

The London Consortium
Static. Issue 03 – Choice and Suffering

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Happiness, Death and the Meaning of Life

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Despite his own protestations to the contrary, Jacques Derrida is more often than not considered to be a theorist of language and textuality, a post-metaphysical thinker resistant to making claims regarding life. If Derrida has made a mark in recent thought this has been most notably in the area of philosophy and literature. Apart from Richard Rorty's possibly unwelcome remark that Derrida reduces philosophy to a "kind of writing" (95), more recent and more sympathetic criticism has nevertheless mobilised Derrida in relation to questions of the interpretation of art (Christophe Menke), or has regarded Derrida as an ethicist whose attention to the conditions of language and textuality would preclude any knowledge of a moral law and justice but must thereby intensify the burden of the decision (Simon Critchley). Derrida would then be a valuable resource to those who wish to read philosophy less as a consideration of truth in general and more as a conversation or exploration regarding the ways in which we make sense of the world. Far from philosophy being outside, above and beyond life, one would need to read philosophy within life, asking about the form of life this or that philosophy enables. If this were so then we could set Derrida alongside, if not within, the neo-Aristotelian turn to literature and life.¹ Martha Nussbaum, perhaps more than any other philosopher writing today has done much to return philosophy and literature *to life*. Both explicitly and implicitly, Nussbaum resists an approach to philosophy that is purely theoretical or cognitive, and she does this by turning to literature as a vehicle of reflection and sympathy, arguing that through literature one expands one's sense of life.

In this essay I will argue that Nussbaum's affirmation of literature and narrative as crucial to the function of a sympathetic, flourishing and ethical life is typical of western philosophy's normative definition of happiness, where happiness has always been aligned with a specific image of autopoietic life and meaning. That is, human life makes sense of itself, gives form to itself and engages in a style of praxis whereby its ends are internal to itself. From this image of life one thereby passes to an ethics. There ought to be no *techné* that is disengaged from life, and life's proper *techné* – the art of life – is nothing other than making meaning of, or narrating of, one's life. Literature would, therefore, not be one praxis among others that is added on to life. Rather, life in all its forms is self-creation, while human life renders this self-creation explicit to itself through narrative; human life is that one praxis that discloses the logic of praxis in general.

Derrida, by contrast, offers a genuine alternative to the image of self-forming life, and he does this through his textualism. There are, however, two crucial features of Derrida's concept of text. First, considered rigorously, textuality is not a feature of language or writing; it characterises life as such. Second, textuality installs death in life. Life is not a trajectory of striving towards presentation, fulfilment and realisation. On the contrary, in order for life to be – for one to think that life *is* – there must already have been a non-living, counter-actualising potentiality. If this is so, then we will need to read literature not as a form of life-realisation but as a process of mourning

or working through. Literature is not a form of therapy or sympathy, a way of returning life to itself. Literature is, *perhaps*, the point at which a life that has always masked and dissimulated itself as necessarily self-organising works against itself. That is to say, there would be one sense in which literature is death: not the opposite or simple other of life, but that which, from within “life itself,” allows for the thought *of life*, and in so doing breaks with life.

Before considering the specific implications of Derrida’s concept of textuality for a reading of literature (and its concomitant metaphysics of life), I will outline the normative image of life and narration that has underpinned the motif of happiness and meaning in western ethics.

Is a Happy Life a Meaningful Life?

Is a happy life a meaningful life? How can *meaning* be related to a life? These two questions are distinct but related. First, a happy life and a meaningful life: are they the same? One answer, often suggested in both philosophy and popular culture, contrasts happiness with meaning. Happiness is unreflective, innocent, joyous, and unquestioning; paradise is lost once we judge life (Nietzsche 63), assess its worth (MacIntyre 70), or strive to *know* its ground.² Such an opposition between happiness and meaning might not be negative. We might argue that a meaningful life is better than a happy life: a life that follows some narrative sequence is more worthy, if not more satisfying and pleasurable, than a life of fortuitous and contingent felicity.³ When sense and meaning are placed above happiness this is usually done to argue for a happiness beyond pleasure, an actively sought and earned happiness, a happiness that comes from one’s life being one’s own. The happiness of immediacy and pleasure is readily sacrificed for the happiness one may or may not achieve in a chosen life.⁴ Another answer ties happiness inextricably to meaning: a happy life is a meaningful life; there is *no* happiness without sense.

