

# THE St. John's Review

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See the Editor's Note for instructions to subscribers.

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**Double Issue** (Fall 2019-Spring 2020)

# The St. John's Review

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Please Note:

This is a special double issue containing both  
numbers 1 and 2 of volume 61.

*A separate number will not be published  
in the spring of 2020.*



# The Future of *The St. John's Review*

In the fall of 2020, *The St. John's Review* will become mainly an online journal.

The reasons for making this decision were detailed in the last double issue of the *Review* in the fall of 2018. As we noted then, online publishing offers some advantages over traditional on-paper publishing. There can be more frequent updates and releases of new articles; authors can use additional media such as audio, video, and interactive applications; readers could engage in well-moderated online discussions.

The first step in the move to online publication will be a static webpage ([www.sjc.edu/review](http://www.sjc.edu/review)) which will present the current issue together with a link to past issues. Over the coming year, a fully functioning website will take the place of the static webpage.

For those of our readers who still prefer booklike objects to digital simulacra, the *Review* will continue to be available in hard copy for a nominal price in a print-on-demand format. Since the journal will no longer be mailed out, the current mailing list of subscribers will be discontinued.

*If you would like to be notified about purchasing future issues when they appear, please send your contact information in an email to [review@sjc.edu](mailto:review@sjc.edu) or in postal mail to Editor, The St. John's Review, St. John's College, Annapolis, MD 21401.*

Please make a note to contact us soon. This will ensure that we know where to send future communications about the *Review*.



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# *Charlotte's Web* for Grownups

Mera J. Flaumenhaft\*

“It is not often that someone comes along who is a true friend and a good writer. Charlotte was both.” With those famous words, E. B. White ends his story *Charlotte's Web*. That ending is a strange joke. It moves us, and it raises questions. Charlotte the spider is called a writer because she forms, with the threads in her web, symbols that are recognizable as words; but can she be called a writer in any fuller sense? And what is it about being a “true friend” and about being a “good writer” that makes their conjunction possible but rare?

The rare existence of true friends who are also good writers suggests that friendship and writing might be in tension with each other—perhaps because, on the one hand, a true friend tends to devote himself so much to the needs and pleasures of his friends as to neglect the development of his own talent; and because, on the other hand, a good writer tends to be too concerned with his own excellence, and its promise of future fame, even of immortal

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\*The writer of this essay passed away at the end of December 2018, leaving it behind on her computer in a draft that was complete but much in need of editing. She had last touched it no later than the beginning of September. The numbers in parentheses (which have been left as they were, somewhat selective and some of them possibly inaccurate) are references to the pages in the sixtieth anniversary edition of *Charlotte's Web* (New York: HarperCollins, 2012).

Everything that Mera wrote she envisioned as a conversational opening to her colleagues, to her students, and to her other friends; and almost all that she wrote was first presented as a Friday night lecture, followed by a question period several hours long, at St. John's College in Annapolis. While she worked on what she was writing, she spent countless hours discussing it all with me (her husband and colleague, Harvey Flaumenhaft)—except for this essay, which she would not share at all, even in the last few months of her life, when she lost the ability



honor, to develop deep friendships in the present. Perhaps, however, being a “true friend” and being a “good writer” do have something to do with each other. Indeed, perhaps the best writer can be the truest, the most lasting friend. White’s story invites its readers to consider how thoughtful speech may be essential to the most generous giving that characterizes both true friendship and good writing.

In accepting that invitation to learning, we’ll begin by considering the characters in the story who are human: Fern Arable, her family, and their neighbors. Their plain American speech well serves their daily needs—in childrearing, in business, in community activities like church, school, and county fair, and in getting and giving information about the latest news or products. Their social relations are based on proximity—on households which are made up of families, relatives who are “close,” and people who merely dwell “nearby”—rather than being based on simply free choice or on introspection and extended discussion. Next, we’ll turn to considering anthropomorphized animals who are able to talk but do so in speech marked by peculiarities that reveal the limits of their capacity for friendship and community life: a family of geese and a solitary rat. And finally, we’ll consider the talking animals who are the protagonists of the story: Wilbur the pig and Charlotte the spider, whose fuller friendship is based on individual choice and on their particular involvement in thinking and speaking together. At the heart of their story is death. Death

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not only to work but even to put words on paper. I have edited what I found on her computer, giving effect to the suggestions that I would have made (and likely would have had accepted)—with a view to condensing what was repetitive, indicating transitions more clearly and in better order, modifying some instances of weak wording or of poor syntax, and correcting errors. The thoughts are all hers; I have tried merely to improve their expression. I believe that I have done what she wanted and expected me to do, to compensate for deficiencies imposed on her by illness. I hope I have succeeded in making suitable for public presentation this remarkable and nobly done farewell from someone who was both so true a friend and so good a writer.

is also the destiny of the human beings in the story, as well as of the other animals and even of the vegetation; but although the sadness of mortality is assuaged by the spectacle of the animals' generation of others like themselves and of the vegetation's seasonal regeneration of itself, the story that links Charlotte to Wilbur suggests another way, besides generation or regeneration, that can mitigate the harshness of death's inevitability. That story is about friendship and writing.

## I. FERN AND THE OTHER FOLKS

Fern Arable is the spirited little girl who seems at first to be the protagonist of *Charlotte's Web*. In sneakers and pigtails, she spends her days swimming in the brook, swinging in the barn, and squabbling with her brother Avery. The story begins when she hears that her father intends to kill a newborn piglet. "This is unfair," she cries, wondering if the gentle man responsible for her own birth would have killed her had she been weak and runty. When she declares that this is "the most terrible case of injustice I ever heard of" (3), a queer look comes over Mr. Arable's face: he seems "ready to cry himself" (3). He agrees to let the baby pig live and be cared for by his daughter. Why does he do this? Is it because he is reluctant to distress his child, or is it in order to teach her that her righteous protest will commit her to a lot of work? He does not concede that killing the runt is unjust. Perhaps he realizes that Fern's appeal to justice is immature, for she has not thought about the difference between what's regrettable and what's unjust, the difference between butchery and murder. He may think that one can be unjust only to another being that is like oneself in its having the ability to distinguish between justice and injustice.

But perhaps Fern has reminded him of something problematic about the breeding, raising, and feeding of one independent living being to another, turning it in effect into that other animal, or destroying it if it cannot serve the purpose of having its flesh transformed into another animal's flesh, rather than leaving it to be most fully itself. In the very beginning, according to the Bible, humans did not eat fellow creatures; even subhuman animals ate

grass rather than other animals. It was not until after the Flood that humans were granted permission to eat meat; and the Bible reminds Noah's descendants of the original prohibition by forbidding all of them to consume the blood in the flesh which they were permitted to eat, and also forbidding some of them to consume animals of certain kinds. They were to be human eaters, not animal feeders. Most of Noah's descendants do eat meat; some—especially the young—refuse, and many of their elders might also abstain if they themselves had to kill the living source of their meat, or see its own intact looks as they begin to consume it. Some languages draw attention to the difference between the animal itself and the food it becomes for humans by having different words, such as “pig” and “pork,” and “sheep” and “mutton.” When Mr. Arable tells his brother-in-law that he'll get some “extra good ham and bacon” from “this wonderful pig” (126), he mentally transforms Wilbur from pig into pork. In the world of Mr. Arable, human beings also make use of some “lower” animals not for food but for work, also in this way substituting human ends for the natural ends intrinsic to the animals themselves. But although no one at this farm would harness or eat the cocker spaniel, Mr. Arable probably couldn't say much about why, not himself being a deep thinker or a thoughtful speaker. He does his work humanely, he cares for his family, and he continues to raise and sell livestock.

Pigs were bred by E. B. White himself, who was amused at readers who thought the author of *Charlotte's Web* might become a vegetarian. (See his essay “Death of a Pig,” and his remarks on a letter from a vegetarian. Indeed, after White's death, PETA—People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals—proposed to turn his home in Maine into a vegetarian cafe and pig protection headquarters!) White's story, however, does, albeit gently, raise questions about whether it is moral to butcher and eat pigs. Does eating a pig violate its nature—is a pig a being with “rights”? Whether it is moral to be a carnivore is a question that will return when we consider Charlotte later on; but however appropriate an *hors d'oeuvre* the question may be for our discussion, and however long it should remain on the table, it is not the main course

in what White's book serves up as food for thought. There is no comment when, with the piglet comfortably cradled in Fern's arms, the family sits down to breakfast, savoring the odors not only of fresh coffee but also of bacon (30), as at the Fair later they will enjoy the smell of frying hamburgers (130). Nor is there comment about young Avery, who catches trout to fry for supper (42), and who will probably grow up to raise pigs and geese for market, even though he will, after his boyhood pranks, learn not to inflict pain upon them.

The rural American setting of this story emphasizes not what its human characters eat, but the way that they live their lives in time. They are born, grow up, have children, grow old, and die—seeming to accept these events as given, and devoting little attention to any life after their bodies have lived out their time. There are no references to a civic life that endures, or to buildings and monuments that serve as reminders of patriotic courage, or to records of inventions and discoveries, or to works of art—the usual means by which human beings aspire to and attain some semblance of immortality. The fertile, peaceful location of the story doesn't even have a name, and there are no references to memorable past events or anticipated future ones. The future of these people lies in their children and their land, which, in different ways, will live after them. "Arable" land is land that is "plowable," and so is suitable for fostering more life, however lived.

The human beings in White's story are decent, peaceable folks; they are not self-promoters seeking to extend their mortal lives by achieving reputations. The Fair is a typically American seasonal event that features eating, entertainment, and new products to be bought and sold. The pig-contest honors a winner judged for size and weight, rather than for ability and training, which can lead to some achievement. "Uncle," the huge hog who wins that official prize, is the last talking animal introduced in White's tale, but he is the least human of the animals in the story. Charlotte, who attempts to approach him with her usual polite introduction, recognizes his "unattractive personality." Unattached to anyone else, he gives nothing to anyone. What he is

recognized for—his only essential activity—is adding more “stuff” to what is already there on him. He has no interest in development, or in learning, much less any interest in speech, or in how long his own fleshly life will endure. “Uncle” is not recognized for any cleanliness that results from a buttermilk bath, or for radiance, or for humility; and his arrogance at the final judging underlines the “miracle” when Wilbur wins the special award for his “humility.”

As with the adults around her, Fern’s attention is on her ever-changing life, rather than on anything like some frozen fame. It also becomes clear that she is less interested in justice than in being a nurturer. Her devotion to Wilbur is inseparable from her self-concern. She would not eat Wilbur, but her doting—especially over “delicious” little children—is sometimes described as “eating them up” for one’s own pleasure. Fern disregards what a “perfect” little *piglet* should be as she uses him to nourish her own growth. Like Fern’s other “infant” (10)—the doll in her carriage—Wilbur is a means to her training for eventual maternity. She gives him his name, and her mother teaches her to nurse him with a baby bottle. Fern keeps her “absolutely perfect” pig (4) clean with a baby bib. But White later shows how a real pig (a pig that’s perfect *as* a pig) eats, describing Wilbur’s pleasure as he noisily—piggishly—sucks and gulps the slops poured over his head (75), and even as he bathes in buttermilk (121).

Although White’s animals, like those in many fables, resemble people, Wilbur soon ceases to be Fern’s “infant” (6,10), her “baby” (9). She “loves” him, and he gazes at her with “adoring eyes” (8), but their mutual affection is never called “friendship.” She waves goodbye to him when she goes off to school, but he just stands on his four legs and watches (10). Nor do they ever speak to each other. They are attached to each other, but they do not seek the same kinds of things, and their attachment will diminish as their needs change over time. Fern is also attached to other animals in the barn, calling them her “friends” (85), but is she *their* friend? She knows that Charlotte is now Wilbur’s “best friend,” and that it is Charlotte whom Wilbur “adores” (57). The animals are comfortable with Fern, who understands what they

are saying, but she is a passive auditor rather than a speaking participant in any community of theirs. She hears them talk about a second threat to Wilbur's life, but this time she does not try to prevent it. Proximity, while it may ordinarily be a necessary condition for friendship, is not sufficient to develop friendship fully. Indeed, is it even always truly necessary: may it be possible for friendship somehow to grow and flourish even without the friends' being in the same time and place?

Readers may be puzzled when White shifts our attention away from Fern. Dr. Dorian suggests that Fern's attention too will shift. And so it does: away from sneakers and animal "friends," and the swing on a warm, mid-summer day—to pretty dresses and human friends who are boys, and the turning Ferris wheel on a cool, late-summer night. When this happens, Mrs. Arable, as usual, is worried. Mr. Arable remarks only that "they've got to grow up sometime. . . . And a fair is a good place to start, I guess" (133). It doesn't take long for Fern's focus on the death of the newborn pig at the beginning of the story to transform into a focus on her own developing life.

Listen again to the earlier description of the rope swing in the barn (68-69). This description is widely admired, especially when read aloud, for the way the verbal rhythm conveys the oscillating motion of the swing and the pleasure of the children. The effect is enhanced by the second person "you" and the verbal form: "you would zoom upward into the sky. . . . Then you would drop down, down, down out of the sky . . . then . . . in again, . . . then out again . . . then . . . out . . . ." (69). The experience will be echoed in Charlotte's story about her aeronaut spider cousin, who, standing on her head, would let out enough thread to form a balloon and "be lifted into the air and carried upward on the warm wind" (104). When Fern repeats Charlotte's story to her own mother, she also uses the second person, but the verbal form she uses increases the vividness of the experience. Charlotte's story, like the swing, transports the listening Fern from her own limited life to a new realm of experience.

Such paragraphs are impressive, but they are merely "purple passages" unless they are woven into the language and thought

of the book as a whole. We'll remember the aeronaut cousin at the end of the book, when Charlotte says why she did all of what she did for Wilbur, and when her own babies balloon away from their first home. The swing passage artfully conveys the thrill of children who relish their forays into risky freedom. "Mothers for miles around" worry about them (59), but the ride is only a brief trial swing out of childhood—a look up at the clouds beyond and a quick return to a familiar safe world. There is no charge or ticket for the swing, no decision or commitment; the ride is brief and free. The motion is not vertical and rectilinear, but curved and cyclical; it returns to where it began. It's a shape we encounter throughout the book, most notably in the cyclical seasons of the year. The swing's oscillation along a circle wheels over the chief attraction at the Fair—the great, round "Ferris wheel turning in the sky" (130). Mrs. Arable will still be warning the children to "hang on very tight" if they "go in those swings" (131). But they run off "toward the wonderful music and the wonderful adventure and the wonderful excitement, into the wonderful midway where there would be no parents to guard them and guide them, and where they could be happy and free to do as they pleased" (131). Are those four "wonderfuls" too many, or do they provide an audible version of the cyclical returns of the story? White and his teacher Will Strunk famously taught in their *Manual of Style* that one should "omit needless words." White's repetition here shows that "style" is not a matter of rigid rules, but of guidelines as flexible as swing ropes and web strands.

The cars of the Ferris wheel also move along a circle; but when passengers on the Ferris wheel return to the starting point, they have had a more dramatic taste of the beyond, both in time and space, than do the children on the swing. Fern, as a passenger on the longer mechanized ride, will not swing alone as she did in her occasional brief liberations from childhood. The tickets, bought first by her new "friend," and then by Fern herself, point to an attachment beyond her family and her animal "friends." This new friendship is incipiently erotic; it is a friendship of the sort that moves in a line toward a mortal future rather than returning along a circle. Fern hopes to win another doll at the fair

(130), and she does return to her family with a “monkey doll” (136); but someday Wilbur and Charlotte will be a distant memory, and Fern together with some nondescript future full-grown replacement for young Henry Fussy will generate and “adore” a human infant of their own.

Fern now shows less interest in the barn animals, less interest in Wilbur’s second rescue and in Wilbur’s triumph at the Fair; and she keeps asking about Henry, about the midway, and about the Ferris wheel (150, 154, 156, 173). Fern is not mentioned in the moving last chapters—the chapters about Charlotte’s death, and about Wilbur’s grief and his rescue of Charlotte’s egg sac and the endangered infant spiders. Nor does White include Fern in chapter fifteen’s description of the universal melancholy of all living beings as the seasons change. Fern is too powerfully possessed by the swinging, soaring life within her.

But the story does not end with the reassuring formulaic ending of many children’s tales: “and they lived happily ever after.” Fern first and Charlotte later do save Wilbur from his own premature death at the hands of others; but then Wilbur, and White’s readers (both children and adults), must cope with something even more frightening than that: the inevitability, for every living being that evades premature death, of *natural* death—which will come someday to Wilbur, as it does to his dearest friend, Charlotte. All living things, even animal and vegetable, show some response to the temporal limitation of their lives. After a depiction of Fern’s eager embrace of change, the sixth chapter (“Summer Days”) tells us that the song sparrow “knows how brief and lovely life is” (43), and the fifteenth chapter (“The Crickets”) vividly evokes the melancholy truth that—like all change—growing up and living itself make us conscious of our mortality. (For perfect expressions of the mood, see the words of the grieving young Margaret in Gerard Manley Hopkins’ poem “Spring and Fall,” or of the speaker in Dylan Thomas’s poem “Fern Hill.”)

