Pharmakon Journal of Philosophy
Issue #2

Published by the students of the Dept. of Philosophy and Religion at American University,
Washington DC
Index

HAPPINESS AND INDIVIDUALITY IN MILL.............................................................3

Robert J. Sharpe-Wasserman, Pomona College

VERY (UN)ILLUMINATING: AN EVALUATION OF PAUL CHURCHLAND'S RESPONSES TO THE KNOWLEDGE ARGUMENT.................................................................8

Jonathan R.S. Barker, Wake Forest University

PLATO'S EPISTEMOLOGY AS EMPIRICISM..........................................................13

Sean Meslar, Christopher Newport University

THE METONYMY OF TRANSCENDENCE: DERRIDA AND THE DIAMOND SUTRA...19

David W. Pritchard, American University
Happiness and Individuality in Mill

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Abstract: In this paper, I identify two competing types of utilitarianism present in John Stuart Mill’s writings, hedonistic utilitarianism and objectivist utilitarianism. His hedonistic utilitarianism commands the maximization of happiness, and his objective utilitarianism the maximization of individuality. I compare the effectiveness of these to two forms of utilitarianism as justifications for individual liberty as defined in Mill’s Harm Principle. I conclude that his objective utilitarianism is superior in this regard because it alone can justify his crucially important voluntary slavery exception.

John Stuart Mill intends to make a utilitarian case for individual freedom. Mill’s anti-paternalism is a component of his argument for individual freedom, and is justified in large part by his arguments for individual freedom in general. But reviewing his anti-paternalism as well his paternalistic exception to the Harm Principle in the case of voluntary slavery, brings to light a tension between two competing types of utilitarianism in his political philosophy, hedonistic utilitarianism and objectivist utilitarianism, both of which can be used to justify the freedom granted by the Harm Principle. The objectivist utilitarian strand in his argument holds individuality to be intrinsically valuable, while his hedonism presents the subjective experience of pleasure as the ultimate value to which all other values are instrumental. The objectivist utilitarianism hidden in Mill’s argument for liberty serves as a better tool for justifying his voluntary slave exception as well as a more powerful argument for liberal freedom.

Mill states that the ultimate source of all “moral obligation,” and by derivation, all norms of justice, is the Greatest Happiness Principle (185). This principle holds that happiness, defined as
pleasure and the avoidance of pain, is “the ultimate end, with reference to and for the sake of which all other things are desirable.” Nothing can be desired or valued for any reason other than its being in itself pleasurable, or a means to satisfaction of further pleasures. Moral principles cannot have any ultimate justification other than the promotion of happiness, because happiness (i.e. pleasure) is the only thing that is intrinsically good.

Principles of justice, Mill says, belong to a subcategory of moral principles: principles of justice stipulate those moral obligations for which there is a corresponding right in some particular person. “Right” is defined as a claim by an individual that society is required to defend, a claim whose legitimacy is derived from the fact that its universalization as a moral imperative is productive of general utility (220-221). Mill’s Harm Principle, if we assume he is consistently applying the happiness-as-ultimate-value rule, must derive its sole and ultimate justification in such a way, because the Harm Principle is a principle of justice. The principle states that “the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others (14)”, delineating both a moral obligation on the part of each individual member of society not to harm other individuals, and a corresponding right of each individual not to be harmed. This principle implies liberty, that is, the freedom to “pursue our own good in our own way” within the bounds of rights, rights understood as protections against interpersonal harm (17). As long as one’s actions do not harm others, they remain within the domain of liberty.

Mill’s anti-paternalism is a subset of his Harm Principle. Let paternalism be defined as “the assumption of sovereignty by society over the actions of an individual member, with the intended purpose of furthering the happiness of the subjected party.” The articulation of the Harm Principle previously mentioned is immediately followed by the statement that the individual’s “own good, either physical or moral, is not sufficient warrant” for the exercise of power by one individual over another, or by all of society against an individual (4). It is important to note though, that logically, the Harm Principle must prohibit not just the use of force when its end is the happiness of the coerced individual, but also in non-paternalistic cases where the end is the happiness of the coercer or of a third party.

Upon reaching this point, we should expect to find a fundamentally hedonistic utilitarian justification for the Harm Principle and its corollary, the anti-paternalism principle, both of these being principles of justice, both of which Mill believes necessarily have a utilitarian basis. And indeed much of his defense of liberty is a substantiation of his utilitarian claim that “mankind are greater gainers by suffering each other to live as seems good to themselves, than by compelling each to live as seems good to the rest (18).” An elaboration of this statement that plays a prominent role in his book is the argument that liberty is the necessary condition for diversity in ways of life, which in turn is necessary for a trial-and-error process that improves individuals and societies over time.

The individual, as well as society, is fallible in its moral judgment, and thus requires for the discovery of what is valuable (that is, conducive to happiness) the opportunity to compare various ways of life with each other in order to learn what is valuable and worthless in each life experiment, and emulating or converting the former into customs. Because all things, including ways of life and customs, are valued instrumentally for their tendency to generate happiness, Mill means in the above argument that individual freedom allows for a learning process that helps us improve our ability to achieve happiness on an individual and social level. Following this line of argument, paternalism can be shown to be wrong because the imposition of a mode of action upon a subject with the intention of improving his lot, prevents him from contributing his unique experiences (both failures and successes) to the wisdom of society regarding the achievement of utility. In other words, paternalism, as well as non-paternalistic violations of individual liberty, inhibit the progress of individuals and society toward greater happiness.

He also argues paternalism is wrong because a given individual tends to be better at securing
his own happiness than any one else is at securing his happiness. This is true both because the individual has a greater motivation to secure his own happiness than anyone else, and because he is more knowledgeable about his individual situation and needs than anyone else; anyone else will inevitably rely on “general presumptions, which may be altogether wrong, and even if right, are as likely as not to misapplied to individual cases” (98). The truth of the latter claim is most evident when we consider that the primary initiator of paternalistic intervention is the centralized state, which intervenes by necessity on the basis of highly standardized information and thus ignores particularity to some degree. Putting this point together with the previous utilitarian argument, we can see that what Mill is saying is that freedom tends to produce utility for the individual who enjoys it, and in those cases when the individual, on account of his fallibility, fails to use his freedom to maximize his own happiness, his mistakes are a social good, increasing the wisdom and thus the happiness of society.

Considering his fundamental Happiness Principle as well as the two-part utilitarian anti-paternalist argument just mentioned, we must conclude that his voluntary slavery exception to the Harm Principle is without foundation. He argues that an individual should not be permitted to voluntarily submit to a slave master:

His voluntary choice is evidence that what he so chooses is desirable, or at the least endurable, to him, and his good is on the whole best provided for by allowing him to take his own means of pursuing it. But by selling himself for a slave, he abdicates his liberty; he forgoes any future use of it beyond that single act. He therefore defeats, in his own case, the very purpose which is the justification of allowing him to dispose of himself. (133)

In other words, voluntary slavery is impermissible because the purpose of liberty is to permit the individual to pursue happiness; using one’s liberty to surrender one’s liberty, and thus the necessary means to happiness, defeats the essentially utilitarian purpose of liberty.

