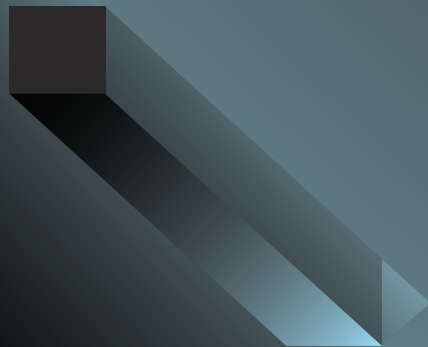
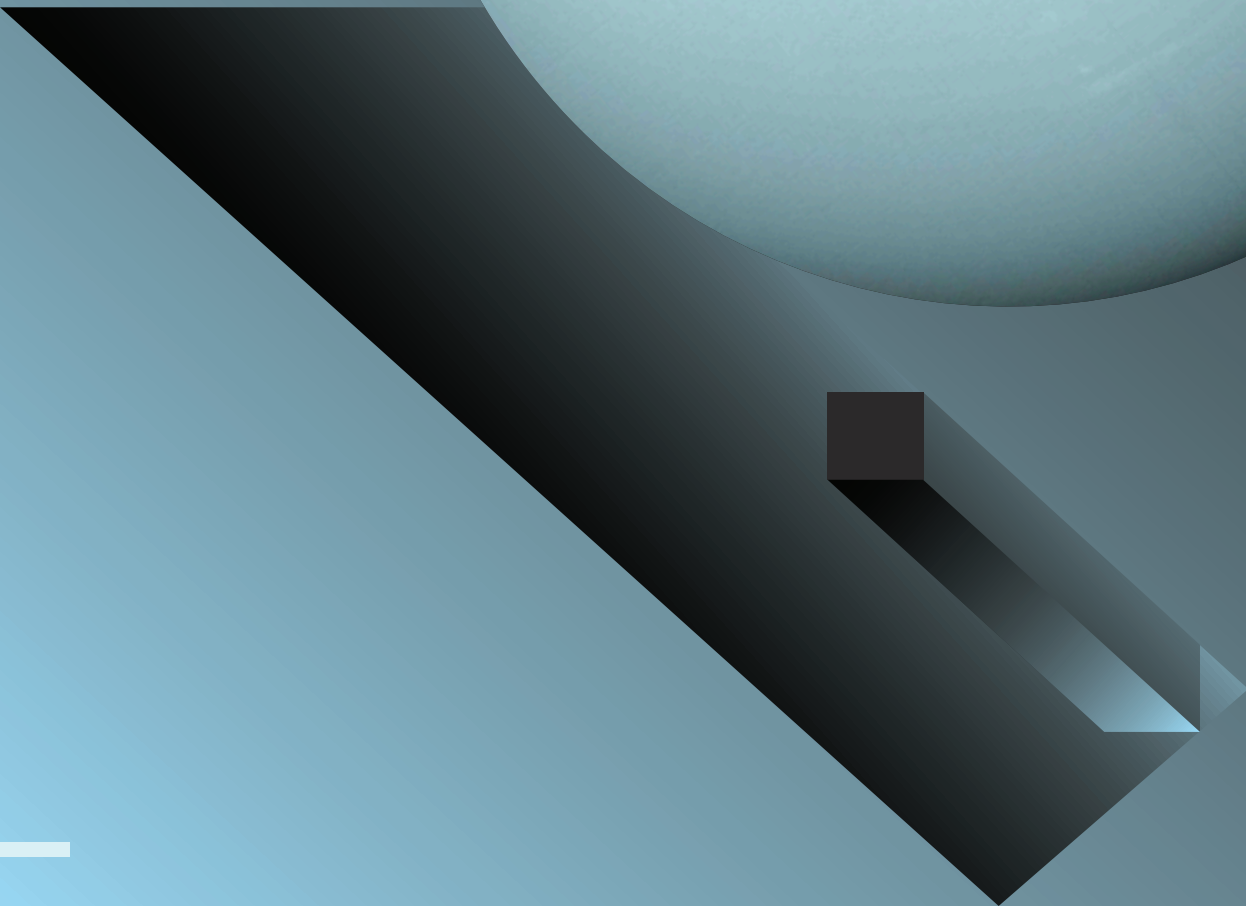
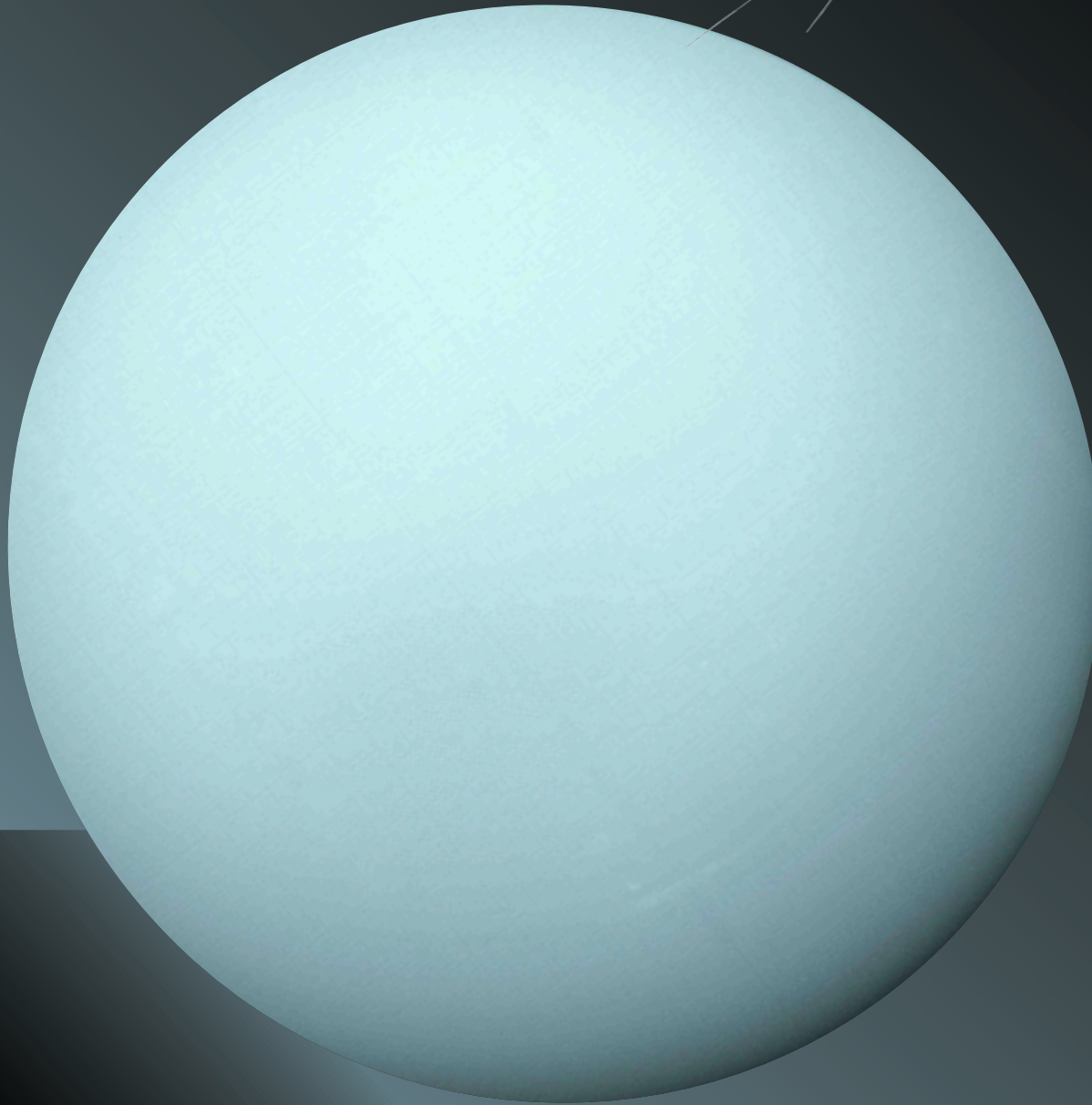
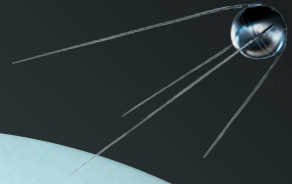
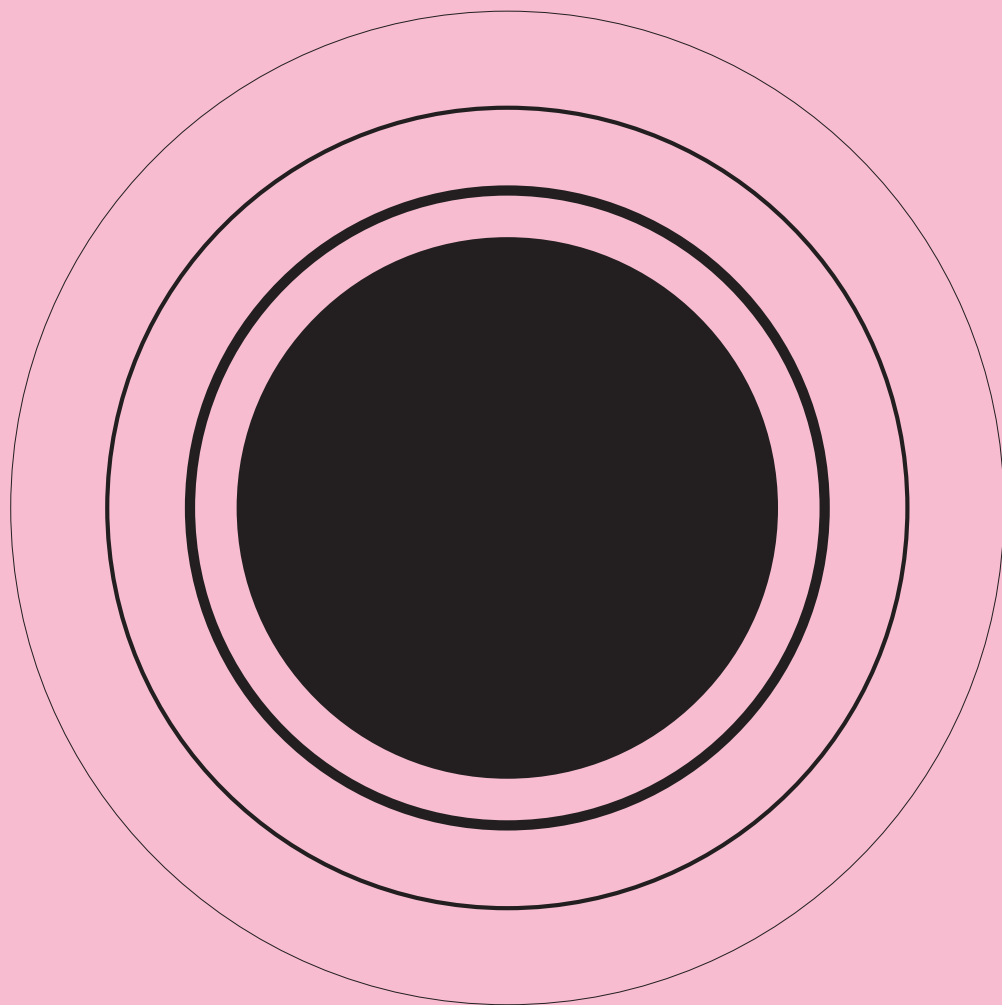


