the “habit” of drug addiction for the “habit” worn by a nun, but at root the two are both “will-obliterating” addictions.¹⁰¹⁰ The various layers are hard to untangle here. The film is surely meant in part to show the difficulty of overcoming addiction, and the danger of failure which even the most promising path of Christian asceticism still holds. Moreover, it shows the destructive hypocrisy that can result from the back-sliding of a convert in organized religion. But James Incandenza’s view is of course not meant to be unproblematic. James is an alcoholic. The narrator reveals that he actually meant *Blood Sister* as a satire on Alcoholics Anonymous, which he once joined for a brief time, only to quit after a short time, “turned off by the simplistic God-stuff and covert dogma.”¹⁰¹¹ As I will argue below (section 2.8), Wallace saw such intellectual impatience with the AA’s “God-stuff” as being counter-productive. Perhaps, if James had been more patient with AA, he would not have ended up committing suicide by exploding his head in a microwave. But, in any case, the narrator’s interpretation of James’s film shows that Wallace saw the similarities between the steps of AA and the path of Christian asceticism.

2.7.3 Theological Ethics and the Monastic Tradition

Wallace’s engagement with ascetical and monastic traditions from the perspective of the double-bind of loneliness can be of help in seeing certain perennial themes of theological ethics in a new light. In the past, ascetical practices such as silence, solitude, and meditation were often seen as a subject of spiritual theology, mystical theology, or ascetical theology—rather than of theological ethics, or moral theology (as it was known in a Catholic context). But considering such practices as ways of confronting the double-bind shows how relevant they are to the enquiries of moral theology.

In a Catholic context, moral theology has for much of its history been preoccupied with the analysis of sins, considered as particular actions, and the exact culpability of those who commit sins. This history has to do with the influence of the Sacrament of Confession (or

¹⁰¹⁰ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 706.

¹⁰¹¹ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 689.

Reconciliation) on theological reflection. The Catholic practice of auricular confession naturally led to a need for consideration and classification of particular kinds of acts. This kind of reflection was present already in the penance books of early medieval Ireland, and it received a great impetus from the requirement proclaimed at The Fourth Lateran Council (1215) that all Catholics confess at least once a year.¹⁰¹² In the sixteenth century a highly elaborate and sophisticated literature of “casuistry,” examining all the circumstances of actions and showing the analogies between different cases, was developed.¹⁰¹³ This development was certainly necessary in some respects, but it led to de-emphasizing of the importance of virtues and the form of a human life as a whole. In the seventeenth and especially the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the flexible “high casuistry” of the sixteenth century was replaced by moral manuals which applied a more speculative and rigidly legalistic approach.¹⁰¹⁴

But the fixation on the morality—and particularly the sinfulness—of particular acts began to loosen in the twentieth century, as moral theologians shifted from considering the action to considering the person. As the Jesuit moral theologian James Keenan put it, the twentieth century saw a shift “from defining moral theology as the fixed science of human action to [...] a guide for the personal and communal development of the conscientious disciples of Christ.”¹⁰¹⁵ This shift was welcomed and given new impetus by the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), which emphasized that moral theology should focus on the Christian vocation to be conformed to Christ and strive for improvement of the world.¹⁰¹⁶

Moral theology after Vatican II has to a large extent overcome the strict separation between moral and spiritual theology. But, for understandable reasons, the elements of the tradition

¹⁰¹² See: John Mahoney, *The Making of Moral Theology: A Study of the Roman Catholic Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), ch. 1.

¹⁰¹³ See: Albert R. Jonsen and Stephen Toulmin, *The Abuse of Casuistry: A History of Moral Reasoning* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

¹⁰¹⁴ Jonsen and Toulmin, *The Abuse of Casuistry*, ch. 14; cf. James Keenan, *A History of Catholic Moral Theology in the Twentieth Century: From Confessing Sins to Liberating Consciences* (London: Continuum, 2010), pp. 3-4.

¹⁰¹⁵ Keenan, *A History*, pp. 6-7.

¹⁰¹⁶ Keenan, *A History*, pp. 95-98.

of spiritual theology that it tended to emphasize were tilted toward an optimistic appreciation of the potential of human beings to live in virtue, freedom, and happiness. This is true not only of theologians who might be considered “liberal,” such as the German Bernhard Häring (1912-1928),¹⁰¹⁷ but also of more “conservative” theologians, such as the Belgian Servais Pinckaers (1925-2008).¹⁰¹⁸ Concerned as they were with overcoming previous moral theology’s fixation on sins, they did not give as much thought as the monastic traditions had to sin in the sense of alienation from God, or existential loneliness. Looking at the monastic tradition from the perspective of the double-bind of loneliness can be a help in pursuing the goals that theologians such as Häring and Pinckaers set for theology: since confronting the double-bind without blinking is a necessary prelude to actualizing the human potential for freedom, virtue, and happiness of which they wrote.

Going back to two early controversies in moral theology and reading them in the light of the double-bind can help clarify what I mean. The first took place before moral theology had fully developed as a discipline: the controversy between Bernard of Clairvaux and the early scholastic theologian Peter Abelard. One aspect of the controversy centred on the notion of sin, and the extent to which it is possible to speak of “secret,” that is, unconscious, sin. Theologian Antonio Autiero has argued that this “fruitful debate” hinged on two ways of viewing conscience: Bernard “defended the personal meaning of conscience” as a habitual stance toward the world, whereas Abelard saw conscience as a matter of individual acts to be judged exclusively by the intention of the agent at the moment of committing them.¹⁰¹⁹ This is not the only way reading of the controversy. Autiero refers to Karl Golser, who gives a contrary reading, seeing Abelard as being more sensitive to the personal meaning of conscience, while Bernard is more concerned with the eternal order of truth.¹⁰²⁰ But recent scholarship has tended to confirm Autiero’s reading. Peter Goodman has argued that

¹⁰¹⁷ For a good overview of Häring’s work see: Keenan, *A History*, ch. 5.

¹⁰¹⁸ See, for example: Servais Pinckaers, O.P., *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, trans. Sr. Mary Thomas Noble, O.P. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995).

¹⁰¹⁹ Antonio Autiero, “*Amoris laetitia* und das sittliche Gewissen: Eine Frage der Perspektive,” in: Stephan Goetz and Caroline Witting (eds.), *Amoris laetitia: Wendepunkt für die Moraltheologie?* (Freiburg: Herder, 2016), pp. 95-113, at p. 99 (translation my own).

¹⁰²⁰ Karl Golser, *Gewissen und objective Sittenordnung* (Vienna: Wiener Dom-Verlag, 1975), pp. 39-41.

Bernard had a subtle understanding of the ability of human agents to deceive themselves, and therefore he had no use for the “clap-trap of pseudo-objectivity” common in penitential manuals.¹⁰²¹ “Assigning (or escaping from) blame,” argues the Jesuit scholar Sylvester Tan, “does not concern Saint Bernard in the way that it does many scholastic theologians.”¹⁰²²

For Bernard the important thing was to realize one’s estrangement from God, including the estrangement of ignorance, as the first step towards overcoming such alienation. And the great danger here is self-deception. Consider the following passage on excuses for sins:

There are many ways of excusing sins. One will say: ‘I didn’t do it.’ Another; ‘I did it, but I was perfectly right in doing it.’ If it was wrong he may say: ‘It isn’t all that bad.’ If it was decidedly harmful, he can fall back on: ‘I meant well.’ If the bad intention is too evident he will take refuge in the excuses of Adam and Eve and say someone else led him into it.¹⁰²³

From Bernard’s perspective, Abelard’s sophisticated analysis of the subjective conditions of culpability could not fail to appear as giving fuel to the human compulsion for self-exoneration, and therefore a way of escaping an honest confession of one’s own misery. It might well be that there is some justification to a self-exoneration, but ultimately (from Bernard’s perspective) it is not helpful to the one making it. It could be argued that Abelard’s approach is more helpful for certain persons at certain times, for whom Bernard’s approach would be an occasion of despair, but Wallace seems to describe persons for whom the converse is true: an Abelard-like approach is a trap, and a Bernard-like approach offers some hope.

Like Bernard, Wallace was deeply sensitive to the human compulsion for self-exoneration and its dangers. Many of the *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* raise this theme. The desire to excuse one’s own faults arises from the fear of loneliness, but ultimately it feeds into loneliness. In *Infinite Jest* the faithful of Alcoholics Anonymous clutch their heads whenever a speaker seems to intent on giving *reasons* for why they became addicted. Even if the

¹⁰²¹ Godman, *Paradoxes of Conscience*, p. 7.

¹⁰²² Sylvester George Tan, “Perceval’s Unknown Sin: Narrative Theology in Chrétien’s Story of the Grail,” in: *Arthuriana* 24.3 (2014), pp. 129-157, at p. 142.

¹⁰²³ Bernard of Clairvaux, *De gradibus humilitatis et superbiae*, XVII,45; *The Steps of Humility*, p. 73.

reasons are in themselves quite understandable, it is not helpful *for the addict* to think too much about them. When one woman goes on and on about the horrible childhood that led her to run away from home and become an addict to forget, her AA audience reacts as follows:

[F]aces in the hall are averted and heads clutched and postures uneasily shifted in empathetic distress at the look-what-happened-to-poor-me invitation implicit in the tale, the talk's tone of self-pity itself less offensive [...] than the subcurrent of explanation, an appeal to exterior *Cause* that can slide, in the addictive mind, so insidiously into *Excuse* that any causal attribution is in Boston AA feared, shunned, punished by empathic distress. The *Why* of the Disease is a labyrinth it is strongly suggested all AAs boycott, inhabited as the maze is by the twin minotaurs of *Why Me?* and *Why Not?*, a.k.a. Self-Pity and Denial[.]¹⁰²⁴

Bernard's approach to sin precisely parallels the AA approach to addiction. It can be objected that moral theology will never be able to dispense with the sort of analysis of action and culpability that Abelard gave. This is true. Nevertheless, insofar as it is concerned with helping persons come to the self-knowledge that they need to develop morally, it can also learn from Bernard's (and Wallace's) sensitivity to the danger that such analysis can be a trap that impedes rather than fosters the knowledge of human misery that is a necessary starting point.

The controversy between Bernard and Abelard finds remarkable parallels in one of the most famous of all controversies in moral theology: that caused by Pascal's polemic against Jesuit casuists in *The Provincial Letters*. Pascal's younger sister, Jacqueline, had entered the Cistercian convent of Port-Royal, a center of the Jansenist movement, a strict Augustinian reform movement in French Catholicism. Pascal had originally been opposed to his sister entering Port-Royal, but later came to approve of her step, and through her influence, began trying to live according to the austere Jansenist ideal, and later was to become the ablest apologist of the Jansenists in their controversies with the Jesuits.¹⁰²⁵ By far the most important author for the Jansenists, and hence for Pascal's theological thought, was St. Augustine. As Cistercians, however, the nuns at Port-Royal were also heavily influenced by

¹⁰²⁴ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 374.

