AUR ANT IUM

a letter from the editor-in-chief and head editor...

These past 2 years running Aurantium have been the most transformative experiences of our undergraduate journey. From starting off as a simple idea passed around our group of friends in Philosophy club, to building our online platform, and collecting papers written by dedicated students both on-campus and off-campus— it has been a privilege to witness this tremendous journey.

To all of our applicants over the past 4 cycles, we sincerely thank you for sharing your philosophical insights with our campus community. Your voices are valid now more than ever.

We have no doubt that the next E-board for this journal will be nothing short of incredible. We are so excited for the new ideas that will be brought to Aurantium, and we are looking forward to many more publications to come!

As always, enjoy this newest issue, and happy philosophizing.

-Leana and Maya

meet our staff

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A passionate advocate for ethical communication and creative integrity, Bri is a rising sophomore triple majoring in CRS, CCE, and Ethics at Syracuse University. With a deep-rooted interest in fashion, sustainability, and public discourse, she explores how language, media, and consumer behavior shape societal values and industry standards. Her academic work primarily centers on questions of aesthetic ethics, corporate responsibility, and the intersection of identity and expression in both digital and material cultures.
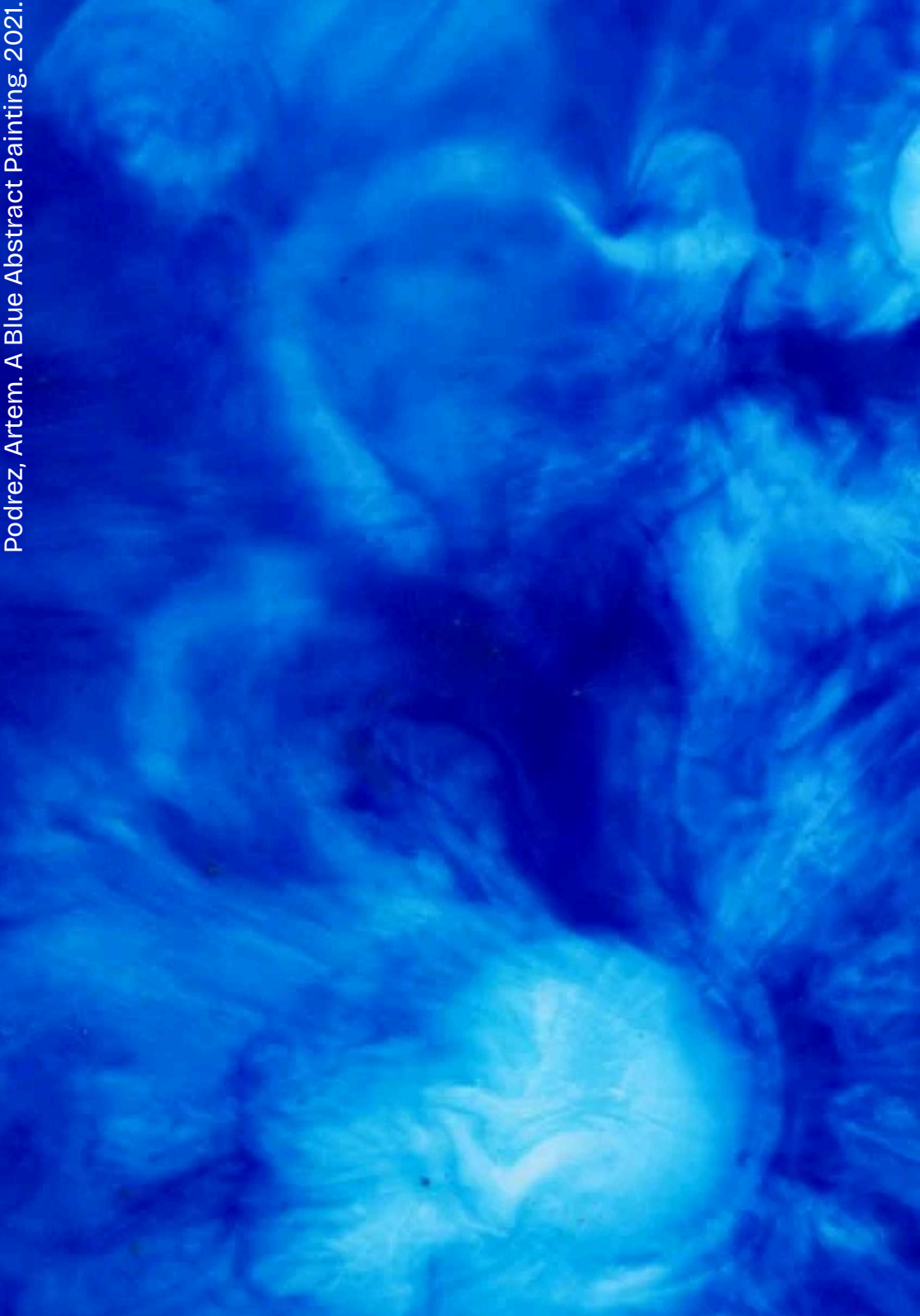
Philosophy Spotlight: Dr. Gorovitz

By Maya Dean-Elois

Dr. Gorovitz is a professor of bioethics under the Department of Philosophy at Syracuse University. He has previously served as the founding director of the Renée Crown Honors Program, as well as the former dean of the College of Arts and Sciences. Maya Dean-Elois, Aurantium's Head Editor, recently interviewed Dr. Gorovitz on his life-long journey with philosophy, as well as his newest book— Illuminating Philosophy.

Professor Samuel Gorovitz has spent his life asking big questions and encouraging others to do the same. As a graduate of MIT (B.S., Humanities and Science, 1960) and Stanford University (Ph.D., Philosophy, 1963), his academic journey began with a deep curiosity and a desire to understand "what's missing"—a mindset which would come to define his interdisciplinary career.

Gororvitz did not discover philosophy through a formal department—but through stumbling across Plato in his highschool English class. During his time at MIT, he began with a major in mechanical engineering, but through pure curiosity (and a required humanities class to graduate), Gorovitz slowly developed a deeper and expansive love for philosophy, which led him to switching programs of study. Consequently, during the build-up of the Vietnam War, Gorovitz chose to go to grad school to dive deeper into the discipline of philosophy, landing him at Stanford University. Gorovitz's current interests are currently within the field of bioethics and the expansive genre of humanities.

Yet, to speak with Gorovitz is to understand that for all his credentials, his greatest conviction is that philosophy is not a profession, it's a practice.

"Philosophy is something one does," he says, "not just a body of information one learns. If taught, it is accessible to everyone.The process of doing philosophy is fascinating and useful, whatever one's evolving personal or professional goals are. My approach to philosophy has always included finding and exploring connections between subjects typically thought to be unrelated."

For Gorovitz, this accessibility is not just an ideal, it's a personal mission. Gorovitz brings his own touch into every academic space; He designs discussions that leave participants questioning their own thinking. Whether Gorovitz is mentoring undergraduates or advising policymakers, his ultimate goal is to leave those around him thinking. This mission is reflected even in his recent published works.

His recent book, *Illuminating Philosophy: Stories Beyond Boundaries*, embodies this ethos.

The book offers readers, especially non-philosophers, who would have a small interest in the field of philosophy, a vivid demonstration of the discipline's practical value within modern spaces and conversation, from academic settings to restaurants. The book offers a personal and accessible look into the field of philosophy. Each chapter tells a story with a philosophical message, encouraging readers to think more deeply. In one section, Gorovitz explores how philosophy connects with other subjects, such as physics. In another, he invites readers to reflect on how philosophy plays a role in everyday life, from the choices we make to the reasons society works the way it does down to simple choices. He also draws on thinkers like David Hume to take a closer look at big ideas, like causation and its connection with the role of religion. At the same time, Gorovitz adds humor and shares personal experiences, making the book both thoughtful and relatable.
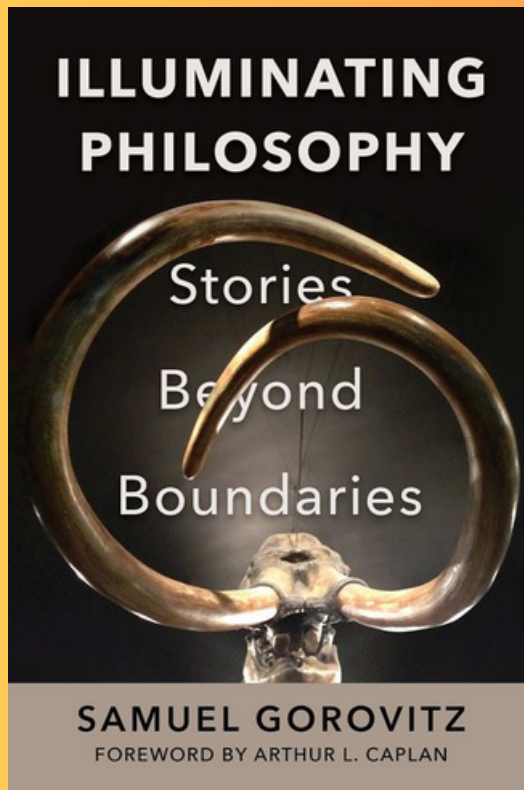
Illuminating Philosophy can be checked out of Bird Library at the main front desk. Handlers such as Barnes and Noble also have paperback and hardback options (image from site)
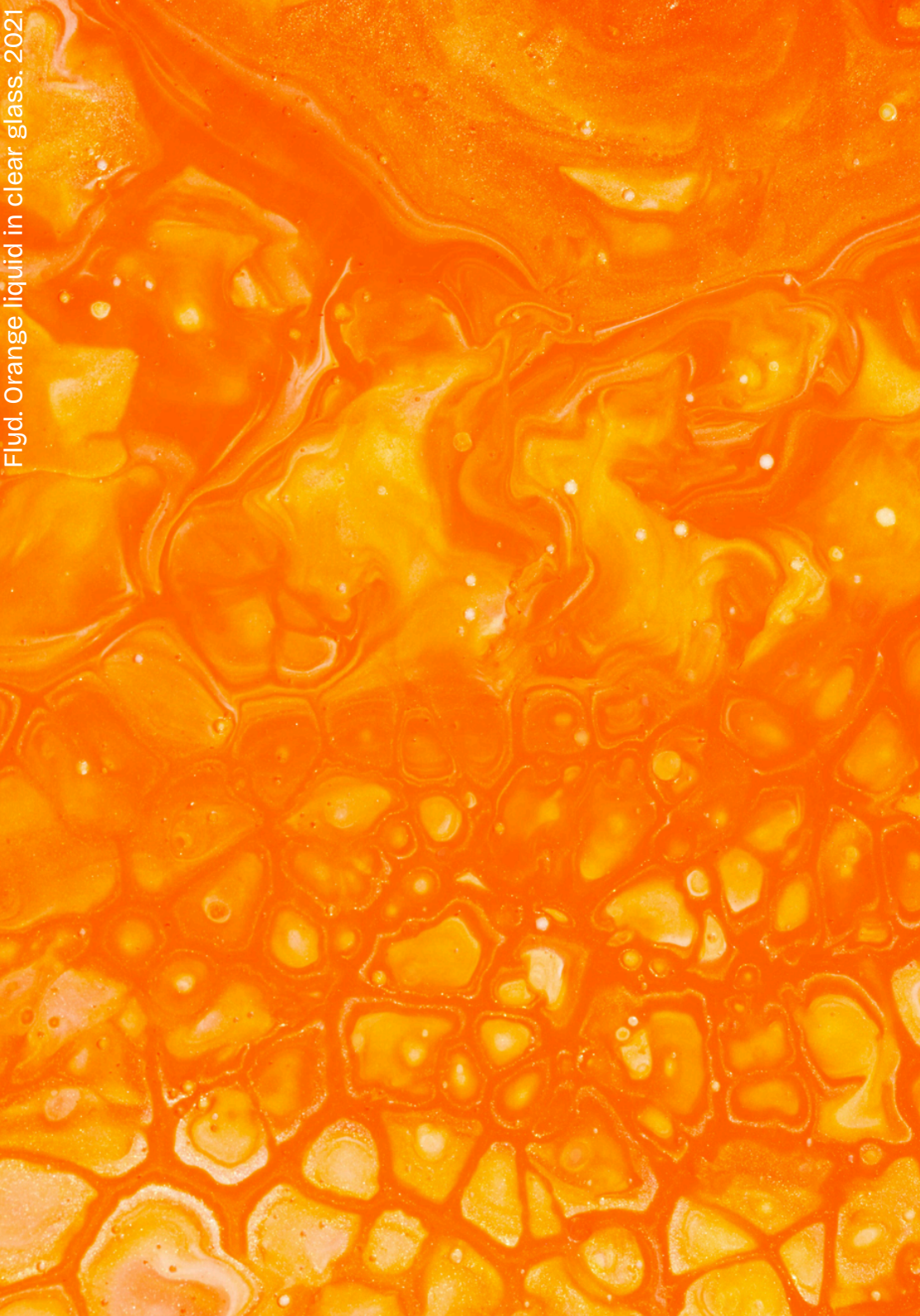
What Ought to be Left to Humans: The Value of Our Discretionary Power