AGORA



Why Publish, & Why Agora?



To publish in these burgeoning years as young students is the act of self-becoming, our departure from the unarticulated planet we sail alone on in the pursuit of meaning. The Agora is the window to this intimate departure, a chance to observe the various questions life begs of us. In these pages we see the struggle with the fleetingness of beauty, with the seeming illegitimacy of a human in an inhuman world, with the birth of a passion for philosophy akin to breathing. We write in the Agora, because otherwise these honest tears are left for the solitary pints, for the cafés and desks, in those seldom philosophical discussions with friends. However, these deep reflections, these journeys of the languageless sea within, from which we forge our identity and the values we'll grow into, ought to be brought from neglect into the spotlight! Here, in these pages, is the legitimisation and appreciation of the tender, self-becoming heart—of the eager philosopher-poet within us all.

The Agora is a forum for all to naïvely express their heart's tremors and aches, hoping to encourage such essential honesty in our own lives and in society. We envision the Athenian, though deeply flawed, dialogue between the frank public and society as a means of self-determination, rejecting the crushing momentum of a world which moves without a push. The paper encourages everyone to let the follies of life ridicule them, and to communalize our 'agonising freedom,' as Sartre would say. Youth is asphyxiated by its naïveté, as 'life can only be understood backwards, but must be lived forwards,' and in response the Agora hopes to create an exciting free exchange of ideas, perspectives, and wisdom, unhindered by formality, accelerating towards an ever greater understanding of the good life.

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Photography by Krisztian Kos

By Krisztian Kos

Golden Faces

Streetlamps rush by on the street outside and the tram windows flicker and flash. Figures, store windows and cars pass silhouettes over the golden light everywhere. Inside, the air is intoxicated by talk and jokes. I’m standing by one of the doors, leaning on a pole, listening to the voices of my friends dance around me.

“Remembrances, desires, hopes – these are the stops of tonight’s tram ride.”

We speed past countless streets and avenues and squares, while the young faces of those around me stay just as flushed, just as fresh throughout. Eyes shining, feet tapping the floor, smiles escaping mouths—they’re not aware of their youth!

Outside on the cold streets, however, the night is not as caring as it is with us. People wandering back home from their day’s work *dot deserted sidewalks*. They turn a corner—and they disappear without a trace. The constants of their life, like their couch at home, last night’s dinner, their warm beds—in short, unconscious habit—tug on them, pulling them back into the comfort of their own homes. For them, life has progressed all the way up to the present moment just to exist as a mixture of images. Yes, some of them do stand out, perhaps with a stronger taste. First dates, parties,

trips. Whatever surrounds these monuments of the past, though, remain as faint images, silent waves washing up on the shore where the grey sky looms overhead. Constantly rotating through the moments of life, without any attention to the present, the only things that one remembers after a while are what one has taken photographs of. It has become so difficult to dedicate ourselves fully to the present, even for a single moment. We find it so much easier to let ourselves be swept along by routine, as we have done for so long. And it is such loyalty to the mundane that stretches out one’s life.

But here, in our tram that’s blazing through at an ignorant speed, history, as soon as it touches the present, vanishes. Each moment is a symbol that stands for nothing but itself. *There’s nothing without—all ends are within*. Images come one after another at oblivious speeds. A brushing of hair, a wink. I need to catch them all, or I miss everything! The subtleties on the verge of experience and unconsciousness are what one treasures the most once they’re gone. All these gestures, looks and laughter are bound up in an intimacy with the present. These moments exist merely because another moment will follow them. They ask nothing of the future and neither do they lean on the past. The present, as insignificant as it may

appear, consumes experience.

A controlled chaos is released into the air and condenses on the windows of the tram. In that brief instant, a grand silence settles down in the tram—on every seat, every pole, every button. No one sees outside, no one sees inside.

“During this thin slice of time, a harmony between action and the present, between old and young, between life and mere existence, forms and persists without contradiction.”

It rises out of the present, over the crowd of memories, to bask in its moment of glory. Lingered impressions are collected into one big basket and are infatuated with the present. Now, the rest—remembrances of things past—are reduced to shadows. The essence of the immense night is captured in this single carriage.

No attempts at preserving it have ever worked. Someone adjusts their collar, and everything shatters. The windows clear up, and we are once again just seen, seen as students, seen as everyone else, seen as lives staring at the future.



Photography by Mistral Zerbi

By Mistral Zerbi

Sharks

“Philosophical thought begins in wonder and amazement...” — Aristotle, *Metaphysics*

“What does it mean to study philosophy?”