¹⁰²⁵ See: Francis X. J. Coleman, *Neither Angel nor Beast: The Life and Work of Blaise Pascal* (London: Routledge, 1986).

the later monastic tradition, and particularly by the greatest Cistercian writer, St. Bernard. Thus, Pascal too was influenced by Bernard's understanding of the human condition.¹⁰²⁶

In 1656, Pascal began publishing a series of anonymous letters "to a provincial gentleman by one of his friends," defending the Jansenists against their critics, and especially the Jesuits, which were to become known as *The Provincial Letters*. The main point at issue was the doctrine of predestination. The Jansenists defended the Augustinian teaching that God "predestines" those whom he wants to save to Heaven, and then moves them by His grace to attain it. Those who are predestined are so not because of their own merits, but purely gratuitously. The Jesuit theologian Luis de Molina (1535-1600) argued that the usual interpretations of Augustine's position amounted to a denial of human free will, and developed an alternate position in which God foreknows what persons will freely do, and then arranges circumstances such that the elect will chose the right things. This led to violent controversies between the Jansenists and Jesuit theologians. The first three of Pascal's letters treat directly of the problem of predestination and grace, but the later letters are concerned more with the consequences of the opposing views especially in regard to sin.

As we saw above (2.7.2), the Jesuit founder, St. Ignatius of Loyola, was deeply influenced by the monastic tradition of asceticism. However, in their handbooks written to help confessors who had to deal with the problems of persons from all walks of life, the Jesuits elaborated a casuistry that is focused on the factors affecting the culpability of individual acts rather than existential situation of estrangement from God. The attempt was rather to "lighten the burden of conscience on the scrupulous and troubled."¹⁰²⁷ Authors such as Tomás Sanchez (1550-1610), Leonardus Lessius (1554-1623), and Antonio Escobar (1589-1669) gave detailed accounts of different situations in which a person could find himself, and the psychological and social factors that could mitigate his guilt in a particular situation. For example, a nobleman in a society in which status depends on honor, which in turn required the

¹⁰²⁶ See: Simon Icard, *Port-Royal et saint Bernard de Clairvaux (1608-1709): Saint-Cyran, Jansénius, Arnauld, Pascal, Nicole, Angélique de Saint-Jean* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2010); Hans Flasche, "Bernhard von Clairvaux als Geistesahne Pascals: Ein Beitrag zur Erhellung der abendländischen Kultureinheit," in: *Sacris Erudiri* 5 (1953), pp. 331-360.

¹⁰²⁷ Jonsen and Toulmin, *The Abuse of Casuistry*, p. 168.

avenging of insults, would be less culpable in killing someone in a duel than someone who killed without such social pressures.¹⁰²⁸

Pascal considered such apparent moral “laxity” or permissiveness of to be a weak point in Jesuit theology, and so it was partly for rhetorical reasons that he concentrated so much on that aspect of their teaching. But he was also genuinely scandalized by a method which he thought ended up explaining human sin away, rather than addressing it at its roots, and thus opening up a path toward salvation. In the first letter, he compares the human person to a man beset by robbers and left for dead, who calls for doctors, who give him contrary opinions:

The first examines his injuries, judges them fatal and tells him that God alone can give him back his lost strength. The second then arrives, and, wanting to please him, says that he still has sufficient strength left to reach home, insulting the first one, who holds the opposite view, and resolving to ruin him.¹⁰²⁹

The first doctor is the Jansenists, and the second the Jesuits. For Pascal, a necessary task of theology was to help persons to see the seriousness of their condition in order that they might come to a cure. Giving a duelist excuses for his addiction to honor and status only increases his misery. “This is the honour which has always been the idol of men possessed by a worldly spirit.”¹⁰³⁰ This “possession” is conceived of by Pascal as something very like addiction.

At times, Pascal expresses his indignation at the Jesuits in terms of the eternal law of God, which he sees them as watering down: “[T]he honour of Christians consists in observing God’s commandments.”¹⁰³¹ This appeal to the commandments has led some recent theologians, such as Paul Valadier, to criticize Pascal for an overly legalistic approach to

¹⁰²⁸ Jonsen and Toulmin, *The Abuse of Casuistry*, ch. 11.

¹⁰²⁹ Blaise Pascal, *The Provincial Letters*, trans. A.J. Krailsheimer (London: Penguin Books, 1988), Letter II, p. 46. The image evokes the parable of the good Samaritan in the Gospel of Luke (10:25-37), and the interpretation is based on that of Augustine in *De Natura et Gratia* (Cf: Mahoney, *The Making of Moral Theology*, p. 49).

¹⁰³⁰ Pascal, *The Provincial Letters*, Letter XIV, p. 220.

¹⁰³¹ Pascal, *The Provincial Letters*, Letter XIV, p. 220.

morality, and to praise his Jesuit opponents for having a better idea of the way in which human action is always done in concrete circumstances.¹⁰³²

Others, however, have shown the subtlety and continued relevance of Pascal's approach to sin. In an important recent study, William Wood has shown the importance of self-deception in Pascal's account of sin. The effect of "original sin" for Pascal is that human beings fall into a state where they are constantly deceiving themselves. They have an aversion to the truth about themselves, and it is this that prevents them from coming to God.¹⁰³³ We saw above (1.2) that there are strong resemblances between Pascal's account of diversion and Wallace's. Now we can see that resemblance more deeply. Both Pascal and Wallace see a kind of deep-level pain in the human heart from which persons are fleeing, and the first step to overcoming that pain is to face it, and its consequences, squarely, without self-deceptive excuses.

Certainly, Pascal's critics are right that he does not always appreciate the necessity of weighing circumstances, and the importance of considering actions in a social context. Moreover, his Jansenist pessimism about the corruption of nature does blind him to the goodness that can still be present in imperfect human striving. Nevertheless, moral theologians would do well to take his polemic seriously. There is a need for more reflection on how honest knowledge of one's own brokenness and sinfulness is a necessary foundation for forming moral character. Wallace can help us find in both Bernard and Pascal possible resources for such an attempt. The challenge facing moral theology today is to find a way to integrate insights such as those of Bernard and Pascal into moral teaching without falling into a counter-productive neo-Jansenist moral rigorism. Antonio Autiero has argued that it is precisely this challenge that is at stake in debates over Pope Francis's recent Apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, on the pastoral care of families. *Amoris Laetitia* has caused controversies in the Church because of an attention to mitigating factors in marriages which

¹⁰³² See: Paul Valadier, *Rigorisme contre liberté morale: Les Provinciales: actualité d'une polémique antijésuite* (Paris: Edition Lessius, 2013); Jonsen and Toulmin, *The Abuse of Casuistry*, ch. 12; Martin Thurner, "Tomás Sanchez (1550-1610)," in: Hilpert (ed.), *Christliche Ethik im Porträt*, pp. 387-406.

¹⁰³³ William Wood, *Blaise Pascal on Duplicity, Sin, and the Fall: The Secret Instinct* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

the Church considers “irregular.” Conservative critics have argued that Pope Francis has watered down the objectivity of the moral law. Thus, at first glance, there seems to be an obvious resemblance between Pope Francis and Abelard and the Jesuit casuists on the one hand, and between his conservative critics and Bernard and Pascal on the other. But Autiero argues that Pope Francis really resembles Bernard more, insofar as he puts the focus on the whole form of a human life, rather than on individual acts.¹⁰³⁴ Autiero seems to me to have raised the key question, but it is a question that requires further reflection. I would myself be inclined to disagree with Autiero, and see Francis as more similar to the Jesuit casuist. But one of the things that gives me pause is the example of Wallace’s approach. For Wallace combines a Pascalian realism about the dire nature of the human condition, with a Pope Francis-like understanding for the difficulties that well-intentioned human beings face in their choices, without a trace of Jansenist rigorism.

2.8 WORSHIP

2.8.1 “The role religion plays in your life, and work”

In 2006, Wallace gave a public reading of his essay “The View from Mrs. Thompson’s” at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles. In the Q&A, a young man asked the following question: “I’m just wondering if you could say a little bit about the role religion plays in your life, and work. Cause you mentioned going to church: do you still go to church?”¹⁰³⁵ By this point it should already be clear that religion played an important role in Wallace’s work, and that for him work and life were not neatly separable. “We could have a long argument about whether in fact I write about it or not,” Wallace said in response. “Sometimes I feel like it’s sort of the only thing that’s interesting and it’s all I write about.”¹⁰³⁶ At this point it will be helpful to turn explicitly to the scholarly literature on Wallace and religion, to help synthesize some of the aspects that I have discussed.

¹⁰³⁴ Autiero, “*Amoris laetitia* und das sittliche Gewissen,” pp. 98-102.

¹⁰³⁵ Bustillos, “Philosophy, Self-Help,” p. 136.

¹⁰³⁶ Bustillos, “Philosophy, Self-Help,” p. 137.

As Matthew Mullins has pointed out in his recent study of Wallace and religion, research on Wallace and religion has tended to fall into three basic groups. Some, like Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly, take Wallace to be a sort Nietzschean nihilist, and cannot accurately be called religious. Others, among whom Mullins includes Michael J. O'Connell, have argued that Wallace is indeed religious and can even be thought of as a Christian writer. Finally, a third group holds that Wallace was "undoubtedly committed to faith, but not to the orthodoxies of any particular religion." Instead, this last group believes he had a pragmatic, post-secular commitment to faith itself, apart from any specific content to that faith.¹⁰³⁷ This third position is the one for which Mullins himself argues "those who reject or dismiss Wallace's spiritual convictions underread him, and those who would argue that he is a Christian writer overread him."¹⁰³⁸ I think that Mullins is essentially right, but I would want to qualify his account in two respects. First, I want to point to an ambiguity in the account of "post-secular faith" that he (rightly) sees as the scholarly consensus view of Wallace and religion. In some scholars, such as Lee Konstantinou, the exclusion of positive content is taken as a Derridean refusal of metaphysics. This seems to me too strong, so that their reading of Wallace is not distinct enough from that of Dreyfus and Kelly. There is an openness and unresolved character to Wallace's approach to faith to which such readings do not do full justice. Second, I think that Mullins himself "overreads" Michael J. O'Connell's claim that Wallace can be read as a Christian writer. O'Connell was not claiming that Wallace was himself a dogmatic Christian, but rather that his work places itself within a tradition of American Christian existentialist writing that includes figures such as Flannery O'Connor and Walker Percy. Thus, I think that O'Connell's position is actually much closer to Mullins's than Mullins seems to suggest.