## II. THE GOOSE AND GOSLINGS

The goose first appears only with the third chapter. Not being confined to the barn, she urges the bored and despondent Wilbur



to squeeze through the fence and join her in the long grass outside his pen. She offers him “freedom.” What this means to her is his eating whenever and whatever he wants; it means his “rooting around”; it means turning himself and everything else topsy-turvy, top to turf, upside down. All the animals are elated as news gets out that one of them is “free.” But, although the goose warns Wilbur against the “old pail trick” that will tempt him back into captivity, he soon gives up his “freedom” and returns to the physical safety and comforts of “home.”

The goose is an odd advocate of freedom. Her trivial chat flows on and on as if she is unable to stop, while it repeatedly gets stuck rather than flowing freely. White does not mean to mock people afflicted with stuttering; rather, the “garrulous” (183) goose has a stylistic affliction that reveals a mental one. She repeats words, whole phrases, and even individual sounds, failing to observe Will Strunk’s famous advice to omit useless words. (White enjoyed reporting that Strunk always repeated this rule three times!) The goose exhibits another common verbal tic of student writers and public speakers who speak haltingly because they don’t *think* fluently: “At-at-at, the risk of repeating myself . . .” (17). The whole book is best when read aloud to be heard, but that loses the funniest repetition, which is the spelling of the goose’s words with double and even multiple letters, as in “TEERRRRRIIFFIICC+CCCC” (89). But in any case, that joke will be missed by children who do not yet read. They will, however, hear the goslings always thank their feeder three times. The speech of the geese reflects how little they know of true “freedom,” even if they are able to wander outside the fence.

The goslings are all the same, being even less individualized than their parents, who are at least sexually distinguished as “goose” and “gander.” This parental pair has coupled by nature to generate more just like themselves. The parents are not at all freely chosen partners, and do not share the full friendship that emerges from such choice. The dramatic account of the hatching shows that choice has nothing to do with the later lives of goslings as siblings or litter-mates. Their mother, who has “nothing at all on my mind, but . . . too many things under my behind”

(33), is proud of her hard work. Like many parents (and many would-be artists and writers) she loves her offspring only because they are her own, the outcome of her own labor; they themselves may not even be lovable. The little ones break “free” of the eggs that confine them, and enter the world together, with no names or distinguishing features—except for the dead, rotten egg which is, even to its mother, just a “dud.” She immediately gives it away. It is not a real gift because it means nothing to her; she would not want to keep it or share it with someone she cares for. The other animals are disgusted and appalled that the rat does want it. But, although those other animals have more of the friendly feelings that the rat lacks, they, like its parents, show no grief or regret that one potential fluffy little gosling became only a rotten egg. The mother who kept it warm with the others, says she is “delighted that the egg never hatched” (74); she’s just “proud of her share in the adventure” (74). Eggs will, like the odor of cooked meat, reappear in later chapters: after the Fair, the rat finds scraps of hard-boiled eggs and deviled-ham sandwiches (139). The story moves from the eight early goose eggs to the five hundred fourteen spider eggs that become Wilbur’s responsibility at the end.

As with the geese, there is a “sameness of sheep” (183)—and this suggests something about the people in White’s rural farmland. They, too, have a “sameness” about them. They live in ordered community, working and playing, and eating and praying, together; but their companionship is not characterized by individual aims and individual choice. Even Henry Fussy is not described in any detail. It’s not clear how much Fern is attracted to him in particular; they have just reached the age for that sort of thing. (The film version of the story misses the point: it characterizes Henry as a fussed-over, indoors boy who would not appeal at all to the spirited Fern—but Fern does remember with pleasure how Henry rocked the seat on the Ferris wheel.) The adults in Fern’s world are men married to sisters, who, although they have names (Mrs. Arable and Aunt Edith Zuckerman), are, like the geese, an extended family whose friendship is founded on domestic activities and the pleasures of occasional release from them. Their “future” depends on

the feeding, safety, and behavior of their children. When they die, something of them will live on—a physical trait, a recipe for blueberry pie or buttermilk bath, something in the barn, a memory of county fairs, and, most important, the largely unexamined habits of decent and lawful life. But although they have more “on their minds” than does the mother goose, their friendships nonetheless have nothing to do with politics, or history, or the varied ways of life in varied places, or the question just what a “miracle” is. Like the goose (and, as we shall see, the rat), they ask few questions. When Dr. Dorian points out to Mrs. Arable that it’s a miracle that spiders know how to weave, whereas she had to be taught by her mother to knit and crochet (109), she says “I don’t like what I can’t understand” (110), and, like most of her human neighbors, she does not inquire further. Dr. Dorian, however, does think about these things, but he is unusual; while the community will consult him about professional matters, it has no interest in him as a friend. He is old and has a thick beard (107); in the pictures he wears glasses. He is probably a reader. Does he also write much? There is no mention of a wife or children. Is he a lonely man, or are his expectations about the future different from those promised by the breeding of livestock and the generation of children? Might his “future” consist of continuing thought, nourished by reading and by serious discussion preserved in writing—with both activities involving “true friends” from times and places other than his own?

The mother goose, while she may be warm, is also cold. She addresses Wilbur as “my friend, my friend” (16), but she will not play with him—and she heartlessly tells the “very innocent little pig” (40) that Zuckerman and Lurvy will “kill” him at Christmastime. Presumably, she knows that her own lovely goslings too will live only until they are fat enough to be someone else’s dinner. What this farm sells are not goose feathers or lamb’s wool, but goose drumsticks and lambchops. The goose, however, really having nothing on her mind, has no interest in true freedom and friendship, or any concern about mortality. Showing no sign that she regards her offspring as compensation for her own limited lifetime, she does not associate maternity with mortality.

Her little goslings, being copies of the mother goose, are a continuation of her into the future, but her speech generates no further thoughts or conversation. Although it is, to be sure, not just noisy honking, its getting stuck points to the fact that her utterance is characterized by its coming to dead stops. While she is said to be “garrulous” (183), she asks no questions, and she has no inclination or talent for weaving her staccato words into stories for those for whom she cares. It is Charlotte, by contrast, the literate spider with the small thin pleasant voice (31), who will teach Wilbur, and White’s readers, how friendship and speech and writing, all interwoven, help us to live freely, even in full recognition of our mortality.

### III. TEMPLETON THE RAT

Except for Wilbur and Charlotte, the only animal in this story who has a name of his own is the rat, Templeton. He is more of an individual than the geese and sheep, whose names are generic and not even capitalized. He is more articulate than the goose, and his voice and speech also reveal much about him. Wilbur hates the sound of Templeton’s gnawing; and when the rat’s rasping teeth—and the goose’s incessant yakking—are replaced by Charlotte’s musical voice and stories, Wilbur’s life changes. Templeton “sneers,” and he “snarls” (148), and he claims (29) that he doesn’t know the meaning of a certain word (“play”). He alone speaks of himself in the third person, indignantly repeating his name to catalogue what he has perceived as insults (167-68). He can read the printed words he collects for Charlotte; but unlike her, and unlike even the other animals who discuss the nuances of the words he brings them, the rat shows no interest in the relation between feelings and speech. Unlike the goose, he always has something “on his mind,” but his mind is merely cunning, not thoughtful. He is furtive, never curious or compassionate. His individuality is not attractive to others: while never lonely, he is alone.

We never hear of Templeton’s parents or siblings, and there is no suggestion of a female companion or baby rats. He neither generates nor seeks out others like himself. Although the oldest sheep refers to him once as “our friend, Templeton,” (89), he

lacks even the limited sociability of the others. Only once, when he returns from his solitary “gorge” at the Fair, does he tell them about it, saying “Oh it was rich, my friends, rich” (147). The rat is their “neighbor,” but he does not work or play or eat with them. He lurks at the edges of their activities. Always in the dark, the rat is never “radiant.” Templeton thinks that needing no friends is a sign of freedom, but we soon see that he, too, lacks freedom, as well as “friendliness” (96) or any other “higher feeling” (46). His haunts are low and underneath—in tunnels, under troughs. Wilbur, by contrast, though he may dwell down upon the ground (like humus), is praised by Charlotte as “humble” (149): he is said to be “modest” and “not proud.” Templeton may have a high-sounding English name, but he is just a low-down American rat who would not be at home in a temple. Having no desire to be elevated, Templeton is averse to uplift.

Templeton is a pack rat, and his hoarding reveals the relation between his lack of friends and his false freedom. His “beady eyes” are always on the lookout for random stuff to appropriate, but he is blind to the feelings of those around him.

Like Templeton, Fern’s brother Avery also engages in random acquisition: he drops into his pocket a disordered heap consisting of fish, blueberry pie, a grass snake, and frogs. It is significant that the rat’s stuff (like Avery’s) is listed randomly, and that, like the food he collects at the Fair, even the items are not wholes themselves but are mere fragments. A missing part or a missing item does not affect the “completeness” of something that is not really a whole. (The reader needs to pay attention to White’s lists. They are one of his trademarks, and he is a master at writing them. The number, order, sounds, and structure of the items in his lists, like the rhythm of his sentences, guide the reader’s response. White’s lists are artful collections, in which even the inclusion or omission of repeated conjunctions—like “and . . . and . . .”—affects their meaning. For interesting examples, compare, on the one hand, “the things that you find in barns” (14), the contents of Wilbur’s slop (75), and the makes of the cars parked in the driveway (83), with, on the other hand, the orderly succession of seasons (124) that gives the story itself a

meaningful shape. Stories when perfect resemble living animals: the whole is destroyed when a part is removed.)

The world of Templeton contrasts with that of the Zuckermans, who have an organized home, as well as having a barn for storage and a dump for “useless junk” (97). To the rat, all the world’s a dump.

Templeton’s solitary feeding is like his obsessive hoarding. He saves and eats or “gnaws” everything. He has no reason to want the goose’s “dud,” but when it “explodes,” he is “miserable” over the loss of his “beloved egg” (74)—the only time he is said to “love” anything. He prides himself on his independence and freedom, but, lacking specific plans, he is enslaved to an undefined future. He takes everything, and gives nothing, except in a deal (169) or bargain. A “gift” would have value for the giver and recipient, but Templeton’s transfers are of mere “stuff,” calculated exchanges of meaningless matter—with strings attached. Wilbur may thus only “borrow” a piece of string, in an incident where, neglecting to “fasten the other end to anything” (58), he falls, and realizes he was thinking only of himself, “trying to show off.” (60). This is the first time the young pig, who is by nature attracted to others, explicitly recognizes “attachment” as a principle, an odd thing to learn from Templeton, who maintains a “deal” (169) out of self-interest, a low form of justice. Such “friendships” end as soon as the terms are fulfilled; they are useful in the present, but have no future, even if the “friends” live on.

Templeton agrees to bring printed words for Charlotte to use in her writing, but he is, surprisingly, for so articulate and well-spoken a rat, uninterested in speech: “Play? I hardly know the meaning of the word,” he says (29). None of his “questions” invites ongoing discussion or thought. They have factual answers (as in: what will be done with the rotten egg? [45]; is the sheep’s description of the Fair true? [123])—or they merely express his sneering pride (as in: what do you think I am, a messenger boy? [99]; what do you think I am, anyway, a-rat-of-all-work? [168]). Not realizing the difference between random heaps of words and a coherent ordered collection—his lists being, like his meals, merely accumulated “scraps”—he sneers that Charlotte will soon expect him to “fetch a dictionary” (99).

At other crucial moments also, Templeton will be useful. At the Fair, for example, he wakes Wilbur from his faint. But he does so by biting Wilbur's tail (140); this is not generous aid given to a friend in need. The rat is amused by the irony of his gift of string; he "grins" when Wilbur falls. Later he is tricked into the quasi-political activities of his more sociable barn-fellows, even though "meetings bore me" (90); and he has "not the slightest interest in fairs" (122). The sheep convinces him to go to the Fair by describing it as a "rat's paradise" (140). When he arrives in this heaven, the lowly rat never *looks* up; rather, he *smells* the ground, finding fulfillment by literally *filling* up. His "high living" (123) and "pleasures of the feast" (175) are solitary, short-lived pleasures that don't rise above the bodily. His ingestion of food, when he is alone, and after no choice or preparation, is mere transfer of stuff. By contrast, "com-panions" (those who together break their bread) maintain friendships that endure over time with others whom they recognize as being like themselves; but Templeton's solitary feeding results in a grotesque distortion of himself: he swells to twice his normal size and his stomach is as "big as a jelly jar" (147), and he is last described as "bigger and fatter than any rat you ever saw . . . as big as a young woodchuck" (175).

At the dramatic climax of the story, Wilbur, who has matured through his friendship with Charlotte, has an "idea" of his own (166). With new authority, he orders Templeton to "stop acting like a spoiled child" (168). Wilbur, like the sheep, moves Templeton by appealing to his lowest desires—promising to share his own meals with Templeton for the rest of the rat's life if the rat will help him save Charlotte's egg sac. White again underscores the rat's nastiness even when he "helps" others, by having him release the sac by biting it "with his long ugly teeth" (169). The sac—and Wilbur's tail in the earlier incident—are the only things that enter Templeton's mouth without getting eaten. The bargain for food promises a limited earthy future, not some everlasting life in a "paradise"; and later, when the sheep suggests that, if he ate less, he might live longer, Templeton asks his final "question": "who wants to live forever?" (175). He knows the answer and has no interest in an ongoing discussion. In White's beautiful fifteenth

chapter (“The Crickets”) about intimations of mortality in all living things, Templeton is not mentioned. He is unmortified by mortality—that of others and even of his own. It’s a dead-end view of life: no anxiety about death, and no hope for the future. He hardly responds to Wilbur’s news about Charlotte’s egg sac and her endangered children.

Templeton refers to the sheep’s description of the Fair as an “appetizing yarn” (123), imagining the story as tasty food with which to fill his body. But the story of Charlotte and Wilbur shows how what stories fill is not the body but the soul. Stories are gifts from a “true friend.” Templeton, like White’s mother goose, talks a lot but tells no stories. The goose, however, will at least leave behind lively offspring, even if their future is destined to be brief. But when the rat dies, all that remains of him will be an unorganized pile of inanimate stuff. There is no sign that he wants to be remembered when he is gone.

#### IV. WILBUR AND CHARLOTTE

White begins his story when Mrs. Arable tells her daughter Fern that “some pigs” were born the night before. The word “some” is indefinite here; all of those pigs but one are unnamed, indistinguishable from each other, and are sold off, eventually to be butchered. One of them, however, differs from the rest of the litter of “ten brothers and sisters” who are briefly mentioned later (12) and never mentioned after that. The distinctive one is too small ever to “amount to” anything, so Mr. Arable will “do away” with it immediately. Fern recognizes this euphemism for “kill.” Her intercession begins the process that transforms this runt piglet into “SOME PIG” (77). In this capitalized pair of words—the most famous phrase in the book—the word “some” singles out as different one of the kind that the noun refers to generically.

The Arabes and the narrator now use the personal pronoun for the piglet: “he” is named, fed, cuddled, and even “adored,” and he grows strong and heavy among them. He turns out to be a thoughtful young pig; an entire paragraph wonderfully describes his attempt to understand how there could be “less than



nothing” (28). Wilbur does more than feed and sleep, he doesn’t just “live”; he *thinks* about life. He wonders how he could be less than two months old and yet tired of living (16), and he plans “to stand perfectly still and think of what it was like to be alive” (26). This self-conscious little guy knows that the food which makes him grow no longer makes him happy, and that the weather can wreck a day that has been carefully planned (this day’s plan being set out in the first list in White’s story [25]). And he knows that a lonely pig will not be “free” even if he escapes his pen. The lamb tells him to “play by himself” (28); but, wondering what “play” means, he yearns to “play with” someone else. Not being self-sufficient in body or in mind, he needs attachment as well as freedom. He needs someone else with whom to talk and think about things: he needs a friend.

One evening, this lowly pig is addressed by an unidentified voice from above. He waits impatiently through a long night, and then a spider in the upper corner of the doorway greets him with the first of many new words, and tells him her name. This new friend waves to him (37)—as did Fern, but Fern’s friendship with the piglet is not reciprocal and turns out to weaken as she grows up. The rest of the story tells how Charlotte not only goes on to save Wilbur’s life (a second rescue), but also enables him to grow up psychically as well as physically. At first, she seems to replace Fern as a more mature maternal protector—but we find that she is not another Fern. Charlotte chooses Wilbur as her friend for himself alone, not because he is her own. She does not save him at birth, name him, or nurse him through infancy: he will be, not a make-believe baby, but a real pig. The pig has four legs, not eight like the spider, so he still cannot wave back, but Charlotte and Wilbur show that friendship is reciprocal; it is not a distant waving of hands, but a close inter-weaving of words. Unlike Fern and Wilbur, Wilbur and Charlotte talk *with* each other.

