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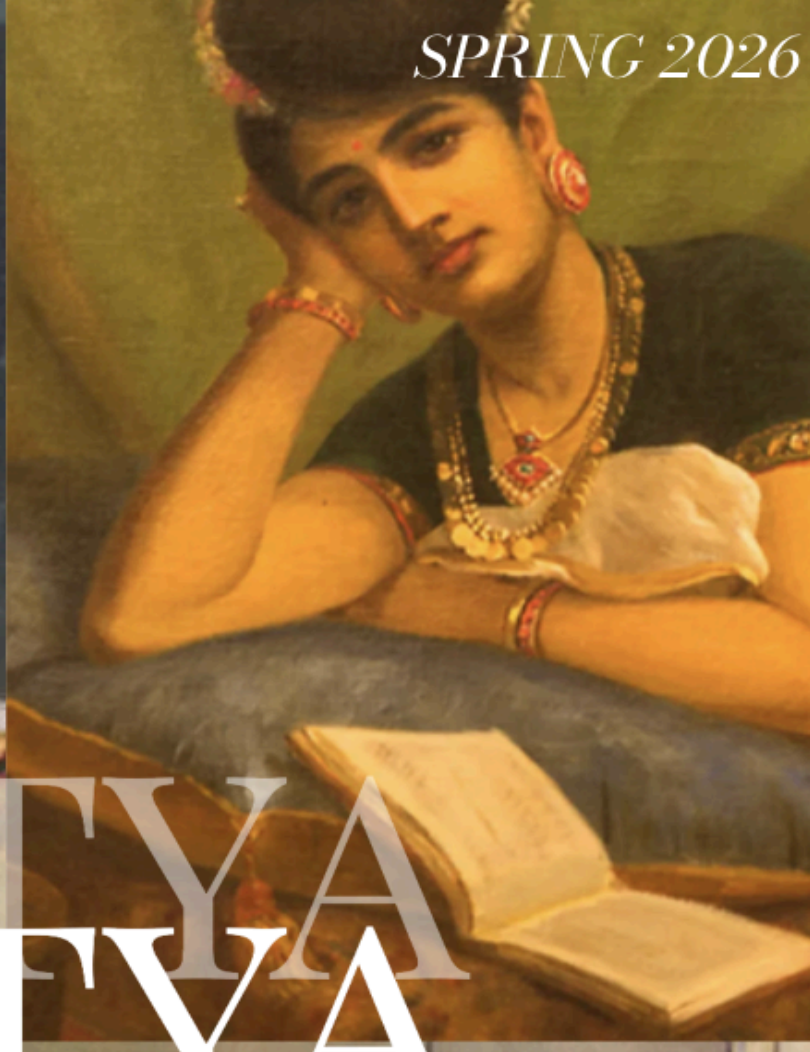

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It's Not Just Generics That Essentialize:

On "Meeting You at a Very Chinese Time in Your Life"

Moby Yang

Of late, a significant number of people on short-form social media platforms like Tiktok and Instagram reels have been "becoming Chinese." Beginning in late 2025 and persisting into early 2026, this trend of cultural "transformation" typically consists of non-Chinese users sharing video or image content of themselves engaging in certain purportedly Chinese customs (drinking hot water, eating steamed buns, etc.) while captioning their video with phrases like (1) "You met me at a very Chinese time in my life", (2) "Day 1 of being a Chinese baddie", and (3) "What I eat in a day since I've become Chinese" (@mylesmarchant 2025; @autumnssimone 2026; @elinamariams 2026). In this paper, I will analyze the language proliferating in this recent "becoming Chinese" trend through Jennifer Saul's argument in her paper "Are generics especially pernicious?", wherein she claims that it is not just generic phrases that can cause people to essentialize and form implicit biases against social groups, but rather all language that mentions such groups (Saul 2023). Saul's expansive view of how language can perniciously mention social groups is particularly helpful for analyzing the "becoming Chinese" trend, given that despite being non-generic, the trend's phrases seem problematic. Saul would argue that even though phrases like (1)-(3) do not contain generic utterances, further interrogation of these phrases reveals that by gratuitously labeling certain actions as "Chinese", they still reflect and perpetuate essentialized conceptions of and implicit biases against Chinese people.

Although the language spreading in the "becoming Chinese" trend is typically non-generic and seemingly innocuous, Saul would pay close heed to utterances like (1)-(3) by

virtue of their mentions of a social group—here being "Chinese" people—and what implicit biases those mentions might be facilitating. Generics are sentences like "ravens are black" and "tigers are striped" (Leslie 2017, 394). A simplified definition might be that a generic is composed of a category C having a property x. For example, "Chinese people drink hot water" is a generic, where C = Chinese people, and x = drinking hot water. Saul would understand sentences like (1)-(3) to be non-generic because they do not verbally attribute a property x to Chinese people in general. However, given that (1)-(3) still mention a social group of "Chinese" people, Saul would argue that such utterances can perpetuate prejudice by leading listeners to form implicit biases—largely unconscious "patterns of associations" made between a social group and a certain property—in regards to Chinese people (Saul 2023, 1696).

Saul's understanding of the potential of sentences like (1)-(3) to perpetuate implicit bias would be informed not just by the utterances' mentions of Chinese people, but more specifically, their "gratuitous" mentions of Chinese people (Saul 2023, 1696). For Saul, gratuitous mentions of a social group include mentions that are irrelevant or unnecessary to the utterance, such as "the tendency to mention the race of criminals when the criminals are black, and not when they are white," thus misleading listeners into thinking the criminal's Blackness had something to do with their crime and potentially causing them to associate Black people with criminality (Saul 2023, 1697). While one might argue that sentences like (1)-(3) do not gratuitously mention Chinese people given the relevance of "Chinese" in a trend about performing Chinese customs in order to "become Chinese," Saul might argue that a speaker framing single actions like drinking hot water as being "Chinese" is itself unjustified. For example, from the perspective of someone unfamiliar with the trend, seeing someone drinking hot water will likely not appear immediately

relevant to Chinese-ness. Anyone can do these things, but utterances like (1)-(3) frame them as being specifically and distinctly Chinese.

Although the gratuitous mentions of Chinese people in (1)-(3) and the "becoming Chinese" trend at large do not form associations between Chinese people and more negative qualities such as criminality, Saul would argue that they at the very least cause listeners to essentialize Chinese people as being a kind that shares some same "essence" or disposition to, for example, drink hot water. Although Saul doesn't bring up presuppositions in her paper, understanding presuppositions might be helpful to illustrate how the gratuitous mentions of Chinese people in (1)-(3) can lead listeners to see Chinese people as an essentialized kind. A presupposition is "what is taken for granted in saying something," or what must be reasoned in order for an utterance to make sense (Kirk-Giannini and Glanzberg 2024, 268). For example, the utterance "Sam stopped smoking" presupposes that "Sam smoked in the past" (Kirk-Giannini and Glanzberg 2024, 268). In regards to the "becoming Chinese" trend, when someone captions a video or image of themselves boiling apples for tea or having hot water at breakfast with (2) "Day 1 of Being a Chinese Baddie" or (3) "What I eat in a day since I've become Chinese", in order for the listener to understand those utterances, those utterances seem to presuppose generic thoughts—such as "Chinese people drink hot water" (@autumnssimone 2026; @elinamariams 2026). Importantly, as Saul paraphrases from Sarah-Jane Leslie (2017), "We only accept striking property generics as true… when the kinds or social groups they are about are essentialised" (Saul 2023, 1684). This logic can be applied to non-striking property generics too, where an essentialized view of a social group of Chinese people is a prerequisite for accepting a generic thought about them—that they drink hot water. Thus, just like how non-generic gratuitous mentions of a criminal's race when they are Black reflect and perpetuate implicit biases, so do

non-generic labels of drinking hot water, eating steamed buns, etc. as Chinese reflect and perpetuate an essentialized conception of Chinese people.

