Editor's Preface

A group of passionate York students sat around a table and set up Dialectic 11 years ago. This resurgent issue hopes to keep the journal alive as a training ground maintained by students, for students. I wish to thank Nick Jones for motivating a group of us to embark on this and Chris Jay for his advice. This issue wouldn't be possible without Alex Hall and Finn Webb devoting much of their summers to it. I will now introduce the papers.

Putting aside the suspect sermon on philosophy being more relevant than ever, two papers are surely of interest to any job-seeking undergraduate. They examine the ideas of workplace surveillance, and free speech, which pervaded the media this summer. First, Charles Smith argues that companies cannot possibly treat anyone as a means to an end (go against the second formulation of Kant’s categorical imperative). Managers within companies, on the other hand, can. He reaches the prescient conclusion that keystroke-logging and GPS-tracking may produce a tendency towards coercion of both employees and customers. Second, Sol Hoffmann provides an extensive investigation into the arguments for no platforming and its implications. He builds on a criticism of the use of Mill’s harm principle to defend no platforming. Through an ameliorated argument for no platforming—it upholds academic standards—it becomes apparent that philosophy may have a unique relationship with the practice.

Two submissions continue Dialectic’s tradition of engaging with the great philosophers. Phoebe Hills offers a convincing solution to an apparent conflict, in Plato’s Republic, between various readings of what Thrasymachus thinks justice is. She uses an interaction with another interlocutor to tease out his correct reading, before a deft exposition of why this reading’s conflict with other readings is merely apparent. Will Dreyfus re-examines the common criticism of Husserl’s phenomenological method, which is that we cannot be sure that our description of an experience maps
onto the experience itself. He first shows that this criticism assumes a very particular ‘introspection’ conception of phenomenological method. After highlighting that the criticism employs the very method is seeks to rebuke, he argues that to rebuke the accuracy of the mapping is somewhat misguided anyway.

Finally, two submissions tackle philosophical issues that have only arisen recently. The past decades have seen a burgeoning concern not with the nature of film as an art form, but with whether films themselves can do philosophising. Diana Neiva attempts to offer a defence of films doing philosophy by responding to the objections that their philosophical contribution is translatable into traditional means, and that the philosophising will be done by the philosopher using the film rather than the film itself. Edward Willems investigates whether the recent direct detection of gravitational waves supports the view that spacetime is a substance, by implying that spacetime is a causal actor. If we wish to describe gravitational waves as causal, he argues, this must be done in such a way that ascribes causality to both gravitational waves and gravity. This forces us to reconsider our notion of causality. No notion seems satisfactory.

The group of students chose the name Dialectic because it encapsulated the journal’s aim of starting conversations: between students and great philosophers, and among students themselves. Perhaps you disagree with the conclusions reached by our authors or object that no reasons have been provided. If you feel you can do better, please submit your considered paper to dialecticjournalsubmissions@gmail.com (or your unconsidered thoughts to our social media @yorkdialectic).

I very much hope you enjoy this issue.

Sam Green
Editor
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III
Do companies treat their employees merely as means to ends? Kantian business ethics and the case of workplace surveillance

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Introduction

Despite Kantian business practices being well defended in the literature, technological advances in the workplace continue to challenge the compatibility of Kant and modern business. In this paper, I will argue a) that companies cannot treat their employees as merely means to an end, but that individual managers could, and b) that by introducing workplace surveillance, managers might coerce employees, using them as merely means to ends. Although some have argued that business practices agreed to in the contract are not mentally coercive, and so do not use employees as merely means, I argue that workplace surveillance may result in companies using their employees in this way. If so, this would be unacceptable for the Kantian. I first outline why a company is not the kind of being that can treat its employees as only a means. This will help explain how individual managers could treat their employees as such by coercing or deceiving them. Finally, I introduce the issue of workplace surveillance, arguing that it often meets the criteria for coercion. Companies that introduce workplace surveillance might consequently treat their employees as merely means to ends and, even worse, force their employees to deceive customers. This will demonstrate why great care must be taken by the Kantian manager implementing workplace surveillance.
Why businesses cannot be Kantian moral agents

Companies cannot treat employees as merely means to ends because, for Kant, only moral agents can be judged against the standards set by the categorical imperative (CI). As Altman (2007) has argued, businesses, being abstract and non-rational entities, cannot themselves act in a way that is morally right or wrong, and they are not moral agents. Businesses are an aggregate of many individuals’ actions. To consider a company to be a moral agent because it is constituted by a collection of moral individuals would commit the fallacy of composition (ibid.: 262). This is because the company does not make decisions – it is not rational. And, for Kant, exercising rationality is synonymous with being a moral agent.

Rationality, in Kant’s sense, is intentional. It is concerned with an agent setting and pursuing their own ‘ends’ and acting to fulfil those aims from good motivations. These ends are premised upon the concept of our self-legislation – our adherence to moral rules, or ‘maxims’, that we choose to follow in recognition of the fact that they 'could serve everyone (as universal) and could bind everyone (as practically necessary)' (ibid.: 256). Companies are not beings that can set their own ends, though. Indeed, as Altman points out, if a business could be thought of as rational in this way, it would be a moral agent, and would thus need to be afforded the respect it is owed in 'accordance with the dignity that all rational beings have' – an absurd conclusion (ibid.: 258). Employees, shareholders and other stakeholders would be using the artificial person of the business itself as merely a means to profit generation. Thus, we can reject the claim that companies can treat their employees as merely means to ends. Nonetheless, although the business cannot treat its employees as mere means, it does not follow that those individuals that constitute it cannot use one another in this way.

1 Neither, as Bowie (2000: 186) points out, can the example of companies who utilise Kantian reasoning and coincidentally make considerable profits, be used as instrumental reasons for utilising the Kantian framework. A true Kantian must act from duty, not in line with duty simply because it serves an ambition for profit.
Treating someone as merely a means to an end

Kant’s second formulation of the CI recognises that we each think of ourselves 'as a rational creature who is entitled to dignity and respect' and Kant extrapolates from this premise, for reasons of consistency, to hold that this should also apply to other rational people (Bowie 2000: 192). Thus, his moral theory is fundamentally egalitarian and requires us to treat all beings that are similarly rational to us as if they are worthy of our respect in line with the CI. In another formulation, the ‘Kingdom of Ends’ formulation, Kant states that 'one should act as if... one was subject and sovereign at the same time', which illustrates what mutual recognition and respect entails (ibid.). Central to this formulation is that one’s maxims could be both universalisable (i.e. held by all without contradiction) and would be accepted by all rational agents like us in a hypothetical social union. The business can be thought of as one such union.\(^2\) In adopting this outlook, the ways in which the manager can interact with their employees are constrained, if they are to act in line with the CI and avoid treating their employees purely as means.

Immediately, we should note that 'no one is used as merely a means in a voluntary economic exchange where both parties benefit' (Bowie 1999: 7). The CI is compatible with business. What the CI does not allow for is the unconstrained usage of autonomous individuals as if they were mere tools, through means of coercion or deception, or otherwise diminishing their rationality (Korsgaard 1996: 140). Thus, if I lied about my business capabilities to win a contract, through my deception I would be using you merely as a tool and not respecting your rationality. Further, I could not will that lying be universalised in the Kingdom of Ends without contradicting my own rationality. If everyone lied like I did, then people would not be able to make informed, rational decisions – I would have undermined their dignity and rationality as well as my own. This might pose a problem for

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\(^2\) Although we should recognise that a business is always only a constitutive part of the wider community and society that it is part of (Evan & Freeman 1988).
business practices, though. After all, is it not the job of a manager to coerce his employees into working harder and more efficiently?