I remember how I was always fascinated by sharks whenever I went to visit the oceanographic museum as a kid. Once, I even saw them in Genova—quite hypnotising. I found them intimidating, although I was well aware that these animals aren’t as deadly and violent as they look. The scuba divers that would occasionally plunge in the aquarium looked confident as they touched the sharks, although I would never question their professionalism, I still believed I was much better off observing these animals from behind a glass. Other than making me feel safe, I imagined the glass of the aquarium to be a portal to a different dimension. On one side my world—on the other side an underwater reality where sounds, colours, tastes and sensations are metaphysically different from mine. As this shark’s realm was beyond my human understanding, it was inevitable for me to restlessly stare at the strange animal and question its behaviour; “What is going on in your mind?”

I thought these words would be heard—as if the shark was going to telepathically answer my question—but no, I was left alone with my mind and my questions.

These animals would repeat the same movements and retrace the same paths and directions, over and over again. Yes it sounds perpetual and repetitive and boring, but the first feeling that came to me was

exhaustion for the poor creatures. They would never stop. I found out later on that sharks depend on constant movement in order to breathe. They keep swimming to take the water in through their gills and filter its oxygen. In other words, they swim or they suffocate. Behind their façade of monotony is a matter of existential urgency: They were not just swimming, they were surviving. And so was I. From an external perspective, I was a kid who had nothing better to do than to stand in front of an aquarium and stare at fish. However, from my own point of view I was exploring the mind of sharks, asking questions that go beyond my capacities of a human perspective. The shark was forcing me to seek hidden meanings.

This episode of my childhood resurfaced during my second week of studying philosophy in University, and only seven years later was I able to make a conclusion from it. Once the shark comes into this world it starts swimming and it can never stop, for the sole reason that this is its only way to subsist. Similarly, humans think, and they will never stop thinking. Some jokingly argue that it appears that most humans never think, but no. All of us think. The distinction I like to point out is the one between people who decide to ignore their own thoughts and questions—the path to unawareness; and those who decide to dive into their questionings and explore further—the path to

philosophy. However, humans, as opposed to sharks, are not born to be philosophers. Philosophy is a decision. Many might believe that the choice between these two paths now seems obvious, however, those who decide to take the path of philosophy will soon realise that we never understood what its like to incessantly think. Once you listen to the armada of thoughts, it’s probably too late, you will be swimming in the aquarium of life before you realise it. People who decide to question things will eventually start looking for answers, winding up in endless whirlpool of aporia. Thinking is capable of killing more than any disease, but once you begin you will never want to stop. On the other hand, those who decide to ignore their minds will only observe you (and the world) from behind a glass. They will be limited to looking and guessing what you’re up to, without ever deeply understanding it.

Thinking is existing, just as much as swimming is living for the shark. Therefore, I decided to think and investigate, not exactly knowing where it will lead me. The only thing I am certain of is that I am not looking through the glass of the aquarium anymore. I am not swimming with sharks either, as that would still make me an outsider. In truth, I became the shark.



Philosophy in the Age of Irony

“Philosophy in the Age of Irony is the spirit of our culture—its grammar, logic, art, architecture; sense of humour, morality, self, relationships. From within and without.”

To steal a signature phrase of Fredric Jameson, irony is the cultural logic of our times. What began in art and literature as a revolution in style, a marque deposee of novelists like Nabokov, DeLillo, Pynchon, and many other frontmen of the unreliable narrative voice among other clichés of diegetic self-awareness, has become much more over the last sixty years. This experiment in style is remembered relative to preceding approaches to writing in American fiction, modern in its radicalism, postmodern in context and form. Indeed, the postmodern label persists in cultural studies and criticism for two reasons. 1) The content of a Pynchon novel is directly reflective of social conditions, political concerns, and cultural anxieties of his era (Vietnam, the arms race, mass consumption, liberation movements, etc.), thus revealing the epochal character of postmodernism which gave birth to a myriad of thought in the arts and sciences, rather than a certain political position, as it is wrongly recognised today. 2) Postmodern art was ironic in its self-awareness, but always allowed audiences to grapple with its themes and subjects; in essence, it was logically dialectical between

humanity, sincerity, compassion and irony, apathy, detachment. It asked the big questions in nuanced ways. The postmodern art of the 1960s (and '70s) encouraged us to think through a series of stylistic choices which ultimately contradicted the essentially human dilemmas it conscribed. However, this stylistic turn has been remembered where the content has been forgotten. The synthetic distance placed between audiences and creators by the ironic wall has become narrative convention (a.k.a. style has become substance): the idea is that if creators can recognise flaws (in their characters, in their writing) audiences will not have to; if the writing recognises its own problems, removing the burden of criticism from us, then it de-problematizes itself. Where this style—i.e., a narrator confessing directly, and insincerely, to readers—was formerly used to hyperbolise the flaws of characters and systems, and allow audiences the right to moral judgement, over the course of the 1980s and 1990s the culture industry (from Hollywood to HBO) appropriated this technique in audiovisual media to, mainly, comedic ends. As with any cultural schism, our taste in content shifted towards this ironic form. We liked characters addressing the fact that they were stuck in a television set or a certain narrative trope, breaking the fourth wall, and content mimicking other (past) content. From sitcoms to Marvel movies, self-awareness, irony, predominates, as it does in everyday humour and conversation. We have been watching this type of content for forty years; it is hardly surprising that our taste has shifted

in its favour. The fact that we might not even question the origins of this cultural effect on our day-to-day lives, on what we say, what we think, and how we do both, is suggestive of how ingrained this cultural logic actually is.

“Why are we more prone to laugh at people being dumb or doing something wrong (e.g. a bad movie) than the once-hilarious gags of Buster Keaton or the wit of Jane Austen? Why do we find unintentional comedy funnier? Why do we prefer laughing at to laughing with people/creators?”

Moreover, our aversion to question the cultural mode also shows how irrelevant philosophy as an academic, and personal, discipline has become under these conditions. There are legitimate economic reasons for the decline of respect for the humanities, including Thatcherite-Reaganite cuts in educational budgets, the prioritisation of profit-making degree choices (economics, business, mathematics, etc.) and thus scepticism of other subjects' use, making it not only trickier for graduates of humanity subjects to find employment but also less likely to pursue these subjects firstly, but there are cultural ones too. There is a reason someone in the 1920s

speaking in public about Kantian metaphysics would be listened to, argued with, and today we overhear this pretentious individual and instead laugh, turn their opinions into private quips, and maybe feel slightly embarrassed. Certainly, the educational shift against subjects like philosophy prevents everyday high school graduates having much to say about it, nor see any purpose to it, but this social response is a product of the content we consume and its effect on social psychology: this dichotomises intrigue, learning, personal flourishing with disinterest and a sense of superiority (manifest by ironic mockery). The mockery of so-called 'high-brow' concepts relates to Theodor Adorno's critique of the culture industry's enforcement of mindless spectatorship: over a period of time, social constructs like class and taste can be standardised through a series of media-driven simplifications we consume on a day-to-day basis. The so-called 'low-brow' entertainment we enjoy (an undemanding TV show) becomes the accepted and normative cultural standard, ultimately discouraging freethought—the ironic storytelling does the thinking about power, inequality, sexuality, morality, religion, etc., for us. In a strange set of circumstances, what was once considered 'low-brow' and vulgar has replaced the 'high' artistic product in the cultural unconscious, to the degree that cerebral and far-reaching products like a philosophical tract or a Picasso painting have become the set-ups of jokes more than objects of intrigue and (via Walter Benjamin) aura. While there is little harm in enjoying media like this occasionally—thinking is ultimately a privilege of leisure in post-industrial society—it hardly feels justified for any form of content to dominate or supersede another (as has been the case for most of recorded history). This entails deconstructing our views of art—relativising artistic value, historicizing the patterns of taste and acceptability—and the practice of philosophy itself. Philosophy is rightfully associated with wealthy, powerful men with an abundance of time on their hands: Rather than the real world, they inhabit leather armchairs with hardbacks of Plato and Aquinas to while away the hours. The oppressed people of society with scarce leisure time consume 'low-brow' content (which

ultimately ingrains ideas like class-as-nature, the virtue of poverty, the dismissal of other forms of content that require effort on the behalf of the beholder) and the powerful read philosophy and come to understand themselves and the world better for it. But, this does not have to be. The ironic distance between audiences and on-screen action shares a cultural context with declining rates of education and political organisation (e.g., the dissolution of the trade union movement in the '80s). In the 19th century, working people's interest in their own rights rose proportionally with self-education and literacy in subjects like politics, history, economics, and philosophy.