For those who wonder whether friends who like each other must be just like each other, Wilbur and Charlotte are a puzzling pair. When a friend is said to be another self, what in that should be emphasized: the difference of an “other” or the sameness of “another”? A pig is about as different from a spider as one can

imagine. Wilbur, housed and fed by others, is a heavy, hungry, demanding youngster, who grunts and screams, and noisily slurps up heavy “slops.” Living down close to manure and mud, his vision and sense of smell are good. Charlotte, mature and self-possessed, chooses her own place in the barn, provides her own food, and liquefies it before she quietly ingests it. She is light and agile, is often unnoticeable, and has a small, thin voice. Being “near-sighted” (37), she senses the world around her through motion—the presence of edible prey, for example, through the vibrations of her web. Unlike the blundering pig, she has a feel for things. But, although she is nearsighted, her greatest achievement turns out to be the *looks* of the written words she displays for others to see. The joke about the goose’s double spelling of “teerriiffiicccc” is complete when Charlotte doubles the lines of the letters to make them “show up better” (93) for those with better vision than she.

Stories about animals can exhibit the variety of interests, abilities, and desires of different human souls. White’s fable about the attachment of two such different animals distinguishes kinds of human friendships and the kinds of pleasures they offer. Charlotte and Wilbur differ in their sizes and ages; in their natural lifespan they differ by years. They cannot derive pleasure from eating together or from other shared bodily activities. Although they are female and male, their mutual attraction has nothing to do with sex and the generation of others like themselves. The erotic ends of the “friendships” of geese or of sheep or of crickets—or of people like Fern Arable and Henry Fussy—are irrelevant to this odd couple.

Charlotte does not speak of loneliness as Wilbur does, but she is a strikingly solitary individual. She does not refer to her parents, and only as characters in her stories do her thousands of cousins exist in White’s story. But her solitary present will produce a populous future. The spinner, not having been a spinster, will be a prolific parent. (White does not mention something known to many of his readers—that the female barn spider, to nourish herself and her progeny, kills and eats the male who has fertilized her eggs. This kind of meat-eating may be the most in-

tense kind of cannibalism imaginable except for ingesting one's offspring, which is something that she does not do.) Charlotte is aware that she herself will not live to see her 514 children (146), or even to see another cycle of the seasons that come round every year (163-64). Although she has thought about and expects her own death, she speaks calmly and with resignation to Wilbur, who must live on without her.

How is Wilbur like her in a way that might explain their mutual attraction? We have seen that he is an unusually thoughtful young pig, fertile in words and articulate about what he thinks. In his eagerness to meet the owner of the mysterious voice, he instinctively adopts the formal speech of a public announcement: "Attention please . . ." (34-35). From the beginning, Charlotte and Wilbur, as different as they are, share an interest in and sensitivity to words and speech and stories. Most of the people in White's story speak, by contrast, in simple declarative sentences with a limited vocabulary of one-or-two-syllable words about familiar shared experiences. They speculate little, and they ask few questions. Their declarative sentences are static—they do not immediately provoke more speech or lead to follow-ups in the future, as questions do. Mrs. Arable does not like to talk further about things she does not understand; and although the farm hand Lurvy notices Charlotte's glistening web, "he isn't particularly interested in beauty" (77). Of the so-called "dumb" animals in the story, the two now under consideration are more interesting and articulate speakers. Wilbur eagerly asks about what he does not understand, especially new words. When he says that Charlotte is "beautiful," she substitutes "pretty." (37). He assumes that, unlike geese and sheep, his new friend has a name (37), and he shows interest in all its components: the colloquial feminine "Charlotte," and the scientific feminine "A. Cavatica" (for "Araneus Cavaticus," the spider who lives in caves or other shady places). Charlotte has her own language, English, but she recognizes that language is variable and conventional rather than fixed and natural: she borrows freely from French and Latin, exhibiting a freedom deeper than what the goose claims to have. The only imaginative, exotic words used by Charlotte's provincial human neighbors are contained in

the names of the cars they drive, whereas she, who has never left the barn, is the only one who mentions a distant place—the Queensborough Bridge, characterized as “sort of” a web, one that took a long time for men to make (60). Wilbur finds in Charlotte a cosmopolitan, sophisticated friend with whom he can enjoy, not the short-lived pleasures of food or sex or simply playing around, but the enduring pleasures of word-play, which involves conversation, jokes, lists, puns, stories, and a lullaby that can endure somehow even beyond the friend’s life. Tied to his new friend as if by strings, Wilbur hangs on her every word—words such as “salutations,”(35), “unremitting” (44) “untenable”(47), “anaesthetic”(48), “sedentary”(60) “versatile” (116)—as she hangs from her stringy web above him. And in Wilbur, Charlotte—the self-sufficient solitary spider—acquires a playful inquisitive interlocutor, a friend unlike the other animals in the barn or the humans who house them there.

Through new words, Wilbur also develops patient open-mindedness about new ideas and other points of view. One of the first things he learns about Charlotte is that she is a “trapper”—a killer. White’s brief description of the fly in her web reminds us that even nameless insects instinctively struggle for their version of “freedom” (37), and that most living beings live at the expense of other lives. A moral turning-point in the story is the moment that White’s audience, young and old, realize that Charlotte is a carnivore, like people and pigs. Fish are eaten by Avery, by cats, and by Charlotte’s cousin—as the once righteously indignant Fern tells her mother—“same as the rest of us”(106). Wilbur himself is at first horrified by his attraction to a “bloodthirsty” (39) friend; but he stays long enough to have a conversation and to consider what his friend says: she has to provide her own food, and insects—especially flies—are a general threat to life (40). Wilbur later calls Charlotte “thoughtful,” because she “anaesthetizes” her prey before she kills it (48). It is true that Mr. Arable treats his pigs “humanely” before he sends them to the hog butcher, but he gives his child no reasoned account of why he does so. Perhaps he is gentle by nature or by habitual training—or because he thinks it is by treating his pigs humanely that he’ll get the best bacon.

Wilbur's use of the two English meanings of "thoughtful" suggests that the habit of serious conversation shapes moral character. That first encounter between Charlotte and Wilbur resembles what happens when "true friends" converse about difficult subjects. Friends may, to be sure, simply agree, and thus both of them feel good and each of them becomes more confident in the truth of his own re-enforced opinions, but when friends with differences of opinion push against each other, revising some thoughts, interweaving others, trying different patterns, getting closer to a stronger shared understanding that continues to need further inspection, which leads to mending, and elaboration, their friendship is then of a more interesting sort, making each of them "thoughtful" in the fuller sense. This sort of friendship assumes a future not fixed and frozen, but one that remains in motion. Even when these friends themselves no longer inhabit living bodies still in motion, they leave in motion—for their friends—everlasting lively questions without clearly final answers.

The friend, then, is not simply another *self*, but an *other* who gives his friends more than mere things—he gives them thoughts with which to think new thoughts. We certainly care about durable keepsakes that remind us of physically absent or deceased friends, but these treasured objects, the continued presence and use of which extend the presence of our friends among us, eventually deteriorate. New insights and questions, by contrast, preserved in probing and beautiful writing, are the most enduring gifts one can bestow. They are not simply given away, but are shared, remaining part of the giver even as they are given to those who will participate in them. And, if they are preserved—in writing or, more precariously, even in speech alone—they can have a life that endures indefinitely long. Work songs, lullabies, love poems, heroic sagas, and philosophical treatises—all live on beyond those who make them. The sharing that begins by singling out a *particular* friend, expands like a great flexible web always in need of repair and revision, a web that holds together precisely because of the tension among its elements.

Such interchange *between* friends develops the habit of "talking things through" *within* oneself, thinking dialectically on one's own. If one could continue doing this well, would one need "*another*

self”? Should one strive to become one’s own best friend? The opportunities for friendship in eating, socializing, and procreating can only go so far—bodily as they are, and limited in time—even though the pleasures that thinking and speaking human beings obtain from eating, socializing, and erotic love do differ from their animal analogues. Friendship that arises from the human striving for lasting honor also can go only so far: competition in pursuit of non-shareable excellence at last requires the friend to assert superiority by destroying his friendly rival—annihilating, rather than cultivating, this “other self.” (Consider the heroic ethos in Homer’s *Iliad* or the comic analogue presented in “The Dream” in the children’s book *Frog and Toad*.) Is deeper, more enduring happiness obtained from thinking together or from self-sufficient solitary thinking? Can anyone ever do without a “true friend”—or are most of us doomed to loneliness and ignorance if we fail to find or cultivate such an “other”? And *what* is it that “true friends” inquire about, whether together or alone: is it the cosmic world of nature or is it the civic world of community—is it body or soul—is it what changes or what abides? E. B. White’s story is a gift for thoughtful children and their parents, a story which—read in the right spirit, and aloud—might someday lead them to such questions thoughtfully presented by good writers like Shakespeare or Homer or even Aristotle.

Wilbur has assumed that friendship is an uncomplicated good. Now he thinks of “what a gamble” friendship is: he suffers “the doubts and fears that often go with finding a new friend” (41). Friendship is a risky gamble because you cannot know whether a prospective friend will change you for better or worse. After all, different foods or activities can cultivate one’s proper nature or distort it—just consider Templeton’s gorging and Fern’s snug binding of a baby pig in a doll carriage. Even long-lasting, virtue-cultivating friendship is a risky gamble with our happiness, for we treasure its benefits and joys knowing that the object of our love will someday pass away. At the beginning of the story, Wilbur is a young innocent who is afraid to die; but by the end, he has learned that what he most fears may be, not losing his own life, but losing the best friend who has passed away.

Thus far we have been thinking about friendship from Wilbur's point of view, but what about Charlotte: what does she gain from their friendship? Consider that Charlotte as a spider is primarily a spinner: she exudes and spins strands of liquid material from herself and weaves them into a "thing of beauty . . . a pattern of loveliness and mystery, like a delicate veil" (77). Charlotte's web is of the sort called an "orb" web, the most beautifully constructed web visible to human eyes. Unlike messy cobwebs that seem to appear by accident in dusty corners, the "geometry" of Charlotte's web invites speculation. It has the characteristic look of other orb webs, and is constructed in the same orderly steps. From straight lines, Charlotte produces a circular pattern. Angle, radius and circumference remind us of shapes we have felt throughout White's story. The title character of this story is a weaver—why?

Charlotte is, as we have seen, "wordy": she likes long words, fancy words (35), and foreign words, as well as words that have several different connotations. Unlike the rat who hoards all words, she carefully selects hers. And, unlike the goose who just "roots around," Charlotte gets to the roots of words—their origins and foundations—seeking a coherent cosmos in the togetherness of families of words. In her company, we note that "humble" means both low to the ground (like humus) and "modest" (114), that "crunchy," as in "crisp, crunchy bacon" (98), may suggest an unintended idea like texture.

Charlotte is, like White, a very good writer of lists, whose items are carefully arranged or else are very deliberately random, and whose meaning is conveyed by sound, number, order, and even the presence or absence of conjunctions. Consider two examples: the random list of the insects that she eats (39), and the organized list of Latin names of her leg parts (55). The word "list," by the way, is a *weaver's* word—it comes from a Germanic root referring to the narrow border of a piece of fabric.

Charlotte's fabrications are thus not limited to the material textiles of an orb web; she also produces verbal texts: sounds interwoven in words, phrases, sentences, and stories. Charlotte is a "patient" weaver. She hangs upside down so that blood will

flow into her head. She knows that writers must often wait for an “idea” that comes when one least expects it, even while one is asleep. Her messages parody the language of ads in the hurried, worried world of commerce, and Charlotte is, indeed, “advertising” Wilbur to those who believe anything they may read about in daily newspapers or hear about in Sunday sermons. Miraculous new washing machines and miraculous old stories—they “buy” them all. As Charlotte writes, she describes her own motion: “up we go, attach, swing that loop” (94). It’s the second great “swing” passage in White’s story. The rhythms, repetitions, and internal rhymes swing along as she swings around her web, chanting a “work song” like those that accompany wool-washing, cotton-picking, and road-construction in the human world. E. B. White’s fine recorded reading of the thirteenth chapter (“Good Progress”) *sounds* like what Charlotte is doing. A good writer can make even the speaking of words sound like the action of work.

At the end of the same chapter, when the sleepy pig asks Charlotte to “tell me a story” (101), she obliges by spinning several dramatic yarns. Unlike the goose, who tells no bedtime stories, Charlotte probably has a whole repertoire of Mother Goose-like tales, of which we hear two. “Once upon a time,” she begins the stories about her cousins’ adventures in an epic water battle with a fish, and in a dreamy lift-off gently into the upper air. The stories, like her fibers, are spun out of herself. Wilbur asks if they are true or whether she just made them up, but a good writer knows that a story can be true even when, and perhaps even because, it is made up; stories, unlike histories, present what should happen, rather than what actually did happen. Charlotte is the “best storyteller” (105); she “never fibs,” (106), says Fern, who recites one of her fables verbatim, capturing the attention even of her unimaginative mother.

The works of good writers are repeated and preserved. They are often even changed—so some good writers attempt to protect their words from the ambitions of future rivals and the misunderstandings of future friends. White does not address that difficulty in this story, but elsewhere we learn that he accurately



warned against the vapid changes made by the words and pictures in the film version of this story, which embarrassed him.

When Wilbur requests a song, we discover that Charlotte also composes lullabies. "My only," she sings, evoking the banishment of loneliness by true friendship. The verse suggests that the seemingly self-sufficient singer has herself experienced the ache of loneliness after all. She's had limited relations with her neighbors in the barn, but she offers herself as the friend Wilbur needs, and singles him out for her own friend: "I've watched you all day, and I like you" (31). The seven-line poem also assuages fear of loss through death—in its meter, rhymes, alliteration, and tone—as she weaves together "my only" (heard also as "my ownly"), "be not lonely," and the repeat of "Deep in the dung and the dark" (104). A lullaby is typically sung to comfort young children, lulling them to sleep. Wilbur asks for this song when he fears being alone, or his own death, or the loss of his "true friend." It is an immortal gift, one that will remain with him "forever," as lullabies and bedtime stories seem to do, long after their authors are gone.

Charlotte can be said to be a weaver in yet another way. The inhabitants of Zuckerman's barn are not there by choice. Some are related by nature; they are kin, and they are akin, being of the same kind. Piglets in a litter or the seven goslings—all of them being copies of their parents—are more like other selves of their parents and of each other than human beings are. But these homogeneous families of different kinds, related not by nature but by living "near-by" each other, are woven by Charlotte into a heterogeneous neighborhood. It is true that although (except for Templeton) they are a friendly sort of community, sometimes addressing each other as "friends" (16, 19, 22), they are not "true" friends, as Charlotte and Wilbur become. Charlotte does, however, give them some experience of a civic friendliness that goes beyond a gregarious flocking with one's own kind or a mere proximity to others—experience, that is, of working together for their common well-being. It is Charlotte who, formally announcing the hatching of the eggs of "our friend, the goose" (44), congratulates the parents on behalf of the other barn dwellers. When

Charlotte tells stories, the other animals come together to listen. She chairs a town meeting, where she calls the roll, which is a civic list—and she then solicits ideas and contributions to her community project. The others, no longer mocking the naive piglet being fattened for Christmas, become a staff of editorial assistants to help Charlotte, the editor-in-chief, save his life. The old sheep even manages, by appealing to the rat’s “baser interests” (89), to get “our friend Templeton” (89) to participate—Templeton, who has no friends and would gladly break up the “assembly,” saying that “meetings bore me” (90). The communal attention now focuses on finding words that will speak to the human community that surrounds them. The animals are no longer just fatted beasts, future food or “fodder,” but a team of differentiated individuals in a common enterprise.

The words in Charlotte’s web work. They convince the human keepers that Wilbur is an extraordinary pig who must live out his natural life. While “nobody ever forgot . . . the miracle of the web” (183), it is the *pig*, not the spider’s writing, that is extraordinary for human beings like Mr. Zuckerman (80-81). When Charlotte calls them “gullible,” perhaps she means that they will, like Templeton the rat or like ordinary pigs, swallow anything. These people are literate; they go to school and church, and they read newspapers, ads, and road signs. The nameless American location of this story about an inquisitive pig and a writer-spider does not foster thoughtful human conversations or writings. Words and writing in this wholesome human-all-too-human setting mostly convey mere information: dates, sales, local news. We hear nothing about political events or scientific discoveries, or even what their minister says in his sermons. Except for Dr. Dorian, the adults do not seem to be readers, or to muse about the meaning of their lives, nor do the schoolchildren ever turn to books to “swing” them beyond their narrow world.

In addition to forming a community and saving Wilbur’s life, Charlotte’s words work in yet another way. Besides effectively using words *connected* in lists, she tricks her human readers by producing a list of *separate* words that describe Wilbur; and these words and phrases produce a striking change in the language-

sensitive Wilbur himself: her second “literary” triumph is that her words make the once timid, sad piglet *feel* and *act* like “SOME PIG” (96). He really becomes “terrific,” “sensational” (91), and “wondrous” (96): “I *feel* radiant,” he says (100). Garth Williams’s picture of the “radiant” pig doing a “back flip with a half twist” (101) depicts a new true freedom in Wilbur, one far beyond what the goose promised when she “took command” and gave him “orders” to “Twist and turn . . . turn and twist” (20-21). Understanding now that “No pig ever had truer friends,” he realizes that “friendship is one of the most satisfying things in the world” (114-15). Charlotte’s choice of him as her personal best friend assimilates him into the wider civic friendship she has woven in the barn.