Saul would understand utterances like (1)-(3) to be examples of non-generics that support her claim that "blocking certain means of expressing prejudice" or avoiding generics alone will not target the implicit biases those generics merely "give voice to" (Saul 2023, 1695-1696). Instead, when encountering "all mentions of gender, race and the like"—such as the mentions of Chinese people in the "becoming Chinese" trend—Saul argues that "we need to call attention to them [those mentions] and ask whether they're relevant, demand evidence for claims, question inferences and so on" (Saul 2023, 1697). Once we further investigate utterances like (1)-(3)—asking what drinking hot water has to do with "being a Chinese baddie" or why eating steamed buns means you are "in a Chinese time in your life," for instance—we find that even these non-generic phrases reflect and perpetuate essentialist thoughts and implicit biases about Chinese people, and it is these implicit biases—not any kind of language specifically—that are "a crucial part (though only a part) of the prejudice we see in action in the world" (Saul 2023, 1696).

Even if the essentialized conception of Chinese people in the "becoming Chinese" trend perpetuates seemingly benign implicit biases, by conceiving Chinese people as an essentialized kind, people form the foundational view of a Chinese "shared essence" that can also allow them to accept other, much more harmful biases, such as ones that associate Chinese people with carrying COVID-19 or being a "model minority" in America. This might also give reason to why popular attitudes towards Chinese people (and other social groups) are able to shift so rapidly; at the foundation of the negatively accepted generalization that "Chinese people carry COVID-19" and the positively accepted generalization that "Chinese people drink hot water" is that Chinese people share some essence that predicts a property of its members at large. Thus, as the

"becoming Chinese" trend exemplifies, even non-generic, seemingly innocuous and humorous utterances like the viral (1) "You met me at a very Chinese time in my life" can communicate the same biases that generics do. The root of the problem, then, as Saul argues, lies not in our language, but in our prejudice. As long as people continue to harbor biased perceptions of social groups, then those biases will find various ways of manifesting themselves in our speech.

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Frankfurt and the Beginning of Anxiety

Patrick Van Hoven

Philosophical anxiety over our moral responsibility emerges from an analysis of the ordinary. When people act under coercion, we tend to absolve them of moral responsibility for their actions. "There was a gun to my head," a cashier might say to the police. "I had no choice but to open the safe." One could formulate on the basis of cases like these the following principle: if one cannot do otherwise, they are not morally responsible. This tends to be a principle we intuitively accept, as evidenced by our regular use of phrases like the aforementioned "I had no choice..." However, upon learning about determinism—the doctrine that every event is caused, in a determinate way such that no other event could have happened, by a prior event—one might begin to feel the grip of the anxiety, and defend it via the following argument:

(P1) If one cannot do otherwise, they are not morally responsible.
(P2) Determinism holds that we can never do otherwise.
(P3) Determinism is true.
(C) We are never morally responsible.

The thought more concisely put is that, because under determinism we can never do otherwise, we can never be morally responsible. Or so one might think. In his paper "Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility," Harry Frankfurt presents a challenge to P1, arguing that the fact that one cannot do otherwise does not establish that they are not morally responsible; in other words, he argues that one can be morally responsible for actions they could not have avoided doing.[1] In this paper, I will rehearse Frankfurt's argument and object initially that his argument is circular,

[1] Harry Frankfurt, "Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility," The Journal of Philosophy 66, no. 23 (December 4, 1969): 829–39.

that he assumes that one who cannot do otherwise still can be morally responsible in order to prove that same conclusion. I will then move to defuse that objection, attempt variously and unsuccessfully to refine it, and conclude ultimately that his argument works. These objections rely on interpretations either mistaken or impoverished regarding what Frankfurt's paper is *doing*; with its proper dialectical function in mind, apparent objections will fade away. As I see, these imagined objectors to Frankfurt fail to recognize that Frankfurt is concerned with dissolving our anxiety about moral responsibility *at its source*. As such, the upshot of my remarks will be a clearer view of the dialectical terrain, a view that will raise questions about the utility of future theorizing in this area.

To challenge P1, Frankfurt simply provides an example of a person who could not have done otherwise yet is morally responsible.[2] Imagine a man, Black, who wishes for another man,

Jones, to rob a bank. Imagine further that Jones has no knowledge of three facts: Black's existence, Black's desires regarding Jones' actions, and the chip Black implanted in Jones' brain. This chip detects when Jones is about to make a decision and, if that decision is to not rob the bank, directly alters Jones' brain chemistry so that he robs the bank. However: imagine that Jones, with no knowledge of the existence of either the chip or Black, chooses on his own to rob the bank, and does so, with no interference from Black at any point. Should we hold him responsible?

According to P1, that principle we supposedly take for granted, Jones is not morally responsible for robbing the bank, for he could not have done otherwise. Had Jones been about to decide otherwise, Black would have known and would have altered his brain chemistry such that

[2] Frankfurt, "Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility," 835–836

Jones still decided to rob the bank. Put another way, there was no possible sequence of events such that Jones did not decide to rob the bank. He could not have done otherwise. And yet it does seem that he is morally responsible, for it was not because of Black, of the fact that he could not have done otherwise, that Jones decided to rob the bank. He made that decision of his own accord and would have made that same decision *even if Black had never existed at all*. What Frankfurt wants to say is that if we came across such a situation in common practice, we would hold Jones morally responsible; indeed, his moral responsibility, to Frankfurt, is intuitively apparent.[3]

One might object to Frankfurt along the following lines. For Jones to have been responsible for his action, he would have had to have been responsible for the motivation that moved him to act.[4] Given that Frankfurt and I are accepting the truth of determinism, we must 4 accept that Jones could not have had any other motivation. Thus, in order for Jones to have been morally responsible for his motivation, one would need to deny P1. The idea here is that, for Jones to have been morally responsible for his action, he would have needed to be responsible for his motivation, and for that to be true, Frankfurt would have already needed to accept the falsity of P1 at the level of that motivation. This would render his argument circular.

However appealing, this objection trades on a misunderstanding of Frankfurt's point. Frankfurt is not providing an *argument* that Jones is morally responsible. If he was, a charge of circularity may have merit, but alas that is not what he is doing. Instead, Frankfurt is trying to

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[3] While one might object to Frankfurt that this conclusion is not actually intuitive, many do feel its force, and it is to them that I address the rest of this paper. Also, for terminological clarity I should note that I take "the ascriptions of moral responsibility we make in common practice" and "the ascriptions that are intuitive to us" to be more or less identical.

[4] This idea stems from the belief that to be responsible involves more than just intentionality: to be responsible, one's motivations must in some sense flow from us and express our deepest selves. Put another way, we must be responsible for the motivations that move us to action. See Susan Wolf, "Sanity and the Metaphysics of Responsibility," in Responsibility, Character, and the Emotions, ed. Ferdinand Schoeman (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 46–62.

tease out our intuitions about P1—he's asking the question "do you *really* think you must be able to do otherwise in order to be morally responsible?" To see why he is doing this, consider that P1 is not tautologous or self-evidently true; indeed, it is hard to see how P1 might be proven without appeal to our intuitions. Thus Frankfurt is asking us to consider an action-level case analogous to the motivation-level case of Jones' motivations. He's asking "at the level of action, does an inability to do otherwise annul responsibility?" His answer is no, and in answering that way he's indicting our intuition that P1 is *ever* true.

