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ILLUSIONS OF FREEDOM?  
A HISTORY OF ATTITUDES TOWARD DEATH

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A Thesis  
Presented to  
the Graduate School of  
Clemson University

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts  
History

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by  
Dominick Bucca  
May 2024

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Accepted by:  
Dr. Michael L. Meng, Committee Chair  
Dr. Kathryn Langenfeld  
Dr. Benjamin L. White

## ABSTRACT

My thesis explores the historical question: “Is there any freedom from death?” through three figures within the Western metaphysical tradition: Thucydides (460-400 BCE), Augustine (354-430 CE), and Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra (1547-1616). In so doing, my thesis suggests the following: for Thucydides, freedom from death arose through the immortality of empire; for Augustine, through the immortality of God’s grace; and for Cervantes, through the immortality of narratives/attitudes of immortality. Moreover, I nest my claim within an exploratory narrative. Which is to say that, lifting a page from Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), I have attempted to break away from the near total dominance of *Historie*—that is, the “conventional” or “standard” way of thinking about the past that seeks to make direct connections and show continuity between primary sources—to create a form of *Geschichte*: an exploratory way of thinking about the past that attempts to actively explore primary sources without intentionally making direct connections. In this light, my exploratory narrative stands as a historical recalling of the Greek concept of ἱστορία (*historia*): I seek to create an attitude of active engagement toward the writings of Thucydides, Augustine, and Cervantes. Hence my main intervention to the study of death: to offer an alive piece of writing that attempts to think, question, and challenge both my primary sources and my own narrative creation.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I owe a debt of gratitude to my three committee members: Professors Michael Meng, Kathryn Langenfeld, and Benjamin White. Without their generous feedback on many confused drafts, my thesis would still be functioning on the ontic level of history. Indeed, I want to extend a special thanks to my advisor and mentor, Michael Meng. During my study abroad trip to Málaga, Spain (a trip generously funded by Clemson's Department of History and Geography), Professor Meng encouraged me to create a thesis project that mirrored my three interests: philosophy, history, and language learning. When I was not *callejear* the streets of *Andalucía*, I was busy talking to Joaquín Rodríguez Ruiz about death, Heidegger, and language learning. Joaquín's comments on an earlier draft were very helpful—*muchísimas gracias, amigo mío!* More recently, Franco Liotta Tidoni has heard about this thesis in Spanish during our bi-weekly Zoom lessons. Franco's knowledge of ancient languages and linguistics has been invaluable and has also saved me from making several embarrassing errors—*mil gracias, amigo mío!* Also, I should like to thank Darrel McGhee, Luke Harlow, Vejas Liulevicius, Vernon Burton, James Burns, Amanda Regan, Otis Pickett, James Bostic, Carl Reed, Sean Baker, Nick Richbell, Anne Grant, Ana María Wiseman, and Roberto Véguez for all their support and encouragement over the past several years. Finally, I wish to thank David Perkey, William Mercer, Toni Ann Chandler, Rodger Bishop, and all my friends at Clemson Community Care for taking the time to either read or chat about my thesis. At its core, my thesis is a dialogue, an open-ended conversation with other individuals who express an attitude of openness toward philosophy and history.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
TITLE PAGE .....	i
ABSTRACT .....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	iii
INTRODUCTION .....	1
CHAPTER	
I. Thucydides .....	27
<i>Pericles's Funeral Oration</i> .....	33
<i>The Plague of Athens</i> .....	38
<i>The Melian Debate</i> .....	43
<i>The Sicilian Expedition</i> .....	47
II. Augustine .....	54
<i>Moral and Physical Evil</i> .....	57
<i>Metaphysical Evil and Metaphysical Freedom</i> .....	64
III. Cervantes .....	79
<i>A Historical Recalling of Tragic Comedy</i> .....	85
<i>The First Sally of Don Quixote</i> .....	91
<i>Laughing at Death</i> .....	100
<i>The Terror of the Sierra Morena</i> .....	105
CONCLUSION .....	115
<i>Pointless Wandering?</i> .....	119
<i>Pointless Thinking?</i> .....	124
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	129

# Illusions of Freedom?<sup>1</sup>

## A History of Attitudes toward Death

### INTRODUCTION

Is there any freedom from death? My thesis explores this historical, European question—moreover, a question that, as Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) might say, has been forced upon us from the imperialism of Western history—through the writings of three figures: Thucydides (460-400 BCE), Augustine (354-430 CE), and Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra (1547-1616). In so doing, my thesis suggests the following: for Thucydides, freedom from death arose through the immortality of empire; for Augustine, through the immortality of God’s grace; and for Cervantes, through the immortality of narratives/attitudes of immortality. These historical attitudes, moreover, are recovered through an exploratory narrative style. Which is to say that my thesis attempts to explore the complexity of these three writers rather than make direct connections among them. Allow me to express this point more precisely by explaining the difference between my narrative of exploration versus what I am calling narratives of direct connections.

Narratives of direct connections, so one might argue, are popular among Western historians. As early as E.H. Carr’s *What is History?* (1961), we see a striving to create

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<sup>1</sup> My thesis title was inspired in part by the following passage from Martin Heidegger’s *Black Notebooks*: “Technology as the historiography of nature is becoming the form of the ‘knowledge’ of any being whatsoever, is taking possession also of the historiology of history (of the past), and is expanding into the basic form of the relation to beings. Every claim to being is wiped out, but the supreme illusion of freedom (the illusion of dominating everything) arises at the same time; the most intrinsic ambiguity of the abandonment of beings by being has attained its now completely unrecognizable sharpness. In the limitless sphere of technology, everything is ‘alive’—; this life is the substitute for the attained a-historicity, and the latter is then taken to be history. By way of many detours and transformations, τέχνη has won a victory over the inceptually still preserved ἀλήθεια (cf. Plato’s *Phaedrus*). The anthropomorphizing of the human being has reached its goal.” See Martin Heidegger, *Ponderings VII- XI: Black Notebooks 1938-1939*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2017), 102.

narratives of continuity that are concerned with offering direct connections or explaining why things happen. As Carr writes, the “historian and physical scientist are united in the fundamental purpose of seeking to explain, and in the fundamental procedure of question and answer.” However, Carr does not stop there. He continues in another section entitled “Causation of History” to argue that because the historian thinks in a diachronic manner, “history” should be thought of in terms of “causes,” or what I have elected to call direct connections: “The study of history is a study of causes.”<sup>2</sup> Though the latter point illuminates Heidegger’s claim that the imperialism of Western history is tied to the imperialism of Western science and, more broadly, Western technology, the former gives us a working definition of what narratives of direct connections seek to accomplish: they seek to establish 1) continuity and 2) causality between primary sources. More recently, in *Thinking About History* (2017), Sara Maza proposes that the “diachronic” attitude of writing about history “cannot be separated” from history itself: “[D]iachronic analysis (how things change over time)” is something that “cannot be separated in practice,” an apparent fact that “[a]nyone who writes history will tell” us.<sup>3</sup>

And historians have told us. In *Houses of History* (2016), Anna Green and Kathleen Troup claim that “[t]he temporal frameworks adopted by historians are also linked to theories of *causality* . . .”<sup>4</sup> Allan Megill, in *Historical Knowledge, Historical Error: A Contemporary Guide to Practice* (2007), argues that the historian’s task is what

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<sup>2</sup> Edward Hallett Carr, *What Is History?* (New York: Random House, 1961), 112-113.

<sup>3</sup> Sara Maza, *Thinking about History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 158.

<sup>4</sup> Anna Green and Kathleen Troup, *The Houses of History: A Critical Reader in History and Theory*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Manchester University Press, 2016), 9.

“Carr assume[s]:” The historian is to make “causal connections.”<sup>5</sup> Zachary Schrag imports a similar line of thinking in his *Princeton Guide to Historical Research* (2021). Here, Schrag maintains that “historians map patterns” and thus “make claims about motive, causation, and influence.”<sup>6</sup>

While historical narratives typically seek to discuss sources in terms of causality and continuity, my exploratory narrative offers a different way of thinking about the past. In this light, my narrative style is inspired by Heidegger’s *Contributions to Philosophy (Of the Event)* (1936-1938) in the sense that my thesis attempts to “leap” from “*Historie*,” i.e., a focus on causality and continuity, to embrace “*Geschichte*,” a focus on actively inquiring or thinking about the historical beyond the narrowing confines of causality and continuity.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, this latter point raises an interesting question: Can one really think about the historical beyond continuity? In other words, can humans follow Heidegger’s call to break away from the structure of *Historie* and engage in a sort of intellectual “wandering?”<sup>8</sup> After all, Heidegger himself fails to wander away from the structure of

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<sup>5</sup> Allan Megill, *Historical Knowledge, Historical Error: A Contemporary Guide to Practice* (Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 81.

<sup>6</sup> Zachary M. Schrag, *The Princeton Guide to Historical Research* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021), 222.

<sup>7</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (Of the event)*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz and Daniela Vallega-Neu (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1989), 388-389. See also Heidegger, *Ponderings VII- XI*, 78. As Miguel de Beistegui puts it: “On this originary temporality Heidegger grounds the phenomenon of history (*Geschichte*). History needs to be distinguished from the mere chronological conception of time that underlies our ordinary sense of history and of historiography (*Historie*); the time of the event of being needs to be clearly distinguished from the essentially successive time of ‘facts.’” See Miguel de Beistegui, *Truth and Genesis: Philosophy as Differential Ontology* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2004), 122. Heidegger’s translators, John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, note a similar point in the 2008 edition of *Being and Time* (1927): “Heidegger makes much of the distinction between ‘*Historie*’ and ‘*Geschichte*’ . . . ‘*Historie*’ stands for what Heidegger calls a ‘science of history’ . . . ‘*Geschichte*’ usually stands for the kind of ‘history’ that actually happens.” See note in Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008), 30.

<sup>8</sup> Heidegger, *Ponderings VII- XI: Black Notebooks*, 176.



*Historie*: he teaches and writes.<sup>9</sup> What is more, Heidegger is not the first writer to claim that humans have the capacity to wander: the Daoist figure known as Zhuangzi (c. 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE) makes a similar claim. As Zhuangzi writes, taking the “[l]eap” means making “the boundless . . . your home;” it means to break away from the “within” and enjoy “the single breath of heaven” one discovers when “wander[ing] beyond the realm.”<sup>10</sup>

Though I will return to the issue of wandering in my conclusion, my overall attempt to break from the “standard” way of doing Western history raises an important question: Is my thesis “history?”<sup>11</sup> If my narrative seeks to take the leap and venture beyond *Historie*, can my thesis still be characterized as “history?” Does not taking the leap already presuppose a break or, at the very least, a turning away from “history?” Or is my attempt to think beyond conventional definitions of “history” not itself historical, i.e., an unfolding of *Geschichte*?

In this introduction, I will suggest that, although both my question and my exploratory narrative are in themselves Western and thus import certain aspects of

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<sup>9</sup> The French thinker Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) puts it well: “Heidegger may well often make fun of those who seek the security of the safe passage or of the ground, of the grounding of ground and the sure route, but he doesn’t want to get lost either, he is a thinker of wandering who does not want to wander when he is philosophizing, when he is thinking, writing or above all teaching (for this is a seminar), and he wants not only order and a map, but also the exit route, the way out (*Ausweg*).” See Jacques Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 36.

<sup>10</sup> Zhuangzi, *Zhuangzi: Basic Writings*, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 23, 44, 83; Heidegger, *Ponderings VII- XI*, 123, 159.

<sup>11</sup> Derrida raises a similar point: “To liberate the question of being and history, one must, then, stop telling stories, which is to say that one must take a step beyond ontic history. This step, which can look like an exit from history in general toward the ahistorical, is in truth the condition of access to a radicalization of the thinking of history as *history of being itself*.” See Jacques Derrida, *Heidegger: The Question of Being and Time*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 39.

*Historie*, my overall approach is grounded in Heidegger’s notion of *Geschichte* in three interconnected ways:

- I. My narrative recalls how Western history takes its bearings from a complex, exploratory approach to the past: the Greek concept of ἱστορία or inquiry.<sup>12</sup>
- II. By reference to Heidegger’s writings, my thesis itself is an expression of *Geschichte* insofar as it is a historical happening within a “world” that is itself “historical.”<sup>13</sup>
- III. My narrative will then proceed to show how, besides Heidegger, three other thinkers—Hannah Arendt (1906-1975), Alexandre Kojève (1902-1968), and Dmitri Nikulin (1962—)—have explored the historical question with which I began my thesis: Is there any freedom from death?

### **A Historical Recalling of *Historia***

To recall the Greek concept of ἱστορία (*historia*) is tantamount to asking: What is history? As we have already seen, Western historians from the mid-twentieth century to

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<sup>12</sup> See Robert Scott and H.G. Liddell, *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1889), Perseus Digital Library. [https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.04.0058%3Aentry%3Di\(stori%2Fa](https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.04.0058%3Aentry%3Di(stori%2Fa) (accessed February 17, 2024).

<sup>13</sup> See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: State University of New York Press, 1996), 349. In his lecture course entitled “Heidegger: The Question of Being and History” (1964-1965/2016), Derrida offers an interesting interpretation of Heidegger’s comment in *Being and Time* (1927) that “even nature is historical.” As Derrida writes: “What does this mean, that nature is historical? This does not mean taking the opposite position to the Hegelian or Husserlian assertion according to which nature has no history, according to which natural history is a contradictory concept, according to which nature is at bottom the non-historical itself, subject to a model of iterative repetition that excludes that other model of repetition, the historical model. No, Heidegger is not here taking the opposite to the classical thesis, and also denies that he is doing natural history. But nature, insofar as its meaning as nature is constituted on the basis of the ek-sistence of *Dasein*, its nature-meaning as landscape, as field of cultivation, place of worship, field of battle or conquest, raw material, and so on. To this extent nature is historical (no *life*). So the totality of the world is historical, whether one designate by ‘world’ the world of nature or the world of culture; the world is historical; that means that the world *is* not, but *worlds* in the ek-static transcendence of *Dasein*, in the historialization of *Dasein*. A fundamental historialization on the basis of which alone one will be able to define different types of production of historical meaning, different lines of historical productivity.” See Jacques Derrida, *Heidegger: The Question of Being and History*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 207-208.

the present have expressed, albeit in their own unique and indeed historical storylines, a similar orientation, namely, an orientation that suggests that “[t]he study of history,” to repeat Carr’s claim, “is a study of causes.”<sup>14</sup> But Carr unwittingly recalls the complexity of ἱστορία in his own narrative. Allow me to explain. In the opening to his *What is History?*, Carr presents us with two passages from “the first and second incarnations of the Cambridge Modern History.” Though Carr immediately dismisses the texts on the grounds that they are nothing but “nonsense,” his reaction to this so-called “nonsense” is, I think, worth mentioning. He writes: “Where the pundits contradict each other so flagrantly the field is open to inquiry.” The latter noun is crucial insofar as it recalls how “the field” of Western history is itself “open to inquiry” because it is grounded in inquiry: it is grounded in ἱστορία or an “inquiry” into events or happenings.<sup>15</sup>

Notice, moreover, that I do not limit the Greek term ἱστορία to strictly human happenings. This is because earlier Greek figures were already using the term “inquiry” as a more general way to describe gaining knowledge or even witnessing things.<sup>16</sup> Plato, for example, used the term to gain greater knowledge concerning animals, an exploration that his student Aristotle would later pick up in his *History of Animals* (c. 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE).<sup>17</sup> Yet, in the fifth century, ἱστορία was used in a more direct manner. Although the

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<sup>14</sup> E.H. Carr, *What Is History?*, 112-113.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 3-4; Herodotus, *The Histories*, trans. A.D. Godley (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1920), Perseus Digital Library, <http://data.perseus.org/citations/urn:cts:greekLit:tlg0016.tlg001.perseus-grc1:1.1.0> (accessed February 10, 2024).

<sup>16</sup> See *Hesiod: Theogony, Works and Days, Testimonia*, trans. Glenn W. Most (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 200; Theophrastus, *Inquiry into Plants*. For more examples, see Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940), Perseus Digital Library, [https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.04.0057:entry=i\(stori\)/a](https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.04.0057:entry=i(stori)/a) (accessed on February 11, 2024).

<sup>17</sup> Plato, *Phaedo* 96a.

term still held its use as “inquiry,” Herodotus’s *Histories* (c. 430) placed the Greek notion of history “closer” to human events rather than natural events.<sup>18</sup> I place an emphasis on the word “closer” because even Herodotus’s narrative has a certain breadth to it: besides exploring both human and natural occurrences, Herodotus offers a critical inquiry into the Greek gods.<sup>19</sup> More interestingly still is that shortly after this discussion, Herodotus pauses and asks “the gods and heroes” for forgiveness: “May the gods and heroes forgive me for speaking as I have about these matters!”<sup>20</sup> Hence the complexity surrounding *ιστορία*: not only does this Greek notion of history reveal a striving to learn but it also recalls the ways in which this striving is itself grounded in an attitude of exploration, what one might call an attitude of wonder (*θαῦμα*).<sup>21</sup> More strongly stated, this brief inquiry into *ιστορία* reveals how Western history originates in an exploratory manner that seeks to show the complexities surrounding temporal occurrences, from human to non-human.

### **Historie and Geschichte**

Martin Heidegger creates a fall narrative: the Western metaphysical tradition has “long forgotten” the openness (what Heidegger calls the “unconcealment”) of “the

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<sup>18</sup> See Seth Benardete, *Herodotean Inquiries* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1969), 4; Simon Hornblower, *Thucydides* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 7; Michael Allen Gillespie, *Hegel, Heidegger, and the Ground of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 1-3.

<sup>19</sup> Herodotus, *Histories*, 2.42-45.

<sup>20</sup> Herodotus, *Histories*, trans. Pamela Mensch (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, 2014), 99 (2.45).

<sup>21</sup> Arnaldo Momigliano makes this point when noting how Greek historians produced many different “types of history,” from what we today would call “political” to “intellectual” history. See Arnaldo Momigliano, *The Classical Foundations of Modern Historiography* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990), 29, 43, 45-47.

Greeks” and thus has forgotten *Geschichte*.<sup>22</sup> Returning to Heidegger’s *Contributions to Philosophy*, it is worth recalling his fundamental distinction between a history that seeks to calculate the historical within segments of time (*Historie* or translated into English as Historiology), and a history that seeks to actively reflect on the “reality” of the historical being: how the human being stands as a uncertain being within space and time (*Geschichte*). As Heidegger writes:

Historiology spreads the illusion that we can gain complete mastery over all reality, and it does so by adhering to everything superficial and displacing the surface itself which it takes as the only sufficient reality. Historiology, as implying an unlimited knowledge of all things, in all respects, and with all the means of presentation, i.e., as implying disposal over everything factual, leads to an exclusion from history. The more decisive this exclusion becomes, the more unrecognizable it is to those who are excluded.

Historiology, in its preliminary forms, in its development into science, and in the leveling down and intelligibility of this science to common calculation, is utterly a consequence of metaphysics, i.e., a consequence of the *history* of being, of being as history. Thereby, however, being and history remain completely concealed, indeed they even withhold themselves in this concealment.<sup>23</sup>

Tying together *Historie* with science, Heidegger suggests that *Historie* expresses an attitude of mastery to the extent that it seeks to create not a narrative of unconcealment, the openness found in *ιστορία*, but rather a narrative of concealment: not “a” inquiry but “the” inquiry into “the history of being.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Volume IV: Nihilism in Nietzsche Volume III: The Will to Power as Knowledge and as Metaphysics and Volume IV: Nihilism*, trans. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper, 1987), 93; Heidegger, *Ponderings VII- XI*, 82, 306. See also Heidegger’s remarks in Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Gregory Fried and Richard Polt 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), 182.

<sup>23</sup> Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy*, 388-389.

<sup>24</sup> Heidegger notes later in his *Black Notebooks* that “Historiology is thus a sibling of ‘technology’; both are fundamentally the same.” See Heidegger, *Ponderings VII- XI*, 78. See also, *Ibid.*, 102, 147, 164, 273.

What Heidegger is suggesting is that *Historie* is concerned with creating a master narrative of the world: a narrative that is predicated on the notion of “power,” on the thought that “everything factual” can and will become “displac[ed]” or “exclud[ed] from history.” Indeed, if we recall how this latter form of history is a product of *Geschichte*, and how Heidegger connects *Geschichte* with the openness of “beyng,” then we might argue that Heidegger’s narrative suggests that scientific history is taking us away from “beyng” and thus stripping us of our historicity: it is stripping us of reality, of acting as “spatio-temporal, mass[es]” within an unpredictable world.<sup>25</sup> In other words, scientific history creates “an immortality of the present,” Heidegger’s “illusion of freedom.”<sup>26</sup>

What about *Geschichte*? If scientific history, whose “goal” is to create a complete and total “anthropomorphizing” of both time and “nature,” arose from *Geschichte*, how can there be a new dispensation of *Geschichte* that breaks away?<sup>27</sup> In a word, how can one break away from the near total dominance of *Historie*? One thing is seemingly clear: the break itself does not arise from the creation of a universal narrative, which seeks to dominate everything through a rigid system of asymmetrical power relations.<sup>28</sup> Yet, my question still remains: How does one break away from *Historie*?

One answer can be found in Heidegger’s *Introduction of Metaphysics* (1935).<sup>29</sup> In these lectures, we find Heidegger expressing an orientation towards destruction: not only

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 78, 152.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 272, 102.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 102, 115, 164

<sup>29</sup> As Gregory Fried and Richard Polt note, unlike some of Heidegger’s earlier writings, “*Introduction to Metaphysics* reads . . . more like an internal critique of National Socialism. Heidegger repeatedly praises recent developments in Germany while snatching the praise away in his next breath by claiming that the

does he lift a violent phrase from Heraclitus—namely, how “[c]onfrontation is indeed for all,” but he also, and perhaps more crucially, expresses how “history” (*Geschichte*) itself is tied to the work of “the violence-doer.”<sup>30</sup> According to this view, *Geschichte* causes a violent break, that is, a “shattering” of *Historie* itself. Yet, it is worth mentioning that this interpretative act of destruction is not a clarion call for self-annihilation. Instead, Heidegger views this “excessive” sway towards “violence” as a historical recalling: in other words, the “violence” causes an “incident” (*Zwischen-fall*), that is, an event, which reveals what “the Greeks” already understood, namely the “character” of “mystery” that makes up “[t]he essence of Being-human.”<sup>31</sup> As a result, Heidegger’s interpretation of *Geschichte* is estranging insofar as it implies a different way of thinking: a mode of thought that desires to think what cannot be thought: the “essence” of the human being as death or “nothingness.”<sup>32</sup> In this light, to think about that which “is and never,” (*Geschichte*), demands that one is no longer thinking within “the supreme illusion of freedom (the illusion of dominating everything).”<sup>33</sup>

In recalling the attitudes of Thucydides, Augustine, and Cervantes, my thesis stands as a form of *Geschichte* rather than *Historie*. Not only does my exploratory narrative recover three forms of European *Geschichte*, but it also, and perhaps more

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developments remain superficial (e.g. IM 36, 39, 41, 81, 129). In short, he attempts to be more revolutionary than the revolution itself. The question of whether Heidegger ‘is a Nazi’ in this text is thus less interesting than the question of what it *means* to be a Nazi. Heidegger is surely raising that question, as well as the broader questions of what it means to be German, to be Western, and to be human. The lines of questioning he initiates can hardly be reduced to a particular party’s program or ideology.” See Gregory Fried and Richard Polt, introduction, in *Introduction to Metaphysics*, xix.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 67, 182.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 183.

<sup>32</sup> Heidegger, *Ponderings VII- XI*, 113.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 102.

interestingly, creates a new form of *Geschichte* within the twenty-first century. More differently stated: my thesis itself is a happening of *Geschichte* to the extent that my exploratory narrative seeks to break away from conventional ways of thinking about the past—that is, what some scholars have called “historical thinking” or “think[ing] historically”—so as to embrace what a Heidegger calls a “different” and “originary” way of thinking about the past.<sup>34</sup> In brief, “history” (*Geschichte*) as an open inquiry into “the future.”<sup>35</sup>

Of course, this notion of *Geschichte* as an open inquiry into the future is an estranging point. Let me explain. In claiming that history has its “origin[s]” in “the future” rather than the past, Heidegger appears to be creating a narrative that suggests, among other things, that “the happenings of history” are never grounded in certainty; instead, they are always grounded in uncertainty, the mysteriousness that makes up the future. According to this view, ontological history (*Geschichte*) moves us away from ontic history (*Historie*) by “opening up” a mode of thought that seeks to challenge the authority of the “modern” assumption that the historical comes to us as something

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<sup>34</sup> See Intelligent Channel, “What is ‘historical thinking’?—Historian Jim Grossman in INT’s ENLIGHTENMENT MINUTES,” uploaded on May 5, 2013, YouTube video, 2:03, <https://youtu.be/i71veYOUHiw?si=M6hiEaAWIM3yCU-g>; Thomas Andrews and Flannery Burke, “What Does it Mean to Think Historically?,” *AHA Perspectives*, 45 (Jan. 2007), 32-35; Heidegger, *Ponderings VII- XI*, 97. Indeed, this attitude of striving to think historically is itself historical. For example, see Alan K. Henrikson, “Thinking Historically,” in *The Fletcher Forum*, Vol. 2, no.2 (1978): 225-35; Stéphane Lévesque, *Thinking Historically: Educating Students for the Twenty-First Century* (Toronto, 2008); James T. Kloppenberg, “Thinking Historically: A Manifesto of Pragmatic Hermeneutics,” *Modern Intellectual History* 9 (2012): 201-216 Stephanie Cole, Kimberly Breuer, Scott W. Palmer, and Brandon Blakeslee, *How History is Made: A Student’s Guide to Reading, Writing, and Thinking in the Discipline* (Arlington, Texas: Mavs Open Press, 2022); American Historical Association, “Historical Thinking Skills,” <https://www.historians.org/teaching-and-learning/teaching-resources-for-historians/teaching-and-learning-in-the-digital-age/the-history-of-the-americas/the-conquest-of-mexico/for-teachers/setting-up-the-project/historical-thinking-skills>. Accessed on February 12, 2024.

<sup>35</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Basic Questions of Philosophy*, trans Richard Rojcewicz and André Schuwer (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 38.



“frozen” or already unfolding as a “decisive” event. Additionally, like “the poet, the architect, the thinker, [and] the statesmen,” the human being who embraces *Geschichte* is at once a “creative” and “violent” person in terms of wishing to disobey the “modern,” “historiographical” striving to think about the historical within quotidian terms: the historical as simply “research” or something that has “its own proper usefulness”—e.g., a “law” that attempts to police the historical human being.<sup>36</sup>

Thus, although my thesis gestures toward this notion of *Geschichte* as a creative challenge against *Historie*, my own exploratory narrative wraps itself up in the garb of contradiction: not only does my exploratory narrative unwittingly make direct connections and show continuity between sources, but it also neglects to shatter the ontic reliance on structure. To put it differently, my thesis against structure hinges upon a particular structure—the philosophy of Martin Heidegger.

I mention my counterclaim for two reasons. First, I want the reader to be aware that my thesis is, at bottom, a restless thesis to the extent that it seeks to challenge structure while, at the same time, holding on to structure, Heidegger’s interpretation of *Geschichte*. Second, I want the reader to be aware of the fact that I agree with another aspect of Heidegger’s teaching: the human being as death or nothingness.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, this latter point is interlaced with *Geschichte*. As Heidegger writes, “[o]nly man is historical . . .” Thus, if Dasein (the human being’s being-there in the world) is nothingness that is itself historical, then *Geschichte* stands as a historical reflection of nothingness within the

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 34-35, 40. As Heidegger writes, “the creative always appears” to us as “violent.” See Heidegger, *Basic Questions of Philosophy*, 83.