Some so-called good writers use words well to make use of, or even to corrupt, their so-called friends: “good” then refers only to technical skill with words. But a “good writer” who is a “true friend” is good in a fuller sense: “good” then applies to the person writing, not just to his skillful action in writing. This “good writer” uses words to make his friend “good” too, to “lift” him to become the best his nature can be.

White’s book contains only one allusion to a real writer: in the list that concludes the description of Templeton, the narrator says that the rat “had no conscience, no scruples, no consideration, no decency, no *milk of rodent kindness*, no compunctions, no higher feeling, no friendliness, no anything” (46). As with Macbeth’s last description of an isolated, sterile life, the eight *no*’s characterizing Templeton add up to . . . nothing. White’s quiet allusion to the greatest writer in his own language will be missed by children and by many adults unfamiliar with Shakespeare. But those who recognize it will realize that, like Charlotte, this unnamed writer is a rare “true friend” to those who learn from him. Such a writer is “immortal,” not merely because his reputation does not die, but because across the ages he weaves together a community of readers seeking true answers to undying questions in the writer’s beautiful web of speech.

It’s easier to say what Wilbur gets from this friendship between him and Charlotte than what Charlotte gets. But she, like him, did need another—someone both like and different from

herself. Wilbur shares her interests, and gives her a project, an activity beyond maintaining her own brief life until she generates more of her own kind: “After all, what’s a life, anyway? We’re born, we live a little while and then we die” (166). Charlotte knows that she will not survive beyond one seasonal cycle—that she is “languishing” (146), and will not live to see her 514 children. Wilbur’s last wink is somehow a wave that tells her that he will save her children’s lives as she saved his. But this is not why she has befriended him. When he asks why she did it, she replies: “By helping you, perhaps I was trying to lift up my life a trifle” (166). The odd conceit of the almost weightless spider lifting herself by lifting the heavy pig conveys the reciprocal nature of their friendship. She has lifted his life as well as kept him alive; and lifting his life has lifted hers by expanding her capacities—to think, to speak, to lead, and to love—moving far beyond her ordinary ability to weave webs and egg sacs. He has lifted her weaving to a higher personal and civic level, and she recognizes this lift as a great gift. But she suggests something more—that befriending *someone else* is befriending *oneself*. Her reply to his typically emotional vow that he would “gladly give” his own life for her is atypically brief and formal: “I’m sure you would. And I thank you for your generous sentiments” (165). Charlotte and Wilbur do not actually say goodbye: there is no such formal announcement that “the end” has arrived for the story of their friendship. White thus suggests again that the friendship rooted in lasting speech and thought, rather than merely in fleeting bodily pleasures and brief good times, does not simply come to an end with the intervention of death.

## V. DEATH

It’s with a death successfully prevented that *Charlotte’s Web* begins, and then the story turns to the thriving young life of Fern, the child who accomplished that rescue by her outburst about the baby pig. Fern afterward expresses no interest in her own death. Nor do the other human characters express any interest in their own deaths; they, as we have seen, are not very introspective. They seem to live in the present, as all of us do for the most part.

From the earliest moments of our lives, however, anxious melancholy about change and loss is a vivid and persistent experience. White's story avoids unsettling young and even older readers by not directly raising the question of their own mortality. But the book is about living beings with limited time to live. Corn and pumpkins, pigs and sheep, crickets and spiders, all of them come into being, flourish for a time, and pass away—and so do we, we human beings, whom the ancients called (in contradistinction to the gods) “the mortals.” In the fifteenth chapter, the crickets sing “the song of summer's ending,” and schoolchildren, parents, goslings—indeed, all living things—are saddened as they sense and prepare for the approaching change. Even a “little maple tree in the swamp heard the cricket song and turned bright red with anxiety”—for what was said by the “sad, monotonous song” of the crickets was this: “Summer is over and gone . . . is dying, dying” (113).

Although human beings commonly fear the end of their own lives and also the loss of those they love, some do find comfort in the quasi-immortality hinted at in generation, and others obtain comfort from faith in an eternal deity who saves souls.

White's story ignores, however, religious doctrines that promise personal immortality. There is no mention of an eternal God who made the world, and the mortal beings in it are never called “creatures.” No divine savior of immortal souls is mentioned: Christmas is associated, not with the birthday of such a savior, but only with the feasting of mortal bodies.

What White beautifully evokes instead is the renewal or replacement of mortal life in cyclical time. New-laid eggs and tiny spiders replace the broken shells and strands of used web (176) as life “springs” forth anew—to replenish the earth, lift our spirits, knit up our frayed fabric, and dry the tears of our grief. In the story, the reader's grief over Charlotte's death is mitigated by the burst of renewal at the end, and the penultimate paragraph of the book uses the religious word “glory” (183) to sum up earthly living in the last lovely list in White's book. It is comfort of a sort, but it is not the “happily ever after” with which many children's stories end.

And yet, there is some happiness of a special sort in the ending of this story. Wilbur—who has turned out to be “*some pig*”—has had “someone come along” who is *some* one that is “in a class by herself” (184); this *some* is also definite. Besides natural bodily generation, some additional consolation for our mortality and even some transcendence of it is suggested by White’s memorable ending when it speaks of Charlotte as an embodiment of true *friendship* and good *writing*.

Before the story ends, Charlotte is “languishing” and her attention has turned to another weaving project, but she decides to accompany her “best friend” to the Fair. He is still dependent on her, anxious about feeling lonely. Charlotte’s written words, with an encore at the Fair, win a special prize for Wilbur and assure him that he need no longer fear premature death. But Wilbur has yet to learn that anticipating the loss of our own lives—at any time—is “less than nothing” compared to the loss of those we love. And everything in White’s story anticipates Charlotte’s death. Her conversation finally ceased, and the spider who, although “sedentary,” was capable also of extended vigorous motion, “never moved again. . . . No one was with her when she died” (171).

Although Charlotte’s friendship with the pig who will outlive her was not an erotic attachment, Charlotte the spinner, as we have seen, had not been a spinster: Charlotte is quite pregnant. Wilbur, who never knew his own mother, and has not fathered any offspring of his own, “delivers” Charlotte’s babies (with Templeton’s ungenerous help); Wilbur names them, and protects them until they are ready to lift off and live lives of their own. Charlotte’s egg sac is her “magnum opus” (144), instantiating one common consolation for mortality: she “lives on” in her children, the five hundred fourteen baby spiders whom she herself will not live to see. A few remain and become Wilbur’s friends; they wave as their mother did, and they leave behind others when they too die. One imagines that the mature, still wordy Wilbur will have many stories to tell them about their mother.

Many people, holding in mind a true friend who has passed away, go beyond telling stories about that departed friend. They feel that they somehow continue to converse with this absent

presence; they wonder what he *would* think and say and do, in response to what they themselves continue to think and say and do. With this departed other self—this true friend who is now no longer seen (or, as the ancients said, is *a-ides* [“non-seen”] like the shades in *Hades*)—we may not only somehow continue conversing, but such conversation may, in literate societies, even take a form that feels like an epistolary correspondence.

As a good writer, the true friend can thus extend the life that he shared with that other self as long as this other self lives on. True friends who were good writers, if only of letters or journals that they leave behind, live on in thoughts and observations that we, the friends they leave behind, can interweave with our own.

And good writers whom we have never known in the flesh—writers from times and places other than our own—can also somehow become true friends in some sense. They can speak to us—re-enforcing, or leading us to revise, what we think and say and do. They can also introduce us to others who can become our true friends, sharing our questions and helping us to seek what’s true. Plato, who writes dramatic dialogues; Shakespeare, who also speaks only through invented characters; Machiavelli who wrote to a friend about his “conversations” with his friends of other times and places—these writers show us that true friends need not be our neighbors or contemporaries. Indeed, we readers say, using the *present* tense, that Socrates dies, or that Shakespeare shows, or that Machiavelli argues—or that Wilbur fears and Charlotte dies. We do so because good writers, and the characters they imagine, can somehow be, everywhere and always, our neighbors and contemporaries.

“Wilbur never forgot Charlotte,” we are told (184). Why was that? It was not just because Wilbur often passively underwent being reminded of her by inanimate things or by her surviving children or by his living friends. And it was not because losing Charlotte kept Wilbur from any loving afterward: “Although he loved her children and grandchildren dearly, none of the new spiders ever quite took her place in his heart. She was in a class by herself.” No, Charlotte was never forgotten by Wilbur because of this: “It is not often that someone comes along who is a true friend and a good writer. Charlotte was both.”

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Friendship with someone like Charlotte may be rare, but it does happen. Ordinary friendship, which involves temporary bodily presence and temporary bodily pleasure, becomes more deeply memorable by becoming true friendship, which involves the pleasure of sharing moral and intellectual activity. True friendship is elevated, morally and intellectually, by serious conversation, and serious conversation is enlivened and is kept alive by good writing. Friendship with a good writer like Charlotte is friendship of a past that lives on, far into the future, providing pleasures that do not end when bodies have been forever divided by death.



# More Than Human: On Human Divinity in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*

Jason Menzin

In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle claims that human beings have the potential to be more than human and may come to live, even if only intermittently, the life proper to a god. But what does it mean to be more than human? And what are the grounds in the *Ethics* for Aristotle's picture of human divinity?

In Book 1 of the *Ethics*, Aristotle presents this preliminary definition of happiness: "The human good proves to be activity of the soul in accord with virtue, and indeed, with the best and most complete virtue, if there are more virtues than one" (1098a16-18).<sup>1</sup> In Book 10, Aristotle refines the definition, connecting the most complete virtue with divinity:

If happiness is activity in accord with virtue, it is reasonable for it to accord with the supreme virtue, which will be the virtue of the best thing. The best is understanding, or whatever else seems to be the natural ruler and leader, and to understand what is fine and divine, by being itself either divine or the most divine element in us. Hence complete happiness will be its activity in accord with its proper virtue; and we have said that this activity is the activity of study.

This seems to agree with what has been said before, and also with the truth. For this activity is supreme, since understanding is the supreme element in us, and the objects of understanding are the supreme objects of knowledge (1177a13-22).

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1. All translations are from Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, tr. Terence Irwin, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1999).

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In this passage, Aristotle identifies “the best thing,” as “either divine or the most divine element in us,” and its activity as contemplative (*theōretikē*), through which it grasps “beautiful and divine things.” At the pinnacle of a metaphysical and epistemological hierarchy, understanding is the highest thing and *theōria* the highest activity which grasps the highest objects of reality.<sup>2</sup>

Aristotle aims to justify the connection between happiness and *theōria* by claiming that the features of happiness are most fully present in *theōria*. Contemplation or study, he judges, is the most continuous, most pleasurable, and most self-sufficient activity (1177a23-28). It is an end in itself, an activity that takes place in the untroubled space and time of leisure, *scholē* (1177b23-25).<sup>3</sup> When practiced over a complete life, *theōria* is complete happiness, the best instance of unimpeded, pleasurable, and free activity (1177b2, 1177b5, 1177b17-26).

Aristotle identifies the life of *theōria* with divinity in the following way. Having argued that the fullest expression of happiness occurs in a life of contemplation, he finds this life “superior to the human level” and “divine in comparison with human life” (1177b27-32). At the same time, he reaffirms the presence of divinity within the human soul, noting that a person lives a life of *theōria* “not insofar as he is a human being, but insofar as he has some divine element in him” (1177b26-27). We temporarily surpass our embodied, compound nature through contemplation and approximate the intelligible regularity of divine bodies. Across a life of study, we become more fully the rational beings we essentially are. “[E]ach person,” Aristotle says, “seems to be his understanding,” and the “understanding, more than anything else, is the human being” (1178a2-8). Paradoxically, to be genuinely

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2. See the discussion below on the first chapter of Book 6 for the way in which the idea here “seems to agree with what has been said before” (1177a19).

3. *Theōria* is “superior in excellence” to moral virtue as it “aims at no end apart from itself” (1177b20-25). In contrast, actions of moral virtue “require trouble, aim at some [further] end, and are choiceworthy for something other than themselves” (1177b16-20). Just as understanding is “superior to the compound” of reason and appetites, so *theōria* is “superior to the activity in accord with the rest of virtue” (1177b28-29). See below on the interrelationship between the primary and secondary senses of happiness.

human is also to be more than human. And Aristotle exhorts us to the more-than-human possibility. "As far as we can, we ought to be pro-immortal, and go to all lengths to live a life in accord with our supreme element" (1177b34-35). Placing *theōria* at the center of life reflects the genuine order of a rational cosmos, "for however much this element may lack in bulk, by much more it surpasses everything in power and value" (1178a1-2).<sup>4</sup> This best life and its activity will be the happiest, the most human, and therefore divinely human (1178a8).

Having considered this possibility, Aristotle moves quickly to qualify the sense of human divinity by exploring the complexities of our compound existence. Where 10.7 concludes with a statement of the most divine life, 10.8 opens with the secondary sense of happiness. The life of moral virtue, Aristotle explains, is happiest in a secondary way,

because the activities in accord with this virtue are human. For we do just and brave actions, and the other actions that accord with the virtues, in relation to other people, by abiding in what fits each person in contracts, services, all types of actions, and also in feelings; and all these appear to be human conditions. Indeed, some feelings actually seem to arise from the body; and in many ways virtue of character seems to be proper to feelings.

Besides, prudence is inseparable from virtue of character, and virtue of character from prudence. For the principles of prudence accord with the virtues of character; and correctness in virtues of character accords with prudence. And since these virtues are also connected to feelings, they are concerned with the compound. Since the virtues of the compound are human virtues, the life and the happiness in accord with these virtues is also human (1178a10-22).

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4. In addition to referring here literally to the intellect, the statement could be read figuratively as referring to the *Ethics* itself, or to this particular statement within the *Ethics*. As a whole, the *Ethics* leads toward a climactic conclusion in 10.7-8, and this small bulk belies its central importance. There is thus a suggestion of structural similarity between the *Ethics* and the *Physics*, in which a long series of arguments reaches its own climactic conclusion, small in bulk, where Aristotle describes the role of divinity in the physical cosmos.

Unless united with *theōria*, such a life never ascends beyond the imperfect intelligibility of human action and circumstances.

Human life differs from divine life not only in the imperfect intelligibility of human relations and feelings, but also in its dependency on external goods—and the philosopher requires fewer external goods. The contemplative life, Aristotle says,

seems to need external supplies very little, or [at any rate] less than virtue of character needs them. For let us grant that they both need necessary goods, and to the same extent; for there will be only a very small difference, even though the politician labors more about the body and suchlike. Still, there will be a large difference in [what is needed] for the [proper] activities [of each type of virtue]. For the generous person will need money for generous actions; and the just person will need it for paying debts, since wishes are not clear, and people who are not just pretend to wish to do justice. Similarly, the brave person will need enough power, and the temperate person will need freedom [to do intemperate actions], if they are to achieve anything that the virtue requires. For how else will they, or any other virtuous people, make their virtue clear? (1178a25-34)

Both types of life require the goods necessary to sustain life, but virtuous people require many non-necessary goods, such as money, power, or freedom, to make their virtue clear, by exhibiting it in just, brave, and temperate acts. The greater and finer actions, such as those of magnificence and magnanimity, require an even greater number of external goods (1178a35).

In Aristotle's account, there is a permanent tension between the two ways of life. The time and trouble required to accumulate and maintain the external goods necessary for the greatest and finest moral actions almost certainly limit, and may even prevent, contemplation. At the same time, placing *theōria* at the center of life naturally and beautifully circumscribes a person's ability and desire to pursue wealth and political power and fame. Aristotle concludes that happiness does not require an excessive amount of external goods: "even though no one can be blessedly happy without external goods, we must not think that to be happy we

will need many large goods. For self-sufficiency and action do not depend on excess" (1179a1-3).<sup>5</sup>

Aristotle suggests that, for human beings, the highest happiness of *theōria* entails the secondary happiness of moral action. His account is not binary but dialectical, seeking to clarify through contrast, qualification, and subordination. Nowhere does he suggest that human beings are gods. Indeed, "happiness will need external prosperity also, since we are human beings; for our nature is not self-sufficient for study, but we need a healthy body, and need to have food and the other services provided" (1178b34-35). As human beings, we live with others and "do the actions that accord with [moral] virtue" (1178b5-7). Our more-than-human potential seems enabled by, but not subordinate to, our living a fully human life together with other people. We need each other—for goodness and for life itself.<sup>6</sup> In order to find the freedom to contemplate, we need first the freedom from want and danger provided by a *polis*, the stability provided by the presence and activity of people with moral virtue.