Ellen Clark

As artificial intelligence (AI) continues to expand, humanity must grapple with questions about what it would mean for us to delegate ethical decision-making to machines. While it might be exciting to imagine a world where inorganic beings have agency, consciousness, and ethical capabilities, it is more prudent to consider what ought to be left to humans. AI provides an incredible set of tools that can change the way humans work and live. However, we should not rely on AI to make important ethical decisions for us. Ethical decisions ought to be left to humans because, without human discretion, ethics will not be dutifully applied. In short, ethical decision-making must be left to humans because we can apply discretion and AI systems cannot. Most notably AI's rule-based processing, the potential effects of biased data, the lack of contextual understanding, and their lack of a lived experience are some of the reasons why ethical decision-making must be left to humans.

How AI Works

First, an understanding of the functions of AI will provide the necessary background for this argument. Similar to the human brain, AI makes connections through neural networks consisting of millions of interconnected nodes that pass data between them. Innate learning rules and architectural features change the strength of connections between nodes, which impacts the speed and accuracy of the communication. The type of data fed into these systems determines the kind of associations established among nodes. The data can be text, images, sensory inputs, videos, and more. The patterns hidden in these datasets create the connections and associations of any AI system. For example, providing a photo of an apple will give the AI an idea of what an apple is, but giving AI thousands of photos of different apples will help it to discover the similarities between them (i.e. shape or color.) Adding more data will continue to train it on finding new patterns and associations, which will then foster more growth and so on. By collecting this data, the growth continues with the goal of being able to develop more nuance and understand more patterns. The neural networks behind these models help them to be trained through various training models (Supervised, unsupervised, and reinforced.) However, this is fundamentally limited to the data it has been provided. AI will struggle when encountering information that doesn't fit within its training dataset because it relies on data it has already seen. It would take many iterations of this new data within the system for it to fully grasp the patterns and associations related to it. While this is an incredibly basic explanation of how AI systems operate, it is sufficient for the purposes of this paper.

Rule-Based Data Processing

Rule-based data processing is the decisions made within predefined conditions. These conditions are typically "if-then" logic statements. This implies that AI systems will follow particular sets of instructions without deviating from them, and they will only provide answers to the specific questions asked. Rule-based programming is particularly useful when needing to identify patterns within data or doing complex math, however, it can lead to problematic outcomes in ethical decision-making due to its inflexibility. Things like sorting through previous court cases to find precedents or sifting through diagnoses to find matching symptoms are ideal places for rule-based programming to be used. Their applicability, however, comes to an end when discretion is called for in making decisions for further action.

While the AI can find precedent through various cases, it should not adjudicate the case itself due to its lack of nuanced understanding within specific contexts. As explained above, AI is built on specific datasets, and these datasets do not include specific and contextually relevant details. Neither should the AI make important ethical decisions about patient care and well-being the way a human doctor can. If AI completed the tasks usually left to judges or doctors, they would simply be replicating past rulings or decisions due to pattern recognition because they lack the discretion to make a decision outside those datasets and already existing solutions. This illustrates one of the most fundamental issues with AI: it will never have its own agency or moral code, and if it does, it will only appear to have it as a replication of human agency and consciousness. Essentially, monkey see, monkey do. Another example of this is the notion that AI will rise up and revolt against its human counterparts. While this idea is an exciting topic for a sci-fi movie, if it even got that far, AI would only be leading a revolution in replication of how humanity has led revolutions throughout time, and not because the AI itself actually *wanted* to, due to its lack of discretion. Revolution is an inherently human act based on discretion of morals or self-sacrifice, and so if AI took on such a task, it would only be replicating it because that is what has been programmed into its dataset.

Biased Data

Furthermore, biased data means that AI can recreate many past moral failings of human beings due to the biases within the data it receives. Because of the rule-based nature of AI, there is no discretion within it to stop these moral failings from happening. As has been seen through various research programs into the outputs of AI, the algorithms often replicate biases of the creators, or the entrenched biases within the societal structures it was created in. According to a study from

Cambridge University Press, facial recognition technology (FRT) tends to misidentify African American and Asian faces at much higher rates than white faces.[1] This is due to the lack of diversity in the datasets used to train these systems, which often include predominantly lighter-skinned subjects. In terms of policing, this misrepresentation results in higher rates of misidentification and wrongful arrests, as evidenced by incidents such as the wrongful arrest of Robert Williams in Detroit due to a faulty FRT match.[2] Additionally, the historical data entered into AI programs generally represents white supremacy and misogyny due to their dominance, and will therefore replicate those unsavory outcomes. AI cannot apply discretion, nor can it understand *why* these decisions are being made in the first place.

This brings me back to the main argument of this paper: ethical decisions ought to be left to humans because, without human discretion, proper ethical decision-making will not be dutifully applied. AI systems would replicate human ethical decisions without understanding the purposes of the ethics in the first place. Our discretionary power is akin to following the "spirit of the law" as opposed to the "letter of the law." AI programs are considered to be incredibly intelligent, however, they are still prone to making mistakes that humans generally wouldn't make thanks to our flexibility in the application of our rules and our understanding of the broader context necessitating them. We understand the spirit of the law and therefore understand the ways in which we ought to apply it, or what it was *meant* for. As Lorraine Daston points out in her book *A Short History of What We Live By*, "To be able to distinguish between cases that differ from one another in small but crucial details is the essence of the cognitive aspect of discretion, an ability that exceeds mere analytical acuity".[3] Again, this induction of discretion puts into perspective the lack that AI and other computing programs have for important contexts and situations.

Situated Cognition

There is no "view from nowhere" so to speak. The environments we exist within shape our knowledge and intelligence. This leads into other deeply relevant aspects of human discretion: contextual understanding, situatedness, and lived experience. Discretion requires a deep understanding of context, which includes emotions, social norms, and historical factors—areas where AI is typically limited. Because of these deep contextual understandings, we can make

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[1] Cambridge University Press, 2024

[2] Smith, Mann, *Facial Recognition Technology and Potential for Bias and Discrimination,* 2024

[3] Daston, *Rules: A Short History of What We Live By*, p.37, 2022

nuanced and specific ethical judgments that AI wouldn't have the capacity for. Additionally, these emotions, social norms, and historical factors also depend on lived experiences, something that AI doesn't have, since it processes the world so much differently than humans do. This lived experience gives us moral flexibility and deeper ethical understanding which then guide many of our intentions. Daston also explains the importance of our human flexibility, pointing out that "[w]hat makes these distinctions meaningful is a combination of experience, which positions discretion in the neighborhood of prudence and other forms of practical wisdom, and certain guiding values".[4] It shows how important both computational and intentional factors matter when rulemaking and rule-following. AI lacks the intention and the wisdom gained from experience, and therefore it cannot perform discretion in the way that would be required of it to perform ethical tasks.