But in light of the claim previously made that liberty, even in failing to secure the happiness of the individual exercising liberty (which it is bound to occur on account of human fallibility), can contribute to the happiness of society, his justification for prohibiting voluntary slavery makes little sense. The voluntary slave sacrifices utility for himself, but in doing so contributes to the wisdom of society, impressing on or reminding his fellow men of the truth that sacrificing liberty is not a prudent means to achieving happiness. The voluntary slave produces utility for all members of society, and the widespread utility generated by his slavery probably far outweighs whatever utility he sacrificed in voluntarily signing away his future freedom.

In fact, an essential part of Mill’s utilitarianism, his belief that the value of happiness is neutral with respect to persons, strongly supports this utilitarian argument in favor of permitting the martyrdom of the voluntary slave for the benefit of society. Mill states:

The happiness which forms the utilitarian standard of what is right in conduct, is not the agent’s own happiness, but that of all concerned. As between his own happiness and that of others, utilitarianism requires him to be as strictly impartial as a disinterested and benevolent spectator. (174)

With this in mind, Mill justifies martyrdom in general with an argument very similar to the utilitarian justification for voluntary slave contracts just given: “all honor those who can abnegate to
themselves the personal enjoyment of life, when by such renunciation they contribute worthily to increase the amount of happiness in the world” (172).

Showing that Mill’s grounds for defending individual liberty justify slavery is almost a *reductio ad absurdum*, and seems at the least to decrease the potency of his defense of liberty. So far though, we have only examined the case against voluntary slavery stated in hedonistic utilitarian terms, that is, solely in terms of pleasure and pain. But there is some ambiguity in Mill regarding his approach to utilitarianism, that may allow us to read him as objectivist rather than hedonistic, and to apply this element in Mill to the task of justifying more adequately the voluntary slavery exception. Ideally, we would want to do this without belying his distinct preference for anti-paternalism.

In chapter three of *On Liberty*, he seems also to make the case for a non-hedonistic utilitarianism. What he calls “individuality” is presented as something intrinsically as well as instrumentally valuable, rather than merely valuable as a means to pleasure. That this idea is present in Mill is suggested by the title of this chapter, according to which individuality is an “element of” and not a means to well-being.

His individuality has two intimately related components. First, possessing individuality means cultivating a unique and well-defined character. A person possessing individuality thus understood, attains “the highest and most harmonious development of his powers into a complete and consistent whole [Mill quoting Humboldt]” -- he “makes his desires and impulses his own,” so that they are “the expression of his own nature” (77). Secondly, he defines individuality as the development of distinctly human faculties—“the qualities which are the distinctive endowment of a human being…the human faculties of perception, judgment, discriminative feeling, mental activity, and even moral preference” (75). These faculties are only put to use and thus trained and developed, in acting freely, as opposed to acting reflexively according to the dictates of culture or in complying with the coercion of the state. When one does the latter, one is no more than a “sheep,” in the sense that one is nonautonomous and indistinguishable from other individuals in conformist obedience (87).

Putting these two ideas together, we can say that individuality is the cultivation of one’s distinctly human faculties toward the end of perfecting a unique and autonomous self. Mill defends individuality thus defined, partly in instrumental terms. Individuality manifests itself in the aggregate as a diversity of ways of life, which is a utilitarian benefit for reasons already explained. Going into more detail on this point, Mill identifies the spirit of liberty with progress because conditions of individual freedom, especially from cultural pressures to conform, permit the proliferation of eccentric geniuses who make transformative contributions to culture:

> There is always need of persons not only to discover new truths, and point out when what were once truths are true no longer, but also to commence new practices, and set the example of more enlightened conduct, and better taste and sense in human life (82)

On the other hand, statements like this one seem to suggest that individuality is valuable independently of its utility: “it is not by wearing down into uniformity all that is individual in themselves, but by cultivating it and calling it forth, within the limits imposed by the rights and interests of others, that human beings become a noble and beautiful object of contemplation.” The “nobility” and “beauty” of man seem to refer to the inherent value of his individuality. Mill bemoans the fact that popular opinion does not recognize “individual spontaneity” as having any “intrinsic worth” (73). The Harm Principle, which is to say liberty, may be justifiable not just by reference to the Greatest Happiness Principle, but also by reference to what we might call the Greatest Individuality Principle, which would command the maximization of individuality in society.
What if we apply the Individuality Principle to the dilemma of voluntary slavery? The slave surrenders his individuality in that he relinquishes his ability to judge and act for himself, and thus subjects his individual development to the will of his master. But if individuality is the value is taken into account in the utilitarian calculus, the same problem does not arise as with a hedonistic calculus, in which the disutility to the individual caused by his losing his freedom is outweighed by the utility produced for others who learn from his error. The determination by society regarding whether slavery brings happiness to the voluntary slave requires the observation of actual slavery by society. By contrast, that slavery violates individuality (understood as the combination of autonomy and uniqueness) can be known a priori, because slavery by its very nature involves the exercise of complete sovereignty by one individual over the actions of another, and thus the violation of autonomy, and by association, individuality. Hence, social learning from the voluntary slave’s folly provides no utilitarian benefit in terms of individuality.

An objectivist utilitarianism that seeks to maximize individuality in society provides a stronger defense of liberal freedom than hedonistic utilitarianism. This is so because the former avoids the reductio ad absurdum of permitting slavery in the name of freedom. Ultimately, however, both versions of utilitarianism provide compelling arguments for liberal freedom, in terms of two distinct and intuitively valuable ends, happiness and individuality.

Works Cited


Very (Un)Illuminating: An Evaluation of Paul Churchland’s Responses to The Knowledge Argument

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Abstract: Professor Churchland has opposed Mary Story-style arguments against physicalism by constructing an argument he believes to be analogous to the Mary Story; because the conclusion of his analogous argument is absurd, he suggests that we dispense with similar from knowledge. I argue in this paper that first, Churchland’s parody argument fails to distinguish between knowledge of what it is like for an agent to experience a certain quale and knowledge of the object that causes the quale, second, I will suggest another, more charitable reading of Churchland’s argument against the Mary Story, and argue that this second reading does little to help his position; third, I will consider a distinct but related argument proposed by Churchland, that when Mary leaves her room she gains only knowledge by acquaintance and not propositional knowledge, and conclude that, in fact, Mary gains both acquaintance knowledge and propositional knowledge, and that hence Churchland’s second argument fail.