Lives of contemplation are superior to lives of mere moral virtue, but also entail lives of human decency. A complete human

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5. This passage may also serve as Aristotle's encouragement to those of his students who will not achieve a great life of action in war and politics or have the intellect to achieve a fully philosophic life in *scholē*. This is the life of modest and decent moral action, which does not require vast accumulations of wealth, possessions, or power, and is probably the best most of us can aspire to.

6. That "the complete good seems to be self-sufficient" is not an exhortation to absolute isolation, although the sense of self-sufficiency in Book 10 does imply a degree of potential solitariness that contrasts with the use of "self-sufficient" in Book 1, where it calls directly on the political and familial relationships of human life. (Compare especially 1097b7-12 for the richly situated sense of self-sufficiency in Book 1). Aristotle claims that "all by itself" self-sufficient activity "makes a life choiceworthy and lacking nothing" (1097b8, 1097b12, 1097b15-16). Engaging in *theōria* does not require other people in the same way that engaging in moral action does. That said, the narrow self-sufficiency of the philosopher is couched in the broader self-sufficiency of a *polis*, which enables the theoretic life. In addition, Aristotle suggests that virtuous friendships can directly augment *theōria*, even if one does not need a virtuous friend in order to contemplate (1177b1). (See also 1169b17-23 on the value of friendship in the happy life.) We are not gods and can only approximate for limited periods of time the completely self-sufficient isolation of a celestial body.

being exhibits the excellences of his compound nature in addition to those of his divine part, prioritizing what is best over what is merely better. We provide shape, order, and purpose to the non-theoretic components of a complete life by exercising our capacity to reach beyond ourselves toward the whole of things and by stretching toward those unchanging beings that are greater than ourselves.

In clarifying the notion of the highest happiness, Aristotle considers the related meaning of divine blessedness.

We traditionally suppose that the gods more than anyone are blessed and happy; but what sorts of actions ought we to ascribe to them? Just actions? Surely they will appear ridiculous making contracts, returning deposits, and so on. Brave actions? Do they endure what [they find] frightening and endure dangers because it is fine? Generous actions? Whom will they give to? And surely it would be absurd for them to have currency or anything like that. What would their temperate actions be? Surely it is vulgar praise to say that they do not have base appetites. When we go through them all, anything that concerns actions appears trivial and unworthy of the gods. Nonetheless, we all traditionally suppose that they are alive and active, since surely they are not asleep like Endymion. Then if someone is alive, and action is excluded, and production even more, what is left but study? Hence the gods' activity that is superior in blessedness will be an activity of study. And so the human activity that is most akin to the gods' activity will, more than any others, have the character of happiness (1178b9-25).

Here Aristotle confirms both the conclusion and corollary already suggested in the sections mentioned earlier: the gods who are superior in blessedness are defined by the activity of "study." Since human happiness echoes divine blessedness, it follows that happiness lies in contemplation more centrally than in anything else. In drawing a parallel between divine blessedness and human happiness, Aristotle recognizes a kinship between the rational element in the compound creature that we are and the perfect rationality of the simple divinity that we are not.

At the same time, Aristotle reinterprets the notion of being blessed by the gods, taking it philosophically rather than mythically. What, for instance, can it mean for Aristotle that the “person whose activity accords with understanding and who takes care of understanding” is “most loved by the gods” (1179a23-24)? If Aristotle’s philosopher-divinities engage in no actions, but only the activity of study, then in what sense can they be said to “pay some attention to human beings”? How do they “take pleasure in what is best and most akin to them” or bless “those who most of all like and honor understanding” (1179a25-29)? Homer’s gods show their love for mortals by intervening on the plains of Troy. But Aristotle’s gods do not act. Removed from the sphere of action, perhaps the “love” of Aristotle’s gods is simply a timeless concord, an eternal consonance between divine contemplation and extraordinary human activity. Perhaps divine love is our being what we truly are, our state of being when we are living out the best possible life for us, which is thinking the same thoughts as a god.

Having looked up to heaven, Aristotle then looks down to earth to illuminate the sense and place of human life by considering other animals.

Other animals have no share in happiness, being completely deprived of this activity of study. For the whole life of the gods is blessed, and human life is blessed to the extent that it has something resembling this sort of activity; but none of the other animals is happy, because none of them shares in study at all. Hence happiness extends just as far as study extends, and the more someone studies, the happier he is, not coincidentally but insofar as he studies, since study is valuable in itself. And so [on this argument] happiness will be some kind of study (1178b25-33).

Since non-rational animals, incapable of *theōria*, cannot be happy, we distinguish ourselves most from the other animals—and even become more than human—when we engage in the activity characteristic of divine beings. But our supreme happiness is qualified, since we remain enmeshed in animal life and its temporal concerns and needs. While non-rational animals are never

happy and the gods are always happy, human beings have a limited prospect for blessedness: they enjoy blessedness insofar as they can manage to spend time contemplating.

Through the passages we have been examining, as well as throughout the *Ethics*, Aristotle uses the terms *theos* (god) and *theios* (divine). How are we to understand these terms? In particular, is Aristotle speaking only figuratively in Book 10, merely exhorting people to be excellent? Or is he making a stronger claim, that we may attempt to rise beyond our habitual place in the metaphysical scale of being? What does the range of Aristotle's usage in the *Ethics* suggest?

At first glance, *theos* and *theios* seem to appear in the *Ethics* in three senses: first, figuratively, to express superlative human actions; second, traditionally, to speak in the customary way about the Greek gods; and third, supernaturally, to indicate powers beyond the reach of human influence.<sup>7</sup>

In the first sense, we find the term "divine" used as a euphemism. The epithet "divine man," for instance, is a figurative expression for someone who is "excellent" or "magnificent" or "admirable." That is how the Spartans seem to use the term, as Aristotle points out: "whenever they very much admire someone, they say he is a divine man" (1145a29-30). In a similar sense, Aristotle notes that the wise man, who is both useless and remarkable, is called "extraordinary, amazing, difficult, and divine" (1141b7-8). Likewise, Aristotle claims that, "while it is satisfactory to acquire and preserve the good even for an individual, it is finer and more divine to acquire and preserve it for a people and for cities" (1094b9-11). Here the term "divine" seems to mean something close to "excellent."

In the second sense, Aristotle uses the terms traditionally in relation to the ancient Greek divinities. He discusses those who praise the gods, who make significant expenditures for the gods, and of those who, like Niobe, even fight with the gods

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7. Irwin discusses the different senses of "*theos*" and "*theios*" in the *Ethics* in a footnote to Book 10 (Aristotle, *Nichomachen Ethics*, 331). He identifies several different categories of usage, some of which are closely interrelated. In my own categorization, I have attempted to capture the most basic distinctions without introducing unnecessary complexity.



(1101b19, 1122b20-22, 1148b1). He notes that many gather together in their leisure time to celebrate and make sacrifices to the gods (1139b10-11, 1160a23-29). There are indications that people seek to honor the gods in the same way that they honor their parents and some even attempt friendship with the gods (1162a5-6, 1163b16-18, 1164b5-6, 1165a24-5). Zeus himself appears three times in the *Ethics* and Thetis once (1124b15-17, 1160b27, 1165a15-16).

In the third sense, terms related to *theos* appear in the *Ethics* when Aristotle speaks of circumstances or events that surpass human understanding and influence. For example, Aristotle wonders if certain occurrences are due to the hidden actions of divinities, or if things occasionally follow from “divine fate” (1099b10-11). He speculates on whether we may view happiness as a gift from the gods, “if the gods give any gift at all to human beings” (1099b12-14). He asks about the mysterious power of nature occasionally to grant, or appear to grant, to an individual a rare degree of virtue, an inborn goodness that seems to result “from some divine cause in those who have it, who are the truly fortunate ones” (1179b21-24).

But Aristotle uses *theos* and *theios* in a fourth sense that is neither figurative, nor traditional, nor supernatural. In this sense, the terms have literal and philosophic significance relating to their place in Aristotle’s cosmic metaphysical hierarchy. Divinity, for Aristotle, stands atop the scale of being, far above humanity: “There are other beings of a far more divine nature than human beings—most evidently, for instance, the beings composing the universe” (1141a35-1141b1). As seems plainly evident in the night sky, the being of the stars surpasses our being. And since “most evidently” does not mean “exclusively,” the pinnacle of being, the actual divinities may include other figures less evident to us. The praise that befits “the god and the good” (1101b30-32) follows from the ontological superiority of divinity. Aristotle’s puzzle about friendship in the 8.7 requires this superiority:

If friends come to be separated by some wide gap in virtue, vice, wealth, or something else . . . then they are friends no more, and do not even expect to be. This is most evident with gods, since they have the

greatest superiority in all goods. But it is also clear with kings, since far inferior people do not expect to be their friends; nor do worthless people expect to be friends to the best or wisest.

Now in these cases there is no exact definition of how long people are friends. For even if one of them loses a lot, the friendship still endures; but if one is widely separated [from the other], as a god is [from a human being], it no longer endures (1158b34-1159a6).

And in 9.4, the fact that we desire to remain our own selves is strengthened by the observation that we would not exchange our own lives for a god's, even though it is a superior life:

No one chooses to become another person even if that other will have every good when he has come into being: for, as it is, the god has the good [but no one chooses to be replaced by a god] (1166a21-22).

Aristotle sees spread throughout the universe the same superior qualities exhibited in a god's life:

The fact that all, both beasts and human beings, pursue pleasure is some sign of its being in some way the best good. . . . But since the best nature and state neither is nor seems to be the same for all, they also do not all pursue the same pleasure, though they all pursue pleasure. Presumably in fact they do pursue the same pleasure, and not the one they think or would say they pursue; for all things by nature have something divine [in them] (1153b25-34).

This suggests that the entire natural world is informed by or interpenetrated with the divine. It is this literal and philosophical sense of *theos* and *theios* that predominates in 10.7-8.

Now what is Aristotle's justification for linking human happiness to this divine form of being, for connecting us to what is more than human? Perhaps the clearest grounding for the idea of human divinity occurs in 6.1:

Previously, then, we said there are two parts of the soul, one that has reason, and one nonrational. Now

we should divide in the same way the part that has reason. Let us assume there are two parts that have reason: with one we study beings whose principles do not admit of being otherwise than they are, and with the other we study beings whose principles admit of being otherwise. For when the beings are of different kinds, the parts of the soul naturally suited to each of them are also of different kinds, since the parts possess knowledge by being somehow similar and appropriate [to their objects].

Let us call one of these the scientific part (*epistēmonikon*), and the other the rationally calculating part (*logistikon*); for deliberating is the same as rationally calculating, and no one deliberates about what cannot be otherwise. Hence the rationally calculating part is one part of the part of the soul that has reason (1139a5-15).

Here Aristotle seems to draw on an unstated analogy with human sensation. That we do not hear with our eyes or see with our ears suggests a necessary concord between the receiver and the thing received. By extension, the part of the soul capable of engaging in the study of beings whose principles are variable cannot study beings whose principles are invariable any more than an eye can hear. The fact that we can grasp truths about eternal, unchanging beings suggests the operation of an *epistēmonikon*; that we can grasp the truths of changing beings points to a *logistikon*. What is most important, however, is that this conception presumes a concord between knower and known. And despite the probably necessary qualification that the soul is only *somehow* similar to its objects, the *epistēmonikon* must be akin to the eternal and unchanging beings which it grasps. Since the changeless objects which the *epistēmonikon* reaches include divine beings, which are themselves unchanging and eternal, the *epistēmonikon* itself must be divine, “ingenerable and indestructible” (1139b24).<sup>8</sup> This conclusion establishes the basis for the divine potential of the human soul in 10.7-8.

8. Cf. 1139b22-24: “What is known scientifically is by necessity. Hence it is everlasting; for the things that are by unqualified necessity are all everlasting, and everlasting things are ingenerable and indestructible.”

More generally, Aristotle's connection between human happiness and the divine is justified within a philosophy of ordered differences, a hierarchical cosmos in which variations are significant and are located within continuous spectra of rightness, beauty, and reality.<sup>9</sup> Within the human being, the soul takes precedence over the body, the sensitive over the nutritive, the rational over the nonrational, the *epistēmonikon* over the *logistikon* (1161b1-28, 1102b1-28, 1139a5-15). In the cosmos, divinities are superior to human beings, who are, in turn, superior to other animals. Being a principle of thought is superior to being a compound of thought-and-desire or being a principle of desire only. Continuous *theōria* is superior to study mixed with moral action, which is superior to an exclusively sensitive and vegetative life. Animals, for their part, are superior to plants, which only grow, and plants, by implication, are superior to non-living things, which do not even grow (1102b1-28, 1139b5, 1175a5-7, 1177a22-23). And although we are not the highest beings in the cosmos, we nevertheless dwell among our own hierarchies of better and worse people, who are distinguished by better and worse lives.

Aristotle grades natural hierarchies among human beings according to rationality—which differs in degree by maturity, by sex, by political status, and by other factors—and in terms of virtue or vice, as in the greatness of the magnanimous person and in the spectrum of virtues from temperance to continence and of vices from incontinence to intemperance (1195a611, 1195b5-13, 1158b13-19, 1161b4-6, 1123b25, 1145b9-14, 1146a10-13, 1119a28-33). Similarly, pleasures fall along a spectrum. “The pleasures that complete the activities of the complete and blessedly happy man . . . will be called the fully human pleasures to the greatest extent. The other pleasures will be human in secondary, or even more remote ways, corresponding to the character of the activities” (1176a27-30). At the pinnacle of this spectrum is the pleasure that corresponds to the highest activity:

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9. This cosmic view relates to a linguistic one—that words and things have central and more or less derivative expressions, that we may understand *pros hen*, as the meanings group themselves around a central one, and then by analogy (1096b26-28). This provides further support for interpreting Aristotle's distinctions in dialectical rather than binary terms.

Every perceptual capacity is active in relation to its perceptible object, and completely active when it is in good condition in relation to the finest of its perceptible objects. For this above all seems to be the character of complete activity, whether it is ascribed to the capacity or to the subject that has it. Hence for each capacity the best activity is the activity of the subject in the best condition in relation to the best object of the capacity.

[For human beings, the activity of contemplation will be] the most complete and the most pleasant. For every perceptual capacity and every sort of thought and study has its pleasure; the most pleasant activity is the most complete; and the most complete is the activity of the subject in good condition in relation to the most excellent object of the capacity. Pleasure completes the activity (1174b20-24).

And the forms of friendship also ascend and descend in hierarchical order, from the central and highest sense—the friendships of good people—to the friendships of pleasure, which are mere approximations of living well together, to the friendships of utility, which can drift toward the mercenary (1157a1-17, 1158b1-13).

Other hierarchies, at large and small scales, appear throughout the *Ethics*: from the superiority of the collective good to the inferiority of the individual good; the superiority of useless study, choiceworthy in itself, to the inferiority of study in the pursuit of money; the natural superiority of right hands to left hands; the superiority of wisdom to prudence; the superiority of genuine self-love that gathers *to kalos* to the inferiority of grasping after possession and power; the superiority of father to son, man to woman, ruler to ruled (1094b9-11, 1096a6-7, 1134b34-35, 1143b35-36, 1168b16-1169a34, 1158b10-13). Within this web of hierarchies, in which the superior does not merely dominate but clarifies and situates the inferior, Aristotle locates the life of contemplation at the very top of the hierarchy. Such a life, he says, “would be superior to the human level” (1177b26).

In Aristotle's picture of what it means to be human, we can become both more and less than what we are. We are compound beings, beings in-between, straddling many dividing lines within

a hierarchical cosmos. We participate in the life of nutrition and sensation as well as the life of rational calculation and emotion. At our worst, we can be bestial, but at our best, we can be demigods, limited divinities. When we contemplate, we become a microcosmos, our soul a hierarchically arranged composite, self-aware of its own order. When we contemplate, we grasp truths that are not merely contingent on our human condition and embodied circumstances, but necessary, concerning divinely stable cosmic beings. Knowing what endures links us in an intellectual kinship with the greater order of which we are a part. The divine in us receives the divine outside of us and our lives come to imitate those of the celestial intelligences. Our being, unlike other forms of being, involves reaching beyond ourselves, beyond what we seem to be, in order to be most fully what we are. But since we are both—both human and more than human—our fulfillment comes in seeking to be both, not merely one or the other.

If we attempted to live the life of the understanding as a god does—continuously, without attending to nutrition, or shelter, or human care—we would die. We would cease to be what we are, fail to remain ourselves. We would have no friends, build no communities, form no families. If we attempted to live the life of a god in full, we would fail as the naturally political beings Aristotle knows that we are. Our life, at its best, involves an irresolvable tension among its different aspects. We can live for a time as what we most essentially are, but we cannot sustain that life unceasingly. On the other hand, if we never contemplated, we would grow and sense, feel and calculate without ever attaining anything unchangingly true. In the absence of contemplation, we would dwell without a center, in the indeterminacy of time and the perplexing welter of mere relational thought, in a calculus without intelligence. As compound beings, our non-contemplative callings necessarily limit our *theōria*. But contemplation remains at the height and heart of life, providing an ordering logic and a stabilizing center. It seems that our capacity to find and to understand something whole and complete beyond ourselves—something similar to our most essential being—enables us to shape the parts of our

lives into something that is whole and complete itself. If so, then it is only through the divine activity of our understanding that human life can finally make sense: to be fully human by being more than human.