<sup>37</sup> Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, 4-5.

framework of narrative. Hence why *Geschichte* itself stands as something that is truly restless or “inexhaustible.” It attempts to think about the unthinkable—the human being as uncertainty, as nothingness whose Dasein acts within “the perspective of the future” rather than the “frozen” past.<sup>38</sup> In this light, *Geschichte* is the “[r]evolution” or “the upheaval” that will “rescue” the historical (Dasein) from what Heidegger sees as “the conservative attitude” of “mere preservation,” of making the historical solely an extension of the past rather than an “extension from the future into the past and from the past into the future.”<sup>39</sup> In short, *Geschichte* or ontological history is an attempt orient the human being toward an attitude of active engagement with the historical/Dasein itself.

### **Historiography**

The historiography of freedom is complex. Though E.R. Dodds, Albert Dihle, Michael Frede, and Paul Christopher Johnson have written about freedom within the Western metaphysical tradition, their interpretations, one might argue, are mostly still on the ontic level. Which is to say that their interpretations are mostly still grounded in history as a form of *Historie* rather than *Geschichte*.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, I agree with Heidegger in the sense that, although revealing interesting insights into the past, many “*historiographical* consideration[s]” fall into a limited way of thinking about Dasein (the historical human being). As Heidegger writes, the human being “becomes finite or [an]

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<sup>38</sup> Heidegger, *Basic Questions of Philosophy*, 34-34.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 35, 38.

<sup>40</sup> Eric R. Dodds, *The Greeks and Irrational* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1951); Albrecht Dihle, *The Theory of the Will in Classical Antiquity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1982); Michael Frede, *A Free Will: Origins of the Notion in Ancient Thought*, ed. A. A. Long (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012); Paul Christopher Johnson, *Automatic Religion: Nearhuman Agents of Brazil and France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020). See also, Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh, 368, 9.

infinite objectivity for the thinking subject.” This move towards the human being as finite, Heidegger continues, “undertakes the disposal of being” and therefore the disposal of the “uncertainty” that makes the human being itself stand as “something most question-worthy.”<sup>41</sup> Although Heidegger believes we are now living in “the age of questionlessness”—that is, an age where Dasein itself is being hidden under the ontic sediments of *Historie*, there are some scholars who discuss, albeit in different ways, the uncertainty of Dasein.<sup>42</sup> In other words, there are scholarly reflections that orient humans toward ontological history: *Geschichte*. Indeed, I should now like to turn to three of these narratives in the subsequent pages.

Approximately a decade after her *Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), Hannah Arendt (1906-1975), a student of Martin Heidegger, explores the origins of another aspect of the Western metaphysical tradition: history. In her essay entitled “The Concept of History: Ancient and Modern” (1961), Arendt recalls how “the Greek concept” of history was oriented towards unpredictability, particularly the unpredictability of human “deeds.” “What is difficult for us to realize,” writes Arendt, “is that the great deeds and

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<sup>41</sup> Heidegger, *Ponderings VII- XI*, 92, 117.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 116. Heidegger defines *Historie* or ontic history as a “danger” to “everything that [is] creative.” He writes: “But a still higher danger comes to history through historiology insofar as the latter (what pertains to its concept) has established itself as the unobtrusive basic form of everyday representation and opinion: the danger that everything creative, scarcely having ventured out in public, rather than transform anything, might itself be changed into the past, not in the crude form whereby it is explained as having already been and it thereby rendered harmless, but rather in that insidious mode according to which the change into the past and the fusion with it do at the same time concede and appropriate something new, whereas in truth that are opposed to every decision and essential transformation. But even if what creates history overcomes the resistance of the historiological (the historiologically current and fixed), it still faces a danger belonging to it essentially and not on account of the sovereignty of historiology. The creative ones themselves slip standards of judgment into the hands and heads of those who will later overcome and condemn and who, through the unavoidable entrance into the public and usual, will cover over the inceptual originariness of what is created.” See *Ibid.*, 89.

works of which mortals are capable, and which become the topic of historical narrative, are not seen as part of either an encompassing whole or a process; on the contrary, the stress is always on single instances and single gestures.” Because of this unique stress on single instances and gestures, the “subject matter of history,” argues Arendt, became tantamount to the study of “interruptions—the extraordinary, in other words.”<sup>43</sup>

Thus, according to Arendt, Western history began on a note of openness towards human fragility. As she explains: “In the beginning of Western history, the distinction between the mortality of men and the immortality of nature, between man-made things which come into being by themselves, was the tacit assumption of historiography.” Although some Greek writers used their works to gain a sense of “permanence,” this striving towards “immortality” or “imperishability,” Arendt maintains, was based on the touchstone of “homeless[ness]:” a person’s deeds made them lose “their home in the world, since the world . . . is perishable and since man-made things, once they come into being, share the fate of all being—they begin to perish the moment they have come into existence.”<sup>44</sup>

Yet, Arendt does not ground her claim in the work of Herodotus. On the contrary, she turns instead to an event from Homer’s *Odyssey* (c. 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE). Noting “the moment when Ulysses, at the court of the king of the Phaeacians, listened to the story of his own deeds and sufferings,” Arendt recalls to us how the immortality of “his own deeds” made Ulysses homeless insofar as the story made him “an ‘object’ for all to see

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<sup>43</sup> Hannah Arendt, “The Concept of History: Ancient and Modern,” in *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 42.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

and hear.” Connecting this point to Greek tragedy, particularly to Aristotle’s notion of tragedy as “catharsis,” Arendt shows how, at base, the Greek notion of “historical inquiry” was predicated on a “paradox:” on the one hand, the “transformation” of human deeds into “history” offered humans a sense of “permanence.” On the other hand, “the tragic aspect of Greek culture” made these inquiries into “human greatness” “futile” because the “activities of men” were transitory.<sup>45</sup> Here we find Arendt expressing a fall narrative: she claims that the Greek notion of “history” has become “lost” in our “modern age.”<sup>46</sup> Citing both the rise of “modern science” and “technology,” alongside “Cartesian” Christianity, Arendt maintains that the domineering “historical truth” is now tied to the desire to “control” “human unpredictability.”<sup>47</sup> Indeed, Arendt, similar to Heidegger, issues a grave warning: We are living in a “dangerous world;” “history” is not only being used to “dominate” but, in so doing, it is also being used to eliminate “the capacity for wonder and thought.”<sup>48</sup> It would thus seem that, at least in this essay, Arendt argues that Western history is no longer concerned with open exploration but rather domination, the striving to wrest from nature the only thing that is given to us: death.<sup>49</sup>

Alexandre Kojève (1902-1968), one of the more brilliant and lesser-known thinkers of the twentieth century, mentions Heidegger when discussing the thoughts of another German thinker, G.W.F. Hegel (1770-1831). Kojève, a Russian-born polymath

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 54, 61-64, 65.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 63, 85, 89-90; Heidegger, *Bremen and Freiburg Lectures: Insight into That Which Is and Basic Principles of Thinking*, trans. Andrew J. Mitchell (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2012), 44-63.

who was learned in subjects as diverse as quantum physics and *Mahāyāna* Buddhism, tells us in a 1936 book review (unpublished) that the thought of Martin Heidegger influenced his lectures on the philosophy of Hegel, published as his *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel* (French: 1947/English: 1969).<sup>50</sup> Spanning from the war-torn years of 1933-1939, Kojève's Hegel lectures are not only an attempt to highlight the philosophy of Hegel, but they are also, as one scholar argues, "original works of philosophy."<sup>51</sup>

To anticipate, I am not interested in discussing whether or not Kojève offers a "correct" interpretation of Hegel's philosophy.<sup>52</sup> Rather, using his Hegel lectures as my intellectual scaffolding, I will argue that Kojève's narrative is similar to that of Arendt and Heidegger's, which is to say that, at least in his Hegel lectures, Kojève views Western history as being orientated towards freedom from death.

Like Heidegger and Arendt, Kojève presents a fall narrative. No longer "limit[ing]" ourselves, like "the ancient Greeks," to exploring "the natural [and] 'eternal' Cosmos," Kojève maintains that "Man" has adopted a form of "study" through "the Judeo-Christian tradition." This "truly anthropological" tradition, Kojève writes, has

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<sup>50</sup> See Alexandre Kojève, "Note inédite sur Hegel et Heidegger," ed. Bernard Hesbois, *Rue Descartes* 7 (June 1993): 29-34. For more on Kojève, see Jeff Love, *The Black Circle: A Life of Alexandre Kojève* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

<sup>51</sup> Judith Butler, *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-Century France* (New York: Columbia University Press 1987), 63. This is only one side of a much more complicated debate surrounding Kojève's interpretation of the work of Hegel. Joseph Flay, for example, disagrees with Butler's claim that Kojève presented us with a "correct" reading of Hegel. He writes: "The interpretation, however, simply does not work; it might be good Kojève, and might even be correct about reality, but it is not Hegel." See Joseph Flay, *Hegel's Quest for Certainty* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984), 299. Jeff Love puts it well: "It is now commonplace to dismiss these lectures as philosophically and philologically unsound—as 'bad' Hegel. Unfortunately, it is equally commonplace to dismiss these dismissals with the confident declaration that they are beside the point, Kojève being not merely an interpreter of Hegel but also a philosopher himself, who is thereby permitted greater interpretative license." See Love, *The Black Circle*, 103.

<sup>52</sup> See Flay, *Hegel's Quest for Certainty*, 299.

given us an “empirical existence” that is “incompatible with ancient and traditional science or philosophy.” Now, we are “*essentially*” different from nature in terms of our temporality. That is to say, quoting from Hegel, Kojève claims that the “modern” human is a “*free historical Individual* (or of the “Person”).” Having this historicity within our possession, we are now finite creatures of negation: “Nature is a ‘sin’ in Man and for Man: He can and must oppose himself to it and negate it in himself.”<sup>53</sup> But Kojève does not stop there: “Even while living in Nature, he [the free historical individual] does not submit to its laws (miracles!): To the extent that he is opposed to it and negates it, he is independent in the face of it; he is autonomous or *free*.”<sup>54</sup>

Yet, no one is free from what is given to us: death. Indeed, being independent already presupposes an antonym: the existence of a dependent, of something “being” in a state of dependency on something else. Or as Kojève puts it: to speak of autonomy or freedom “engenders the relationship of Mastery and Servitude.”<sup>55</sup> But where does history arise? How is Western history tied to this master-slave dichotomy?

Kojève gives us an answer through his commentary on Hegel. “For Hegel,” Kojève claims, “History does not begin until the ‘first’ Fight for Recognition, which would not be what it is—i.e., anthropogenetic—if it did not imply a real risk of life.”<sup>56</sup> In other words, Western history is tied to freedom to the extent that freedom arises at the very moment of historical recognition: at the very moment when the slave (the historical

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<sup>53</sup> Alexandre Kojève, “The Idea of Death in the Philosophy of Hegel,” trans. Joseph Carpino, *Interpretation* 3, no. 2/3 (Winter): 119-120.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 120-121.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 148; Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, ed. Allan Bloom, trans. James H. Nichols Jr., 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1969), 252 (hereafter abbreviated as *IRH*).

<sup>56</sup> Kojève, *IRH*, 252.

individual) attempts to flee from the “Terror” that lies at the foot of her master (death).<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, it is through this “risk of life” where we see the rise of history: “History . . . is only an evolution of the ‘contradiction’ (*Widerspruch*) arising from the ‘immediate’ (*unmittelbar*) solution of this first social or human conflict proved by the opposition (*Entgegensetzung*) of Mastery and Slavery.” “Therefore, Man’s freedom and individuality indeed presuppose his death,” which, as Kojève writes, is also interlaced with the finite human individual’s “historicity, since . . . it is nothing other than free individuality of individual or individualized freedom.”<sup>58</sup>

Thus, both freedom and history are in a state of negative dependency: they both depend upon the destruction of the human individual to initiate the recognition of the free historical individual. But how can one be “an individual” and not be historical? If “the presence of death” makes us “creative agents of History,” then how can we, as being not-

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<sup>57</sup> Kojève, “The Idea of Death,” 140. As Kojève puts it elsewhere: “The human being, given to herself in this way, reminds us of a person in a swamp. She knows that the swamp as a whole can take her away, and if she could find something to hand onto, she would be completely safe. But she cannot. She tries to take hold of as much as possible, lays down boards, etc., but she never knows if she has taken enough. She stands on a small bit of land but does not know if she will hold it for long and fears remaining on it. She looks around, seeks another small bit of land (a closer one?), avoiding the slippery spots (but, perhaps, they are firmer?), avoiding the slippery spots (but, perhaps, they are firmer?), jumps onto it and is afraid again, searches again, etc., without end or, more accurately, until the end: she will run until she downs or for as long as she has not drowned she will run—such a person is not serene and not secure; she is in terror.

The human being, given to herself in this way, is given to herself in the tonus of terror: she is in terror in the terrible world of killing and death. It is terrible for her to see the destruction of things (is it not terrifying in a fire?); it is terrible to see death and killing. But not only this; she is in terror where there was death, where what was is no longer (is not terrifying in a ‘ghost town’?), where she sees the absence of whatever could have been (indeed, it is terrible in the desert where there is so much ‘unfilled’ space), but especially where she sees nothing (how terrible at night!). She is in terror as well where there is no end, but there is finitude where there is still no death or killing, but where they can be (indeed, it is terrible to be around a terminally ill person or one condemned to death; and is it not terrible where it ‘smells of death’?). And what does it mean that for ‘the human being in the world’ it is always and everywhere terrible or, at the least, that it can be terrible for her always and everywhere?” See Kojève, *Atheism*, trans. Jeff Love (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 76-77.

<sup>58</sup> Kojève, *IRH*, 252.



dead, participate in “historical freedom”?<sup>59</sup> In a word, how can there be freedom for the living? Here is where Kojève makes a delicate point: “[M]odern” history, with its emphasis on “*the free historical Individual*,” expresses a profound hatred of the world: an “auto-negation” thesis that, in calling for “immortality,” calls for the apocalyptic destruction of being in the world that has been given to us.<sup>60</sup>

Indeed, though I will explore this point more precisely in my narrative on Augustinian Christianity (Chapter 2), Kojève brings this “illusion,” one might argue, to its logical end:

But Man cannot *really* become immortal. It is the *being* of what is negated that passes into negation and *realizes* its result. Thus, by (actively) negating the real natural World, Man can create a historical or human (“technical world”) World, which is just as real, although real in a different way. But death is pure Nothingness, and it subsists only as *concept* of death (= presence of the absence of life). Now, by negating a concept one only manages to create another *concept*. Hence Man who negates his death can only ‘imagine’ himself immortal: he can only *believe* in his ‘eternal’ life or his ‘resurrection,’ but he cannot really *live* his imaginary ‘afterlife.’ But this faith, whose counterpart and origin are the faculty of freely bringing about one’s death, also distinguishes Man from animal. Man is not only the sole living being which knows that it must die and which can feely bring about its death: he is also the only one which can aspire to immortality and believe in it more or less firmly.<sup>61</sup>

Therefore, by transforming “Man” into a “*free historical individual*,” Kojève argues that the “modern” historian creates an illusion, namely the illusion that there can be “*eternal life*,” a world stripped of “death.” Of course, when pushed to the extreme, this claim leads to the assumption that, in creating the illusion of eternal life, the historian

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<sup>59</sup> Kojève, “The Idea of Death,” 143.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 120; Kojève, *IRH*, 246. As Kojève notes, “[f]or history to exist, there must be not only a given reality, but also a negation of that reality and at the same time a (‘sublimated’) preservation of what has been negated . . . Now, to preserve oneself as negated it to *remember* what one has been while one is becoming radically other.” See Kojève, *IRH*, 232.

<sup>61</sup> Kojève, *IRH*, 256.

negates what he seeks to preserve: the human individual. As Kojève writes, the concept of “the free historical individual” expresses only two options: “one must either change oneself”—i.e., adapt to the “Judeo-Christian conception” of “God,” or simply “perish.” But Kojève pushes the claim even further in terms of showing how 1) both options imply becoming something “essentially and radically *other*” and 2) how this notion of otherness is tantamount to “active auto-negation:” the negation of “the natural or social World.”<sup>62</sup>

Accordingly, at least as expressed in his Hegel lectures, Kojève recalls how Western history has not only fallen away from “the Greek” understanding of history but also, and perhaps more importantly, has moved towards the illusion of “freedom:” the belief in “the free historical individual.” Moreover, Kojève argues that this movement takes its bearings from a negation of reality: it seeks to negate the only thing given to us, the “Terror” of death, Kojève’s “pure Nothingness.”<sup>63</sup>

Currently a Professor of Philosophy at The New School for Social Research in New York, Dmitri Nikulin (1962—) expresses a similar orientation about history in his *The Concept of History* (2017). “Following Vico,” Nikulin begins by telling us that the concept of “history is opposed, although not opposite to, nature: nature is there and is not produced by us, although it can be transformed by our activity.”<sup>64</sup> One can see this claim, argues Nikulin, in “[t]he modern understanding of history that arose at the end of the seventeenth century.” This view of history sets its sails according to the gale of “modernity:” the “scientific method.”<sup>65</sup> In this sense, scientific history seeks to establish

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 257.

<sup>63</sup> Kojève, “The Idea of Death,” 119, 141; Kojève, *IRH*, 222, 256.

<sup>64</sup> Dmitri Nikulin, preface in *The Concept of History* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), x.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., xi, 38.

a set of “laws” that gives “humankind” an “objective purpose or telos,” an ending in other words, that easily explains either the “progress” or “tragedy” of both “the human and natural world.”<sup>66</sup>

However, this view of history has not always stood. Like Heidegger, Arendt, and Kojève, Nikulin claims that Western history has fallen: “*Early history is neither teleological, nor providential, nor universal.*” “Most importantly,” continues Nikulin, “there is no end or telos to a geographical and genealogical history, other than the purpose of preserving memorable events, the names of people (both men and women), and the things of the past.”<sup>67</sup> According to this interpretation, “early modernity,” e.g., “Galileo, Descartes, and Newton,” has fallen away from “early history.” Since many narratives now embrace what Nikulin calls “a strict mathematical” concept of history, we have forgotten the ways in which Western history is grounded in “*historiē*.” That is to say, we have forgotten how the concept of history is rooted in *ιστορία*: a way of thinking about the past that is concerned primarily with studying and “finding out about other things, places, peoples, their customs, languages, local myths, and histories—about the natural and cultural other.”<sup>68</sup>

Thus, according to Nikulin, the concept of history is rooted in “wonder” about studying the past. In this light, Nikulin’s view of history takes its bearings from “science in the ancient pre-Aristotelian and Ionian sense.” He writes: “History, then, comes close to being a science in the ancient pre-Aristotelian and Ionian sense—as the discovery of

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., ix.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 23, 94.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 29.

nature, peoples' ordered genealogies and their natural surroundings. As such, history is knowledge, a 'science' about things past and present that may be useful for the future and are inscribed into the ordered and beautiful cosmos." Keeping this in mind, Nikulin concludes that when faced with the question "What is history?", we should embrace a recalling of *ιστορία*, of remembering how there is "no proper" way doing history at large: there is no "one monolithic universal and teleological history" that allows us "to overcome our finitude." Rather, there exists a "*plurality of histories*" that attempt, in wide variety of continuity narratives ("contingent" narratives of history), to not only study the past but, in so doing, "suspend" the past.<sup>69</sup> The latter, Nikulin argues, is the taproot of history: "[H]istory derives from a profound need on the part of humans to somehow preserve themselves against non being, which is expressed in the mode of *epimeleia heautou* or *caritas sui*, care for oneself."<sup>70</sup> Though stressing the point that this attitude of history arises from both a "fear of non-being" and a "hope for overcoming such non-being," Nikulin, like Kojève, makes it clear that history is not salvatory; it is not freedom from death. "History allows us not to overcome our finitude but rather to suspend it by stressing it and using it."<sup>71</sup>

Hence, Nikulin's narrative is fundamental to my own approach in a twofold sense: 1) similar to Heidegger, Arendt, and Kojève, Nikulin's inquiry recalls how Western history was at once grounded in *ιστορία*, and 2) his approach highlights how "[e]very history" is based on a particular "structure" of organization: a continuity

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 173, 2.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 2, 173.

narrative “that provides the form of and for history and the interpretative narrative, the fabula, that gives content to history and describes interactions between people within a history.” Indeed, like my own study, Nikulin suggests that, although history is a study of happenings and thus demands some form of structure, narrative is something that “does, can, and should change,” according to one’s own thinking about how “the historical should be preserved.” In short, building upon Nikulin’s *The Concept of History*, I argue that “[t]he historical should be conservative but the narrative of history should be progressive.”<sup>72</sup>

### **My Approach**

Yet, Nikulin’s thesis raises the question: What is a progressive narrative? Throughout the following pages, I will offer what I would call an example of a progressive narrative that goes beyond conventional narratives of history. What I mean here is simply this: in an attempt to historically recall ἱστορία, my thesis will explore the historical question “Is there any freedom from death?” through three primary sources without intending to showcase continuity, causality, or influence. Accordingly, this approach is an attempt to mirror my sources: other than being united by my original question, neither Thucydides, Augustine, nor Cervantes have any historical ties to one another. This latter point is crucial: it allows me to think genuinely about my sources. Yet, one might ask: What is that? What is “genuine thinking?”<sup>73</sup> Lifting a page from Heidegger, I suggest that genuine thinking is a type of thinking that is alive—it seeks to

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Heidegger, *Ponderings VII- XI*, 239, 257. See also, Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (Of the event)*, 96, 171; Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, 135.

awaken thought rather than to null it to sleep.<sup>74</sup> Hence my main intervention to the study of death: to offer an alive piece of writing that attempts to think, question, and challenge both my primary sources and my own exploratory narrative.

### **Chapter Outline**

Allow me to offer a brief sketch of my thesis. The following pages are organized into four different, yet interconnected exploratory narratives: chapters one through three and my conclusion.

The First Chapter is structured around the work of Thucydides. In exploring *War of the Peloponnesians and the Athenians*, I will argue that, on the one hand, Pericles's Funeral Oration, the Athenian envoy in the Melian Debate, and Alcibiades's speech in the Sicilian Expedition suggests that there is, in fact, freedom from death: the immortality of empire gives one the capacity to achieve a "lasting memorial" by means of physical markers or the "greatness" of Athens itself.<sup>75</sup> On the other hand, the endings of both the Plague of Athens and the Sicilian Expedition seems to suggest that, although incomplete, Thucydides's narrative arc undermines the Periclean claim that empire is the wellspring of immortality.

The Second Chapter is structured around the work of Augustine. In exploring *On the Free Choice of the Will* (387/395 CE), *Confessions* (397), and *The City of God*

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<sup>74</sup> Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, trans. William McNeill and Nicholas Walker (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 23. Heidegger notes elsewhere that *Geschichte* "awakens and brings about thoughtful questioning." See Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (Of the event)*, 7. As Derrida writes, "what Heidegger wishes to awaken is a fundamental ontology slumbering beneath special or general metaphysics, which is interested only in beings and does not ask the question of the being of beings. He wants to awaken the fundamental ontology under metaphysical ontology and the ontological under the ontic." See Derrida, *Heidegger: The Question of Being and History*, 11.

<sup>75</sup> Thucydides, *The War of the Peloponnesians and the Athenians*, 114 (2.41.4).

*against the Pagans* (413/426), I argue that, for Augustine, immortality does not arise through empire. On the contrary, freedom from death arises through the emptying of the human will for the will of God. In this light, Augustine expresses a kind of hesitancy against human existence, given that the latter implies that one is in time and death and therefore away from that which is good: God.

The Third Chapter is structured around the work of Cervantes. In exploring *Don Quijote* (Pt. I: 1605; Pt. II: 1615), I argue that, for Cervantes, there is no freedom from death other than illusions of freedom: e.g., Pericles's immortality of empire; Augustine's immortality through God's grace.

The Conclusion attempts to shatter these attitudes of thought. Returning to the issue of intellectual wandering through the work of Zhuangzi and Heidegger, I argue that, although there is no freedom from death, there is a peculiar form of freedom that allows us to think more openly about history—intellectual freedom. Yet, my claim does not stop there. I also grapple with my counterclaim: Is intellectual freedom/intellectual wandering even possible? Can we really think beyond our own village, our own *pagus*? Or are we forever stuck in the pagan mentality? In short, are we forever stuck in the Western illusion of freedom?

## CHAPTER ONE

### Thucydides

What is truth for Thucydides (460-400 BCE)? In the opening pages of his *History of the Peloponnesian War* (c. 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE), Thucydides tells us that few rarely “search out the truth;” and when they do, they usually do not accept it. “So little trouble do people take to search out the truth, and so readily do they accept what first comes to hand.”<sup>76</sup> But Thucydides is not like other people. Having presented a narrative with “the clearest evidence available,” he lets the reader know that his truth is unlike that of his contemporaries.<sup>77</sup> He writes: “From the evidence I have presented, . . . one would not go wrong in supposing that events were very much as I have set them out; and no one should prefer rather to believe the songs of the poets, who exaggerate things for artistic purposes, or the writings of the chroniclers, which,” as he remarks, “are more concerned with “good listening” rather than “represent[ing] the truth.”<sup>78</sup> In other words, instead of exploring a truth that one might say belongs in “the imaginary realm of fable,” Thucydides tells “the truth”—a truth that will “be a possession for all time” rather than “a performance-piece for the moment.”<sup>79</sup> And yet, what is truth for Thucydides?

F.M. Cornford (1874-1943) argues that Thucydides’s truth is one of tragedy. In *Thucydides Mythistoricus* (1907), Cornford maintains that Thucydides’s truth is predicated on “the tragic theory of human nature.” According to this view, Thucydides

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<sup>76</sup> Thucydides, *The War of the Peloponnesians and the Athenians*, trans. Jeremy Mynott (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 14 (1.20.3).

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 15 (1.21.2).

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 14 (1.21.1).

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 16 (1.22.4).



expresses an “artistic or philosophic” narrative pattern.<sup>80</sup> Because Thucydides’s truth expresses this “tragic irony” that humans die while trying to escape their own death, his narrative, argues Cornford, has nothing to do with “Darwinian biology” or “the categories of mechanical and physical science.”<sup>81</sup> Rather than attempting to articulate this latter, “scientific view of human history,” Cornford sees Thucydides as a tragic thinker who, in trying to document “human acts and passions,” “lacked the indispensable aid of accumulated and systematic knowledge, and of the apparatus of scientific conception, which the labour of subsequent centuries has refined, elaborated, and distinguished.” Hence, Cornford writes that Thucydides’s truth is “not” “a scientific” truth: it is a “tragic” truth to the extent that it sheds a spotlight on our servitude to death.<sup>82</sup>

In *Thucydides and the Science of History* (1929), Charles Norris Cochrane (1889-1945) disagrees with Cornford’s interpretation of Thucydides’s truth. As the title of his book suggests, Cochrane views Thucydides’s truth as scientific: “The truth is that Thucydides had the assured faith of a scientist because he was a scientist.” Distancing himself from “Cornford” who has “gone too far” in his tragic reading of Thucydides, Cochrane moves to show the ways in which Thucydides “frequently employed scientific standards both in the examination of fact and in its interpretation.”<sup>83</sup> Following “the

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<sup>80</sup> F.M. Cornford, *Thucydides Mythistoricus* (Cambridge: Edward Arnold, 1907), viii, x. In *Thucydides and the Philosophical Origins of History*, Darien Shanske makes a similar claim by means of Thucydides’s “tragic” expressions in Pericles’s speeches. See Darien Shanske, *Thucydides and the Philosophical Origins of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 42.

<sup>81</sup> Cornford, *Thucydides Mythistoricus*, vii, xv, 72, 148.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, viii, ix.