The reason we come to accept P1 is not, as stated, because it is in some way inherently true; rather, we come to accept it because it seems to adequately align with our intuitions about moral responsibility in various action-level cases. For example, in the stick-up scenario I mentioned at the beginning of this paper, we would not hold the cashier morally responsible for opening the register, and P1 seems to provide a plausible explanation as to why. This is true also of many other cases where we find people to be absolved of moral responsibility by the unavailability of alternate possibilities of action. On the flip side, P1 seems able to justify the claim that a person is morally responsible: something we often say in response to someone doing wrong is that "they made their choice" or "they did not have to do that" or "they could have done otherwise," and are therefore responsible. By thinking about these various action-level cases, we come to observe that P1 seems to consistently yield a determination of moral responsibility that accords with our intuitions. Thus, we take it to be a *criterion* of moral responsibility, a condition that must be satisfied for a person to be morally responsible. It is only then that we submerge it from our external questions about one's actions and exogenous circumstances into our internal questions about one's motivations.

In that light, all Frankfurt is doing is saying: "look, here is a case—indeed, a family of

cases—where someone is morally responsible despite failing to satisfy the criterion of P1. Clearly, then, P1 is not a valid criterion for moral responsibility." The argument he's making is that we justify P1 based on it aligning with our intuitions in various action-level cases, and yet there seem to be other cases (like that of Jones and Black) where it fails to align with our intuitions. Thus, per Frankfurt, the original grounds on which we took it to be a universal criterion of moral responsibility, applicable to motivations as well as actions, have been undermined.

All that said, it therefore makes no sense to claim that Frankfurt is being circular in his argument for Jones being responsible, for he simply makes no such argument. He proceeds not from some set of premises to Jones being responsible but from it being intuitive that Jones is responsible to the inadequacy of P1 in aligning with our intuitions (its apparent success in doing so being the only original reason we endorsed it).

The objector might refine his objection. "Fine," he might say. "Frankfurt can evade this charge of circularity. However, he has still failed to give an account of our intuitions about Jones. He has failed to justify them. Indeed, he has failed to provide any theory at all of what moral responsibility really is." To this I respond: this is certainly true, but it is not an *objection* to Frankfurt's paper. Frankfurt is simply not in the business of providing a theory of moral responsibility. All he is doing is casting doubt on something we previously thought was a criterion for moral responsibility by showing that there are cases where people cannot do otherwise but are still morally responsible. It is easy to exaggerate Frankfurt's project, but his task is actually quite narrow. All he is doing is undermining the grounds for P1, which we justify on its alignment with our common practice in various cases, by simply showing that it does not, in fact, align with our common practice in cases like that of Jones.

The objector might still be unhappy. "But, Frankfurt," he might say, "how do we know if Jones really is responsible if we do not even know what it is to be responsible?" To this question, I would respond that the objector has failed to grasp the full import of Frankfurt's argument, particularly as it pertains to the salience and importance of the questions the objector is so concerned with. One might put things this way. The reason we were roused in the first place to think about what moral responsibility is because it was threatened by determinism. Why was it threatened by determinism? Well, because of the argument provided above, the argument that took P1 as a premise. However, now that we have done away with P1, that argument fails and we see that determinism does not threaten moral responsibility, for the principle on account of which determinism would have done so, P1, has been discarded.

It may be, of course, valuable to engage in inquiry about what moral responsibility is, for it is always good to learn more about the world, and to know what it is we are talking about. But what I have hoped to show is that the value of such inquiry is not here connected to the extent to which it addresses a *problem*. Without P1 and with Frankfurt's dialectic hopefully clarified, we have no reason to think Jones is not responsible, and in our common practice we would hold him responsible; more generally, without P1 we have no reason to think moral responsibility is under threat. There is, once one has read Frankfurt carefully, no problem to which theorists may address their proposed solutions.

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Blurred Boundaries:

The Social-Political Distinction in "Reflections on Little Rock" and "To Save the Jewish Homeland"

Sofie Robinson

In a preface to her controversial essay, "Reflections on Little Rock," Hannah Arendt declares, "as a Jew I take my sympathy for the cause of the Negroes as for all oppressed and underprivileged people for granted."[5] Her parallel between Jews and Black Americans invites a comparison of her views in "Little Rock" to her 1948 essay, "To Save the Jewish Homeland." This examination yields fascinating insight into the complexities—the simultaneous coherence and imperfection—of her philosophical framework as it differentiates the private, political, and social realms.[6] Though the distinction between the social and political spheres partially explains the discrepancy between Arendt's legal recommendations regarding school integration and the organization of a society of Jews and Arabs in Palestine, this resolution is incomplete. However convincing her argument in each individual essay may be, the inconsistencies between them reveal the haziness of the overarching frameworks upon which she relies, and, more specifically, that the boundary between the social and political realm is permeable.

In "Little Rock," Arendt argues that federally-enforced school integration represents an intrusion of law into the social realm, which is not the proper sphere of legal action. She asserts that the government's guiding principle can only be equality. However, the social sphere cannot

[5] Hannah Arendt, "Preliminary Remarks" to "Reflections on Little Rock," Dissent, Winter 1959, 46, in Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, "Chapter 7: Being at Home in the World (1951–1961)," in Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World, second ed. (Yale University Press, 2004), 309.

[6] The distinction between the public and private spheres originates in the works of Plato and Aristotle. See Hannah Arendt, "What is Authority," in Between Past and Future (Penguin Books, 2006), 104.

be bound by such a principle, because society rests on "the right to free association, and therefore to discrimination."[7] It follows, then, that the government cannot act in the social realm, as doing so would impose the principle of equality on a sphere defined by its right to inequality. For Arendt, schools belong to the social sphere, because in selecting a school for their child, parents exercise that sphere's characteristic "right to free association."[8] She accordingly concludes that enforcing desegregation in the case of Little Rock represents an overreach of a government principle—equality—into a realm in which it is not binding.[9] Moreover, the extension of law—and thus, equality—from the political realm to the social threatens the very existence of the social realm. Because the social realm is defined by its right to free association, and free association necessarily entails discrimination in that it determines who belongs and who doesn't, enforcing equality in the social sphere undermines the conditions upon which its existence depends. As Arendt puts it, "[t]he moment social discrimination is legally abolished, the freedom of society is violated."[10]

By contrast, laying out her approach to establishing a Jewish state in Palestine, Arendt argues that coexistence, enforced by a higher power, is necessary. In her view, "not a single possible solution or proposition affecting the Palestinian conflict is in sight that could be realized

[7] Hannah Arendt, "Reflections on Little Rock," in Responsibility and Judgment (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 2003), 209, 206–207.
[8] Arendt, "Little Rock," 212.
[9] To be sure, Arendt supports equal political rights for Black Americans. She remains steadfast, however, in her conviction that the government can do no more than establish this political equality. Accordingly, she argues that Civil Rights advocates should shift their focus from school integration to overturning anti-miscegenation laws, which legally enforce segregation and violate "an elementary human right compared to which 'the right to attend an integrated school'... [is] minor indeed." Arendt, "Little Rock," 202–203.
[10] Arendt, "Little Rock," 209. See also Hannah Arendt, The Origins of Totalitarianism (New York, NY: Mariner Classics, 2024), 61, 28 (arguing that equality is "a working principle of political organization in which otherwise unequal people have equal rights." However, when equality is "perver[ted]... from a political into a social concept… differences become all the more conspicuous." Indeed, "[t]he more equal conditions are, the less explanation there is for the differences that actually exist between people," so equality appears to be "granted in the form... of privilege").

without enforcement by external authority."[11] Specifically, she posits that "[s]mall local units composed of Jews and Arabs under the command of higher officers from countries that are members of the United Nations could become an important school for future cooperative self-government."[12] This proposed solution of government-imposed integration of Jews and Arabs in Palestine closely mirrors the realities of school integration in Little Rock.[13] There, a school, a "small local unit," brings together Black and white students—"Jews and Arabs," in this analogy—"under the command of higher officers" from the federal government. Yet while she advocates this very solution in Palestine, she opposes it in Little Rock. The parallels continue in that the Little Rock Nine were supposed to be the first, but not the only, Black students at the newly-integrated school; they were a step towards "future cooperative self-government," or coexistence without external enforcement. To use Arendt's own language, Little Rock Central High School was "an important school" for the ultimate goal of future coexistence. Despite these parallels, Arendt takes seemingly contradictory stances in each case by advocating governmental intervention to force integration in Palestine while opposing it in the analogous situation in Little Rock.