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# Constructing the World: The Kantian Origin of the Very Idea

Raoni Padui

In the twentieth century, the notion of a constructed world became commonplace.<sup>1</sup> Today we have a variety of different forms of constructivism, ranging from childhood pedagogical theories to meta-ethics, from mathematical constructivism to sociological theories of social construction.<sup>2</sup> Ian Hacking begins his book *The Social Construction of What?* with a rather humorous list of entities or properties that had been deemed constructions in the past half century, including notions of authorship, brotherhood, facts, gender, illness, quarks, nature, or simply “reality” itself.<sup>3</sup> While the prevalence of such claims increased during the frantic years of the so-called “science wars” and the rise of the debates surrounding post-modernism, many of these ideas have their sources in the nineteenth century. By the end of that century one can already find Hans Vaihinger, a sober Kant scholar and founding

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1. Cf. Rudolf Carnap’s 1928 *Der Logische Aufbau der Welt*, *The Logical Structure of the World and Pseudoproblems in Philosophy*, translated by Rolf A. George (Chicago: Open Court, 2003); Alfred Shutz’s 1932 *Der Sinnhafte Aufbau der Sozialen Welt*, *The Phenomenology of the Social World*, translated by George Walsh and Fredrick Lehnert (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1967); Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Anchor Books, 1967). A recent update of central aspects of Carnap’s project can be found in David J. Chalmers, *Constructing the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

2. These are summarized by Ian Hacking, *The Social Construction of What?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).

3. Hacking, *Social Construction*, 1-2.

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editor of *Kant-Studien*, arguing for the central place of fictional constructs in our mathematics, logic, natural science, in addition to our practical and religious conceptions of the world.<sup>4</sup> Roughly around the same time, Wilhelm Dilthey came to interpret systematic and competing philosophical claims as worldviews (*Weltanschauungen*),<sup>5</sup> making way to today's colloquial use of the word "philosophy" to mean a view of the world that individuals hold. And no one in that century argued as forcefully as Nietzsche did for how much of our meaningful experience, which we may at times take as given, is actually produced (largely unconsciously) by human projections and fabrications. Take this characteristic claim from one of his earliest texts:

Everything which distinguishes man from the animals depends upon this ability to volatilize perceptual metaphors in a schema, and thus to dissolve an image into a concept. For something is possible in the realm of these schemata which could never be achieved with the vivid first impressions: the construction of a pyramidal order according to castes and degrees, the creation of a new world of laws, privileges, subordinations, and clearly marked boundaries—a new world, one which now confronts that other vivid world of first impressions as more solid, more universal, better known, and more human than the immediately perceived world, and thus as the regulative and imperative world.<sup>6</sup>

The post-Kantian flavor of this passage is unmistakable, and not only for the uses of Kantian notions such as image, schema, con-

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4. Hans Vaihinger, *The Philosophy of 'As If': A System of the Theoretical, Practical, and Religious Fictions of Mankind*, translated by C. K. Ogden (London: Routledge & Kegan, 1965).

5. Wilhelm Dilthey, *Weltanschauungslehre: Abhandlungen zur Philosophie der Philosophie, Gesammelte Schriften*, Band VIII (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1960).

6. Friedrich Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense," in *Philosophy and Truth: Selections from Nietzsche's Notebooks of the early 1870's*, edited and translated by Daniel Breazzeale (New Jersey: Humanities, Press, 1993), 84.

cept, and regulative ideas.<sup>7</sup> There is also the contrast between the stable and universal demands of our conceptual grasp of the world, and the messy manifoldness of the intuitions that must be structured by our mind in order to become meaningful experiences. Nietzsche argues here, as he does elsewhere in several of his late works, that the world of becoming is falsified by the stabilization that results from our regulative fictions, often using the language of “constructing” the world.<sup>8</sup> I want to argue that this idea, which finds an explicit articulation in Nietzsche’s work and becomes a recognizable position to hold by the twentieth century, has its origins in Kant’s philosophy. I hope to show how it arose historically in Kant’s text in an essentially ambiguous entanglement between mathematical theories of construction, the role of transcendental imagination, and the systematic unity demanded by reason. Its sources have little to do with the “subjectivism” that it later came to represent.

Before turning to Kant, however, it may be useful to clarify the concept under investigation and to answer one obvious initial objection. It is important to delimit the notion of construction that I will be tracing back to Kant, since it can be confused with several closely related notions. I would like to differentiate *local* versus *global* or *cosmic* notions of construction. The *local* notion of construction would involve the claim that there is a specific sphere of our lives, or a particular object-domain, that should be understood as arising from human construction or production, whatever that may come to mean. The distinction between sex and gender, for example, has been mobilized by some philosophers and theorists in such a way that it may leave intact specific biological aspects of sex, while implying that there is a restricted

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7. On Nietzsche’s relationship to Kant and transcendental philosophy, see R. Kevin Hill, *Nietzsche’s Critiques: The Kantian Foundations of his Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003), and Michael Steven Green, *Nietzsche and the Transcendental Tradition* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002).

8. Cf. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, edited by Rüdiger Bittner and translated by Kate Sturge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 20-21.

field called “gender” in which roles and norms are socially and culturally produced. While these constructions have been previously tethered to an illicit biological basis, that is, *naturalized*, they are actually largely the product of contingent historical and human activities.<sup>9</sup> This notion of construction, often used within the tradition of critical theory, is meant to epistemologically undermine that which has been considered natural and stable in order to *de-naturalize* it by showing its constructability. The ultimate goal is often political, since by laying bare its historical origination one may hope to uncover the conditions that may render it once again malleable or changeable. This *local* notion of construction does not have to rely on any robust notion of the *world as a whole* being constructed, rather, it can do its critical work within a restricted domain. It can therefore rely on a notion that there are *some* things in our social world that are artificially or conventionally produced, a notion that is arguably as old as philosophy itself, and can already be found in the ancient debates regarding whether our political institutions are grounded in nature or in convention—the so-called *phusis/nomos* debates. It would be strange and implausible to argue that *this* idea of construction, which is continuous with our contemporary understanding that some things are artificially produced by craft or *tēchne*, has its origin in Kantian criticism, although its particular strand within critical theory was undoubtedly influenced by Kant’s critical philosophy. While this local notion of construction is extremely influential in contemporary uses of the term, what I’m primarily interested in here is rather the *global* or *cosmic* sense of construction, that is, the idea of the *world itself and as a whole* being a construction rather than something given.

This is the reason why I want to trace this particular notion of construction back to Kant, rather than to the historically pre-

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9. Sally Haslanger, *Resisting Reality: Social Construction and Social Critique* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). For a version that also extends this critique to biological factors, see Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

vious “maker’s knowledge tradition.”<sup>10</sup> This tradition is a likely candidate in any genealogy of constructivism, especially if one traces the notion of construction back to Vico’s “*verum esse ipsum factum*” (“the true is precisely what is made”).<sup>11</sup> However, immediately after stating his principle, it becomes clear that Vico is thinking paradigmatically in terms of the demiurgic activity of God rather than about a human form of thought: “And, therefore, the first truth is in God, because God is the first Maker.”<sup>12</sup> It is definitely the case that Vico argues we know only what we make, and that he uses the *verum factum* principle in order to argue for his *Scienza Nuova*, stating that the “world of civil society has certainly been made by men, and that its principles are therefore to be found within the modifications of our own human mind.”<sup>13</sup> But it is important to note that he contrasts this ability we have in relation to civil society to the world of nature, which is made by God and therefore only fully known to He who made it. This is also the case for Hobbes, who attempts to extend the procedure of construction from mathematics to civil society, but denies that this special kind of access would be applicable to nature: “Geometry therefore is demonstrable, for the lines and figures from which we reason are drawn and described by ourselves; and civil philosophy is demonstrable, because we make the commonwealth ourselves.”<sup>14</sup> Following this claim, he immediately goes

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10. Cf. Jaakko Hintikka, “Practical vs. Theoretical Reason—An Ambiguous Legacy,” in *Knowledge and the Known, Historical Perspectives on Epistemology* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1991), 80-89. Another good account of this tradition, with special emphasis on Bacon’s role within it, can be found in Antonio Pérez-Ramos, *Francis Bacon’s Idea of Science and the Maker’s Knowledge Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 48-62.

11. Giambattista Vico, *On the Most Ancient Wisdom of the Italians, Unearthed from the Origins of the Latin Language*, translated by L. M. Palmer (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 46.

12. *Ibid.*, 46.

13. Giambattista Vico, *The New Science*, translated by Thomas Bergin and Max Fisch (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984).

14. Thomas Hobbes, “Six Lessons to the Professors of the Mathematics,” in *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes*, Volume VII (London: John Bohn, 1745), 184.

on to deny that physics could be a demonstrable science, since natural bodies are not constructed by us. No thinker in the maker's knowledge tradition endorses wholeheartedly the idea that the world as a whole is our construction, rather, they attempt to show that a limited domain is a human product and can therefore be known in the same way that other human products can be known. What we have here therefore is a limited or local form of construction, together with an epistemology that argues for the complete intelligibility of the products of the human mind.

While Vico and Hobbes seem to restrict their claims to the specific domain of civil society, one may attempt to trace a more robust notion of subjective construction to Descartes, and therefore argue that the true source of modern subjectivity is to be found in Descartes' rather than Kant's philosophy. There is a long interpretive tradition that traces the idea that the world is nothing but a construction of subjectivity back to early modern thought, rather than to Kant. Take, for example, Heidegger's influential reading of the origin of the modern age, which he describes in the following manner and traces back to the Cartesian *cogito*:

The fundamental event of modernity is the conquest of the world as picture. From now on the word "picture" [*Bild*] means: the collective image of representing production [*das Gebild des vorstellenden Herstellens*]. Within this, man fights for the position in which he can be that being who gives to every being the measure and draws up the guidelines.<sup>15</sup>

It is difficult to deny that there are aspects of Cartesian thought that suggest the idea of a world that is constructed. For skeptical purposes, he is willing to entertain the idea that the world is noth-

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15. Martin Heidegger, "The Age of the World Picture," in *Off the Beaten Track*, edited by Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 71; "Die Zeit des Weltbildes" in *Holzwege. Gesamtausgabe, Band 5* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1977), 94. See also Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, translated by Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983), 187.

ing but a dream or the imaginings of insanity. But these suggestions are usually made in passing, in order to prove another point, and with several caveats in mind. These suggestions were then read retrospectively by the later post-Kantian tradition as if it were already found in Descartes' original arguments. Let us take as a paradigmatic example of this retrospective reading the moment Descartes entertains the idea that we may build the world out of matter and motion in *Le Monde*. When he does this, he does so with constant and explicit reminders that such an enterprise is the work of the wandering aspects of human imagination:

For a while, then, allow your thought to wander beyond this world to view another, wholly new, world, which I call forth in imaginary spaces before it. The Philosophers tell us that these spaces are infinite, and they should certainly be believed, since it is they themselves who invented them.<sup>16</sup>

The world that is invented out of matter and motion is sharply distinguished from the actual world constructed by God; it is more of a theoretical model than a world in which we actually live. Now compare the modesty of the way in which Descartes presents the imaginary world he constructs in *Le Monde* with the Archimedean formulation presented by Johann Gottlieb Buhle in his 1802 *Geschichte der Neuern Philosophie*: “Give me matter and motion and I will build you the world [*Gebt mir Materie und Bewegung, und ich will euch Welten bauen*].”<sup>17</sup> This reformulation of what Descartes actually said is repeated almost verbatim by Schelling in his early *System of Transcendental Idealism*<sup>18</sup> and by Hegel in his lectures on the history of philosophy.<sup>19</sup> What is interesting to note here is how close the reformulation of

16. René Descartes, *The World and Other Writings*, edited and translated by Stephen Gaukroger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 21.

17. Johann Gottlieb Buhle, *Geschichte der Neuern Philosophie, Dritter Band* (Göttingen, 1802), 19.

18. F. W. J. Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism*, translated by Peter Heath (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1978), 72.

19. G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy: The Lectures of 1825-1826, Volume III*, translated by R. F. Brown and J. M. Stewart (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1990), 147.

Descartes that is found in Buhle, Schelling, and Hegel is to Kant's early account in "Universal Natural History and Theory of the Heavens" of the universe of Newtonian physics: "It seems to me that in a certain sense one could say here without being presumption: *Give me matter and I will build a world out of it*, that is, give me matter and I will show you how a world is to come into being out of it."<sup>20</sup> Neither is this account directed at Descartes, nor is the careful (perhaps rhetorical) humility found in Descartes that distances the presumption of a human construction of the world from the way the world was actually created by God. By the time Samuel Taylor Coleridge picks up the phrase, it is directly ascribed to Descartes, asserted with full presumption, and phrased in the language of construction: "Give me matter and motion and I will construct you the universe."<sup>21</sup> In other words, it is only in light of later developments, especially within the German Idealist reception of Kant, that the radical notion of Cartesian subjectivity became highlighted and retrospectively constituted. With these caveats in mind, I will now turn explicitly to the notion of constructing the world in Kant, by analyzing what "construction" and "world" meant for his critical philosophy.

### 1. Mathematical Construction

The first important point that ought to be stressed is that the notion of construction [*Konstruktion*]<sup>22</sup> was a technical and primarily mathematical concept at Kant's time. The mathematical

20. Immanuel Kant, "Universal Natural History and Theory of the Heavens, or Essay on the Constitution and the Mechanical Origin of the Whole Universe according to Newtonian Principles," in *Natural Science*, edited by Eric Watkins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 200.

21. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria, or, Biographical Sketches of my Literary Life and Opinions, Volume I* (New York: George P. Putnam, 1848), 371. On the relationship between Coleridge and German Idealism, see Paul Hamilton, *Coleridge and German Philosophy: The Poet in the Land of Logic* (London: Continuum, 2007).

22. On the etymology of *Konstruktion*, see Helga Ende, *Der Konstruktionsbegriff im Umkreis des Deutschen Idealismus* (Meisenheim am Glan: Verlag Anton Hain, 1973), 5-8.

understanding of construction is not something Kant introduced nor by any means original to his thinking, but rather something he inherited from his philosophical milieu.<sup>23</sup> Some interpreters today speak of Kant's constructivism as if Kant were simply using a *metaphor* of construction in his philosophy, as Onora O'Neill does in *Constructions of Reason*,<sup>24</sup> or as John Rawls does in calling his reformulation of Kant's practical philosophy "constructivism."<sup>25</sup> Others, like Tom Rockmore, understand by Kant's constructivism a general position that results from Kant's so-called Copernican revolution. On this reading, the idea that we only know aspects of nature that we have ourselves inserted into nature is what constitutes Kant's epistemological constructivism.<sup>26</sup> But these more metaphorical understandings of Kantian constructivism do not take up the notion as a technical concept in Kant's work. Kant's most general definition of construction is the following: "In a general sense one may call construction all exhibition of a concept through the (spontaneous) production of a corresponding intuition."<sup>27</sup> This general definition often came

23. Cf. Johann Heinrich Lambert, *Anlage zur Architectonic, oder Theorie des Einfachen und des Ersten in der Philosophischen und Mathematischen Erkenntniß* (Riga: Johann Friedrich Hartknoch, 1771).

24. Onora O'Neill, *Constructions of Reason: Explorations of Kant's Practical Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 20.

25. John Rawls, "Kantian Constructivism in Moral Theory," *The Journal of Philosophy*, Volume 77, No. 9 (1980): 515-572.

26. Tom Rockmore, "Hegel and Epistemological Constructivism," *Idealistic Studies*, Volume 36, Issue 3 (2006): 183-190. Of course, the status and meaning of Kant's so-called Copernican revolution is a subject of great debate. Cf. Hans Blumenberg, *The Genesis of the Copernican World*, translated by Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), 595-614; Ermanno Bencivenga, *Kant's Copernican Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987); Norman Kemp Smith "The Meaning of Kant's Copernican Analogy," *Mind*, vol. 22 (1913), 549-551; S. Morris Engel, "Kant's Copernican Analogy: A Re-examination," *Kant-Studien*, vol. 54 (1963), 243-251; Pierre Kerszberg, "Two Senses of Kant's Copernican Revolution," *Kant-Studien*, vol. 80 (1989), 63-80.