<sup>83</sup> Charles N. Cochrane, *Thucydides and the Science of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1929), 14-15, 18. See also F.E. Adcock, *Thucydides and His History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1936), 109; William T. Bluhm, “Casual Theory in Thucydides’ Peloponnesian War,” *Political Studies* 10 (1962): 15; Robert Gilpin, “The Theory of Hegemonic War,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 18, no 4.

principles and methods of Hippocratic medicine to the interpretation of history,” Thucydides, writes Cochrane, “assumed that all human actions and suffering are subject to natural causes, and by these are meant the causes that are proper to human nature.” Herein lies one of Cochranes’s main points: both Thucydides and Hippocrates “were writers” who “accept[ed] *men* no less than *things* as ultimate for the purposes of historical as of medical science.”<sup>84</sup> But Cochrane does not stop there. Anticipating what Theodor Adorno (1903-1969) will later call the “standard of calculability” within the humanities, Cochrane writes that for one to posit that Thucydides’s truth rests on science rather than philosophy is not an extreme “judgment”—it is merely expressing “the present” orientation, which is to say that it is expressing the desire to distance itself from the broader claims of “theory” or “philosophy.” He writes: “If we praise Thucydides” as being “the most scientific,” “it is because our spiritual affiliations are with ‘science’ rather than with philosophy.”<sup>85</sup> Therefore, for Cochrane, Thucydides is “a scientific

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(1988): 591-592; Steven Forde, “International Realism and the Science of Politics: Thucydides, Machiavelli, and Neorealism,” *International Studies Quarterly* 39, no. 2 (1995): 150-152.

<sup>84</sup> Cochrane, *Thucydides and the Science of History*, 18.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 15. In his lectures entitled *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947), Theodor Adorno argues that “[f]or enlightenment, anything which does not conform to the standard of calculability and utility must be viewed with suspicion.” Or as he puts it later: “Bourgeois society is ruled by equivalence. It makes dissimilar things comparable by reducing them to abstract quantities. For the Enlightenment, anything which cannot be resolved into numbers, and ultimately into one, is illusion; modern positivism consigns it to poetry. Unity remains the watchword from Parmenides to Russell. All gods and qualities must be destroyed.” More interestingly still, Adorno also seems to critique Cochrane’s claim that human beings can be seen as observable objects for study. As Adorno writes: “Enlightenment stands in the same relationship to things as the dictator to human beings. He knows them to the extent that he can manipulate them. The man of science knows things to the extent that he can make them. Their ‘in-itself’ becomes ‘for him.’ In their transformation the essence of things is revealed as always the same, a substrate of domination.” See Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987) 3, 4-5, 6.

historian” because his truth is predicated on “the method of science:” it seeks to reveal “the usefulness” of “mankind” and, therefore, “history.”<sup>86</sup>

Leo Strauss (1899-1973) takes a still different approach concerning Thucydides’s truth. In his *City and Man* (1964), Strauss notes how, when opening the pages of Thucydides’s work on the war of the Peloponnesians, one is immediately “immersed in political life at its most intense, in bloody war both foreign and civil, in life and death struggles.”<sup>87</sup> Though not mentioning Cochrane by name, Strauss nevertheless moves to distance himself from his interpretation. Strauss begins by noting how “we seem to be compelled to fall back on the trite assertion that Thucydides is distinguished from Plato by the fact that he is a historian.” From here, he highlights how this assertion—which is a “particularly easy” assertion for we are all, in fact, “the sons of the age of historicism,” bares a “close kinship between the ‘scientific history of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries:” “Thucydides has been called a ‘scientific historian.”<sup>88</sup> Yet, Strauss punctures this assertion to the extent that he shows how between Thucydides’s narrative style—a “severely military and diplomatic history,” and his desire to create a truth that will “be a possession of all times,” the Athenian does not lend himself to what Strauss calls “the works” of scientific historians.<sup>89</sup> On the contrary, Strauss sees Thucydides as “a philosophic historian.” Thus, for Strauss, Thucydides’s “thought is therefore not radically

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<sup>86</sup> Cochrane, *Thucydides and the Science of History*, 31-32.

<sup>87</sup> Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 139.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

alien to that of Plato and Aristotle.” Still, this point raises a serious question: What is “a philosophic historian”?<sup>90</sup>

Strauss answers this question perhaps most clearly in his essay entitled “Notes on Lucretius” (1967). Noting the ways in which Lucretius’s poetic work mirrors that of Thucydides’s, Strauss writes that, through Lucretius’s thought, one can see how “philosophy” takes its bearings from the fear that is the lifeblood of religion:

Religion thus serves as a refuge from the fear of the end of the death of the world; it has its root in man’s attachment to the world . . . The recourse to the gods of religion and the fear of them is already a remedy for a more fundamental pain: the pain stemming from the divination that the lovable is not sempiternal or that the sempiternal is not lovable. Philosophy transforms the divination into a certainty. One may therefore say that philosophy is productive of the deepest pain. Man has to choose between peace of mind deriving from a pleasing delusion and peace of mind deriving from the unpleasing truth. Philosophy which, anticipating the collapse of the walls of the world, breaks through the walls of the world, abandons the attachment to the world; this abandonment is the most painful. Poetry on the other hand is, like religion, rooted in that attachment, but unlike religion, it can be put into the service of detachment. Because poetry is rooted in the prephilosophic attachment, because it enhances and deepens that attachment, the philosophic poet is the perfect mediator between the attachment to the world and the attachment to detachment from the world. The joy or pleasure which Lucretius’ poem arouses is therefore austere, reminding of the pleasure aroused by the work of Thucydides.<sup>91</sup>

If we tie together this latter point—namely, that philosophy, at least for Strauss, is inextricably tied to a dark, pessimistic vision of the complete collapse of the world, with Strauss’s earlier comment that Thucydides is a philosophic historian, then we might argue that philosophic history is a narrative that strives to talk about our temporality, our finite placement within the cosmos—in a word, a narrative that talks about death, or how

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 236.

<sup>91</sup> Leo Strauss, “Notes on Lucretius,” in Leo Strauss, *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 84-85.

we are truly limited within space and time. Furthermore, Virginia J. Hunter articulates this latter point by Strauss in *Thucydides: The Artful Reporter* (1973) to suggest, among other things, that Thucydides's truth is one of "human tragedy" because it deals with suffering and death: things that "defy human control."<sup>92</sup> More recently, in *Thucydides and the Pursuit of Freedom* (2015), Mary P. Nichols "addresses the views of Strauss" to argue that Thucydides's tragic orientation reflects how his truth is one that is concerned with "the restraints" of human "freedom:" it reflects how Thucydides's work "teaches his reader both their freedom and dependence."<sup>93</sup> Put more simply, Nichols maintains that "freedom was a central theme for Thucydides."<sup>94</sup>

Building upon these important insights, I argue that Thucydides's narrative is not only concerned with freedom but also with the illusion of freedom—immortality, or the futile striving to be freed from death. By making this point, I suggest that Thucydides recalls a deadly truth: the immortality of empire cannot save human individuals from death. Moreover, I say "deadly truth" in an attempt to sharpen the respective claims made by Cornford, Strauss, and Hunter.

I present my claim in four sections. My first section is centered around Pericles's Funeral Oration. Here, I recover how Pericles believed in the immortality of empire. My second section uses Thucydides's account of the Plague to undercut this notion that imperialism can grant either the human being or groups of human beings the capacity to achieve freedom from death. My third section segues into the Melian Debate. In this

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<sup>92</sup> Virginia J. Hunter, *Thucydides: The Artful Reporter* (Toronto: Hakkert, 1973), 177, 181.

<sup>93</sup> Mary P. Nichols, *Thucydides and the Pursuit of Freedom* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015), 13, 15.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

section, I show how the Athenian envoy takes up the banner of Pericles: speaking to the Melians, the Athenian military leaders make it clear that Athens itself has the power to decide life or death and, therefore, the power to decide whose memory will live on vis-à-vis empire. My fourth section explores the debate around the Sicilian Expedition. In highlighting how the Athenians select Alcibiades's pro-war speech over Nicias's call for peace, I show how Athens itself seems to side with the Periclean belief that empire is the key that unlocks the door to immortality. What is more, by drawing attention to the fact that, like the Plague of Athens, Thucydides stresses the failure of empire through his narrative of the Sicilian Expedition, I also suggest that, although left unfinished, Thucydides's own narrative arc seems to maintain a tragic attitude towards empire: that Athenian imperialism cannot offer humans immortality.

### **Pericles's Funeral Oration**

War reveals the fragility of human life. In the aftermath of the first year of fighting between the Spartans and the Athenians, Thucydides writes that “the Athenians held a public funeral for the first men to die in the war.”<sup>95</sup> Indeed, he notes how the bones of the deceased were gathered together and placed in a tent “for two full days” prior to being moved for the state funeral, a move that allowed the people to “bring such offerings . . . for their own dead.” On the day of the ceremony, “procession carts,” Thucydides writes, brought in cedar coffins, “one for each tribe, and the bones of each man are placed in the coffin for his tribe.”<sup>96</sup> The Athenians then placed each coffin within “a public

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 109 (2.34.1-2). See also Julia L. Shear, “Their Memories Will Never Grow Old’: The Politics of Remembrance in the Athenian Funeral Orations,” *Classical Quarterly*, vol. 63 (Dec. 2013): 511-536.

<sup>96</sup> Thucydides, *The War of the Peloponnesians and the Athenians*, 109 (2.34.1).

tomb,” which, according to Thucydides, was located “in the most beautiful suburb of the city where they always bury their war dead, except of course for those who died at Marathon, whose valour they judged so outstanding that they buried them just where they fell.”<sup>97</sup> Now, with the bones of “the first victims of the war” on public display, Pericles, Thucydides tells us, “stepped forward from the tomb, mounted the platform that had been set up so that he could be heard by as many as possible in the throng,” and proceeded to give the eulogy for the first band of soldiers to die as a result of the city’s attempt to dominate the Spartans.

Pericles’s eulogy does not focus on the results of the war; rather, his speech highlights what I interpret to be three aspects of Athenian imperialism: democracy, freedom, and immortality. The former of which was the first topic of discussion, given that, according to Pericles, the city of Athens was at its political peak: “I shall portray the way of life that [has] brought us to our present position . . . our rise to greatness.”<sup>98</sup> Indeed, Athenian greatness was founded upon “a form of government” that did “not emulate the institutions” of their “neighbours,” democracy. “Democracy,” Pericles states, “is the name we give to it, since we manage our affairs in the interests of the many not the few; but though everyone is equal before the law in the matter of private disputes, in terms of public distinction,” the citizens are “not” organized around “rank” but by their “personal worth” to the city. “[P]overty,” he continues, “is no bar to anyone who has it in them to benefit the city in some way, however lowly their status.” Furthermore, this form

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid. (2.34.5-6).

<sup>98</sup> Ibid. (2.36.4).

of “conduct” is the foundation stone for what Pericles calls the Athenian “spirit of freedom.”<sup>99</sup> Though the spirit of freedom allows Athens to manage “the small tensions of everyday life,” it does so on the grounds of fear. As Pericles explains: “[F]ear makes us the most severely law-abiding of people, obedient to whoever is in authority and to the laws, especially those established to help the victims of and those laws which, though unwritten, carry the sanction of public disgrace.”<sup>100</sup>

Athenian freedom was predicated on the expansion of empire. Boasting about how Athens was “open to the world,” Pericles tells us that the wellspring of their success came from maintaining a strong military. “When the Spartans invade our land, they come not on their own but with all their allies, whereas we act alone when we attack a neighbour’s territory and generally have no difficulty gaining the upper hand, although we are fighting on the soil of others and against people defending their own homes.” Moreover, according to Pericles, the Athenian “upper hand” came from not only maintaining “a navy” but also “an army of . . . citizens” who stood ready to take “on many different missions by land.”<sup>101</sup> “Whenever our enemies engage with a part of our forces,” Pericles tells his crowd, “they flatter themselves that a success against some of us is the same as repelling all of us, and that in any defeat they were beaten by the whole of our forces.” This willingness “to meet danger” with “a courage that owes more to natural character than to force of law . . . is reason enough to admire our city.”<sup>102</sup> However,

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid. (2.37.1-2).

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 111-112 (2.37.2-3).

<sup>101</sup> Ibid. 112 (2.39.1-3).

<sup>102</sup> Ibid. (2.39.3-4).



Pericles does not stop there. He states that the Athenians have other “qualities” that demonstrate their “power” as an empire.<sup>103</sup>

One of these qualities arose from the people themselves: the Athenians held an “interest” in furthering their empire. Pericles states: “With us, moreover, people combine an interest in public and private matter, and those who are more involved in business are still well enough aware of political issues.” According to this view, anyone “who fails to participate in public affairs” is “positively useless” insofar as “all” Athenians are “personally involved in actual political decisions or in deliberation about them, in the belief that is it not words that thwart effective action but rather the failure to inform action with discussion in advance.”<sup>104</sup> “Indeed, this openness to embrace politics is also what “distinguish[es]” the Athenians “from others” in the sense that the Athenians, according to Pericles, “bring” to their political ventures a “very high degree . . . of both daring and analysis,” whereas “others” only bring a sense of “ignorance and analysis.”<sup>105</sup>

Athenian imperialism gives one the freedom to achieve a lasting legacy—namely, living immortality. Pericles claims that “the very power” of Athens is not merely a “boast designed just for present effect.” Rather, it is “the actual truth” that one can see when the city is “put to the test.” “She alone neither gives an aggressor cause for resentment at the calibre of opponent by whom he is beaten, nor gives a subject cause for complaint that his rulers are unworthy.”<sup>106</sup> “The proof of our power,” Pericles asserts, “is supported by the strongest evidence and by every possible witness.” Here, we see the tyrant of Athens

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 113 (2.41.2-3).

<sup>104</sup> Ibid. (2.40.2-3).

<sup>105</sup> Ibid. (2.40.3).

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 114 (2.40.3-4).

move to attack the heroic work of Homer: “We need no Homer to sing our praises, nor any poet to gratify us for the moment with lines which may fail the test of history, for we have forced every land and sea to yield to our daring and we have established everywhere the lasting memorial of our power for good and ill.”<sup>107</sup> This sentence is crucial. It highlights how the Athenians no longer need the poetic works of Homer to help them achieve freedom from death. On the contrary, the city itself stands as a “lasting memorial” against death.<sup>108</sup> Additionally, Pericles states that the city offers an “enduring tribute” of the dead by means of both physical markers (the building of “monuments” that will “commemorate their lives”) and the existence of the “greatness” of Athens itself. The latter of which allows for the memory of the dead “to be celebrated forever in word and deed.”<sup>109</sup>

In short, for Pericles, Athenian imperialism is the key that unlocks the door of immortality. Although war is a reminder that human individuals die, Pericles makes it clear that the Athenians can overcome death by means of empire. Calling the city of Athens a “lasting memorial,” Pericles states that they no longer need a “Homer to sing [their] praises.”<sup>110</sup> Instead, the “greatness” of Athens itself gives them the ability to obtain an “enduring tribute,” an “eternal memory” that will outlast the lives of humans.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 114 (2.41.4).

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 115 (2.43.1-4).

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 114 (2.41.4).

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 115 (2.43.1-4).

## **The Plague of Athens**

Thucydides's account of the "The Plague of Athens" (430-425 BCE) recalls how death destroys the greatness of Athens and thus destroys Pericles's claim that empire can grant immortality.

While the Spartans had "set about wasting" the city of Athens, an unexpected event occurred: the plague. As Thucydides narrates, the Spartans "had not been there many days when the plague first broke out among the Athenians, and although it is said to have struck in many places before, . . . there is no previous record anywhere of a pestilence so sever and so destructive to human life."<sup>112</sup> And destructive it was. Neither "[t]he physicians" nor any "other human arts" "were able to help" those infected with the disease. The former, Thucydides explains, experienced "the highest mortality" within Athens: "The physicians were not able to help at its outset since they were treating in ignorance, and indeed they themselves suffered the highest mortality since they were the ones exposed to it."<sup>113</sup> Although many tried to build "sanctuaries" or consult with "oracles" to escape the plague, "all" these strivings were completely "useless" insofar as nothing related to the "human arts" could assuage the pain and suffering. Thucydides writes: "Whatever supplications people made at sanctuaries and whatever oracles or the like they consulted, all were useless and, in the end, they abandoned them, defeated by the affliction."<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 118 (2.47.2-3). One estimate suggests somewhere between 75,000-100,000 people (25% of the Athenian population) died during the duration of plague. See Robert J. Littman, "The Plague of Athens: Epidemiology and Paleopathology," in *Mount Sinai Journal of Medicine* 76 (2009): 456.

<sup>113</sup> Thucydides, *The War of the Peloponnesians and the Athenians*, 118 (2.47.3-4).

<sup>114</sup> Ibid. (2.47.4)

The plague was a mysterious enemy for the Athenians.<sup>115</sup> I say “mysterious” because Thucydides stresses how none of his contemporaries could agree on the origins of the disease. On the one hand, Thucydides writes that some of the Athenians believed that the plague had originated somewhere “beyond” the Egyptian river valley: “It first came, so it is said, out of Ethiopia beyond Egypt, and then spread into Egypt and Libya and into most of the territory of the Persian King.” On the other hand, Thucydides also notes that there were some who “suggested” that “the Peloponnesians had put poison in the rain-water tanks (there being no wells yet in the Peiraeus).” Yet, after presenting his reader with both stories, Thucydides writes that no one knew the “likely origins” of something so “powerful” and “disruptive” to the Athenian way of life.<sup>116</sup>

Having “had the disease himself,” Thucydides proceeds to document the ways in which the plague exhausted “all human endurance.”<sup>117</sup> Though the plague’s origins are unknown, we do know one thing: if someone had the plague, they were likely suffering. As Thucydides writes, those diagnosed with the plague were often “affected by sensations of a violent fever in the head and a redness and inflammation of the eyes; internally, both the throat and the tongue immediately become bloody and emitted an unnatural and foul-smelling breath.”<sup>118</sup> However, these symptoms did not represent every case: some of the Athenians experienced “constant restlessness,” others “were beset” with “internal fever[s],” “acute diarrhea,” and even “total loss of memory.”<sup>119</sup> Indeed, as

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 86 (1.142.9).

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 119 (2.48.2-3).

<sup>117</sup> Ibid. (2.48.1; 2.50.1-2).

<sup>118</sup> Ibid. (2.48.2-3).

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 120 (2.49.7-8).

Thucydides writes, “the plague defined all reason.” In other words, the disease itself was “quite different” from other, more “familiar diseases” the Athenians were used to treating.<sup>120</sup>

Though the plague caused differing symptoms, the outcome was often still the same: death.<sup>121</sup> “Some people died from neglect, others despite devoted care. Not a single remedy was found,” writes Thucydides. “No one’s constitution was proof against it, regardless of their strength or weakness, but it swept them all away, whatever kind of care and treatment they had received.” For instance, if someone in a family was struck with the disease, the entire household, Thucydides writes, “died in their droves like sheep, and this caused more deaths than anything else.” This latter point is crucial: it shows how, according to Thucydides, the “despair” of Athens was the “most terrible thing of all.”<sup>122</sup>

Yet, this “sense of despair” metastasized, growing into a “general” state of “misery” for the Athenians. With “people overcrowding the city from the fields,” the city soon experienced another problem: a shortage of houses. Now “a total disaster,” Athens, Thucydides writes, forced many of its inhabitants to live in tiny “huts,” or homes “that were stifling in the heat of the summer.” Of course, the empire’s problems did not stop there. Because the plague was so widespread, the Athenians had to forego normal burial practices. As a result, bodies began crowding the streets of Athens. As Thucydides writes, the condition of Athens was one of “total disorder:” “The bodies of those dying

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid. (2.50.1-2).

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 121 (2.51.1).

<sup>122</sup> Ibid. (2.51.1-5).

were heaped on each other, and in the streets and around the springs half-dead people reeled about in a desperate desire for water.”<sup>123</sup> Moreover, the various “sanctuaries” established for refuge “were full of the bodies of those who had died before.”<sup>124</sup> Abandoning their normal “funeral customs,” the Athenians, Thucydides continues, “resorted to quite shameless forms of disposal through their lack of means after so many of their relatives had already died.” While some “took advantage of the funeral pyres” and gave the deceased a proper burial, others simply threw “whoever’s body” on top of a burning tower of bodies.<sup>125</sup>

The plague also led to the “first” forms of “lawlessness” within Athens. With piles of bodies burning around the city, Thucydides writes that many saw this as the perfect opportunity “to indulge themselves in ways they would previously have concealed, since they saw the rapid change in fortunes—both for those who were well off and died suddenly and for those who originally had nothing but, in a moment, got possession of the property of these others.” In this respect, whatever led to “immediate pleasure” became “the standard of what was good and useful.” Neither “the law of man” nor “the fear of the gods” stood in the way of restraining the Athenians. That is to say, the Athenians “judged [that] it made no difference whether or not they show[ed]” any sort of “respect, seeing that everyone died just the same.”<sup>126</sup> Accordingly, this sense of lawlessness gradually increased because, as Thucydides explains, “no one expected to live long enough to go on trial and pay the penalty, feeling that a far worse sentence had

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid. (2.52.2-3).

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 122 (2.53.3).

<sup>125</sup> Ibid. (2.53.4).

<sup>126</sup> Ibid. (2.54.1-4).

already been passed and was hanging over their heads, and that it was only reasonable to get some enjoyment from life before it finally fell on them.” Concluding his account, Thucydides writes that this movement from the peak of empire to the depths of the plague “was the burden of suffering [that] the Athenians bore.”<sup>127</sup>

Thus, Thucydides’s account of the plague challenges Pericles’s claim that empire is the key to immortality. Indeed, in showing how the plague destroyed the greatness of Athens, Thucydides also recalls to us why many Athenians became persuaded by Pericles’s call for war. Allow me to explain. Because death was so widespread during the plague, the deceased never received a proper burial, which meant that they also never received the sort of remembrance that comes with burial practices. One sees this comparison perhaps most clearly in Pericles’s Funeral Oration. Here, Pericles tells us how war/empire grants one a better chance at remembrance: not only can one gain a sense of remembrance through physical makers such as tombs or memorials but also, and perhaps more importantly, through the greatness of Athens itself: Pericles’s oration was part of a public memorial—that is, it stood as an “enduring tribute” to commemorate the lives lost during the first year of fighting with Sparta.<sup>128</sup> In this sense, we can how Pericles’s argument for war offers something that the plague does not—namely, the opportunity to achieve immortality by means of the city itself.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid. (2.54.1-4).

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 115 (2.43.1-4).

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 114 (2.41.4).

## **The Melian Debate**

“The Melian Debate” recalls how Athenian imperialism does not only offer immortality—it also offers the “power” of deciding the life and death of others.<sup>130</sup>

“[B]efore doing any damage” to the Melians, Thucydides tells us that “the Athenian generals, Cleomedes son of Lycomedes and Teisias son of Teisimachus, sent envoys to make proposals to the Melians.” However, instead of allowing the Athenian delegates to speak “before the people in the assembly,” the Melians “told” the various delegates “to explain” their “business” in front of small group of ruling authorities.<sup>131</sup> The Athenian envoy, Thucydides writes, did not like the fact that they were presenting their proposals in front of the leaders of Melos: “We see that our discussions are not to take place before the popular assembly—no doubt to prevent us from deceiving the people at large with one continuous presentation of persuasive arguments that would go unchallenged (for we realise that this is the point of your bringing us before this smaller body).”<sup>132</sup> The Melians made it clear that they have “no objection on the grounds of fairness” to debate the Athenians, given that their “proposal is clearly at odds with the realities of war.” With an Athenian invasion already taking place, the Melian officials explained to the envoy of “self-appointed judges” that their military presence had already revealed to them that the current meeting was not an attempt toward “justice.” On the contrary, “the present meeting” was centered around “the question of survival.”

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 381 (5.97.1).

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 378 (5.84.3).

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 379 (5.85.1).



Accordingly, Thucydides writes that the city of Melos had two options: “war” or “enslavement.”<sup>133</sup>

The Athenians made it clear that their desire was to “rule” over the Melians. Not wanting to “resort to fine phrases” or “embark on long and unconvincing arguments,” the Athenians stated that since they had “the right to rule” over both the Spartans and the Melians, the present meeting was only an attempt to discuss “the practical possibilities” of war—a point that reaffirmed the Melian’s suspicion that the envoy was not concerned with administering justice but rather flexing their imperial muscle.<sup>134</sup> What is more, the Athenians made it clear that they were the stronger of the two factions: “You understand as well as we do that in the human sphere judgments about justice are relevant only between those with an equal power to enforce it, and that the possibilities are defined by what the strong do and the weak accept.”<sup>135</sup>

Undeterred by the Melian’s pleas for a “discussion” centered around “fairness and justice,” the Athenians made their imperial agenda clear: “What we will demonstrate is that we are here for the benefit of our own empire and that what we have to say is also for the safety of your state. We want to rule you without any trouble to ourselves and we want your safety to benefit both of us.”<sup>136</sup> “And how could we benefit from being slaves as you would from being masters?” asked the Melians.<sup>137</sup> “Because submission,” replied

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid. (5.86.1).

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 379-380 (5.88.1; 5.89.1).

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 380 (5.89.1).

<sup>136</sup> Ibid. (5.91.2).

<sup>137</sup> Ibid. (5.92.1).

the Athenians, “would save you from suffering a most terrible fate, while we would profit from not destroying you.”<sup>138</sup>

But the Athenians did not stop there. They continued to tell the Melians that their arrival was “not a test” to see if they could “save” Melian “honour.” Instead, the envoy of Athenian delegates said the present meeting threw open “the question” of “self-preservation” for the island of Melos, given that the Athenians were “far stronger” than the Spartan colony.<sup>139</sup> Having heard this reply, the Melians, Thucydides writes, told the envoy of delegates that as long as Melian troops “were taking action” against the Athenians, they would “still hold up [their] heads in hope” of winning the war.<sup>140</sup> Of course, the Athenian delegates did not share the Melian’s orientation towards hope:

Well, hope is certainly an encouragement in times of danger, and those who rely on hope when they have other resources may be damaged but are not destroyed by it. Hope, however, is prodigal by nature, and those who stake everything they have on it see the truth only at the moment of disaster; at the time when they could still guard against its effects themselves, if only they knew its real nature, hope is in plentiful supply. Don’t let this happen to you, weak as you are and with your lives in the balance; and don’t make the common mistake of those who still have the means to save themselves through normal human resources but when all obvious grounds for hope desert them at a time of stress they turn instead to the obscure—to divination, oracles and whatever else of this kind inspires hope but brings ruin.<sup>141</sup>

While the Melians were hopeful for salvation from imperialism, the Athenians, one might say, were more realistic insofar as they knew “the truth” of empire.<sup>142</sup> In other

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid. (5.93.1).

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 381 (5.101.1).

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 382 (5.102.1).

<sup>141</sup> Ibid. (5.103.1).

<sup>142</sup> See Robert Scott and H.G. Liddell, *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1889), Perseus Digital Library, [https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=e%29ipi%5Cs&la=greek&can=e%29ipi%5Cs0&prior=\\*a\\*](https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=e%29ipi%5Cs&la=greek&can=e%29ipi%5Cs0&prior=*a*)

words, the Athenians knew the seemingly “obvious” law of “humankind:” Whoever “has the upper hand” can lord or “rule” over others. Hence, the Athenians “have no good reason to fear that [they] shall be at a disadvantage” because they are the ones who have the “upper hand.”<sup>143</sup>

Reminding the Melians of the reality of empire—how Athens can destroy them in “one decision”—the Athenians, Thucydides writes, “withdrew from the discussion; and the Melians, left to themselves, reached very much the same conclusion as they had expressed before.” That is to say, the Melians embraced their hope for “salvation.” They put their “trust in” not only “the Spartans” but also “the gods,” which, according to them, had been protecting their city for over 700 years.<sup>144</sup> Yet, this notion of divine protection was no match for the Athenian empire: shortly after returning back to their military camps, the Athenians, Thucydides tells us, “immediately commenced hostilities” against the Melians.<sup>145</sup> Hence, the Melian Dialogue sheds a spotlight on two crucial points: 1) empire gives one the “power” to decide the life and death of others, and 2) without empire, human individuals die—in other words, the power of empire means having the ability to prolong life and memory beyond the grave.<sup>146</sup>

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q&d=Perseus:text:1999.01.0199:book=5:chapter=103:section=1&i=1#lexicon. (accessed February 17, 2024). Joel Alden Schlosser writes that *elpis* or hope is a “richly complex” word throughout Thucydides’s narrative structure. See Joel Alden Schlosser, “Hope, Danger’s Comforter”: Thucydides, Hope, Politics,” *The Journal of Politics*, vol. 5, no. 1 (Dec. 21, 2012): 70. See also Adam Potkay, *Hope: A Literary History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 48-49.