Drawing on the work of Arnold and Bowie (2003), we can distinguish between two kinds of coercion in a Kantian sense. Firstly, there is physical coercion, which we can grant is always wrong in business situations, as Sollars and Englander do (2007: 122). Secondly, we can recognise psychological coercion, though there is less agreement on what counts as coercion in this sense. For Arnold and Bowie, to have psychologically coerced an employee, three criteria must be met:

1. the coercer must have a desire about the will of the victim;
2. the coercer must have a desire to compel the victim to act in a way that makes the coercer's first desire efficacious; and
3. the coercer must be successful in getting the victim to conform.

(2003: 229, as quoted in Sollars & Englander, 2007: 122.)

Taking the example of employees being forced to work overtime to avoid being fired, Sollars and Englander reject that in such cases psychological coercion has taken place. This is because they believe that in businesses where working overtime is a routine part of work, the threat of firing is merely 'a statement of the terms of employment' that does not constitute a legitimate coercive threat (ibid.: 123). The employee entered into their employment contract knowing that they may be required to work overtime, and so cannot claim to have been deceived as they knew that this was a possibility. As such, it would not meet Arnold and Bowie’s criteria. The coercer 'need not have a desire to compel a worker' to work overtime by changing their will, but simply a desire for the worker to carry out their contract, which the worker already agreed to by signing it (ibid.). Consequently, such manipulation does not amount to treating someone as a means to an end.

Is workplace surveillance coercive?

Accepting Sollars’ and Englander’s defence of threatened firing as
non-coercive, I turn now to explore ‘workplace surveillance’ and whether it might meet the criteria for coercion. Workplace surveillance can be defined as the 'sustained monitoring' of an employee by their employer whilst they are working (Macnish 2017: 175). This usually involves tracking various aspects of an employee’s workday – for instance, logging their keystrokes on a company computer, recording which websites they visit, who they call and for how long, or tracking their location via GPS in a company car (ibid.: 177). Clearly, this will capture everything that an employee does with company equipment, totally erasing their privacy. Importantly, many employees are not aware as to the extent to which they are monitored, as 'American companies generally aren't required by law to disclose how they monitor employees using company-issued devices' (Solon 2017). Are such practices treating employees merely as means to an end?

I argue that some employees are mentally coerced by workplace surveillance, according to Arnold and Bowie’s criteria for coercion. Although not necessarily coercive, such practices have a contingent tendency to produce coercive behaviours because of their highly intrusive nature. Trivially, it should first be noted that if the employer does not disclose their surveillance, as Solon claims is the case in America, above, then they deceptively infringe upon their employees’ rights to privacy, which would straightforwardly mean treating someone as only a means to an end through that deception. So, many instances of workplace surveillance are straightforwardly morally impermissible for Kant. Assuming that employees know that they are being surveilled does not solve the problem, though. As the following example shows, great care must thus be taken by the Kantian manager when implementing workplace surveillance.

Consider the call centre worker who is unsatisfied with her job. A customer asks if she enjoys working for the company. In such a case, thanks to the chilling effects of surveillance\(^3\), she might not answer truthfully. She would know that her employer could be surveilling her calls and so might

\(^3\) For more, see Macnish (2017: 35-7).
be expected to answer that she 'enjoys working here'. Despite the fact that the intention of the surveillance might have been legitimate – perhaps to 'chill' only inappropriate behaviours like customer abuse or increase efficiency (Macnish 2017: 180) – the desire on a manager's part to alter an employee's behaviour (reducing abuse or increasing efficiency) results in the employee self-censoring and deceiving the customer. Thus, the company's surveillance meets the three criteria for coercion outlined by Arnold and Bowie – even with the clarifications made by Sollars and Englander – by ensuring that the employee is coerced to act as she otherwise would not have. The manager both has a desire to change her will (1), and their desire is successful in bringing about that change and ensuring that she conforms (2), (3).

Not only this, but workplace surveillance also coerces the employee to treat the customer as merely a means to an end by ensuring that she deceives him – undermining his rationality, and so reflexively hers, too. Kant, as we recall, would not allow such behaviour, as this would not be universalisable in the Kingdom of Ends. The employee could not wish that all people lied like her. Thus, all parties' rationalities are undermined, and so workplace surveillance of this sort could not be accepted by the Kantian on account of the coercion and deception that the coercion brings about.

**Conclusion**

In this paper, I have argued two points. Firstly, that companies – as non-rational abstractions – cannot possibly treat their employees as merely means to an end. And, secondly, that individual managers could treat employees in this way if they introduced workplace surveillance of a certain kind. As such, although the benefits of workplace surveillance (such as limiting abuse or encouraging productivity) may be economically valuable, for the Kantian it would be morally impermissible for managers to implement it in cases where it coerced employees to change their wills – particularly if it also inadvertently coerced them to deceive customers.
Clearly, I have only shown that such practices are impermissible in one contingent application of the technology; workplace surveillance may not necessarily be coercive if carefully implemented. Even so, I have shown that there is at least one plausible way for managers to treat their employees as no more than a means to an end, even with good intentions, and so care must be taken by the Kantian pursuing such policies until we can better ascertain what surveillance is morally permissible.
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Should philosophy students oppose no platforming within the university?

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**Introduction**

In this essay I make the case that philosophy students should avoid no platforming because it brings benefits to philosophy students within the academic community, and society, outside of the academic community. No platforming is ‘the practice of blocking, or attempting to block, an individual from speaking at a university because of expressed moral or political views’ (Simpson and Srinivasan, forthcoming: 1). By ‘academic community’ or similar phrases I mean educational institutions, specifically a university, and its body of staff and students. Before arguing for these two benefits, I present a criticism of no platforming’s most common justification: Mill’s harm principle. This argument from Simpson and Srinivasan (forthcoming) runs that it is not relevant to discourse within a university and even if it is, I argue that university students possess an endurance against such harm. In trying to present a revised argument in favour of no platforming—now based on academic standards rather than the harm principle—it becomes clear that this may be difficult for philosophy in particular. Once we examine *why* this is difficult for philosophy, two positive reasons to avoid no platforming in philosophy emerge. The first is that philosophy students may have a unique benefit to gain from hearing the speakers that would have been no-platformed. The second reason relates to the benefit that society may gain.
The harm principle and its support for no platforming

In their paper, Simpson and Srinivasan (forthcoming) demonstrate how Mill’s harm principle is often the first point of call in supporting the no platforming of speakers whose views may cause harm and offence to others. The harm 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’ (Mill 1859: 13). But there is a problem with invoking the harm principle to defend no platforming. When one does so, one suggests that the university is simply ‘an extension of the public sphere’ (Simpson and Srinivasan, forthcoming: 10). There is the assumption that the tolerance enjoyed by everyone on the street, flat earth theorists and all, must surely be enjoyed in a centre of critical inquiry. But this mischaracterises the university. In fact, they are places where credentialed faculty members routinely silence the incompetent and give platforms to the most competent, to maintain the intellectual reputation of the university. So it seems that ordinary free speech principles do not, in fact, apply here and so this invalidates the use of Mill’s harm principle to defend no platforming in universities.