27. Immanuel Kant, "On a Discovery Whereby Any New Critique of Pure Reason is to be Made Superfluous by an Older One," in *Theoretical*



with the specification that construction primarily refers to the production of mathematical objects. Unlike Fichte and especially Schelling after him, for whom talk of *philosophical construction* became legitimate, Kant actually maintained a strict separation between the concepts operative in philosophical cognition and the constructability of mathematical objects.<sup>28</sup> In the doctrine of method of the *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant goes to great lengths to differentiate the discursive use of reason from its intuitive use through construction, which is appropriate to mathematics.<sup>29</sup> Those who attempt to surreptitiously absorb the results of mathematics into philosophical cognition, like Wolff before him and Schelling after, are lead to conflate the ability to produce a conceptual object and to subsume a given manifold under conceptual articulation.<sup>30</sup> The following is his most sustained account of construction in the *Critique of Pure Reason*:

Philosophical cognition is rational cognition from concepts, mathematical cognition that from the construction of concepts. But to construct a concept means to exhibit *a priori* the intuition corresponding to it. For the construction of a concept, therefore, a non-empirical intuition is required, which consequently, as intuition, is an individual object [*ein einzelnes Objekt ist*], but that must nevertheless, as the construction of a concept (of a general representation), express in the representation universal validity for all possible intuition that belong under the same concept. Thus I construct a triangle by exhibiting an object corresponding to this concept, either through

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*Philosophy After 1781*, edited by Henry Allison and Peter Heath (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 287.

28. The most thorough essay that I know of on the problem of construction in Kant, from which I have profited greatly in this discussion, is Alfredo Ferrarin, "Construction and Mathematical Schematism: Kant on the Exhibition of a Concept in Intuition," *Kant-Studien* 86 (1995): 131-174.

29. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, translated and edited by Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 633, A 719/B 747. It will be cited as *KrV*.

30. *Ibid.*, A 735/B 763.

mere imagination, in pure intuition, or on paper, in empirical intuition, but in both cases completely *a priori*, without having had to borrow the pattern for it from any experience. The individual drawn figure is empirical, and nevertheless serves to express the concept without damage to its universality, for in the case of this empirical intuition we have taken account only of the action of constructing a concept [*die Handlung der Konstruktion des Begriffs*].<sup>31</sup>

The example is fairly clear. When I construct a geometrical object, I must have recourse to intuition, whether empirical or pure, and actually build it in space. The constructed object is, importantly, an individual, but an individual permeated by universality. It does not matter that this particular triangle on the chalk board was constructed or drawn with an unsteady hand, and its lines are less than perfectly rectilinear. It also does not matter that the triangle that I visualize in my imagination is double the size as the one you visualize in yours for a given Euclidean proof, since these individual triangles are actually only stand-ins for the activity of construction (something of a blueprint or recipe for making triangles of this sort). This is the primary context for Kant's understanding of construction. It is a kind of making or producing, but one that is simultaneously particular and universal, ultimately yielding an individual in intuition but not building it arbitrarily or contingently, but with a rule that yields universal validity.<sup>32</sup>

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31. *Ibid.*, A 713-714/B 741-742.

32. On Kant's understanding of geometry and construction in mathematics, see Michael Friedman, *Kant and the Exact Sciences* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 55-95. Friedman offers a particularly contemporary account, filtered through twentieth century philosophies of mathematics, that can be tempered and complemented by the more historical approach of David Rapport Lachterman, *The Ethics of Geometry: A Genealogy of Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 49-65 and Daniel Sutherland, "Kant's Philosophy of Mathematics and the Greek Mathematical Tradition," *Philosophical Review*, Vol. 113, 2 (2004): 157-201. On Kant's notion of mathematics more generally, see Jaakko

Mathematics was the primary context within which the notion of construction arose. Following Proclus, it had become commonplace to distinguish between mathematical *theorems*, which were primarily theoretical questions of knowing or seeing something already true, and mathematical *problems*, which often involved issues of construction.<sup>33</sup> The former propositions in Euclid's *Elements* end with the famous Q.E.D. (Latin for *quod erat demonstrandum*), which translates the Greek phrase *hoper edei deixai*, meaning "what was required to be proved, or shown, or demonstrated." The latter end in "Q.E.F." (*quod erat faciendum*), which translates *hoper edei poiēsai* or "what was required to be done or made." Mathematical constructions are matters of *poiēsis*, matters of making or creating, and are often articulated through other Greek verbs relating to construction and fabrication. When constructing figures within propositions, Euclid uses the Greek verb *sunistanai*, which means "to put things together or to combine," and is regularly translated by "to construct."<sup>34</sup> Many problems in Euclid are challenges of construction, as in the first proposition of book I, which asks that we construct an equilateral triangle on a given straight line. The diagram is an empirical representation of the proposition, but even if one were to avoid its use, the verbs of production used in the proposition, as well as the references to the constructive aspects of the postulates, would require one to construct lines, circles, and ultimately a triangle in one's pure imagination.<sup>35</sup>

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Hintikka, "Kant on the Mathematical Method," *The Monist*, Vol. 51, 3 (1967): 352-375; Charles Parsons, "Kant's Philosophy of Arithmetic," in *Mathematics in Philosophy: Selected Essays* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), 110-149; Lisa Shabel, "Kant on the 'Symbolic Construction' of Mathematical Concepts," *Studies in the History and Philosophy of Science*, Vol. 29, 4 (1998): 589-621.

33. Euclid, *The Thirteen Books of The Elements, Volume I*, translated with introduction and commentary by Sir Thomas L. Heath (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1908), 124-129.

34. Euclid, *The Elements*, Book I, Proposition I, 16-17.

35. Cf. Kant's use of this proof for his mythological origin of the geometric revolution in Kant, *KrV*, Bxi.

While Kant wants to keep philosophical cognition separate from mathematical construction, it is through the notion of the pure figurative synthesis of the imagination that the idea of a constructive intellect begins to affect other parts of the Kantian edifice. The mediating role that the transcendental power of the imagination plays in connecting concepts to intuitions not only makes it a central and indispensable faculty of human experience, it also demonstrates the ways in which our mind is essentially *figurative* for Kant. Whereas some today would argue for a strictly logical articulation of certain geometric functions, Kant resists the abstraction into a purely logical domain by insisting that geometry requires spatial intuition. For him, there can be no such thing as geometry without the imagination; for example, there can be no purely logical account of the production of a line, since it involves what he calls a *figurative* synthesis: “We also always perceive this in ourselves. We cannot think of a line without drawing it in thought, we cannot think of a circle without describing it, we cannot represent the three dimensions of space at all without placing three lines perpendicular to each other at the same point.”<sup>36</sup> No analysis of concepts could ever make clear to us what these mean, and it is only by drawing these figures in intuition that we can make sense of these representations—knowing them requires constructing them.<sup>37</sup>

## 2. The Role of the Imagination

Due to the figurative nature of our understanding and the necessity of application of our concepts to corresponding intuitions, the transcendental faculty of the imagination is a necessary condition of our experience.<sup>38</sup> This is especially so when the imagination is understood in its active or productive aspects rather than its merely reproductive or associational activities. As he puts it

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36. Kant, *KrV*, B 154.

37. *Ibid.*, A 162/ B 203.

38. *Ibid.*, A 102. On the various ways in which the imagination is important to Kant, see the first part of Rudolf A. Makkreel, *Imagination and Interpretation in Kant: The Hermeneutical Import of the Critique of Judgment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 9-42.

in the A-deduction: “The principle [*principium*] of the necessary unity of the pure (productive) synthesis of the imagination prior to apperception is thus the ground of the possibility of all cognition, especially that of experience.”<sup>39</sup> The imagination plays a central role in the activity of synthesizing the manifold given to us in intuition.<sup>40</sup> While Kant acknowledges that there is something fairly mysterious about the exact mechanisms through which this faculty operates, he realizes that it is the fulcrum without which the understanding would not be connected to sensibility.<sup>41</sup> Together with the transcendental unity of apperception, which is famously stressed as more fundamental in the B-deduction, the transcendental imagination is responsible for the continuity we find in our experience. While the unity of apperception relates all the perceptions I have back to one consciousness that experiences them continuously<sup>42</sup> (that is, all my perceptions relate back to a unity that is the correlate of all my representations), synthetic unity of the imagination relates all appearances in an objective ground of continuous association Kant calls *affinity*.<sup>43</sup> As an object of sensation undergoes change, it is not only continuously related to a subject experiencing it, but the possibility of experiencing change relies on seeing each singular perception continuously synthesized as one and the same object. This synthesis is neither the intellectual synthesis, nor the empirical reproductive imagination (the latter following largely Humean and Lockean psychological laws of association). This is the synthesis of the productive imagination, which Kant argues is a kind of spontaneity peculiar to the faculty of the imagination.<sup>44</sup> While at times Kant can be found stressing the differences between the spontaneity of intellect and of the imagination, at others he claims that it is only in their working together that we have a unified whole called the understanding: “The unity of apperception in

39. Kant, *KrV*, A 118.

40. *Ibid.*, A 120.

41. *Ibid.*, A 124.

42. *Ibid.*, A 122.

43. *Ibid.*, A 123.

44. *Ibid.*, B 152.

relation to the synthesis of the imagination is the understanding, and this very same unity, in relation to the transcendental synthesis of the imagination, is the pure understanding.”<sup>45</sup>

The synthetic function of the imagination is most clearly seen as producing schemata that mediate between the understanding and sensibility. In the schematism, the problem investigated is how to apply categories to objects, or more precisely, how to subsume objects under the categories given their heterogeneous sources and natures. Kant argues that there must be a third thing that is on the one hand homogeneous to the purity and universality found in the conceptual realm, and on the other to the concreteness and particularity of sensibility.<sup>46</sup> As an example of a schema for the application of a concept to *pure* intuition Kant speaks of the “schema of the triangle,”<sup>47</sup> thereby bringing us back to the discussion of the construction of concepts in mathematics. Now the schema of a triangle is different from the diagram drawn on paper or even the image produced in the imagination, since it is the general rule through which both of those can be constructed.<sup>48</sup> What is important in either the pure or empirical application is that the schema is not to be confused with an image, since it can “never be brought to an image at all.”<sup>49</sup> So while the schema is still the product of the synthetic activity of the transcendental power of the imagination, this product is less an image than a rule, or rather a “representation of a general procedure of the imagination for providing a concept with its image.”<sup>50</sup> My imagination gives me a schema through which I can construct several different triangles, and even though any given application of that rule will yield an individual triangle rather than a universal, that individual construction is somehow indicative of the general procedure of constructability. So when I construct an isosceles triangle on a given straight line in the first proposition

45. Ibid., A 119.

46. Ibid., A 138/B 177.

47. Ibid., A 141/B 180.

48. Ibid., A 718/B 746.

49. Ibid., A 142/B 181.

50. Ibid., A 140/B 179-180.

of Euclid's *Elements*, I use a rule that would be the case for *any* given straight line, rather than for this particularly given one.

### 3. The World as a Construction of Reason

At least within the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant gives the impression of wanting to restrict the notion of construction to this very particular work that the understanding, in conjunction with the imagination, does in a primarily mathematical context. But the notion of construction appears to overstep these neat boundaries, most notably in Kant's ambivalent if not outright contradictory claims about the possibility of the construction of the concept of matter in the *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science*.<sup>51</sup> If construction were shown to be possible not only in mathematics but also in natural science, while we would have an extension of its domain, it would still remain within the local rather than global conception of construction. But does the notion of construction in Kant ever outstrip the sphere of the understanding and contaminate, so to speak, the ideas of reason, where the world as a totality finds its appropriate domain? Is reason so spontaneous that it can be said to construct its particular kind of concepts (the ideas) in a way analogous to how mathematical objects are constructed? This would be the only way that it could make sense to speak of the "construction of the world," since the world is a notion whose proper sphere is beyond possible experience. But Kant goes to great pains to differentiate the kinds of spontaneity that can be found in the imagination, in apperceptive self-consciousness, in theoretical reason's drive to the unconditioned, and in practical reason's autonomy. It is important not to conflate all of these different functions of the mind's spontaneous

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51. Immanuel Kant, *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science*, in *Theoretical Philosophy After 1781*, edited by Henry Allison and Peter Heath (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 185-187. On Kant's use of construction in natural science, see Michael Friedman, *Kant's Construction of Nature: A Reading of the Metaphysics Foundations of Natural Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013) and Eckart Förster, *Kant's Final Synthesis: An Essay on the Opus Postumum* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).

activity, even if it cannot be denied that sometimes Kant is unable to draw the distinctions he desires with enough clarity, slipping into a discussion of “a spontaneity of cognition”<sup>52</sup> in general when contrasting it to the receptivity found in sensibility. This is also the case in the famous attempt to deduce the autonomy of practical reason from the kind of freedom found in the theoretical faculties in the third part of the *Groundwork*, where Kant traces one form of spontaneity from another.<sup>53</sup> What I hope to demonstrate in this section is that the way in which Kant thinks of the spontaneous unifying function of reason is with recourse to an analogy with the operations of the understanding. This *analogy* creates a stronger relationship between the way the understanding constructs and the way reason operates than a simple *metaphor* of construction could establish.

The general rubric of the analogy is simple and runs as follows: as the understanding operates on the manifold of intuition, so does reason operate on the understanding: “In fact the manifold of rules and the unity of principles is a demand of reason, in order to bring the understanding into thoroughgoing connection with itself, just as the understanding brings the manifold of intuition under concepts and through them into connection.”<sup>54</sup> With the notable exceptions of Gerd Buchdahl and Alfredo Ferrarin,<sup>55</sup> few commentators have paid any attention to this analogy, which

52. Kant, *KrV*, A 126.

53. Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, edited and translated by Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 57; *Akademie Ausgabe* 4: 452.

54. Kant, *KrV*, A 305/B 362. Kant repeats this analogy at other important places in the *Critique*: “The understanding constitutes an object for reason, just as sensibility does for the understanding. To make systematic the unity of all possible empirical actions of the understanding is a business of reason, just as the understanding connects the manifold of appearances through concepts and brings it under empirical laws.” (A 664/B692).

55. Gerd Buchdahl, *Metaphysics and the Philosophy of Science* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1969), 502, and Alfredo Ferrarin, *The Powers of Pure Reason: Kant and the Idea of Cosmic Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 40-42.



Kant even names explicitly as an analogical relation in Reason's drive towards the production of ideas: "Yet although no schema can be found in *intuition* for the thoroughgoing systematic unity of all concepts of the understanding, an analogue [*ein Analogon*] of such a schema can and must be given, which is the idea of the maximum of division and unification of the understanding's cognition in one principle."<sup>56</sup> The analogy shows the way in which the understanding's operation on the manifold of intuition and reason's operation on the understanding share several important traits. For example, reason's iterative drive from condition to condition all the way to the unconditioned should also be understood as *synthetic*. Analysis of conditionality could only result in the next, proximate condition and in an indefinite series, but the Unconditioned as a *totality* of conditions must be arrived at synthetically.<sup>57</sup> When this demand for systematic unity and completeness is applied to subjective conditions, it gives rise to the idea of a soul, when to objective conditions, of a world. And when it is applied to a notion of any object at all, whether actual or possible, in the subject or object, pure or empirical, it gives rise to the transcendental ideal, or to the onto-theological God understood as the being of all beings. For our purposes here, the important one to focus on is the transcendental idea that is a product of the spontaneity of reason applied to the understanding in a manner analogous to how the understanding operates on appearances. What we have here is a second-order application of synthetic unification, bringing the understanding into systematic unity with itself in a manner that actually constructs a world:

I call all transcendental ideas, insofar as they concern absolute totality in the synthesis of appearances, world-concepts [*Weltbegriffe*], partly because of the unconditioned totality on which the concept of the world-whole [*der Begriff des Weltganzen*] also rests even though it is only

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56. Kant, *KrV*, A 665/B 693.

57. *Ibid.*, A 308/B 365. See also Kant's explanation in terms of syllogistic logic, where the unconditioned is the series of conditions understood through the application of universality, of "allness," which results in the "totality of conditions," in *KrV*, A 322/B 379.

an idea, and partly because they have to do merely with the synthesis of appearances.<sup>58</sup>

This unity is not, Kant stresses throughout the transcendental dialectic, a fictional unity or a being “arbitrarily invented [*willkürlich erdichtet*]” by the human mind.<sup>59</sup> While it is true that for Kant it is “only a projected unity,”<sup>60</sup> this projection does not have the character of falsifying reality (as it would later have for Nietzsche).

The problem of how unity, multiplicity, and totality could be produced simultaneously in the notion of the World is one that had worried Kant deeply since the first section of his inaugural dissertation.<sup>61</sup> His critical solution is to argue that because the idea of the world is not an actual construct, the kind of projection performed is one Kant calls *problematic*. The systematic unity and coherence of our experience is given as a problem, but unlike the problems of construction in Euclid, for which we do have a solution, these have the strange character of being *insoluble* problems: “Thus we might say that the absolute whole of appearances is only an idea, since, because we can never project it in an image, it remains a problem without any solution [*niemals im Bilde entwerfen können, so bleibt es ein Problem ohne alle Auflösung*].”<sup>62</sup> If the idea of the world or any of the ideas of reason were actual constructions, then we would be able to produce an image that instantiated its schema. This is why it is, strictly speaking, inappropriate to speak of “constructions of Reason” in Kant.<sup>63</sup> Just as

58. Kant, *KrV*, A 407-408/B 434.

59. *Ibid.*, A 327/B 384.

60. *Ibid.*, A 647/B 675.

61. Immanuel Kant, “On the Form and Principles of the Sensible and the Intelligible World,” in *Theoretical Philosophy 1755-1770*, translated and edited by David Walford and Ralf Meerbote (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 377-383.