In their popular work on the religious situation of contemporary culture, *All Things Shining*, the philosophers Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly claim that Wallace offers "the

¹⁰³⁷ Matthew Mullins, "Wallace, Spirituality, and Religion," in: Ralph Clare (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to David Foster Wallace* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 190-202, at p. 192.

¹⁰³⁸ Mullins, "Wallace, Spirituality, and Religion," p. 193.

most sensitive current account of the sadness and lostness of the present age.¹⁰³⁹ This sadness they see as following from what Nietzsche famously called “the death of God.” For Dreyfus and Kelly, Wallace represents a stage of culture for whom the death of God has become so unquestioned that even the memory of the sacred has faded:

For one finds in Wallace no hope for salvation by God, nor even any resignation to the loss of this hope. Indeed, hope and resignation of this sort are moods almost completely absent in Wallace. He seems to have lost even the memory for the sacred as it was traditionally understood; any notion, that is, of an external source of meaning for the re- turn of which one could legitimately hope or to the loss of which one could properly be resigned.¹⁰⁴⁰

On their reading Wallace is a nihilist in the sense that he does not see any “source of meaning” in reality, and they go on to claim that Wallace holds the only hope for a meaningful human life to be found in the willful imposition of meaning on reality by the human subject: “[T]he sacred in Wallace—insofar as he can see such a phenomenon at all—is something *we impose* upon experience; there is nothing *given* about it at all.”¹⁰⁴¹ Dreyfus and Kelly even suggest that Wallace’s suicide on September 12, 2008 shows that such a nihilist approach to the meaning of life does not work. Wallace’s suicide is not only the result of “neurophysiological and neurochemical” problems, but also a “warning” to a nihilistic culture: “the proverbial canary in the coal mine of modern existence.”¹⁰⁴²

Dreyfus and Kelly’s interpretation of Wallace has been rejected by most Wallace scholars. Marshall Boswell calls their reading of his suicide a “deeply offensive exploitation.”¹⁰⁴³ And more generally, as Mullins notes, “most scholars maintain that there is more to Wallace’s spirituality than [...] nihilism.”¹⁰⁴⁴ We have seen that there are certain passages in Wallace which give a color of plausibility to the Dreyfus-Kelly interpretation. Wallace does claim that

¹⁰³⁹ Dreyfus and Kelly, *All Things Shining*, p. 21.

¹⁰⁴⁰ Dreyfus and Kelly, *All Things Shining*, p. 45.

¹⁰⁴¹ Dreyfus and Kelly, *All Things Shining*, p. 47.

¹⁰⁴² Dreyfus and Kelly, *All Things Shining*, pp. 23, 26.

¹⁰⁴³ Boswell, “Trickle-Down Citizenship,” p. 470.

¹⁰⁴⁴ Mullins, “Wallace, Spirituality, and Religion,” p. 192.

in our times it is necessary “to *make up* a lot of our own morality and our own values.”¹⁰⁴⁵ But, as Jeffrey Severs and others have shown, and as we saw above (2.6.1), Wallace’s work seriously complicates the idea of “making up” values.

Lee Konstantinou has pointed out that Dreyfus and Kelly neglect the element of “submission” that Wallace includes in his descriptions of faith, and which seems to be the opposite of “imposition.” Dreyfus and Kelly, Konstantinou argues “are correct to call Wallace an atheist” but they are incorrect to see his idea of the sacred as being entirely a matter of imposing meaning by force of will.¹⁰⁴⁶

But what does Konstantinou mean by the claim that Wallace is an “atheist”? He admits that this is a strange claim, given the fact that Wallace “tried to convert to Catholicism,” and especially given the fact that Wallace claimed in the Kenyon Commencement Speech that “there is actually no such thing as atheism.”¹⁰⁴⁷ But Konstantinou thinks that “atheist” can still be an accurate description of the kind of faith towards which Wallace’s fiction points, since he sees it as a faith that “lacks metaphysical ground,” and does not “advocate specific ontological claims.”¹⁰⁴⁸ “A new form of secular belief, a religious vocabulary (God, prayer) that is emptied out of any specific content and is engineered to confront the possibly insuperable condition of postmodernity.”¹⁰⁴⁹ Konstantinou compares Wallace’s faith to the “radical atheism” of Jacques Derrida, as interpreted by Martin Hägglund.¹⁰⁵⁰ Against certain interpreters, such as Kevin Hart, Jean-Luc Marion, and John Caputo, who see Derrida’s critique of metaphysics as being (ultimately and with qualifications) reconcilable with the tradition of “negative theology” of Christian mystics such as Pseudo-Dionysius and Meister Eckhart, who emphasized that God is beyond all metaphysical categories, Hägglund reads

¹⁰⁴⁵ Lipsky, *Although of Course*, p. 159.

¹⁰⁴⁶ Lee Konstantinou, *Cool Characters: Irony and American Fiction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), pp. 331-332, note 10.

¹⁰⁴⁷ Konstantinou, *Cool Characters*, p. 331, note 10; Wallace, “Kenyon Commencement Speech,” p. 362.

¹⁰⁴⁸ Konstantinou, *Cool Characters*, p. 166.

¹⁰⁴⁹ Konstantinou, *Cool Characters*, p. 170.

¹⁰⁵⁰ Konstantinou, *Cool Characters*, p. 166.

Derrida as being a “radical” atheist, insofar as he critiques not only the idea of God as absolute presence, but also the very desire for such presence. On Hägglund’s reading, Derrida shows that temporality and vulnerability are the very conditions of desire, and thus the desire for immortality and invulnerability are always illusions, contradicted by the roots in the desire for a very temporal survival. “If one can only desire the mortal, one cannot desire immortality, since it would eliminate the mortal *as mortal*.”¹⁰⁵¹ Contrary to the claims of theology, “the temporal finitude of survival is not a lack of being that we desire to overcome.”¹⁰⁵² Rather, it is the very temporality and vulnerability of life that makes us care about life: “If life were fully present in itself—if it were not haunted by past and future, by what has been and what may be—there would be no reason to care about life, since nothing could happen to it.”¹⁰⁵³ Hence Derrida’s appropriation of religious language always transforms the meaning of such language. “Messianic hope is for Derrida a hope for temporal survival, faith is always faith in the finite, and the desire for God is a desire for the mortal, like every other desire.”¹⁰⁵⁴

Hägglund seems to me to give a plausible reading of Derrida.¹⁰⁵⁵ But Konstantinou’s reading of Wallace as holding a similar “radical atheism” seems to me not quite right. There are indeed passages in Wallace which seem to support such a reading. In the “Kenyon Commencement Speech” he emphasizes that his use of religious language is not about “big fancy questions of life after death.” Rather, the truth that he is getting at is “about life *before* death.”¹⁰⁵⁶ In his review-essay of Joseph Frank’s biography of Dostoevsky, Wallace asks the question,

¹⁰⁵¹ Hägglund, *Radical Atheism*, p. 120.

¹⁰⁵² Martin Hägglund, “The Radical Evil of Deconstruction: A Reply to John Caputo,” in: *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 11.2 (2011), pp. 126-150, at p. 133.

¹⁰⁵³ Hägglund, “The Radical Evil of Deconstruction,” p. 133.

¹⁰⁵⁴ Hägglund, *Radical Atheism*, p. 120.

¹⁰⁵⁵ For a probing critique of Hägglund’s thesis see: John Caputo, “The Return of Anti-Religion: From Radical Atheism to Radical Theology,” in: *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory*, 11.2 (2011), pp. 32–125; for a response to that critique see: Hägglund, “The Radical Evil of Deconstruction.”

¹⁰⁵⁶ Wallace, “Kenyon Commencement Speech,” p. 363.

Does this guy Jesus Christ's life have something to teach me even if I don't, or can't, believe he was divine? [...] Can I still believe in JC or Mohammed or Whoever even if I don't believe they were actual relatives of God? Except what would that mean: 'believe in'?¹⁰⁵⁷

Konstantinou reads this as evidence for Wallace's radical atheism: he wants to reinterpret faith in a way that excludes its traditional content.¹⁰⁵⁸ We recall Wallace's claim, in his introduction to an issue of the *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, that whenever someone brought up the doctrinal content of their religious beliefs, "I find myself looking at my watch or shifting my feet, immediately and deeply bored."¹⁰⁵⁹

On the other hand, there are also texts which tell against Konstantinou's reading. In the very same introduction in which he speaks of boredom at specific religious content, Wallace speaks in terms which are actually closer to negative theology than to "radical atheism." He writes: "[T]he stuff that's truly interesting about religion is inarticulable [...] there's nothing about it I really *know*, and nothing about it that anybody, I don't think, really *knows*."¹⁰⁶⁰ Religious language, he says, is "expressive of a self's heart's special tangle, of a knowing and verbal self's particular tortured relation to what is unknow- and -sayable."¹⁰⁶¹ If this is Derridean, it is closer to John Caputo's Derrida than to Martin Hägglund's. At times Wallace speaks of relation to the unsayable and unknowable precisely in terms of a sort of immortality, albeit not personal immortality. Recall the email to Robert Bolger, quoted at length above (2.6.3), in which Wallace writes, "identification with God yiel[d]s 'immortality,' since the part of us that is or is-in God can clearl[y] not be a[n]nihilated the way the individual ego can."¹⁰⁶² As we saw, this can be read as a sort of pantheistic, or Buddhist mysticism—in the next line Wallace writes, "It's like the old joke: Q: What did the mystic say to the hot dog vendor? A: Make me one with everything"—or it can be read as a sort of

¹⁰⁵⁷ Wallace, "Joseph Frank's Dostoevsky," pp. 269-270.

¹⁰⁵⁸ Konstantinou, *Cool Characters*, p. 331, note 10.

¹⁰⁵⁹ Wallace, "Quo Vadis," p. 8.

¹⁰⁶⁰ Wallace, "Quo Vadis," p. 8.

¹⁰⁶¹ Wallace, "Quo Vadis," p. 8.

¹⁰⁶² Bolger, "A Less 'Bullshitty' Way to Live," p. 45.

negative theology, in which the “unsayable” is somehow beyond being. But, in any case, it is not radical atheism in Hägglund’s sense.