We can go further, though, and assume that universities are places where normal free speech principles apply. I believe that one of the fundamental cornerstones of all academic study is that students have to be aware that any reasoned debate or discourse is kept within academic discussion. A clear distinction should be made between what Mill takes to be harmless ‘self-regarding speech’ and harmful speech which exceeds opinion to become ‘verbal conduct’ (Simpson and Srinivasan, forthcoming: 7). The context is important for determining which of these classifications speech falls under – and our context is the university. This maintains the limitation of harm within the university, because in theory (perhaps not always in practice), students are conditioned into understanding that different well-reasoned opinions with which they do not agree are often not intentionally aired to offend. Rather they are created to aid in discovering truths. I take such understanding to be what the term ‘academic conduct’ means.
Behaving in line with academic conduct (even though endurance is not its aim), means students will have some endurance to the supposed harms of controversial opinions. The academic environment prevents them from becoming more than harmless opinion as students risk being academically dismissed if they exceed the parameters of academic conduct. Thus, the very nature of the university, as an environment whereby everyone is aware of the maintenance of academic conduct, means that Mill’s harm principle—even if relevant—is not a priority when discussing the dangers of academic freedom within the university. I have outlined why universities are not subject to ordinary free speech norms. As a result, Mill’s harm principle cannot be used to defend no platforming, and even if it were, we can expect students to have some endurance against any harms.

**Can we maintain high academic standards without no platforming?**

I will now present a revised defence of no platforming along the following lines. Academic standards require no platforming, therefore we should practise no platforming. Simpson and Srinivasan (forthcoming: 12) raise this problem by proposing a hypothetical situation ‘whereby a speaker does not believe in things which we widely accept to be true, and important to the teaching of a subject’. For example, it would be bizarre to suggest that a flat earth theorist could teach a geography course well, when they deny the existence of foundational truths of the discipline. Therefore, it seems like we cannot escape the reality that academic standards will drop if we do not allow no platforming. I would like to propose that the maintaining of high academic standards, if we take this to be a priority when questioning whether to no platform somebody or not, should be within the hands of the departmental staff themselves. This seems to be the most logical way to get around this issue for most subjects, as the staff themselves will have more experience and knowledge in the subject. They will be able to make sure that the speaker has enough academic credibility in order to have the suitability to speak in a certain academic field. No platforming is a tool to reject those who think utterances such as “is the earth flat?” are still open questions; a tool to reject those who are seen to be so academically
incompetent that they deny foundational truths.

Our revised defence of no platforming, however, seems to fail when it comes to philosophy particularly though. Disciplinary incompetence has been identified with rejection of the closed questions of a subject. However, as Simpson and Srinivasan point out, ‘philosophy itself is a subject where closed questions rarely exist.’ (Simpson and Srinivasan, forthcoming: 20). Take for example Descartes’ first philosophy whereby he tries to rid himself of all that he knows and tries to rebuild the foundations from the beginning. There is no obligation to accept these foundational beliefs within philosophy and therefore it cannot be considered in the same way as other disciplines (Simpson and Srinivasan, forthcoming: 20.) I have no real answer as to how philosophy can be used to maintain academic standards regarding the content of speaker’s views. There may need to be some institutional body which checks the credibility of the speaker regarding what they have academically produced and had published, rather than the content of their beliefs.

Yet, as philosophy students, it is not our prerogative to worry about academic standards because our subject has a much larger scope as to what is still an open question. And what is an open question should be decided by those who have more academic prowess. It would be their duty to make sure people are no platformed not based upon the content of an argument, but rather the speaker’s academic credibility in the academic community. Thus, I have attempted to show how inevitably, academic standards would be in grave danger without the use of no platforming on certain occasions. But this transgresses the duty of students.

The benefit to philosophy students

I will now present two reasons for opposing no platforming. First, controversial speakers who would have otherwise been no platformed are a valuable resource: philosophy students can dissect their arguments and analyse their faults. As students of philosophy we are used to being exposed to a large variety of arguments in various different forms, which often have
premises or conclusions that we disagree with. Therefore, one reason as to why we should oppose no platforming is that we are conditioned to seeing arguments which we take to be flawed and to search for their weakest points in order to attack them. It seems intuitively correct to want to experience these opinions in their most logical and rational expressions, within the safety of the academic community. As argued previously, it is reasonable for members of the academic community to have some endurance to challenging ideas.

To further this point, we also have a responsibility towards our own beliefs and opinions in order to strengthen them and improve our philosophical skills. In the book *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury, the protagonist’s boss says ‘If you don’t want a man unhappy politically, don’t give him two sides to a question to worry him; give him one. Better yet, give him none.’ (Bradbury 2008: 80). This is significantly relevant to the no platforming debate as if we allow no platforming, then we are in one sense, preventing either side of the debate from having their say. By allowing a speaker to voice their opinion, we too are encouraged to bring our own opinions up to the surface; whereas if we were not provoked and given the opportunity to voice our doubts, then really nobody wins. The speaker’s opinion goes unscathed and our own opinions go unheard. Therefore, philosophy students have reason to oppose no platforming. Exposure to controversial viewpoints allows us to improve our skills of identifying the weak points in arguments. And precisely because this is philosophy’s chief concern, we particularly should have a level of endurance and ability to distance oneself from controversial viewpoints. I have made the case that philosophy students should oppose no platforming because of the benefits they can gain. I will conclude with an argument that it is also in the interests of society as a whole to oppose no platforming.

**The benefit to society**

No platforming has certain negative after-effects which I believe we have a duty to oppose. Specifically, the proliferation of dogmatism on a societal level. It is possible that no platforming could reinforce the beliefs of the
person who has been no platformed. We can take it to be the case that people generally believe that their opinions are true. Most of those in philosophy are willing to accept that if their argument (based on their opinion) has been defeated, then they either have to revise their own argument, accept defeat, or adopt a new position. If no platforming is permitted, then people who are actively trying to voice their opinion, who will probably believe their own opinion to be true, are being denied that chance. By doing so, it then encourages such person to believe that their point is even more worthwhile than before, because they are trying to say something which is being silenced by the academic community. Therefore, the ‘truth’ which they believe they may have discovered seems, to them, truer than ever before. Academic scrutiny will surely mean less to the holders of these opinions: their opinions are ‘rejected anyway’ so they have little reason to respect the authority of anything which comes from an exclusive institution. Furthermore, this may encourage the speaker to find different audiences. In 2015, Germaine Greer’s invitation to give a public lecture at Cardiff University was rescinded following a student petition. O’Keefe (2016: 87) notes that afterwards she gained larger platforms such as appearances on Celebrity Big Brother and BBC Newsnight. This shift from the safety of academic scrutiny to the public eye is troublesome because a controversial argument’s transgression means that it is more likely to develop into something greater; it will most likely become a bigger deal and thus have more of an impact than it would have within the safety of academic scrutiny.