In The Rediscovery of Light¹, Paul Churchland uses a parody of Frank Jackson’s Mary Story in Epiphenomenal Qualia² and What Mary Didn’t Know, attempting to demonstrate that the so-called

‘Knowledge Argument’ is equally as ridiculous as the conclusion drawn from his parody and that therefore Jackson’s argument shouldn’t be taken very seriously. I will argue that the force of his alleged analogy is removed once one understands that Churchland’s parody does not adequately resemble Jackson’s original formulation of the knowledge argument. Churchland suggests that the invalidity of his parody argument counts not against his position but against the force of Frank Jackson’s Mary Story. I agree with Churchland that his parody argument is invalid, but for a different reason than he thinks. Moreover, attempts to understand Churchland’s criticism in terms of the knowledge by the description/ knowledge by acquaintance distinction also are unhelpful to Churchland’s position. That Paul Churchland has failed to rebut the claims made by Frank Jackson does not, of course, suggest that the knowledge argument against physicalism is valid, but it does suggest that one would be wise to avoid frivolous parodies of well-respected arguments.

Churchland’s Luminance Parody

Mary is a blind genius, says Paul Churchland, and she knows just everything physical there is to know about the nature of light. However, no matter how much Mary learns about light, she will never know what it is like to actually see light. Therefore, he argues, there is something about light that is nonphysical (Churchland calls it luminance). Churchland’s intention is to show that since his ‘luminance argument’, as I shall call it, very closely resembles Jackson’s ‘qualia argument’ and since the conclusion entailed by his luminance argument is plainly absurd (light is obviously a completely physical phenomenon), we ought not accept Jackson’s conclusion. His main argument in The Rediscovery of Light is a kind of a reductio ad absurdum via analogy. Consider the two arguments, formally mapped side by side:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Qualia Argument</th>
<th>The Luminance Argument</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) Mary, before her release, knows everything physical about other people.</td>
<td>(1)’ Mary, when she is blind, knows everything physical about light.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) Mary, before her release, does not know everything there is to know about what it is like for other people to see color.</td>
<td>(2)’ Mary, when she is blind, does not know everything there is to know about what it is like for other people to see light.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) Therefore, there are truths about other people that escape the physicalist story.</td>
<td>(3)’ Therefore, there are truths about light that escape the physicalist story (call these truths statements about luminance, per Churchland)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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3 This is nearly the Jackson’s exact wording of his knowledge argument in What Mary Didn’t Know

4 This is a formal construction of Paul Churchland’s presentation of the second of his “Jackson/Chalmers-like arguments”. Concerning premise 1, Churchland says Mary is a physicist who “comes to know everything physical there is to know about EM waves”. Concerning premise 2, Churchland says that she “has not access at all to “the visual point of view.” That is, she cannot know just what it is like for other people to see light, since she is blind. His conclusion is that “even complete knowledge of the physical facts must still leave her ignorant of the structure of luminance. Luminance must therefore be, in some way, nonphysical.”
The Luminance Argument looks quite a bit like the Qualia Argument, indeed, but there is an important difference. The reason Churchland’s Luminance Argument is laughable is not that, as he thinks, it equivocates on “knows about” but that its conclusion doesn’t follow in the way he thinks it does. Paul Churchland’s confusion in *The Rediscovery of Light* lies in his conflation of Mary’s knowledge of other people’s *perception of light* with her knowledge of *light itself*. Churchland’s attempt to construct a *reductio* thus fails because it does not parallel Jackson’s Qualia Argument the way it should if his parody is to have any force. Frank Jackson’s conclusion in the Qualia Argument (that there is something about other people that is not told in the physicalist story) depends on the premise that Mary does not know something about what it is like for *another person* to experience color or light and not that Mary does not know something about color or light *as such*. To illuminate (pun intended) this distinction, consider the following two statements:

(A) Mary does not know that for S to experience X is a lot like Y
(B) Mary does not know that X is a lot like Y

The first proposition is a description of what Thomas Nagel famously called that ‘what-is-it-like-ness’ of certain qualitative mental states and the second is a description of the an extra-mental object itself. Notice that although (A) might *entail* (B), the two are certainly not the same statement and therefore ought not be conflated; (A) might be true and (B) false, or vice-versa.

What actually follows from Churchland’s (1)’ and (2)’ is Jackson’s conclusion in the original knowledge argument against physicalism, not that light can be described by two ontologically distinct categories. For on Churchland’s argument, Mary knows all true propositions about the physical world but does not know something about other people, namely, she does not know what it is like for another person (or herself) to see light since (per Churchland) she is blind. What follows from Churchland’s two premises is not that propositions about light are not completely exhausted by the physicalist account, but that propositions about other people are not completely exhausted by physicalism, which is precisely what Frank Jackson wants to demonstrate in his knowledge argument. Churchland’s parody argument, therefore, ends up proving too much.

**Another Reading of the Luminance Parody**

Perhaps, though, the above depiction is unfair to Churchland’s argument. Maybe in *The Rediscovery of Light*, he intends his argument to be read this way:

(1)” For any true physical proposition\(^5\) p, Blind Mary knows that p.
(2)” But Blind Mary does not know that r, the true proposition that seeing light is like such-and-such.
(3)” Therefore, r is true but cannot be a physical proposition.
(4)” Therefore, light is made of both the physical and the nonphysical.

This second reading of the Luminance Parody first may seem attractive. However, although I want to be as charitable as possible, this understanding of Churchland has little more success than the first formulation of the Luminance Argument given above, and therefore it may not be charitable of me to attribute it to Churchland. This reading again ends up (validly) entailing Jackson’s conclusion without necessitating Churchland’s conclusion in (4)””, that light is made of both physical stuff and nonphysical “luminance”, even though the first conclusion, (3)””, follows validly and soundly. If Mary knows all physical propositions but she does not know a certain proposition, r,

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\(^5\) By “physical proposition”, I just mean any kind of declarative statement about (and only about) the physical world. The statement, ‘all continental philosophers have beards’ is an example of such a proposition.
then r cannot be a physical proposition. What is not specified in this argument, is precisely what r is about, the key distinction articulated above in (A) and (B). Is r a statement about the nature of light or about the nature of what it is like for a person to see light? Again, if Churchland is to follow Jackson’s lead (as he must, if his *reductio* is to be successful), then r is about the former rather than the latter. As we saw earlier, though, if r is about what it is like to see light and not about light *qua* light, then (4)” cannot be validly entailed, even given (1)”-(3)”.

**Knowledge By Acquaintance?**

Maybe Churchland’s criticisms of the Mary story later in *The Rediscovery of Light* can stand on their own two feet, without the assistance of his parody argument. In his commentary on the Luminance Argument, Paul Churchland notes that there are at least two kinds of knowledge. In *What Mary Didn’t Know*, Jackson agrees, following Churchland in labeling these descriptive and acquaintance knowledge. Consider my knowledge that this desk is wooden. What I know in this case is a proposition that carries information content about a state of affairs. My knowledge how to build a desk is, however, an ability, a faculty of some sort; I know how to do something rather than knowing that something is the case. Maybe Churchland’s objection in *The Rediscovery of Light* and as described by Jackson in *What Mary Didn’t Know* is something like this:

(1)” If the Mary story shows physicalism to be false, then Mary must come to know a new proposition upon leaving the room (since physicalism as a metaphysical theory claims only to be responsible for propositions and not perceptual/acquaintance knowledge).