Moreover, when Wallace says “I don’t, or can’t, believe” in specific religious doctrines, one needn’t necessarily take this as meaning that he is committed to the rejection of such beliefs on account of a Derridean refusal of metaphysics. As we have seen, Wallace studied Derrida, and other critics of metaphysics closely, but he was never fully committed to their project. The unsayable was the unknowable, and yet Wallace often spoke of it as “something bigger.” Consider the following passage from a magazine interview Wallace gave in 1996:

If you’re about 30, believing in something bigger than you is not a choice. You either do or you’re a walking dead man, just going through the motions. Concepts like duty and fidelity may sound quaint but we’ve inherited the best and the worst, and we’ve got to make it up as we go along. I absolutely believe in something, even though I don’t know what it is. And those friends of mine who are religious... I envy them because they don’t have to think about it. You want to sleep with somebody who’s not your wife? It’s a sin and that’s the end of it.¹⁰⁶³

Note that here Wallace even seems to speak with something like regret about his not being able to affirm the doctrines of a particular religion. He “envies” his friends who can, because the specific content gives them more definite guidance than his vague sense of an unknowable, unsayable, “something bigger” gives him.

This is the context in which I would interpret Wallace’s various experiments with trying to join religious denominations. Wallace often mentions going to church in his autobiographical creative nonfiction. Thus in “The View from Mrs. Thompson’s,” a reading of which provoked the question with which I began this section, Wallace writes of going over to the house of Mrs. Thompson, a lady whom he knows from “church” to watch the events of September 11, 2001 unfold on television in the following terms:

The church I belong to is on the south side of Bloomington, near where my house is. Most of the people I know well enough to ask if I can come over and watch their TV are members of my church. It’s not one of those churches where people throw Jesus’ name around a lot or talk

¹⁰⁶³ David Foster Wallace, “1458 Words,” in: *Speak Magazine* 2 (1996), p. 42; cf. Mullins, “Wallace, Spirituality, and Religion,” p. 191.

about the End Times, but it's fairly serious, and people in the congregation get to know each other well and to be pretty tight.¹⁰⁶⁴

And a little later in the essay, Wallace describes how the church ladies at Mrs. Thompson's house sit silently watching "the horror" of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, and pray in an unassuming manner: "No one in Mrs. Thompson's crew would ever be so nauseous as to try to get everybody to pray aloud or form a prayer circle, but you can still tell what they're all doing."¹⁰⁶⁵ And Wallace, too, describes how he prays, prays that his cynicism about President George W. Bush is not justified. The simple prayer of the church ladies inspires him to pray that Bush is not "just some soulless golem or nexus of corporate interests dressed up in a suit," but rather something more like the statesmen whom the innocent ladies from his church see: "Make no mistake, this is mostly a good thing [...] this is good to pray this way. It's just a bit lonely to have to. Truly decent, innocent people can be taxing to be around."¹⁰⁶⁶ The loneliness seems to stem from the fact that a part of Wallace is always too skeptical to be fully at one with the others.

Wallace seems to hint that Mrs. Thompson is a Catholic—she can read Latin, the liturgical language of Roman Catholicism, and has a prayer of St. Francis hanging on her wall.¹⁰⁶⁷ But D.T. Max reveals in his biography that Wallace was actually using "church" as a euphemism for Alcoholics Anonymous. In order to preserve anonymity Wallace routinely called going to AA meetings "attending church" and friends from AA "friends from church."¹⁰⁶⁸ Nevertheless, Wallace did at times attend actual churches. With the Poag family, friends from AA in Illinois, he occasionally attended their Mennonite church. One of the Poags recalls as follows:

I remember him saying that for "organized religion" he thought Mennonites probably had it pretty close to "right" but he was generally distrusting of institutionalized faith and any sort of

¹⁰⁶⁴ David Foster Wallace, "The View from Mrs. Thompson's," in: *Consider the Lobster*, pp. 128-140, at p. 135.

¹⁰⁶⁵ Wallace, "The View from Mrs. Thompson's," p. 140.

¹⁰⁶⁶ Wallace, "The View from Mrs. Thompson's," p. 140.

¹⁰⁶⁷ Wallace, "The View from Mrs. Thompson's," pp. 137, 139. She also, however, has the "Desiderata" by Methodist poet Max Ehrmann on the wall (p. 137).

¹⁰⁶⁸ Max, *Every Love Story*, p. 263.

dogmatic interpretation of the Bible. He liked people at my church, but was always a little uneasy with the idea of organized religion. He did seem to like the teachings of the Mennonite religion and found much of it valuable for reflection and growth...¹⁰⁶⁹

But Wallace had a more enduring interest in Catholicism. His college roommate, Mark Costello, was a Catholic who had even thought about becoming a priest.¹⁰⁷⁰ Later, he fell in love with the poet Mary Karr, while she was converting to Catholicism. This apparently led Wallace to begin the formal process for reception into the Church, the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults (RCIA), but the priest “told him he had too many questions to be a believer, and he let the issue drop.”¹⁰⁷¹ In interviews he claimed to have twice begun RCIA:

Brought up an atheist, he has twice failed to pass through the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults, the first step toward becoming a Catholic. The last time, he made the mistake of referring to “the cult of personality surrounding Jesus.” That didn’t go over big with the priest, who correctly suspected Wallace might have a bit too much skepticism to make a fully obedient Catholic.¹⁰⁷²

There is some uncertainty about whether Wallace was ever actually baptized. In “A Supposedly Fun Thing” he describes receiving Holy Communion, and of being familiar with the way ordinary communion hosts taste as opposed to hosts on a cruise ship, which he wouldn’t have known if he had never been fully received into the Church by being baptized.¹⁰⁷³ Michael O’Connell argues that this was imaginative license, and that Wallace was never baptized, although he would have attended church while in RCIA.¹⁰⁷⁴ O’Connell thinks “sometime between [Wallace’s] experience on the cruise ship in March of 1995 and [an interview with Streitfeld] in March of 1996, Wallace had ceased to identify, and worship, with the Catholic Church,” although he notes that there are some signs of continued engagement with Catholicism later on.¹⁰⁷⁵ In 1999 Wallace referred to himself as a Catholic in

¹⁰⁶⁹ Ervin Beck, “David Foster Wallace Among the Mennonites,” in: *Journal of the Center for Mennonite Writing* 4.6 (2012): <https://mennonitewriting.org/journal/4/6/david-foster-wallace-among-mennonites/> (accessed September 18, 2018).

¹⁰⁷⁰ Max, *Every Love Story*, p. 19.

¹⁰⁷¹ Max, *Every Love Story*, p. 166.

¹⁰⁷² Streitfeld, “The Wasteland,” p. 69; cf. Stein, “David Foster Wallace,” p. 93.

¹⁰⁷³ Wallace, “A Supposedly Fun Thing,” p. 323.

¹⁰⁷⁴ O’Connell, “Your temple is self and sentiment,” p. 270.

¹⁰⁷⁵ O’Connell, “Your temple is self and sentiment,” p. 270, p. 289, note 9.

two postcards to writer Don DeLillo, for whom he had a Mass offered.¹⁰⁷⁶ At the time he was engaged to marry Catholic social worker Juliana Harms, with whom he had discussed conversion.¹⁰⁷⁷

Ultimately, whether he was a practicing Catholic or not, Wallace maintained a certain skeptical distance from Catholic doctrine. As O'Connell argues, "Wallace was repeatedly drawn toward faith but was unable to let go of the doubts that kept him from fully surrendering."¹⁰⁷⁸ It is this argument of O'Connell's which led me to see his position as closer to Mullins's than the latter suggests. Like Mullins, O'Connell sees that Wallace was not a Catholic or a Christian in a dogmatic sense, although he sees him as making use of Catholic themes in his novels, and more particularly of carrying on a tradition of Catholic literature. D.T. Max remarked at a discussion that perhaps Wallace "flirted" with Catholicism because the sensual, corporeal nature of its worship appealed to him.¹⁰⁷⁹

In many ways, Wallace's use of Catholicism resembled that of the so-called "modernist" Catholic theologians of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, who saw Catholicism as an expression of an inarticulable "religious sense" in human beings, rather than as objectively revealed truth. And this resemblance is perhaps more than accidental. Catholic modernism was heavily influenced by the philosophy and psychology of religion developed by the American pragmatist William James.¹⁰⁸⁰ And Wallace too, was heavily influenced by James. James was a key influence on Alcoholics Anonymous, which Wallace attended for years, and Wallace also read James's work directly. James's pragmatism, which brackets questions of speculative truth in favor of the practical and psychological effects of

¹⁰⁷⁶ Max, *Every Love Story*, p. 322, note 11.

¹⁰⁷⁷ Max, *Every Love Story*, p. 251.

¹⁰⁷⁸ O'Connell, "Your temple is self and sentiment," p. 289, note 9.

¹⁰⁷⁹ "D.T. Max in conversation with James Wood on David Foster Wallace," panel discussion, Mahindra Humanities Center, Harvard University, December 10, 2012: <https://youtu.be/QsbKT5oudo4> (accessed September 18, 2018).

¹⁰⁸⁰ See: David G. Schultenover (ed.), *The Reception of Pragmatism in France and the Rise of Roman Catholic Modernism, 1890-1914* (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2009).

religion, provided Wallace with a way of making sense of the experience of religion, without recourse to metaphysical claims of he remained skeptical.¹⁰⁸¹

In the end it was really Alcoholics Anonymous, with its emphasis on the practical effects of praying to a “higher power,” however one defined it, that formed Wallace’s religious vision. Mary Karr was later to recollect of Wallace: “He had a kind of vague, higher-power thing.”¹⁰⁸² This had to do with his own experience of Alcoholics Anonymous, and it is something that he explores in his characters, most famously in Don Gately.

2.8.2 Alcoholics Anonymous, William James, and the Higher Power

As we saw above (1.3), Wallace saw addiction as having the same structure as the “worship” of a god: addicts give themselves over to the “substance” to which they are addicted, so fully that it becomes the “your one true friend, that you gave up all for, [...] your mother and lover and god and compadre.”¹⁰⁸³ And devotion to the substance takes on a weirdly ritualistic form, which Wallace compares to “Black Mass.”¹⁰⁸⁴ For Wallace, the best hope of dealing with this kind of self-destructive worship is to be found in the practice of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). Although in *Infinite Jest* Wallace mocks AA as well as praising it, so that some scholars have argued that AA is better read as part of the problem rather than the solution, I agree with the view of most scholars that *Infinite Jest* is meant to portray AA as part of the solution.¹⁰⁸⁵

In 1989 Wallace spent four weeks at McLean Hospital, a psychiatric hospital associated with Harvard University, being treated for suicidal depression. The psychiatrists there “told him

¹⁰⁸¹ Evans, “The Chains of Not Choosing”; Rob W. Short, “Big Books: Addiction and Recovery in the Novels of David Foster Wallace” (PhD diss., Gainesville: University of Florida, 2017), pp. 128-136.