Having outlining this problem, I will explain how opposing no platforming offers a solution through containment to the academic sphere: a sphere where dangerous ideas can be efficaciously and authoritatively quashed. They are safer contained in the academic community because academic opinions can be more open than the public’s. By this I mean that the academic community will be more likely to welcome the opinions of both sides to an ongoing debate. Take the 2016 EU referendum for example: the academic community voiced their opinion (largely on the side of ‘Remain’) in the hope of trying to give high quality, well informed
arguments to the general public. However, a large portion of the general public turned their back against intellectual opinion. When something transgresses containment and is out in the public sphere, it can manifest into a form of populistic dogmatism, the proclaimers of which stay stubborn to their pre-existing opinions and refuse to accept input from the academic community. If we allow no platforming, then provocative opinions reach a very different audience; one which is likely to allow it to manifest into a position whereby the academic community will struggle to gain any worthwhile influence over it again. Therefore, it is our moral duty as philosophy students to oppose no platforming in order to contain arguments within their most rational and well-reasoned versions, in order to prevent the opinions from appealing to dogmatism. Even if the argument is undefeated in the public sphere, it is not likely to survive unscathed when put against the academic community, which gives philosophy students the opportunity to weaken an argument. Academic endurance against provocative arguments plays a fundamental part as to why it would not survive unscathed because we will allow (as philosophy students) some more controversial arguments to be heard. The practice of no platforming can reinforce the speaker’s views, and if we do not contain these arguments within the academic realm then they can manifest into more problematic forms, both for society and the academic community.

Conclusion

Philosophy’s difficult relationship with closed questions means it will have a unique relationship with no platforming (Simpson and Srinivasan, forthcoming). Following this, I have argued that no platforming can be detrimental to society as a whole. Now the case may be made that for some disciplines, when the benefits to academic standards, and the costs to society, of no platforming are weighed up, it is better to adopt no platforming. But when you combine the fact that refraining from no platforming may benefit wider society, with the fact that it brings benefits to philosophy students, the weight is very much on the opposite side of no platforming. Therefore, philosophy students should oppose no platforming.
Bibliography


Thrasymachus: conventionalist, immoralist or completely incoherent?

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Throughout Plato’s Republic we see Socrates engage in various dialogues with people who claim to know the meaning of certain values. His debate in Book One with Thrasymachus over the nature of justice is particularly controversial, so much so that it is revisited in later books. One source of such controversy are the various readings of what Thrasymachus means by ‘justice’. On the one hand, some read him as presenting a conventionalist account: that justice is obeying the laws or those who make them; the rulers of a society. Conversely, some claim that Thrasymachus endorses the immoralist view: that justice is the advantage of another, therefore it is always irrational to act justly. And, whichever view you believe, there is also the question of whether Thrasymachus manages to present a coherent argument that successfully supports the claim he may or may not be trying to make. As is clear from this introduction alone, Thrasymachus’ debate with Socrates in Book One presents us with a plethora of issues in addition to the focus of their dialogue which is, what is justice? I think it is easy to read Thrasymachus’ position as conventionalist, through the disjointed and incoherent presentation of his argument. But ultimately I believe that through Socrates’ questioning and Thrasymachus’ clarifications it is evident that he takes an immoralist stance. Furthermore, I think that it is possible to read Thrasymachus as providing a coherent argument for this, when one properly searches for the true meaning in his albeit convoluted presentation.
Thrasymachus makes four distinct claims, stating that justice is

I. nothing other than the advantage of the stronger;
II. the advantage of the established rule;
III. to obey the rulers or law or;
IV. the advantage of the other.

The difference between these four 'definitions' alone immediately highlights the struggle to find one, consistent view in his argument. The reading that Thrasymachus is supporting a conventionalist viewpoint clearly derives from his initial claim, that 'justice is nothing other than the advantage of the stronger' (338c), and even more so in his clarification that what he really meant was 'the advantage of the established rule' (338e) – his second claim. These two and even the third seem to echo the conventionalist position that justice is merely obeying the law. Rather than being a universal quality, independent and above the law, justice is a value that will vary depending on the country, the type of rule and legal system. The words ‘nothing but’ especially suggest a reductive account of justice, and his second and third claims imply further that justice is synonymous with compliance with the law, or the ruler’s commands. If this is taken as his main claim it is easy to see how one could read Thrasymachus as endorsing the conventionalist view.

However, in my opinion, Plato makes it clear that this is not in fact Thrasymachus’ view through his dialogue with Cleitophon. Cleitophon is the one who holds the conventionalist stance and proposes that Thrasymachus does too, suggesting that what Thrasymachus truly meant was that justice is 'what the stronger believes to be to his advantage' (340c). This would rescue the conventionalist interpretation at this point, because then it would follow that rulers make laws that they believe, rightfully so or not, will benefit themselves. Therefore, as long as one obeys the laws, one will be doing what the rulers believe is to their advantage, so will be acting justly. However, Thrasychamus’ rejection of this suggestion makes it clear that he is not willing to commit himself to that view. He clearly states that it is his first claim, that justice is the advantage of the
stronger, that he endorses and only supports the second under the assumption that rulers are always the stronger. Consequently, he is committed to the rejection of conventionalism because he believes that justice is what is really to the advantage of the stronger rather than simply the laws that they may think benefit them. The fact that obeying the laws alone is not sufficient for justice for Thrasy machus clearly distinguishes him from the conventionalist stance.

After this clarification has been made, we are then left with Thrasy machus’ first and last claims. This final claim of his, that justice is 'the advantage of another' (343c), constitutes the immoralist account of justice. The immoralist view is both explanatory and evaluative; acting justly is not in one’s interest because when you do you are benefitting another instead of yourself. Therefore, it is irrational to act justly and good to act unjustly. Indeed, this is the stance he seems to take for the rest of the dialogue, and this clearly supports the immoralist reading of Thrasy machus. But this causes a problem for Thrasy machus as he now has two claims: ‘justice is the advantage of the stronger’ and ‘justice is the advantage of another’. This does not immediately seem to be an issue as the claims are not obviously contradictory and they can work together. For example, if the agent is a subject when they act justly they are benefitting the ruler, therefore they are benefitting both the stronger and another. However, if when a ruler is just by acting to the advantage of the stronger, then they will be acting to the advantage of themselves. Yet this means that under Thrasy machus’ other definition that they are also acting unjustly. Although this view seems incoherent and at the very least confused, one may still be able to achieve a plausible immoralist reading from Thrasy machus.

Annas (1981) suggests that the issue is that Thrasy machus made his original claim (i) in too narrow a context. She believes that Thrasy machus’ real claim is that justice is the advantage of another, however when he is first defining justice he is thinking only in terms of the subjects who act in accordance with their rulers. Therefore by acting justly they benefit both another and the stronger. When he reformulates this more
broadly to apply to the subject and the ruler then the conflict with (i) arises, but she thinks the final formulation ‘takes it over in spirit’ (Annas 1981: 46). Indeed, Nicholson (1974: 221) agrees, suggesting that it is Thrasymachus’ aim to ‘make a stir by presenting its essential point... in its most striking application, the conduct of the ruler’. This unusual order of presentation may make his argument seem contradictory, but if we take his core claim to be that justice benefits another, it only conflicts with his earlier claim because Thrasymachus was applying the later, broader formulation to a specific context first. This is further supported by Plato’s portrayal of Thrasymachus as a whole. He is volatile and hot-tempered, speaks in extremes, and is determined to prove his point and shock the crowd. There may be various reasons why Plato chose to present him in this way, but it does make it plausible that Thrasymachus’ argument seems less coherent than it actually is due to his desire to make bold claims to attract the attention of the audience. Therefore, I believe that one can achieve a coherent immoralist reading of Thrasymachus, if one does not put too much weight on Thrasymachus’ first claim. As long as ‘justice is the advantage of another’ is kept as Thrasymachus’ main claim, and we view his first claim as simply one of the correct applications of his core claim, then we can easily believe Thrasymachus to be presenting a coherent immoralist viewpoint.