(2)” But Mary does not come to know a new proposition upon leaving the room (rather, she gains knowledge by acquaintance).

(3)” Therefore, the Mary story has not shown physicalism to be false.

The problem in both scenarios, says Churchland, lies with Mary herself and not with the ontology of luminance or qualia; even if we could know with certainty that physicalism is true, we still shouldn’t expect Mary to have acquaintance knowledge about light (that is, we shouldn’t expect her to know what it is like to perceive luminance) since that would be requiring physicalism to complete a task it never set out to complete in the first place. Unfortunately, while there is indeed a distinction between description knowledge and acquaintance knowledge, Churchland is wrong to suggest that this distinction applies in any relevant way to the Mary story. Before I explain, consider the following thought experiment:

Archilochus is one of the prisoners in Plato’s allegory of the cave. He has lived his whole life facing a wall watching the shadowy figures of puppets dance back and forth. He and his fellow prisoners have never left the cave and have never experienced the sight or the feel of sunlight. One day, Archilochus is released from his bonds and is allowed to wander freely outside in the sunlight. He experiences the soft, warm rays against his face and immediately understands just what it is like to be in the sun. Returning to the cave, his fellow prisoners ask him what it was like to be outside. What did the sunlight feel like? It felt, he reports, a lot like fire. It was hot and bright, but soft and comforting. Archilochus’ report belies his actual epistemic constitution: he has gained, upon leaving the cave and experiencing what it is like to feel sun, not just knowledge by acquaintance but also propositional knowledge and has expressed it in comparative terms: feeling sunlight was a lot like such-and-such. Critically, therefore, he has not only experienced light but he also now has gained new propositional knowledge; he knows ‘what it is like to feel sunlight’. When asked about his experience, Archilochus reports a proposition, the proposition that the what-is-it-like of feeling sunlight is like the what-is-it-like of feeling fire and this is precisely the same type of report one
would expect if Archilochus had gained propositional knowledge of his experience. His declarative
description is evidence of the category of his new knowledge.

Return to (2)” of Professor Churchland’s objection, that Mary gains knowledge, but not
knowledge that after leaving her black and white room. Churchland is right to say that Mary has
knowledge by acquaintance about color that she previously lacked; however, he errs in thinking that
that is all Mary gained. Consider what would happen if we asked Mary questions of the same kind as
those posed to Archilochus. What is the color red like? What did it feel like? Can you describe it?
She would likely report that seeing red was a lot like such-and-such, maybe a lot like hearing the
sound of a trumpet, or like the feeling of pricking one’s finger on a pin. That her descriptions are
propositional in nature is no accident; when an agent like Mary encounters a new quale, she both
acquires new abilities and comes to know new propositions, propositions that are such that before
her encounter with the quale she didn’t know them.

It is tempting to berate Paul Churchland for his belittling and condescending treatment of
Frank Jackson’s knowledge argument, especially since no reading of his parody argument (insofar as
I can understand it) yields the conclusion he wants for his reductio. His type of argument is motivated
by the same genus of sentiment that prompts the ‘there must be a response’ reaction to Mary story-
style arguments against physicalism. It is, however, too facile to brand this kind of reasoning
presuppositional as nearly all philosophical discourse proceeds with a certain understood level of
holy-cow-ism (if such a phrase can be used).
Plato’s Epistemology as Empiricism

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Abstract: Given the extreme importance of Plato’s contributions to the foundation of contemporary Western thought, there are very few aspects of his philosophy that are unexamined and even fewer that are agreed upon universally. One exception to this rule concerns Plato’s epistemological views, namely that his theory of the Forms and divided reality constitute what would contemporarily be called a form of rationalism. It will be the goal of this essay to demonstrate the opposite of this belief, that Plato’s epistemology as expressed through the doctrine of recollection constitutes an empiricist view of knowledge.

Given the extreme importance of Plato’s contributions to the foundation of contemporary Western thought, there are very few aspects of his philosophy that are unexamined and even fewer that are agreed upon universally. One exception to this rule concerns Plato’s epistemological views, namely that his theory of the Forms and divided reality constitute what would contemporarily be called a form of rationalism. It will be the goal of this essay to demonstrate the opposite of this belief, that Plato’s epistemology as expressed through the doctrine of recollection constitutes an empiricist view of knowledge. The difficulties in such a stance are immediately apparent in examining one of Plato’s great epistemological works, the Theaetetus. In the dialogue, Socrates attempts to arrive at the nature of knowledge and in so doing explicitly rejects the claim that “Knowledge is perception.” Given such a statement, it is apparent that a deeper analysis of Platonic

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doctrines will be required. First and foremost is the need to explain that, while Plato may claim that perception is not equivalent to knowledge, this denial does not explicitly preclude his epistemology being empirical in its foundation. In order to do this, it will first be necessary to establish a more clear definition of empiricism.

The first account of empiricism will be that of John Locke, who outlined his epistemological views most clearly in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. The first of Locke’s goals in his essay is to deny the existence of pre-existing ideas. He denies the presence of even the most basic tenants of logic as “not known to children, idiots, &c.” (Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*). The claim that children are devoid of innate ideas holds an interesting parallel to the demonstration of recollection in the *Meno* which will be examined later. In opposition to ideas and thoughts being present *a priori*, Locke offers the following account:

The steps by which the mind attains several truths. The senses at first let in particular ideas, and furnish the yet empty cabinet, and the mind by degrees growing familiar with some of them, they are lodged in the memory, and names got to them. Afterwards, the mind proceeding further, abstracts them, and by degrees learns the use of general names. In this manner the mind comes to be furnished with ideas and language, the materials about which to exercise its discursive faculty. And the use of reason becomes daily more visible, as these materials that give it employment increase. But though the having of general ideas and the use of general words and reason usually grow together, yet I see not how this any way proves them innate. The knowledge of some truths, I confess, is very early in the mind but in a way that shows them not to be innate. For, if we will observe, we shall find it still to be about ideas, not innate, but acquired; it being about those first which are imprinted by external things, with which infants have earliest to do, which make the most frequent impressions on their senses. In ideas thus got, the mind discovers that some agree and others differ, probably as soon as it has any use of memory; as soon as it is able to retain and perceive distinct ideas. But whether it be then or no, this is certain, it does so long before it has the use of words; or comes to that which we commonly call "the use of reason." For a child knows as certainly before it can speak the difference between the ideas of sweet and bitter (i.e. that sweet is not bitter), as it knows afterwards (when it comes to speak) that wormwood and sugarplums are not the same thing.

Locke’s views on the nature of knowledge are centered on the use of reason to order the perceptions one gathers from sensory experience. The pivotal concepts in Locke’s views are contingent on the absence of universally acknowledged truths, which would seem to indicate that no knowledge could be present prior to experience. Ultimately, Plato’s epistemology will not meet Locke’s criteria for empiricism for this reason.