<sup>143</sup> Thucydides, *The War of the Peloponnesians and the Athenians*, 382-383 (5.105.2-3).

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, 384 (5.111.5; 5.112.3).

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, 385 (5.114.1).

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, 382-383 (5.105.2-3).

## **The Sicilian Expedition**

Before his death in 429 BCE, Pericles, Thucydides explains, told the Athenians how they could defeat the Spartans. He said: If the Athenians “held back, looked after their navy, did not try to extend their empire during the war and did not expose the city to risk, then they would prevail.” However, the Athenians, under the leadership of Alcibiades, “did just the opposite.” In an attempt to extend their empire, the Athenians embarked on an imperial quest to overtake the island of Sicily.<sup>147</sup> Furthermore, though only offering a brief sketch of the early debates surrounding the Sicilian Expedition (415-413 BCE), the following pages will show how the Athenians preferred Alcibiades’s speech (450-404 BCE) over Nicias’s (470-413 BCE) and thus preferred Pericles’s original claim that war and the expansion of empire grants them immortality.<sup>148</sup>

The debate begins on a note of hope. “[H]oping to divert” the Athenians from waging war on Sicily, Nicias, a general who, “against his wishes,” was appointed to command the naval expedition to Sicily, asked the leaders of Athens to reconsider the option of peace rather than war. “This assembly was convened to discuss ways and means of equipping our naval expedition to Sicily. In my view, however, this begs the very question we ought still to be considering—whether it is right to send the ships at all.” Indeed, another war was not something Athens “should be undertaking.” As Nicias explains to the assembly, “I don’t believe that after only a hasty consultation on matters

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<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 130 (2.65.7).

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 402 (6.24.3-4). Indeed, Nanno Marinatos claims that, alongside Pericles’s speeches, the dialogue of Nicias reveals Thucydides’s “tragic” sensibilities. Marinatos writes: “Thucydides and Nicias speak with one voice focusing on the absurdity of human existence.” See Nanno Marinatos, “Nicias and Pericles in Thucydides’ Narrative,” *Wiener Studien* vol. 134 (2021): 67-68.

of the greatest moment and on the advice of men who are not even Greeks, we should be undertaking a war which is actually none of our business.”<sup>149</sup> Moreover, Nicias argues that Athens should not plan for another war, given that they have not won the on-going war with Sparta: “[W]e should resolve not to put our city at risk by reaching out for a new empire before we have secured the one we have—especially as the Chalcidians in the Thracian region, after all those years in revolt from us, have still not been subdued, and there are others on the mainland who are unreliable subjects too.”<sup>150</sup>

To be sure, one setback could cause the Athenians to lose their war with Sparta. Nicias expresses this point by reminding the assembly that the Spartans have not been defeated. “[T]he Spartans and their allies” still have time to “recover” their armies. Therefore, Athens “should not feel so elated,” Nicias states, because the Spartans, “even now” in the face of “their humiliation,” have the opportunity to “recover from their loss of face—especially given their long-term preoccupation with their reputation for valour.”<sup>151</sup> Furthermore, Nicias argues that “the issue” is not “the barbarians” that live in Sicily but rather the on-going war with the Spartans. In other words, the Athenians should “keep a sharp watch on a state like Sparta, which as an oligarchy has [its] active designs” on destroying Athens.<sup>152</sup> What is more, “[a]larmed that this pro-war sentiment had spread to the “young people,” Nicias asked the leading chairman to prove his worth “as a good citizen” and place the issue of war with Sicily on the ballot: “Chairman, if you really do regard it as your role to care for the city and if you want to prove yourself a good citizen,

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<sup>149</sup> Thucydides, *The War of the Peloponnesians and the Athenians*, 392 (6.9.1).

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, 393 (6.10.25).

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, 394 (6.11.4-6).

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*

put this matter to the vote and reopen the issue with the Athenians.”<sup>153</sup> Before stepping away from the assembly, Nicias made one last attempt to prevent Athens from going to war with Sicily.

Likening the assembly of leaders to a group of well-trained “physicians,” Nicias asked the leaders to work together to cure a sick Athens: “Think rather that you would be acting as [a] physician to the city when it was suffering from a bout of bad decision-making, and that this is the responsibility of office—to do everything you can to help your city, or at least never to harm it knowingly.”<sup>154</sup>

Yet, want for war was too widespread. Shortly after Nicias’s speech, Thucydides tells us that “most of the Athenians . . . spoke in favour of the expedition” to conquer the island of Sicily. Moreover, “[t]he most enthusiastic supporter” of the Athenians was a man by the name of Alcibiades. Though Alcibiades “wanted to oppose Nicias” on the grounds of differing “political differences,” there was also a “personal reason” that drove him towards the desire for war. As Thucydides writes, Alcibiades “was passionately eager to be made general and hoped that he could thereby conquer both Sicily and Carthage and so by his success promote both his personal wealth and his reputation.”<sup>155</sup>

Alcibiades “craved tyranny.” Living “beyond his actual means,” Alcibiades had a “general” sense of “lawlessness;” which is to say that “every activity he engaged in” revealed the ways in which “he craved tyranny.” Although the Athenians knew that, when compared to Nicias, Alcibiades was the one who could better manage “the affairs

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<sup>153</sup> Ibid., 395 (6.14.1).

<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid. (6.15.1-2).

of war.” Indeed, this “excellent” ability to manage “the public sphere” was offset by Alcibiades’s private life. Thucydides writes: “[A]nd although in the public sphere he was excellent at managing affairs of war, in private matters they were every one of them offended by his mode of life.”<sup>156</sup>

Alcibiades extends an earlier claim of Pericles, namely, that peace itself is a greater threat to life because it implies the destruction of the immortality of empire. Speaking on the possible naval invasion of the island of Sicily, Alcibiades makes it clear that an “inactive” or peaceful city poses an even greater “danger:” the death of empire. As Alcibiades states, “[i]t is not an option for us to set [the] limits [of] empire like accountants; on the contrary, since we are in this situation we are forced to take active initiatives against some other cities and keep our grip on the rest, because there is a danger that if we do not take others into empire we shall fall into theirs.”<sup>157</sup> Unlike Nicias, Alcibiades sees an “inactive” city as a city that has been “destroyed.” In other words, it is only through constant threat of “adversity” that an empire can thrive, given that through adversity one can achieve “the greatest security” of all: freedom from death through empire. For empire does not allow the “knowledge” of the deceased to “diminish with age;” on the contrary, empire secures life and memory through its “existing character and institutions.”<sup>158</sup>

After Alcibiades concluded his remarks, we are told that “the Athenians were even more motivated than before to undertake the expedition.”<sup>159</sup> Indeed, although Nicias

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<sup>156</sup> Ibid., 396 (6.15.4).

<sup>157</sup> Ibid., 398-399 (6.18.3).

<sup>158</sup> Ibid., 399 (6.18.6-7).

<sup>159</sup> Ibid., 399-400 (6.19.1-2).

attempted to give another speech to “change their minds,” the Athenians were already in agreement: they wanted war in hopes of achieving immortality through empire. As Thucydides writes, the Athenians “were all the more motivated” to wage war with Sicily. “Everyone,” Thucydides continues, “had fallen in love with the voyage: the older men believing that either they would overwhelm the places they sailed against or that so great a force could at least suffer no disaster; the young men of military age yearning to see these far-off sights and spectacles, full of good hope for their safe return . . .” However, this desire to visit places unseen was not the only reason why the Athenians had fallen in love with war—Alcibiades’s claim concerning the immortality of empire had persuaded them, too. Thucydides writes that the Athenian soldiers were excited to gain “the opportunity . . . to acquire a power that would be an endless source of earning in the future.”<sup>160</sup> If we take this sentence and tie it together with another point—namely, how empire does not allow anything to “diminish with age,” then we can see how the Athenian desire for war was driven in part by the larger desire to evade death by means of empire.<sup>161</sup>

Yet, Thucydides moves to challenge this claim that immortality can be won by empire. He writes that “the Sicilian expedition” was one of “the many mistakes” Athens made in the aftermath of Pericles’s death. Indeed, the expedition was riddled with many mistakes: there was an ongoing issue of political corruption; Athens itself could not afford the troops they sent to Sicily; the military leaders disagreed with how they should

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<sup>160</sup> Ibid., 402 (6.24.3-4).

<sup>161</sup> Ibid., 399-400 (6.19.1-2).



invade; once the invasion did begin, however, the Athenian forces were either killed or imprisoned; and finally, the commander of the campaign, Alcibiades, was charged with treason and defected to Sparta to avoid his trial in Athens.<sup>162</sup> After discussing how the citizens of Syracuse imprisoned and killed a large plurality of their troops, including the “virtuous” of “all the Greeks:” Nicias, Thucydides writes that “they” (the Athenians) “could not believe that their forces had suffered such complete and utter destruction . . .” An entire “generation of their youth,” states Thucydides, had been destroyed during the Sicilian Expedition. Because of the death and destruction of the Athenian forces, the Athenians did not feel Pericles’s greatness of war; rather, “they felt crushed by the weight of despair.”<sup>163</sup> In short, although Alcibiades was more successful at rallying Athens behind Pericles’s claim that war is the best means to escape death, the Sicilian Expedition itself reveals the flaw in the immortality of empire. More precisely: empire did grant Athens the opportunity to achieve immortality through everlasting memorials. Instead, much like the plague, the war against Sicily brought Athens “suffering,” “fear,” “misery,” and “death.”<sup>164</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Although neither the war against Sparta nor Thucydides’s own history ends with Athens’s decision to invade Sicily, the narrative leading up to the Sicilian Expedition seems to suggest a tragic attitude towards imperialism. Let me explain.

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<sup>162</sup> Ibid., 403 (6.28.1-2); 414 (6.44.4); 414-416 (6.47-48); 441-444 (6.89.92); 508 (7.86.1-5).

<sup>163</sup> Ibid., 510 (8.1-4).

<sup>164</sup> Ibid., 509-510 (7.86.1-4; 7.87.1-4; 8.1-4).

The speeches given by Pericles, the Athenian envoy to the Melos, and Alcibiades claim that immortality through empire is possible. That is to say, through empire, the Athenians can gain an “enduring tribute” either through “lasting memorial[s]” or through the “greatness” of Athens itself.<sup>165</sup> However, Thucydides’s account of the Plague of Athens and the Sicilian Expedition undercut this claim, perhaps first initiated by Pericles, that imperialism grants freedom from the oblivion of death. In both the plague and the war with Sicily, we see how Thucydides draws our attention not to greatness but to suffering and death.<sup>166</sup> Indeed, although one might argue that Thucydides’s history is an attempt towards eternal remembrance—he tells us that his narrative should stand “a possession for all time,” the narratives surveyed in this chapter seem to indicate that Thucydides finds the Periclean claim of immortality of empire as an illusion: Athenian imperialism cannot grant an individual or groups of individuals freedom from death.

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<sup>165</sup> Ibid., 114 (2.41.4); 115 (2.43.1-4).

<sup>166</sup> Ibid., 118 (2.47.4); 120-121 (2.50.1-6); Ibid., 510 (8.1-4).

## CHAPTER TWO

### Augustine

For Augustine (354-430 CE), the human being is “the author of [its] evildoing.”<sup>167</sup> Reflecting on his work *On the Free Choice of the Will* (387/395), Augustine describes his text as a “careful” attempt to reveal how “the sole origin of evil is the free choice of the will [*voluntas*].”<sup>168</sup> This remark highlights a pessimistic orientation toward human action insofar as it places a certain stress on the fact that free will is inextricably tied to evil. In other words, evil originated not through the divine grace of God but when Adam and Eve disobeyed God’s commandment and ate the forbidden fruit from the Tree of Knowledge. Furthermore, this moment of humankind’s “fall” from the Garden of Eden is noteworthy for Augustine because it marks the rise of two interconnected notions of evil: 1) “sin” (*malum culpae*) and “the punishment of sin” (*malum poenae*).<sup>169</sup> The former can be thought of as “do[ing] evil,” the moral choice to commit sin; the latter as the sufferings incurred from this evil, the penalty for choosing to go against the benevolent God.<sup>170</sup> Indeed, as Maria Rosa Antognazza shows, Augustine’s discussion of free will as sin and the punishment of sin is one of the more important taxonomies put forward in the intellectual history of evil: it lays the germinal seedbed for Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz’s *Theodicy* (1710).<sup>171</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> Augustine, *On the Free Choice of the Will* (1.1.1.3) in *On the Free Choice of the Will, On Grace and Free Choice, and Other Writings*, trans. Peter King (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 3.

<sup>168</sup> Augustine, *Reconsiderations* in *Ibid.*, 127 (1.9.1).

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, 92 (3.9.26.94).

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, 3 (1.1.1.1).

<sup>171</sup> Maria Rosa Antognazza, “Metaphysical Evil Revisited,” in *New Essays on Leibniz’s Theodicy*, Samuel Newlands and Larry Jorgensen, eds., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014): 112-134.

In *Theodicy*, Leibniz furthers Augustine’s work by arguing that there are not two but three distinct aspects of evil: 1) *metaphysical* evil, 2) *moral* evil, and 3) *physical* evil. While we might say moral and physical evil are stand-ins for *malum culpae* and *malum poenae*, metaphysical evil is, as Antognazza suggests, “Leibniz’s . . . full acknowledgment of a kind of evil which cannot be regarded as punishment for moral evil.”<sup>172</sup> To put it differently, it would seem that metaphysical evil is Leibniz’s way of affirming an assertion put forward by Augustine, namely that evil itself is human-made: it arose from “the First Man.”<sup>173</sup>

Though mindful that historians try to avoid applying terms from different time periods, I will use Leibniz’s trichotomy to structure the subsequent chapter. My reasoning for doing so is simple. I argue that alongside trying to overcome time, Augustine desires to overcome death, which, for him, is a metaphysical evil that originated with the Fall of humanity. Indeed, Hans Blumenberg has argued that this capacity to persist in metaphysical evil creates “a new concept of freedom” for the modern age, that is, it gives us the free will (*voluntas*) or power to be evil.<sup>174</sup>

Building upon Blumenberg’s work, I suggest that Augustine’s concept of freedom is metaphysical: it stands as a hypostatic union towards God. By hypostatic union, I mean quite simply this: the renunciation of the human will for the will of God.<sup>175</sup> Though the

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<sup>172</sup> Ibid., 122.

<sup>173</sup> Augustine, *On the Free Choice of the Will*, 93 (3.9.28.102).

<sup>174</sup> Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), 133.

<sup>175</sup> Here, I am adhering to Vladimir Lossky’s definition. He writes: “The human hypostasis can only realize itself by the renunciation of its own will, of all that governs us, and makes us subject to natural necessity. The individual, i.e. that assertion of self in which person is confused with nature and loses its true liberty,

metaphysical concept of emptying oneself toward God is usually associated with the apophatic currents of Eastern Orthodoxy, to view Augustine as a writer of human hypostasis is not a far-fetched idea: Norman Russell notes how “[e]ven a writer such as Augustine, whose cast of mind was different from that of his Greek contemporaries, accepted [the] exegesis of Psalm 82:6.”<sup>176</sup>

To avoid any misunderstandings, I have no interest in claiming that Augustine is a writer of Eastern Orthodoxy or that he argues for a sort of “transhumation” of the divine-human body as Andrea Nightingale has argued.<sup>177</sup> Indeed, while Nightingale’s approach explores the currents of Platonism that course through much of Augustine’s writings, the present study strives to take a different approach. Following the scholarship put forward by Richard O’Connell and Roland J. Teske, I will recall how Augustine is a writer who views death as a metaphysical evil, as something that should be negated for the eternal goodness of God.<sup>178</sup> In so doing, I will develop more precisely another claim, made by John M. Risk, that Augustine’s concept of freedom rests on pessimism.<sup>179</sup> That is to say, that Augustine’s concept of freedom rests on the negative attitude that suggests that freedom itself cannot occur on Earth; instead, freedom must “happen” in the “beyond,” in the hypostatic union with Augustine’s benevolent God.

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must be broken.” See Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Orthodox Church* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 1991), 122.

<sup>176</sup> Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 8.

<sup>177</sup> Andrea Nightingale, *Once Out of Nature: Augustine on Time and the Body* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011) 197.

<sup>178</sup> Robert J. O’Connell, *St. Augustine’s Early Theory of Man* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968); “The Plotinian Fall of the Soul in St. Augustine,” *Traditio*, Vol. 19 (1963): 1-35; Roland J. Teske, “‘Vocan Temporales, Faciens Aeternos’: St. Augustine on Liberation from Time,” *Traditio*, Vol. 41 (1985): 29-47.

<sup>179</sup> John M. Rist, *Augustine: Ancient Thought Baptized* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

My claim is presented in two sections. In the first section, I lay out moral and physical evil as expressed in *On the Free Choice of the Will*. In the second section, I move to explore the metaphysical notions of evil and freedom by means of a layered reading of Augustine's *Confessions* (397) and *The City of God against the Pagans* (413/426).

### **Section I: Moral and Physical Evil**

Written in a period of eight years (Pt. I: 387-388; Pt. II: 391-395), *On the Free Choice of the Will* attempts to answer a question that had “hounded” Augustine during his youth: “How is it that we *do* evil?”<sup>180</sup> This question does seem to trouble Augustine: he later writes that it was this very question concerning evil that “deceived” him into the fringes of a gnostic set of Christianity: Manicheism.<sup>181</sup> Known for their ascetic practices and sharp critiques against the Old Testament, the Manicheans led Augustine into what one historian refers to as the equally opposed world of “metaphysical and moral dualis[m].” A world were “there are two fundamental and equally opposed principles in the world: the good principle, manifest in Light; the evil principle, manifest in Darkness.”<sup>182</sup>

Nevertheless, this bifurcated world began to unsettle Augustine. After almost a decade of worshipping with the Manicheans, Augustine describes how he became disenchanted with the religious sect: “[M]y ignorance was much troubled, and it seemed to me that I was coming to the truth when I was in fact going away.”<sup>183</sup> Though

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<sup>180</sup> Augustine, *On the Free Choice of the Will*, 5 (1.2.4.10).

<sup>181</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. F.J. Sheed (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 2006), 44 (3.7.12).

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*, xi.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, 44 (3.7.12).

Augustine argues that it was not so much the notion of evil but rather the discovery of philosophy that moved him away from Manicheism, he still lists the question “Whence come evil?” as the principal reason for following the Manicheans.<sup>184</sup> Indeed, in the following section, I will unfold and thus explore this question in a more precise manner. In so doing, I will recall not merely the significance of Augustine’s narrative but, more importantly, I will highlight how Augustine himself was a restless writer: he struggled with the Christian fact that, on the one hand, we are fallen, evil beings, and, on the other hand, we possess the power to overcome our evil through metaphysical freedom: deification or human hypostasis with a benevolent God.

### **The Free Choice of the Will**

*The Free Choice of the Will* is centered around one question: Is God evil? Framed in the style of a Platonic dialogue, this text concerning free will has two central figures: Augustine and Evodius. Indeed, the latter of which begins the dialogue. Evodius asks Augustine: “Please tell me whether God is not the author of evil.” This opening sentence is important in the sense that it showcases how Augustine aims to center the discussion of free will around the Christian concept of evil. Yet, we might ask: What is evil? Here, Augustine is precise—there are two notions of evil: “I shall tell you if you make it plain what kind of evil you are asking about. We usually speak of ‘evil’ in two ways, namely when someone has (a) done evil; (b) suffered something evil.”<sup>185</sup>

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<sup>184</sup> Ibid., 76 (5.3.3); 44 (3.7.12).

<sup>185</sup> Augustine, *On the Free Choice of the Will*, 3 (1.1.1.1).

By viewing the former as moral evil and the latter as physical evil, we can perhaps see more clearly how Augustine's concept of evil has nothing to do with God. Rather, evil is a human concern: "someone" has either caused it or has been inflicted by it. What is more, instead of telling Evodius that "it is blasphemous to think" that God is not good, Augustine explores the question concerning evil alongside his interlocutor. He writes God "does not *do* evil" since evil itself presupposes that which is human.<sup>186</sup> Evil, Augustine continues, manifests itself "through the will:" it arises through human agency (history), what he calls "evildoing[s]."<sup>187</sup> Indeed, Augustine reminds Evodius that these evildoings have their own purpose. God "is just," which is to say: "He hands out punishments to evildoers, punishments that are doubtless evils to those who suffer them."<sup>188</sup>

After revealing to Evodius how "[e]vil things are not learned," Augustine proceeds to take up the question that "caused" him to "fall" into the company of the Manichaeans: "How is it that we *do* evil?"<sup>189</sup> The latter verb is crucial: it recalls how evil is not passive; it is active in the sense that it comes into existence through human happenings. In other words, we might say that this is yet another move by Augustine to reveal the ways in which evil is human made: God cannot have any connection with the origins of evil/sin. "Now we believe that everything that exists comes from the one God, although God is not the author of sins."<sup>190</sup> But even Augustine notices the glaring issue with his assertion.

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<sup>186</sup> Ibid.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid. (1.1.1.3).

<sup>188</sup> Ibid. (1.1.1.1-2).

<sup>189</sup> Ibid., 5 (1.2.4.10).

<sup>190</sup> Ibid. (1.2.4.11).



As he explains, “This is the sore point: If sins come from the souls that God created, and those souls come from God, how is it that sins are not almost immediately traced back to God?”<sup>191</sup>

Augustine’s answer is relatively simple: God is good, not evil. Responding to Augustine’s question, Evodius lets it be known that this inquiry into the origins of sin has been “troubling” him during their conversation: “You have now stated plainly what keeps troubling my thoughts, pushing and dragging me into this very investigation.”<sup>192</sup>

Augustine moves to calm his friend, reminding him that their guiding polestar is a God who is truly good:

Take heart! Believe as you do; there is no better belief, even if the reason why it is so hidden. Holding God in the highest esteem is surely the most authentic beginning of religiousness. Nor does anyone hold God in the highest esteem without believing that God is omnipotent, nor changeable in even the least detail, the Creator of all good things, Who is more excellent than they are, the most just Ruler of all He has created. Nor does God require the assistance of any nature in his creating—as though He were not sufficiently powerful all by Himself! It follows that God created all things from nothing.<sup>193</sup>

Although God “created all things from nothing,” Augustine maintains that God did not create sin—that is, sin is evil, and God stands as “the Creator of all good things.” Therefore, to say that God created sin would already presuppose that one is not talking about Augustine’s God, given that his definition of God rises and falls with goodness. Put more plainly, because God is good for Augustine, God cannot be evil: for evil itself

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<sup>191</sup> Ibid. (1.2.4.11).

<sup>192</sup> Ibid. (1.2.5.12).

<sup>193</sup> Ibid., 5-6 (1.25.5.12-13).

would require free will and death—that is, two “changeable” things that occurs outside of God.<sup>194</sup>

Stating that they have “settled” the issue between God and the notion of sin or moral evil, Augustine moves to “gain an understanding” of Evodius’s initial question: “How is it that we *do* evil?” With this question, Augustine writes that they “are really asking *why* it is we do evil.” In other words, why moral evil? What causes human beings to be evil? Before giving us an answer, Augustine asks Evodius to name a few “evil deeds.” Evodius replies: “Adultery, murder, and sacrilege—not to mention others that time and memory will not allow me to list.”<sup>195</sup> Selecting the first deed as their topic of discussion, Augustine pushes his friend to explain why adultery is considered evil. Evodius explains: “It is not evil because it is forbidden by the law. Instead, it is forbidden by the law because it is evil.” “Well, people are often condemned for acting rightly, are they not?” replies Augustine. Yet, Augustine does not stop there: he reminds Evodius that the law is human and thus evil. “Look again at history—and, not to send you to other books, look at the history which stands out by virtue of its divine authority. You will quickly find just how evil we must think the apostles and all the martyrs are if we accept that condemnation is a reliable judgment of evil doing.”<sup>196</sup>

Ruling out all of Evodius’s responses, Augustine tells his friend that the answer he is looking for is not external but rather internal. As Augustine writes, “lust is the evil in adultery, and you will run into difficulties as long as you are looking for evil in the

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<sup>194</sup> Ibid.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid. 6 (1.3.5.14).

<sup>196</sup> Ibid., 7 (1.3.7.18).

outward visible deed.”<sup>197</sup> In other words, lust is what leads us toward sin: it causes us to “desire” something other than God’s love. While “Good people” focus on “turning their love away from things that cannot be possessed without the risk of losing them,” “Evil people” are different: they “try to remove hindrances so that they may securely attach themselves to these things to be enjoyed.” Additionally, Augustine characterizes this notion of an evil life as “a life full of crime and wickedness, a life which is better called death.”<sup>198</sup> This statement is crucial because it recalls how lust or moral evil arises from the “will and free choice” to follow one’s heart.<sup>199</sup> That is to say, not only do we have the power to obtain God’s love but we also have the power to negate God’s love. It is this latter point where moral evil converges with physical evil: human beings are punished for having the capacity to negate a creator who is good, God.

Moreover, in stressing how death is akin to wickedness, the above statement returns us to an earlier point, namely, how Augustine expresses an orientation towards the idea that death is a “changeable” thing that should be overcome. Although one could interpret the text as Augustine saying that a life of sin is tantamount to a life of death, I should like to push this claim even further: If “[n]othing makes the mind a devotee of desire but its own will,”<sup>200</sup> and the will itself is “so great of a sin,”<sup>201</sup> then Augustine’s concept of freedom is predicated on hatred against free will: for free will itself implies existing in death, a “changeable” thing that exists outside the goodness of God.<sup>202</sup> Indeed,

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<sup>197</sup> Ibid. (1.3.8.20).

<sup>198</sup> Ibid., 9 (1.4.10.30).

<sup>199</sup> Ibid., 19 (1.11.21.76).

<sup>200</sup> Ibid. (1.11.1.76).

<sup>201</sup> Ibid. (1.11.22.77).

<sup>202</sup> Ibid., 5-6 (1.25.5.12-13).

Augustine underlines this point when discussing the differences between free will and freedom. Even though free will is “so great a sin,” Augustine writes that human beings have the capacity to “live *rightly*,” i.e., “gain the happy life through the will” by focusing on God’s love.<sup>203</sup> Furthermore, by focusing on God’s love, human beings can become “happy” through “eternal law,” which, as Augustine explains, allows both divine grace and “freedom” to arise.<sup>204</sup> To be sure, Augustine is explicit that the key to human freedom is not physical but metaphysical: “Our freedom is this: to submit to this truth, which is our God Who set us free from death—that is, from the state of sin.” He also notes that “human beings” were once all “established in a happy life;” however, we “fell,” which caused us to enter into “this condition” called “the afflictions of mortal life.”<sup>205</sup>

It would thus seem that Augustine evinces a sense of hesitancy about human life. Although he views the human being as a mortal agent of free will, this notion of mortality comes at a cost. Mortality, in other words, presupposes that the human being is “outside” or “beyond” that which is God. Nevertheless, Augustine is hopeful. As the previous passage suggests, Augustine believes that human beings have the power to regain our “happy” lives through self-renunciation—we can renounce our free will (“the afflictions of mortal life”) for the will of God (the “happy life” of “freedom”).<sup>206</sup> But what is that? In

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<sup>203</sup> Ibid. (1.11.22.77); 25 (1.14.30.100-101).

<sup>204</sup> Ibid., 27 (1.15.32.109-110).

<sup>205</sup> Ibid., 20 (1.11.23.79).

<sup>206</sup> Ibid.

other words, what does it mean to empty ourselves toward God?<sup>207</sup> Indeed, in claiming the latter point, is Augustine not suggesting that “mortal life” is evil?<sup>208</sup> If so, does not Augustine’s thesis presuppose a kind of hatred against mortality, time, and, as Hannah Arendt suggests, human life itself?<sup>209</sup>

These are the questions I will explore more precisely in the subsequent section on metaphysical evil and metaphysical freedom. To anticipate, I do not seek to answer these questions. Rather, my exploratory narrative will linger in Augustine’s writings and, in so doing, recall the historical significance of some of the deeper currents of his theology, namely, deification or Augustine’s striving toward a hypostatic union with a benevolent God.