Her differing positions on the validity of governmental intervention in Little Rock and in Palestine can be partially resolved by appealing to the distinction between the social and political realms. Arendt's conception of political action requires a group, as she describes "the political sphere of [men's] lives [as] where they act together in the pursuit of a common concern."[14] This

[11] Hannah Arendt, "To Save the Jewish Homeland," in The Jewish Writings, ed. Jerome Kohn and Ron H. Feldman (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 2007), 388.
[12] Arendt, "Jewish Homeland," 400.
[13] In this paper, I refer to intervention in Palestine by the United Nations and its member countries as "governmental." Though intervention in a nation by its own government differs from intervention by an international organization, the role of the federal government in Little Rock mirrors that of the UN in Palestine insofar as both represent the intrusion of politics into a non-political realm. Because my focus is on the distinction between the social and political realms, I use the term "governmental" to capture both forms of political intervention.
[14] Arendt, *The Origins*, 513.

group is first formed, however, in the social realm, through the inherently discriminatory process of free association.[15] In the social sphere to which schools belong, "discrimination is [an] indispensable... right," and this right is violated by federally-enforced coexistence.[16] Government intervention in the case of Little Rock is thus illegitimate for Arendt because it infringes on social rights.[17]

On the other hand, Arendt's theories of statelessness indicate that she conceptualizes coexistence in Palestine as aiming to establish a political rather than a social right, so this coexistence can be legitimately enforced by governmental power. Arendt affirms that stateless people, without a government to protect them, essentially lack rights altogether—even human rights. In The Origins of Totalitarianism, she argues, "Not only did loss of national rights in all instances entail the loss of human rights; the restoration of human rights, as the recent example of the State of Israel proves, has been achieved so far only through the restoration or the establishment of national rights."[18] If Jews need a state to have rights, then forced coexistence, aiming to establish such a state in Palestine, is a political matter.[19] Therefore, according to Arendt's framework, governmental intervention in Palestine is valid because, unlike in Little Rock, it does not involve an invasion of the social sphere by the political. Arendt's distinction

[15] See Arendt, "Little Rock," 205 (arguing that in the social realm, "[w]hat matters... is not personal distinction but the differences by which people belong to certain groups whose very identifiability demands that they discriminate against other groups in the same domain").
[16] Arendt, "Little Rock," 206.
[17] Because political action requires the formation of a group, the social realm is the enabling condition of politics. It follows, then, that politics that extends to the social realm is self-undermining, because threats to the social realm threaten the possibility of politics in the first place.
[18] Arendt, *The Origins*, 319.
[19] In this paper, I seek to read Arendt's arguments in the strongest possible sense and therefore to resolve the tension in her work as convincingly as possible using her own frameworks. It is notable, though, that her concept of human rights as necessarily bestowed by the state seems to run contrary to her later fear that "a Jewish state can only be erected at the price of the Jewish homeland." If she imagines the goal of establishing a Jewish community in Palestine as more than simply to establish a state that grants political rights, then her arguments can no longer be reconciled using the social-political distinction, as she would then support forced social coexistence in Palestine while criticizing it in American schools. Arendt, "Jewish Homeland," 397.

between what law can achieve in the political realm compared to the social reconciles, at least on the surface, her simultaneous support of forced coexistence in Palestine and rejection of it in America.

In a rigorous sense, though, Arendt's distinction between the social and political realms is nebulous. Her argument in "Little Rock" implies that political equality is the extent of what the law should guarantee—no government can intervene beyond establishing political rights without violating the social or private spheres. However, in Palestine, Arendt does not believe that political equality between Jews and Arabs will suffice. Her opposition to partition—a solution in which both Jews and Arabs would have a state, and therefore, independent political rights—reveals that she seeks something beyond these rights. Arguing that "[a]s long as Jewish and Arab leaders both claim that there is 'no bridge' between Jews and Arabs... the territory cannot be left to the political wisdom of its own inhabitants," Arendt explicitly recognizes that political rights alone are insufficient. "The independence of Palestine," she continues, "can be achieved only on a solid basis of Jewish-Arab cooperation."[20] This "cooperation" lies outside the realm of "political wisdom," and appears to fall within the lines of what she considers 'social' in "Little Rock." Indeed, she proposes that collaboration be enforced by UN member countries, which can establish Jewish-Arab councils, allowing "conflict [to] be resolved on the lowest and most promising level of proximity and neighborliness."[21]In this council system, the political structure of a federated state merges with ideas regarding association from the social realm: "proximity" and "neighborliness." In contrast to her premise in "Little Rock" that political equality should be the limit of what the government guarantees, Arendt advocates

[20] Arendt, "Jewish Homeland," 400. But cf. Arendt, "Jewish Homeland," 401 (emphasizing that "[t]he real goal of the Jews in Palestine is the building up of a Jewish homeland. This goal must never be sacrificed to the pseudo-sovereignty of a Jewish state"). This argument for a "homeland" over a rights-granting "state" further obscures Arendt's contention that only sovereign enforcement of political equality is legitimate.
[21] Arendt, "Jewish Homeland," 400.

internationally-imposed coexistence in Palestine that, even if not strictly social, certainly extends beyond mere political equality.

Arendt's social-political distinction, though insightful, does not seamlessly resolve her differing ideas on when sovereign intervention is acceptable. Considered separately, her arguments in each of "Little Rock" and "Jewish Homeland" appear intriguing and cogent. Taken together, they reveal tensions in one another that cannot be fully reconciled. However, these tensions do not discredit each essay. They instead reveal that the categories of the private, social, and political that Arendt invokes to analyze issues of government intervention are permeable. The council system that she advocates in Palestine embodies a certain interdependence between the social and political spheres. Mixed councils, a political structure, rely on a sense of "neighborliness," a social concept of associating with those nearby.[22]Therefore, realizing political cooperation necessitates a concurrent degree of acceptance in the social realm, so government intervention cannot be limited strictly to the political realm. In the case of Jewish-Arab councils in Palestine, for instance, the 'government' of UN member countries must establish "neighborliness" in the social realm to achieve the ultimate goal of political equality. The friction between these two essays reveals that Arendt's framework, though intriguing and largely convincing, remains imperfect. Because the lines between the categories it distinguishes are porous, it cannot overarchingly determine when and where government intervention is justified. Arendt attempts to form as rigorous a model as possible, but it is ultimately only a model, with room for exceptions and permeability.

Though the language of the social and political spheres is helpful in articulating when governmental action is legitimate, we still must determine what each sphere amounts to in

[22] Arendt, "Jewish Homeland," 400.

concrete cases. We thus have two options: either determine, through a somewhat arbitrary act of judgment, where exactly the boundary between the spheres lies; or acknowledge that the distinction is indeterminate and decide questions about the proper scope of government action without relying on it alone. In either case, the language of the social-political distinction does not identify where that distinction is—we must apply the language to give it substantive meaning. Accordingly, seeking to resolve the tensions in Arendt's work through an appeal to the social-political distinction is bound to fall short, for language alone cannot settle questions of governmental legitimacy. The social-political distinction is ultimately defined by acts of interpretation and application that its own language cannot fully govern.

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Violent Pornography: Ignoring Pain for Pleasure

Emma Cohler

As feminist movements have gained significant traction in recent years, more men have claimed to support women in this fight for women's rights and push back on inherently sexist practices, yet violent pornography consumption has not decreased.[23] With prominent feminists such as Catharine A. MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin calling out the irreparable harm caused by male consumption of violent pornography, we must ask ourselves what, then, differentiates violent porn consumption from other sexist practices like cat-calling and unequal pay, and why are men so reluctant to give it up? The answer to this question will provide us with a better idea of how we can work with men to lessen the consumption of violent pornography and ultimately protect women against acts of violence. In this paper, I argue that, despite being aware of the violence within violent pornography and the repercussions of violence against women, men continue to consume these materials in part because they are afraid of confronting how their engagement with a practice that inherently harms women reflects on their character.