¹⁰⁸² O’Connell, “Your temple is self and sentiment,” p. 271.

¹⁰⁸³ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 347.

¹⁰⁸⁴ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 347.

¹⁰⁸⁵ For the view of AA as part of the problem see: Holland, *Succeeding Postmodernism*, pp. 60-63, 76-77. For the view of AA as part of the solution see: Bolger, “A Less ‘Bullshitty’ Way”; Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, pp. 143-148; Evans, “The Chains of Not Choosing,” pp. 186-187; David Morris, “Lived Time and Absolute Knowing: Habit and Addiction from *Infinite Jest* to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*,” in: *Clio* 30.4 (2001), pp. 375-415; Short, “Big Books.”

that he was a hard-core alcohol and drug user and that if he didn't stop abusing both he would be dead by thirty."¹⁰⁸⁶ After leaving the Hospital he entered Granada House, a half-way house for recovering addicts, on which Ennet House in *Infinite Jest* is based. One of the things that Granada House did was force him to go daily to AA meetings. Granada House was later to post a testimonial on its website from "an ex-resident" generally thought to be Wallace.¹⁰⁸⁷ It is worth considering Wallace's testimonial, as it sums up much of his thought on addiction and recovery. Wallace describes his situation as an addict as a "dilemma":

On the one hand, I knew that drugs and alcohol controlled me, ran my life, and were killing me. On the other, I loved them—I mean really loved them, as in the sort of love where you'll do anything, tell yourself any sort of lie to keep from having to let the beloved go. [...] This was my basic situation. I both wanted help and didn't.¹⁰⁸⁸

The dilemma consists in the coincidence of two loves, or two desires. A self-destructive love of the addictive substances, and a rational desire to be free of them. The rational desire to be saved from the destruction that the substances can wreak never seems strong enough to conquer the self-destructive love of the substances. At Granada House Wallace found a community that understood this dilemma, since they lived it themselves, and helped him to escape it. The way of escape seemed "uncomfortable and undignified and dumb." Wallace "resented the radical simplicity" of AA's "advice to newcomers," but he stuck it out. The basic advice was to attend an AA meeting every single day, "make one such meeting your home group, get a sponsor and tell him the truth, get active with some kind of job in your home group, pray for help whether you believe in God or not."¹⁰⁸⁹ But, to his surprise, this advice worked: "[F]rom the perspective of almost fourteen years sober, it looks like precisely what I needed."¹⁰⁹⁰

¹⁰⁸⁶ Max, *Every Love Story*, p. 135.

¹⁰⁸⁷ [David Foster Wallace,] "An Ex-Resident's Story," Granada House (2004): <http://granadahouse.org/testimonials/an-ex-residents-story/> (accessed September 19, 2018); for the attribution to Wallace see: Bustillos, "Philosophy, Self-Help," p. 128.

¹⁰⁸⁸ [Wallace,] "An Ex-Resident's Story."

¹⁰⁸⁹ [Wallace,] "An Ex-Resident's Story."

¹⁰⁹⁰ [Wallace,] "An Ex-Resident's Story."

In *Infinite Jest*, Wallace describes this simple program at work in various characters, but above all in Don Gately. Gately comes into AA without “any God- or J.C.-background.”¹⁰⁹¹ “He had nothing in the way of a like God-concept.”¹⁰⁹² But he is so desperate to escape from the grip of his desire for drugs that he follows the AA program to the letter and kneels down every morning to pray for deliverance and every evening to give thanks for a day gone by without taking drugs. The head of Ennet House tells him: “[I]t didn’t matter at this point what he thought or believed or even said. All that mattered was what he *did*.”¹⁰⁹³ And so Gately just does it, feeling “like a true hypocrite” for praying to a Higher Power in Whom he has no belief. But, to his great astonishment, the ritual works:

About four months into his Ennet House residency, the agonizing desire to ingest synthetic narcotics had been mysteriously magically removed from Don Gately, just like the House Staff and the Crocodiles at the White Flag Group had said it would if he pounded out the nightly meetings and stayed minimally open and willing to persistently ask some extremely vague Higher Power to remove it. The desire. They said to get creakily down on his mammoth knees in the A.M. every day and ask God As He Understood Him to remove the agonizing desire, and to hit the old knees again at night before sack and thank this God-ish figure for the Substanceless day just ended, if he got through it.¹⁰⁹⁴

Gately is completely puzzled by this success:

How could some kind of Higher Power he didn’t even believe in magically let him out of the cage when Gately had been a total hypocrite in even asking something he didn’t believe in to let him out of a cage he had like zero hope of ever being let out of? [...] He couldn’t for the goddamn *life* of him understand how this thing worked, this thing that was working.¹⁰⁹⁵

The head of Ennet House tells Gately that if he goes through the motions, belief will follow: “If he did the right things, and kept doing them for long enough, what Gately thought and believed would magically change.”¹⁰⁹⁶ But this is not what Gately experiences. Aside from the

¹⁰⁹¹ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 466. “J.C.” is of course a reference to Jesus Christ.

¹⁰⁹² Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 467.

¹⁰⁹³ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 466.

¹⁰⁹⁴ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 466.

¹⁰⁹⁵ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 468.

¹⁰⁹⁶ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 466.

mere desperate prayer into the emptiness he has “no real solid understanding of a Higher Power.”¹⁰⁹⁷ Instead,

[W]hen he tries to go beyond the very basic rote automatic get-me-through-this-day-please stuff, when he kneels at other times and prays or meditates or tries to achieve a Big-Picture spiritual understanding of a God as he can understand Him, he feels Nothing—not nothing but *Nothing*, an edgeless blankness that somehow feels worse than the sort of unconsidered atheism he Came In with.¹⁰⁹⁸

But what kind of “understanding” of the Higher Power ought he to expect? Marshall Boswell suggests that Gately “clearly understands God to be a fiction.”¹⁰⁹⁹ This is a possible reading, and Boswell can point to the “agnostic-soothing riff” that Gately is ready to give newcomers about “God” in AA clichés as referring to “a sort of benign anarchy of subjective spirit.”¹¹⁰⁰ And yet, this understanding of God as a necessary fiction seems to me to determinate, and not to do enough justice to the puzzlement that Gately continues to express.

To his AA sponsor, Gately complains, “there was no way something he didn’t understand enough to even start to believe in was seriously going to be interested in helping save his ass,” but his sponsor responds “maybe anything minor-league enough for Don Gately to understand probably wasn’t going to be major-league enough to save Gately’s addled ass.”¹¹⁰¹ This fits with Wallace’s own description of religion as having to do with “what is unknow- and -sayable.”¹¹⁰² Gately seems to be looking for the wrong kind of understanding of how worship of a Higher Power helps. One AA member tells Gately a parable of a fish, which Wallace would later use in the Kenyon Commencement Speech: An old fish swims up to some young fish and asks “how’s the water,” and the young fish look at each other in puzzlement and ask “What the fuck is water?”¹¹⁰³ One way of seeing the problem with articulating the unknowable something expressed in the idea of a Higher Power is that it is

¹⁰⁹⁷ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 442.

¹⁰⁹⁸ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 442; capitalization sic.

¹⁰⁹⁹ Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, p. 146.

¹¹⁰⁰ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 366; Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, p. 145.

¹¹⁰¹ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 468.

¹¹⁰² Wallace, “Quo Vadis,” p. 8.

¹¹⁰³ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 445; cf. Wallace, “Kenyon Commencement Speech,” p. 355.

too all-embracing to be isolable. As Robert Bolger argues, perhaps one can this as “Wallace’s secular equivalent of ‘The Kingdom of God is Within You’ or his form of secular mysticism.”¹¹⁰⁴

Boswell is, however, certainly right that the approach to God that Wallace shows us with Gately is pragmatic.¹¹⁰⁵ What is important for Gately is that prayer has a practical effect in his life—it helps him to stay sober. *How* exactly prayer works, what is the ontological status of the Higher Power invoked in prayer, these are secondary questions. This, of course, fits with the pragmatic method developed by (among others) the American psychologist and philosopher William James. Ontological claims, James argued, are to be judged not so much by their being traced to indubitable first principles of thought, but rather by the practical effects that they have in human life. Pragmatism is, “*The attitude of looking away from first things, principles, ‘categories,’ supposed necessities; and of looking towards last things, fruits, consequences, facts.*”¹¹⁰⁶ Pragmatism is, as the philosopher Cornel West has put it, the “evasion of philosophy,” insofar as it brackets the questions of ultimate truth with which philosophy has tended to concern itself, in favor of the practical effects of belief in those truths.¹¹⁰⁷

James famously defended the reasonableness of choosing to believe in a religion on pragmatic grounds. For those for whom it is a live option, James argues, religion is also a *momentous option* and a *forced option*. It offers “a certain vital good” which will be gained by belief and lost through unbelief. And therefore one cannot suspend judgment about it; suspension of judgment would itself be a judgment:

We cannot escape the issue by remaining sceptical and waiting for more light, because, although we do avoid error in that way *if religion be untrue*, we lose the good, *if it be true*, just as certainly as if we positively chose to disbelieve. It is as if a man should hesitate indefinitely

¹¹⁰⁴ Robert Bolger, “A Less ‘Bullshitty’ Way,” p. 51.

¹¹⁰⁵ See: Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, p. 146.

¹¹⁰⁶ William James, “Pragmatism” [1907], in: *Pragmatism and Other Writings*, ed. Giles Gunn (London: Penguin Books, 200), pp. 1-132, at p. 29.

¹¹⁰⁷ Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1989).

to ask a certain woman to marry him because he was not perfectly sure that she would prove an angel after he brought her home.¹¹⁰⁸

James argues that it is therefore reasonable to choose to believe in a religion, and to commit to religious practices, without epistemic certitude.

In many ways, James's argument resembles Blaise Pascal's "wager" in the *Pensées*. Pascal famously argues that it is worth betting on Catholicism being true, since if it isn't one will not lose anything by betting it is, and if it is one will gain something infinite by betting on it.¹¹⁰⁹ But there are two important differences. First, for Pascal the argument is very specifically about Catholic Christianity, which he tries to show as the only consistent alternative to nihilism through many of the apologetic aphorisms. But for James, while Christianity might be the only live option for himself and his audience, other religions are equally justifiable. In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James shows the psychological similarities between religious experiences in differing traditions, and argues that the beneficial effects for life that can justify religious faith, "the permanently patient heart," and "the love of self eradicated," can "be found outside of Christianity altogether."¹¹¹⁰ The second difference is that, for Pascal, the wager is to end in complete certitude: "[Y]ou will realize that you have wagered on something certain."¹¹¹¹ By going through the motions of religion, one will be disposed to receive a supernatural gift of completely certain faith. But for James, one will never have complete certitude about the metaphysical claims of the religion that one practices, one will only have the practical certitude that the acceptance of those claims has enriched one's life. Hence, one of James's students, the philosopher George Santayana, argued that James was essentially a kind of agnostic. A peculiar sort of agnostic, certainly, since he argues *for* accepting religious claims (while most agnostics would argue *against*), but nevertheless an agnostic, since he argues that one should remain ultimately uncertain

¹¹⁰⁸ William James, "The Will to Believe," in: *Pragmatism and Other Writings*, pp. 198-218; at p. 215.