## **Section II: Metaphysical Evil and Metaphysical Freedom**

### **Confessions**

In Book XI of the *Confessions*, we find Augustine wrestling with the question: What is time? Similar to his discussion in *On the Free will of Choice*, Augustine tells us that time is something that is not with God. He writes: “And no time is co-eternal with You, for You stand changeless; whereas if time stood changeless, it would not be

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<sup>207</sup> Along with me, the following scholars have raised these questions: Jeff Love and Michael Meng, *Revolutionary Bio-Politics from Fedorov to Mao* (Singapore: Palgrave MacMillan, 2023); Alexis Torrance, *Human Perfection in Byzantine Theology: Attaining the Fullness of Christ* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 2; Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, ed. Allan Bloom, trans. James H. Nichols Jr., 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1969), 246-258. Besides making it clear that “Man is a (free) Individual only to the extent that he is mortal,” Kojève also writes that it is this mortality that gives us our freedom, for “where there is eternal life and hence God, there is no place for human freedom, individuality, or historicity.” See Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, 251, 258.

<sup>208</sup> Augustine, *On the Free Choice of the Will*, 20 (1.11.23.79).

<sup>209</sup> Hannah Arendt puts it well: Augustine’s concept of “eternity cannot be understood by a temporal being except in terms of absolute futurity, it can be actualized only in the form of radical negation of the present. In other words, because self-love loves the present, it must turn into self-hatred.” See Hannah Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 27.

time.”<sup>210</sup> If God is “changeless” and time is not, does this mean that time itself is something that changes? The answer Augustine gives is yes. As Augustine writes, “this much I dare affirm I know: that if nothing passed there would be no past time; if nothing were approaching there would be no future time; if nothing were, there would be no present time.”<sup>211</sup> Moreover, for Augustine, God is not simply a “changeless” thing that dwells outside of a linear time. Rather, God is something that does not change, that is, God is something that is immortal. As Augustine writes,

Already, Lord, You have said with strong voice in the ear of my spirit that You are eternal, *who only have immortality*: for You change neither in form nor motion, nor is Your will changed as the times change, for a will which is now one thing and now another is not eternal . . . Again, O Lord, You said with strong voice in the ear of my spirit that all natures and substances, which are not what You are, and which yet exist, were made by You: only what is not at all is not from You. Such, for example, is the movement of a will away from You, who are, towards some other thing of less being than You: such a movement is a fault and sin.<sup>212</sup>

Here, we see Augustine argue that God is not only “eternal” but that he has something we do not, namely, “immortality.” Indeed, this notion of immortality presupposes an existence without human will. Unlike human will, which, as we have already seen, is a “mortal affliction” that exists within time itself, God’s will is something that is either outside or not affected by time: God’s will is not “changed as the times change.”<sup>213</sup> But Augustine goes further. He states that “a will” that moves us away from the immortality of God is “a movement” toward “fault and sin.” If the human will exists in time, is this movement toward “fault and sin” not somehow bound with time? In other

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<sup>210</sup> Augustine, *On the Free Choice of the Will*, 5-6 (1.25.5.12-13); *Confessions*, 242 (11.14.17).

<sup>211</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, 242 (11.14.17).

<sup>212</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, 266 (12.11.11).

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*

words, because the human will exists in time, at least since the Fall of Man, does this notion of a will that is not God's not imply that time itself is something akin to a "fault and sin," given that time implies being away from the "immortality" God? Augustine seems to suggest that time is something that should be overcome through the grace of God. He writes that God will "set [us] free" from "a life" that is always "scattering" away from that which is God. Because God is not with time, and human life is, we might say, enslaved to time, then Augustine's desire of wanting to be "set free" from life by God's grace implies a striving to be set free time itself.<sup>214</sup>

Yet, one might ask: What is a life freed of time? Of course, this question unfolds another interesting question: What is immortality? Is it simply the human being 'being' with God? If so, what is that? What does it mean for a human being "to be" with God? Is it a return to the so-called divine status we had before the Fall? Or is it something completely different? One thing is seemingly clear: Augustine's notion of "immortality" is not time—it is not this notion of the human being persisting in the changeability of time. As Augustine writes, "no time is co-eternal" with God.<sup>215</sup> Still, what does Augustine mean by "immortality"?<sup>216</sup>

Though not giving us a straightforward answer, Augustine does tell us that eternalness or immortality implies a "union"—perhaps a reunion—with God's dwelling-place, the heaven of heaven. As Augustine writes, "*the heaven of heaven*," that is, "*the*

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<sup>214</sup> Although F.J. Sheed translates the phrase 'Ecce distention est vita mea' as "[M]y life is but a scattering," Michael P. Foley notes that similar to Plotinus (Ennead 3.7.11.41), this sentence could be translated as "life is a distension." See the quote and Foley's commentary (footnote 103) in *Ibid.*, 255 (11.29.39).

<sup>215</sup> Augustine, *On the Free Choice of the Will*, 5-6 (1.25.5.12-13); *Confessions*, 242 (11.14.17).

<sup>216</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, 266 (12.11.11).

*Lord's . . . dwelling-place,*" is a "creature [that] is not co-eternal" with neither the human being nor God.<sup>217</sup> According to Augustine, this "happy creature" stands as a "pure mind united in perfect harmony in a binding union of peace with those holy spirits, the citizens of Your City which is in heaven far above the heavens we see."<sup>218</sup> More curiously still is that Augustine describes this heavenly thing as an "intellectual creature" that is "in no-way co-eternal" with God; rather, it is "a partaker in His eternity."<sup>219</sup>

So far, this much can be noted: Augustine's notion of immortality is coterminous with heaven, which is not merely a realm of everlasting happiness. Instead, it is a happy creature that appears to give us some sort of intellectual capacity to think in a "pure" and "united" manner with certain "holy spirits."<sup>220</sup> Indeed, Augustine expands upon these latter points. He writes that, prior to "that man who committed the first sin," humans had "some sort of knowledge" that had at once "been happy." However, shortly after the Fall, "we all died" and thus "misery descended" upon humankind.<sup>221</sup> And humankind is indeed in a state of misery for Augustine: he defines his own life as tantamount to living in death. "[W]hen I came into this life-in-death—or should I call it death-in-life?" Though Augustine is likely discussing his previous life before baptism, his claim concerning life as a living death nevertheless unfolds an important point, namely, how death is tied to life (or perhaps life is tied to death), which, as we have already seen, presupposes that

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<sup>217</sup> *Ibid.*, 266 (12.11.12).

<sup>218</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>219</sup> *Ibid.*, 265 (12.9.9).

<sup>220</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>221</sup> *Ibid.*, 206 (10.20.29).



humankind is already in some kind of “fault” or “sin:” we are not “with” God in “the heaven of heaven.”<sup>222</sup>

Since eternity for Augustine presupposes some sort of atemporal/deathless realm (i.e., “the Life which cannot die”), one might argue that Augustine’s concept of metaphysical freedom, that is, his concept of human hypostasis with God, pivots on the assumption that the human being will overcome time and death: the human being will be “brought back” to God.<sup>223</sup> Yet, what does “brought back” to God mean? Perhaps the most obvious point to note is this: Any “mysterious” reunion with God presupposes some sort of breakdown or destruction of that which is the human being.<sup>224</sup> As Augustine writes, “the deepest places of my soul are torn . . . until the day when I shall be purified and melted in the fire of Thy love and wholly joined to Thee.”<sup>225</sup> Is Augustine suggesting that the human being will be destroyed during the reunion with God? He does suggest this idea when he writes: “Let me not be my own life: of myself I lived evilly and to myself I was death.”<sup>226</sup> What is more, if we pair the previous statement with two other points—namely, that we should “not” let our “hearts be overcharged with the cares of this life,” and that we should “[g]o not after thy lusts but turn away from thy own will,” then it would seem plausible to suggest that the human being does not enter into a Christ-like hypostasis with God.<sup>227</sup>

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<sup>222</sup> Ibid., 6 (1.6.7); 265 (12.9.9).

<sup>223</sup> Ibid., 122 (7.6.8).

<sup>224</sup> Ibid., 310 (13.23.34).

<sup>225</sup> Ibid., 255 (11.29.39).

<sup>226</sup> Ibid., 266 (12.10.10).

<sup>227</sup> Ibid., 215 (10. 31.46); 242. (11.14.17).

Thus, in terms of his *Confessions*, Augustine expresses an orientation towards the idea that metaphysical freedom demands a particular overcoming: it demands the overcoming of time, death, and that which is the human being. In this light, Augustine's concept of freedom presupposes a total extirpation from everything we know. Let me explore this latter point more precisely by turning to my last source: Augustine's *City of God*.

### **The City of God**

*The City of God* (413/426) stands as a crucial touchstone for understanding how Augustine thought about metaphysical evil and metaphysical freedom. To be sure, my final section on Augustine does not attempt to explore these two concepts in all twenty-two books that make up *The City of God*. Instead, my section has a far humbler goal: the remaining pages offer a thumbnail sketch of Augustine's later thinking on time, death, and freedom. The first section stands as a layered reading of the chapters that shed some light on Augustine's attitude about human existence. The second section moves to focus exclusively on Book 22, a set of chapters dedicated to exploring issues related to heaven and the hypostatic union with God—in a word, metaphysical freedom.

Augustine is a pessimistic thinker: for him, human life is a miserable condition. We see Augustine articulate this claim when discussing one of the key aspects of human existence: friendship. In a chapter entitled “That we cannot rest secure in the friendship of good men while the perils of this life compel us to be anxious,” Augustine claims that friendship presupposes metaphysical evil: it presupposes death. Calling life a “miserable condition,” Augustine writes that human existence is not only miserable because of “the

mass of evils” that occupy “this world”—e.g., “famine, war, pestilence, or captivity,” but it is also miserable because lurking within human existence “is a much more bitter fear” than all the mass of evils thrown together: the fear that “friendship will be transformed into perfidy, malice, and wickedness.” Yet, one might ask: What causes friendship to transform into “perfidy, malice, and wickedness?”<sup>228</sup>

The answer Augustine gives us is twofold: mortality and death. As Augustine explains, wickedness “is brought to our knowledge” through “grief:” when we “hear” about “the death of [some]one whose life has been sweet to us.” But Augustine does not stop there. He ties his claim to mortality, to human beings living, as sinful beings, in time. “The life of mortal men, then, is afflicted, sometimes more lightly but sometimes more harshly, but the death of those whom we love most dearly.”<sup>229</sup> Indeed, this point about mortality as something that afflicts us becomes even more apparent when connected to Augustine’s narrative of creation. Here, we find Augustine making it clear that time is distinguished from God (immortality) by the fact that time implies a change, perhaps mortality or death, that does not exist with God. He writes: “[E]ternity and time are rightly distinguished by the fact that time does not exist without some movement and change, whereas in eternity there is no change.” What is more, Augustine continues by noting that time, as tied to mortality or death or change, is something that did not exist until after the Fall of Man. He writes:

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<sup>228</sup> Augustine, *The City of God Against the Pagans*, trans. R. W. Dyson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 1178 (book 22, chap. 30).

<sup>229</sup> *Ibid.*, 929-930 (book 19, chap. 8). See also Augustine’s discussion concerning the death of his friend in *Confessions*, 59-60 (4.4.7-9).

Moreover, when the sacred and wholly truth-laden Scriptures say that ‘In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth’, this is so that we may know that nothing was made before the heaven and the earth; for if something was made before them, it is this something that would then be said to have been made ‘in the beginning’ . . . For that which is made in time is made both after and before some time: after that which is past, and before that which is to come. But there could have been no ‘past’ before the creation, because there was then no creature by whose changing movement time could be enacted.<sup>230</sup>

Hence, Augustine points the finger of scorn at Adam and Eve: they are the originators of time as being tied to mortality or death. In other words, because of Adam and Eve, time is no longer tied to the goodness of God. On the contrary, time is now tied to mortality, the metaphysical touchstone for human existence: [T]he fall of the first man—or, rather, of the first human beings,” lead to “the origin and propagation of human death.”<sup>231</sup> Shortly after mentioning this point, Augustine tells us that he feels as though he “must speak somewhat more carefully of the kind of death” he is most “concerned” with. He writes that although the soul is certainly “immortal, it nonetheless also has a certain kind of death of its own.” It would thus seem that time as mortality does not simply mean death; instead, there appears to be two deaths: death of the body, and death of the soul. As Augustine explains, “[t]he death of the soul therefore occurs when God forsakes it, and that of the body comes when the soul forsakes it.” While Augustine claims that this “second death” is “something good,” that is, it brings the human being into a divine communion with God, he nevertheless argues that death stands as a metaphysical

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<sup>230</sup> Augustine, *The City of God Against the Pagans*, 456 (book 11, chap. 6).

<sup>231</sup> *Ibid.*, 541 (book 8, chap.1).

punishment from God: “Death, generated in unbroken succession from the first man, is beyond doubt the punishment of all who are born of him.”<sup>232</sup>

But Augustine does not stop there. Discussing how humanity “would not have been subject to death, had not the first two . . . merited it by their disobedience,”<sup>233</sup> Augustine moves to define the fallen human being as something that “resembles” the fallen angel, Lucifer. He writes: “Thus, when a man lives according to man and not according to God, he resembles the devil.” Now, while this point presupposes that not all human beings live according to themselves, it nevertheless illuminates how, at least in *The City of God*, Augustine imputes a radical notion of free will onto human beings. To put it differently, the previous quote recalls Augustine’s notion of free will (*voluntas*) as being not merely a physical power—more precisely, the will to lord over another human being—but also a metaphysical-theological power: the power to rebel against God. Indeed, we see Augustine express this point when he writes how God’s angels, albeit Lucifer, are not like human beings. He writes: “For even an angel should have lived not according to self, but according to God, if he was to abide in the truth and utter God’s truth rather than his own lie.”<sup>234</sup>

Furthermore, Augustine also describes how the will itself presupposes this capacity for “lust,” which, when taken to its most extreme, can transform into “the lust of mastery,” that is, “the harshest kind of mastery, which lays waste to the hearts of mortal men.”<sup>235</sup> This claim is perhaps one of the central reasons why Augustine wishes us to

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<sup>232</sup> Ibid., 541 (book 8, chap. 1); 545 (book 8, chap. 4); 547 (book 8, chap. 6).

<sup>233</sup> Ibid., 581 (book 14, chap. 1).

<sup>234</sup> Ibid., 586 (book 14, chap. 4).

<sup>235</sup> Ibid., 586-87 (book 19, chap.15).

“acknowledge that this [life] is a misery” to the extent that it “compels us to be anxious” about the possibility of being overpowered.<sup>236</sup>

In Book 22, we find Augustine creating an emancipatory narrative. Human beings can “escape” “the miseries of this life” through “the grace of Christ, our Saviour, God and Lord.”<sup>237</sup> According to this view, God is beneficial for human beings because his “grace” helps us “escape” from our “present condition of misery.”<sup>238</sup> If we recall how mortality and death are things that keep us away from the eternalness of God, then this striving to “escape” from our “present condition of misery” is indeed radical: it expresses an orientation towards overcoming human existence itself.<sup>239</sup> Augustine argues this latter point when describing how “the grace of Christ” frees us from “the error which imprisons the sons of Adam in a dark place from which no man can be delivered.”<sup>240</sup>

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<sup>236</sup> Ibid., 928-29 (book 19, chap. 8). Here, Augustine is expressing an orientation towards Pauline theology. As the German theologian Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976) explains, “St Paul sees that the life of man is weighed down by anxiety (μεριμνάω, 1 Cor. 7.32ff.). Every man focuses his anxiety upon some particular object. The natural man focuses it upon security, and in proportion to his opportunities and his success in the visible sphere he places his ‘confidence’ in the ‘flesh’ (Phil. 3. 3f.), and the consciousness of security finds its expression in ‘glorying’ (καυχᾶσθαι).” See Rudolf Bultmann, “Demythologizing in Outline” in *Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate*, ed. Hans Werner Bartsch, trans. Reginald H. Fuller, (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), 18. Augustine also discusses how “the weight of bodies” is determined by “love,” which, according to the Christian writer, is twofold concept: human beings can either love that which is “the carnal or sensual life” or that which is “good.” God. See Augustine, *The City of God Against the Pagans*, 487-488 (book 11, chap. 28); 591 (book 14, chap. 7). See also, Augustine, *On the Free Choice of the Will*, 9 (1.4.10.30). Arendt writes “that Augustine, [B:O33147] although he never became fully aware of the inadequacy of part of his terminology, knows of an entirely different kind of *caritas*, namely, of a love that stands in no relation whatsoever to either *appetitus* or *cupiditas*, and therefore is truly of divine and not of human origin. This entirely different kind of love is the *caritas* that is diffused *in cordibus nostris*, “the love that is shed in our hearts” (Rom. 5:5). In this sense *caritas* indicates not God’s ‘circulating’ presence within us, but the grace bestowed by the Creator upon his creature.” See Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine*, 22.

<sup>237</sup> Augustine, *The City of God Against the Pagans*, 1156-1157 (book 22, chap. 23).

<sup>238</sup> Ibid., 1159 (book 22, chap. 24).

<sup>239</sup> Ibid.

<sup>240</sup> Ibid., 1153 (book 22, chap. 22).

It would thus appear that Augustine is expressing a pessimistic attitude: he is arguing that one should reject human existence for God. But again, we must ask: What is that? What does it mean to reject the human for God?<sup>241</sup> To frame the question using Augustine's own words: What does it mean to be "clothed in incorruption and immortality"?<sup>242</sup>

Upon death, those who follow the word of God will "obtain" entrance into "the eternal blessedness of the City of God." Needless to say, Augustine makes it clear that "the City of God" is not an ordinary city. It "will not be like an evergreen tree, where the same greenness seems to persist because the appearance of dense growth is preserved by the emergence of fresh leaves in the place of those which wither and fall." Rather, the eternal city of God will be a city where "all the citizens of that city will be immortal:" they all "will obtain that which the angels never have lost."<sup>243</sup> According to Augustine, this 'thing' that we have lost is our "immortality" with God. He writes that, upon coming into the city of God, the human being will somehow acquire (or perhaps reacquire) a

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<sup>241</sup> Alexis Torrance expresses this question in so many words when he writes: "One cannot fault the casual or even seasoned observer from wondering how theosis is really ever reached if, in fact, it is inherently unattainable as such: in what way from this perspective, is deification a 'doctrine' referring human destiny? Should the doctrine, in order to be truer to its content, be re-named one of 'perpetually deferred deification'?" See Alexis Torrance, *Human Perfection in Byzantine Theology*, 2; Augustine, *The City of God Against the Pagans*, 1152 (book 22, chap. 21).

<sup>242</sup> Norman Russell suggests that, within the Greek patristic tradition, there are three ways of approaching deification: nominal, analogical, and metaphorical. As he explains: "The nominal interprets the biblical application of the word 'gods' to human beings simply as a title of honour. The analogical 'stretches' the nominal: Moses was a god to Pharaoh as a wise man is a god to a fool; or men become sons and gods 'by grace' in relation to Christ who is Son and God 'by nature.' The metaphorical use is more complex. It is characteristic of two distinct approaches, the ethical and the realistic. The ethical approach takes deification to be the attainment of likeness to God through ascetic and philosophical endeavor, believers reproducing some of the divine attribute in their own lives by imitation. Behind this use of the metaphor lies the model of *homoiosis*, or attaining *likeness* to God. The realistic approach assumes that human beings are in some sense transformed by deification. Behind the latter use like the model of *methexis*, or *participation*, in God." See Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition*, 1-2.

<sup>243</sup> Augustine, *The City of God Against the Pagans*, 1107 (book 22, chap. 1).

“spiritual body” that is “clothed in incorruption and immortality.”<sup>244</sup> I say “somehow” because Augustine believes in what one theologian has called the central “mythology” of Christianity: the resurrection of the dead.<sup>245</sup> In other words, Augustine believes that the “earthly body” will be “raised up to a heavenly body.”<sup>246</sup> Moreover, Augustine claims “that the human body may receive from the Almighty Artist a property which will enable it to be born up to heaven.”<sup>247</sup>

Therefore, Augustine’s definition of human hypostasis takes its bearings from something akin to the resurrected Jesus Christ: “Christ was conformed to us by mortality, so shall we be conformed to Him by immortality; and this, indeed, does have reference to the resurrection of the body.”<sup>248</sup> Although Augustine stresses how this notion of human hypostasis is tantamount to a Christ-like synthesis between the human being and that which is “heavenly,” the Christian writer nevertheless maintains that we are all “made in the image of God.” And yet, what does it mean to be “made in the image of God?” In other words: What, exactly, is “God”?<sup>249</sup>

To be sure, Augustine does tell us that God is not merely “the Creator of this wonderous nature,” but He is also “the true and supreme God” who “governs all that He has made, wielding supreme power and supreme justice over it.”<sup>250</sup> Indeed, Augustine

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<sup>244</sup> Ibid., 1150 (book 22, chap. 20); 1152-1153 (book 22, chap. 21).

<sup>245</sup> See Bultmann, “Demythologizing in Outline,” 3.

<sup>246</sup> Ibid., 1153 (book 7, chap. 21); 1112-1113 (book 22, chaps. 4-5). See also, Ibid., 1137 (book 22, chap. 11); 114 (book 22, chap. 16). Moreover, this statement highlights Caroline Walker Bynum’s claim that Augustine “reject[s] the Pauline seed metaphor” for “metaphors of resembled statues or vessels or buildings.” See Caroline Walker Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200-1336* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 95-96.

<sup>247</sup> Augustine, *The City of God Against the Pagans*, 1137 (book 22, chap. 12).

<sup>248</sup> Ibid., 1144 (book 22, chap. 16).

<sup>249</sup> Ibid., 1160 (book 22, chap. 24).

<sup>250</sup> Ibid., 1162 (book 22, chap 24).



also notes that, in the eternal city, God “will be all in all.” Consequently, if we take these two points and pair them with another claim—that is, how in the eternal city there will be “freedom for all,” then Augustine’s God is freedom in the highest sense of term: God is the divine “freedom of the will.”<sup>251</sup> In this respect, God is the exact opposite of free will, which is to say that God is a positive capacity of the free will: God is the power that allows us “not” to be “able to sin.”<sup>252</sup> Indeed, if human life is tied to sin, then what is the human being without sin? Is it even a “human being”? Here, Augustine expresses a sense of honesty: he tells us that he is unsure as to what it would be like to be “in a condition where we will neither cease from work through idleness nor be driven to it by need.”<sup>253</sup>

Furthermore, Augustine claims that we “cannot even imagine” God’s will precisely because we have been persisting in “error” since the Fall of Man.<sup>254</sup> But this claim wraps itself up in the garb of contradiction. Let me explain. As we have already seen, Augustine states that human beings are “made in the image of God.”<sup>255</sup> Yet, if we are made in the image of God, then do we have something that is already detached from the miserable world of suffering and sin? In other words, in claiming that human beings have the capacity to somehow become “partaker[s] of God,” is Augustine suggesting that, similar to God, human beings have some sort of “power”?<sup>256</sup> To be clear, Augustine stresses that we are powerless in the face of sin without God: “[T]here is no escape from

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<sup>251</sup> Ibid., 1180 (book 22, chap. 29).

<sup>252</sup> Ibid., 1179 (book 22, chap. 30).

<sup>253</sup> Ibid., 1178 (book 22, chap. 30).

<sup>254</sup> Ibid. See also, Ibid., 1153 (book 22, chap. 22).

<sup>255</sup> Ibid., 1160 (book 22, chap. 24).

<sup>256</sup> Ibid., 1180 (book 22, chap. 30; 1159 (book 22, chap. 24); 1162 (book 22, chap 24).

[the world of sin] other than through the grace of Christ, our Saviour, God and Lord.”<sup>257</sup>

Still, this notion of being at once “made by Him in His own image” and, at the same time, being in “error” against that very image unfolds a series of interesting issues concerning how a believer of Christ achieves “freedom” from time and death.<sup>258</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Augustine’s narrative illuminates his impossible solution: the striving for “immortality” without calling for the explicit extirpation of the human being.<sup>259</sup> Most simply: Augustine creates what one scholar has called a narrative of “metaphorical deification.”<sup>260</sup> In so doing, the Christian writer attempts to express a freedom that may not be coherent since it predicated on “the resurrection” of the dead, which itself presupposes not only that there is something ‘beyond’ that which is death—i.e., “the eternal blessedness of the City of God.”<sup>261</sup> But also, and perhaps more significantly, that this something ‘beyond’ death stands a “reward” to the extent that it “promises” to those who are “obedient” to God a peculiar sort of “gift,” namely, the “godly” gift of “life everlasting” (that is, a “life in which there is no death”).<sup>262</sup> Thus, unlike Thucydides, Augustine does not offer us the possibility of immortality through imperialism. To the

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<sup>257</sup> Ibid., 1156 (book 22, chap 22).

<sup>258</sup> Ibid., 347 (book 8, chap. 23); 539 (book 7, chap. 28); 628 (book 14, chap. 25). See also, Ibid., 1153 (book 22, chap. 22); 605 (book 14, chap. 11); 1155 (book 22, chap. 22); 1162-1163 (book 22, chap. 24).

<sup>259</sup> Ibid., 1152 (book 22, chap. 21).

<sup>260</sup> Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition*, 1, 85, 199, 233-38.

<sup>261</sup> Augustine, *The City of God Against the Pagans*, 527 (book 7, chap. 20); 975-978 (book 20, chap. 6). See also, Ibid., 1024 (book 20, chap. 24); 1142-1150 (book 20, chaps. 14-20); 1165-1168 (book 22, chaps. 24-26).

<sup>262</sup> Ibid., 215-216 (book 5, chap.15); 225 (book 5, chap. 19); 573 (book 8, chap. 23). See also, Ibid., 39 (book 1, chap. 26); 235 (book 5, chap. 26); 414 (book 5, chap 16); 581 (book 14, chap. 1); 948 (book 19, chap. 19). I might add that this notion of gaining a reward from God recalls the story of Job. See Job 42:10-17.

contrary, Augustine's concept of "freedom" is interlaced with "the grace of God," which allows one to somehow move beyond "the animal body [and] into the newness of the spiritual body:" the body that is "clothed in incorruption and immortality."<sup>263</sup> In sum, Augustine's concept of freedom is metaphysical: it takes its bearings not from the earthly realm of time and death but from the so-called heavenly realm of God and immortality.

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<sup>263</sup> Ibid., 1161 (book 22, chap. 24); 1179 (book 22, chap. 30). See also Ibid., 543-546 (book 8, chaps. 3-5); 570-573 (book 8, chap. 23); 1144-1145 (book 22, chaps. 17); 1156 (book 22, chap. 22).