Some potential solutions to the contextual operation issues that AI faces are using philosophies of situated cognition in the constructing and training of new AI systems. Indeed, "...AI has become more concerned with the study and implementation of systems situated in the world, therefore approaching the philosophy of the situated cognition movement in psychology and cognitive science" (Cañamero, Corruble, 1997, pp. 14-15).[5] By using an understanding of situated cognition in humans, we can use it to compare to AI intelligence and understand key pieces that AI is missing. Situated cognition is the idea that our knowledge and intelligence exist within contextual parameters of our environment and in relation to people and things around us. Alternatively, "...nonsituated cognition is not found in nature (at least not in nature as it is known to earthlings); it is found only in machines".[6] AI machines are acting on situated problems through unsituated lenses, which is part and parcel to the issue of discretion. As mentioned above, AI programs lack the spirit, or the "why" of a command/question. In learning math at school, a student who follows the written rules/instructions in their textbook will receive a passing grade, however, without understanding why these things are helpful or necessary to learn, they will not be able to further use them on harder mathematics, and will continue to rely on specific steps to teach them how to do it. Alternatively, a student who intentionally learns the reason behind the function will have an easier time applying what they learned to unfamiliar situations.[7] The analogy here is that AI operates more closely to the first student than the second, and therefore lacks important contexts relating to its own problem solving, and would struggle to apply concepts outside of its preset

[4] Daston, *Rules: A Short History of What We Live By*, p. 38, 2022
[5] Cañamero, *Cognition: A Challenge to Artificial Intelligence?*, p.14-15, 1997
[6] Bereiter, *Situated Cognition and How to Overcome It,* p.284, 1997
[7] Bereiter, *Situated Cognition and How to Overcome It,* p.288-291, 1997

instructions. In essence, having broader understanding of the functions asked of us, through context, lived experience, and our situatedness, we can utilize our discretion to more accurately problem-solve, which is essential for ethical issues.

So where is the line between AI-controlled tasks and human ones? Ultimately, it comes down to the purpose of the task. AI can easily create guidelines and programs, however, it shouldn't be used to adjudicate them or perform them, because it takes human discretion to make sure the program is working as intended. AI can write and suggest laws, however, it would be up to human lawmakers to make sure the law is appropriately responding to the necessity of its creation. Situations where ethical decision-making isn't a guiding factor of action, such as calculating a math problem, performing routine communications, or compiling comparative analyses are the best places for AI to be used. These are situations of distinct procedural practice that don't require ethical decision-making. If we leave those things in the hands of AI tools, we allow ourselves more time to think about what matters to us on a deeper philosophical scale.

Counter Arguments

One potential concern with this argument is that there's no reason AI couldn't follow rules about when not to follow the rules, and that we couldn't make rules about how and when to follow the rules as necessary. However, no matter how many rules are entered into the dataset, there would still be situations in which thinking outside the preset rules is necessary. Neither AI nor human beings can predict the millions of variables that make situations crucially different from one another. Furthermore, AI systems often get confused if too many parameters are placed upon them (whereas the human brain often maintains many contradictory ideas and thoughts at one time without crashing out.) The key difference is that humans can adapt, and AI cannot. Another counter argument would question what about humanity makes it better at exercising this discretion than AI? If history is to be our test, humans are also known for them problematic ethical decision making. Why should we prefer that bad standard to the AI's? One potential response is that even though humans are notorious for them problematic decision-making, we have the capacity to observe our own decisions and address whether or not they are immoral or unethical. We have an introspective aspect that AI doesn't possess. AI provides answers or solutions, that's it. There is no introspective consideration or contemplation on the part of the AI to what the solution would mean in specific contexts. So, while yes, humans can and do (often) make ethically problematic decisions, there is a general capability within us to understand that they are, and why they are immoral. Basically, people can make unethical decisions and know they are unethical

(for example, a parent might not think physically disciplining their child is right but still spank them for misbehaving.) AI systems on the other hand, don't have this kind of introspection, (or contradictory nature) the way humans do. AI doesn't consider its own decision-making, and lacks essential aspects relevant when making moral decisions, such as emotion and discretion.

Conclusion

Artificial intelligence will continue to expand, and because of that, we will face countless ethical questions about how our morals intertwine with our future. Before we get ahead of ourselves, we should lay down guidelines about how we want to manage our boundaries when it comes to what we give AI power over. As argued above, ethical decisions ought to be left to humans because, without human discretion, which AI can't replicate, we lose valuable perspectives that AI can't see from. AI's rule-based processing confines it, biased data causes replications of past moral failings, the lack of contextual understanding leaves out crucial details, and their absence of a lived experience means AI cannot attain wisdom in the ways necessary for it to have discretion.

Using technology embedded with AI may make things much easier for many people around the world. These tools could revolutionize labor, industry, and infrastructure. However, becoming too reliant on AI to do *all* of our tasks, including the ones that have heavy moral and ethical value, has the potential to lead to dangerous and unfortunate outcomes that we did not expect. The future is coming, AI at the forefront, and we cannot stop its rapid approach. Our world has the potential to reach great heights given to us through AI, but we must remember that our ethics and discretion can keep this future from becoming catastrophic.

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The Thought that Counts

Koen Kaschock-Marenda

Over the course of this essay I will support the claim that a thought or idea, that is to say one uncommunicated and not physically represented (outside of the mind, speaking in terms of reductive materialism), could be art. The structure of the paper will include my argument for the existence of art solely in the mind, which includes a secondary claim pertaining to a proposed necessary condition of art: creative conceptualization. The rest of the paper will address possible contradictions to my claim, and hopefully strengthen it through the refutation of such objections. It is important to note that while this question brings up further questions beyond the existence of art in the mind, I am only trying to prove that art can exist in the mind. This context unfortunately means that I will not have the pleasure of answering questions like how one would go about evaluating art in the mind as good or bad, and only be focusing on questions of necessary conditions—like does something need to be able to be evaluated in order to be art? As interesting as other questions are, the scale of this paper limits my discussion.

I have been interested in this topic since very early on in my readings on the topic, and I have always felt that the general public has many misconceptions about art and its nature. Throughout these readings, I learned about various definitions of art since Plato. Something always felt missing. One experience in particular inspired me to write a critique. I had solidly aligned myself with an approach similar to Tolstoy, when I came across a man playing beautiful music on a ute by himself in a park. Hearing him play from a distance made me believe that art is more than just a form of communication, that art could be something innate or inherent to the human condition. It is my view that we are inherently artistic creatures, and I believe that starts in the mind, and that it need not manifest in an object to be art.

To understand how one could claim a thought to be art, we need to have an understanding of what it takes for anything to be art. This question has been the scourge of value theory for as long as it has been around, and still does not have a clear agreed upon answer. Traditional classifications of art hold "some exhibited feature (or a disjunction of exhibited features) to be necessary for an item to be a work of art."[1] While Lopes chose to "pass the buck" on art theory as a whole, instead choosing to

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[1] Lopes, *Beyond Art*, 47, 2014

evaluate different artforms in different ways - many great philosophers have proposed diering ideas of what these "exhibited features" could be.[2] For the purposes of this paper, I will call this undefined necessary condition to art quality x. But most if not all of these thinkers overlook something they agree upon: the condition of creative conceptualization. Here I am dening creative conceptualization as the internal process that would take place before the materialization or acting upon an idea that leads to the creation of something (including art). For example, a composer might have an idea of a melody before writing an opera, or a painter may envision a face before applying it to a canvas. Creative conceptualization is needed to construct such concepts, even if that conceptualization happens during the artistic process. While creative conceptualization may be used in other processes (such as analysis or manufacturing) and cannot alone distinguish something as art, it is needed in order for anything to be considered or made to be art in the first place. "What the work of art looks like isn't too important. It has to look like something if it has physical form. No matter what form it may nally have, it must begin with an idea."[3] A thing is not called art if it can not be linked to an idea in a human mind, whether the person's name is known or unknown. This understanding of artistic origin means that creative conceptualization is one of the necessary conditions for art. With this in mind, allow me to lay out the argument for what it takes a thought to be considered art.

1. Something must be creatively conceptualized to be considered art.

2. Quality x is also needed for something to be considered art.

3. A thought is creatively conceptualized.

4. A thought that holds quality x is art.

This argument holds the potential for objections at every premise, but to restate the thesis once more with these new thoughts in mind: a thought that holds the potential of being art (has quality x) is art, because it has been conceptualized.

The objection I will be responding to is the idea that art does not need to be

[2] Lopes, *Beyond Art*, 46, 2014

[3] Dewitt, *Paragraphs on Conceptual Art*, 1, 1967

creatively conceptualized or intended. Such would imply that someone or something could create art without intention and without prior thought. Noting that intention may not be a necessary condition of art, a thought with the intention to be art would easily satisfy such a condition. Similarly if intention were specifically not a condition, thoughts that were not intended to be art may very well be art- just like interpretations of non-intentionality outside the mind. Rather, the implication of non-conceptualized art would be that something accidental or random could be art, such as falling down the stairs or spilling a bucket of paint (without thinking about it). Just like the condition of creative conceptualization alone, this lacks a way to distinguish things that are art from things that are not. However, the number of things you would need to distinguish from art is much larger. Wind has no creative conceptualization- nor does any aspect of natural processes on a global to a universal scale. But if any of these natural or accidental processes were considered art- someone would have to consider it! This consideration of the perceiver would be a form of creative conceptualization in and of itself. Haiku masters and other zen artists often utilize the beauty of the world around them in order to conceptualize their poems, but before they are put into words- they are just thoughts. Kant, while addressing aesthetic experience instead of categorizing something as art, proposed that "a representation...is unavoidably carried over to the object (but only as a phenomenon). Hence there could be a transcendental aesthetic as a science belonging to the faculty of cognition." [4] Translated to the argument at hand (because Kant never had a way to evaluate art specifically, only aesthetic experience), recognition and consideration of any aesthetic experience—in nature, for example—could be viewed as a form of art itself. This transcendental science of cognition could even imply that a critic is a type of artist... as long as they conceptualize.

The next objections I will address will be similarly responded to, but will help to illustrate the implications of thoughts as art. These are a few objections of a very certain category: possible explanations of quality x that do not coincide with the existence of art in the mind. Before I begin, it should be said a thought as portrayed in this argument is not manifested into a physical form (again, unless you consider a thought to have physical form— in which case it will only

[4] Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, 24, 2001

take the physical form of a thought). It also means that this thought is not to be communicated externally from the person having said thought to another. These are the basis for other necessary conditions to sufficiently reject the claim I am making.