If this is so, or if we are to make any way with this argument, we need to ask just what *meaning* might be in relation to a life. Words are meaningful as part of a language; works of art are meaningful as part of a culture or tradition; even natural objects might be meaningful if we read or interpret them as signs or (in C.S. Peirce’s terminology) indexes of causes and events. In all these cases something is meaningful because it is relational, located in a system that gives a word, art object or event some function or regularity in relation to a whole, which itself functions in relation to intentional or purposeful lives. (It would make no sense to ask the meaning of a word or text outside use.) Whatever our theory of meaning, meaning would seem to be located *within life* rather than attributable *to life*. In this paper I want to argue both that life has frequently been presented as meaningful and that our very explanation of what meaning is has no less frequently relied upon a specific image of life. Life is defined as self-realisation, striving and formation; while meaning is production, relation, expansion, enhancement

and fruition. Life is understood through the very same concepts – of striving, form, realisation, intention and fulfilment – that we use to describe meaning and interpretation.

In the conclusion of this paper I will be turning to pragmatism which, like a series of other late nineteenth-century movements in philosophy (including phenomenology and Bergsonism) explained a certain loss of life and happiness through the very possibility of meaning. Meaning is, according to such dialectical approaches, that which allows consciousness to make its way in the world, to act, to master life or to constitute some totality or horizon within which it can recognise and realise itself. But it is this very potential or possibility that also allows meaning to enslave life; the concepts we formed actively come to appear as set over and against life, and we then vainly search for a truth or sense outside the act of language. Pragmatism, like phenomenology and Bergsonism, therefore recalls us to the *act* of language and does this by seeing language as the passage from proper potential to actuality, as a way in which we realise ourselves and our world. What such modern approaches share with Aristotelian accounts is a concept of natural normativity. Language *ought* to be seen as a manifestation and actualisation of life, not some ghostly spectre against which life will always be found wanting. A happy life is therefore a life that gives meaning to itself, rather than a life that is haunted or alienated by concepts whose activity or production *from life* has been forgotten. The connection between meaning and life, evidenced most fully in pragmatism, does however have a long philosophical tradition, a tradition that Derrida has criticised for its privileging of realised and fulfilled potential – an act that is not separated from itself – over unactualised potential, or forces and events that are not grounded in a will to action or realisation. Accordingly, when Derrida criticises speech-act theory he is explicit that he is in agreement with its assumptions about the *possibility* of meaning, but wants to ask why the successful, felicitous or “happy” act is considered as normative at the cost of the failed speech act, an “act” that nevertheless bears a force. I will conclude by looking at the force, allure or sense of an unrealised act in Henry James’ *The Turn of the Screw*, where the presentation of the meaning of life can be contrasted with the full and actualising sense of William James’ pragmatism.

A Happy Life is a Meaningful Life Because Life is Meaningful

According to Aristotle, happiness is specifically human and is tied to the essential nature of the human soul. Unlike merely nutritive or perceptive souls, which strive to maintain themselves without a sense of their own end, human beings have a form, which is realised in the explicit or deliberative choice of their form. A happy life does not respond in an ad hoc or immediate way to pleasures; a happy life supplants the nutritive and perceptive strivings with a striving for completeness, self-sufficiency, self-realisation and form (*NE* 1097b8-15). (So form can be taken in two senses here: broadly, with each being realising its form in its proper mode of life, and specifically, in that human realisation is an awareness and striving for

form as wholeness, unity and coherence.) Human happiness is the realisation of our form as rational beings (*NE* 1280a32-4), with this realisation being a choice and awareness of our forming power (*NE* 1098a7-8). Happiness is, therefore, neither an activity we undertake for some other end (*NE* 1140A25-8), for human souls *are* their own end (*NE* 1098A16-17); all we do is directed to realising who we are, and who we are is given in our power to choose and deliberate – to have a sense of ourselves as forms. Nor is happiness for Aristotle something that occurs within life. Happiness is an *energeia* in two senses. It is the actualisation or fulfilment of what we ought to be – our rational and deliberative potential. Second, it is a complete motion; when we are happy we are not on our way to being fully and completely happy. Unlike building or creating an external object, which may be complete when it reaches its end, happiness is complete at each moment of its realisation. Exercising our capacity for self-realisation is a complete fulfilment of our potential without remainder. We might achieve more wealth, more honour, more friendships – all those things that are a part of happiness – but this does not increase the amount of happiness, for we are only happy when we realise ourselves fully, and so external means and ends are subordinate to the project of selfhood within which they are located. The actualisation of our potential to be happy is therefore the actualisation of a potential to realise a state (*NE* 1048b6-9). Other potentials are motions of change – becoming hot or cold, hungry or satiated, tired or energised – so that potentiality involves accidental differences to a substance (*NE* 1045b36-1046a2). *Proper* potentials, such as the potential to be happy, are realised in stability, *in a substance becoming what it is* (*NE* 1049a13-18). Happiness is realised when our virtuous lives take on a form or unity that would not be threatened or altered by contingent desires or external pleasures; and form in this sense is *self*-realisation, not form imposed upon matter, but matter as potentiality becoming what it ought to be (*De Anima* 412a19-22). Happiness is also essentially tied to activity, for only when we are active is change chosen and mastered rather than received. A happy soul does not resist or sacrifice pleasure, for she is simply not attracted to anything that would disrupt or hamper her chosen, ordered, unified and deliberative self.