62. Kant, *KrV*, A 328/B 384.

63. Except, of course, metaphorically or more loosely, as do Susan Neiman, *The Unity of Reason: Rereading Kant* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 70, and Buchdahl, *Metaphysics and the Philosophy of Science*, 510.

we can construct an equilateral triangle, we would have to be able to imagine God, World, and Soul as particulars which were also universally valid. Even though no image can actually be furnished for the world as a whole, in its regulative employment we must act *as if* we did have such an image: “in relation to which we direct every empirical use of our reason in its greatest extension as if the objects themselves had arisen from that original image of all reason [*als ob die Gegenstände selbst aus jenem Urbilde aller Vernunft entsprungen wären*].”<sup>64</sup> What exactly is the world, if we take it to be a kind of problem without a solution, which we must contemplate but cannot properly bring into an image—a necessary illusion that is not a mere fabrication?

While Kant would most likely become uncomfortable with an attempt to mix reason with the imagination, we must return to the imagination's power to schematize in order to understand what the ideas of reason really are. In fact, this relationship is strongly suggested by Kant's own use of the analogy between reason's unification of the understanding and the understanding's unification of experience: “Thus the idea of reason is an analogue of a schema of sensibility [*ein Analogon von einem Schema der Sinnlichkeit*].”<sup>65</sup> He analogizes, rather than identifies both processes of synthetic unification, because Reason's production of ideas is not capable of leading to the cognition of a concept or an object, unlike the cases of mathematics and natural science. This nevertheless shows a more significant why in which the synthetic unification that reason performs on the understanding is analogous to the understanding's application to intuition: it also uses *schemata*. In fact, the ideas of reason are really only schemata, as Kant makes clear throughout the dialectic:

It makes a big difference whether something is given to my reason as an object absolutely or is given only as an object in the idea. In the first case my concepts go as far as determining the object; but in the second, there is really only a schema for which no object is given, not even

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64. Kant, *KrV*, A 673/B 701.

65. *Ibid.*, A 665/B 693.

hypothetically, but which serves only to represent other objects to us, in accordance with their systematic unity, by means of the relation to this idea, hence to represent these objects indirectly. Thus I say the concept of a highest intelligence is a mere idea . . . ; it is only a schema, ordered in accordance with the conditions of the greatest unity of reason.<sup>66</sup>

God is a schema for organizing all possible beings, the soul is a schema for organizing all subjective experiences, and the world a schema for organizing all actual existent objects. We hypostatize these ideas if we treat them as things in themselves or if we treat them as images produced by the empirical part of our imagination: “Thus they should not be assumed in themselves, but their reality should hold only as that of a schema of the regulative principle for the systematic unity of all cognitions of nature.”<sup>67</sup> The only reality they have is the reality of schemata, in an analogous manner to the schema produced by the productive imagination in its creation of rules for the construction of mathematical objects. What exactly these “schemata of reason” are is not something Kant makes clear, since he had earlier implied that schemata are always products of the imagination and that they serve as a rule or procedure for producing images for concepts.<sup>68</sup> But we are also told that reason cannot produce an image of the ideas, cannot make them sensible or provide intuitions for these concepts. More importantly, it is entirely unclear whether these schemata Kant is describing in the dialectic are themselves also products of the transcendental power of the imagination. But if they are not, he never explains how exactly a schematism of reason would operate, assuming there were such a thing.

This systematic unity that is demanded by reason in order to lead the work of the understanding both towards completeness and internal coherence is also closely related to what Kant calls the *architectonic* nature of reason. While the unifying function

66. Ibid., A 670/B 698.

67. Ibid., A 674/B 702. Here he is speaking of world-concepts in particular.

68. Ibid., A 140/B 179.

of Reason in producing *Weltbegriffe* ought not to be directly identified with the architectonic and cosmic nature of Reason, they share important characteristics.<sup>69</sup> Since, for Kant, “the unity of reason is the unity of a system,”<sup>70</sup> and since what he means by architectonic is “the art of systems,”<sup>71</sup> what a philosopher does when she is reflecting on experience and organizing it into a coherent whole is simply a systematic extension of reason’s spontaneous drive toward unification. Humans are natural metaphysicians, even if at times bad ones. The construction of a system is performed architectonically because it cannot be a mere heaping together of parts, regardless of what construction means etymologically (the Latin *con-struere* originally meant to pile up together). Kant argues that the unity of a system must be organized scientifically, likening the articulated whole of a science to the organic unity of the body of an animal, which requires a quasi-teleological organizing principle.<sup>72</sup> Since the systematic totality of a science is never given concretely to us, and we are always in the midst of the construction of a systematic whole, *in media res*, one may ask how we can build without a plan. Are we architects without a design? Not entirely suprisingly, it is once again a *schema* that furnishes the blueprint of the architectonic construction: “For its execution the idea needs a schema, i.e., an essential manifoldness and order of the parts determined *a priori* from the principle of the end.”<sup>73</sup> Once again, Kant does not fully spell out what he means by such a schema, which initially appears to be more teleological in nature than the unifying schema of the ideas of reason.<sup>74</sup> But through a schematizing activity that organizes and unifies the disparate into a whole, we now have a way to connect reason’s projection of the idea of World to the

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69. Ferrarin, *The Powers of Pure Reason*, 25-103.

70. Kant, *KrV*, A 680/B 708.

71. *Ibid.*, A 832/B 860.

72. *Ibid.*, A 833/B 861.

73. *Ibid.*, A 833/B 861.

74. Richard L. Velkley, *Freedom and the End of Reason: On the Moral Foundation of Kant’s Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 136-145.

unity of a system that is built organically by philosophy and science. And indirectly, Kant has made possible the likening of our synoptic view of the world with the activity of the intellect that was often reserved for either mathematical or imaginative construction. Recall that the Greek word *sustēma*, which means an organized whole, shares the same root with *sunistanai*, the word most often associated with construction in Greek mathematics, which means to organize by placing together. The way in which the mathematical mind is able to construct schemata for its objects can now become a model for how the philosopher can construct a system of the world. While doing so would involve ignoring or simply transgressing several boundaries Kant wanted to erect throughout his scrupulous distinctions, the analogies and different forms of schemata can serve as pores through which later thinkers can begin to expand the notion of mathematical construction.

#### 4. The Aftermath of Kantian Construction

The immediate repercussions of Kant's notion of construction, as well as its relationship to both the imagination and system-building in German Idealist philosophy, are well known and extensively documented.<sup>75</sup> In different ways, Maimon, Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel further developed aspects of Kant's understanding of the architectonic and constructive nature of human reason and put them to work for purposes of philosophical construction. It would be impossible to do justice to the many complexities and vicissitudes the notion of construction took under these different authors—which has already been established by several commentators.<sup>76</sup> However, I would like to show briefly

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75. For a quick summary, see Dieter Henrich, *The Unity of Reason: Essays on Kant's Philosophy*, translated by Richard L. Velkley (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), pp. 40–48. On Schelling and Hegel especially, see Bernhard Taureck, *Das Schicksal der Philosophischen Konstruktion* (München: Oldenbourg Verlag, 1975). For a survey of its different uses throughout several German Idealists, see Helga Ende, *Der Konstruktionsbegriff im Umkreis des Deutschen Idealismus* (Meisenheim am Glan: Verlag Anton Hain, 1973).

how a notion of constructing the world arises from being liberated from its mathematical context by the subsequent work of Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel.<sup>77</sup> This is important, since this liberation from mathematical contexts, while advancing positions contrary to Kant's own intentions, uses some of the insights regarding the unifying and schematizing nature of Reason developed within Kant's critical philosophy. A paradigmatic case can be found in Schelling's 1799 *First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature*, where he interprets the transcendental standpoint as comprehending being itself through a notion of construction:

If, according to these very principles, everything that exists is a construction of the spirit, then being itself is nothing other than the constructing itself, or since construction is thinkable at all only as activity, being itself is nothing other than the highest constructing activity, which, although never itself an object, is the principle of everything objective.<sup>78</sup>

In an 1803 essay entitled "On Construction in Philosophy," an essay that is primarily a review of a treatise by Benjamin Karl

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76. A clear comparison of the uses of construction in Fichte and Schelling can be found in Daniel Breazeale, "Men at Work: Philosophical Construction in Fichte and Schelling (Plenarvortrag of the Brüsseler Kongress der Internationalen Fichte-Gesellschaft, 2009). For an overview of Fichte's and Schelling's appropriation of construction and its relationship to intellectual intuition, see Paul Franks, *All or Nothing: Systematicity, Transcendental Arguments, and Skepticism in German Idealism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 338-354. On Schelling and construction, with special attention to the way he goes beyond Kant and Fichte in the philosophy of nature, see Eckart Förster, *The Twenty-Five Years of Philosophy*, translated by Brady Bowman (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 232-249.

77. Here I agree with Paul Franks when he claims that "German idealists want to free construction in intuition from its restriction to mathematics" (Franks, *All or Nothing*, 191).

78. F. W. J. Schelling, *First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature*, translated by Keith Peterson (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 13-14.

Henrik Höyer, Schelling more explicitly treats and criticizes Kant's distinction between philosophical methodology and mathematical construction. Here Schelling claims that the very "scientific fulfillment" of philosophy depends on a correct understanding and elaboration of the notion of construction.<sup>79</sup> Schelling argues that Kant correctly understood the nature of construction, insofar as he saw it offering a way for thinking the identity of concept and intuition, of the universal and the particular.<sup>80</sup> However, while correctly interpreting the notion of construction, it is in denying its use to philosophical cognition and restricting it to mathematical intuitions that Kant misunderstands the nature of philosophy itself. The tensions that arise from the many dualisms of Kantian philosophy, from concepts and intuitions to the unconditioned and the conditioned, or as Schelling puts it with a Platonic twist, "the absolute, that is in itself unlimited and completely one, and the particular which is limited and not one, but many," can only be overcome through the constructive ability to simultaneously present the universal and the particular. Once philosophical method is itself identified with the activity of construction, Schelling's various attempts to create a philosophy of nature must be thought through the notion of construction. As puts it, with perhaps deliberate hyperbole, "to philosophize about nature means as much as to create it."<sup>81</sup>

While Kant wanted to keep the activities and potencies of reason, the understanding, and the imagination largely compartmentalized within distinct domains, both through the mathematical notion of construction and the analogy between the schematizing of reason and the schema of the imagination it became possible for later thinkers to collapse certain Kantian distinctions. In their attempts to overcome what they saw as various Kantian dualisms, the mediating role of the imagination and of schemata became particularly attractive philosophical tools for German idealists. For Schelling, the struggle between Kant's op-

79. F. W. J. Schelling, "On Construction in Philosophy," translated by Andrew A. Davis and Alexi Kukuljevic, *Epoché*, 12.2 (Spring 2008): 271.

80. Schelling, "On Construction in Philosophy," 273.

81. Schelling, *First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature*, 5.



positions “can only be solved through the construction of the Idea and through the productive imagination.”<sup>82</sup> As the young Hegel claimed, following upon Schelling’s footsteps, “the imagination is nothing but Reason itself.”<sup>83</sup> Prefiguring the claim Heidegger would put forward over a century later,<sup>84</sup> Hegel argued that the productive imagination was the common root or source for both the activity of our conceptual grasp of the world and the receptivity found in intuition: “The productive imagination must rather be recognized as what is primary and original, as that out of which subjective Ego and objective world first sunder themselves into the necessarily bipartite appearance and product.”<sup>85</sup> This mediating role of the imagination even took on aesthetic forms that would already prefigure Nietzschean notions of aesthetically and artificially constructing the meaningful world around us. This is evident in Fichte’s suggestion of the role of aesthetics offering a middle ground, similar to that of a schematism, between the realism of our ordinary experience and the constructive idealism of the transcendental standpoint:

This midpoint is aesthetics. From the ordinary point of view, the world appears to be something given; from the transcendental point of view, it appears to be something produced (entirely within me). From the aesthetic point of view, the world appears to be given to us just as if we

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82. Schelling, “On Construction in Philosophy,” 278.

83. G. W. F. Hegel, *Faith and Knowledge*, translated by Walter Cerf and H. S. Harris (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1977), 73. *Werke in zwanzig Bänden, Werke 2* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1986), 308.

84. Cf. Martin Heidegger *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, translated by Richard Taft (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997); *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik*, Gesamtausgabe, Band 3 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1991). For a comparison between Heidegger’s interpretation and a more faithfully Kantian reading of the same issues, see Dieter Henrich, “On the Unity of Subjectivity,” in *The Unity of Reason: Essays on Kant’s Philosophy*, edited by Richard Velkley (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 17-54.

85. Hegel, *Faith and Knowledge*, 73; *Werke 2*, 308.

had produced it and to be just the sort of world we would have produced.<sup>86</sup>

It is important to note here that Fichte is not merely discussing the production of a work of art, of a particular artificial product. Rather, it is the world itself that is seen at times as something given, at times as something that we ourselves construct. German Idealism transforms the world as a given entity into one that is a construction of reason. This is what we find in the early Hegel, for whom the world becomes a world-view and a product of Spirit itself:

Reason constructs [*konstruiert*] itself in its emanation as an identity that is conditioned by this very duplicate; it opposes this relative identity to itself once more, and in this way the system advances until the objective totality is completed. Reason then unites this objective totality with the opposite subjective totality to form the infinite world-intuition [*unendlichen Weltanschauung*].<sup>87</sup>

This is not to say that we have already arrived at the more radical notion we find in Nietzsche of world-construction, since for Fichte as for Hegel this self-organization of the world is essentially rule-governed and rational. But the ingredients are there for the Nietzschean turn, namely the central role of schemata and the imagination, the liberation of construction from its mathematical context, and the world understood as no longer given to us, but built by us.

To conclude, the constructive relationship we have to the world we meaningfully inhabit is something introduced as a serious option only after Kant's Copernican revolution. This is not to suggest that Kant himself meant to introduce such a relation-

86. J. G. Fichte, *Foundations of Transcendental Philosophy: (Wissenschaftslehre) Nova Methodo*, translated and edited by Daniel Breazeale (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 473.

87. G. W. F. Hegel, *Difference between Fichte's and Schelling's System of Philosophy*. Translated by H. S. Harris and Walter Cerf (Albany: SUNY Press, 1977), 114; *Werke in zwanzig Bänden, Werke 2* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1986), 47.

ship, as we can see from his various attempts to keep the notion of construction in its proper mathematical domain, stressing the problematic status of the ideas of reason. Nevertheless, as we have seen above, Kant made the notion of the construction of the world possible by providing all the ingredients used later in order to produce this notion through the liberation of construction from its mathematical and restricted domain. In so doing, Kant made possible a radical new relationship to the world in which we inhabit. As Rémi Brague has argued in *The Wisdom of the World*, traditional pre-critical ontology tended to relate questions of ethics and what it means to live a good life to the project of articulating the place of the human within the ordered cosmos.<sup>88</sup> On this view of our relationship to our world, there is a necessary connection between ethics and physics, and consequently theoretical knowledge (*theōria*) is seen as the highest form of human activity because the contemplation of the world around us is of direct consequence to the question of what it means to live a human life harmonious with an articulated whole. Take as a paradigmatic example the teleological argument in Plato's *Timaeus*, which connects the question of why we are given vision to the contemplative knowledge of astronomical movement:

This is the cause and these the reasons for which god discovered vision and gave it to us as a gift: in order that, by observing the circuits of intellect in heaven, we might use them for the orbits of the thinking within us, which are akin to those, the disturbed to the undisturbed; and by having thoroughly learned them and partaken of the natural correctness in their calculations, thus imitating the utterly unwandering circuits of the god, we might stabilize the wander-stricken circuits in ourselves.<sup>89</sup>

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88. This is largely the argument of Rémi Brague's *The Wisdom of the World: The Human Experience of the Universe in Western Thought*, translated by Teresa Fagan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

89. Plato, *Timaeus*, translated by Peter Kalkavage (Newburyport: Focus Publishing, 2001), 47B.

This claim is a refrain in ancient and medieval thought, and is repeated with even more ethical purport in the introduction of Ptolemy's *Almagest*, where he argues that theoretical knowledge of the orderly movement of the stars and wanderers in the cosmos "makes its followers lovers of this divine beauty, accustoming them and reforming their natures, as it were, to a similar spiritual state."<sup>90</sup> Arguably, Kant has created the conditions for rendering such an enterprise senseless. We have seen how with Kant, the world itself becomes a problem, and how he offers, through his account of the interrelationship between mathematical construction, schemata, the imagination, and the unifying functions of the Understanding and of Reason, the means by which German idealists come to think of the world as a construct of human reason. By the time we arrive at Nietzsche and Vaihinger, even the orderliness of such a constructed world can be seen as largely fictitious. Arguably, by this point the wisdom Brague describes has been radically eroded. The goal of emulating the orderliness and systematic completeness around us is not a project for one who knows that such an order is actually constructed by us.

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90. Ptolemy, *Almagest*, translated and annotated by G. J. Toomer (London: Gerald Duckworth, 1984), 37.