To support my argument, I examine how the consumption of violent pornography is linked to violence against women and how men are aware of the violence within it, yet they continue to consume such content. I then present Elizabeth Spelman and James Baldwin's conception of how white Americans ignore Black grievances due to their fears of what accepting Black grievances would entail for their characters, and I connect this framework to male consumption of violent porn. Following this, I further explain why men who consume porn ignore the impact of these materials due to their similar fears of confronting how consuming violent porn reflects on their character. I specifically emphasize how the pleasure associated with

[23] Ana J. Bridges, et.al. "Aggression and Sexual Behavior in Best-Selling Pornography Videos: A Content Analysis Update." *Violence Against Women* 16, no. 10 (2010): 1066.

consuming violent porn furthers the desire to ignore its impact. Finally, I delve into a greater discussion of why it is important to understand that men ignore violence in violent pornography out of fear.

Although there is limited research on pornography, studies on the topic reveal that more than 60% of men consume porn and over 88% of popular pornographic videos contain some form of physical aggression.[24] In defining violence as any act of physical aggression, these statistics indicate that most men are likely engaging with violent pornography to some degree. While some may argue that engaging with other forms of violent media, such as video games centered around war and car theft, does not typically lead to violent actions,[25] research shows that viewing violent pornography has a different effect; there is a direct correlation between the consumption of violent porn and violence perpetuated against women during sexual acts.[26] Viewing violent acts such as hair pulling and spanking in pornography, for example, has a positive correlation with engaging in such actions during sex.[27] Additionally, given that pornography research is primarily conducted on people living in Western societies, the rest of this argument will be limited to those communities to avoid overgeneralizations about distinct cultures.

As recent feminist movements have prompted greater education on how violence is perpetrated against women, many men have made commitments to lessen this violence. One example of this is the emphasized importance of affirmative consent for sexual acts. While

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[24] Rafael Ballester-Arnal, et al. "Pornography Consumption in People of Different Age Groups: an Analysis Based on Gender, Contents, and Consequences." *Sex Res Soc Policy* 20. (2023): 766; Bridges, "Aggression and Sexual Behavior," 1075.

[25] Andrew Przybylski and Netta Weinstein. "Violent Video Game Engagement Is Not Associated with Adolescents' Aggressive Behaviour: Evidence from a Registered Report." *Royal Society Open Science* 6, no.2 (2019): 8.

[26] Paul J. Wright, Robert S. Tokunaga, and Ashley Kraus. "A Meta-Analysis of Pornography Consumption and Actual Acts of Sexual Aggression in General Population Studies." *Journal of Communication* 66, no. 1 (2015): 192.

[27] Ana J. Bridges, et al. "Sexual Scripts and the Sexual Behavior of Men and Women Who Use Pornography." *Sexualization, Media, & Society* 2, no. 4 (2016): 10.

consent has historically been seen as implied, many have come to know that this leaves room for ambiguity and can result in various forms of sexual assault, particularly against women. As they recognize that implied consent can lead to these acts of violence, more men search for explicit verbal consent and pay greater attention to things such as body language before engaging in sexual acts.[28] The increased prevalence of affirmative consent also speaks to how there is now an increased culturally ubiquitous emphasis on the importance of sexual consent, meaning that most men actively check for consent, as participating in nonconsensual acts is viewed as immoral and socially unacceptable. Asking for consent prior to a sexual act shows an understanding of the harm that could occur if the involved parties did not consent, for the person asking is doing so to avoid harming the other person. This reveals that men who ask for consent are capable of recognizing violence against women, particularly sexual violence, and many seem to oppose its perpetuation as they view it as a moral and social wrong.

Unlike more socially acceptable acts of harm against women that are easier to look past, such as catcalling or an undesired shoulder grab from a male colleague, violent pornography presents an *unavoidable* depiction of physical and verbal violence against women during sexual acts. Therefore, if men can recognize that violence is perpetrated against women during sexual acts, as exemplified by the greater emphasis on affirmative consent, then men watching this type of pornography must have some awareness of the obvious violence depicted in it. Despite being otherwise committed to lessening violence against women, this perception of violence is ignored, as most men with this awareness have not stopped consuming violent porn – notably, the aforementioned 60% of men.[29] The use of 'ignore' here rather than ignorance is intentional, as the shifting societal commitments of these men indicate that they find violence against women,

[28] Malachi Willis, et al. "Explicit Verbal Sexual Consent Communication: Effects of Gender, Relationship Status, and Type of Sexual Behavior." *International Journal of Sexual Health* 31, no. 1 (2019): 67-68.
[29] Wright, Tokunaga, and Kraus. "A Meta-Analysis of Pornography Consumption," 192.

especially during sex, morally repugnant, but have the subsequent cognition to consume more; to ignore something, one must possess knowledge of its existence and disregard it.

In *Managing Ignorance*, Elizabeth Spelman presents a framework for understanding such managed ignorance in terms of white America's ignoring of Black grievances (namely, the ongoing effects of racism and slavery in America). Spelman elaborates on James Baldwin's idea of racial ignorance in America, proposing that white America ignores the truth value of Black America's claims because they are "unwilling to think about [Black grievances] being true or false," out of fear of the "implications of…taking seriously the idea that blacks might have some grounds for grievance."[30] This fear-based ignorance described by Baldwin and, consequently, Spelman is derived from white America's fear that if they were to take these grievances to be true, then they must acknowledge both that Black Americans have historically been wronged and that they have had some role in these wrongdoings. Hence, white Americans do not want to believe that Black Americans' grievances are true, but they do not actually believe that they are false, so they ignore the issue altogether by not concerning themselves with the grievances.[31]

By viewing male consumption of violent pornography through the lens of Spelman's analysis of racial ignorance, we can recognize the similarities between white Americans and men who watch violent porn; both groups act as oppressors who are unwilling to reflect on their actions. In white Americans not confronting the past racial harms they and their ancestors have committed against Black Americans, they fail to affirm that these harms have been done, which also prevents them from considering ways to rectify both the harms and their resulting disparities. This is exemplified by how many states have limited the discussions of slavery and

[30] Spelman, Elizabeth V. Managing ignorance. In Shannon Sullivan Nancy Tuana (ed.), Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance. (2007): 122.
[31] Ibid

racism in the classroom[32] as well as how the United States government has provided limited reparations to descendants of people who were enslaved, which modern human rights groups such as the NAACP advocate for.[33] Men who watch violent pornography are like these white Americans in that they know that there is violence in this content, but they refuse to reflect on the harm within it and the harm that arises from engaging with it. This leads to the continued oppression of women by supporting future violent acts against them, as demonstrated by violent pornography consumption being correlated with violent acts during sex.[34] Seeing the relation between these groups can then lead us to postulate the role of fear-induced ignorance in men's reluctance to discontinue violent porn consumption: what might these men be afraid of, and how might this fear impact their views on violent pornography?