In conclusion, although Thrasymachus in no way presents a straightforward immoralist stance, it is clear that this is the view that he endorses. Although one may be tempted to take his initial claims as him presenting a conventionalist stance, through his rejection of Cleitophon’s suggestion and further clarification it is evident that his aim is to argue for the immoralist account of justice. The conflict between his claims can be resolved by taking his final reformulation to be his core immoralist position, with the others simply being muddled applications of this.
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Can films philosophize? The rationality and the imposition objections

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There is an ongoing debate in the Anglo-American philosophy of film, around the possibility that at least some films may be means to do philosophy. This has been defended mainly by Stephen Mulhall (2001) and Thomas Wartenberg (2007). Critics of this ‘film as philosophy’ (FAP) hypothesis make several objections, some of which are borrowed from objections to the idea of literature as philosophy, but I will be focusing on two. First, the rationality objection suggests that it is irrational to use films to do philosophy if literature achieves the same results more effectively. Second, the imposition objection states that any philosophizing is never done by the film itself, but the philosopher interpreting it. The following will be a defence of a version of the ‘moderate pro-cinematic philosophy’ position taken by Wartenberg (2011: 16). I will begin by briefly presenting Wartenberg’s theory and his responses to the rationality and the imposition objections. Then, I will argue that, although Wartenberg’s theory seems to be the most plausible within the FAP debate, it leaves some doubts that can be answered by making some bolder arguments to solve the rationality and the imposition objections.

In 2007, Thomas Wartenberg published his book, Thinking on Screen: Film as Philosophy, where he defended FAP. To defend his ‘moderate pro-cinematic philosophy’ position, he adopted a ‘local’ strategy that considers specific known philosophical techniques and then asks if there are films that can constitute such techniques (Wartenberg 2006: 131)
He argues for three main ways of doing philosophy through film:

1. illustration of a philosophical theory;
2. self-reflection or reflection about the nature of cinema, and;
3. thought experimentation.

Bruce Russell (2002) presents a ‘generality objection’ to films doing philosophy. It states that films cannot do philosophy because philosophy concerns itself with general, universal truths, but films are concerned with particular states of affairs. Wartenberg’s (2007) argument runs, however, that thought experiments are well-established philosophical tools that constitute only particular cases. Therefore, if a film is a thought experiment, then we can consider it to be doing philosophy. That is to say, not all philosophical endeavours aim at establishing general truths, as the ‘generality objection’ posed by Bruce (2002) presupposes. Wartenberg’s appeal to thought experiments, however interesting, leaves some objections unanswered.

The first objection is called the ‘rationality objection’ and is posed by Paisley Livingston (2006). With Hegelian inspiration, Livingston asks: ‘If we in fact believe a more efficient means to our goal is available, would it not indeed be irrational to pass it by?’ (Livingston 2006: 17). So, if we have texts that are known tools that work perfectly to philosophize, it would be irrational to make films instead (Livingston 2009: 56).

Wartenberg hints towards an answer to this challenge by stating that films have abilities texts do not. He claims that ‘film is both a visual and temporally extended art form [that] gives it an immediacy that is greater than other art forms in its presentation of philosophy’ (Wartenberg 2007: 137). This may not seem very concrete, but if we consider Wartenberg’s analysis of The Matrix (1999) in Thinking on Screen, we can better understand how the film can philosophize in ways that are prompted by cinema’s nature that cannot be done in texts. Briefly, Wartenberg argues that the film is a thought experiment that extends Descartes’ evil genius
thought experiment inasmuch as it makes us experience the same doubts as the main character, Neo, in a way specially allowed by cinema. So, maybe the challenge here is that Wartenberg and philosophers who want to defend this moderate version of a pro-FAP thesis, ought to present more compelling examples. They should present films that make use of their specific techniques that allow them to philosophize more effectively than other more traditional means. This also is a challenge to the argument for the cinematic thought experiment. Why use cinematic thought experiments instead of textual ones? We need a compelling and bold argument for accepting to include films in our philosophical bibliographies.

Our argument in favour of ‘pro-cinematic philosophy’ is ‘moderate’ because of a certain concession. This is that we can only evaluate whether some films do philosophy if there are already established works of philosophy in traditional means. Without being reduced to saying that films merely illustrate a philosophical text, we can say that the existence of recognized philosophical texts on a subject should be a referent that helps us to identify the philosophy being done by the film. Indeed, Wartenberg states that thinking about typical philosophical topics (the ‘eternal questions’) is one conception that we can have of philosophy (Wartenberg 2007: 29)\(^1\). So, we are not arguing that films should replace texts; rather they can complement them.

If we are to take the position that film has a unique essence, we should note that we need not fulfil the strong demands of what Livingston labels the ‘bold thesis’ (Livingston 2009). This is the strong claim that films can make original contributions to philosophy by means unique to the cinematic medium. For this thesis to be correct, films must meet

1. The ‘means condition’, according to which film can do philosophy through exclusive cinematic means and
2. the ‘results condition’, according to which the philosophy that the film does has to be innovative and original (Livingston 2009: 11).

\(^1\) Wartenberg argues for two more conceptions of philosophy that he considers to only function if considered in conjunction: philosophy as a meta-discipline, and as a set of methods (Wartenberg 2007: 30).
Perhaps unsurprisingly, Livingston rejects the bold thesis (Livingston 2009). We should say that the requirement of originality and innovation seems to demand from film something that is questionable even for traditional philosophy. How original and innovative can philosophy be in the twenty first century? If we know about the existence of a film that makes some points from a different perspective, adds new premises to an argument, invents a new thought experiment to tackle a philosophical issue, and so forth, and that we can trace that to a traditional philosophical reference, we can still adopt our position of moderate pro-cinematic philosophy.

I want to argue that Wes Craven's Scream (1996) is a film about the possibility of hyperreality. Hyperreality was not an original concept in 1996, since Baudrillard had already written about this possibility in 1981, but the film contributes with a new perspective on the subject. We do not have to accept any kind of essentialist theory of cinema—that film has a unique essence not enjoyed by other art forms—in order to agree that films have some, not unique, but paradigmatic techniques such as a narrative, sound track, actors, and so on. Thus, as Aaron Smuts states in his defence of the bold thesis, we should just have to be concerned with ‘means that are significantly more cinematic than merely presenting a philosophical lecture’ (Smuts 2006: 10-11). So, we do not have to accept Scream as having a unique essence that is not shared by any other art form, we just have to recognize it as a film that employs paradigmatic cinematic means that are crucial to the epistemic power it has. If my argument is that Scream is a thought experiment on the possibility of hyperreality, we could ask if there is something about cinematic thought experiments that justifies using them instead of just using texts, responding to the rationality objection.