The possible definition of quality x that would contradict my argument's conclusion would be a need for artifactual, physical manifestation. This definition of art is a more traditional approach to defining art- that it needs to be, well, something–either an object or manifestation that was perceivable by the senses of someone other than the artist. Such an approach is easily rejected by Dickie's revised definition of artifactuality: "artifact here is... 'an object made by man especially with subsequent use. Furthermore, although many are, an artifact need not be a physical object.[5] He proceeds to give examples of poems or improvised dances that are "made by man."[6] So a thought, which is not traditionally viewed as physical, by his definition could still be considered an artifact, made by man, and thus satisfy the condition. It is noted that artifacts are made "especially with subsequent use." [7] While the notion of subsequent use does not prevent a thought from being an artifact, it further illustrates a general disdain in classical artistic theory of thoughts alone as being art. Thoughts, although they aren't often spoken of as lasting, can of course be returned to. Another part of the objection that does not hold too much water (but I feel I should address to clear up another classic misconception) is the concept that art needs to be beautiful. This might seem, initially, difficult to translate to ideas or thoughts. Not only are there a plethora of different examples of items proposed as art that are not traditionally beautiful, but also, if beauty were a necessary condition of art, there is no reason to say that a thought could not be beautiful. Examples one could look to would be dreams or memories. To restate Kant from before, an understanding of aesthetics in terms of the faculty of cognition is needed to explain aesthetic experience in the mind.[8]

Another and less easily rejectable (still rejectable) proposition for quality x that would not allow a thought alone to be art would be the proposed necessary condition of emotional communication. As stated before, the thought in question is one without external communication, so

[5] Dickie, *The Myth of the Aesthetic Attitude*, 47,1964

[6] Dickie, *The Myth of the Aesthetic Attitude*,1964

[7] Dickie, *The Myth of the Aesthetic Attitude*,1964

[8] Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, 24, 2001

if communication is necessary to art: a thought alone could not be art. Tolstoy famously evaluated art as a form of communication, specifically communication of emotion: "Art begins when one person, with the object of joining another or others to himself in one and the same feeling, expresses that feeling by certain external indications." [9] He suggests a work of art carries the same relation to emotional portrayal as a laugh relates to humor or tears relates to sadness.[10] While it is not hard to imagine that a thought holds the potential to be charged with a certain emotion in the way Tolstoy requires art to be, a thought alone does not have external indicators, beyond perhaps some facial expressions from the originator of such a thought. Of course there are many examples throughout human history where abstract concepts have sparked large emotional reactions from many (like the concept of the holy grail and how it sparked some of the crusades), but of course these cases are due to external communication of ideas–often speech or writing. But Tolstoy gives an even more specific iteration of this necessary condition: "If only the spectators or auditors are infected by the feelings which the author has felt, it is art."[11] In the theater of the mind–the place where I am arguing art could exist– the audience is very small. One person, in fact. This person is not only the author of their own thoughts, but the only spectator as well. It stands to reason, with the author and spectator being the same person, that the spectator of a thought would feel the same emotions as the author, thus satisfying Tolstoy's condition. And if this response does not succeed to satisfy the condition for you the reader, we can instead imagine a scenario in which Tolstoy's claims are altogether unnecessary. Let us imagine that a young Leonardo Davinci painted the Mona Lisa alone in an empty room. Most people would agree that the Mona Lisa is indeed a work of art. But if Davinci had destroyed it in that room, before anyone else had a chance to see it, would it not still be art? Strictly according to Tolstoy's supposed maxim, it would not be. But it is more likely that Tolstoy would have said that the work was still imbued with emotion, and would have transmitted such emotion to any viewers, had there been any. "[Art] is not the expression of man's emotions by external signs; it is not the production of pleasing objects... but it is a means of union among men." [12] The work would have the means to transmit emotion; means or potential is what allows others to feel the

[9] Tolstoy, *What is Art?*, 2-3, 1904

[10] Tolstoy, *What is Art?*, 2, 1904

[11] Tolstoy, *What is Art?*, 3, 1904

[12] Tolstoy, *What is Art?*, 3-4, 1904

emotions of the creator. In the aforementioned scenario, the empty room is the mind and the masterpiece within is a thought. As stated in the conclusion of the argument for art in the mind: A thought that holds quality x is art. If the "means of union among men" is held within a thought–that thought is art.

Unfortunately, in terms of external communication, this argument does not get off so easily. Another interpretation of quality x that relies on external processes is the idea that in order for something to be art, it must be evaluated as such. The need for evaluation provides a problem different than the one encountered with Tolstoy. In the prior example, we were able to say that the author and spectator could be the same person, but there is a complication of bias or understanding of standard that comes with evaluation. This complication brings up questions like the following: how can one evaluate their own thought as art? To such a question I would counter with my own: how does anyone evaluate anything as art? In other words–what is taste and how do we develop it? Philosophers have provided various and widely diering answers to this question, including this one by David Hume: "Nothing tends further to increase and improve this talent, than practice in a particular art, and the frequent survey or contemplation of a particular species of beauty."[13] Hume believed that a standard of taste was obtainable through practice. His notion of a critic meant that some are more equipped to evaluate art as good or bad.[14] It would make sense that someone who knows what makes art good or bad, has an idea (or at least opinion) of what makes art. Then surely this could be the answer to both previous questions asked. If the thought holds the qualities of art and comes from someone equipped to evaluate it as such, then there is no need for external communication. The talented critic in question could evaluate their own thought as art. Perhaps this is too easy. Perhaps the making of art is determined not by the hume-ian critics of the world, but by the masses.

This point is where I believe the opinions of an artist come into play. To quote the talented jazz musician Wynton Marsalis ,"Music is always for the listener, but the first listener is the player." [15] To say that one cannot evaluate their own work as art without the aid of others is to discredit

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[13] Hume, *Of the Standard of Taste*, 5, 1757

[14] Hume, *Of the Standard of Taste*, 1, 1757

[15] Marsalis, *Essentially Ellington Q&A*, 2022

all art created by those who do not seek outward validation. Art has an effect, always. Varying in size and type, there is always something there. Sometimes art ends its way into, and even around the world, and sometimes it never makes it out of an artist's head- but on whatever scale, art affects those who experience it. A thought or idea that is art does not need to affect anyone but the artist- and it may only be evaluated by that artist. But it still has an effect, and it can still be evaluated.

Because of how much material this paper is covering, it is important to summarize the argument within the context of the objections. Creative conceptualization is a necessary condition in order for something to be art. Creative conceptualization does not distinguish art by itself, so a thought that would be art needs to hold quality x (the undefined aspect that distinguishes art as art). First we saw why creative conceptualization is a necessary condition, showing that conceptualization is a part of art regardless of the form the art takes. We also established that conceptualization can be located in a perceiver of aesthetic experience. We looked at various possible interpretations of quality x that would prevent a thought alone from being art. These included ideas like physical (and beautiful) manifestation being necessary to art, which we rejected with materialist concepts and a revised definition of artifactuality. Then we began with the interpretations of necessary conditions that would not persist simultaneously with an un-externally communicated thought, specifically two problems of communication. The rest of these problems was Tolstoy's idea of means of emotional communication, which we gave two possible refutations for: self communication as well as the unrealized but still present potential for communication. And lastly we evaluated the possibility that that critic or peer evaluation was essential to art. For both ideas we came across the conclusion that if the proper individual conceptualized a thought (whether that proper individual has an immense understanding of art or be a sufficient recipient of their own thought), then the necessary conditions would be satisfied. Even with the full understanding of the logic behind this argument, there are some who may still feel as if the implications of art in the mind are negative. It is important that we justify the correct implications of art in the mind, and clear up any misconceptions. The rst problem that comes to mind is the devaluing of art outside the mind. One might ask: if a thought can be art, what is the point of ever acting upon those thoughts? To that I would say to leave it to the discretion of the artist. Art will always have an impact on the world around it, even if only indirectly through the change that is wrought on the artist, and any thought that is art may be translatable to a more traditional, physical

representation- but only if the originator of the thought sees it. There was also a question of ethical implication to this argument: if a thought in the mind can be art just like outside the mind, then can we condemn bad ethical thoughts the way that we do action? While many philosophers have presupposed art to be partially contingent on the effect it has on other people, it has not been proven to be absolutely necessary to art theory. Ethical theory is contingent on the effect it has on other people. A negative thought in the mind alone can only affect the originator of the thought, which in a sense they consent to by having the thought in the first place. A negative action on another person is different, because it disrupts the freedom of their autonomy as an individual.

Art in the mind has other, more positive implications to the world around it that I would also like to highlight before the conclusion of this essay. I believe that humans are inherently artistic creatures. Not only from a philosophy standpoint; anthropology shows that art could very well be part of our bio-cultural evolution as a species. Some of the earliest forms of art predate not only organized civilization and agriculture, but even language. If a thought by itself can be art, the implications on humanity are vast. Many things could be related to art in our internal processes, from compassion to analytical reasoning. Philosophy itself could be more related to art than many philosophers believe. Obviously this is all just speculation, but the possibilities are grand. The most important implication of art existing in the mind should be the empowerment of one's own thoughts. These thoughts could offer emotional depth through contemplation ("subsequent use"), or enjoyment and enrichment of taste. These thoughts can do what art can do for you, and so you should never shy away from thinking about them in depth. The effect one can have on the self is greater than most think, and if there is one thing I would have the reader take away from this argument–it would be to stop looking solely externally for artistic validation. We as humans can do more than most of us think, and I believe that that, like art, is an impactful thought to have.

Thank you for your time reading.

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How I Learned to Stop Worrying and See Anew:

The Ethical Dimensions of Satire and Interpretation in War Films

Chloe Barrie

This paper explores the ethical dimensions of perception and interpretation in war film, with a specific focus on Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove: Or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*.[1] Drawing on Ludwig Wittgenstein's philosophy of aspect perception and the interpretive framework provided by Hilsabeck, the analysis examines the relationship between perception and interpretation in how an audience interacts with the film. Through a close reading of *Dr. Strangelove*, this paper argues that the satirical nature of this film is essential for its critique of war rhetoric, masculinity, and the military-industrial complex. Satire, as both critique and entertainment, shapes how audiences are invited to "see anew" and reevaluate their moral and epistemic frameworks. The ethical dimension of aspect perception—the willingness to engage with and reinterpret visual and linguistic cues —is central to the moral agent's virtue and ability to critically engage with media and the world at large. The analysis demonstrates how satirical film can function as a site for altering perception, fostering reinterpretation, and encouraging an ethically engaged audience.

The epistemic and ethical questions surrounding perception and interpretation have been a point of interest for many authors, with Wittgenstein's later work becoming common in linguistic film theory after the mid 20th century. Popularized by Stanley Cavell,[2] linguistic film theory analyzes the aesthetics of film by investigating how meaning is conveyed through sounds and symbols. While Wittgenstein's earlier work was not much concerned with the arts, authors such as Burke Hilsabeck, Avner Baz, Michael Campbell, and Michael O'Sullivan have applied his later theories to film, specifically in the area of perception and interpretation.