“Philosophy is not a mind exercise for the leisurely, it is something that directly informs and is informed by the material world, which can help us understand how we as individuals and groups exist in relations to others, and can even be pragmatic, actively affect experience.”

We would rather avoid involving ourselves in questions of ontology, knowledge, God, language, ethics, etc., because our culture and economy has conditioned us against this in academia and aspires to restrict it in our leisure time too.

“The way I see it, philosophy should not be a privilege, but an essential component of our wellbeing: Its sincere vitality in private and public discourse ought to be remembered despite its un-fashionability in today's cultural mode.”

Philosophy is a personal and political means which should be freely available to all. The answers to these injustices are systemic, material, and totally political.

But, here is also a part to play for advocates of philosophy like you and me, which begins with acknowledging cultural conditions and the unconscious prejudice against philosophical discourse and discipline as well as the types of people philosophers are (i.e., class, background, personality). In rejecting the ironic norm of today, it is easy for today's philosophers to betray themselves with arrogance and pretence, to adopt alternativism superficially and play into stereotypes of philosophy we seek to dissolve; philosophers are prone to traditionalism, to reject the modern simply for being modern (or postmodern), which in the worst case exhibits in rejecting the advances of modern disciplines such as neuroscience, which increasingly offers scientific explanations for our questions concerning the mind. We must follow Karl Popper and other analytic thinkers in uniting philosophy and science (two seemingly opposed methods) as a rule in our approach to culture also. We cannot reject irony forthright and cast our favour against the culture, no matter our disillusionment with it. We must move beyond an ironic style and perspective by embracing its communicative power in our postmodern society and, by doing so, deconstruct its origins and effects—the only way to discuss philosophical concepts to people who may, or may not, profit from hearing them is to approach with an air of irony (a style) but close in on substantial, unironic content, to return to the juxtaposing but revelatory form of the postmodern authors of the 1960s. We must advocate a sincere reading of art, literature, theory, philosophy, etc., with the intrinsic humanity uncovered and re-attached to the content we consume. We must advocate this as a means of self-exploration and spiritual liberation for all people, of which all people are deserving, which entails political struggle as much as personal excavation.

“Only then will philosophy survive the culture of our times.”

Nihilism & Goulash

By Sinan Karadoğan

Life as the sum of particle collisions, the collisions that happened to have just the perfect orientation and velocity to stick. Life as a journey of these coincidences, an insane probability, an unlikelyhood that just had to happen. We just navigate the lottery of life, in awe of the curiosity of it all, of the surprises that life delivers us.

I'm a Californian, and for some particular reason I ended up living in Scotland, and for some particular reason collided with Krisztian Kos, another impossible sum of the unlikely. We happened to both be guilty, hypocritical, coping nihilists who hold philosophy as the salvation from our agonising freedom. Brothers in humanity and life from the get-go, brought together by our estrangement from an absurd society, a movement without a push, a crushing momentum we helplessly obey. That is, before we found each other.

Together, we forge our own culture. But it was in vain. What we wanted was impossible. The only discovery we achieved was that our solitude is eternal.

We are all doomed to existential solitude—the only escape is through writing, where only vestiges of the *pour-soi*, a man at his truest, can ever be seen. But it does barely any good to me.

“Solitude. Solitary pints. Confessions of a nihilist will never be heard — only read.”

It's painful to admit that my truest self cannot be shared, will only ever be a mere impression, a fossil at a museum, dead, collecting dust like some old fable from a distant land, estranged from its author.

Alone in nihilism, and yet the struggle with meaninglessness is the strongest definition of a human, the

single most unifying feature of all humans, stranger to stranger.

This brings me to a fine summer evening in Budapest of all places. In our heels and our calves and our thighs and our spines and our hips we felt the wear of our long day of awe and exploration of the city. From the whining of our stomachs, from its little temper tantrum, we realized that we forgot lunch, and our minds hungered for a good meal.

Jégkert it was; Krisz recommended it from prior experience. And it would be Jégkert that witnessed our discovery, encouraged it, and promoted such a painful truth paradoxically to its aims as a restaurant. Paradox will be a theme, although it generally is throughout life. Here is also where the second part of the name is introduced: Goulash. Ah where do I start, it was euphoric; a startling demonstration of paprika, stewed all

day, forged from a patience, respect, and piety only born out of years of peasant struggle for a shred of relief and good in life. A heavy stew of potatoes, carrots, and meat cubes brightened by paprika and a pepper mash called *erös pista* served on the side. A brilliant dish of humble origins, a testament to humanity and our intuition to enjoy life even at the most exploited classes of society. A marvelous education which changed my life, but not nearly as much as the ensuing conversation. In retrospect, I don't know who suffered more, me, or the goulash?

Because we die it is in vain to live. Krisz and I, now with our goulash, stared into the abyss of uncertainty, of unknown, of a destructive decay before which all the mosques, cathedrals, and temples of the world fall, leaving behind a world in which nothing stands, let alone me and my curious mind. The goulash distracts us but somehow Krisz and I continue to stare at each other, with our own histories of existential angst, with our silent confession of nihilism; that indeed the world is worthless and indeed nothing makes sense, that neither my happiness nor my sadness matters.

But we do nothing about it. We're in denial. Yet without even a whisper of our nihilist hearts we still admit that our true selves hide behind our eyes. We know this intuitively, an unspoken awareness. We ask why we hide, why can't we unite at last, relieve ourselves of our solitude at last, embrace our agonising freedom together? We just sit there like scared fools, and we know it! But the fact just remains there laughing at us, and we can't do anything about it but take the humiliation, acknowledge our hypocrisy, and just sink into our profound idiocy, our helplessness.

We are rejectors of fact, embracers of ignorance. We bend the world to our will, truth is what comforts us, not what reflects what truly is. We live under a dome of ignorance with neatly painted stars and horizons and goals and ends and desires surrounding us, comforting us, and if we were to

go on like this we would die with a smile on our faces—life completed to perfection.

“But we've had our conversations with Death, we couldn't even have that satisfaction of philosophical suicide.”

Our time alone with Death and the abyss has brutally destroyed such naïve happiness. Death, the lack of a God, the lack of nobility, robs us of any sense of meaning, direction, value, desire, or passion. But here we are in agreement, and yet we refused to unchain ourselves from the masks life forces us to wear, the masks of sociability and hedonism, masks of a clown given our unspoken confession of nihilism—because to do so would end life. We sat there wallowing in our absurdity.

We needed an escape. We asked what is a true unification of souls, what is the bane of solitude? Love, we thought. Love, where two become one, naked in every dimension. But that's an intimacy beyond our particle collision. We are not ready for such vulnerability, to cry in front of each other, to spiral out into a pit of despair, like some helpless infant.

We fell into a dialogue of futile confessions. “The eradication of distraction is our imperative, so as to liberate ourselves from ignorance.” “But love, the sublime, beauty, is even that a false distraction? The sublime, a force of its own, a beauty rooted in human nature?” No, it, too, is unclear, a sensation, a momentary distraction—sublimity and love don't change nihilism.

“As every party comes to an end, when the night dims out into that dreadful silence, we always return to the same existential crises.”

Our faith in beauty is akin to a man thrashing against the

inevitable. Fine, we live in no man's land, a desolate land of decay, from which total freedom springs. That is the courage, the nobility of a philosopher, his admittance of ignorance, the embracement of the broken world, the embodiment of the abyss, to let its primal eye bore into his heart, lodge itself deep an eternal doubt, an infinite echo of shattered glass, to forever live in between two worlds: That of our intuitions of happiness, and that of the awareness of our insignificance—a brutal tug-of-war that tears a man apart, dooms him to constant turmoil, to suffer when he's at peace, and to be at peace only when he suffers. The only thing we will ever know is this struggle, this war, this impossible contradiction, our eternal foolishness, this absurdity.