¹¹⁰⁹ Pascal, *Pensées*, pp. 121-125; L 418; B 680.

¹¹¹⁰ William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, ed. Eugene Taylor and Jeremy Carrette (London: Routledge, 2002 [1902]), p. 187.

¹¹¹¹ Pascal, *Pensées*, p. 125; L 418; B 680.

about the objective status of those claims: “[B]eliefs and opinions, if they had any objective beyond themselves, could never be sure they had attained it.”¹¹¹²

Alcoholics Anonymous found in James’s pragmatic approach to religious faith a key to their own experience. In the collaboratively written book which gave the movement its name, the chapter on the Higher Power is called “We Agnostics.”¹¹¹³ Their experience was that the hold of addiction was too great for them to free themselves, but that entrusting themselves to a power “higher” than themselves, however vaguely understood, helped. The first three of the famous “twelve steps” of the program, they sketch out how this is supposed to work:

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.¹¹¹⁴

A key realization that enabled the “agnostics” among them to accept these steps was the idea that they were *already* worshipping: “We found, too, that we had been worshippers. [...] Had we not variously worshipped people, sentiment, things, money, and ourselves?”¹¹¹⁵

In an essay which Wallace called “great,”¹¹¹⁶ Louis Hyde makes the point that every alcoholic has already experienced a power greater than themselves, namely the alcohol itself: “[E]very active alcoholic already has a higher power at work in his life: the booze.”¹¹¹⁷ As we saw above (1.3), Wallace saw addiction as a form of worship. But the worship of a higher power in the second and third steps is a different kind of worship. Wallace does describe it at times as in some sense replacing the worship of the Substance. So, in a note in *Infinite Jest*, he writes that when a newcomer starts AA, and withdraws from their substance, it “leaves an

¹¹¹² George Santayana, *Character and Opinion in the United States* (New York: George Braziller, 1955), p. 45.

¹¹¹³ *Alcoholics Anonymous: The Story of How Many Thousands of Men and Women Have Recovered from Alcoholism*, 4th ed., (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 2001), ch. 4.

¹¹¹⁴ *Alcoholics Anonymous*, p. 59.

¹¹¹⁵ *Alcoholics Anonymous*, p. 54; cf. Short, “Big Books” p. 166.

¹¹¹⁶ McCaffery, “An Expanded Interview,” p. 49.

¹¹¹⁷ Hyde, “Alcohol and Poetry,” p. 7.

enormous ragged hole in the psyche, the pain of which the newcomer's supposed to feel and be driven kneeward by and pray to have filled by Boston AA and the old Higher Power."¹¹¹⁸

AA thus became a key for Wallace to understanding the double-bind of loneliness. The double-bind is one between loneliness and worship of powers like alcohol which end up intensifying loneliness. But the solution has to do with "choosing some sort of god or spiritual-type thing to worship."¹¹¹⁹ In Wallace's inverted eudemonism, this choice of an object of worship plays a similar role to the judgement about the end of human life, the *telos* in which happiness consists, in Aristotelian ethics. But the framing of this choice in terms of worship is meant to do justice to the experience of such an object or end as somehow exceeding human power—being "higher—and also to the experience of the giving away of the self that seem to be at stake in such matters of ultimate concern.

In his little book on Wallace and religion, *The Gospel According to David Foster Wallace*, the Mormon writer Adam S. Miller argues that in Wallace's conception of the worship of something spiritual there is not meant to be any experience of transcendence. Rather, the experience is meant, in a sense, to fail, bringing the worshipper back to the immanent world. He sees therein a critique of the way religious eudemonism has often been understood:

The human drive to completion is intense and fundamental. [...] A hunger for an uppercase Substance capable of extinguishing desire looks, on the face of it, like a commitment to desire. These are the false gods we worship: whatever coincidental Substances might promise perfect release. God has himself regularly been conceived along these lines. And the heavens where he resides have often been described as a finally satisfying place reachable only by way of death.¹¹²⁰

But the "god or spiritual-type thing" of Wallace's worship is not supposed to function like such an object. Rather, Miller argues investing *any* object with transcendent hope is idolatry. The true point of worship comes, for Miller, at the moment when one realizes that it fails:

¹¹¹⁸ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 1054, note 292.

¹¹¹⁹ Wallace, "Kenyon Commencement Speech," p. 362.

¹¹²⁰ Miller, *The Gospel*, p. 26.

And when that idol fails—when it disappoints your aiming and shows itself without transcendence: immanent, disheveled, disenchanting—there will be a moment, perhaps quite brief, when all that remains of worship is a pang of raw aiming. This moment when it looks like your worship has failed is the religious moment.¹¹²¹

For, at that moment it becomes possible to pay attention to attention. And then the disappointed worshipper can see the world in a new light:

And, more, attention can come to your attention as what gives (to you) both yourself and the world. In your disappointment, the aiming that's common to every idol can show itself as "the subsurface unity of all things" and then, in this light, the world will no longer appear as something that might satisfy but, instead, as something "sacred, on fire with the same force that lit the stars."¹¹²²

Miller's reading of Wallace here is in line with the theological tradition at least on this point: God is not one more object among the objects of this world, one which is simply more satisfying. Rather, He is the transcendent source, Who is at the same time intimately close to all immanent things, because they are merely participations of His being. But Miller goes perhaps a little too far in claiming that worship does not meet with transcendence at all. Wallace is not so apodictic. He leaves the question of transcendence more open than Miller is willing to do.

In any case, Wallace's framing of the fundamental question of human practical life in terms of worship resonates with certain strands of theological ethics. But from the perspective of Christian theology his framing of worship as a response to the double-bind raises some important questions. Is there not a danger of an instrumentalization of worship here?

2.8.3 Worship, prayer, desire, and theological ethics

There have been a number of recent attempts in theological ethics to consider the moral life from the perspective of worship, liturgy, or prayer. Wallace's work can help to deepen these attempts. Indeed, in a small way, some of them have already begun to engage with Wallace.

¹¹²¹ Miller, *The Gospel*, p. xii.

¹¹²² Miller, *The Gospel*, p. xiii.

The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics, edited by Protestant theologians Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells, gives a sustained and systematic account of theological ethics through reflection on worship and liturgy. Convinced that the worship of God is the most important thing that Christians do, Hauerwas and Wells argue that Christian ethical norms are only intelligible with reference to the practices of worship in which they are embedded. “All that Christians do and do not do thus finds its intelligibility in the worship of God.”¹¹²³ The intelligibility comes from centering everything in their lives on God. This centering enables them to confront the misery and loneliness of the human condition, and begin to overcome them:

The Church is found where Jesus spent most of his time: with those whose knowledge of their neediness led them to expect most from God; with people who knew they were in slavery and exile, and who longed for the liberation that only God could bring. [...] The Church is made up of the lonely. The lonely are those who have given up the lone search and have accepted the disciplines and shared responsibilities of common life.¹¹²⁴

The practice of Christian worship thus becomes central to the way in which Christians are to live in the world. One of the contributors to the volume, Protestant theologian Philip Kenneson, argues that true worship allows the Church to recognize the forms of false or idolatrous worship prevalent in human culture, in order to overcome them:

Whereas much contemporary life is devoted to exalting and extending the reign of the gods of fashion, convenience, efficiency, novelty, violence, excess, fear, and insecurity, the *ekklesia* [Church] is called to devote itself to worshiping the only true and living God. The gospel announces the good news that these false gods need no longer hold us in bondage.¹¹²⁵

Other contributions in the volume unfold how specific Christian liturgical practices—such as confessing sins, hearing readings, offering gifts, receiving communion, and so on—can help Christians recognize specific problems and address particular moral problems that

¹¹²³ Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells, “How the Church Managed Before There Was Ethics,” in: *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), pp. 39-50, at p. 50.

¹¹²⁴ Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells, “The Gift of the Church,” in: *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*, pp. 13-27, at pp. 22-23.

¹¹²⁵ Philip Kenneson, “Gathering: Worship, Imagination, and Formation,” in: Hauerwas and Wells (eds.), *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*, pp. 53-67, at p. 63.

arise in various spheres from the treatment of the poor and racial minorities, to war, medicine, and sexuality.

A similar approach to seeing the practice of Christian worship in its relevance to life in the world to that taken by *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics* has been taken by the Calvinist philosopher James K. A. Smith in his three volume Cultural Liturgies series. The Cultural Liturgies series is meant to offer a Christian “theology of culture,” and in doing so it develops what is essentially a theological ethics built around the notion of worship. The first volume, *Desiring the Kingdom*, focuses on education. “What if,” Smith asks, “education was primarily concerned with shaping our hopes and passions—our visions of ‘the good life’—and not merely about the dissemination of data and information as inputs to our thinking?”¹¹²⁶ He tries to show how contemporary culture in fact educates hearts in precisely that way by what he calls “cultural liturgies”. For example, shopping at a shopping mall forms desires through a ritual-like engagement with spaces and images, that all hold an implicit view of the good life: “the mall has its own pedagogy, an interest in the education of desire.”¹¹²⁷ This pedagogy of desire is liturgical because it gathers the desires of many persons and focus’s them on objects from which they are to derive meaning for their lives.

Thus, in the second volume of the series *Imagining the Kingdom*, Smith gives a more detailed account of worship and how it “works.” In this volume Smith himself brings up David Foster Wallace in a brief, but highly suggestive passage.¹¹²⁸ On his reading, Wallace shows how “we construct our world and act within it on the basis of what we worship.”¹¹²⁹ Worship, Smith argues, is linked to what one *loves* in an ultimate way. “We are what we love,” and we have an innate tendency to worship the ultimate object of love, therefore, “we are what we worship.”¹¹³⁰ One of Smith’s conclusions is that Christians should intensify their engagement

¹¹²⁶ James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*, Cultural Liturgies, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), p. 18.

¹¹²⁷ Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, p. 23.

¹¹²⁸ Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, pp. 22-27.

¹¹²⁹ Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, p. 27.