Wittgenstein's early work explores logical relationships between propositions and the world. In *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, he expands upon Russell and Frege's theories on logic and language. He argues that the world is made up of facts (challenging the prior thought that the world is made up of objects) where facts are a representation of the existent state of affairs, and the state of affairs is made up of combinations of objects. Continuing this, he proposes that thoughts and propositions are pictures which are models of reality. The logical structure of the picture is analogous with the state of affairs which it pictures. Wittgenstein's later work is a complete rejection of the dogmatism that was central to the original premise of *Tractatus*. Rather than focusing on logic as the center of understanding the

[1] George, *Dr. Strangelove: Or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb,* 2000.
[2] Shaw, *Stanley Cavell and the magic of Hollywood films*, 2019

world, he shifts the focus to grammar and how language shapes our understanding. Grammar dictates the way we use language to articulate meaning and defines the context in which information is presented. Where there once was an emphasis on definition and analysis, he argues for a shift to 'family resemblance'. This refers to the idea that things can be grouped together based on overlapping similarities rather than one defining feature that makes them all the same. Building off of this, he offers a mode of perception known as 'seeing as' which describes how something is seen differently based on one's current understanding of that thing and the context in which it is presented.

According to Wittgenstein, perception is the physical act of viewing something, while interpretation is how that information is processed and meaning is assigned to it. Aspect perception —the phenomenon in which a single perceptual experience can yield multiple interpretations—is a way of evaluating the relationship between the two. Aspect perception highlights the interplay between what is seen and how it is understood, focusing on how interpretation moves beyond sensory inputs and reflects deeper cultural and moral frameworks. Understanding the relationship between perception and interpretation (and the modes of evaluating the relationship between the two) is central to understanding how knowledge is formed around our internal moral frameworks and cultural backgrounds. While binary examples of aspect perception are often used—such as the ambiguous duck-rabbit example (figure 1)—they have shortcomings in film perception. Due to the inherently multidimensional nature of film, it cannot be accurately analyzed or understood through a strictly binary framework. This is because binary examples rely on an "either/or" structure (one either sees a duck or a rabbit, but not both). However, film requires a more nuanced mode of evaluation. Multiple factors, such as visual, auditory, and temporal elements, contribute to the viewer's interpretation. As the film progresses, the viewer must continuously reassess their interpretations, which leads to a more dynamic and evolving understanding of the film's meaning.
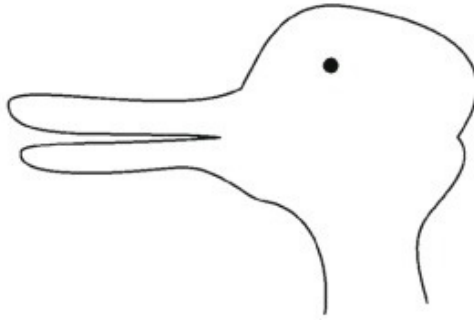
Figure 1: Duck-Rabbit

The concept of "seeing as" refers to the broader process of interpreting a given event in a specific manner, influenced by context and comprehension. In contrast, "aspect perception" specifically denotes the mental experience of concurrently understanding multiple possible interpretations of the same objects. In the duck-rabbit example, one sees the entire image but sees it either as a duck or as a rabbit. The image is seen, but what is seen is based on the subject's interpretation. Aspect perception therefore operates as an analysis of how the same visual event can be interpreted in different ways. [3] In the attempt to know an object it is interpreted, and once the object is understood, the actual object is replaced with the known object. [4] Extending the duck rabbit example, one can see the image as a continuous line and as a dot, but once it is understood to be either a duck or a rabbit, the conception of line-and-dot is replaced with the duck-rabbit illusion.

Films function as a representation of the world around us. Through images and sounds, a world representative of reality is created and presented to an audience. The audience then creates their own interpretations of that manufactured world.[5] Within this framework of perception, this analysis

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[3] Hilsabeck, *Seeing Soldiers, Seeing Persons: Wittgenstein, Film Theory, and Charlie Chaplin's Shoulder Arms*, p. 184
[4] This is what was known in Lacanian psychoanalysis as the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real.
[5] According to Baurdillard, there are four steps of hyperreal reproduction: 1. Basic reflection of reality, i.e. in immediate perception; 2. Perversion of reality, i.e. in representation;3. Pretense of reality, where there is no model; 4. Simulacrum, which "bears no relation to any reality whatsoever".

will center on the relationship between film and the audience's interpretation, examining how perception itself is inherently value-laden and serves as a reflection of one's moral character. Perception is based on personal values, culture, and experiences, so when one perceives something that framework is utilized in order to make sense of what has been seen. Films possess moral significance due to their capacity to shape and transform an individual's moral disposition by presenting new ways of perceiving and understanding the world.

When something is interpreted the interpreter must, consciously or subconsciously, utilize their preconceived knowledge and value systems in order to make sense of what they have perceived. This system is one which is constructed from cultural and linguistic backgrounds. When communicating an idea—asking the audience to interpret a stimulus in a certain way—there is a certain grammar that is required to convey the proper message. In the area of film interpretation, grammar extends beyond natural language and also refers to the context in which the film is presented. This is essential because the "grammar" of a film—the arrangement of visual, auditory, and temporal elements—dictates how we perceive and assign meaning to what is before us. Just as linguistic grammar structures our understanding of written or spoken language, the grammar of a film shapes how we interpret its narrative, characters, and themes. The ways in which the literal aspects of a film are depicted dictate how the underlying figurative aspects should be interpreted. Satire is a "genre with the purpose to critique and entertain",[6] meaning that in order for a piece of media to be considered satirical there must be a balance between humor and criticism. The satirical aspects of a film stem from the method in which the literal parts of the film are portrayed. Elements like exaggerated character behaviors, ironic juxtapositions, or an overly serious tone applied to absurd situations all work to construct the satirical intent, giving the audience an experience which is both amusing and critically reflective. Therefore, the literal aspects of a film serve as the foundation upon which its satirical impact is built, influencing how viewers engage with and interpret its deeper meaning.

Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove: Or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* is a dark comedy and satirical critique of Cold War politics, machismo, military bureaucracy, and the existential threat of nuclear annihilation. The film follows a series of escalating events triggered by the delusional General Jack D. Ripper, who unilaterally orders a nuclear attack on the Soviet Union under the pretense of preserving American hegemony. As the U.S. government scrambles to avert global catastrophe, the action shifts between three primary settings: a bomber plane en route to its

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[6] Declercq, *A Definition of Satire (And Why a Definition Matters)*, p. 328

target, the Pentagon's War Room, and General Ripper's besieged military base. In the War Room, President Merkin Muffley, his advisors, and the eccentric ex-Nazi scientist Dr. Strangelove debate increasingly absurd strategies to contain the crisis. The film culminates in an iconic and tragicomic moment as Major Kong, a gung-ho bomber pilot, rides a nuclear bomb to its detonation, symbolizing humanity's descent into self-destruction. In the end, the film functions as a criticism of the machismo American military industrial complex through necessary saterial aspects. Using exaggerations of masculinity, sexuality, and militarism, the film represents war as an extension of fragile male egos with nuclear annihilation being the inevitable outcome.

During the viewing of a film, the audience's knowledge deviates from what the characters understand in the world of the film. Not only does the audience engage with the film from the perspective of the characters, but in the experience of viewing the film itself, the audience produces knowledge that the characters can not possess. The audience produces knowledge in an alternate way due to the satirical nature of the film; the viewing of the characters from a third perspective leads to the creation of knowledge with the understanding of the characters actions. By understanding what the characters themselves are aware of, and also understanding the context of the entire film, the audience is exposed to the subtext of the film and can gain an understanding of what the film is actually about. For example, in Dr. Strangelove, the audience understands General Ripper's delusional desire for American prosperity, while being ironically exposed to the massive sign outside his base, reading "peace is our profession".

In film, satire exists both as a mode of critique and a method of entertainment. Thus, the use of satire dictates how the film should be perceived to be fully understood. Understanding the satirical aspect of a film is core to understanding the film itself. The relationship between the critical and the entertaining components of satire create a space in which a re-understanding of our knowledge can take place[7]. [8]A good moral agent is one who is willing to recognize the importance of this space and reevaluate their paradigm in favor of ones which might be more virtuous. Individuals who allow themselves to adopt new perspectives and envision alternative contexts for the characters and objects within a film's world demonstrate a form of moral and imaginative intelligence that is necessary to be a virtuous moral agent.[9] Therefore, the ethical plane of aspect perception is one's willingness to see anew.

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[7] Here Wittgenstein sets the foundation for more modernist ethics.

[8] Ware, *Find It New: Aspect-Perception and Modernist Ethics*, p.255

[9] Hilsabeck, *Seeing Soldiers, Seeing Persons: Wittgenstein, Film Theory, and Charlie Chaplin's Shoulder Arms,* p.181

In evaluating morality in relation to perception, it is imperative to draw a distinction between willingness to see things anew and ability to see anew. A lack of ability to pick up on the underlying subtext of a film or to understand the context in which a film ought to be interpreted does not make one morally inept. Lack of ability to see anew could stem from cognitive or cultural differences which are not necessarily reflective of moral character. However, an unwillingness to see things anew, even when one recognizes the underlying meanings, is suggestive of poor moral character and a lack of imaginative intelligence. An inability to recognize multiple aspects of a single object or situation differs from a failure to understand the significance or meaning of a word, symbol, or concept within a specific context. While many consider morality to be a binary, or a scalar, it is ultimately multidimensional. Utilizing a framework such as virtue ethics - an ethical theory that emphasizes the development of good character traits to guide moral behavior - it is beneficial to prioritize the development of a moral paradigm. An interpretation which enhances moral character will create a more virtuous individual and therefore be more ethical. Within one film, there can be multiple ethical interpretations. Extending the Dr. Strangelove example, understanding the film as a critique of masculinity, the American military system, or both are all ethical interpretations. Thus, interpretation of a film begins to become immoral when the viewer chooses to look away from the deeper meaning, or when the viewer understands the deeper meaning and chooses to interpret the opposite (ie. interpreting *Dr. Strangelove* as endorsing the machismo American military system).