Returning to the premise that there are men who recognize violent pornography as violent, we can contemplate how this recognition alongside the inherent connection between viewing pornography and pleasure may support their fears of confronting their consumption of these materials. While men who consume violent pornography are aware that it is violent, they, like white Americans in recognizing Black grievances, do not want to take this to be true. As the act of viewing violent pornography is so heavily associated with masturbation, believing that this content depicts violence against women would force the men who consume it to reflect on how they have derived physical pleasure from materials that feature the abuse of women. If these men do believe that they are morally righteous and that violence against women is immoral, confronting their consumption of violent pornography might lead to the realization that there is a contradiction in their morals. This reflection could then cause them to question their status as

[32] GianCarlo Canaparo and Jonathan Butcher. "Rejecting Critical Race Theory in State K–12 Laws." The Heritage Foundation. 2024; Donald Collins. "Critical Race Theory and the Scam of the Ban." Al Jazeera. 2021.
[33] NAACP. "Reparations." 2019.
[34] Paul J. Wright, Robert S. Tokunaga, and Ashley Kraus. "A Meta-Analysis of Pornography Consumption and Actual Acts of Sexual Aggression in General Population Studies." *Journal of Communication* 66, no. 1 (2015): 192

decent, moral people in our society, thus potentially creating intense inner turmoil. It is this fear of possibly having to reevaluate their moral values and whether they are morally righteous that fosters the subsequent managed ignorance of their actions.

This understanding of fear-based ignorance enables us to see how fear itself partially motivates their continued consumption of violent porn, providing us with a better idea of how to successfully work with men to reduce their engagement with these materials. This can be done by expanding discussions on the topic to include acknowledgment of such fears and how past actions need not define one's status as a moral person, for example. These practices can be coupled with highlighting how discontinuing the consumption of these materials can help protect women from future acts of violence, which is inherently moral. This understanding also reveals that arguments against pornography consumption that allude to it being a shameful, immoral practice might not be as successful as some think, for this rhetoric may only escalate the very fears that support their fear-induced ignorance.

Furthermore, this discussion is especially relevant to younger generations growing up with unregulated access to the internet. Despite greater overall support for feminist ideas such as consent as compared to past generations,[35] men are starting to use the internet to engage with violent pornography at younger and younger ages,[36] and this can lead to the belief that the actions depicted in this content are what is expected during sexual acts. For example, engagement with violent pornography is correlated with an uptick in sexual teen dating violence.[37] Teaching and interventions for teenagers who consume violent pornography could help limit their perpetuation of cycles of violence against women as adults, so it is essential to

[35] Graf, Allyson, and Viviane Johnson. "Describing the 'Gray' Area of Consent: A Comparison of Sexual Consent Understanding Across the Adult Lifespan." *The Journal of Sex Research* 58, no.4 (2020): 455
[36] Grace B. Jhe, et al.. "Pornography Use among Adolescents and the Role of Primary Care." *Family Medicine and Community Health* 11, no.1 (2023): 1.
[37] Whitney L. Rostad, et.al. "The Association between Exposure to Violent Pornography and Teen Dating Violence in Grade 10 High School Students." *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 48, no. 7 (2019): 2143.

work with them as well. Thus, we must now take steps to prevent further escalation of sexual violence against women, especially young women who may not even know that they don't have to like violence during sex.

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Aristo-Lentian Ethics:

Deficiency and Deprivation as a Means of Virtue Development

Konstandina Deleidi

In this paper, I will explain how Aristotle and Aquinas' ethical frameworks work in conjunction to apply virtue ethics to Orthodox Christian Great Lent. To do this, I must first clarify exactly what Aristotle advocated for in his *Nicomachean Ethics.* In particular, his ideas of virtue between vices and the moral exemplar are vital to the concept of fasting. Then, I will describe the tradition of the Lenten fast, what it is, and what it is motivated by. The purpose of the fast is connected to the moral exemplar, but at first glance its intentional deficiency is antithetical to virtue ethics. To address this tension, I will connect Lent to Aristotle by introducing Thomas Aquinas and his idea of *prudentia*, a master virtue that governs judgements of all other virtues. As Aristotle rejects normative ethics, *prudentia* is important in defining the spectrum of vice, which makes the fast permissible. With both Aristotle and Aquinas in mind, I will emphasize the parallels between self-control and the mechanics of fasting. In total, this paper will demonstrate that fasting is a practice of virtue, and practical wisdom and reasoning reconcile and contextualize deficiency during Great Lent.

Aristotelian ethics fit within a larger field known as virtue ethics. Virtue ethics extend much beyond Aristotle, but the *Nicomachean Ethics* is a cardinal text within the field. The most important characteristic of virtue ethics is that actions are judged by the characteristics–the virtues– they represent. Aristotle wrote that "matters of action are said to be moderate, then, when they are comparable in kind to what the just or moderate person would do."[138]An act is

[38] Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Bartlett and Collins (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 1105b5-7.

considered right when it is done with consideration of what a virtuous person would do in the given situation. Simply put, an action is courageous if it is what a courageous person would do. For Aristotle, virtue is not an end in itself, and acting according to positive values like generosity, truthfulness, and amiability are not necessarily the function of a human. Instead, they are instrumental to a greater good, a type of pure happiness and fulfillment termed *eudaimonia.* This concept of happiness or flourishing is hard to define, but it is both the end function of human beings, as well as a constant habit: "the human good becomes an activity of the soul in accord with virtue."[39] Therefore, virtues are a step towards the final goal of living well.

In order for *eudaimonia* to be attainable, Aristotle thought that there must be certain conditions in place. For example, it would be impossible for an ugly person or a poor person to be truly happy because they are viewed negatively and not fully integrated into society.[40] This is a manifestation of Aristotle's contempt for extremes, namely, deficiency. Deficiency of wealth, beauty, or some other standard, would make *eudaimonia* inaccessible, and therefore would make virtuous acts intrinsic instead of instrumental. Without the possibility of a greater end, virtues would be ends in themselves. In this way, it is not necessarily the existence of someone's ugliness that prevents them from flourishing, but rather their deficiency of beauty.

Aristotle's very definition of virtue is dependent on extremes: they are precisely the mean between vices. For example, courage is the moderation between the vices of cowardice and overconfidence. In this scenario, cowardice is the deficiency and confidence is the excess. In order to find a characteristic we want to embody, we should aim for the middle value, which is to say that we should avoid going too far in one direction. We should be amiable, as this is the balance between callousness and people-pleasing. It would be vicious, not virtuous for us to be

[39] Aristotle, 1098a16-17.
[40] Aristotle, 1099b4-5.

mean and anti-social, but on the other hand, it would also be vicious to be so overly friendly that we lose a grip on our own well-being. This formulation works for many virtues and scenarios. According to Aristotle, an extreme deficiency or excess of wealth would prevent a person's actions from being truly virtuous.

If mean values are to be used as an actual foundation for ethical guidelines, then there needs to be a form of judgement to guide actions. How can we tell that an action is right on account of a certain virtue? Similar to the aforementioned, a person can let their virtues and decision making be guided by a vision of a moral exemplar. This is generally a person who is considered to be wholly virtuous, with a strong foundational sense of what is right. In this, "he, then, who deems himself worthy of great things and is worthy of them is to be great souled."[41] Aristotle goes on to explain that while a great-souled person does have a particular excess of greatness, this makes them perform virtues through moderation and strong will. Thus, we should base our decisions on the idea of a moderate person as a model and a guideline.[42] The problem here is that Aristotle himself did not give any example to conceptualize, much less follow. In order to solve this problem and apply the teachings of *Nicomachean Ethics,* we must find a role model to emulate and ground our perception of virtues in. Looking cross-culturally, an example of a worthy candidate would be Jesus Christ. Christians believe that Christ is the only man to have lived a purely virtuous life, as he is the only sinless human. Although Aristotle did not historically overlap with Christ, this conception of a man without wrong-doing and an inherent sense of virtue, a "knower of excess and deficiency," would match the standard perfectly.[43] Aristotle's idea of the moral exemplar shows that by tuning our behaviors to mimic someone who

[41] Aristotle, 1123b2-3.
[42] Aristotle, 1105b5-7.
[43] Aristotle, 1106b-5.

is virtuous, we ourselves can act virtuously. By this framework, faith and life in the image of God is a virtuous practice.