## CHAPTER THREE

### Cervantes

Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra (1547-1616) is a comic writer. In the opening to *Don Quijote* (Pt. I: 1605; Pt. II: 1615), Cervantes tells us that his “history” of Don Quixote de La Mancha was almost cast aside due to a simple problem: he was unable to craft a “preface” to his famed knight of La Mancha. He writes: “[A]lthough it was hard work crafting the book, composing this preface you are reading now was much more challenging.” “Many times,” he continues, “I picked up the pen to write, and many times I put it down again, unsure as to what I should write.” However, just as he was getting ready to abandon the project altogether, Cervantes notes that “a friend” of his “entered into his study” and, being “a funny and well-meaning person,” inquired to see what was troubling him. Hearing about how Cervantes was struggling “to write a tale as dry as esparto grass,” the clever friend offered a solution: “[S]ince this work of yours seeks to undo the authority and wide acceptance that books of chivalry enjoy in the world and among the public, there is no need in begging maxims from philosophers . . . or miracles from saints.”<sup>264</sup> On the contrary, Cervantes should focus his attention on creating a narrative that is “loud and witty”—that is to say, Cervantes should strive to write something that not only “moves the melancholy to laughter” but also that causes “the

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<sup>264</sup> Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quijote de la Mancha*, ed. Francisco Rico (Barcelona, Spain: Penguin, 2019), 60, 66. (My translation; hereafter: Cervantes, *Don Quijote*). Antonio de Padua Andino Sánchez has argued that Cervantes’s prologue in *el Quijote* is “the most original prologue ever seen in Spanish literature.” See Antonio de Padua Andino Sánchez, “Quintiliano y el prólogo de la primera parte de Don Quijote,” *Cervantes: Bulletin of the Cervantes Society of America* 39, no. 2 (Fall 2019): 69-92 (see quote on page 90).

joyful to laugh even more.”<sup>265</sup> In short, Cervantes’s friend suggests that he should write a comedy. Yet, what is comedy?<sup>266</sup>

For Eric Auerbach (1892-1957), the answer is this: Cervantine comedy is a form of mockery that ridicules chivalric narratives. In *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (1942-45/1946), Auerbach implies that Cervantes’s *Don Quixote* takes its bearings from Latin literature, particularly from Petronius’s *Satyricon* (1 C.E.). Classifying both novels as comedies—albeit from different historical and cultural ages, Auerbach argues that Petronius’s short story entitled “Dinner with Trimalchio” is a mirror by which we find Don Quixote’s reflection. Describing what historians of comedy call “the superiority theory of laughter,” Auerbach notes how Petronius’s narrative structure places a certain stress on laughter as a form of mockery.<sup>267</sup> He writes: Though each character “has his private destiny, their destinies are similar; their lot, for all its turbulences, is the common lot, common and vulgar.” This latter adjective is important. It highlights what seems to be Auerbach’s main critique against Petronius—namely, how his tale of Trimalchio ridicules “the instability of earthly happiness.”<sup>268</sup> To put it plainly, Auerbach views Petronius’s story as being “vulgar” insofar as it mocks the “illusion” that the human individual can free itself from “reality,” and, therefore, death.<sup>269</sup> Hence why, for Auerbach, *Don Quixote* expresses a “crude vulgarity:” similar to Petronius’s

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<sup>265</sup> Cervantes, *Don Quijote*, 66.

<sup>266</sup> Mary Beard, *Laughter in Ancient Rome: On Joking, Tickling, and Cracking Up* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015), 23.

<sup>267</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>268</sup> Eric Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, NJ; Princeton University Press, 2003) 27, 29.

<sup>269</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

Trimalchio, “Cervantes’s Don Quixote cannot emancipate himself” from reality.<sup>270</sup> In this light, Cervantes’s novel is a tragedy. As Auerbach notes, *Don Quixote* sheds a spotlight on the genre of tragedy in the sense that Don Quixote’s way of life—his “foolish illusion” of chivalry, is in constant conflict with reality, with the “tragic complications” that arise when madness meets the “representations of everyday life.”<sup>271</sup>

Of course, Auerbach is not the first to claim that *Don Quixote* expresses a tragic orientation. In his essay entitled “Don Quixote’s Shipwreck” (1919), the Spanish philosopher Miguel de Unamuno (1864-1936) argues, among other things, that *Don Quixote* is a tragic comedy. Unamuno writes: “*Don Quixote* is more grimace than a smile. Or better yet, it is tragic laughter; the only tragic laughter in the entire span of the history of the human spirit.”<sup>272</sup> But one might ask: What is tragic laughter?

Unamuno offers us an answer: “[T]ragic laughter is a laughter that laughs at itself and which dissolves into infinite mourning. If the Homeric Zeus had heard his own bursts of laughter, those bursts, which shook the world, what would have happened? Perhaps it would have meant the earlier arrival of Christianity, another manifestation of something other than smiles.”<sup>273</sup> More differently stated, tragic laughter is a form of comedy that ridicules our enslavement to death, which, according to Unamuno, expresses an orientation to the infinite: it is something we can never overcome. Furthermore, in his earlier work on *La Vida de Don Quijote y Sancho* (1904/1905), Unamuno connects this

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<sup>270</sup> Ibid., 127, 339.

<sup>271</sup> Ibid., 342-343.

<sup>272</sup> Miguel de Unamuno, “Don Quixote’s Shipwreck,” in *Our Lord Don Quixote: The Life of Don Quixote and Sancho with Related Essays*, trans. Anthony Kerrigan (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967), 423-424.

<sup>273</sup> Ibid.

notion of tragic laughter to the futile quest for immortality. He writes: “What moved you, my Don Quixote, to your madness for remembrance and fame and your striving to live in the memories of men, unless it was your striving not to die, your craving for immortality, that craving that we inherited from our fathers?” In laughing at the futility of freedom from death, Unamuno states that Cervantes is mocking “the horror of having to end in nothingness.”<sup>274</sup> Consequently, Unamuno views Cervantes’s *Don Quixote* as a form of tragic laughter because it ridicules the knight’s life of chivalry: the striving to achieve permanence in a world that ends in nothingness.

In this light, Unamuno’s thought converges with the thought of two other figures: Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975) and Vladimir Nabokov (1899-1977). In the former’s work on the history of laughter, *Rabelais and His World* (1965/1984), Cervantes’s *Don Quixote* stands not simply as a form of “grotesque realism”—a work of literature that purposely “degrades” or speaks negatively of the human body, but also, and perhaps more crucially, as “an important turning point in the history of laughter.”<sup>275</sup> For Bakhtin, *Don Quixote* presents images of “abundant defecation,” that is, throughout the novel, Cervantes develops a “grotesque realism of the gay bodily grave (belly, bowels, earth) which has been dug for Don Quixote’s abstract and deadened idealism.”<sup>276</sup> Tying this degrading thread back to Latin literature, Bakhtin maintains that one can see the germ of

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<sup>274</sup> Miguel de Unamuno, “Vida de Don Quijote y Sancho,” in *Del sentimiento trágico de la vida y otros ensayos* (Barcelona, Spain: Penguin, 2020), 328.

<sup>275</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helen Iswolsky (Bloomington, IN; Indiana University Press, 1984) 18, 21, 66. This point seems to anticipate William Egginton’s broader claim that Cervantes “invented fiction.” See William Egginton, *The Man Who Invented Fiction: How Cervantes Ushered in the Modern World* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), xxii.

<sup>276</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 22.

this “modern,” “grotesque concept of the [human] body” in Latin works such as Petronius’s “Dinner with Trimalchio.”<sup>277</sup>

Indeed, Vladimir Nabokov picks up on this point of degradation in his *Lectures on Don Quixote* (1951-52/1983). Like Bakhtin, Nabokov argues that Cervantes’s book does not express a “humane” or “sensitive” form of comedy.<sup>278</sup> On the contrary, the laughter found in *Don Quixote* is “crude” in the sense that it mocks both physical and mental suffering. The latter insofar as Cervantes cheerfully details the various beatings and blows that Don Quixote and his friends encounter thanks to the knight’s madness.<sup>279</sup> And the former in the sense that Don Quixote’s madness is the result of a mental illness—Alonso Quixano, a farmer of modest means, transforms into Don Quixote through consuming one too many books of chivalry.<sup>280</sup> Commenting on the various ways in which Parts I and II of *Don Quixote* exhibit “samples of cheerful physical . . . and mental cruelties,” Nabokov concludes that, in mocking human suffering, Cervantes’s novel stands as “one of the most bitter and barbarous books ever penned:”

We are going to speak on cruelty . . . The author seems to plan it thus: Come with me, ungentle reader, who enjoys seeing a live dog inflated and kicked around like a soccer football; reader, who likes, of a Sunday morning, on his way to or from church, to poke his stick or direct his spittle at a poor rogue in the stocks; come, ungentle reader, with me and consider into what ingenious and cruel hands I shall place my ridiculously vulnerable hero. And I hope you will be amused at what I have to offer . . . Both parts of *Don Quixote* form a veritable encyclopedia of cruelty. From that viewpoint it is one of the most bitter and barbarous books ever penned. And its cruelty is artistic. The extraordinary commentators who talk through their academic caps or birettas of the humorous and humane mellowly

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<sup>277</sup> Ibid., 30-33, 70, 299.

<sup>278</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Don Quixote* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt, Brace, 1983), 52

<sup>279</sup> Ibid., 39-40.

<sup>280</sup> Ibid., 51.



Christian atmosphere of the book . . . have probably been reading some other book or are looking through some rosy gauze at the brutal world of Cervantes's novel.<sup>281</sup>

Harold Bloom (1930-2019) argues that although Cervantes's novel is a tragic comedy, it is still more hopeful than some of the satire written by Jonathan Swift (1667-1745).<sup>282</sup> As Bloom writes in an article entitled "The Knight in the Mirror" (2003): "Swift's satire corrodes, while Cervantes's allows us some hope."<sup>283</sup> In other words, unlike Swift's comedy, Cervantes's gives us an illusion—namely, of escaping death through heroism. Yet, Bloom's comment, though interesting, can perhaps be developed more fully. Indeed, in the following pages, I will put forward a twofold claim: 1) that Don Quixote desires an illusion that offers freedom from death, and 2) that this striving to be freed from death is futile insofar as Don Quixote is a historical being and thus cannot escape what Cervantes's views as the tragic truth of human existence: we die.

I develop this claim in four sections. In the first section, I tease out a point made by Auerbach and Bakhtin: that Cervantes's *Don Quixote* (hereafter, *el Quijote*) takes its bearings from another death-oriented comedy, Petronius's "Dinner with Trimalchio."<sup>284</sup> In the second section, I expand upon the recent work of David Castillo and William Egginton to suggest that *el Quijote* offers a "devastating critique" of Augustinian Christianity, before then proceeding to show how this criticism is based largely on a

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<sup>281</sup> Ibid., 51-52.

<sup>282</sup> Jonathan Swift, "A Modest Proposal," in *The Essential Writings of Jonathan Swift*, eds. Claude Rawson and Ian Higgins (New York: W.W. Norton & Company), 295-301.

<sup>283</sup> Harold Bloom, "The Knight in the Mirror," *The Guardian*, December 2003. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2003/dec/13/classics.miguelcervantes#:~:text=The%20knight%20is%20Cervantes's%20subtle,known%20the%20cost%20of%20confirmation.>

<sup>284</sup> See William Arrowsmith, "Luxury and Death in the Satyricon," *Journal of Humanities and the Classics*, 5, no. 3 (Autumn, 1966): 304-331; Valerie M. Hope "At Home with the Dead: Roman Funeral Traditions and Trimalchio's Tomb," in *Petronius: A Handbook*, eds. Jonathan Prag and Ian Repath (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 140-160.

mockery of human suffering.<sup>285</sup> In the third, I focus on the scene of Don Quixote's death to argue that, similar to Thucydides, Cervantes maintains that there is no escaping our servitude to the human body.<sup>286</sup> Finally, I discuss how Don Quixote's journey in the Sierra Morena showcases how Cervantes is a tragic writer: there is no freedom from death other than the narratives/attitudes of immorality.<sup>287</sup>

### **A Historical Recalling of Tragic Comedy**

Petronius's "Dinner with Trimalchio" anticipates *el Quijote* insofar as the Latin story mocks enslavement to both the human body and death. Opening the scene to a group of well-to-do students trying to plot their way out of a Roman orgy, Petronius's narrator, Encolpius, tells us that as they were despairing over their unfortunate situation, a servant arrived with some uplifting news: they were going to Trimalchio's for dinner. As the servant later explained to Encolpius: "Trimalchio is your host. He's a most refined man: he has a water clock in his dining room, and a trumpeter who's always in uniform, so that he constantly knows how much of his life he's lost."<sup>288</sup> Intrigued by this description of their host, Encolpius and his friends decide to head to the local baths in order to prepare for the feast.

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<sup>285</sup> David Castillo and William Egginton, "Cervantes, Reality Literacy, and Fundamentalism," in *Millennial Cervantes: New Currents in Cervantes Studies*, ed. Bruce Burningham (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2020), 221.

<sup>286</sup> See Andrés Lema-Hincapié, "Las muchas muertes de Alonso Quijano el bueno," in *El Segundo Quijote (1615): Nuevas Interpretaciones Cuatro Siglos Después*, ed. Conxita Domènech (Iberoamericana Editorial Vervuert, 2018), 83-103.

<sup>287</sup> Here, I agree with Dmitri Nikulin's claim that comedy can serve as a form of serious thinking. See Dmitri Nikulin, preface to *Comedy Seriously: A Philosophical Study* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), vii.

<sup>288</sup> Petronius, *Satyricon*, trans. Gareth Schmeling (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020), 38.

Yet, as they were walking to the city, Encolpius notes that they came across a strange scene: They “noticed an old bald man, dressed in a red shirt and playing ball with some long-haired boys.” Though the event itself “deserved closer inspection,” Encolpius states that “it was the head of the house who got their attention: he was wearing house slippers and throwing around green balls.” Alongside this figure stood two servants: one holding a bag of green balls, the other holding “a silver chamber pot.” Marveling at “the display of [such] luxury,” an assistant to Menelaus, a close friend of Encolpius, said to the group of astonished men: “This is your host, and it is his table where you will put your elbows.”<sup>289</sup> Shortly after Menelaus’s comment, Encolpius tells us that Trimalchio “snapped his fingers,” a move that summoned the servant holding the silver chamber pot. Once their host had “emptied his bladder,” the group watched as Trimalchio “called for some water” and then proceeded with his game of ball.<sup>290</sup> Here, through Encolpius’s narration, we find Petronius making a crucial point: although Trimalchio is a wealthy man, he is not entirely free—he is still enslaved to the needs of the human body.

Yet, Petronius does not stop there: the Latin writer moves to mock Trimalchio’s enslavement to death. Now, close to dinner time, we find Encolpius and his friends arriving at Trimalchio’s estate for the banquet. In awe of all the golden objects hanging in Trimalchio’s doorway, Encolpius states that they also encountered another set of interesting treasures: wall-to-wall murals that dramatized the history of Trimalchio’s life. “There was a mural of a slave market with an inscription of prices and names. Trimalchio

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<sup>289</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>290</sup> Ibid., 113.

himself was portrayed with long hair and holding a caduceus of Mercury, escorted by Minerva, and entering Rome. After this the painstaking and careful painter had depicted with commentary below the pictures, all the details of how Trimalchio had learned accounting and then been made steward.”<sup>291</sup> Passing by the final image—a giant portrait of Trimalchio standing alongside the Roman goddess of fate, i.e., Fortuna, the group of men found their way into the dining hall.

Carried into the dining hall on a series of tiny pillows was their host, Trimalchio. Encolpius states that “[t]he spectacle” of Trimalchio arriving on little pillows “elicited laughter” from all those in attendance. Picking food from his teeth with “a silver toothpick,” Trimalchio made his first announcement: “My friends, it was not yet convenient for me to come to the dining room, but I didn’t wish my absence to delay you any longer . . .”<sup>292</sup> As his guests were reading the various jars of wine, Trimalchio “clapped his hands and said: ‘It’s sad, but wine lives longer than miserable man. So, let’s drink our fill. Life goes best with wine.’”<sup>293</sup> Following Trimalchio’s orders, the guests began to busy themselves with wine sampling; yet, as they were filling themselves up with wine, “a slave brought in a silver skeleton, so constructed that its joints and spine, being loosely fitted, could be turned in all directions.” Slamming the skeleton on the dinner table, Trimalchio proceeded to play with his macabre toy, twisting it into various life-like postures. Examining the skeleton, Trimalchio turned to his guests and said:

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<sup>291</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>292</sup> Ibid., 121-123.

<sup>293</sup> Ibid., 125.

“Alas, we’re sad creatures, poor man’s all nothing. Thus we’ll all be, after Orcus takes us away. Therefore let’s enjoy life, while we can live well.”<sup>294</sup>

As Trimalchio left for the bathroom, his guests began to talk more freely. One fellow, Seleucus, broke the chatter around the dinner table by talking about his hatred of bathing and how, thanks to a local funeral, he was able to skip today’s bath. “[A] bath’s like getting dry-cleaned, the water’s got teeth, and my insides melt away. But when I’ve swallowed a jug of mead, I say fuck off to the cold.” Yet, today, as Seleucus tells his friends, he skipped the cold due to a funeral:

“Of course I wasn’t able to bathe, since I was at a funeral today. A fine fellow, a very good man, Chrysanthus gave up the ghost. It was just the other day that he greeted me. I seem to be talking to him now. Damn, we’re nothing but ambulatory bladders of wind. We’re worth less than flies, for they at least have some significance, while we’re worth no more than bubbles. And what if he had not gone on a fasting cure? For five days he didn’t throw any water or crumb of bread into his mouth. Yet he joined the dead. The doctors killed him—much more likely it was his bad luck, since a doctor’s nothing other than a comfort for the mind. Still, he was carried decently, on a bier, with a good pall . . .”<sup>295</sup>

“Annoying” those around him with this dirty and death-ridden story, another guest “shouted out: ‘Let’s think about the living. He got what he deserved: he lived decently and died decently. What’s he have to complain about? He started out with an *as* and was ready pick up a *quadrans* with his teeth out of the shit . . .’” Encolpius tells us that talk like this continued until Trimalchio made his reappearance.<sup>296</sup>

Mopping the sweat from his face, Trimalchio announced: “My friends, excuse me. For many days now my stomach has not been responding to my needs.” “[I]f any of

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<sup>294</sup> Ibid., 126-127.

<sup>295</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>296</sup> Ibid.

you want to relieve yourselves,” he continued, “there’s no need to be ashamed.”

Thanking their host for “his generosity and kindness,” Encolpius states that all the guests “suppressed [their] laughter” by drinking more wine.<sup>297</sup>

Now, with an empty stomach and a packed dining hall, Trimalchio moved to make yet another announcement: “Friends, even slaves are men and have drunk the same milk as everyone else, even if an evil fate has overwhelmed them. But if things go my way, they’ll soon taste the water of freedom. In fact, I’m setting them all free in my will.” Overwhelmed by the cheerful response, Trimalchio “ordered a copy of his will to be brought in” so he could show his guests he was telling the truth. Looking over to his friend Habinnas—a well-known stonemason who had “a reputation for making superior tombstones,”<sup>298</sup> Trimalchio asked: “Tell me, my dearest friend, are you building my tomb in the way that I ordered you?” Remarking to Habinnas how he hoped his tomb would allow him to “live on after death,” Trimalchio told his friend to add the following inscription: “This tomb must not pass to an heir.” Additionally, in an attempt to prevent anyone from damaging his tomb, Trimalchio declares that he is going to appoint a watchman: “I’ll appoint one of my freedmen to guard my tomb and prevent the common people from running there to shit.”<sup>299</sup>

Speaking on matters concerning the human body, Trimalchio told the crowd that an astrologer by the name of Serapa revealed to him that he had approximately “thirty

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<sup>297</sup> Ibid., 155.

<sup>298</sup> Ibid., 199.

<sup>299</sup> Ibid., 215.

years, four months, and two days of [his] life left.”<sup>300</sup> After making this statement, Trimalchio ordered his servants bring out all of his burial items.<sup>301</sup>

Showing everyone his burial gown and bottles of oil and wine, Encolpius notes that Trimalchio did a series of unthinkable things: not only did he start serving samples of his burial wine, but he also began to sprinkle his own burial oil on all his guests. As Encolpius writes, “[a]t once he opened the flask of nard oil and sprinkled some on all of us and said: ‘I hope this pleases me as much when I’m dead as it does when I’m alive.’” In a state of “repulsive drunkenness,” Trimalchio decided that now was the time to play dead. Calling together “a set of trumpeters,” Trimalchio stretched himself out on the dinner table and said to his servants: “Imagine I’m dead. Play something pretty.” Following their “dead” master’s command, the servants began to play. However, as Encolpius concludes, this call for an early funeral ended Trimalchio’s lively dinner party. “One of the trumpeters, a slave of the undertaker, who was the most respectable man among them, blew his trumpet so loudly” that the local fire department, “thinking that the house of Trimalchio was on fire, suddenly broke down the door, and with water and axes began to create a disturbance to the full extent of their rights.”<sup>302</sup>

In short, Petronius’s attitude toward emancipatory narratives is, at least in terms of the “Dinner with Trimalchio,” one of mockery. As we have seen with some of the more shocking scenes—e.g., the moment when Trimalchio openly “empties his bladder” in front of his soon-to-be guests, Petronius wishes to ridicule the illusion that one can be

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<sup>300</sup> Ibid., 228-229.

<sup>301</sup> Ibid., 231.

<sup>302</sup> Ibid.

freed from that which is the human body. Indeed, the following section will highlight how, in many ways, one can see a similar attitude of mockery in Cervantes's *el Quijote*.

### **The First Sally of Don Quixote**

*El Quijote* discusses the theme of immortality or the striving for freedom from death. We see Cervantes develop this theme perhaps most clearly in Part I, particularly with his narration of how Alonso Quixano “became” the famed knight of La Mancha—Don Quixote. I stress the word “became” because Cervantes is clear that Alonso Quixano did not always believe in the illusion of immortality: he was driven to this enchantment through his “reading books of chivalry.”<sup>303</sup> Approaching fifty, Alonso Quixano seemed to be living a modest life as a “*hidalgo*” (a gentleman) in La Mancha: not only could he afford quail on Sundays, a delicacy that took up three-fourths of his income, but he also employed a housekeeper and a tradesperson to help him manage his estate, which, we are told, consisted of a skinny nag and a well-bred dog to take to the track.<sup>304</sup>

But Quixano had a problem: boredom. As Cervantes writes, “this aforementioned gentleman” spent “most of the year” in a state of “idleness.” In an attempt to vanquish this specter of boredom, Quixano began “reading books of chivalry,” a seemingly harmless habit. Selling “acres” of his estate so he could “buy more books of chivalry,” Quixano began “to lose his mind.”<sup>305</sup> Indeed, it was at this point of madness that Quixano “had the strangest idea that any madman could conceive:” “he would become a knight

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<sup>303</sup> Cervantes, *Don Quijote*, 80.

<sup>304</sup> *Ibid.*, 79. For more on the portrayal of animals in *el Quijote*, see Jeremiah Trujillo, “In Harmony with Nature: The Sheep Episode in Richard Strauss’s *Don Quixote*, op. 35,” *Cervantes: Bulletin of the Cervantes Society of America* 39, no. 2. (Fall 2019): 93-110.

<sup>305</sup> Cervantes, *Don Quijote*, 80-81.



errant and search the world for adventures . . . and therefore gain eternal glory and fame.” Cervantes continues: “The poor man already imagined himself being crowned the emperor of Trebizond.”<sup>306</sup> Accordingly, Alonso Quixano decided to embark on a quest to be freed from death—in a word, a quest for immortality.

Yet, immortality is hard work, as Alonso Quixano discovered while gathering together his great-grandfather’s armor. Cleaning the old metal, Alonso Quixano noticed that his grandfather’s helmet was not really a helmet; instead, it was a steel cap. Thus, using some fragments of “cardboard” and “steel,” the gentleman farmer “fashioned together a makeshift helmet.” Though the first safety test instantly “destroyed” what “had taken him a week” to construct, Alonso Quixano reassembled his so-called helmet piece. Not wanting to risk another week’s worth of labor, Alonso Quixano skipped the safety test and “declared” his second helmet as “an excellent piece of headwear.” Of course, headpiece or not, a knight is nothing without his noble steed. And after using four days of thinking, we are told that Alonso Quixano decided on a “noble” name for his nag, a name that reflected “his new order and way of life:” “*Rocinante*” (literally “before horse”). “Having given his nag a name,” Alonso Quixano “decided to give himself a new name:” “*don Quijote de la Mancha*” (Sir thigh piece of La Mancha).<sup>307</sup> So happy with his new name, Alonso Quixote said to himself:

If I, due to my evil sins or my good fortune, stumble across a giant, as what usually happens to knights errant, and I kill him, or slice his body in half, or, in short, defeat him, would it not be good to have someone to send him to, so he can fall down on his knees in front of my fair lady and say in a respectful and surrendering voice: ‘I, fine lady, am the giant Caraculiambro, the lord of the island Malindrania,

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<sup>306</sup> Ibid., 82-83.

<sup>307</sup> Ibid., 83-84.

conquered in single combat by the never sufficiently praised knight Don Quijote de La Mancha, who ordered me to present myself to your ladyship so that your greatness may dispose of me at your own will?’<sup>308</sup>

In the above passage, we see the germ of illusion. Now a noble knight from La Mancha, Don Quixote declares that he cannot live without the illusion of freedom. Cervantes expresses this point when he notes the ways in which Don Quixote was so “pleased” to have “discovered someone to call his lady.” In other words, one might say that Don Quixote was delighted to have found an illusion, given that the aforementioned lady was nothing but the product of his own madness, of his own craving for eternal glory. Although not discounting the possibility that there might have been a lady by the name of “*Aldonza Lorenzo*” in a neighboring village, Cervantes states that Don Quixote’s “thoughts” are to blame for creating such a “magical” figure like “*Dulcinea del Toboso*.”<sup>309</sup>

And yet, Don Quixote continues to strive towards madness. Cervantes writes: “On a hot July morning, Don Quixote put on his armor, mounted his nag, and rode into the fields in search of adventure.” This first sally was indeed a covert enterprise: Don Quixote left “without mentioning to anyone his plans” for slaying giants and helping fair ladies. But just as Don Quixote was starting to feel a “great joy” about “beginning his good desire,” Cervantes tells us that the knight was suddenly “attacked” by “a terrible thought”—he had left his village without being “knighted.” For a moment, this thought “made him hesitate;” however, “his madness being stronger than his own reason,” Don

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<sup>308</sup> Ibid., 84-85.

<sup>309</sup> Ibid., 83-84.

Quixote decided that “he would have himself knighted by the first person he encountered,” given that so many others had done so in “the books of chivalry.”<sup>310</sup>

Thus, Don Quixote continued on his way, or, at least, “the way of his horse, given that he saw this method of traveling being the force of adventure”—but what is that?<sup>311</sup> What, exactly, is Don Quixote’s “force of adventure”? We are aware of one thing: adventure does not mean an acceptance of mortality.<sup>312</sup> Indeed, if we recall how, in a fit of boredom, Alonso Quixano (before letting his madness transform him into the noble knight from La Mancha) noted his longing for “eternal glory and fame,” then we might argue that the force of adventure stands as a shorthand for the striving to be freed from death: Don Quixote’s illusion of freedom, of immortal glory.<sup>313</sup>

Yet, chivalry, nay, the illusion of immortality, is coterminous with human suffering—hence, the tragic aspect of Cervantes’s novel.

The above point is made clear through the telling of Don Quixote’s first adventure. Highlighting how Don Quixote was on the road so long that “had he any brains, they surely would have melted,” Cervantes moves to show how “the annals of La Mancha” seem to suggest that the knight’s first adventure occurred at a place of rest: “a little road-side inn.” Calling the road-side inn “his palace for salvation,” Don Quixote and “his half-starved nag made their way to the inn just before nightfall.”<sup>314</sup> Two ladies of “easy

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<sup>310</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>311</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>312</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Learning to Live Finally: The Last Interview*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Nass (Brooklyn, New York: Melville House, 2007), 24.

<sup>313</sup> Cervantes, *Don Quijote*, 82.

<sup>314</sup> Ibid., 88.

virtue” watched as Don Quixote approached the inn “he thought was a castle.”<sup>315</sup> After waiting several moments for “a dwarf to announce his arrival via trumpet,” Don Quixote grabbed Rocinante’s reins and rode closer to the “two beautiful ladies sitting beside castle.” As he was doing so, “a pig farmer just so happened to sound his horn.” “Instantly,” Don Quixote knew what this sound “represented:” “his arrival to the castle.”<sup>316</sup> With his “cardboard visor now raised,” Don Quixote asked the prostitutes he mistook as ladies to quit their laughing. “[L]aughter without reason is nothing but insanity,” said Don Quixote. The innkeeper, whom Don Quixote saw as “the governor of the castle,” came outside to see what was causing so much humor. Viewing the madman’s “knightly contraband,” the innkeeper proceeded with caution. But instead of denying this strange figure lodging, the innkeeper, “intimidated” by Don Quixote’s strange appearance, told “the knight” that he could most certainly stay at “the inn without any beds.”<sup>317</sup> Here, we might say this reply stands as a message from Cervantes: the striving for immortality is truly a restless endeavor.