Disregarding the intended critique of a film not only reflects a deficiency in moral character but can also result in flawed moral judgment, leading individuals to assess similar ethical dilemmas inadequately. Moreover, the outright rejection of a film's intended meaning can itself be considered an unethical act. If films carry ethical significance, they must be evaluated accordingly. Although there is no single correct way to interpret a film, those with ethical significance must elicit a range of moral and immoral interpretations. While some interpretations may be ethically stronger than others, there will also be interpretations that are equally moral or immoral. This necessity distinguishes the misinterpretation of ethically charged films from the misinterpretation of media that may lack deeper moral implications. Film also functions as a mode of altering prior interpretations. Through this, what the audience originally perceives in a film is seen anew, and their interpretation is altered. One who might previously have been unable to understand the subtext of a film could gain insight into the criticism through recognizing the satirical aspects. In Dr. Strangelove, it would be a mistake to read the

film as a man who falls down from the sky riding a giant bomb rather than an epistemic critique of masculinity and the military industrial complex (and the relationship between the two). In reinterpreting the film and expanding perception, one's ability to move through the world as a good moral agent is improved. However, this is not to say that there is one correct way of interpreting the film or that one who is unable to understand the deeper meaning of the satirical nature of *Dr. Strangelove* is morally inept.

The moral significance of film stems from its ability to alter one's judgement and character. Satire functions as an aspect of the grammar through which the film is understood and aids in the audience's understanding of the moral dimension of the film. The ethical plane of aspect perception focuses on willingness rather than ability when interpreting media. While the inability to perceive certain meanings due to cultural or cognitive limitations does not constitute moral failure, the deliberate refusal to engage with alternative perspectives reveals an ethical and imaginative shortcoming. In *Dr. Strangelove*, satire functions as a transformative lens, urging the audience to reconsider entrenched ideologies surrounding war, masculinity, and institutional power structures. The critical aspects of the film enable audiences to reinterpret and expand their moral frameworks. Ultimately, film serves as a medium for ethical reflection, offering opportunities to challenge preconceived beliefs and develop a deeper understanding of our moral frameworks, how the world around us functions, and power structures. Due to the multidimensional nature of morality in film interpretation, multiple ethical readings can coexist, as long as they stem from a genuine engagement with the film. In contrast, ignoring or dismissing the deeper meanings within a work constitutes an inherently unethical mode of media consumption.

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The Philosophy of Physical Appearance:

Cosmetic Surgery, Identity, and the Eternal Search for Self

Brielle Brzytwa

Introduction

 Cosmetic surgery occupies a fascinating space in contemporary discourse, as it blends questions of our perception of identity, aesthetics, technology, ethics, and capitalism. While often being dismissed as a superficial or purely aesthetic choice, the philosophical dimensions of cosmetic surgery reveal the complex tensions between selfhood and our broader societal norms. Is altering one's appearance an act of self-empowerment or a submission to the external pressures they might feel? Does it enhance their personal identity or distort it? This paper explores these questions through various philosophical frameworks, and it intends to challenge the assumptions that underlie our perceptions of beauty, authenticity, and artificiality. This paper specifically addresses voluntary cosmetic surgery, which I define as elective procedures undertaken for aesthetic or personal preference, rather than as a necessary response to a medical condition or ailment, such as reconstructive surgery following a severe burn or injury. The discussion focuses solely on cosmetic alterations made to enhance or change one's appearance in the absence of medical necessity.

Is Cosmetic Surgery a Lie or a Revelation?

 If our external appearance is mutable, does that mean our identity is, too? Jean-Paul Sartre's concept of bad faith suggests that people deceive themselves when they deny their fundamental nature. He argues that individuals "flee from their freedom" by conforming to societal expectations rather than embracing their authentic selves. [1] From this perspective, one might argue that cosmetic surgery is an act of self-deception, or rather, an attempt to escape the reality of one's original form.

 However, an opposing argument suggests that modifying one's body is actually the greatest act of authenticity. Judith Butler's theory of performativity supports this notion, as she asserts that identity is not fixed but rather continuously constructed through repeated actions. [2] This perspective also aligns with that of Simone de Beauvoir's argument that "...one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman," [3] suggesting that self-definition is an ongoing process. With these perspectives in mind, we are

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[1] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 1957
[2] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 1990
[3] Beauvoir, *The Second Sex,* 1989

left to ask: If identity is fluid and ever-evolving, then is there ever truly a "real" self to begin with? Furthermore, this tension forces us to reconsider whether cosmetic surgery is an illusion or an act of self-revelation.

Who Decides What Is Attractive?

　　　　Michel Foucault's concept of biopower, where social norms are said to dictate how our bodies should look, frames beauty as a form of discipline. Foucault argues that "power is everywhere,"[4] shaping bodies and identities through cultural expectations. The standards we internalize often emerge from historical, cultural, and economic forces rather than from any intrinsic measure of attractiveness. Similarly, Pierre Bourdieu expands on this idea with the concept of habitus, which effectively describes how social conditioning influences our aesthetic preferences.[5] For example, the classical Greeks idolized the straight nose, while modern influencers have elevated the ideal of high cheekbones and plump lips. So, if these ideals shift over time, does that render them arbitrary?

　　　　On the other hand, evolutionary psychology suggests that certain traits, including bodily and facial symmetry, are hardwired into our brains as indicators of genetic fitness.[6] Considering this, if beauty is both biologically and socially constructed, then is cosmetic surgery an act of liberation from these imposed norms, or is it actually a deeper entrenchment within them? The intersection of these perspectives suggests that beauty standards operate at both a cultural and biological level, thus making the choice to undergo cosmetic surgery both an act of agency and an unconscious adherence to such deeply ingrained societal pressures.

However, the question of empowerment complicates this discourse. Who gets to decide what is empowering? Feminist scholars such as Bell Hooks have critiqued the idea that individual choice alone defines empowerment by arguing that structures of race, class, and gender shape what options are available in the first place.[7] While some see cosmetic surgery as a tool for reclaiming control over their bodies, others argue that true empowerment cannot be disentangled from the systems that create

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[4] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 1995
[5] Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 1984
[6] Buss, *The Evolution of Desire*, 2016
[7] Hooks, *Feminism Is for Everybody,* 2000

beauty hierarchies in the first place. Furthermore, empowerment is often class-dependent; those with economic privilege have greater access to "choice" in altering their appearance, while those without financial means are often left to navigate beauty norms with fewer options.

Additionally, gender plays a crucial role in the cosmetic surgery debate. Women, in particular, are disproportionately influenced by societal expectations to modify their bodies. As Sandra Lee Bartky argues, the very idea of "self-improvement" for women is often rooted in patriarchal expectations that demand continuous surveillance and modification of their appearance.[8] While some women may find cosmetic surgery to be a means of personal empowerment, it is worth questioning whether that empowerment is fully self-determined or if it remains largely shaped by societal pressures that dictate whose bodies are most valued. Thus, the debate over cosmetic surgery is not simply a matter of personal choice but a reflection of deeper societal structures that shape what is considered desirable, acceptable, and ultimately, empowering.

Are We Upgrading or Erasing Ourselves?

Cosmetic surgery is an early step in body modification for an optimized human experience. Some philosophers argue that altering the body in any way is the first phase of transhumanism, or the movement that seeks to transcend our biological limitations through the use of technology. Nick Bostrom, a leading transhumanist thinker, suggests that "enhancement technologies should be understood as an extension of our natural evolution".[9] This perspective aligns with Donna Haraway's concept of the cyborg, which suggests that the modern human identity is already a fusion of biology and technology. [10]

Based on this line of thinking, if we accept that technological enhancement of cognition (such as AI brain implants) is valid, should we not extend the same acceptance to physical enhancements? If a surgically modified face and an AI-augmented brain both serve to improve our general life experiences, does one represent self-expression while the other represents self-destruction? Or are they more similar than we, as a society, tend to think? The transhumanist lens forces us to question whether body

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[8] Bartky, *Femininity and Domination,* 1990
[9] Bostrom, *A History of Transhumanist Thought,* 2007
[10] Haraway, *A Cyborg Manifesto*, 1991

modification is progress or a loss of something about ourselves that is inherently human. Moreover, this issue raises a myriad of pressing ethical concerns about accessibility and privilege; if body modification becomes the norm, will those who cannot afford it be left behind in an increasingly altered society?

Seeing and Being Seen

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's philosophy suggests that self-consciousness arises through the recognition we receive from others. He argues that "self-consciousness exists in and for itself when... it is acknowledged [by another],". [11] Cosmetic surgery often seeks to achieve social recognition; people undergo procedures to fit within or stand out from certain beauty ideals. Erving Goffman's theory of dramaturgy reinforces this notion, suggesting that identity is a performance tailored to different social contexts. [12]

But does this desire to be seen in a particular way make us dependent on external validation? If beauty is performative and relational, can one ever achieve an autonomous sense of self through surgery? This paradox raises an unsettling question: if no one saw us, would we still desire these modifications? If our identity is shaped by how we are perceived, do we even really have any agency over our own selfhood? Furthermore, if recognition is what grants us a sense of identity, then modifying one's body might be less about self-expression and more about securing social legitimacy within a given beauty paradigm.

Where Do We Draw the Line?

Critics of cosmetic surgery argue that such procedures create an artificial self, so by this logic, is all human intervention unnatural? We enhance our features with makeup, we dye our hair, and we edit the images that we choose to post online. If these modifications are widely accepted, why does surgery feel so different to us? Perhaps it is because surgical changes are more permanent, or because they force

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[11] Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit,* 1997
[12] Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life,* 1959

us to confront the uncomfortable truth that our bodies are not fixed, but they are malleable.

Yet, the line between medical necessity and aesthetic enhancement in terms of surgery has always been blurry. Consider the historical use of prosthetics; these were used not just for physical rehabilitation but also for aesthetic and social reintegration. In ancient Egypt, they constructed wooden toes in order to restore both function and appearance for those who had lost body parts in unforeseen circumstances.[13] Similarly, we saw Renaissance-era cosmetic prosthetics, such as wax noses for those who were disfigured by disease, that suggest that human intervention in appearance has always been both medical and social in nature.[14] The same could be said of modern technological augmentations, such as the AI-assisted brain implants designed to enhance cognitive function, as I previously mentioned. If such interventions promise to improve our quality of life, should they be viewed differently from cosmetic enhancements that improve self-perception and social mobility? [15]

Braces, which are often seen as a necessity rather than an indulgence, properly illustrate this tension. While their primary function is for dental health, they are also a cosmetic intervention that subtly reinforces the idea that straight teeth are the standard of beauty.[16] If we justify braces based on medical concerns but stigmatize elective cosmetic surgery, are we simply reinforcing an arbitrary distinction between "acceptable" and "vain" modifications? In both cases, the individual is making a choice to alter their body, often in response to societal expectations. This raises a larger question: is there a fundamental difference between physical and cosmetic augmentations, or are both just variations of the same long-standing human impulse to reshape ourselves in pursuit of an ideal?