David Hume is considered to be the greatest of the “British” empiricists; his skeptical views concerning epistemology nearly single-handedly ended abstract enquiry until Immanuel Kant rebuilt the intellectual pursuit. Hume’s position represents empiricist epistemology taken to its logical extreme and should for this reason be the final criteria by which Plato’s views are be judged. Hume

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8 *ibid*
begins with a distinction between what he finds to be the two forms of human thoughts, simple and complex. Simple ideas are formed from sense-impressions, the direct perceptions of our sensory faculties. From these simple ideas, we make more complicated combinations in our minds, but ultimately never escape the foundation of all forms of knowledge as derived from impressions. For Hume, contemporary metaphysical and epistemological pursuits fail because they are overly ambiguous and have alienated themselves from the sensory origin of human knowledge. A theory compatible with Hume’s criteria will need to return to having its basis in simple, rather than complex, ideas.

The key to understanding Plato’s epistemological views as empiricist is the doctrine of revelation, an argument which states that our souls are born into our bodies with pre-existing knowledge of the nature of the immaterial Forms. Plato argues that seemingly untaught instances of knowledge of absolutes like geometrical images and concepts like equality demonstrate their necessary pre-existence. In the *Meno*, Socrates briefly describes the doctrine of recollection. “And if the truth of all things always existed in the soul, then the soul is immortal. Wherefore be of good cheer, and try to recollect what you do not know, or rather what you do not remember” He proceeds to question a young boy who, although without any sort of education, is brought to see the validity of various geometrical deductions. Ultimately, the burden of recalling our knowledge of the Forms falls on our sensory experience under such a doctrine. Because the soul is unable to escape the body while it is still alive, the only way to reach a greater degree of recollection is through experience of imitations in the physical world. The argument is clarified to a greater degree in the *Phaedo*, wherein Plato uses the form of Equality to champion his argument. While we can see the manner in which a stick may be equal to another stick in number, we have never in this current life experienced equality independent of other physical objects. Furthermore, because there are in this life no instances of complete equality, even among the most similar physical objects, the doctrine of recollection claims that the only feasible source for this knowledge comes from knowledge of the Forms prior to physical experience.  

It is now necessary to address the apparent difficulties with maintaining the stance articulated in the opening of this paper. A cursory examination of the doctrine of recollection would apparently indicate the opposing view, namely that it more closely resembles rationalist epistemology rather than it does empiricism. Because our acquaintance with the Forms, the ultimate source of knowledge, takes places before experience, the deductions made from sensory experience cannot be seen as the origin of true knowledge. In order to maintain consistency, the definition of empiricism used in this essay will need to establish experience from the soul as an equally dependable as that of our corporeal sensory faculties. The focus of this examination will therefore need to change to the manner in which the soul experiences the Forms and whether this can be deemed a form of observation.

Little is said concerning the relation between souls and the Forms in the Platonic canon; however, two such instances can be found in the *Republic*. The first and most recognizable of these is found in book seven, in the allegory of the cave. In the allegory, the philosopher is dragged up from the cave, thrust into the light of the surface and blinded upon his first seeing the sun. The surface is of course analogous to the world of the Forms and the sun to the form of the Good. Here

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it is apparent that the manner in which we experience the Forms is at least closely related to sensory observation. However, one may argue that the apparent ability to escape the cave would indicate that experiencing the Forms in this life is in fact possible. An immediate objection to the use of this example is that the allegory refers to the life of an individual rather than the transition between life and death (which is for the purposes of this essay the only time during which an individual can re-attain their knowledge of the Forms), and those returning to the cave are both aware of the Forms and aware of their awareness which is a very different set of circumstances than we see present in the original doctrine of recollection. This objection is easily resolved when taken in conjunction with Plato’s claim that no true philosopher has to this point ever agreed to take up the role of leader, i.e. return to the depths of the cave. Another favorable interpretation is that the “rough, steep path” is rather the life journey of a philosopher and it is only through the escape of the soul from the body that we are truly able to leave the cave of our ignorance. This would resolve both the issues of experiencing the immaterial Forms with the sensory faculties of the body as well as explain why there have been no instances of someone returning to the physical world with knowledge of the Forms. This interpretation, while significantly more pessimistic than the general tone of the Republic, provides a feasible explanation concerning an issue to which Plato’s immediate writings do not provide a satisfying answer.

The second instance supporting the soul’s empirical experience of the Forms is found in book ten, specifically within the myth of Er. While this story never explicitly recounts the soul’s experience of the Forms themselves, it does relate a soul’s journey through a series of empirical observations. An interesting passage may contain the closest description of the form of the Good:

Each group spent seven days in the meadow, and on the eighth they had to get up and go on a journey. On the fourth day of that journey, they came to a place where they could look down from above on a straight column of light that stretched over the while of heaven and earth, more like a rainbow than anything else, but brighter and more pure. After another day, they came to the light itself, and there, in the middle of the light, they saw the extremities of its bonds stretching from the heavens, for the light binds the heavens like cables girding a trireme and holds its entire revolution together.

In the preceding description, it seems clear that the marvelous light described is the form of the Good, the force which holds the universe together. The inclusion of such a vivid description of what the form of the Good would look like seems to indicate that Plato understood the process of experiencing the Forms as very similar to the process literally described in the myth of Er.

In considering Plato’s conception of knowledge obtained before birth, it is necessary to return to Hume’s criteria for empirical knowledge. For Plato, the only source of knowledge is the Forms; all things experienced in the physical world constitute opinion. If one considers Plato’s Forms in terms of Hume’s simple ideas, Platonic empiricism appears to be logically consistent. Just as Humean complex ideas are formed on the basis of our knowledge of simple ideas, so too is the ordering and comprehension of our experience of the physical world dependent on our preexisting knowledge of the Forms in Platonic thought. The similarity of the two bases for knowledge shows

13 Ibid
14 Ibid
15 Ibid
16 Ibid
an adequate agreement between the two epistemologies to deem Platonic empiricism at least compatible with what has been decided to be Hume’s requirements for empiricism.

The other key difficulty in reconciling Platonism with Humeanism is in determining whether experience of the Forms can be considered sensory observation to a strict empiricist. Consider for example an individual who was completely unable to see, for a Humean skeptic, this individual would have no basis for assuming the reality of the visual world. If all the world were in this condition and one individual were to gain or recover the ability to see, there would be no objection on the side of empiricists to that individual’s determination of reality through the new-found sensory ability. This same principle can be applied to the ability of the soul to perceive the Forms; there is no empirical reason to deny the validity of a new or newly recollected form of sensory observation insomuch as it can be deemed to be sensory. Furthermore, because Humean empiricism disregards the importance of other individuals in determining validity of knowledge, the denial of or failure to recollect the Forms by any other person or group of people would have no bearing on whether knowledge of the Forms should or should not be trusted. Therefore, an individual who becomes cognizant of their prior experience of the Forms can, by Humean standards, feel assured of the empirical validity of their observations.