Aristotle's theory of human happiness is part of, and historically foundational for, a more general account of both life and meaning. If we want to know what something is – its essence or real definition – we need to ask about its function or what it strives to do. A natural organism's form, or what it really is, is given in its capacity for self-realisation (Foot 116). This is not simply a teleological approach, where we imagine that each being has an end or proper function. It gives emphasis and priority to what something is properly (its form) over what it may or may not become (its accidental potentials). Such form is intrinsic, for it is not arrived at by happenstance but allows us to understand or define just what such a being *is*. Living beings realise themselves, and self-realisation is a good thing (*NE* 1168a5-8).

We can tie this good of life to meaning in two ways. First, in the specifically human case, we can see how a narrative life is also a meaningful

and good life. Humans have the power of choice and reflection. They can view their lives as a whole. They can maximise their realisation of choice by choosing ends, such as intellectual development, which increase self-sufficiency. One chooses that which increases the power of choice. Reflective development allows one to be aware of oneself as a deliberative being and thereby increases the success of deliberation. We choose those lives most conducive to choice: the life of freedom, independence, stability and virtue (where we are active rather than passive in relation to our pleasures). Perhaps the main legacy of Aristotelian ethics today is this emphasis on a narrative life. We cannot know or intuit the good as some external object; the good is produced through specific realisations of a good life. Further, this very activity of deciding the good is intrinsic to, if not exhaustive of, the good.⁵ A happy life is good for its own sake because it is life exerted to its full power, a life that decides and orders itself. Attributing meaning or sense to one's life – forming this life as my own – is *not a way of achieving happiness*. Self-formation is happiness; we are happy realising what we can do. There is a passage from “I can” to “I ought.”

In addition to the specifically human capacity for rational, self-conscious and political self-formation, we can tie the good life to meaning in a more general sense. Evil in its ontological sense is not my disapproval of this or that pernicious action; evil is the negation of life. *Good life* is a tautology. Life, realisation, growth, power, actualised potential and formation *are* good; not ends we choose so much as parts of the same complex (which includes choice), which *is* end-seeking. Evil remains within itself or turns back upon itself, is nothing other than itself, and has no life of realisation. The good, therefore, *is* meaning: a coming to presence or realisation that goes beyond itself to understand, reflect and represent itself. A life of choice that is also aware of itself as having the power to choose is opposed to an evil that is not so much commanded by an *other* end, as it is devoid of all end, law, form or sense (Kant, *Religion* 46-7). Evil is the absence of sense, the failure of a potential to realise its immanent end, a tendency to remain without relation, in itself, devoid of life. Not only has meaning often been defined in relation to the self-fulfilling life, our very notion of life is tied to the realisation or expression of meaning, while evil, by contrast, is the failure of expression.

Life as Expressing Life

I have already touched upon the ways in which Aristotle's concept of life as proper actualisation of what a being ought to be (its proximate potential) is tied to meaning. The definition of a being, or what it is, is what it ought to be and what it strives to be (*De Anima* 412b10). In the human case, what we ought to be is intrinsically tied to what we choose to be. A happy life is a chosen life; happiness is an act determining itself and internal to itself, neither given from without, nor directed to an end beyond itself.

Of all the challenges to the happiness tradition, to the idea that we realise the good by fulfilling what we essentially are, the most formidable comes from Kant. Aristotle bases his ideal of virtuous self-realisation on the life of the human soul: our rational nature and the best realisation of that nature in the politically active, deliberative and communicative self (*Ethics* 1178a2-8). The main problem with this argument of *the good* from Kant's point of view is just its claim to *know life* (Kant, *Practical Reason* 27: 1.1.1). It is true that the perceived world is one of striving towards ends, and that we also perceive ourselves as in harmony with nature's lawful directedness, and it is also true that we must presuppose that other wills also congruently perceive the same harmony (44: 1.1.1). However, to move from this necessary perception of striving and directedness to what we properly are, and then to conclude that our happiness lies in answering the definition of ourselves as rational, is to mistake the very nature of reason. For Kant, reason is not one power of realisation among others, not a capacity or potential within the self that may or may not be actualised, for there can only be a world of connectedness and meaning *because* of reason's supersensible power to give the world sense. Reason cannot be our meaning or essence, for we only have essence – what we take something to be through time – because of reason. The human soul cannot be an object of knowledge with a proper form (in Aristotle's sense) because the world we know is always given from the point of view of a soul that is the spontaneous origin of our synthesised, ordered and relational world, a soul that can never be known in itself before those relations (51: 1.1.1). We are always within relationality, never capable of grasping the non-relation in its pure potential. The soul is inferred after the effect, after its activities of world-forming.