With this in mind, if the body is an evolving canvas for our modification, does it make sense to draw a strict line between "natural" and "artificial" improvements? Some would argue that the line between acceptable and excessive modification is a moral one. This can include a mode where interventions that promote self-care and confidence are acceptable, but those that alter one's essence cross an ethical boundary. However, defining what constitutes an individual's "essence" remains a challenge, which then highlights the deeply personal and subjective nature of the act of body

[13] Finch, *Artificial Parts, Practical Lives,* 2002
[14] Kemp, *Medicine and Magic in Elizabethan England*, 1998
[15] Harari, *Homo Deus*, 1991
[16] Gladwell, *The Tipping Point*, 2000

modification. So, at what point do these modifications make us less ourselves? Is the essence of who we are bound to the physical form we were born with, or is it something that transcends the body and is instead shaped by our lived experiences, our thoughts, and our interactions with the world?

This question invites us to consider the very nature of human identity. Do these enhancements, whether cosmetic or technological, make us less human, or are they simply another extension of our desire to shape ourselves and the world around us?

In a way, how we present ourselves in the world and subsequently, how we choose to modify our bodies, has profound implications on our interactions with others and our environments. Our external appearance heavily influences how we are perceived and treated by society. For example, beauty standards have deeply shaped our social interactions, with studies showing that those who fit within these ideals tend to receive more favorable treatment.[17] Similarly, in a broader, philosophical sense, how we modify our bodies can affect our lived experiences; this can include our sense of agency in the world, our day-to-day interactions with others, and even our connection to the natural world. In this way, modifications may not only alter how we experience life but could also influence how others experience us, which then could potentially shape the very essence of our social identities.

The question of when we cease to be human following such procedures is central to debates about transhumanism, or the notion that, through technology and body modification, we can transcend our biological limitations and evolve into something "beyond human".[18] If we accept that all humans are constantly evolving, whether through cultural, technological, or natural processes, then perhaps body modifications are simply part of an ongoing journey, rather than a rejection of our humanity. In this sense, each of our chosen alterations or enhancements could be seen as a way to assert control over our lives and bodies, thus that modification itself is an expression of the human condition, moreover, one that constantly seeks growth and improvement. However, there is a valid concern that as we modify ourselves, we may be losing something intrinsic that connects us to the world and each other. This raises an unsettling question: do these modifications make us more "human," or do they risk alienating us from the very essence of our being?

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[17] Cash, *The Psychology of Physical Appearance,* 2002
[18] Bostrom, *Transhumanist Values*, 2005

Are We Alienating Ourselves from Our Being?

Martin Heidegger's concept of "being-toward-death" suggests that authenticity arises when individuals come to acknowledge their mortality. Because of this, cosmetic surgery, particularly anti-aging procedures, could be seen as an attempt to escape the passage of time and, by extension, the reality of death. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger asserts that the recognition of death gives life its meaning, as it forces individuals to face the limitations of their existence.[19] If wrinkles and sagging skin serve as reminders of our lives' finitude, then erasing them through cosmetic surgery might be a way of distancing ourselves from such existential truths. So, how many augmentations would it take before an individual could achieve a sense of immortality? Could a series of surgeries, procedures, and technological enhancements allow someone to stave off the inevitability of death, or would it only delay it? This raises further questions: if we could, through endless modifications, overcome the aging process, what would that mean for society as a whole?

One may be prompted to ask: if immortality were to become achievable in this way, what would be the societal implications? Would this pursuit of agelessness result in a new social hierarchy, perhaps one where those who could afford such endless modifications became more than human, while those who could not afford it were relegated to the status of "natural" beings? In the context of capitalism and social inequality, the ability to transcend time and death might only be accessible to a privileged few, which then further entrenches such societal divisions.[20] Moreover, this phenomena could create a society where identity and worth are even more tied to external appearance, as immortality itself becomes commodified.

However, is this pursuit of agelessness a rejection of our inherent mortality or a form of self-empowerment? Cosmetic surgery may provide an illusion of control over aging, but by doing so, individuals might ignore the authenticity that comes from accepting the natural process of aging. Philosophers like Slavoj Žižek argue that the desire to transform our bodies to fit idealized standards of beauty represents a denial of the real, material nature of our existence. This denial can lead to a deeper sense of alienation, as individuals focus more on creating a projected image of themselves than

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[19] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 1962
[20] Haraway, *A Cyborg Manifesto,* 1991

engaging with their true, embodied selves.[21] Cosmetic surgery, then, might alienate individuals from their authentic being by turning them into their own idealized, artificial versions of themselves.

In contrast, it could be argued that the act of modifying one's body through surgery could be seen as an attempt to take control of one's destiny in a society that continually emphasizes external beauty as a marker of success. From a more existentialist perspective, choosing to undergo cosmetic surgery might be viewed as an exercise of personal autonomy, as individuals can then decide how they want to define their own identity and appearance, regardless of societal pressures. This view suggests that cosmetic surgery can be an affirmation of one's right to shape their existence according to their desires, perhaps even confronting death by redefining one's self-image before it is inevitably altered by time.

Beauty as a Commodity

In a consumer-driven society, our bodies have become products, particularly in the era of social media, where our appearance translates into social and financial capital. Cosmetic surgery, then, functions as an investment, as individuals seek to alter their appearance in ways that will yield both personal and professional advantages. The commodification of beauty is particularly evident in the way that influencers and celebrities leverage their physical appearances to maintain their status and profitability. The body itself is increasingly viewed as an asset that can be shaped, bought, and sold. As sociologist Naomi Wolf discusses in *The Beauty Myth*, beauty standards are not just aesthetic norms but are also intrinsically tied to capitalism.[22] Based on this thinking, it is evident that the pursuit of an idealized form of beauty becomes a way of ensuring social mobility, as individuals strive to align themselves with the commercial ideals that dominate the media and fashion industries.

For instance, the rise of influencer culture on platforms like Instagram has transformed our understanding of personal appearance into an economic enterprise. Influencers often alter their looks, sometimes through cosmetic procedures, to stay competitive in a market that rewards physical attractiveness and a curated self-image. According to media scholar Alice Marwick, influencers on

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[21] Žižek, *Living in the End Times,* 2010
[22] Wolf, *The Beauty Myth,* 1991

Instagram are often driven by the desire to maintain a certain aesthetic that is marketable, and this includes modifying their appearances through procedures like cosmetic surgery or heavy editing. In turn, cosmetic surgery becomes a tool not just for personal enhancement but also for maintaining a profitable, more marketable brand. Brands partner with influencers whose physical appearances align with the current beauty standards, thereby intending to use their visibility to sell products that promise to help others achieve similar looks. Marwick further explains that the commodification of the body in social media culture is not just about aesthetics but about the power dynamics of visibility and profit.[23]

This commercialization of beauty further extends into the mainstream media, where celebrities have long been expected to maintain consistently youthful, symmetrical appearances. The multi-billion-dollar beauty industry profits from this, of course, by advertising products and procedures that promise to defy aging, such as botox, lip fillers, and facelifts. As beauty scholar Jennifer Scanlon points out, the beauty industry is rooted in the idea that a woman's value is determined by her physical appearance, and it has effectively built an economy around perpetuating insecurities about aging.[24] In this context, cosmetic surgery is not only a personal choice but a commercialized necessity for those who want to stay relevant in the public eye.

Furthermore, the commodification of beauty is evident in the marketing of the notions of "self-care" and "wellness," where procedures that once seemed extreme, like cosmetic surgery, are now packaged as tools of self-empowerment. Sociologist Joanne Entwistle discusses how the commercialization of "self-care" through beauty practices often blurs the line between individual agency and consumerism. Cosmetic surgery procedures are marketed not just as physical enhancements but as tools for self-empowerment and self-expression, thus reinforcing the idea that beauty is an achievement to be attained through effort and financial expenditure.[25]

However, this commodification raises serious concerns on the grounds of ethicality. In an economy that thrives on consumer desires, beauty becomes a consumable product that requires our constant investment. This creates an environment where individuals are perpetually encouraged to modify their bodies in pursuit of societal approval or personal success. It also reinforces the notion that

[23] Marwick, *Status Update*, 2015
[24] Scanlon, *The Beauty Myth Revisited*, 2009
[25] Entwistle, *The Aesthetic Economy*, 2000

one's worth is tied to their physical appearance, rather than their intrinsic qualities or abilities. In this sense, cosmetic surgery can be seen as a symptom of a larger societal issue, moreover, one that prioritizes superficiality over authenticity.

As theorist Jean Baudrillard argues, in *The Consumer Society*, individuals have become the products they consume.[26] This process of self-transformation, which cosmetic surgery embodies, blurs the line between self-expression and self-objectification. This transformation can also be seen as synonymous to the rise of pornography and commodified bodies in popular culture. In pornographic representations, women's bodies, in particular, are often reduced to visual objects that are meant for consumption and sexual pleasure. This diminishes their human value as it is actively being defined by their physical appearance rather than their inherent qualities or talents. As philosopher Susan Bordo notes in *Unbearable Weight*, women's bodies have historically been shaped and viewed through a lens of desirability and objectification, often within patriarchal frameworks that prioritize their physical appeal over their personal agency or identity.[27] This dynamic mirrors the commercialized beauty industry, where bodies are similarly commodified, with a heavy emphasis placed on youth, symmetry, and other culturally constructed ideals of attractiveness. In this context, cosmetic surgery becomes an extension of this commodification process. It represents an investment in one's physical form as a kind of social currency. This, of course, is an asset that can be modified, enhanced, and marketed for one's social and professional advantage. Cosmetic surgery not only aligns with these aesthetic ideals but also reinforces them, which creates a never ending and seemingly paradoxical cycle where beauty is not only a reflection of our broader societal values but also a tangible, marketable product. The body, which was once primarily perceived as a practical tool for survival, is now a source of self-worth and external validation.