One way could be to endorse what Tom McClelland calls the 'Socratic Model'. In this model, films do not make explicit general claims about certain subjects: instead film 'prompts its audience into greater philosophical understanding precisely by not making explicit philosophical
claims about its narrative, but rather by inviting us to do some of the work for ourselves’ (McClelland 2001: 12). So, on the one hand, this means that one could object that Scream does not philosophize because it is not explicit enough about its position on hyperreality, (because there is not an argument which provides a framework for the thought experiment). But on the other hand, it leaves its potential general conclusion to the audience. This difference between traditional thought experiments and screen ones may be advantageous to film. As McClelland notes, ‘letting the scenario speak for itself’ can be a better way for us to ‘use our own capacity for reason to work out the real significance of the scenario’ (McClelland, forthcoming) and that can constitute an epistemic advantage over texts. This properly responds to the rationality objection.

The second objection to films doing philosophy is called the ‘imposition objection’. Let us agree that The Matrix is a philosophical thought experiment that establishes the deception hypothesis. The problem may be that this meaning is imposed by the philosopher who interprets the film, not having been intended by the Wachowski sisters. Even if we seem to have a strong case of a cinematic thought experiment that establishes the possibility of FAP, it is not guaranteed that the philosophical meaning was intended by the film’s author(s).

To solve this problem, Wartenberg argues that we could adopt a ‘creator-oriented’ kind of interpretation (Wartenberg 2007: 25) which ‘attempts to reconstruct the meaning that the author of a work intended’ (Wartenberg 2016: 175). This kind of interpretation takes into account the author’s social background. If we were to make anachronistic interpretations of a work, this would be an ‘imposition’ or at least, as Wartenberg says, an ‘audience-oriented’ interpretation. However, Livingston argues that the creator-oriented kind of interpretation proposed by Wartenberg is too ambiguous and loose. It is hard to know what philosophical theories the author was aware of. Instead, Livingston supports a ‘partial intentionalism’ in which the author’s intentions are only of partial concern (Livingston 2009). This kind of intentionalism makes
use of ‘internal’ as well as ‘external’ evidence of a film (Livingston 2009: 108). It analyses the film itself and sees if the philosophical impression we get ‘meshes’ with the author’s philosophical concerns registered in her interviews, journals, etc. (Livingston 2009: 99). If we do this, we avoid any kind of imposition. Wartenberg replies by saying that we do not need to commit to such a strong intentionalism, saying that the authors (filmmakers) only have to be aware of the ‘philosophical problèmatique’ and not of any specific theories (Wartenberg 2016: 175). Thus, Livingston’s ‘partial intentionalism’ expands the search for something that need not be found.

The question remains whether I am imposing a hyperrealistic interpretation of Scream. I want to argue that both Wartenberg's and Livingston's answers to the imposition objection can, in conjunction, help us to make a case for Scream as a thought experiment about hyperreality. Wartenberg argues that the philosophical content of a film can be debated and interpreted in several ways in order to understand if it philosophizes or not (Wartenberg 2009: 121). As Livingston rightly notes, Wartenberg’s ‘creator-oriented’ interpretations are too loose: the filmmaker Craven could have intended many different things, and his social context is too rich to try to completely understand one of the philosophical meanings of Scream. Thus, a stronger intentionalism, as the one defended by Livingston, can help us make a closer interpretation and understand the philosophy that Craven does through Scream. Otherwise we could take the risk of assuming a priori that the film philosophizes, only then to debate particular interpretations, which goes against a kind of experimental approach that goes from the film and the general impression we get from it, to a plausible interpretation (not assuming beforehand that the film philosophizes).

Livingston’s partial intentionalism, however, has some problems too, especially since it seems to make interpretations of films that are too attached to very particular philosophical positions. For example, he argues that director Ingmar Bergman’s work is profoundly influenced by the Finnish philosopher Eino Kaila, rejecting several psychoanalytic
of Bergman’s work on the grounds that Kaila was himself critic of psychoanalysis (Livingston 2009: 129). However, the influence of Kaila and psychoanalysis is not mutually exclusive. Could not the work of Bergman show both influences? Influence does not mean endorsement in all aspects. So, in this aspect, Wartenberg’s proposal could justify a psychoanalytic account because psychoanalysis was a trend during his years of filmmaking.

Thus, I would like to suggest that both accounts can complement each other sometimes, avoiding too loose or too narrow interpretations. Scream can be an example of a film that could benefit from both accounts: in a creator-oriented interpretation, the hypothesis of hyperrealism was a concern of Scream’s era; but it was also a concern of Wes Craven, as he said several times in various interviews. His concern about the relationship between reality and fiction is common to some of his other great works, as Nightmare on Elm Street (1984) and Wes Craven’s New Nightmare (1994).²

To conclude, with a bolder version of what we could say about cinematic thought experiments, and a conjunction between two types of intentionalism, we can reply to the rationality and the imposition objections. This was achieved by arguing that some films can do philosophy about traditional topics, in new ways. My position may be seen as too conservative, but the advantage is that it could help to convince the more sceptical philosophers. It may be the cautious position to have, but the burden is on pro-FAP philosophers to make the case for adding films to philosophy.

² I would like to note that if we accept the ‘death of the author’ this intentionalism does not apply. However, it could be said that someone who is persuaded of the death of the author is probably going to accept more easily FAP, since all interpretations could be valid. However, in an Anglo-American framework usually highly sceptical, and facing the imposition objection, intentionalism can help us make the case for FAP.
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Introspection and reflection: a defence of the phenomenological method

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The phenomenological method is often the subject of undue criticism. In particular, the practice is condemned for its making heavy use of introspection as a method for understanding certain elements of consciousness. I will show a popular version of this criticism, originally put forward by H.J. Watt, to be not only self-defeating but also wholly inapplicable to the phenomenological method, especially when bearing in mind the overall project of phenomenology. In order to do so, I will argue that ‘introspection’ is not a term which, properly understood, can be applied to the phenomenological method at all. Rather, it is a misunderstanding of what can be more accurately described as ‘reflection’. Moreover, it will become clear that even if this were not the case, Watt’s objection comes laden with a presupposition that fatally undermines his argument. I will then go on to show that, even if it were the case that Watt’s objection was a strong one, there is good reason for the phenomenologist to be totally unmoved by it, as it somewhat misses its mark. This is not to suggest that the phenomenologist owes no defence of their methods, only that what has become something of a standard criticism is in fact tremendously weaker than its supporters might think.

It is necessary early on to give a working definition of phenomenology, which is itself a term that resists simple definition. However, for our purposes there is no harm in employing a simple one given by D.W. Smith, who writes: ‘Phenomenology is the study of
structures of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view' (Smith 2018: 1). The phenomenological method, therefore, is any reasonable process engaged towards this end. This definition is deliberately broad, but, as we shall see, even with such a charitably wide target Watt’s criticism misses the mark. What is important for the purposes of my argument is that this definition provides an insight into the overall goal of the project of phenomenology which, crudely, is to give an account of consciousness through the lens of human experience, or phenomena. However, as I’ve implied, a unifying definition of phenomenology is not easily discovered; there are too many distinct types of phenomenology to even mention here, and a great many excellent philosophers each with their own varying thoughts on the subject. To keep matters straightforward, I will be referring primarily to the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl, widely thought to be the founding father of phenomenology as a distinct school of philosophy. Specifically, as Husserl’s philosophy did change radically over the course of his life, I will refer to his seminal text, *Ideas*, and the commentary of *Ideas* provided by David Cerbone (2015) in his article 'Phenomenological Method’.