However, once we realise this, we are granted a thoroughly new and non-relational potential: the power to think of the will as such, a pure desire or striving that has no end, no already given or proper actualisation. A potential to realise and synthesise – a potential that has no already determined object or end towards which that realisation is directed – is therefore nothing other than existence without essence. Thus Kant does not define the will by essence – its definition or proper predicates – but by existence or its power to act; he distinguishes strictly between *what* something is and *that* something is, with the will being existence of being-in-act rather than being in essence. The will does not have an end that it ought to realise; it is realisation as such, the potential *to act*, without a determination of what must be acted (57: 1.1.2). The will can only have itself as its “end,” for any external end would diminish the pure potential to realisation, for realisation would be invaded, corrupted or impeded by what already is. Kant raises the goodness of the pure and self-realising act beyond nature and beyond any object. I must only will what can always be willed. If I will an object that is *sometimes* desirable, then I place an object above the will; I act in this case, exceptionally or only insofar as I claim to know a particular state of affairs and what is best for now, and not from the will's potential to act as such. A moral action, one which I *can* do but may have no

motivation to do, evidences the power of the will to act without any object other than itself: how sublime is the thought of a humanity that acts only to realise itself as human, as liberated from any object within the world: “The idea of personality awakens respect; it places before our eyes the sublimity of our own nature (in its [higher] vocation) while it shows us at the same time the unsuitability of our own conduct to it, thus striking down our self-conceit” (91: 3.1).

Morality proper is the potential to act as such: the very thought of the idea that one might will without personal or worldly incentive, simply because one can will, is best evidenced in an action above all pathology, interest, motivation or particularity. A will of pure duty has no end other than itself; it is referred to nothing and can be valued by nothing other than its own realisation: “It is the effect of a respect for something entirely different from life, in comparison and contrast to which life and its enjoyment have absolutely no worth” (92: 1.1.3). We are elevated by the very idea of duty, of the thought of an action as pure act, not the action of *me* as a specific self or *for* some specific end, but impersonally insofar as I am human, acting from the point of view of any will whatever: “the soul believes itself to be elevated in proportion as it sees the holy law as elevated over it and its frail nature” (81: 1.1.3). A purely willing humanity wills only itself, is never subject to external motivation, and thus produces from itself its own power and possibility. If I *can* think of a will liberated from any end, then desire is taken beyond this given world to think a supersensible world, a world of pure duty. Nothing could be more ennobling nor – after the effect of acting without motivation – more motivating.

In choosing to do what any will whatever would choose to do, regardless of any specific idea of what counts as a good life, the will realises itself to its utmost power. Evil, accordingly and by contrast, does not just choose an end that works against the life or interests of others; it negates the life-surpassing power of the will as end-determining rather than end-oriented. If will is the power to act, decide, form and think *in the absence of any interest or external object*, then a good will wills nothing other than will; an evil will is caught, blinded, impeded and negated by an object, by what is not properly itself. Good for Kant is no longer *life* enhancing itself – grounded on the specific potential of souls such that each soul has its own proper potential – so much as will willing itself, such that will is potentiality in general: the power *to*, liberated from any *power of*.

On the one hand, then, Kant intensifies Aristotle’s commitment to the *prima facie* good of actualisation and affirms an axiology whereby evil is refusal of potentiality; evil is inertia, non-relationality, senselessness, and negation of the synthesising power that allows being to be. On the other hand, Kant introduces a peculiarly modern feature that locates the good of life beyond life in the peculiar possibility of meaning. Meaning is no longer, as it was for Aristotle, a question of asking what a being properly is – its essence – and then defining the good as the maximisation or bringing into

existence of this essential definition. Meaning for Kant is not life *in itself*, but the power of life in the form of the subject, to form itself freely and realise its own potential with relation only to itself. To a certain extent, then, and in contrast with Aristotle, the will is non-relational potentiality, a power to exist or actualise – to bring into being – unimpeded by any definition of *what* must come to be. This idea of a non-relational potentiality – of that which exists without an essence and that realises itself by going beyond itself – is, according to Martin Heidegger, the most significant question in Kant's thought (Heidegger, *Kant*), a question that Kant himself foreclosed but which Heidegger will actualise in his affirmation of an existence without essence, and in his criticism of Nietzsche as the metaphysician who by contrast reduced the truth of the world to will to power, thereby precluding the realisation of the unworldly and uncanny potential of *Dasein* as its own truth, with no end other than itself (Heidegger, *Nietzsche*).