Finally, the most persuasive argument in viewing Plato’s epistemology as empiricist may stem from the role of the Form of the Good in shaping human reasoning. Concerning the role of the good in the act of knowledge, Plato states, “the objects of knowledge owe their being known to the Good, but their being is also due to it, although the Good is not being, but superior to it in rank and power.”17 Here we can plainly see that, according to Plato, it is through the Good that we are able to know other things; this creates an inconsistency between Platonic and traditional rationalist epistemology. For a rationalist, humans are innately endowed with the faculties of reason and through this faculty they are able to establish certain principles. For a Platonist, it is only after we experience the form of the Good that we are able to know anything else, making all knowledge dependent on the original experience of the form of the Good. As no knowledge can be acquired without prior experience, Plato’s epistemology cannot be called rationalist by nature and is consequently much more appropriately deemed empiricist in nature.

One important distinction to bear in mind in all interpretations of the doctrine of recollection is centered on the differing terms for “remembering” and “recollecting” in ancient Greek. In response to the theory concerning recollection in the Meno, Aristotle wrote an essay attempting to differentiate the terms for memory and recollection. Jacob Klein summarizes the distinction in his Commentary on Plato’s Meno:

Memories are about what happened in the Past. Thus we remember that and what we thought, learned, grasped immediately, heard and saw in the past. To remember is not to have a sense perception or a notion of something “right now,” but to have or to experience these as having been had or experienced in the past. Memories are time-laden… To remember something means to possess a more or less persistent image of that something as it happened or appeared in the past, comparable to a picture or an imprint made by a seal ring… On the other hand, to recollect something does not at all mean to have something “in one’s memory”; nor does it mean to reacquire the same memory of that something, nor even to acquire such a memory at all.18

17 Ibid
Here the difference between recollection and memory, particularly in regards to the Meno’s presentation of recollection, becomes critical. The nature of recollection does not have the same material implications of those of remembering, meaning that reasoning back to the necessity of empirical experience of the Forms is more difficult. In arguing from this differentiation, one could claim that the distinction between memory and recollection is sufficient evidence to infer that Plato’s epistemology is more based in rational deduction than empirical observation. While the distinction between the two terms confirm the differing nature of normal sensory observation and the soul’s interaction with the Forms, such a difference does not preclude the possibility of both being a form of experience or observation. Using the term recollecting does not speak to the nature of the process, but rather seeks to separate it from the process of remembering, a separation which is very much compatible with the thesis of this paper.

The objection still exists that a Platonic empiricism misses the entire essence of empirical epistemology, namely that something’s measurability corresponds to its truth value. In Plato’s works, there is not only nothing to suggest that anyone can find and measure the Forms but rather a stronger suggestion in the more self-critical works such as the Sophist and the Parmenides that it may be impossible for anyone to find the Forms in his or her life. It is for this reason that the expanded definition of empiricism presented to this point is being supported. Plato’s ideas are admittedly incompatible with strict empirical views; the application of the term’s validity is dependant entirely on one’s evaluation of the manner in which Plato relates the soul to the Forms in the time a soul spends between two human lives.

No collection of arguments involving interpretation of Plato’s dialogues can completely quell the qualms associated with describing an immaterial, immeasurable experience as empirical. Because the Forms exist beyond the physical realm, empiricists and Platonists would agree that there should be no union of the two ideologies. Additionally, as Plato was among the first devoted epistemologists in the history of philosophy, he would have been largely unconcerned by attempts to label his theories of knowledge. The distinction between empirical and rationalist epistemologies is more a byproduct of the importance of Enlightenment philosophers than of an actual use in creating a divide among theories of knowledge. However, referring to Plato’s epistemology as rationalist holds implications (discussed in this paper) which deviate from the theories Plato actually formulated. For this reason, it is more accurate and intellectually responsible to, if compelled, label Plato as a very unique empiricist.
The Metonymy of Transcendence: Derrida and the Diamond Sutra

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Abstract: In The Diamond Sutra, the Buddha says, "the perfection of transcendental wisdom is not really such." The Buddha continually renounces cornerstones of Buddhist thought as being merely names for otherwise inexpressible concepts. Using Derrida's discussions of the supplement in Of Grammatology, I argue for a consideration of transcendence as a metonymic rather than metaphoric operation in Buddhist thought. Ultimately, the idea of "transcendence" is not one of a one-to-one correspondence, where one person moves beyond, to meaning; rather, it is the constant excess of meaning always already exceeding its nominal manifestation—a transcendence of, not to, meaning in discourse.

In The Diamond Sutra, the Buddha tells Subhuti that the current discourse should be referred to as "the Diamond of the Perfection of Transcendental Wisdom," and goes on to explain that "the perfection of transcendental wisdom is not really such. 'Perfection of transcendental wisdom' is just the name given to it." Though it is just one of the many examples of the Buddha's warnings against reification, this particular moment raises a troubling question in that even the notion of transcendence, of moving beyond, is merely nominal. How can this be, when to transcend almost necessitates an ego-entity having a phenomenal experience of some kind, which is antithetical to the

teachings of the Buddha? By revisiting the Buddha's conception of transcendental wisdom in *The Diamond Sutra* and relating it to Derrida's notions of the violence of naming and the "the interminable overflowing of the whole by the part" which paradoxically allows for a multiplicity that defies the idea of "whole" by making it "part of the part [of the part]."\(^{20}\) we can reconsider "transcendence" not as a site of fixed and absolute meaning, but as an indeterminate locus for the proliferation of meaning. In this figuration, meaning is not transcended to beyond a text by a simple subject, but transcendent of the fixity and closure of a text's boundaries and frames.

Before rethinking transcendence in the Buddha's teachings, it is important to note the basis for such an investigation. Later in *The Diamond Sutra*, after the above quotation, the Buddha entitles a chapter "No One Attains Transcendental Wisdom,"\(^{21}\) wherein the Buddha explains to Subhuti that "in reality there is no formula that gives rise to the consummation of incomparable enlightenment."\(^{22}\) When taken alongside one another, these notions—that transcendental wisdom is only a name for something otherwise inexpressible, and that there is no formula by which enlightenment may be attained—are striking, revealing a great deal about the Buddha's figuration of transcendence and at the same time engaging in the same linguistic play characteristic of the work of Derrida. For what does it mean to "attain" transcendental wisdom? In order for it to be attained, two conditions are necessary: first, that "transcendental wisdom" be a finite, fixed thing, an *object*; and second, that there be an attainee, a *subject* who may somehow possess that wisdom. The Buddha problematizes a simple subject/object division, which seems to explain how the idea of transcendental wisdom becomes only nominally expressible, while otherwise remaining out of the mind's reach.