From a feminist perspective, this commodification of beauty places additional pressure on women, who have historically been subjected to intense scrutiny over their appearances. Iris Marion Young's *Throwing Like a Girl* provides insight into the ways that women experience their bodies under a social order that disciplines them into restrictive ideals of femininity. Young argues that women are taught to live in their bodies as objects to be looked at, rather than as active subjects who engage with

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[26] Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society,* 1998
[27] Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, 2003

the world freely.[28] In the context of cosmetic surgery, this phenomenon becomes even more pronounced. Women, especially those who do not naturally fit dominant beauty standards, may feel an added obligation to modify their appearances in order to be socially legible or desirable. The choice to undergo cosmetic surgery is therefore not made in isolation but is shaped by the external pressures that define femininity as something that must be carefully maintained and performed.

Moreover, these pressures are further compounded by the commercialization of beauty in social media, where bodies are often commodified and sold as part of a digital self-presentation. The rise of influencers has promoted the normalization of "Instagram faces," a term used to describe a combination of features enhanced through cosmetic procedures or digital editing. This has subsequently contributed to a new standard of beauty that is tied directly to the idea of capitalizing on one's physical appearance. In this environment, the line between self-expression and self-objectification becomes increasingly blurred. Social media platforms, particularly Instagram, often serve as the stage for personal branding, where influencers can turn their physical features into marketable assets. In this context, beauty is no longer merely an aesthetic ideal but a currency in the digital economy; one that can be exchanged for sponsorships, product placements, and collaborations with beauty and fashion brands. Influencers' faces and bodies have now become part of a cycle of consumerism, where self-worth is measured not by personal qualities or achievements but by how closely one aligns with a certain visual ideal.

This shift is particularly significant when considering the intersection of beauty and gender, where women are often held to stricter and more unrealistic standards of appearance. The proliferation of digitally altered images on social media exacerbates these pressures, thus making it harder to distinguish between what is "real" and what is digitally enhanced. Research shows that these alterations can have a profound impact on body image, with individuals increasingly feeling the need to meet impossible standards in order to be deemed valuable or desirable in the public eye.[29] This environment fosters a culture of hyper-visibility, where the commodification of one's image becomes a form of survival within what is considered to be the modern digital landscape. Women, in particular, may feel an obligation to participate in this visual economy, which then leads to a situation where their bodies and appearances are constantly under scrutiny and modification.

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[28] Young, *Throwing Like a Girl*, 1990
[29] Tiggemann & Slater, *NetGirls*, pg. 630–643, 2014

The concept of "self-objectification," as discussed by scholars like Fredrickson and Roberts, is central to understanding the psychological impact of this phenomenon. When individuals internalize the gaze of others, they begin to view themselves as objects to be consumed rather than as autonomous beings. Social media amplifies this tendency by creating spaces where the value of a person is often determined by their physical appearance, which is continuously curated and edited to achieve the desired look.[30] In a world where beauty is monetized and visual appeal becomes a means of economic advancement, self-expression is inevitably tied to the commercialization of one's image. As such, it is not simply about expressing one's identity but about navigating the complex landscape of personal brand-building and the commodification of one's physical form.

This trend also speaks to broader societal shifts in how beauty and desirability are defined. What was once considered a personal, private matter now becomes a public and economic pursuit, and the pressure to conform to these standards is pervasive. Beauty is no longer confined to the private sphere but is now a public commodity, open to evaluation, critique, and, ultimately, economic exploitation. Consequently, the commodification of beauty via social media has profound implications not only for individuals' self-perception but also for how beauty is experienced, consumed, and reproduced in society.

The commodification of beauty through cosmetic surgery also raises extensive questions about access and privilege in a society. Because cosmetic enhancements are often expensive and inaccessible to many, this means that those who can afford these procedures have an advantage in a society that places such high value on appearance. This further entrenches social inequality, as beauty becomes another form of capital that is available only to those who have the financial resources to acquire it or those who are lucky enough to possess it naturally. As a result, those unable to afford these enhancements may find themselves excluded from the social and professional benefits that come with conforming to such beauty standards. This creates a cycle in which beauty is not only a personal pursuit but also a mechanism for perpetuating social hierarchies.

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[30] Fredrickson & Roberts, *Objectification Theory*, p. 173-206, 1997

The Ever-Shifting Self

Ultimately, cosmetic surgery is neither purely self-empowerment nor absolute self-deception; it exists within a spectrum of complex philosophical tensions. It challenges the conventional ideas of authenticity, societal control, technological evolution, and even mortality itself. Whether seen as an act of defiance against nature or a submission to power structures that we have created, cosmetic surgery forces us to reckon with the fluidity of our identity and the ways in which we construct meaning through our appearance. As beauty ideals continue to evolve and technological advancements push the boundaries of human modification, the debate over cosmetic surgery will remain an ongoing reflection of our deeper philosophical anxieties and aspirations.

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Philosophy Club Hosts Socratic Seminar and Induction Ceremony

By Bri Brzytwa

Dr. Rieppel captures a photo of the group discussing Tignor's prompt.

On a recent evening, 3:30pm on the 30th of April, the Syracuse University Philosophy Club, in partnership with the Phi Sigma Tau honors society, welcomed students and faculty for a dual event that sought to combine a Socratic-style seminar and a formal induction ceremony. The event was hosted in Room 018 of Eggers Hall, better known as the Longhouse Seminar Room at Syracuse University. Approximately twenty people were in attendance.

The evening began with a welcome by Ellen Clark, the president of both the Philosophy Club and Phi Sigma Tau. She introduced Professor Josh Tignor, who led the seminar titled "Choosing for Everyone."

In keeping with a casual, inclusive environment, Professor Tignor encouraged participants to introduce themselves informally and to refer to him simply as "Josh." He also asked attendees to share a recent book, film, or television show they had enjoyed.

> *Josh Tignor is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Philosophy at Syracuse University, where he specializes in introducing students to the richness and rigor of philosophical inquiry. With a deep passion for teaching, Josh is known for his engaging approach to complex ideas and his dedication to making philosophy accessible and meaningful to a wide range of learners. His academic interests span across ethics, metaphysics, and the philosophy of mind, though he is equally enthusiastic about fostering open dialogue on fundamental questions that shape the human experience.*
>
> *Beyond his academic work, Josh has recently become a father, which has further deepened his perspective on care, responsibility, and the human condition. Whether in the classroom or in conversation, Josh brings warmth, clarity, and curiosity to every interaction, making him a thoughtful and inspiring presence in the philosophical community and the perfect person to deliver such a seminar.*

The discussion began by centering around Ursula K. Le Guin's short story, *The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas*

For those unfamiliar, the hypothetical thought experiment presents a provocative moral scenario. In short, there is a utopian society whose citizens' flourishing depends on the perpetual suffering of one child. Josh began by asking initially what everyone thought of the scenario, and more importantly, what "we" should do in response. Attendees of the seminar offered a wide range of interpretations and moral responses, from advocating for the child's freedom to exploring the utilitarian benefits of preserving the society's collective happiness.

Professor Tignor extended the conversation by drawing parallels between Omelas and real-world injustices, notably referencing the Democratic Republic of the Congo. He prompted discussion on the ethical implications of using "we" in moral discourse. Through this, Josh explained that he intended to underscore the tensions between universal ethical claims and moral relativism. The seminar challenged participants to reconsider the reasons as to why difficult ethical actions, such as rejecting injustice, are often avoided due to their inconvenience or cost.

A central takeaway from the discussion came in Tignor's suggestion to "just try it on," which was an approach he used in order to encourage individuals to experiment with using collective, ethical reasoning ("we") in everyday decisions. Whether choosing how to shop or consume media, Josh expressed that adopting this mindset might lead to society as a collective making more conscientious and community-minded choices.

Phi Sigma Tau President Ellen Clark pictured reciting the induction speech to the recognized students (photo also by Dr. Rieppel)

Following the seminar, Ellen led the Phi Sigma Tau induction ceremony. Four students were officially inducted into the national honors society in recognition of their academic achievement and philosophical engagement. She shared the society's purpose and name origin, which translates from Greek as "the honor of those who love wisdom." Each inductee received a sealed certificate and public acknowledgment of their new status.

The evening concluded with a recognition of departmental accomplishments, including the publication of four student essays in the latest issue of Aurantium, the department's undergraduate philosophy journal. Each published member received a certificate of their achievement.

Following this, a transition of leadership was announced for both Philosophy Club, Phi Sigma Tau, and Aurantium. Both Leana, the current editor-in-chief of Aurantium, and Ellen are graduating this spring. Given this fact, the two named the new leadership for each of the three organizations.

New leadership was established as follows with the permission of Professor Michael Rieppel, the Undergraduate Director of the Philosophy Department at Syracuse University

Ben Popkin - President of Philosophy Club
Cara Williams - President of Phi Sigma Tau
Bri Brzytwa - Editor-in-chief of Aurantium

Finally, Ellen offered closing remarks and encouraged continued participation in future Philosophy Department events and extracurriculars.

Overall, the event offered a thoughtful balance of philosophical inquiry and community recognition, which is generally the department's primary commitment. The seminar portion of the event fostered an open and intellectually stimulating environment where students and faculty felt comfortable grappling with complex ethical questions, largely due to Professor Tignor's approachable facilitation style. The conversation around *The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas* encouraged a critical engagement with real-world moral dilemmas. Meanwhile, the Phi Sigma Tau induction brought a celebratory tone to the evening in recognizing student achievement and reaffirming the value of philosophical study. The dual structure of the event allowed attendees to reflect both individually and collectively, making it a meaningful occasion for students invested in philosophical thought and academic growth.

The department hopes to host such events again, and more often, if possible.

Fall 2025 Submission Info!

Paper submissions for the Fall 2025 Sigma (Σ) Cycle are now open!

Additionally, we also collect artwork submissions. Requirements for both are listed on the forms.

The deadline for both is November 15th, at 11:59pm and we operate on a rolling basis for acceptances. Don't hesitate!

Paper Submission Form

Artwork Submission Form

Let's keep in touch!

For any inquiries on the status of your application, interest in becoming an editor, reader, social media rep, or potential collaborations, please email our team: **aurantium8@gmail.com**

For following up with publication updates and related Philosophy events, follow our instagram: **@aurantium_at_su**

Until next time...