We had a silence at last, and we remembered our neglected goulash, cold now. Poor thing, what an injustice. That goulash, what was once an epitome of the celebration of life, the end of our travels, what we called happiness now lies as a testament of our hypocrisy, a pill we have to swallow, spoonful after spoonful, an act of shame and guilt we endure as each bite passes. We eat in silence, in shame, and this delicious goulash enters us, and we embrace our curse of solitude, our world of absurdity. Finishing that goulash was an admittance of our uselessness, of our insignificance as thinkers, suffering for no end, suffering for the sake of suffering. What else did you expect from a dinner between two nihilists?

I confess an uncertainty in all this nihilism as I confess mortality. However, with what I know of what I want in life, I know my desires are illegitimate, and I'm pretty sure I know what beauty is. There is a chance, though, that beauty is still a red rose of life I have not seen, and perhaps beauty is something that is beyond a reason to desire. But that is something absolutely unfathomable for now.

The End (A saying that's horrible)

Erratum on Sea

There is a girl who calls herself a Woman standing on the pier as a colourless wave caves upon sedimentary rock, foams freely, and leaves behind an elegy to the salt and the haar on its delicate face.

She is standing taller than she thinks as she sands herself with thought, discerns her spectral past from her becoming, battling the sightless nemeses of nostalgia and melancholy by dissecting the seeming notions of the girl she is for some memory of the Woman she has always wanted to be.

She has forsaken anger, remorse, and envy. This has made her lonely, though she may keep the company of ghosts and oneiric things among the bleach-white waves, their smells and sounds as they lay bare the rock: Again. Again. Again.

The girl wears her hair in the same fraught coronal and patterns as her mother, and her mother's mother, who were the ones that taught her to sight read sheets and sing their songs, but also to long as silently and needlessly as she must. There is a feeling smile on her face with which she sees, while the unchained strands of her mother's hair waltz in shapes and rays, and beat down upon her eyes. Her mouth is pink and retinal, uptaking the rawness of the world, with creases around the edges from laughter she cannot recall.

She has redressed herself with ocean pearls over her wrists and neck; the softest cashmere coat she has seen so many beautiful women wear. On her feet are stilettos, more comfortable and broken than the blades of springtime grass from formative memories in the amber countryside which warmed the skin on her sophomore toes as if assuring ecstasy to fragile, unexpected ears, lying so freely and confidently.

The girl's distaste for the cold, the bitterness of being coerced, betrayed, subjected, has brought her in search of the picturesque: the pier's edge which looks indifferently out upon a harsh, saline world she does not know, nor presumes to understand. There is a veil of wind which scars her face like fissured glass between the girl and the blue material encasing the rock she uses for footing. The rock is peeling away with each wave. No matter the shadows of human words and fractals of human bodies that pass her by, she bears witness to sublimity alone, to its haunting ceremony and arrhythmic rage; two tepid drops of seasalt breeze across the girl's face with a featherweight touch, sketching upon her grandmother's cheekbones like mulberry silk, and without once disrupting her perfect poise. She will be a Woman once upon a time.

To understand, this Woman has learned to use her head: to think and acknowledge, to cast herself within the time of her life, to audience her events with the wisdom and passions of her age. Her autumn-red irises are what shade and sadden the smells of the sea, of the softening earth.

Never again will she mistake kindness for naivety, passion for glee, agony for anger, or face the despair of existing another day in the dead, unsensual world. She sees learnedly. She is self-aware. Hands closed upon the fabric of her cheek; legs erect, limp yet statuesque, ready to curtsy, bow, and fall flat; her mother's hair is an unfathomable power that will describe her. To the Woman, her body is a totality of parts, but she does not see that she is tall and requisite: the site of unknown ecstasy. She does not know that we see her so.

Unknown,
August 2023, Norfolk

Reflection on Thomas Nagel's *The Absurd*

By Georgy Kamensky

The feeling of absurdity permeated my mundane activities more than I would ever want in the last couple of years. My memory brings me back to the West Sands beach, where I sat by the bonfire at 2 AM, in complete awe of the cosmos' splendour, its unfathomability to my narrow human mind and its total disregard toward my human destiny. In that context, reading "The Absurd" by Thomas Nagel provided some satisfying answers to specific questions. In this reflection, I will attempt to recap and critically reflect on Nagel's text.

Nagel begins his analysis by arguing that despite many people believing their lives to be absurd, they cannot provide decent justification for these beliefs. Many believe that their present activities are useless, saying, for example, that

a) today's actions won't matter in a million years. Nagel responds:

b) if that is the case, one should not be worried because what will be in a million years does not matter today either.

Suppose I don't care about getting 0 for this reflection in X time; I won't care about writing it today. So, when I get 0 in X time, I will remain nonchalant towards the grade and the process of writing it X time ago. Nagel then proceeds:

c) even if our actions today were going to matter in a million years, this wouldn't be enough to make them non-absurd today because their "mattering" in a million years would depend on their "mattering" today.

This point by Nagel appears more entangled. It's either Nagel reiterates points a)b) in an opposite direction which is redundant because Nagel showed that a) and b) have a biconditional relation. Or it's an attempt to express something not entirely clear. If a new point is being made, it's not sound to say that things in X time were going to matter without first saying a word about the character of today's "mattering". If the future grade for the reflection matters to me, I don't understand why writing it today is an absurd action because it indeed matters to me. I gather Nagel aims to establish a totality: either every action must matter or none.

Nagel continues his analysis, stating that utterances about the absurdity of life are often made in the context of relative comparisons of human life duration with the totality of the cosmos. Yet, it cannot be why life appears absurd to us. If humans could live forever, it wouldn't render their lives more meaningful than "short" lives have. The opposite extreme, "since we will all die, not a single action is justified", is also rejected. Nagel responds that such views force us into an impasse, for we will never find a reason within life to satisfy us. So, we either have to embark on an infinite regress of justification, or accept that, for example, taking aspirin to end a headache can be a self-justifying action. Nagel believes the arguments above are unsuccessful attempts to convey something essentially correct. Nagel then offers an explanation I find fascinating!

The feeling of absurdity strives from the inner conflict between our mental ability to abstract ourselves from the seriousness we lead our lives with, to the point from which they appear preposterous, and our simultaneous inability to shift entirely into that transcendental space.

"Many people aim to find meaning by associating themselves with something more significant, e.g. serving society, God or the state, believing that these more significant notions are not absurd."

However, Nagel argues there ought to be reasons for believing something bigger matters, returning one to the previously discussed infinite regress of justification. One could say that if we find our lives absurd and cannot find any final meaning, we shouldn't be concerned with looking for it at all because no answer would matter. Nagel believes this to be a misunderstanding of the problem. The mental ability to abstract from life is not supposed to provide us with reasons that matter but rather show that our life actions can only be justified by themselves. Nagel compares the inner conflict causing the feeling of absurdity to epistemological scepticism. The latter instils doubt of knowledge of the most "evident" things around us. The former makes us behold our lives yet routinely lead them.

Both do not preclude us from living as usual but leave an unpleasant aftertaste; they make us feel like part of a "ritual of an alien religion". Nagel leaves one with a choice for numbing the absurdity feeling: either total immersion into the routine; or renouncement of the earthly life. Nagel explains that both fail to bring alleviation and then posits a radical solution—suicide; however, not advising to commit it before considering whether the absence of sense is that much of a problem once again

Nagel's analysis of the origins of absurdity feeling has shifted my philosophical interest from finding the ultimate meaning towards understanding why one is so preoccupied with having a life that matters; this question was unfortunately left unexplored by Nagel. Such reasons appear deeply psychological. I'm afraid that even if Nagel gave me a clear explanation of what actions matter, the feeling of absurdity would only be aggravated by the feeling that the world is way too simple—I would rather live performing actions that "do not matter". It seems that neither living with absurdity nor finding what matters can bring peace of mind. Nagel views absurdity as a manifestation of how unique the ability of human minds to abstract away is. In sharing Nagel's awe, I want to conclude with Kant's citation:

"The field of philosophy, in this sense, may be reduced to the following question:

What is Man?"