Once inside the inn, the knight from La Mancha bowed before his hostess. Calling the innkeeper “a valiant knight,” Don Quixote explained that he would “never rise from his castle” unless he deemed “his glory acceptable for all humankind,” and thus, Don Quixote asked the innkeeper to knight him. At first shocked by his guest’s strange request, the innkeeper, being “a sly man,” decided to indulge in Don Quixote’s illusion:

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<sup>315</sup> Enriqueta Zafra studies the ways and which sex workers are portrayed in *el Quijote* in “La Prostituta y la prostitución en Don Quijote: modelos de ‘mujeres libres.’” See Enriqueta Zafra, “La Prostituta y la prostitución en Don Quijote: modelos de ‘mujeres libres,’” *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies*, Vol. 86 (5): 625-640.

<sup>316</sup> Cervantes, *Don Quijote*, 88-89.

<sup>317</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

“[H]e promised to grant Don Quixote’s request” for knighthood. “I expected nothing less of you, my Lord,” replied the knight to-be. Indeed, after Don Quixote had risen and taken in some food, the innkeeper told the knight how he, too, had once followed “the honorable profession of chivalry.” Wanting “something to laugh at,” the innkeeper proceeded to tell his guest how he used “to travel the world in search of adventures . . . [T]raveling to many places like the Percheles in Málaga, the Islas of Riarán, the Compás in Sevilla, . . . the Rondilla in Granada, . . . the Potro in Córdoba, . . . and so many other places he exercised the dexterity of his hands and feet, wooing women, . . . stealing from orphans, and, finally, becoming a well-known figure in most of the courts and tribunals in Spain.”<sup>318</sup> Astonished how easily his mad guest believed this tall tale, the innkeeper “told everyone in the inn of Don Quixote’s insanity, . . . of how he believed the inn to be a castle, and how he expected to be knighted come morning.” Indeed, while “everyone heard this story” and, therefore, knew that there was a well-armed madman eagerly awaiting his knighthood, Cervantes notes that one of several traveling muleteers decided that now was the time “to go water his mules.”<sup>319</sup>

Yet, this action proved ill-timed. As the muleteer “moved Don Quixote’s armor” so he could use the watering trough, the knight from La Mancha pulled down his cardboard visor and called for “Dulcinea’s help,” for he was about to have “his first knightly challenge.” Undeterred by these knightly ramblings, the muleteer continued moving Don Quixote’s gear. But suddenly, without any warning, he received “a blow” on the head

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<sup>318</sup> Ibid., 88-89.

<sup>319</sup> Ibid., 96-97.

from Don Quixote's lance. Our knight's strength was noted. Cervantes writes: "Had the muleteer received a second blow, he would have no longer needed the assistance of a physician."<sup>320</sup> Turning his attention to the other muleteers, who, after seeing their friend unconscious, proceeded to "throw rocks" at the mad knight, Don Quixote suddenly felt a burst of courage: The knight "had enough courage to attack all the muleteers in the world."<sup>321</sup> Trying to break up the fight between the muleteers and Don Quixote, the innkeeper decided now was the time to make this mad guest a knight and send him on his way. As Cervantes writes, wanting "to get him out of the inn," the innkeeper "dubbed Don Quixote a knight" and "sent him on his way without asking for any payment."<sup>322</sup>

Feeling "delighted at having been deemed a knight," Don Quixote mounted Rocinante and made his way out of the little inn. Heeding the innkeeper's parting remarks about having certain travel supplies, e.g., money and extra clothes, Don Quixote decided it was best "to return home:" not only did he want to pick up "the necessary supplies" for knighthood, but also, and perhaps more crucially, he wanted to get "a poor neighbor of his" to serve as his "squire" (Cervantes's notes this "poor neighbor" was "well suited for the deeds of a squire"). Yet, not far from the inn, Don Quixote began to hear "the sound of cries coming from the dense forest." Sensing an adventure might be close at hand, Don Quixote said to himself: "I thank heaven for giving me a great opportunity to fulfill the duties of my profession and gather the fruit of my good desires."<sup>323</sup>

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<sup>320</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>321</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>322</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>323</sup> Ibid., 101.

The knight from La Mancha followed the sound of child-like screams. In so doing, he came upon a horrific scene: A boy, about fifteen years old, was “strapped half-naked to a tree” and being “whipped with a leather belt.”<sup>324</sup> Cervantes writes that an “angry” Don Quixote approached “the peasant man” who was doing the whipping. “Discourteous knight,” Don Quixote said to the peasant, “it is not fit for you to freely assault someone who cannot defend himself; mount your horse and take up your lance . . . and I shall make you see how your actions reveal what you are: a coward.” The peasant quickly untied the boy. But once released, the boy tried to explain to his knightly rescuer that the man doing the whipping was neither a peasant nor a noble knight; rather, he was a wealthy farmer named Juan Haldudos. Don Quixote responded: “That is of little importance . . . For even Haldudos can become knights, especially since everyone is a child of their own deeds.”<sup>325</sup> After making the farmer “swear by all the orders of chivalry in the world” that he would pay the boy and see to it no more lashing is done, Don Quixote made his back to the main road. Once the farmer was sure Don Quixote was out of sight, he “tied the boy back to the tree and gave him so many lashes that he left the poor boy half dead.”<sup>326</sup> As for Don Quixote, Cervantes writes: The knight was “very happy” that he “righted a wrong; and proceeded to his village thinking about how what had happened was just the first of many adventures of chivalry.”<sup>327</sup>

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<sup>324</sup> This scene is similar to the scenes of abuse depicted in the anonymous work *Lazarillo de Tormes* (1554). See *Lazarillo de Tormes*, trans. Illan Stavans (New York: W.W. Norton Company, 2016).

<sup>325</sup> Cervantes, *Don Quijote*, 103.

<sup>326</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>327</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

Don Quixote's happiness grew while on the road to La Mancha. After traveling several miles from the flogging incident, Don Quixote noticed a group of merchants approaching the opposite side of the road. Of course, "already thinking about a new adventure," Don Quixote saw this moment as "the perfect opportunity . . . to imitate" something from his "books of chivalry."<sup>328</sup> Commanding the group to "confess their love to the most beautiful damsel in the world—Dulcinea of Toboso," Don Quixote straightened his stance and grabbed his lance, a series of movements that revealed to the merchants they had but one of two options: 1) confess their love to Dulcinea, or 2) face the wrath of the lover of "the empress of La Mancha:" Don Quixote. As "a clever joker" among the merchants proceeded to "mock" Don Quixote's madness, the knight "lowered his lance" and proceeded to attack the still-talking merchant. Coming at the man with so much "rage and fury," Don Quixote would certainly have harmed the merchant had Rocinante not "tripped" and "rolled" the knight some distance away. Now buried in a ditch, an injured Don Quixote shouted: "Flee not, cowards; wretches, give me some time. It is not mine but my horse's fault that I am lying here." One of the merchants marched over and, taking Don Quixote's lance, "smashed it into tiny pieces" and then proceeded "to beat" the knight so violently that the other merchants had "to plead with him to stop."<sup>329</sup>

But this attack was nothing for the noble knight of La Mancha. As Cervantes writes: "Unable to move his body," Don Quixote "considered himself fortunate to the

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<sup>328</sup> Ibid.

<sup>329</sup> Ibid., 106-107.



extent that this sort of event would only happen to a knight errant.”<sup>330</sup> Thus, at least in Part I of *el Quijote*, Cervantes reveals the futility of his knight’s quest for chivalry. Not only does he ridicule Don Quixote’s own suffering, but, more importantly, he also sheds a spotlight on the sufferings of others, highlighting how Don Quixote’s selfish quest for freedom is, at bottom, destructive and harmful.

### **Laughing at Death**

There are moments in Part II of *el Quijote* where, like Petronius, Cervantes ridicules human servitude to death. In Chapter XI, we find Don Quixote and his noble squire, Sancho Panza, on their way to a festival in Saragossa. Taking “a bad joke” Sancho played on him regarding the enchantment of the beautiful Dulcinea of Toboso into “an ugly peasant girl” as the work of “evil enchanters,” Don Quixote was immersed in a set of deep thoughts on how he might rescue Dulcinea from her evil enchanters.<sup>331</sup> Sancho, being a considerate squire, tried to bring his master back from his sorrowful state of mind: “Señor, sorrows were not made for animals but rather men; yet if men dwell too much in their affections, they become animals; thus, you should snap out of your affected state and show those enchanters the sort of bravery that comes with being a knight errant . . . Why be so down? Allow the devil to take all the Dulcineas in the world, for the well-being of one knight errant is worth more than all the enchantments and transformations one finds on earth.” “Be quiet, Sancho,” Don Quixote said in a rather low tone. “Be quiet, I say, and do not speak blasphemies against that enchanted lady, for I am to blame for her

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<sup>330</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>331</sup> Ibid., 683, 685.

misfortune: her troubles were born from the hatred those enchanters have for me.”<sup>332</sup> As Don Quixote was lecturing Sancho on the ways of enchantment, the knight’s lecture was suddenly interrupted by the passing of the most unusual sort of cart: a cart driven by “the Devil himself.”<sup>333</sup>

For Don Quixote, the appearance of the Devil “proved to be a new adventure.” Watching the Devil move about the cart with “Death,” “Cupid,” and several other mysterious creatures, both Don Quixote (who was “glad” to see a new adventure) and Sancho (who was “fearful” of Death) were unsure as to what to make of this demon-driven cart. Thinking this could be “a dangerous new adventure,” Don Quixote announced: “Carter, wagon driver, devil, or whatever you may be, tell me now, who are you, where are you going, and who are all these people in your wagon, which looks more like Charon’s boat than an ordinary cart.”<sup>334</sup> The Devil coachman replied: “Señor, we are the actors in Angulo el Malo’s company; and today being the eighth day of the Corpus Christi celebrations, we performed the play *The Parliament of Death*, in a nearby village.” “By my faith of chivalry,” Don Quixote responded, “when I saw this wagon, I imagined that this would be some great adventure, but now I see you must first touch appearances with your hand to avoid deception.” Yet, just as Quixote was telling the Devil and his friends goodbye, “a clown carrying bells and cow bladders” came racing towards the cart full of actors.<sup>335</sup> Startled by this unusual sight, Rocinante took off running with Don Quixote still saddled. While Sancho was busy helping his master,

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<sup>332</sup> Ibid., 685.

<sup>333</sup> Ibid., 687.

<sup>334</sup> Ibid.

<sup>335</sup> Ibid., 688.

Cervantes tells us that one of the “demon dancers” “jumped on” Sancho’s mare and proceeded “to beat” it with the clown’s “bells and cow bladders.”<sup>336</sup>

Believing that the demon dancer had “stolen his donkey,” Sancho rushed to tell Don Quixote of his missing mare. “I will get it back,” Don Quixote promised, “even if he imprisons me in the darkest depths of hell.” Suddenly, Sancho realized that the demon dancer had not stolen his mare: the donkey was found coming back to Rocinante. Nevertheless, Don Quixote was ready to “punish” that “demon” even if it meant “harming one of the actors in the cart.”<sup>337</sup> Hearing these loud threats against them, “the demon dancer,” “Death,” “Cupid,” and all the other of actors performing in *The Parliament of Death* jumped out of the wagon, ready to fight Don Quixote and Sancho. Here, Cervantes tells us that Sancho sought to prevent his master from participating in this sort of adventure: “It would be crazy of you to attempt this adventure, Señor, for not only do they have sticks and stones, but they also have Death, and it would be foolish of any man to go fighting an army that has Death by its side . . . And if that doesn’t stop you, you should remember that none of the figures seem to be knighted.” “Well, if that is your decision,” Don Quixote replied, “good Sancho, wise Sancho, Christian Sancho, . . . let us leave these phantoms and return to our quest for worthier adventures because I now see that this land is barren: it cannot provide us with the sorts of adventures we are looking for.” Grabbing Rocinante’s reins, Don Quixote pivoted away from the cart of

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<sup>336</sup> Ibid., 689.

<sup>337</sup> Ibid.

angry actors, and, with Sancho following quickly behind him, the two rode away in search of more adventures.<sup>338</sup>

Though one could argue that Don Quixote's next death-oriented adventure occurred in the chapter entitled "The Wedding of Camacho the Rich and what happened to Basilio the Poor" (Part II; Chapter XX), the remainder of this section will briefly survey another chapter that I find much more interesting and indeed crucial for understanding Cervantes's attitude toward death: the final chapter (Part II; LXXIV), or the death of Don Quixote.

Cervantes begins his final chapter on a note of human finitude. He writes: "Since that which is human is not eternal, but instead in a state of decline from its inception, and because the life of Don Quixote was not favored by heaven in any sort of way that would have stopped its natural decline, it came to pass that when he least expected it, because whether it was the melancholy caused by his defeat in battle or simply the will of heaven, he fell ill with a serious fever and was bedridden for six days, during his time in bed, he was visited often by his friends . . ." <sup>339</sup> But when his friends realized they could do no more in trying to keep his spirits up, they called the local physician. Checking Don Quixote's pulse, the physician told his niece, housekeeper, and Sancho Panza: "[T]hey should consider the well-being of his soul because his body was in danger." Interestingly, Cervantes writes: "Don Quixote heard this conversation and had a peaceful spirit; however, his family and friends did not, for they started to mourn as if he was already

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<sup>338</sup> Ibid., 690-691.

<sup>339</sup> Ibid., 1174.

dead.” The physician’s opinion was simply this: “melancholy and depression were killing him.”<sup>340</sup>

After resting for several hours, Don Quixote awoke from his slumber and shouted: “Blessed be Almighty God who has done so much good for me! His mercy is boundless, and the sins of men do not prevent them.” Telling those around him that “he feels like he is dying,” Don Quixote continues to assure them that all is well. Indeed, when some friends of his walk in, the feeble knight proceeds to tell them that “he is cured of his illusions.” “You gentlemen should congratulate me: I am no longer Don Quixote of La Mancha but Alonso Quixano, the man whose way of life is called ‘the Good.’” “God’s mercy,” Don Quixote explained, “has shown him the foolishness of his ways, of how he should become the sworn enemy of all things chivalry.” His friends were stunned: they had arrived to tell him the news of “Dulcinea’s disenchantment.” Yet, Don Quixote was not in the mood for jokes. He states: “Friends, I am dying very quickly; leave all your jokes aside. And bring me a priest and someone to write my will—in crucial times like these, a man needs a priest to talk about his soul and a man to write his will while he is doing so.”<sup>341</sup>

Sancho Panza wanted Don Quixote to continue his quest for immortality. “Oh, Señor! Please do not die; you should follow my advice and live for many years, for the greatest madness that a man can make in his life is believing that he should die, just like that, without someone killing him or any other hands trying to end his life beside that of

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<sup>340</sup> Ibid., 1174-1175.

<sup>341</sup> Ibid., 1175-1176.

melancholy.”<sup>342</sup> Although Sancho tried to talk his master into going on another sally for immortality, Don Quixote refused: “I was mad, and now I am sane; I was Don Quijote of La Mancha, and now I am Alonso Quixano the Good.” Several days after making this statement, Don Quixote died. Yet, Sancho’s advice to his master proved to be itself an illusion or, to use Sancho’s own parlance, a piece of “madness” to the extent that after the old knight’s death, Sancho did not try to bring his master back to life. Instead, like the rest of Don Quixote’s family, Sancho accepted the fact of death: Don Quixote was dead; he would never search for freedom again. In the aftermath of Don Quixote’s death, Cervantes writes that although Don Quixote’s “house was in a state of confusion,” his family and friends continued living as if the knight errant from La Mancha had never lived: “[T]he niece ate, the housekeeper drank, and Sancho Panza rejoiced, given that inheriting always seems to wipe away . . . the memory of grief from the living.”<sup>343</sup>

Hence, like Thucydides’s narrative of the plague, Cervantes’s narrative of the death of Don Quixote suggests that the quest for recognition is futile since we all die. And since we all die, freedom stands as an illusion, a noble lie that convinces us of the ahistorical: that we can somehow escape death and thus escape the terror and suffering that occupies the historical human individual.

### **The Terror of the Sierra Morena**

If we say that death is an estrangement from that which is human, then Don Quixote dies at least twice throughout the novel. Coming across a set of prisoners being

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<sup>342</sup> Ibid., 1777.

<sup>343</sup> Ibid., 1179.

forced to walk to the gallows, Don Quixote, alongside his loyal squire, Sancho Panza, decided that no one, not even the king of Spain, should try “to make slaves of those whom both God and nature have made free.” Therefore, grabbing his lance, Don Quixote proceeded to attack one of the principal guards of the Holy Brotherhood (a band of imperial police officers tasked with marching the prisoners to the gallows). At first, taken back by Don Quixote’s willingness to fight, the other officers of the Holy Brotherhood quickly grabbed their swords and arrows and made their way toward Don Quixote and Sancho. Yet, just as the guards were beginning to commence their counterattack, the prisoners, perhaps aware that now was the perfect opportunity “to achieve their freedom,” broke loose from their fetters and overwhelmed the guards, a move that, as Cervantes writes, “undoubtedly” saved the knight and his squire from experiencing a bearing from the Holy Brotherhood.<sup>344</sup> This event made Don Quixote a “liberator.” By the same token, it also made him and Sancho into criminals against the Spanish crown. Hence, the reason why Don Quixote and Sancho decided to journey into the Sierra Morena, an “uninhabited place” that Sancho announced was their “purgatory.”<sup>345</sup> But what is that? In other words, what does purgatory mean for Cervantes?

In the remaining pages, I shall unfold these questions by exploring Don Quixote’s adventure in the Sierra Morena. In so doing, I will contend that the journey into the Sierra Morena anticipates Don Quixote’s death, which is to say that the mountain range itself stands as a space beyond human life and thus history itself.

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<sup>344</sup> Ibid., 262.

<sup>345</sup> Ibid., 292, 295.

I nest my claim within a Kojèveian framework. Beginning the first section with Alexandre Kojève's *Atheism* (1931/1999), I will suggest that the mountain range can be interpreted metaphorically as Kojève's notion of "the desert."<sup>346</sup> In other words, Cervantes's description of the Sierra Morena as a "desolate," "fear"-driven landscape, matches, at least metaphorically, Kojève's account of the desert as a sort of infinite space—more precisely, a space where there "is so much 'unfilled space'"—that orients one away from the "terror" of life (death) and towards another sort of terror: the terror that arises from the absence of history, from "the absence of whatever could have been."<sup>347</sup> I will then proceed to briefly sketch out the chapters that detail Don Quixote's journey into Sierra Morena, highlighting the ways in which the "uninhibited" region resembles Kojève's terrible place beyond death.<sup>348</sup> I will conclude with the journey's end: how Don Quixote is brought back into historical existence by his local *cura* (priest), an interesting move to the extent that it seems to imply how a current of Christian thought desires the world of glory and action.<sup>349</sup> In short, it seems to imply how an aspect of Christianity desires Don Quixote's illusion of freedom.

In *Atheism*, Kojève (1902-1968) explores a wide range of existential topics: death, suicide, and the notion of human estrangement. While all these topics are tragic and thus connected to my thesis, I shall limit my discussion to the latter topic of estrangement,

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<sup>346</sup> Kojève, *Atheism*, trans. Jeff Love (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 77.

<sup>347</sup> *Ibid.*, 76-77; Cervantes, *Don Quijote*, 271, 291, 295.

<sup>348</sup> Cervantes, *Don Quijote*, 295.

<sup>349</sup> See David Castillo and William Egginton, "Foundations," in David Castillo and William Egginton, *Medialogies: Reading Reality in the Age of Inflationary Media* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 65-72; "The Apocalypse Will Not Be televised! Baroque Lessons in Apocalypticism, Demagoguery, and Reality Literacy," *Hispanic Issues On Line*, Issue 23 (2019): 16-30; William Egginton, "Cervantes's Black Mirror," *Cervantes: Bulletin of the Cervantes Society of American*, Vol. 40 (2020): 175-190.



which, as I will soon show, is connected to Cervantes's *el Quijote*. Now, Kojève maintains that humans share a commonality: each of us are "given other something(s)." "These something(s)," as Kojève continues, "are other people." Moreover, these "other people" are important, for they allow us to see the world not as "something completely strange" but as something completely familiar: we are at home when we are around other something(s). Or, as Kojève explains, "[s]eeing other people outside myself, I stop perceiving the world as something that is completely strange, as something other, fundamentally [*v korne*] distinct from that something which I myself am."<sup>350</sup>

Indeed, we extend this notion of commonality to other things. For example, we do not become overwhelmed with "fear" or "terror" when we encounter a "stone" by the riverside or when we interact with domesticated animals such as cats or dogs. These things are what Kojève calls "qualified content:" They are "related" to us "in some way or another" through our worldly contact and thus through a shared feeling of commonality. However, this perceived notion of commonality vanishes at the sight of dusk, which is to say that nightfall ushers in "the gloom of non-being:" a feeling of terror that estranges us from being in contact with 1) other something(s), and 2) other things that are considered to be qualified content. "I am in terror," Kojève writes, "when there is none of this content; I am afraid at night when the world threatens to dissolve in the gloom of non-being and when it seems at times that it (especially where I do not even see

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<sup>350</sup> Kojève, *Atheism*, 22.

that I see nothing, do not see the gloom which is nonetheless something or other—behind my back) loses the last bit of commonality with me—its somethingness.”<sup>351</sup>

According to this interpretation, we are not beings that have been given (for Kojève, everything in the world has been given to us) “the tonus of serene certainty,” of the serene confidence that everything, including ourselves, is sempiternal or everlasting. On the contrary, we live in a world of great terror and suffering: “The human being, given to herself as interacting with the world and in the world of death and killing, cannot be given and cannot be given to herself in the tonus of serene certainty.”<sup>352</sup> Yet, if the human being is not given serene certainty in the world, then what is she given? Kojève provides an answer in what is perhaps one of the more intriguing passages presented in

*Atheism:*

The human being . . . is given to herself in the tonus of terror: she is in terror in the terrible world of killing and death. It is terrible for her to see the destruction of things (is it not terrifying in a fire); it is terrible to see death and killing. But not only this; she is in terror where there was death, where what was is no longer (is it not terrifying in a ‘ghost town’?), where she sees the absence of whatever could have been (indeed, it is terrible in the desert where there is so much ‘unfilled’ space), but especially where she sees nothing (how terrible at night!). She is in terror as well where there is no end, but there is finitude where there is still no death or killing, but where they can be (indeed, it is terrible to be around a terminally ill person or one condemned to death; and is it not terrible where is ‘smells of death’?). And what does it mean that for the ‘human being in the world’ it is always and everywhere terrible or, at the least, that it can be terrible for her always and everywhere?<sup>353</sup>

The answer appears clear: for Kojève, the human being is given “the tonus of terror,” that is, the terror that arises from “the terrible world of killing and death.” Yet,

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<sup>351</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>352</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>353</sup> Ibid., 77.

Kojève does not stop there. He goes further to suggest that the human being can also encounter the tonus of terror through the estrangement from life and death and thus the estrangement from history itself: “[S]he is in terror where there was death, where what was is no longer.” Indeed, Kojève argues that the human being does not have to go far to find this sort of terror from “the absence of whatever could have been:” the human being can encounter this terror in that “‘unfilled’ space” known as “the desert,” for the desert does not provide a clear “end” that the human being can see. Rather, stuck in a space “where there is no end” in sight, the desert gives the human being a peculiar form of estrangement. This terror of estrangement presents itself in a twofold sense: 1) the human being is given the terror of “nothing” in terms of existing in an infinite, “‘unfilled’ space;” and 2) the human being is given the terror of being estranged from the terror of death, which, if we recall Kojève’s Hegel lectures, is tantamount to the terror of being estranged from history itself.<sup>354</sup>

Hence, the significance of Kojève’s thought for my study of Don Quixote. It allows us to see more precisely the ways in which Don Quixote’s freedom is akin to death. In other words, although Don Quixote’s journey into the Sierra Morena takes him away from the terror of living, it nonetheless brings him into the circumference of another sort of terror: the terror of total estrangement, death.

Profitable adventures take place in Sierra Morena. After Don Quixote liberated a group of inmates scheduled to go to the gallows, both he and Sancho were “fearful” of

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<sup>354</sup> Ibid; Alexandre Kojève, “The Idea of Death in the Philosophy of Hegel,” trans. Joseph Carpino, *Interpretation* 3, no. 2/3 (Winter): 139-141.

being caught by “The Holy Brotherhood.” Though Don Quixote was proud to boast that he had only a “shadow of fear” of any such authority,” it was Sancho who was the “natural coward” of the group.<sup>355</sup> Perhaps fearful of what might happen to him and his mad master in an imperial courtroom, Sancho made a group decision: the two men would go into hiding in the Sierra Morena. Leading the way into this mountainous landscape, Sancho’s main “intention,” Cervantes writes, was for him and Don Quixote to avoid the Holy Brotherhood by simply spending “a few days” in “the rugged country.”<sup>356</sup>

Indeed, Don Quixote seemed to enjoy his squire’s idea. “As soon as Don Quixote caught a glimpse of the mountains,” Cervantes writes that the knight’s “heart swelled with joy: the landscape seemed to be the perfect place for the sort of knightly adventures he was seeking.” But just as Don Quixote was “recalling the marvelous events other knights errant had in similar lonely and desolate places,” he and Sancho spotted a rather unusual object. Picking up what was later determined to be a traveler’s bag, Sancho discovered some nicely made clothes, a leather notebook, and a pocketful of gold coins, the latter of which Sancho claimed under the authority of squirely deeds. Astonished to see such luxury goods, Don Quixote shouted: “Blessings to the heavens for sending us a profitable adventure!”<sup>357</sup>

Clueless as to why someone would leave profitable goods lying in the Sierra Morena, Don Quixote thought it might be best to examine the contents of the leather notebook. Discovering that the first page was “a rough draft” of a poem discussing the

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<sup>355</sup> Cervantes, *Don Quijote*, 266.

<sup>356</sup> *Ibid.*, 268.

<sup>357</sup> *Ibid.*

“boundlessness of love,” Don Quixote concluded that the owner of this journal had to have been a “scorned lover.” His suspicion was confirmed when he read aloud the first entry: “Your false promise and my certain misfortune have carried me to a place from which you will likely hear the news of my death before hearing the stanzas that outline my sorrow.”<sup>358</sup> By making the Sierra Morena a “place” that is tantamount to “death,” the scorned lover’s sonnet reveals how, like Kojève’s notion of “the desert,” the mountain range is a terrible place: it is a place of terror.<sup>359</sup> Indeed, Sancho confirms this point in his refusal to leave Don Quixote’s presence: “For whenever I leave your presence, I am filled with a fear that troubles me with a thousand kinds of shocks and visions.”<sup>360</sup>

Furthermore, Cervantes tells us that Sancho’s fear is rooted in the boundlessness that makes up the Sierra Morena. Making their way into “the harshest part” of the Sierra Morena, Don Quixote and Sancho are in a terrain that has no end: they are simply “wandering endlessly” in a space that is completely “desolate.” Speaking on the “silence” and “suffering” that seems to occupy much of the Sierra Morena, a restless Sancho tells his master: “It feels as though I am being buried alive.” Indeed, Don Quixote does not refute his squire’s comment. “I understand you, Sancho,” replied Don Quixote.<sup>361</sup>

After several days of wandering in “purgatory,” Don Quixote ordered Sancho to leave the Sierra Morena.<sup>362</sup> Taking with him a letter addressed to Dulcinea of Toboso,

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<sup>358</sup> Ibid., 270. Javier Lorenzo gives an interesting look at the role of sonnets in *el Quijote*. See Javier Lorenzo, “Sonnets over Forts: Rethinking Lyric Insertions in the Captive’s tale,” *Cervantes: Bulletin of the Cervantes Society of America* 41, no. 1 (Spring 2021): 135-151.

<sup>359</sup> Kojève, *Atheism*, 77.