An important way Christians practice virtue by mirroring Christ is through fasts like the Great Lent. Lent is a time of abstinence from both food and iniquities and is meant to prepare the body and soul for the Resurrection on Easter. The tradition of fasting comes from the mimicry of Jesus as described in Matthew 4:2-4. In this chapter, Jesus led Himself to the wilderness in order to experience temptation to understand the human experience better: "For forty days and forty nights He fasted and became very hungry."[44] In the same scene, Jesus is tempted several times by the devil, and does not give in to this temptation. By resisting the devil's lure, Jesus was strengthening self control.[45] In parallel, during Lent, Christians go through a process of habitual deprivation. They learn to be hungry and uncomfortable, just as Christ was, and maintain their composure through it all. It is an exercise of moral strength and self-control. In this time, Christians also undergo a spiritual process of virtue amplification.[46] This is a time of prayer, alms-giving, and positivity beyond hunger. Isaiah chapter 58 addresses that fasting must be coupled with internal improvement and spirituality, as well as charity and good works.[47] By stripping themselves of as much worldly desire as possible, Christians are attempting to purify and filter their lifestyle to be as similar as possible to Jesus. Thus, all of Lent aims at following an example, which is an important step toward becoming virtuous.

Aristotle thought that by habitually choosing our actions based on the moral exemplar, we will develop our experience with virtues. After a consistent period of evaluating our actions based on a model, we start to develop practical wisdom. In Greek, practical wisdom is referred to

[44] Matthew 4:2-4 (New Living Translation).
[45] "Was Jesus' Time in the Desert Literal?" Verse By Verse Ministry International. Accessed March 1, 2026.
[46] Mastrantonis, George. "Great Lent - a Week by Week Meaning - Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America." Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America. Accessed March 1, 2026.
[47] Isaiah 58:6-7 (New Living Translation).

as *phronesis,* or the wisdom which helps us make decisions. This is vital for being ethical, which is why Aristotle thinks that young people cannot even begin in this endeavor: they simply do not have enough experience.[48] In the Christian sense, this would equate to an instinct to follow Christ's example, or habitual knowledge of scripture that would guide someone through their own decisions. When Christians keep Christs' example in mind as they choose how to conduct their lives, they are demonstrating *phronesis* and making an effort to solidify their virtues.

St. Thomas Aquinas engaged thoroughly with Aristotelian ethics, especially considering *phronesis*. In his *Summa Theologiae,* Aquinas attempts to answer a seemingly endless array of questions regarding subjects such as theology and ethics. I am particularly interested in the way he interacts with Aristotelian ideas, including virtue ethics and practical reasoning. He agrees with Aristotle that virtue is the mean between vices.[49] He also notes that reason is what we use to determine what is situationally deficient or excessive. Reasoning then defines the spectra of virtues. In exploring Aristotle's dynamic, he brings in a new concept that works alongside *phronesis*, which he specified as prudence, or *prudentia* in Latin. *Prudentia* is both a way to evaluate virtue, and a virtue within itself. It is in a sense a master virtue, since it is the ability to use practical reasonableness in all choices and deliberations: "it belongs to the ruling of prudence to decide in what manner and by what means man shall obtain the means of reason in his deeds."[50] By invoking *prudentia*, Aquinas finds a way to use human reasoning to create boundaries for the Aristotelian extremes. Together, Aristotle and Aquinas build the structure that frames Christian fasting.

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[48] Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Bartlett and Collins (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 1095a2-3.
[49] Finnis, John, "Aquinas' Moral, Political, and Legal Philosophy", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2021 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.).
[50] Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Theologiae,* trans. Fathers of English Dominican Province, ST II-II q46 a.7.

At face value in the *Nicomachean Ethics,* extremes are vices that are incompatible with virtue. If we use Aristotle alone to evaluate Great Lent, characterized by intentional deficiency, the whole process would be vicious. However, if *prudentia* is added to the equation, there is room to reconcile the deficiency. If prudence helps us assess how we should act by determining what amount of deficiency/excess is harmful, then it is possible to define a spectrum in which fasting, which is normally considered negative deprivation, can actually be virtuous. If someone intentionally seeks deprivation while rationally considering their actions and using the fast to help develop virtues, they are exercising prudence. The addition of Aquinas' input here is what helps use rationality to reframe the standard for virtue in *Nicomachean Ethics.* Great Lent would require the individual to constantly assess his own actions and the values they imply. The hunger for food and iniquity is a tool to evaluate and strengthen virtues. So, through prudence, Christians understand that their deliberate deficiency is not vice, but a step toward *eudaimonia*.

Aquinas further associates *prudentia* with the ability to govern one's own desires. This has some element of self control as a special virtue. Similar to the idea of self control, the Great Fast is intended to be an increase of asceticism in one's life. Essentially, the goal is to live with the discipline of a monk, diminishing desires as frequently as possible. Aristotle would normally assert that to desire nothing is a deficiency, resulting in laziness or unmotivation. Practical reasoning, according to Aquinas, is the link between these two seemingly contradictory premises. Furthermore, Aristotle does understand and acknowledge that virtue ethics are circumstantial. He advises to strive for "not a middle belonging to the thing in question but rather the one relative to us."[51] The virtues may manifest differently, and the correct choice in one scenario may not be the same in others in order to "make [virtue] harmonize with the particulars

[51] Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Bartlett and Collins (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 1106b6-7.

involved."[52] This rejection of normative (standardized and regulatory) ethics gives the space for virtue to include fasting, deprivation, and asceticism.

If there is room to circumstantially evaluate virtues, then it makes sense that Lenten fasting would be virtuously favorable with consideration. Initially, the deficiency implicated by abstinence would be, on the surface, in complete tension with Aristotle's formulation. However, in combination with controlled practical reasoning and prudence, we can understand that the fast does not actually entail the harms of deficiency. In any case, deficiency is used in order to increase virtue. Just as Aristotle mentions that the "great-souled" are in excess of greatness, but use this to increase virtue, Jesus' deficiency of desire is used to demonstrate virtue as well. The strength of will was important to both Aristotle and Aquinas, and this directly relates to the motivations of fasting. Aristotle spoke negatively of incontinent men who cannot or choose not to control their actions because of their desires. He contrasts this to the "self-controlled person," who "knowing that his appetites are bad, because of reason does not follow them."[53] By this standard, the self-control and practical reasoning necessary for fasting are examples of admirable virtues.

Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* provides a framework for how we should define and use ethics in order to live a good life. Christianity advises that to become wholly fulfilled, its followers should be steadfast in their faith, and do their best to emulate Christ. During the forty day fasting period of Great Lent, Christians diminish their appetites and resist temptation to follow a strict regimen of self control. One of the most salient motivations of the fast is to develop virtues and increase good works. Aristotelian ethics advocate for the habituation of positive actions which result in a positive character. These positive actions are judged using a

[52] Aristotle, 1107a29-30.

[53] Aristotle, 1145b14-15.

balance between deficiency and excess. Aquinas, in his *Summa Theologiae*, explicated that we use prudence to precisely determine what is too much or too little in our given circumstances. All considered, this paper demonstrates that by utilizing *prudentia* to reconcile intentional deficiency, the Great Lent is certainly an exercise of virtue.

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15. Ibid., 1107a29-30.
16. Ibid., 1145b14-15

Perception and Its Limits: Dignāga's Critique of Nyāya Epistemic Pluralism

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Classical Indian epistemology contains a debate about the number and nature of pramāṇas, or ways of gaining valid knowledge. The Nyāya school (one of the six orthodox schools of Hindu philosophy, known for its rigorous approach to logic and epistemology) posits four pramāṇas: perception, inference, analogy, and testimony. The Buddhist epistemologist Dignāga, writing in the fifth century CE, reduces the list to just perception and inference. On the surface, this appears to be a disagreement about classification. However, I will argue that the dispute is in fact a more complex disagreement about what perception fundamentally is. This question matters because how we define perception determines where we draw the boundary between direct experience and reasoning; a boundary with significant consequences for what we can claim to know and how.