¹¹³⁰ Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, p. 27.

in traditional practices of worship, in order to counteract the influence of less beneficial cultural liturgies. Smith sees the medieval monastic practice of the Liturgy of the Hours as a model here. He laments the fact that in the Calvinist tradition monastic liturgical practices were largely abandoned in favour of “de-ritualized, sermon-centric, intellectualist piety,” and argues that this was against Calvin’s intention. While Calvin had criticized the elitism and withdrawal from the world that he saw in Catholic monasticism, he had wanted to extend its formative liturgical practices to all believers.¹¹³¹

In the third volume *Awaiting the King*, Smith applies his insights to political questions. Attempting to broaden the usual understanding of politics as exclusively a matter of state power and electoral mechanisms, Smith “modes of “life in common” that fall outside the narrow interests of state and government.”¹¹³² He examines the actual modes of human solidarity at work in modern societies, the common goals that contemporary citizens pursue, the habits that are fostered to help attain those goals, and the rituals or quasi rituals that are enacted to foster such habits and to train desires on those goals. Here again Smith refers to Wallace, particularly Wallace’s examination of devotion to sports.¹¹³³ He sees that in Wallace, “the rituals of the tennis academy are also invested with the aura of the temple, the halo of devotion.”¹¹³⁴ Smith urges the Christian Church to become more aware of the rituals that are actually forming human solidarity in order to enact its own rituals in a way more calculated to fostering true solidarity.

In Smith’s work we see a theological ethics that is already beginning to take inspiration from Wallace in order to see how *worship* is vital to understanding human ethical life. The present dissertation has tried move further in the same direction using the double-bind as a way to see the choice of what to worship as involving a “forced option” to use William James’s term. But, from a theological point of view, an objection can be raised to such an approach to worship. Does it not instrumentalize and falsify worship if one approaches it with an ethical

¹¹³¹ Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, p. 155.

¹¹³² Smith, *Awaiting the King*, p. 11.

¹¹³³ Smith, *Awaiting the King*, pp. 23-26.

¹¹³⁴ Smith, *Awaiting the King*, p. 24.

concern in mind? Can one really worship if one is motivated by the desire to escape a double-bind? The Liturgical Movement of the 20th century, which tried to restore Christian worship to a central position in the Christian life, was aware of this danger. Romano Guardini devoted the last chapter *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, one of the foundational texts of the Liturgical Movement, originally published in 1918, to this question. Guardini notes that the traditional Roman liturgy seems remote from ethical concerns, serenely absorbed in the Divine Mysteries. Guardini sees this as a manifestation of a principle that he terms “the primacy of logos over ethos,” by which he means a primacy of truth and being, over acting and doing. The Liturgy is concerned with God for His own sake: with adoring Him and offering to Him, in simple acknowledgement of His Absolute Reality. But, Guardini argues, the modern age with its subordination of knowledge to practical power, does not appreciate this. He attacks pragmatists like James and the “modernistic” Catholic theologians whom they influenced, head on:

[In pragmatism] truth is no longer viewed as an independent value in the case of a conception of the universe or in spiritual matters, but as the expression of the fact that a principle or a system benefits life and actual affairs, and elevates the character and stability of the will.¹³⁵

But, he goes on to argue, this makes true worship impossible. True worship has to see the truth of the Divine as the absolutely primary thing, and prostrate itself before the Divine Mystery without ulterior motive. If this is done right, he thinks, it will certainly have ethical consequences, but these consequences are entirely secondary as far as intention goes. The very last paragraph of *The Spirit of the Liturgy* puts this point with great rhetorical force, and is worth quoting at length:

In the liturgy the Logos has been assigned its fitting precedence over the will. Hence the wonderful power of relaxation proper to the liturgy, and its deep reposefulness. Hence its apparent consummation entirely in the contemplation, adoration and glorification of Divine Truth. This is also the explanation of the fact that the liturgy is apparently so little disturbed by the petty troubles and needs of everyday life. It also accounts for the comparative rareness of its attempts at direct teaching and direct inculcation of virtue. The liturgy has something in itself reminiscent of the stars, of their eternally fixed and even course, of their inflexible order, of their profound silence, and of the infinite space in which they are poised. It is only in

¹³⁵ Romano Guardini, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, trans. Ada Lane (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1998), p. 88.

appearance, however, that the liturgy is so detached and untroubled by the actions and strivings and moral position of men. For in reality it knows that those who live by it will be true and spiritually sound, and at peace to the depths of their being; and that when they leave its sacred confines to enter life they will be men of courage.¹¹³⁶

Guardini's objection is a serious one. And yet the distance between his view and the more pragmatic one taken by Wallace is not as great as at first appears. In a way, this question is the same as the question of eudemonism and egotism that we considered in section 2.6.3 above: "[C]an you really love what you need so badly?"¹¹³⁷ But as we saw above, the apparently "ulterior" motive can really be absorbed into the love of a greater good in which one participates. A similar point could be made about worship. It is questionable whether a character like Don Gately ever really attains to the kind of worship described by Guardini, but he could certainly be understood as being on a path that leads in that direction.

The point can perhaps be made more clear if we move from a consideration of worship as *liturgy*, the corporate worship of the Church, to worship as *private prayer* of the kind that Gately practices every morning and evening in his room. As the American moral theologian Scott Hefelfinger has recently pointed out, Thomas Aquinas's treatment of prayer bears some remarkable resemblances to his eudemonistic account of the moral life.¹¹³⁸ For Aquinas prayer "interprets our desires."¹¹³⁹ That is, prayer both expresses and gives shape to the desires of the human heart. Aquinas interprets the "Our Father," the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples (Matthew 6:9-13), in this light. The Our Father, he argues, teaches us what we should desire, and in what order we should desire what we desire. The first thing we ought to desire is the final end or *telos* of our lives. Aquinas argues that this is expressed in a twofold way:

¹¹³⁶ Guardini, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, p. 95.

¹¹³⁷ Wallace, "Joseph Frank's Dostoevsky," p. 266.

¹¹³⁸ Scott Hefelfinger, "Christian Prayer, Where Grace Dances with Desire," paper presented at the Seventy-Third Annual Convention of The Catholic Theological Society of America, Indianapolis, June 9, 2018. I am grateful to Prof. Hefelfinger for sending me the MS of his paper. Cf. Christine E. McCarthy, "Moral Theology (II)—Topic Session: The Role of Grace in Moral Theology," in: *CTSA Proceedings* 73 (2018), pp. 117-118.

¹¹³⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, IIa-IIae, q. 83, a. 9, c.

Now our end is God towards Whom our affections tend in two ways: first, by our willing the glory of God, secondly, by willing to enjoy His glory. The first belongs to the love whereby we love God in Himself, while the second belongs to the love whereby we love ourselves in God. Wherefore the first petition is expressed thus: 'Hallowed be Thy name,' and the second thus: 'Thy kingdom come,' by which we ask to come to the glory of His kingdom.¹⁴⁰

This point recalls the teaching that I examined in section 2.6.3 above: the love that creatures are to have for the Creator is like the love of parts for a greater whole of which they are parts; it is primarily a love of the whole for its own sake, and only secondarily a love of their own participation therein. For Aquinas, prayer helps creatures to grow into the proper kind of love for their creator. He argues that the rest of the Our Father is concerned with desiring means for the attainment of the final end, or removing obstacles to that attainment. The final petition "deliver us from evil" is the prayer to be freed from everything that hinders human happiness. Of course, this is the prayer that most persons who pray *begin* with. Don Gately praying to make it through another day sober, is praying for deliverance from evil. But the point is that prayer is a path that leads from particular desires for deliverance to a more encompassing desire for God. Thus, the "pragmatic" approach to worship taken by Wallace and William James need not be seen as absolutely opposed to the "disinterested" approach taken by Guardini—they are rather different stages on the same path.

From the vantage point of Aquinas's theology of prayer, I think it is true that Wallace describes only the early stages of the path of prayer in his characters. In the Christian tradition the path of prayer has often been theorized as a path of friendship with God. The theologian Samuel Kimbriel, in his recent monograph *Friendship and Sacred Knowing*, has argued that the path of friendship with God is rooted in the teaching of the Gospel of John that God is in Himself a mysterious relationship of love, or friendship between God the Father and God the Son, the eternal *Logos*. This allows Christianity to understand the spiritual journey as a journey into the friendship of God Himself. Kimbriel argues that this allows Christianity to then come to a deeper understanding of human friendship as well, as a common journey into divine friendship. Moving beyond even the high estimation that ancient thinkers had for friendship. In modernity, Kimbriel argues, friendship suffers a crisis

¹⁴⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, IIa-IIae, q. 83, a. 9, c.

rooted in the same processes that brought about secularization. Following Charles Taylor's account of the "buffered self" of modernity, which insulates moderns from some of the vulnerability of the pre-modern "porous self," but also makes religion more difficult for them. Kimbriel argues that this buffering makes profound human friendships more difficult. Kimbriel even refers to Wallace's short story "A Radically Condensed History of Post-Industrial Life" in explicating the modern crisis of friendship.¹⁴¹ What Kimbriel does not point out is that Wallace was not only a penetrating analyst of the crisis of friendship in our time, but that Wallace also points to a way beyond it. While Wallace's work does contain many descriptions of friendship—for example, the friendships of Hal Incandenza with various of his fellow students at the E.T.A.—on the whole, the same shadows hang over Wallace's descriptions of friendship that we saw hang over his descriptions of romantic love (section 2.5 above. And yet, as this dissertation has attempted to show, Wallace's does offer a hope beyond the shadow: a worship of "some sort of god or spiritual-type thing" capable of transforming desire. A worship which would begin to heal human loneliness itself, and also open up the possibility of further victories over loneliness in a new kind of fellowship with other human beings.

¹⁴¹ Kimbriel, *Friendship as Sacred Knowing*, p. 27.

CONCLUSION: THE ESCHATOLOGICAL IMAGINATION AND THE DOUBLE-BIND

Timothy Jacobs calls Wallace's imagination "eschatological."¹⁴² He borrows the term from Joseph Frank, who used it of Dostoevsky. Frank argues that Dostoevsky imagined the "end" condition of the situations that he confronted. This end-condition is usually a situation of complete despair, but by describing it, Dostoevsky dramatizes "the supreme importance of hope for human life."¹⁴³ The word "eschatological" is of course derived from the Greek *ἔσχατος* (*eschatos*), "the last." As Jacobs points out, Wallace even uses the word *eschaton* ("the last thing," "the end of the world") as the title of a game played by students at the Enfield Tennis Academy in which nuclear war is re-enacted.¹⁴⁴ In Wallace, the eschatological element is found in his bringing his characters to absolute misery, to the very limits of what is humanly bearable. At that limit, what in AA parlance would be called "the bottom" a new hope becomes possible.