It may seem this is all we may profitably say about transcendence in Buddhism. It is without a subject or an object, and therefore inexpressible beyond a finicky nominative. But such things are never quite so simple. Throughout the discourse of *The Diamond Sutra*, the Buddha confronts the notions of "setting forth majestic buddha-lands," "molecules," "[the] Idea of fundamental reality," "a perfectly formed body," "any truth-declaring system," "goodness," and "Cosmos," saying in one way or another that "these terms are merely figures of speech."\(^{23}\) The fundamental basis of the sutra itself, then, is grounded in an admission by the Buddha to Subhuti that "words cannot explain the real nature of a cosmos. Only common people fettered with desire make use of this arbitrary method."\(^{24}\) This distinction-making method seems to undermine any attempt to define "transcendence" at all, since its meaning cannot be explained by our arbitrary chains of signifiers.

But to adopt this view seems to cast aspersions on the philosophy of *The Diamond Sutra*. For if transcendence is inexpressible in words, it seems to live up to its name as being beyond what we have in front of us, suggesting an almost dangerously Platonic figuration of a transcendental experience. We may describe transcendence, but never *know* it in a way we can articulate. This raises a difficult question: how, then, can the Buddha talk of transcendence as such, using the arbitrary fetters of language, if it is something beyond "attainable" knowledge?\(^{25}\)

The more important question here is not whether or not we can talk about transcendence but about its relation to the text. How does "transcendence" relate to the rest of the Buddha's text, and how is it that we can understand its position? This seems simple: we know the difference between "the perfection of transcendental wisdom" and the "Idea of fundamental reality" through


\(^{21}\) *Diamond Sutra* 37.

\(^{22}\) *ibid*.

\(^{23}\) *Diamond Sutra* 28; 31; 32; 41; 42; 44; 51; 52.

\(^{24}\) *Diamond Sutra* 51.

\(^{25}\) I use attainable here merely as placeholder, to suggest the beyondness of transcendence in this model rather than to fall back to a straw man with whom I have already dealt.
language. The names are different, and thus through differentiation we understand these terms. We know "transcendence" since it is not "reality" and not "cosmos." Again, this seems self-explanatory. But it leads the way to a discussion of the name that will eventually help clarify and expound the Buddhist text and its depiction of transcendence.

In Of Grammatology, Derrida takes up the question of the significance of names, concluding that names themselves are extremely problematic. "To name, to give names that it will on occasion be forbidden to pronounce, such is the originary violence of language which consists in inscribing within a difference, in classifying, in suspending the vocative absolute." The act of naming entails an act of violence that insists on difference, the separation of one thing from another in an attempt to ascribe identity. Without language, we do not have a way to articulate difference and thereby lose a distinct sense of "identity" as a fixed concept or "ego-entity"; without identity, we no longer need to separate cosmos from fundamental reality, and the arbitrary chains of language fall away. But for Derrida—and, as we shall see, for Buddha—it is much more complicated. The violence of differentiation, of "think[ing] the unique within the system," gives way to a violence "that is reparatory, protective, instituting the 'moral,' prescribing the concealment of writing and thus the effacement and obliteration of the so-called proper name which was already dividing the proper." In other words, the violence of naming allows for the violence of institutionalization, of codified value-systems of morality and truth—the very reified systems the Buddha firmly disavows in The Diamond Sutra as "merely figures of speech."

But in a Derridean framework, what more are there than these figures of speech, these tropes comprising the text that extends beyond its literal meaning and persists as the system of signifying relations in which everything interrelates? The key in this discourse and our discussion of transcendence comes in the form of what Derrida calls the supplement. The supplement "adds itself, it is a surplus, a plenitude enriching another plenitude, the fullest measure of presence. It cumulates and accumulates presence." A discussion of both the supplement and presence seems necessary in our consideration of Buddha's transcendental wisdom.

For what does transcendence imply if not a certain movement beyond what is at hand to a greater presence? The dictionary definition is one of going "above and beyond the limits of material experience"; it follows that such a thing would problematize the Buddha's teaching, that one could move closer to some extant thing. However, since The Diamond Sutra vehemently disavows such reliance on any kind of presence, relegating it all to the realm of names, we are still left with a question of how transcendence is functioning in the Buddha's discourse.

The Buddha's particular treatment of "states" to which one might "transcend" becomes vital to this inquiry (the quoted words will lose their sting momentarily, and indeed their significance as frightening concepts). In the ninth chapter of The Diamond Sutra, the Buddha asks Subhuti about various "levels of matriculation" (again those pernicious quotes!) in the pursuit of enlightenment. The catch, with each, is that the state itself is characterized by its own lack. Thus the following exchange, making perfect sense, takes place:

Subhuti, what do you think? Does a disciple who has entered the stream of the holy life say within himself, I obtain the fruit of a stream entranter?

Subhuti said: No, World-Honored One. Wherefore? Because "stream entranter" is merely a name. There is no stream entering. The disciple who pays no regard to form, sound, odor, taste, touch, or any quality is called a stream entranter.

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27 Derrida, Of Grammatology 112.
28 Derrida, Of Grammatology 144.
29 Diamond Sutra 26.
Variations on this theme comprise the rest of the section: there is an absence of fixity in the conditions constituting a person's enlightenment. The condition itself is marked by its absence. This present absence, or presence by virtue of an absence, can be said to connect the Buddha's discussion of enlightenment with the Derridean supplement, which "occupies the middle point between total absence and total presence."\(^{30}\) We now see a significant and important connection: enlightenment entails not the obtainment of something, but the "fill[ing] and mark[ing] of a determined lack," just as Derrida describes the working of the play of substitution.\(^{31}\) The discourse of the Buddha, the question of enlightenment at all, thus becomes not concerned with gaining anything, with a kind of absolute presence, but with an absence, a void opened up by the lack of regard for form and all the other phenomenal experiences that are themselves merely illusions.

It is interesting to note also that the preceding discussion focuses on the section in *The Diamond Sutra* where the Buddha addresses and dismisses the hierarchy of enlightenment. By denouncing the utterance of presence, the "such am I" of states of enlightenment, the Buddha radically calls into question his own notions of transcendence. How can one transcend if the state to which one might transcend is itself an illusion, constituted by an absence of itself? We must defer answering this question and instead look briefly to Derrida for further fortification. Derrida, like the Buddha in *The Diamond Sutra*, is wary of reason, saying that "[i]t is incapable of thinking this double infringement upon Nature: that there is lack in Nature and that because of that very fact something is added to it."\(^{32}\) The fundamental presence of absence, that is, the way the supplement functions through a logic of paradoxical nothingness as the contingent for something at all, the utterance which brings the not-there into the fold: this is also the logic of enlightenment. For as the Buddha says, the "unformulated principle is the foundation of the different systems of all the ages."\(^{33}\) The inexpressible utterance is comprised of its being uttered, just as the very lack of a thing is its constitution: we see clearly that enlightenment takes on the same character as the supplement, and that it operates through the void rather than the voice, the absence rather than the presence, the no-self rather than the self.