Watt’s criticism is characteristic of an epistemological breed of scepticism about phenomenology (Cerbone 2015: 13). The crux of the objection is that, due to the ephemerality of experience, it cannot be said that an introspective account of that same experience maps onto reality in any meaningful sense. If the phenomenological method is to carefully examine lived experiences via the application of introspection to those experiences then, necessarily, scenarios like the following will occur:

At T₁, the subject has the experience of, say, watching a black cat stroll by. Simultaneously, as per the phenomenological method, the subject produces a description of the experience of a cat strolling by via introspection. At T₂, which is any infinitely small increment of time after T₁, the experience had by the subject at T₁ is over. However, the description of the experience of a black cat in motion endures in the mind of the subject. With the original experience now irretrievably
missing, there is nothing left to say whether the description is accurate or not.

This thought experiment seeks to show how the ephemerality of experience robs the phenomenological method of any explanatory power when it comes to consciousness. In this scenario there is no extant evidence that there is any relationship whatsoever between the lived experience and the description of that lived experience. If this is the case, then the phenomenologist has failed in their project to explain consciousness through the lens of lived experience. However, I will now demonstrate that this is not the case, firstly by mounting a rescue of the connection between experience and description, and secondly by rejecting the importance of this connection.

The problem is partly to do with the connotations of the word ‘introspection’. It suggests a model of consciousness which involves our somehow floating outside of our own consciousness looking in. This is certainly not what Husserl had in mind when describing the phenomenological process. There is no reason for a phenomenologist to commit themselves to this model; it is merely an image conjured by the word ‘introspection’ but by no means necessary to the phenomenological method. If this connotation were accurate, it would certainly be fair to wonder at the relationship between actual experience and this strangely detached other self, observing from afar. However, as things are, it seems strange and unnecessary to suppose this very detached relationship between person and experience. In fact, it seems intuitively obvious that we have immediate access to the content of our experience by virtue of having experienced it in the first place. We are conscious of our own consciousness and aware of our own experiences. The fact that a particular experience has come and gone hardly seems an important factor in how accurate our description of it is either. Of course, all of our recollections of past events are fallible, but this is no more so the case for experiences than for any other event. Cerbone argues that it is more difficult to ascertain the truth about an event in the past than the truth about our experience of that event: ‘Even if
I am wrong about having seen a deer, I can feel pretty confident that I seemed to see a deer’ (Cerbone 2015: 15). Presupposing the mediacy of lived experience is crucial to Watt’s ephemerality objection, but that mediacy is simply not present in the phenomenological method. ‘Introspection’ carries with it the implication of this mediacy, therefore it is better to describe the phenomenological method in terms of ‘reflection’, in order to avoid this worry. Of course, this tweak of vocabulary is not our only recourse in the face of epistemological scepticism such as Watt’s, as I will now demonstrate.

A much more serious flaw in Watt’s argument, as Husserl himself made clear, is that it suffers from a fatal circularity. To put it simply, the sceptic employs reflection in their objection to reflection. The very worry that the sceptic is concerned about - namely that enduring definitions of an experience after the fact might stray from the truth about said experience - belies some reflective awareness of the experience in question. It is too late to deny the possibility of reflection as a method of gaining knowledge about consciousness, when we are already debating the accuracy of that knowledge. At that stage, it is already implied that some knowledge has been gained, and any attempt to deny as much is self-defeating. So, even more damaging to Watt’s criticism than its insistence on a bizarre model of consciousness is its reliance on reflection, the very thing it attempts to refute.

There is a further, final, way the phenomenologist may resist Watt’s criticism, and perhaps the most obvious method of escape. When presented with an objection embroiled in matters of accuracy and matters of fact, the phenomenologist is most likely to respond with cool indifference. Phenomenology is unconcerned with whether the black cat took five steps or six before jumping over the bush; it is not the business of the phenomenologist to meticulously document human experience. Therefore, the presence of a disparity between a lived experience and the description of said lived experience (although by Watt’s own reasoning this would be impossible to assert) does not limit the usefulness of that description.
As per our definition above, the phenomenologist aims to uncover truths about ‘structures of consciousness’ (Smith 2018) and as such is unconcerned with matters of accuracy and precision in remembered experience. This renders Watt’s ephemerality objection completely unproblematic. Even if there is no standard by which to measure the reliability of our recalled experience after the experience itself, we can still come to know truths about the structure of consciousness. It is the nature of the structure of consciousness we are seeking when employing the phenomenological method, whereas Watt’s ephemerality problem refers to the content of conscious experience. So, the phenomenologist need not even engage intimately with Watt’s objection to disregard it on the grounds that it is misdirected.

In conclusion, the phenomenological method survives criticism on the grounds of introspection. Firstly for the reason that, properly understood, the phenomenological method isn’t a matter of introspection but of reflection. It is the connotations of the word ‘introspection’ that lead us to an unhelpful model of consciousness which is prone to Watt’s ephemerality objection. Having dispensed with this model, the ephemerality objection becomes much harder to apply to the phenomenological method. As it turns out, the objection itself rests on a circularity regarding the very reflection it seeks to refute. In order to make an argument against reflection in the Husserlian sense, Watt’s argument employs that same self-reflection. This circularity weakens the objection even further. The blow that proves fatal to Watt’s ephemerality objection is that it simply misses the mark. When we consider that overall project of phenomenology, it seems obvious that the phenomenologist would be completely unmoved by Watt’s objection. This is because it does not in any way threaten the ability of the phenomenological method to derive truth regarding the structure of consciousness, only the content of certain lived experience. Hence, with these three counter objections in place, I have provided a thorough defence of the phenomenological method against a common criticism.
Bibliography


Do gravitational waves show that spacetime is a substance?

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Very recently, a late piece of supporting evidence for Einstein’s General Theory of Relativity has come from the LIGO observatory in California, in the form of direct detection of so-called 'gravitational waves'. This evidence also looks to provide a potential support for spacetime substantivalists, who believe spacetime to be a substance with its own properties. I will argue that the recent discoveries actually offer no such support, given the theoretical background of General Relativity.

Firstly, a brief word on the phenomenon itself: Gravitational waves (hereafter 'GWs') work on the general-relativistic model that paints gravity as the effect of spacetime curvature on the paths taken by objects through spacetime. GWs themselves are instances of this curvature that propagate at the speed of light, causing objects in the spacetime regions through which they pass to contract and stretch accordingly with the frequency of the wave. GWs are caused by masses in motion whose circumferences are non-uniform, such as binary solar systems. The non-uniformity of these systems means that their gravitational effects oscillate, creating a 'ripple' in spacetime – a GW.

Spacetime substantivalists believe spacetime to be an ontological entity with its own, first-order properties. The pertinence of GWs to the substantivalist debate lies in causation. If spacetime can be shown to be a causal actor, this seems to speak towards its substantiality. After all, in order to be a link in a causal chain, spacetime would presumably have to be
some sort of thing 'in its own right'. Furthermore, the manner in which spacetime interacts causally with matter, if indeed it does, might give clues as to exactly the sort of substance for which we are supposed to take it. The difficulty here is that, while gravity has classically been considered a sort of force, and therefore causal, on the framework of General Relativity, any specific thing we might want to label as 'gravity' falls away. This is because gravity has been 'geometrized' – that is, its effects have been explained as the warping of spacetime, which affects the geometrical parameters within which properly causal interactions occur. It now becomes less obvious whether it is valid to call gravitational effects properly causal; to speak of the spacetime-curvature phenomena that produce the effects of gravity as causal is rather like saying that a triangle’s having three vertices causes it to have 180 internal degrees, in that this is clearly not a straightforward case of material causation.