Agora Theory



The end *telos* of life is to live in the greatest possible conformity to the labour and ends that truly have meaning for us and embody what we live for. That is the only time conformity should be held in a good light—as a conformity towards the individual and its own understandings. For a life to be free, it naturally must be created from within, as opposed to being created by external sources. The self must be curated by an individuality that has matured and understood its own nature, otherwise, we will be forced to come to the harsh realisation, probably amid an alienating routine, that our footsteps are not ours. But such crude awakenings allow for an urgency to introspect oneself (*self-discover*) and then act towards a new meaningful direction (*self-become*).

The importance of the internal dialogue between self-discovery and self-becoming is the centre of the Agora Theory, because it is the only means to a meaningful life. But what does it mean to self-discover? Self-discovery begins with an initiative to ask or investigate their internal composition, passions, ideals, the life and world they are heading onto, and ultimately the person they would ideally be.

“At first, all of our ideals are inherited externally, and to avoid becoming a product of external forces, we ought to discover or define the ideals and values that motivate us, which will guide our decision-making in the path of self-becoming.”

Meaningful self-becoming is when we transform our beings via action on the basis of such ideals. Inspired by Spinoza, we imagine human beings to exist on a spectrum between external definitions and their internal definitions, and although to fully define oneself would be a divine creation of something from nothing, one can say that we are less free

without engaging in this dialogue with ourselves.

It has been long known that the internal dialogue is useful for a meaningful life, however, many threats within adolescence and contemporary culture detrimentally stagnate the veracity of the internal dialogue, namely when youthful fragility collides with dogma into conformity. When we speak for ourselves, we risk standing alone in contradiction towards pillars of authority, whether that be your peers, religious and educational institutions, and your own family. Obviously, it is easier to stand safely amongst the commonly accepted and assumed during young adulthood where the feeling of doubt is deeply rooted in our everyday life.

“There is a risk that one falls too deep into conformity, letting it define how one thinks, and consequently preventing one from imagining beyond. Therefore, we must be prepared to plunge into solitude as if we were becoming aliens in our own homes, because perhaps only then can we truly belong to ourselves.”

Such solitude is only temporary as we discover others who exist similarly and recreate our homes and families with such people.

Ultimately, it is impossible for us to define a universal destination because our thoughts of an ideal life grow along the accumulation of experience, and assuming that there is an infinite amount of human experience, humans tragically lack the omniscience required to make such normative judgements. However, we believe there is an ideal journey we can take. Consider the Proustian idea of *real journey* where as one travels, “the traveller’s world does not change in its actual scenery, but rather in the traveller’s vision”—Real journey asserts that a real voyage of discovery

doesn’t involve searching for new landscapes but rather acquiring new perspectives. Even if we were to visit Mars or Venus with the same senses, we would perceive them in a manner similar to how we see things on Earth. This is the extent of our visual capability. However, if we could learn to see as others do, meaning to behold the universe through the eyes of another, of a hundred others, we would uncover the multitude of universes that each of them perceives and inhabits. This, then, is the true journey to aspire to, one that can only be accomplished through shared experiences, dialogue, and empathy. Therefore the Agora is our personal attempt to accelerate our ‘progression’ by providing a forum to share our perspectives, and thus see the same world, or even just this town and its three streets, through ten thousand minds and twenty thousand eyes.

“Too often we hold the internal dialogue as a private and solitary exploration, asphyxiated as we articulate our understanding of the good life alone.”

Without a forum to discuss these ideas, the internal dialogue is often left to the sidelines of life. By organising weekly philosophical discussions, the Agora hopes to combine our internal dialogues into a thriving exchange of ideas, accelerating the evolution of our thoughts, providing new perspectives which might uncover something about ourselves. The Agora paper and society is a dialogue itself too, existing only as the Agora Theory as of September 7th, 2023, continuously evolving as more people contribute to the conversation.

By Sinan Karadoğan

Abysmal Love

For just a particular moment in this planet’s solar orbit, its northern hemisphere begins transitioning to an age of decay, coldness, and darkness, and likewise all the plants and animals prepare for a season of hibernation, and for a moment life will reach its most inactive moment, where Death strikes particularly deep, and is exceptionally rampant. Yet somehow humans are captivated by the bright colours of Death the trees of October are so well known for.

It was a crisp, clear-skied, Wednesday evening when for some reason October’s bellowing winds curiously brought dear old Ivan Ivanov to a nearby ruined cathedral’s cemetery. He strolled through the endless rows of tombstones, tightly wrapped up in a scarf and trench coat, flanked on both sides by what was once a glorious attempt to reach God, but now only a few flying buttresses, a solitary tower, and around eighteen column stumps. Always foundations last the longest; The ideas that never took flight, the conceptions with no forms, always they last the longest because they stood for the immaterial, and the material always crumbles.

“And so would I one day,” thought Ivan Ivanov as he stood directly under where the cathedral’s mighty spire would have stood— Completely gone now, nothing but a blue sky left in its place.

But these were thoughts for another time, when that would be Ivan never thought, but certainly not now. The cathedral ruins were on a grassy bluff that overlooked the Russian coast of the Gulf of Finland whose sea-born winds struck him hard, threatening to crush Ivan as it did to two marauding dictators in 1812 and 1943. The Russian cold is no joke. Nonetheless, the view was heartwarming: Looking down the bluff one could see above in the distant horizon the water, sprinkled with white tufts in the wind, underneath of which laid these solitary gravestones, covered in moss, swarmed by green weeds wet from last night’s rain, all of which dwarfed by a colossal sky dotted

by wandering floating mountains, following the winds just as Ivan had done, drifting.

Ivan glided to *his* destination, a final gravestone, a particularly weathered one. It took a moment for Ivan to realise where he was, when suddenly the winds stopped, and the sky froze still, watching him as his eyes widened in horror as he read

“Вечная память Ивану Иванову. Сын Виктора и Варвары Ивановых”

“Everlasting memory to Ivan Ivanov. Son of Viktor and Varvara Ivanov.”

Beside him laid his sisters Лариса and София and his little brother Игорь. Ivan is dead, and so was everyone he had ever loved, here, soaked rain after rain, food for worms, home of moss and bird shits, crumbling unrecognisably, forgotten and destitute. So much for ‘eternal memory,’ the skull and bones on the ancient tombstone barely remain visible.

“No how could it be! How could it be?” Ivan cried, “No, how am I dead, and my family, why did they have to die too?” “Was I ever alive? Did we ever exist?”

“The winds picked up and Ivan stared up into the black cosmos, asphyxiating his tear-stained cheeks as infinity divides him, rendering him to zero. A darkness descended into Ivan’s heart as he begins to embody the nothingness that surrounds him in a cemetary—Our lives are stolen from us by Death without any justification, without reason, as if we were a joke.”

“Oh the foolishness,” Ivan thought, “of ever thinking we had dignity, a notion humiliated time after time by our final definition.”

Death is a brutal submission before the universe, a confession of our helplessness, an inevitable transformation into the winds.

Death must chuckle, find it funny, that as we on our deathbeds, that is if we’re lucky enough to be in one, churn with angst and dread from the looming doom we always saw coming in the distant horizon, but would never confront in its totality. Now, however, there is no escape, the gravestones force Ivan to finally confront those delayed thoughts, to see the inevitable end as the inevitable present, to realise that our lives are an effort in vain, like thrashing against the imminent, an attempt to stop the tides from rising, or the sun from setting. Little do we know that we *already are* extinguished like the dead that lay all around Ivan—He’s no different, and neither is his family—an irrelevant stick in the mud, where the winds still carry on, the waves keep crashing, and the rain keeps falling all the same, as though nothing changed.

Ivan, scanning through his life, through all his years of desires, of friends, of drinking, of partying, of lovemaking, of beautiful intimate relationships, saw all of it die before him, utterly shattered, eroded by the salty silence of universe. His romantic love was but an intuition of ignorance, an experience blind from the abyss that surrounds us all, from the destructive decay in which nothing stands, and therefore illegitimate—a happiness cannot be born from ignorance.