If the principle of enlightenment is the logic of the supplement, how does transcendence fit into the Buddha's teaching? The answer comes in *The Diamond Sutra* chapter entitled "The Incomparable Merit of this Teaching,"\(^{34}\) wherein the Buddha touts his own teachings in a seemingly innocuous way, characterizing his discourse as being more meritorious than innumerable material donations:

*I*If there be one who gives away in gifts of alms a mass of the seven treasures equal in extent to as many mighty Mount Sumerus as there would be in three thousand galaxies of worlds, and if there be another who *selects even only four lines from this discourse* upon the perfection of the transcendental wisdom, receiving and retaining them, and clearly expounding them to others, the merit of the latter will be so far greater than that of the former that no conceivable comparison can be made between them.\(^{35}\) (emphasis mine)


\(^{32}\) Derrida, *Of Grammatology*  149.

\(^{33}\) *Diamond Sutra*  24.

\(^{34}\) Though the titles of the sutra's chapters come from the translator, I still feel it fit to include them here, and including them does not affect the point I am making about the sutra itself.

\(^{35}\) *Diamond Sutra*  45.
But it is the way the Buddha touts his text that gives us pause and cause for closer analysis. He compares immeasurable plenitude to the minutiae of four lines of text, but his specificity is key. It is not a particular four lines of discourse; he leaves open the question of which four lines, as if to say that any four lines from the discourse would suffice to be received and retained. The Buddha suggests that any four of his lines add up to more than an overflowing of finite, material wealth. A wealth that can be present versus a few sentences from a text that effaces itself, refusing to be reified. But not just refusing to be reified. By leaving open the question of which four lines, the Buddha suggests that the first sentence and last sentence, paired with two sentences drawn at random from the rest of the sutra, would indeed be more valuable than a measurable quantity of material wealth. Similarly, a section plucked from the middle of a chapter is equally viable. The Buddha places merit on his discourse not simply because he's expounding it, but because its merit is not bound by a certain hierarchy or order that requires the presence of the whole text in order to generate meaning. To single out a small portion of the discourse is important, too; the Buddha avoids instituting the entirety of the sutra as a determined school, suggesting that a small part of it will suffice. It makes sense, then, that he says elsewhere "the buddha-teaching must be relinquished; how much more so misteaching!" Relinquishing the teachings, retaining only four of the many lines of the sutra, serves to undermine a fully present schematic for a path to enlightenment, a path whose hierarchy already is undermined by the Buddha's declaration of its arbitrariness. Transcendence, the transcendental wisdom, is only present by virtue of its absence, marked by the very gesture that concedes to its never having been there in the first place.

There is still more discourse to hear, still more fodder from which four lines may be plucked. The text announces the disappearance of concepts even as it invokes those concepts by naming them. The Buddha's discourse works as "a sequence of supplements," announcing the "necessity" of "an infinite chain, ineluctably multiplying the supplementary mediations that produce the sense of the very thing they defer: the mirage of the thing itself, of immediate presence, of originary perception." The supplement defers, insisting in the space between absence and presence, or subject and object. A snippet of the sutra holds more clout than infinite material gifts precisely because it defers the assertion of any kind of ego-entity. Someone gives something to someone else—that is the structure of the gift. It requires two subjects and an object, or a subject, a direct object, and an indirect object, grammatically speaking. But it asserts that there is identity and distinction between different people and things, and moreover that a hierarchy exists in those distinctions (the giver being the subject of the sentence, and the recipient the indirect object).

Transcendence does not have a material basis; it depends not on the achievement of a certain rank, but rather on a series of relations, most importantly the relating of the discourse to others. This very gesture, the explanation of a few lines of The Diamond Sutra, necessarily entails the relinquishment of reified concepts and identity, or at least a discussion thereof, and it is that very discussion that forces us to explain—in words—the inadequacy of words and the danger of hypostatizing or fixating on concepts or identities. We need words to expound their own failures; only through the system of distinctions and hierarchies can we describe the problematic nature of distinctions and hierarchies. For "the person writing is inscribed in a determined textual system. Even if there is never a pure signified, there are different relationships as to that which, from the signifier, is presented as the irreducible stratum of the signified." Transcendence takes place not at

36 Diamond Sutra 23.
37 Derrida, Of Grammatology 157.
38 Derrida, Of Grammatology 160.
the site where language is transcended and meaning, the signified, can be known, but rather within
the textual system. It is a movement within language, not beyond or above it.

The Buddha's valorization of someone who retains four lines of his discourse and expounds
them to others is not simply a faith in his own teaching. It is a testament to the power of language
itself, for language is the realm in which meaning occurs, where there is an overflow of meaning
beyond the sites at which names seemingly fix signification. Language is inadequate, but it itself tells
the story of its own inadequacy; by explaining and analyzing the sutra, a person comes to realize that
transcendence itself marks not a single, fixed moment of presence—for such a moment is indeed
antithetical to the Buddha's teachings—but the very exorbitance of the supplement itself.
Transcendence describes "the indefinite process" that is "always already inscribed [in] the space of
repetition and the splitting of the self."39 That is, the moment one articulates the teachings of the
Buddha, one also effaces it, for the significance of even four lines is their relation to the whole, that
they can generate meaning—signify—beyond their own limited capacity to name.

Transcendence, then, as articulated in The Diamond Sutra, functions by metonymy. It is a
constant series of associations marking the overflow of meaning from its boundaries in a discourse
rather than a finite moment in which one is capable of stepping outside the text. This transcendence
defies a simple subject-object split in that it effaces the ego-entity, the subjecthood of the Buddha,
and as well disrupts the "object" of the text by making it a permeable, associative system, four lines
from which can signify more than innumerable material donations. It defies the presence of meaning
by forcing us to articulate its absence, giving us merely a trace which has always already defied the
hierarchical violence of the naming act. Language's failure is its very success: to know our fetters we
must write them, use them to articulate their own limitation.

The Buddha's idea of transcendence is not merely a word game, though. He marks a radical
departure from the logic of the transcendental by gesturing toward an alternative to phenomenal and
trans-phenomenal experiential data. The Diamond Sutra demonstrates what Derrida learns from his
reading of Rousseau: that "there have never been anything but supplements, substitutive
significations which could only come forth in a chain of differential references, the 'real'
supervening, and being added only while taking on meaning from a trace and from an invocation of
the supplement, etc."40 Transcendence is the textuality of a text: meaning is always already
happening, spilling out beyond its confines in the movement from signifier to signifier, between them,
an unending chain by which we articulate meaning through our very inability to fix it in a particular
site. Four lines of text from The Diamond Sutra are related ad infinitum from person to person, and we
realize limitlessness only in the limitations language affords. Language is not itself meaning: it "opens
meaning" by removing the notion of some kind of present meaning which may be at all attained.41
Meaning is relational, not final, and so transcendence comes to describe the ceaseless process by
which that meaning is constituted, the endlessness of the signifying chain, and ultimately the way
meaning itself continues far beyond our ability to articulate it in a discourse.

Works Cited


39 Derrida, Of Grammatology 163.
40 Derrida, Of Grammatology 159.
41 ibid.