GWs might offer a way to fix this problem for substantivalists by offering a demonstration of spacetime’s being intuitively causal, and thereby giving an indication of the sort of substance it is supposed to be. This is because the process of matter being affected by a GW looks a lot more like classic material causation, in that a wave, of a sort, passes through a material structure, affecting its material properties. The analogy with other (causally effective) sorts of wave, such as electromagnetic waves, is obvious. Taking this further, we might look to the wavelike nature of GWs to give an idea of spacetime as a sort of medium; just as water waves propagate through water, we might think, so do GWs propagate through spacetime. At first blush, then, GWs appear to be a very promising prospect indeed for the substantivalist.

However, we must be careful not to let our intuitions run away with us. For one thing, it is quite a leap to take GWs to be waves as we usually understand the term, solely on the basis of their apparent effects. This is particularly questionable if we have a strong definition of ‘waves’ that includes propagation through a medium; if this is what is meant when we appeal to intuition to classify GWs as waves, those in opposition to
substantivalism are likely to object to this early step, citing circularity. Objections could come even earlier, to the classification of GWs as properly causal. Although it does seem intuitive to say of a particular GW that it causes a particular deformation in a material structure, we must note that this is part of exactly the same process as gravity. That is, a GW constitutes an area of particular curvature that propagates through spacetime, and which, just like gravity, temporarily changes the geometry of the regions through which it passes. Since we have already questioned the sense in which gravity can be said to be a causal phenomenon, and GWs are essentially an extension of the same process, we must choose between two courses of action: Either we can allow that the geometrized processes of deformation due to GWs and gravity are simply non-causal, and abandon this opportunity to find a more comprehensible substantivalism, or we can allow that GWs are causal, and retrospectively grant the same of gravity. In order to follow the discussion further, we will look at following up the second option by positing more specifically defined notions of causation on which we could understand both phenomena as properly causal.

It will be necessary to differentiate between theories of causation because, as we will see, GWs may well be defined as causal actors on some definitions and not on others. We look first to the counterfactual theory of causation. The theory states, very broadly, that A can properly be said to cause B if, in most relevantly similar possible worlds in which B occurs, A also occurs. This claim is far from self-evident, and the theory is not without difficult obstacles, but it is possible to see the attraction of defining causation in terms that so concisely link causes to effects (Lewis 1973). Furthermore, we seem to be able to say straightforwardly of GWs that they act causally on the world, on this view.

This appears to be so much to the good for the substantivalist, but we must recall that our search for a sense in which GWs are properly causal has the aim of clarifying in what sense spacetime is supposed to be substantial. This is not helped by counterfactual causation, because the theory is neutral with respect to ontology. For example, on the
counterfactual theory, absences, such as holes and shadows, can be properly causal; I cannot thread a needle in a possible world in which it has no eye, hence the eye is a (contributing) cause for my being able to thread the needle. That spacetime is a causal actor does not serve either to vouch for or to illuminate its purported substantiality if such things as holes and absences share this causal status.

There is another problem to be teased out here, namely one of reference. The counterfactual theory works on a modal basis rather than an ontological one. This can be seen in that it requires a separate, supporting ontology. An ontology, for instance, that does not admit of holes, or parses talk of holes into talk of something else (cf. Lewis & Lewis 1970: 207-208), is not going to allow the theory to treat holes as causal actors, since the counterfactual theorist will not strictly be able to talk about them, or place them in causal chains, etc. A defence that holes and GWs are thus differentiated, in that we can quantify over one and not the other, would, however, be misguided, in that such an argument would have to presuppose an ontology that included GWs, exactly the ontological question we meant to settle by the substantivalist debate. Counterfactual theories are, then, a dead end for the substantivalist.

Process theories of causation are perhaps the other major player in the causal literature. I propose to deal with them quite broadly. What distinguishes process theories of causation is the aspect of continuation; some set of spacetime events can be seen as causal, on the process theory, iff it demonstrates the smooth continuation of some feature through space and time. For our purposes, it seems that this notion of a 'feature' has to be quite narrowly construed – to consider the continuous transferral of some distinguishing 'mark', as in Salmon's theory (Salmon 1994), seems too blatantly to run afoul of the ontological-referential problem above. By contrast, considering the transferral of physical properties such as energy, a common go-to for process theories, seems to have the added bonus that, if GWs are found to be causal because they transfer energy, they certainly could not be phrased out of our theory. Unfortunately, the question of

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whether just this is the case is quite fraught.

Richard Feynman, although working outside his usual field, provides us with the most widely accepted thought experiment attempting to make the case for this transferral of energy. If we imagine a stick with two beads set loosely into a groove running along it, and then imagine a GW passing through the region of our experimental setup, the contractions caused by the GW are going to have the proper distance between the two beads oscillate. This will cause them to move along the stick, creating friction, which produces heat, a form of energy. However slight the amount of this energy, it has to have come from somewhere, and the GW seems the only possible avenue (Feynman et al. 2002: 17&18). Hence energy is transferred by the GW, which is therefore a causal actor. If we go with Feynman’s thought experiment, then, we get a picture on which spacetime is not only able to act causally on matter, but is also able to carry energy, really a rather fleshed-out meaning for 'substance'.

However, dissent exists regarding this position. There are two main points to be made. The first is an objection to the thought experiment; Fred Cooperstock, by far the most prolific objector to Feynman’s 'sticky bead' argument, points out that Feynman neglects the action of the GW on the stick. While the distance between the beads might well vary, it is not clear that this would cause them to rub against the stick, which could flex accordingly with their motion (Cooperstock 2015). This fits with the point that Feynman seems to attribute the non-flexing of the stick to reactionary forces, which itself appears to construe the GW as a force acting on the setup, something that, as we have seen in the discussion of geometrization, is not consistent with the general-relativistic background. Thus, the thought experiment is at least contested. The second point to be made against the notion of energy transfer is simply to note that the only successful direct detection of GWs has been by LIGO, which, as an 'interferometer', does not rely on direct energy transfer, but measures changes in the time taken for a laser to make a round trip, essentially measuring changes in distance directly. By contrast, results obtained in the 1970s from 'Weber bars',

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which do rely on direct energy transfer, have since been debunked (Levine 2004).

The point of all of this is not to deny causation to GWs outright. The thing to take away from this discussion is that attributions of direct causation to spacetime phenomena, seeing as these affect the world geometrically, serve more to put pressure on our notion of causation than to reveal anything about the nature of the phenomena themselves. One might think that this is due to our importing intuitive ideas about waves from other contexts; things applicable to other types of waves, such as energy transfer and the notion of a medium, may not make sense for GWs (as noted in Rynasiewicz 1996). Given what we have seen, it might not make sense to think of GWs as things that give off their own causal signals, so much as causal signals in their own right, i.e. as the information that a massive body is in a certain place, propagating at a time-lapse due to the speed of light, the fastest that information can travel. Although this is conjecture, one thing appears certain; if the clear distinction between spacetime substantivalism and its opponents ever had a determinate sense, it seems to have been left behind by subsequent developments in physics.
Bibliography


PHILOSOPHY

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