Harrowed, Ivan broke down, his heavy heart pulling him to the ground where he belongs, hands and knees in the cold mud, staring inches away from his gravestone, whether it is there or not, it doesn’t matter—it will be there inevitably.

Now, suddenly, a cloud unveils a radiating sunset over his frost-bitten face, a sweetness, at last, to brighten this dark world, this ash-ridden existence. Glory in a goddess land, there, on the horizon, a cosmic sublimity from which dreams are born, dreams which Ivan cannot help but float away into, up into the heavens into a perfect warmth. Here music is concieved, a whole orchestra, heaving out heavy winds of longing and an inner turmoil, a howl from the languageless sea within, a voice that peaks at the glimpse of light, that calls for hope, surging Ivan higher and higher,

views of the heavens striking his heart as he heads closer and closer to the sun, and just then, enveloped by the glory of the sun, love is born, an electrifying, vein-swelling beauty that grants true immortality. The cannon fire, the artillery shell, the violins strike their strings, the trumpets sound in line with a hundred bellowing choir chests calling out for their motherland.

But in the midst of his flight the sun finally set, eternally extinguished, and the voices ceased, the violins fell silent, the cannon only a pile of scrap, leaving only a few solitary oboes and clarinets to accompany Ivan as he fell, falling from the heavens. Ivan swipes at the air, desperate to cling onto anything, to let him stay amongst true beauty. But it was all air, hot fucking air, and Ivan fell back into the darkness, his eyes opening at last.

“Every day, the dreams end, and reality consumes us.”

The dreams are just that: Dreams. Ivan fell from the disintegration of these dreams, from the impossibility of salvation from the abyss. These dreams are not a meaning to life, but rather a distraction from the lack of one. Distractions, that glory, love, as Ivan knew it, sublimity, all of it, what he saw in that sunset was only temporary, like as one claims to fly when really they are falling.

Ivan paced across the cemetery, thinking of a way out towards a life that is not ignorant of its ash consitution, but still worth living for. Wind violently whistled past the tombstones, sounding thousands of wailing voices which rose and circled Ivan like sharks. Death was calling, slowly striking his bell, staring at him with a luring finger.

The night finally set, the last desperate rays of the sun swallowed by the Earth, a total darkness seeped into every crevice. A destructive decay descended upon Ivan, destroying whatever it touches; the

tower fell, sounding its bell one last time; the buttresses breaking, crumbling into an infinite regress until all material fades away leaving behind an ethereal realm of nothingness—an unarticulated space of pure essence, a mere existence and nothing more. Ivan, beyond flesh and bone in the midst of the abyss, saw but one man, scythe in hand, book in the other. Death invited Ivan for a walk to discuss, and offered himself for questioning for as long as Ivan’s hourglass did not finish.

An ethereal Ivan begs, “Death, is it true? Am I dead? Were those dreams, those glimpses of pure beauty, all those beauties waiting to be written, the art to be made, the struggles to conquer, that serene smile I could’ve had when I greet my bitter departure to you, were they all false, are they truly just mere illusions?”

“This world around you, this nothingness is Death. You only see it because you are facing death as an inevitable present, not that you are actually dead. You are still at the cathedral. But truly, what difference does it make? I will come to kill you no matter what, you will be put into the ground, and you will be forgotten, not even as a scrap of scripture floating across the universe. You might as well be dead already, as well as your family, as well as anything that strove for glory in the material world. The visions of beauty you pursue, though beautiful, do not change the tides, do not stop the sun from setting, do not alter what you will inevitably crumble to, and do not change the nothingness that constitutes you. Your dreams, though truly beautiful, are nothing,” uttered Death.

“But can’t I make my own meaning? Live on my own terms of value, bolstered by a subjective empowerment?” inquired a now desperate Ivan Ivanov.

“Of course you can, but not without it being clearly a coping lie you make to keep on living. Fine, live under this dome of ignorance, comforted by the cosmos *you choose to see*, hateful of the deceitful ‘lies’ I have shown you. But one day your dome will come

crashing in—I will come for you, and I will kill you. Then you will have to realise the emptiness of your life, the emptiness of the stories you told yourself, will regret your foolishness. You will have to see the true colour of the world around you. Even more, you will lie on your deathbed left wondering where all the time went, churning with regret because you spent your life celebrating a glory which never existed—All because you chose ignorance over truth.

You will have to face me one day, and your ‘subjective truths’ are nothing to me. So the choice is yours whether to lead a life of pain and truth, or one of blissful ignorance and ultimate regret. You suffer either way, but with truth every pain and joy will be legitimate. I would always shed a legitimate tear over an illegitimate smile.”

“No, I refuse this! It can’t be! You evil force of nature, fuck you, I am the master of truth, I can decide what is and what isn’t, *you* are nothing. Ha!”

“I have shown you your end, illustrated who you really are, proven that whereas you thought you were a sandcastle before the tides come, that really you never stood, that you never existed, that the march of decay does not spare you. You, let alone that mighty cathedral, will never achieve the glory you expected your life to culminate in, even if all you wanted

was the pathetic glory of even the slightest bit of significance. The mere glimpse of the moon and the cosmos should have crushed your illusions, and I laugh at how shocked you are. Fucking humans.”

Ivan couldn’t speak—Deep down he new that man is nothing in respect to the universe, and any meaning we make is inevitably meaningless.

After a bit they left each other, and Ivan was alone in the abyss, struggling to swallow the truth. Ivan Ivanov took a good look around him and saw that Death is everything, that while the human is temporary, the *inhuman* is immutable and omnipresent. Ivan recognised the inhuman of his own being, and yes his heart did beat, yes Ivan could love, but that love would end like everything else.

Eventually, Ivan accepted what Death uttered to him, accepted that his material existence was worthless, that such dreams belonged to a zoo, a spectacle of human nature. What nailed the final bolt in his coffin was a confession of human flaw: Even if poor old Ivan Ivanov did come across objective meaning, a truth that supposedly gives value to life and gives him a purpose, Ivan could never comprehend it nor any objective truth for that matter for the simple reason that Ivan is not a god—His perspective cannot encompass all that is, and he’ll never know all that is not, forbidding all humankind from the certainty necessary for knowledge. Life, the philosopher’s quest, is like being an explorer of the infinite—Ivan will never fully understand the world around him, because he will never be able to decipher the infinite. Scripted into life, Ivan realised, is a weightlessness, since

value must always being a construct, life as nothing but an intuition we have faith in.

“How can a heart made of ash, love ash?” asked Ivan Ivanov.

Ivan threw in the towel. Hopeless, he no longer thrashed against the inevitable, no longer expected any meaning from his life. He merely exists, waiting to die.

But he still has a life to live, all this time in his hands, and he still remembers those dreams he had, which now are but a torture, a harsh contrast to this unholy world. Damn is the heart stubborn, damn does it feel great to be in love and in that love exist immortal for even only a split second, to soar without thinking of the fall, to bask in the sunset as if it would simply stay there.

“Maybe all these beauties exist precisely because they are always destroyed; beauty contingent on its inevitable extinction, beautiful because of the emptiness within all.”

Still, it dared Ivan to dream once more of another life, of perhaps an abysmal love, a love that is in full awareness of its death, an appropriate coexistence of the two philosophies without the hypocrisy and ignorance, but rather the simultaneous flourishing of both like coffee and chocolate; a wonderful mixture of two flavours without diluting each other, embracing their complementary differences—The synthesis of a sublime melancholy. To have a lover in the abyss, a love that stares into the grim world with you, hand in hand, carrying on cosy in such bittersweetness. Ivan may have seen the last sunset of his life, doomed to his realm of darkness, but this abysmal melancholy allows him to love it nonetheless, to love despite the decay. Abysmal love is to go for a kiss with Death even if it makes it your last.