<sup>360</sup> Cervantes, *Don Quijote*, 271.

<sup>361</sup> Ibid., 271-271, 277.

<sup>362</sup> Ibid., 295.

Don Quixote's lover who, as Cervantes writes, could "neither read nor write," Sancho mounted Don Quixote's horse and left the "uninhabited" country.<sup>363</sup> Yet, not long after returning to the main highway did Sancho run into two figures from La Mancha: the local priest and barber. Though at first concealing that he had left Don Quixote in the Sierra Morena, Sancho later revealed to the priest Don Quixote's plan to stay in the rugged terrain until receiving word from his fair lady of Toboso. Calling Sancho a "good Christian" for informing them of his master's plans, the priest announced that they must "free" Don Quixote from his "penance" in the Sierra Morena. Deciding that he would return to the rugged landscape as "a fair lady in distress," the priest announced that he had a plan to rescue their "adventurous knight from La Mancha."<sup>364</sup>

Yet, a problem soon emerged: after slipping into a dress, the priest soon realized that it was dishonorable for "a man of faith to be dressed as a fair lady." Telling the barber that he was willing to "let the Devil have Don Quixote" if the two of them "didn't exchange costumes," the priest, now back in his clerical clothes, told Sancho that he and the barber had reached a mutual agreement: upon entering into the mountainous landscape, the priest would rush to disguise himself as a noble squire and the barber a fair princess.<sup>365</sup> Though the priest slightly altered his plan, given on account of meeting several others who were willing to help him rescue Don Quixote, Cervantes tells us that the priest plan was a success—they were able to bring Don Quixote back into "the world" of "knight errancy."<sup>366</sup>

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<sup>363</sup> Ibid., 291, 295.

<sup>364</sup> Ibid., 309, 310, 307.

<sup>365</sup> Ibid., 313.

<sup>366</sup> Ibid., 329.

In short, Don Quixote's journey into Sierra Morena sheds light on three essential points. First, Cervantes's narrative highlights what Kojève calls "the tonus of terror," that is, how the essence of human beings is predicated on a terrible life: no matter if we are in the historical world or beyond it, we still experience some degree of terror, the latter of which Cervantes calls the feeling of "being buried alive."<sup>367</sup> Second, it reveals how an aspect of Christianity, at least according to Cervantes, is centered around action and glory, the two pillars that makeup Don Quixote's illusion of freedom.<sup>368</sup> Finally, it showcases how, at least in *el Quixote*, Cervantes does not believe that we can ever go beyond the illusion of freedom and thus Western history itself. Hence, Cervantes is a tragic thinker: his narrative of Don Quixote of La Mancha recalls how there is no immortality other than narratives of immortality we tell ourselves.

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<sup>367</sup> Kojève, *Atheism*, 77; Cervantes, *Don Quijote*, 268.

<sup>368</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. Maudemarie Clark and Alan J. Swensen (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998), 42.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Conclusion

Is there any freedom from death? My thesis recalls three different historical attitudes toward this metaphysical question. Indeed, in the First Chapter, I look at four stories nested in Thucydides's *History of the Peloponnesian War*: 1) Pericles's Funeral Oration, 2) the Plague of Athens, 3) the Melian Debate, and 4) the Sicilian Expedition. In so doing, I reveal how Thucydides's narrative expresses an orientation towards the Periclean belief that empire can grant one an "enduring tribute" either through physical memorials or the "greatness" of Athens itself.<sup>369</sup> By the same token, I also show the ways in which Thucydides's narrative arc, although unfinished due to his death, expresses a tragic orientation. It seems to suggest that the Periclean striving for immortality by means of empire is an illusion: Athenian imperialism cannot free human beings from the oblivion of death. Of course, this claim is complicated, given that Thucydides makes it clear that he desires to create a narrative that will stand as "a possession for all time."<sup>370</sup>

In the Second Chapter, I look at three works by Augustine: 1) *On the Free Choice of the Will*, 2) *Confessions*, and 3) *The City of God against the Pagans*. By exploring these three works of theology, I argue that Augustine's narrative reflects an attitude of pessimism about human existence: not only does he maintain that the human being is "the author of evildoing," but he also views the human being as a being that exists in "error,"

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<sup>369</sup> Thucydides, *The War of the Peloponnesians and the Athenians*, 115 (2.43.1-4); *Ibid.*, 115 (2.43.1-4).

<sup>370</sup> *Ibid.*, 16 (1.22.4).



that exists in a life of “misery.” Or as he calls it: “the afflictions of mortal life.”<sup>371</sup> Correspondingly, it is here where we find Augustine suggesting that “freedom” is metaphysical. Put differently, Augustine argues that freedom does not exist within the world; instead, it ‘exists’ outside of the world to the extent that it is found alongside the “immortality” of God.<sup>372</sup> Indeed, although Augustine does not desire human beings to commit suicide, his writings seem to express what I have called a hesitancy about human life. For example, calling humanness a “miserable condition,” Augustine writes that we need God’s grace in order to be “set free” from this miserable life of sin.<sup>373</sup> More than that, by claiming time is not with God, Augustine suggests that metaphysical freedom is deferred insofar as it arises when we enter into a hypostatic union with God. In brief, for Augustine, our freedom from death arises in the ‘beyond:’ it arises when we renounce our will for the will of God.<sup>374</sup>

In the Third Chapter, I look at two works—Petronius’s “Dinner with Trimalchio” and Cervantes’s *el Quijote*. After showing how the latter seems to be a historical recalling of the former, I move to show how, on the one hand, *el Quijote* expresses a tragic-comic attitude toward death: Cervantes ridicules Don Quixote’s striving to escape death through chivalry, that is, the sort of Periclean striving for a narrative that will bring “eternal glory

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<sup>371</sup> Augustine, *On the Free Choice of the Will*, 3 (1.1.1.3); Augustine, *Reconsiderations* in *On the Free Choice of the Will, On Grace and Free Choice, and Other Writings*, 127 (1.91); Augustine, *The City of God Against the Pagans*, 267 (book 7, preface), 484 (11, chap. 26); Augustine, *Confessions*, 206 (10.20.29).

<sup>372</sup> Augustine, *On the Free Choice of the Will*, 20 (1.11.23.79); Augustine, *Confessions*, 266 (12.11.11).

<sup>373</sup> Augustine, *The City of God Against the Pagans*, 1178 (book 22, chap. 30); Augustine, *On the Free Choice of the Will*, 20 (1.11.23.79); Augustine, *Confessions*, 255 (11.29.39).

<sup>374</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, 266 (12.11.11).

and fame.”<sup>375</sup> Furthermore, we see Cervantes express this point perhaps most clearly in the death of Don Quixote. Shortly after the death of Don Quixote, Cervantes tells us the following: “[T]he niece ate, the housekeeper drank, and Sancho Panza rejoiced, given that inheriting always seems to wipe away . . . the memory of grief from the living.”<sup>376</sup> On the other hand, I also bring to light how, for Cervantes, there is no notion of immortality: Don Quixote dies, which seems to suggest a tragic attitude toward death. That is to say, like Thucydides’s narrative arc, Cervantes’s seems to orient the human being toward the idea that there is no freedom from death other than the illusions of freedom. Even so, Cervantes goes further than Thucydides to the extent that he (Cervantes) argues that human beings need illusions of freedom to survive.<sup>377</sup>

Stepping away from these three writers, I want to pose the following question: What is the point or purpose of my exploratory narrative? Indeed, by asking this question, I bring to light another question of equal stature: Why must my thesis have a point, or why must it be useful? Does not utility or usefulness return us back to the fold of ontic history (*Historie*), that is, a narrative suggesting, among other things, that the human being is enclosed in certain structures or teachings? In this respect, the question of the utility of historical narratives cannot move beyond the narrowing question of individual freedom from death.

It would thus seem that there is no freedom beyond attitudes/narratives that resist death—or is there? Throughout this brief conclusion, I contend that there may be a kind

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<sup>375</sup> Cervantes, *Don Quijote*, 82-83. See Thucydides, *The War of the Peloponnesians and the Athenians*, 144 (2.41.4); 115 (2.43.1-4).

<sup>376</sup> Cervantes, *Don Quijote*, 1179.

<sup>377</sup> Ibid; Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, 41-43.

of thinking that allows us to move beyond our own narrowness, thereby freeing us from narratives of utility and narratives that seek to ensnare us into the ontic idea that humans are simply finite beings that strive to resist death. Accordingly, I ground my claim in the writings of two intriguing figures: Zhuangzi (c. 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE) and Martin Heidegger (1889-1976).

Furthermore, I have selected Zhuangzi and Heidegger because they seemingly offer us two distinct ways of thinking “beyond” utility. Or do they? Elisabeth Hirsch, Reinhard May, Ma Lin, Katrin Froese, Michael Weston, Takeshi Umerhara, Archie S. Graham, and others have shown similarities between Zhuangzi and Heidegger.<sup>378</sup> More recently, Eric Nelson has argued that Heidegger’s thought dovetails not only with “the mysterious figures of Laozi (老子) and the Zhuangzi” but also with other “East Asian philosophies.”<sup>379</sup> Indeed, Heidegger gives us a reason to draw such conclusions: he mentions Zhuangzi in his *Country Path Conversations* (1944-1945/1995).<sup>380</sup> In contrast to much of the recent scholarship, my engagement with Zhuangzi and Heidegger illuminates a neglected aspect. That is to say, my exploratory narrative will attempt to

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<sup>378</sup> Elisabeth Feist Hirsch, “Martin Heidegger and the East,” in *Philosophy East and West* Vol. 20, No. 3 (July 1970): 247-263; Reinhard May, *Heidegger’s Hidden Sources: East Asian Influences* (New York: Routledge, 1996); Ma Lin, “What Does Heidegger Have to Do with an East-West Dialogue?” in *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* Vol. 4, No.3 (June 2005): 299-319; Katrin Froese, *Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Daoist Thought: Crossing Paths In-Between* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2006); Michael Weston, *Recovering the Mystery: Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Cooper, Dao and Zen* (London: Epiphanies Press, 2021); Takeshi Umerhara, “Heidegger and Buddhism,” in *Philosophy East and West* 20, no.3 (1970): 271; Archie S. Graham, “Art, Language, and Truth in Heidegger’s Radical Zen,” in *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 27:4 (December 2000): 503-43.

<sup>379</sup> See Eric S. Nelson, “Heidegger and the Way” in *Heidegger and Dao: Things, Nothingness, Freedom* (London: Bloomsbury, 2023), Kindle. See also B. Davis, Briand Schroeder, and Jason M. Wirth, eds. *Japanese and Continental Philosophy: Conversations with the Kyoto School* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011).

<sup>380</sup> Heidegger, *Country Path Conversations*, trans. Bret W. Davis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 156-157.

show how both figures not only offer a critique against utility, but also a critique against narratives that seek to establish a particular point or purpose. Hence, my primary claim is that Zhuangzi and Heidegger are two pointless thinkers: although expressing different historical attitudes—for example, the former is a writer of joy; the latter is a writer of tragedy—Zhuangzi and Heidegger develop what I refer to as two distinct, yet interconnected ways of thinking beyond human narrowness: pointless wandering and pointless thinking.

My conclusion is divided into three short parts. First, I discuss how Zhuangzi’s Dao is the key that unlocks the door to human “freedom.” It gives us the capacity to free our thinking from “points” or “utility.”<sup>381</sup> Then I turn to Heidegger’s concept of “freedom,” that is, “philosophy” or a type of “violent” thinking that seeks to “shatter” that which is “utility,” by means of his *Introduction to Metaphysics* (1935/2000) and *Ponderings VII- XI: Black Notebooks 1938-1939* (2014).<sup>382</sup> Finally, I conclude on a note of doubt: I grapple with whether or not we have the freedom to think beyond the narrow framework of utility and thus if we have the intellectual freedom to move beyond attitudes that resist death.

### **Pointless Wandering?**

Before “wandering” in Zhuangzi’s work, let me provide a thumbnail sketch of Zhuangzi and his “distinct” form of Daoist thought.<sup>383</sup> To begin, it might be best to recall

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<sup>381</sup> Zhuangzi, *Zhuangzi: Basic Writings*, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 109, 56, 59.

<sup>382</sup> Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Gregory Fried and Richard Polt 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), 14, 175, 181, 191; Heidegger, *Ponderings VII- XI: Black Notebooks 1938-1939*, 42, 143, 246.

<sup>383</sup> Zhuangzi, *Zhuangzi: Basic Writings*, 23.

that Zhuangzi is not so much a person as rather a set of Daoist texts from the fourth-century BCE.<sup>384</sup> Though not much is known about the origins of “the Zhuangzi” or the writings of “Master Zhuang,” several scholars have argued that Zhuangzi’s work is just one of many attempts to critique the rise of political corruption during the Warring States Period (475-221 BCE).<sup>385</sup> Accordingly, following Confucianism (the teaching of Confucius) and Mohism (the teachings of Mozi), Daoism arose as an attempt to reform society. However, unlike its contemporaries, Daoism did not seek to end suffering through the extirpation of the human. On the contrary, figures like Zhuangzi wanted to extinguish suffering by moving beyond “points” or the narrowing views that “plagued man.”<sup>386</sup>

Indeed, rather than calling for self-immolation, a clarion call found in certain currents of Chinese Buddhism and Daoism, Zhuangzi makes it clear that to “break away” from the narrowing view of points, humans need to take a “leap,” which is to say that humans should “forget” points and focus on the “infinite” or “boundless” “freedom” found in that which is the Way or the Dao.<sup>387</sup> As Zhuangzi writes, like “fish who forget

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<sup>384</sup> For more on the scholarship surrounding the origins of the Zhuangzi, see Brian Howard Hoffert, “Chuang Tzu: The Evolution of a Taoist Classic,” PhD diss., (Harvard University, 2002).

<sup>385</sup> Zongsan, *Nineteen Lectures*, 46-60; Zhuangzi, *Basic Writings*, 1-5; Edward Slingerland, *Effortless Action: Wu-Wei as Conceptual Metaphor and Spiritual Ideal in Early China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 12, 38, 121, 270. For more on self-immolation in both Chinese Buddhism and Daoism, see for example Jimmy Wu, “Reflections on Self-Immolation in Chinese Buddhist and Daoist Traditions,” in *Martyrdom, Self-Sacrifice, and Self-Immolation: Religious Perspectives on Suicide*, ed. Margo Kitts (New York: Oxford Academic, 2018), 264-279. See also James A. Benn, *Burning for the Buddha: Self-Immolation in Chinese Buddhism* (Honolulu, Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 2007); Jimmy Yu, *Sanctity and Self-Inflicted Violence in Chinese Religions, 1500-1700* (New York: Oxford Academic, 2012).

<sup>386</sup> Zhuangzi, *Zhuangzi: Basic Writings*, 50, 56.

<sup>387</sup> *Ibid.*, 67, 27, 30, 109, 39, 52.

each other in the rivers and the lakes, . . . men forget each other in the arts of the Way.”<sup>388</sup>

Zhuangzi also goes further insofar as he suggests that when in the Dao, the human does not only forget points but also “everything.” After hearing about a man who could “sit down and forget everything,” Confucius, Zhuangzi tells us, “looked startled and said, ‘What do you mean, sit down and forget everything?’” Here, the man replied: “I smash up my limbs and body, drive our perception and intellect, cast off form, do away with understanding, and make myself identical with the Great Thoroughfare. This is what I mean by sitting down and forgetting everything.”<sup>389</sup>

But Zhuangzi does not stop there. Telling a story about two men, Carpenter Shi and his apprentice, Zhuangzi ties together point or “utility” with living “a miserable life” of narrowness: a life that is “cut off in mid-journey.” Arriving at the place between “Qi” and “Crooked Shaft,” Carpenter Shi and his apprentice come across an oak tree “broad enough to shelter several thousand oxen and measured a hundred spans around, towering above the hills.” Zhuangzi pauses to mention that the “lowest branches” of this oak tree “were eighty feet from the ground, and a dozen or so of them could have been made into boats.” Returning to the main story, Zhuangzi writes that Carpenter Shi was not interested in the giant oak tree and “went on his way without stopping.” His apprentice, however, was dumbfounded: “Since I first took up my axe and followed you, Master, I have never seen timber as beautiful as this. But you don’t even bother to look, and go right on without stopping. Why is that?” Carpenter Shi replied: “Forget it—say no more!

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<sup>388</sup> Ibid., 84. See also Ibid., 44, 59, 70, 76.

<sup>389</sup> Ibid., 59, 86-87.

. . . It's a worthless tree! Make boats out of it and they'd sink; make coffins and they'd rot in no time; make vessels and they'd break at once." Concluding that the oak tree was "not a timber tree," Carpenter Shi said: "[T]here's nothing it can be used for. That's how it got to be that old!"<sup>390</sup>

Yet, the following night, Zhuangzi writes that the giant oak tree "appeared" to Carpenter Shi in a dream. The oak tree said:

What are you comparing me with? Are you comparing me with those useful trees? The cherry apple, the pear, the orange, the citron, the rest of those fructiferous trees and shrubs—as soon as their fruit is ripe, they are torn apart and subjected to abuse. Their big limbs are broken off, their little limbs are yanked around. Their utility makes life miserable for them, and so they don't get to finish out the years Heaven gave them, but are cut off in mid-journey. They bring it on themselves—the pulling and tearing of the common mob. And it's the same way with other things.

As for me, I've been trying a long time to be of no use, and though I almost died, I've finally got it. This is of great use to me. If I had been some use, would I ever have grown this large? Moreover you and I are both of us things. What's the point of this—things condemning things? You, a worthless man about to die—how do you know I'm a worthless tree.<sup>391</sup>

In the above passage, Zhuangzi ties together three key themes that have been at the forefront of my thesis. First, he makes it clear that to speak of "utility," one already presupposes that something is "useful," which, if we recall how the main protagonist is a carpenter—someone who makes and sells things that can be "made" useful, then we can say that utility stands alongside that which can turn a profit.<sup>392</sup> Second, this notion of utility or usefulness is tied to a narrow view of life. Zhuangzi discusses how the "useful trees" encounter a "miserable life" of harm: "[T]hey are torn apart and subjected to

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<sup>390</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>391</sup> Ibid., 59-60.

<sup>392</sup> Ibid., 59.

abuse.”<sup>393</sup> Indeed, this claim brings us squarely to my final theme, namely, how a miserable life of utility is one that is oriented towards death. Mentioning how the carpenter is nothing special, that is, he is merely a thing “condemning [other] things,” Zhuangzi connects death to him rather than the useless oak tree. Hence, for Zhuangzi, to speak in terms of “utility” is already a move towards a non-Daoist view of humans insofar as the term itself presupposes death and thus a life already “cut off mid-journey.”<sup>394</sup> Nay, how “stupid and blockish,” Zhuangzi tells us, for one to think that “man” is simply “limited” or “bound[ed]” by “the space he lives.”<sup>395</sup>

Here, Zhuangzi expresses a sense of straightforwardness that could be applied to today in the sense that academics harbor this narrowing view of the human. Zhuangzi writes that just as one “can’t discuss ice with a summer insect,” one cannot “discuss the Way with a cramped scholar.” One might ask: Why? Here, Zhuangzi replies, it is because the scholar is enslaved to a narrow way of thinking: “[H]e is shackled by his doctrines.” Indeed, Zhuangzi claims that most people are unwilling to “come out [from] beyond” their own “banks and borders” to see “the great sea” (that is, “the waters of the world” that make up the Dao) and thus “realize” how they are living in their “own pettiness.”<sup>396</sup> Therefore, according to the writings of Zhuangzi, the human is not a point or something useful. Instead, the human is something pointless: it cannot be regulated or “made” into

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<sup>393</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>394</sup> Ibid.

<sup>395</sup> Ibid., 42, 44-45.

<sup>396</sup> Ibid., 56, 98.



something “useful,” given that a human is nothing but a vanishing bubble—a blimp, in other words—on the “[t]en thousand streams” that make up that which is the Dao.<sup>397</sup>

### **Pointless Thinking?**

Though converging with Zhuangzi in terms of critiquing utility, Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) is a different writer to the extent that, at least in his later work, he expresses an orientation towards interpretative violence.<sup>398</sup> When one hears my claim, one might be drawn to Heidegger’s political life. In April 1933, Heidegger plunged himself into the political atmosphere of Germany by not only assuming the position of rector at the University of Freiburg but doing so under the acquiescence of Nazism. Though Heidegger’s tenure as rector was short-lived—he resigned the following April, he never publicly renounced his affinity for Nazi politics.

Moving beyond Heidegger’s politics, the following pages linger in Heidegger’s thought as expressed in two of his later works: *Introduction to Metaphysics* (1935/2000) and *Ponderings VII- XI: Black Notebooks 1938-1939* (2014). In so doing, these pages will show, very briefly, how Heidegger’s later thought can be read not only as a critique of utility but also, and more importantly, as a critique against all forms of narrow thinking. In this respect, Heidegger’s philosophical attitude highlights the ways in which

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<sup>397</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>398</sup> As Heidegger puts it elsewhere: “To make itself understandable is suicide for philosophy.” If this claim is the case, Heidegger committed suicide quite often: he both published and gave lectures at the University of Freiburg. See Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (Of the event)*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz and Daniela Vallega-Neu (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1989), 344. In *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* (1929-1930/1983), Heidegger expresses an orientation towards active wondering rather than violence: he discusses topics such as what being-in-the-world means for stones, lizards, bees, and plants. See Heidegger, “Clarification of the Essence of the Animal’s Poverty in World by Way of the Question Concerning the Essence of Animality, the Essence of Life in General, and the Essence of the Organism” in Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*, trans. William McNeill and Nicholas Walker (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1995), 201-264.

Western ιστορία can be read more broadly as having a basis in a non-narrow way of thinking about the historical human being (Dasein).<sup>399</sup> Most simply: Heidegger's narrative reveals how *Geschichte* expresses an orientation towards θαῦμα or “wonder.” The latter of which I argue is an attempt to “leap” beyond attitudes that seek to resist death.<sup>400</sup>

Like Zhuangzi, Heidegger points the finger of scorn at scholars: they are the ones who speak of the human being in terms of utility or usefulness. According to Heidegger, the “current” striving “among teachers and researchers in the sciences” is toward a model of “useful” thinking—a type of thinking that “attempts to prove” and thus already “limits” the human being: it presupposes that the human being has “an end,” that the human being's own being-there (Dasein) can somehow become a “finite” “subject-object” for mechanical study.<sup>401</sup> Yet Heidegger goes further. He claims that this notion of useful thinking is itself a sign of “slavery” insofar as it reveals how the “research university” is following “everyday standards:” the capitalistic, non-creative standards “that one would otherwise employ to judge the utility of bicycles or the effectiveness of mineral baths.”<sup>402</sup> In other words, thinking in terms of point or utility is enslaving because it implies that one is not willing to be “the violence-doer:” that is, someone who

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<sup>399</sup> Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, 126. Though Heidegger is thinker or philosopher, he nevertheless declares in one of his earlier lectures (1925) that he has “no philosophy at all.” See Heidegger, *History of the Concept of Time: Prolegomena*, trans. Theodore Kisiel (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1985), 301-302.

<sup>400</sup> *Ibid.*, 196.

<sup>401</sup> Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, 13; Heidegger, *Ponderings VII- XI: Black Notebooks*, 52-53, 117

<sup>402</sup> Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, 13-14; Heidegger, *Ponderings VII- XI: Black Notebooks*, 102, 187.

uses “the force of spirit” to “break” into a sense of “openness” or different ways of thinking about the “human-historical Dasein.”<sup>403</sup>

Of course, when fixed within the complicated web of Heidegger’s politics, the violence-doer appears to be Hitler’s avatar: a “violent” human being who wishes to “renew” Western *Geschichte* as a whole.<sup>404</sup> However, I would suggest that Heidegger’s “violence-doing” goes far beyond the fray of Nazism to create what some have called a mode of thought that seeks to exceed all forms of historical dogmatism: truncated ways of thinking about human Dasein.<sup>405</sup>

Though Heidegger stresses violence, I am interested in how his philosophy also expresses an interest in wonder. Besides calling for a “violent” form of thinking that “constantly renews itself,” Heidegger writes that human thought is itself “an inexhaustible source of wonder.”<sup>406</sup> Indeed, if we recall how a more open expression of historical Dasein is *Geschichte* rather than *Historie*, and the former stands as a recalling of the exploratory essence of Western ἱστορία, then Heidegger’s claim seems to recall how wonder is more broadly an aspect of ἱστορία. Indeed, there is some historical evidence to support this claim: at least since the earliest origins of ἱστορία, the notion of thauma (θαῦμα) or wonder has been expressed, albeit in differing ways, among writers

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<sup>403</sup> Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, 6-7.

<sup>404</sup> Ibid., 13-17; 167-168, 179. Heidegger writes that “[t]he living thing . . . constantly renews itself, streaming out over itself in ever new forms.” See Ibid., 172. Heidegger praised the “Führer state” in his seminar “On the Essence and Concept of Nature, History, and State” (1933-1934). See Heidegger, *Nature, History, State*, trans. Gregory Fried and Richard Polt (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 64.

<sup>405</sup> See for example, Jeff Love and Michael Meng, “Heidegger’s Metapolitics,” *Cultural Critique*, Vol. 99 (Spring 2018): 98; Jacques Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, 279-281.

<sup>406</sup> Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, 172.

whom we might consider historians.<sup>407</sup> Although I am not interested in proving whether or not Heidegger’s orientation towards *ιστορία* or *θαῦμα* is “correct,” his overall discussion of the openness of human thought is nevertheless crucial for my own thinking; which is to say that Heidegger’s philosophical attitude sheds light on the ways in which thinking itself can be emancipatory. It can question the illusions of utility or usefulness. In this sense, Heidegger’s thought dovetails with that of Zhuangzi’s insofar as both writers discuss how human beings have the “freedom” to think beyond their own narrowness, thereby revealing how human beings have the power to think beyond narrowing attitudes toward death.<sup>408</sup>

Thus, the writings of Zhuangzi and Heidegger show that humans have the freedom to move beyond attitudes of usefulness (*Historie* or ontic history) and attitudes of immortality. Still, should we believe them? For instance, Zhuangzi maintains that his own attitude is simply a dream. He writes: “And someday there will be a great awakening when we know that this is all a great dream. Yet the stupid believe they are awake, busily and brightly assuming they understand things, calling this man ruler, that one herdsman—how dense! Confucius [is] dreaming. And when I say [he is] dreaming, I am

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<sup>407</sup> For *thauma* in Herodotus and Thucydides, see for example Herodotus, *Histories*, 7.125, Perseus Digital Library, <http://data.perseus.org/citations/urn:cts:greekLit:tlg0016.tlg001.perseus-grc1:7.125> (accessed on February 20, 2024); Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, 3.38, Perseus Digital Library, <http://data.perseus.org/citations/urn:cts:greekLit:tlg0003.tlg001.perseus-grc1:3.38> (accessed on February 21, 2024). Several scholars have highlighted the relationship between *ιστορία* and *θαῦμα*. For example, see François Hartog, *The Mirror of Herodotus: The Representation of the Other in the Writing of History* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), 303; Stephen Greenblatt, “The Go-Between,” in Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 119-151, especially, 123-128; Dmitri Nikulin, *The Concept of History*, 28-29; Jessica Lightfoot, “*Thaumata* and the Ethnographic Tradition: Herodotus and the Edges of the Earth,” in Jessica Lightfoot *Wonder and the Marvellous from Homer to the Hellenistic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 58-68.

<sup>408</sup> Heidegger, *Ponderings VII- XI: Black Notebooks*, 263.

dreaming, too. Words like these will be labeled the Supreme Swindle.”<sup>409</sup> In short, should we believe we have the freedom to think beyond attitudes of utility and immortality? Or is my own attitude of openness (*Geschichte* or ontological history) toward intellectual freedom/wandering “the Supreme Swindle,” “the supreme illusion of freedom”?<sup>410</sup>

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<sup>409</sup> Zhuangzi, *Zhuangzi: Basic Writings*, 43.

<sup>410</sup> Heidegger, *Ponderings VII- XI: Black Notebooks 1938-1939*, 102.

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