In this paper, I will argue that Dignāga's reduction of pramāṇas to two depends on his restrictive definition of perception as nonconceptual awareness of particulars, and that this definition preserves a clearer distinction between perception and inference than Nyāya's inclusion of determinate cognition within perception. I will first reconstruct Nyāya's fourfold theory as presented in the Nyāya Sūtra and discussed by Bimal Krishna Matilal. I will then explain Dignāga's two-pramāṇa theory from the Pramāṇasamuccaya, drawing on the interpretation of Jonardon Ganeri. Finally, I will argue that once conceptual determination is included within perception, the boundary between perception and inference becomes unstable in a way that Dignāga successfully avoids. This matters because a stable perception–inference distinction is essential to any epistemological system: if the line between direct experience and

reasoning collapses, we lose a principled account of how different kinds of knowledge are grounded. Dignāga's two-pramāṇa theory, I will suggest, offers a more philosophically rigorous foundation for that distinction.

By determinate cognition, I mean cognition that identifies its object as falling under a universal (for example, “this is a cow”). By nonconceptual perception, I mean cognition that presents a particular without adding a linguistic element. For example, suppose I walk into a field and visually encounter a brown, moving shape. At the most basic level, there is a visual of a patch of brown with a certain motion. On Dignāga’s account in the Pramāṇasamuccaya, this immediate awareness of a unique, momentary particular counts as perception. It does not yet involve the thought “cow,” nor does it classify the object under a general type. It is simply the presentation of a particular. By contrast, when I judge “this is a cow,” I apply a universal, cowhood, to what is seen. On the Nyāya view articulated in the Nyāya Sūtra, this classificatory act is still perceptual because universals are real features present in the object itself. The cognition presents the object as qualified by a universal that genuinely inheres in it. The disagreement, therefore, concerns whether the classificatory element (“cow”) belongs to perception itself or whether it represents a conceptual addition that should instead be assigned to inference.

The Nyāya philosophy contains four pramāṇas: perception (pratyakṣa), inference (anumāna), analogy (upamāna), and testimony (śabda). These are presented as distinct ways of gaining valid knowledge. The classification reflects Nyāya’s epistemological realism, that the world contains substances, properties, and universals, and cognition can reveal them. Perception, according to the Nyāya Sūtra, is cognition produced by sense-object contact and free from error. Nyāya distinguishes between indeterminate (nirvikalpaka) and determinate (savikalpaka)

perception, but determinate perception plays the primary epistemic role. When one sees an animal and cognizes "this is a cow," that cognition counts as perceptual. The object is presented not merely as a bare particular, but as qualified by a universal. As Matilal explains, Nyāya takes universals (sāmānya) to be real features of the world, lying in particulars. Therefore, conceptual identification does not distort perception, as it reflects the structure of reality. Perception reveals objects as qualified by universals because universals are genuinely present in them. For Nyāya, conceptual determination completes perception rather than categorising it into inference. Inference involves reasoning from a sign to something not presently perceived, such as inferring fire from smoke. Analogy and testimony are treated as distinct pramāṇas because they involve distinctive cognitive processes and cannot, according to Nyāya, be reduced to perception or inference. Thus, Nyāya's fourfold system reflects epistemic pluralism. Different cognitive processes are distinguished based on their origin and function. The crucial question for my purposes is whether including determinate cognition within perception maintains a clear distinction between perception and inference.

Dignāga begins from a different starting point. In the Pramāṇasamuccaya, he argues that there are only two pramāṇas because there are only two fundamentally distinct kinds of knowable objects: particulars (svalakṣaṇa) and universals (sāmānyalakṣaṇa). Each pramāṇa corresponds to one of these. Perception is direct awareness of a particular. It is nonconceptual and free from linguistic determination. What is given in perception is a momentary particular. Conceptual classification does not belong to perception. Conceptual cognition instead belongs to inference. When one cognizes "this is a cow," one is not directly perceiving a universal. Rather, one applies a conceptual construction that operates by excluding what is not cow. As Ganeri explains, Dignāga's theory distinguishes between what is immediately given and what is

constructed through conceptual exclusion. Universals are not independently real entities, as they are products of conceptual construction. Because all valid cognition/ ways of knowing concern either particulars (known by perception) or conceptual constructions (known by inference), Dignāga reduces the number of pramāṇas to two. Testimony and analogy can be categorized as forms of inference. If there are only two kinds of objects available to knowledge, there are only two means of knowing. The reduction is therefore grounded in a structural claim about cognition and reality.

I now argue that Dignāga's restrictive definition of perception preserves a clearer distinction between perception and inference than Nyāya's account does. First, determinate cognition involves applying a universal to a particular. To cognize "this is a cow" is to classify that particular under a general concept. This classification presupposes prior recognition of experience. Second, applying a universal appears to involve moving beyond what is strictly given in immediate awareness. The perceptual presentation consists of things like colors and shapes. The identification of the object as a cow involves recognizing it as an instance of a type. That recognition depends on previously acquired general knowledge. Third, this structure resembles inference. Inference likewise involves moving from what is immediately given (for example, smoke) to a more general or non-present claim (fire). Although Nyāya distinguishes the two based on causal origin, both involve the conceptual application of universals. If perception already includes conceptual determination, then the structural difference between perception and inference becomes unclear. Both involve universals and both involve cognitive transitions beyond the strictly given. The distinction rests primarily on causal origin rather than on the kind of cognition involved.

Dignāga avoids this difficulty by sharply separating the two. Perception presents only a

particular, and inference alone handles conceptual universals. The distinction between pramāṇas thus has a difference in cognitive structure, nonconceptual immediacy versus conceptual mediation. This structural clarity explains why only two pramāṇas are needed. For this reason, Dignāga's account offers a more principled basis for limiting the number of pramāṇas than Nyāya's fourfold system. An objection is that Nyāya need not define pramāṇas in structural terms. The Nyāya philosopher could argue that perception and inference differ in their causal origin as perception arises directly from sense-object contact. In contrast, inference depends on recognizing a pervasion relation and performing a distinct reasoning process. Even if both involve universals, their causal generation differs, and that is sufficient to distinguish them. However, if pramāṇas are meant to represent fundamentally distinct kinds of valid cognition, then differences in cognitive structure seem philosophically more significant than differences in causal history alone. Dignāga's system explains the distinction between pramāṇas by appealing to the structure of what is known, particulars versus conceptual constructions. Nyāya's appeal to causal origin leaves open the question of whether perception and inference differ in kind or only in etiology. Thus, while Nyāya can preserve a formal distinction, Dignāga provides a clearer theoretical rationale for limiting the number of pramāṇas.

In this paper, I have argued that the dispute between Nyāya and Dignāga over the number of pramāṇas turns on their competing definitions of perception. Nyāya includes determinate cognition within perception and maintains four distinct pramāṇas. Dignāga restricts perception to nonconceptual awareness and reduces the list to two. I have argued that once conceptual determination is included within perception, the structural boundary between perception and inference becomes unstable. Dignāga's restrictive account preserves a sharper distinction and provides a stronger basis for limiting the number of pramāṇas. I have not shown that Nyāya's

system is incoherent. Rather, I have aimed to show that with respect to the clarity of the perception–inference distinction, Dignāga's two-pramāṇa theory is philosophically preferable.

The implications of this argument extend beyond the specific dispute between Nyāya and Dignāga. At a broader level, this debate illustrates that disagreements about how many ways of knowing exist are rarely merely taxonomic as they reflect deeper commitments about the nature of mind and the structure of reality. To classify epistemic sources is already to take a stand on what cognition is and what the world makes available to it. This suggests that epistemic pluralism, despite its apparent inclusivity, carries a risk: multiplying pramāṇas without a principled account of their structural differences may obscure rather than illuminate the distinctions that matter most. Dignāga's reductive move is not merely an exercise in parsimony, but a reminder that a leaner epistemology can sometimes offer greater clarity.

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