Jacobs emphasizes Wallace's resemblance to Dostoevsky in this eschatological structure. But another point of comparison might be Dante. In Dante's *Divine Comedy*, the character Dante begins lost in the dark woods of this world, without seeing a path to the goal of happiness. But after being brought to the eschatological realms of Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven, he sees his life with new clarity, and the goal of his life in "the love that moves the sun and other stars."¹⁴⁵

In the course of this dissertation I have shown how David Foster Wallace describes human beings as being caught in the endless cycles of the double-bind of loneliness, which often leads them into their own terrestrial approximation of Hell. He approaches the problem of the double bind as a novelist, but as a novelist who is engaged in what Terry Eagleton calls a

¹⁴² Jacobs, "The Brothers Incandenza," p. 290, note 4; "The Eschatological Imagination."

¹⁴³ Jacobs, "The Brothers Incandenza," citing: Joseph Frank, *Dostoevsky: The Years of Ordeal, 1850-1859* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), p. 158.

¹⁴⁴ Jacobs, "The Eschatological Imagination," pp. 23-24.

¹⁴⁵ Dante Alighieri, *Paradiso*, Canto 33, line 145, trans. Anthony Esolen, *Paradise* (New York: The Modern Library, 2007).

“rhetorical” discourse,¹¹⁴⁶ which “investigates” (to use Alasdair MacIntyre’s term¹¹⁴⁷) the ways in which human lives miss their desirable goal (their “good”) through being caught in the bind. Wallace’s investigation shows how human life is always marked by a deep level loneliness, and by a tendency to overcome that loneliness through various kinds of “flight from the self” that in the long term intensify that loneliness. But he also shows that there are features of late 20th and early 21st century Western culture that aggravate the double-bind. He shows how the modern cosmic imaginaries of the physical world as infinitely large, but finally meaningless *res extensa*, lead to anxieties of isolation and insecurity in the human subjects, who no longer see themselves as having a place in a cosmos (1.2). The flight from the loneliness of that condition often leads to a kind of perverse giving away of the self in addiction (1.2), and is exploited in economically profitable but soul-destroying ways by capitalism and consumerism (1.4). The individualism of capitalist society can in turn lead to totalitarian reactions (1.5). Wallace is particularly interested in changing relations of modern subjects to language. He sees the rise of new kinds of abstraction in modern mathematical science as leading to a questioning of the existence of any world outside the subject—a question that he takes very seriously, as expressing fears of the deepest possible loneliness (1.6). He considers also some of the ways in which intellectual culture has tried to deal with that fear in Hegelianism (1.7), and poststructuralism (1.8 and 1.9). But notes how Hegelianism can feed totalitarian appetites, and poststructuralism can lead to an alienating ironic distance from reality. Moreover, he is deeply attuned to the ways in which capitalism and consumerism are able to coopt the postmodern protest against modernity, bringing about a hypermodern world of ever greater loneliness (1.10).

But I have also tried to show how Wallace describes a glimmer of hope to be found in such approximations of Hell. There are paths that can transform the Hell of extreme loneliness into a Purgatory, a means of ascending toward happiness. The very extremity of the predicament of those caught in the double bind leads them to seek ways out of it. And the

¹¹⁴⁶ Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, p. 179.

¹¹⁴⁷ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 24.

various paths—literature and art, love, civics, mysticism, and worship—all tend to converge on “the same force that lit the stars—compassion, love, the sub-surface unity of all things.”¹¹⁴⁸

In exploring these paths I found in Wallace a helpful dialogue partner for theological ethics. Indeed, the exploration has itself been ethical and theological. I have brought Wallace into dialogue with writers from the theological tradition—from Augustine to Bernard of Clairvaux and from Aquinas to Ignatius of Loyola and Pascal. I have attempted thereby to exemplify how the reading of novelists such as Wallace helps theological ethics to keep its hand on the pulse of the human search for a truly human life. And I believe that this is ultimately the point of theological ethics: to show how humans can become truly human in overcoming their loneliness in communion with a higher unity that is beyond the merely human. Dante’s eschatological imagination expressed itself in an epic poem, which was at the same time a complete theological ethics, with neatly ordered circles of vices and virtues. It was a grand vision of human life with a robust metaphysics of participation, and a neo-Platonically inflected eudemonistic understanding of desire.¹¹⁴⁹ Wallace’s work does not hold any such confident and complete vision. His work is an eschatology for our hypermodern time: tenuous, and hesitating. He himself remained hesitant about the possibility of transcendence. But his very hesitancy is a spur to theological thinking, a guard against the ever-present temptation of ideological reduction. Theological ethics must of course go on to treat of many other things. It must not only develop accounts of the virtues necessary for overcoming loneliness, but must also develop norms for the various personal, social, and ecological challenges that human beings face today—but in all its work it must keep in contact with the reality of human life, its misery as well as its potential for happiness.

¹¹⁴⁸ Wallace, “Kenyon Commencement Speech,” p. 362.

¹¹⁴⁹ See: Guardini, *Dantes göttliche Komödie*.

The Double-Bind of Loneliness

				one.' E——: 'I agree. It's the big one all right. It's the what-do-you-call. ...'
#30	5	03-97	27	I have to admit it was a big reason for marrying her, thinking I wasn't likely going to do better than this because of the way she had a good body even after she'd had a kid.
#31	6	03-97	28-33	But you want to know how to really be great? How your Great Lover really pleases a lady? Now, all your basic smoothie-type fellows will always say they know, they're an authority and such.
#36	7	05-97	33-34	So I decided to get help. I got in touch with the fact that the real problem had nothing to do with her.
#40	8	06-97	82-86	It's the arm. You wouldn't think of it as a asset like that would you. But it's the arm.
#42	9	06-97	86-91	The soft plopping sounds. The slight gassy sounds.
#46	14	07-97	116-124	Alls I'm—or think about the Holocaust. Was the Holocaust a good thing? No way.
#48	11	08-97	100-115	It is on the third date that I will invite them back to the apartment. It is important to understand that, for there even to be a third date, there must exist some sort of palpable affinity between us, something by which I can sense that they will go along.
#51	12	11-97	115	I always think, "What if I can't?" Then I always think, "Oh shit, don't think that."
#59	15	04-98	213-225	As a child, I watched a great deal of American television. No matter of where my father was being posted, it seemed always that American television was available, with its glorious and powerful women performers.
#72	16	08-98	225-226	I love women. I really do. I love them. Everything about them.

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ABSTRACT

Die Werke des amerikanischen Schriftstellers David Foster Wallace (1962-2008) enthalten viele „Doublebinds“ – Probleme, bei denen der Versuch einer Lösung des Problems selbst ein Problem darstellt. Ein Doublebind besteht zwischen Einsamkeit und Isolation auf der einen Seite und Versuche, Einsamkeit aufzuheben auf der anderen. Wallace beschreibt die Schrecken der Einsamkeit und Isolation in einer immer stärker atomisierten Welt. Und er beschreibt, wie der Schmerz der Einsamkeit den Anstoß gibt, sich selbst hinzugeben. Dies kann entweder bewusst geschehen – wie bei dem Versuch, sich einer Nation oder einer Ideologie hinzugeben – oder (häufiger) unbewusst bei der Verfolgung von Zerstreuungen (Alkohol, Drogen, Ruhm, Sinnlichkeit und ähnliches mehr) um sich von der Einsamkeit abzulenken. Wallace nennt diese Versuche manchmal „Worship“ (Anbetung). Aber die meisten Formen von Worship helfen nicht wirklich, Einsamkeit und Isolation zu überwinden. Sie drehen sich zurück in eine immer tiefere Einsamkeit. Daher kann das Doublebind zwischen Einsamkeit und Worship auch als Doublebind der Einsamkeit angesehen werden – Einsamkeit als Doublebind. Wallace wollte nicht nur das Doublebind beschreiben; er wollte auch nach Wegen suchen, um es zu überwinden. Nach meiner Auslegung, deuten die Werke von Wallace darauf hin, dass es keine „Lösung“ des Doublebinds im Sinne einer Einsicht oder Praxis gibt, die es einem erlauben würde einfach zu entkommen. Es gibt jedoch Wege, mit dem Doublebind zu leben, ihm zu konfrontieren, und von innen her teilweise zu überwinden oder zu transzendieren. Ich versuche zu zeigen, dass für Wallace diese Wege religiöse und ethische Dimensionen haben. Sie sind Wege, um eine Ethik zu finden, die eine echte Verbindung mit anderen ermöglicht – ein Hingeben des Selbst, das paradoxerweise mit dem Auffinden des wahren Selbst zusammenfällt. Wallace nutzt dazu theologische und religiöse Begriffe. Ich versuche zu zeigen, dass die theologische Ethik in Wallace Impulse für die eigene Reflexion finden kann. Wallace kann der theologischen Ethik dabei helfen, der ideologischen Falle zu entkommen, sich als einfacher Ausweg aus dem Doublebind der *conditio humana* zu präsentieren. Sein Werk kann der theologischen Ethik helfen, sich dem erlebten menschlichen Zustand zu stellen und eine wahrhaft menschliche Weise, damit umzugehen theologisch zu reflektieren.

The writings of the American novelist David Foster Wallace (1962-2008) are full of double-binds, problems in which any attempt at a solution to the problem is itself a problem. One of these is rooted in loneliness or isolation on the one hand, and unacceptable attempts to undo loneliness on the other. Wallace describes the horrors of loneliness and isolation in an ever more atomized world. And he describes how the pain of loneliness engenders an impulse to “give oneself away.” This can happen either consciously—as in the attempt to “give oneself” to some cause greater than the self—or (more often) unconsciously in the pursuit of pleasures or excitements to distract—oneself from loneliness. Wallace sometimes calls this giving away of the self “worship.” But most forms of “worship” do not really help to overcome loneliness and isolation. They spiral back to an ever-deeper loneliness. Hence the double-bind between loneliness and “worship” can also be seen as simply the double-bind of loneliness; loneliness as a double-bind. Wallace was not content with describing the double-bind; he also wanted to explore ways of overcoming it. On my reading, Wallace’s work suggests that there is no “solution” to the double-bind in the sense of an insight or practice that would allow one to simply escape. There are, however, ways of living with and confronting the double-bind that partially overcome it or transcend it from within. I argue that Wallace sees these ways as having both religious and ethical dimensions. They are ways of finding an ethics that enables real connection with others—a “giving away” of the self that paradoxically coincides with a finding of the true self. In sketching out such paths, Wallace makes use of theological and religious ideas. I show that Wallace’s work can be an aid to the reflections of theological ethics. He can help theological ethics to escape the ideological trap of serving as one more deceptive easy way out of the double-bind of the human condition. His work can help theological ethics face the human condition as experienced, and to reflect theologically on a truly human way of dealing with it.