Could it be? Did Ivan have a beauty that isn’t born from the dome of ignorance, a beauty that isn’t a coping lie, a beauty that exists directly as a product of Death? Abysmal love, born from

the stubborn heart which beats for nothing, a heart that moves without a push. Life as lived only in the trenches, yes, knee deep in mud and blood, in the middle of no man’s land, lived at the moment when the rain stops and the skies unveil an impossible warmth into the coldest of hearts.

Love as the bane of solitude, a co-explorer of the infinite; two torn souls completed. Abysmal love; lovers prepared to meet their end, to confront their fate and return to nothingness—To that abyss which made their love and beauty possible. Yes, those dreams and those lofty cathedrals are still nothing, but we can carry on with our newfound melancholy, that equilibrium of beauty and sadness. No, it isn’t a euphoric conclusion, but at least it’s a world dominated by one point, a stability from which Ivan could finally stand and breathe, could finally have a reason to live.

The all-encompassing abyss that consumed Ivan waned, developed a few wrinkles, a few curious textures and gestures and inklings, shapes forming until suddenly Ivan was back at the cathedral ruins, swarmed again by gravestones, consumed again by those cold sea-born winds, the tower reconstructed, the buttresses holding what walls that still stood, and the stumps, well, still being stumps. Back into life, Ivan observed the weathered stones again, felt the wet grass, relished the sensation of existing at all. Ivan gasped as if he had been slightly asphyxiated for an eternity. The night which consumed Ivan was transitioning into dawn, the sun breaking against the horizon, emitting just the slightest tears of light. Ivan wasn’t sure he’d ever see the light of day again, and his eyes basked in the dawn. Ivan, as a new, but utterly weightless man, took his first ever step forward, his first step of truth. Ivan stood as a master of Death and Life, and Ivan marched out of the cathedral following the echo of his beating heart. A new day had been born.

The End (Another comforting lie)

Visions of Time

I

As I part from my childhood so serene
And step into a novel night unknown,
My quiet being is muffled by a fog,
Which lies on dampened streets its waiting.

Its veil is cast on spires and towers,
Which stood their tallest in the light of day.
But darkness brought its piles and piles of sky
And buried all the town in blindness.

On corners, streetlamps stutter their pale light
-A cold and clenching breath of hope.
And passing one, I pass them all; for all
Their warmth and words are swallowed by the fog.

It slowly seeps through hard, stone walls,
Through the covered worlds of libraries.
Its somber silence fills the empty air
And drains me of Time; Time no longer mine.

II

A girl's fresh laughter embraces the street,
And brings, to me, a pair of crimson lips.
Jumping voices follow her light feet
To then gift me precious little skits.

The climbing chatter and its warm humming,
The smiling voices and flying words
Heave me into their night that's coming
And landing quick, like sparrow birds.

Young voices and glasses clinking
Shine from every garden drenched in light,
Shine from every bar with windows blinking
-Shine forth life with all their might.

These children of the night dance and dance,
Rejuvenating a soul which sees less and less,
Spinning the heart into a dream-like trance
Which once again beats beneath my breast.

III

But, in the end, even Youth is silenced:
A lone nocturne chimes in the hollow street,
And the last of laughs die in my cold hands
-The fog has returned with its dampened sheets.

I am, again, alone with mute visions,
With fragments of a childhood so serene,
That remain in the breathing white silence,
Forever fugitive as Time itself.

29 October 2022

We Invite You to Bring Annotations to Agora Discussions

This paper is an extension of the Agora Society, which is a public forum for conversations essential to the journey of self-becoming, akin to many of the themes illustrated in these pages. **We meet every week** to think about what it takes to make a meaningful life, to live deliberately, and the ways in which culture stands as an obstacle. As it is difficult to open deep topics with new people, we encourage interested readers to make annotations to the pieces that speak to them, and to use the paper itself to enquire about the various themes its authors have already intimately addressed in our Agora meetings. Reach out to **agora.standrews@gmail.com** for information about meetings and joining the society!

Would You Like to Be in the Next Agora Publication?

Essential to our mission as a paper is our accessibility to the poetically and philosophically stoked souls of St Andrews! Should you want to participate in our project and share a piece with St Andrews, anonymously if desired, anyone may submit a work for review, whether that be a poem, an aphorism, a short story, an essay, a meandering thought, or even a bit of original sheet music—We welcome it all. **Simply scan the QR code or send the suggestion to agora.standrews@gmail.com.** This paper hopes to belong to the public just as much as to the crew which formed it!



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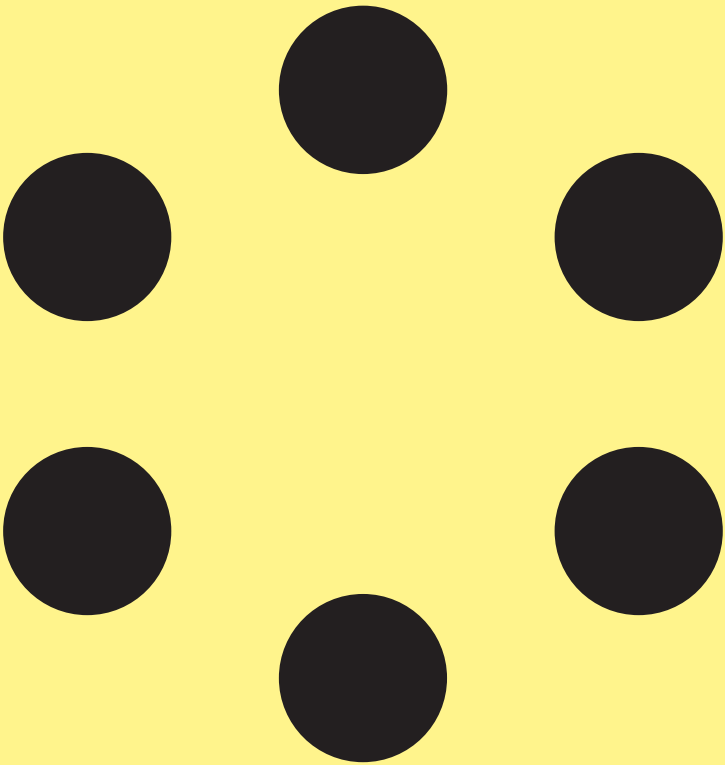
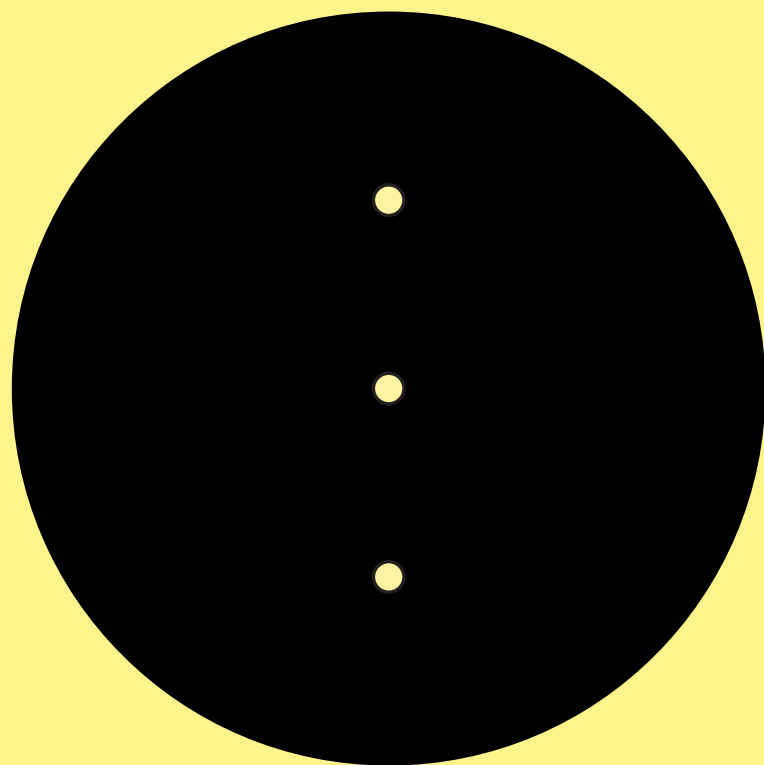
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