Meaning as Normatively Grounded on Life

There are far too many theories of meaning and far too many controversies concerning the very concept of meaning for me to establish any rigorous single connection between meaning and the normative concept of life. However, we can make some headway by looking at what a theory of meaning tries to do. This might help us to understand why someone like Derrida has granted so much importance to the potential failure of meaning and why he sees this potential failure as both essential and ethically significant. (I would therefore challenge a certain perception of contemporary post-structuralism as a theory that concerns itself with the conditions of meaning and which has abandoned any question of life and certainly of the good life. On the contrary, I would argue that both Derrida's criticisms of the understanding of potential and relations in traditional philosophy are underpinned by what he takes to be a more rigorous concept of life, one in which death, and not just the idea of death, is essential. Derrida does not offer a different theory of meaning so much as diagnose the investment in meaning, or why our explanations privilege the realisation of sense rather than its deferral. So before I go on to look at a concept of life that would not be imagined through an image of meaning I want to describe the ways in which life and meaning have been mutually defined such that a good life, a flourishing life, or a happy life is defined through an essence of life. This is so even in an anti-foundational approach, such as Christine Korsgaard's, where my commitment to living and acting well is grounded on what I take myself to be; were I to act other than normatively, or without the sense of my humanity, I would not be the person I am.

More generally, the connection between life, meaning, and happiness is achieved via the definition of what we can properly say exists or has being. That is, from grounding assumptions or principles about being, we move here to proper being. So that something *properly is* if it realises its potential, and this potential is not the potential for some thing to have more or less of this or that quality (the potential for accidental change), but the

“proximate potential” for something to be what it is, to realise the power that would define its specific being.⁶ It is this aspect of Aristotelian philosophy in particular which intertwines the possibility of definition with a being’s proper mode, and allows us to understand the force of recent post-structuralist criticisms of the relations between sense, being and life.

At first glance it might seem odd to approach the question of happiness through the work of Derrida, for there is very little mention of the term, and a great deal of attention paid to the *conditions for referring to life* as opposed to life itself. It might appear even more perverse to argue that we can best understand the difference and force of Derrida’s work if we focus on happiness, living well, joy, flourishing, expansion, and self-realisation. However, I want to argue that the conceptual bridge from a traditional metaphysics of life to the post-structuralist present lies in the concept of potentiality; the historical bridge is Aristotle’s distinction between potentiality (as potential for change) and potentiality proper (the potentiality for being).

Before looking back again at Aristotle we might ask why the metaphysical question of potentiality is still important today. One way in which the concept has been given relevance is in the thought that follows Heidegger and his insistence that inauthenticity, or refusing one’s potential to think and act, is neither accidental, nor external, nor necessarily avoidable. Why do bodies act against their nature? Why do bodies *not* realise their interest or potential? On the one hand, this question would seem to require establishing a proper potentiality – that which we should be, our true and active self-realisation, which would not be haunted by ideology, illusion or false consciousness. On the other hand, we would also have to ask, as Heidegger does: what is it about our proper potential being that allows for non-realisation? Why is *not* achieving our potential possible for humanity? One of Heidegger’s great achievements, and one that is crucial for Derrida’s deconstruction, is to have insisted that a possibility (such as the fall into inauthenticity) cannot be external and accidental but must tell us something about what something *is*. If it is possible for us to behave irrationally then this shows that reason is able *not* to realise its potential; if it is possible for human life to become inauthentic, no longer aware of its active freedom and history, then this tells us that authenticity has to be wrested away from potential and essential banality (Heidegger, *Being*). If, as Derrida argues, it is possible that communication and meaning might not be full and transparent, might be disengaged from the security of context, then this discloses what is essential and necessary to meaning (its necessary and essential difference from any self-present, already- fulfilled, and secure sense) (*Limited* 10). Indeed, far from Derrida being a promulgator of a play of differences or a rampant relativist, he actually insists on the essential and necessary nature of what so many philosophers dismiss as accidental: if meaning does not fulfil itself, if the proper is not actualised, this discloses something essential about potentiality and *life*. In its establishment of the essential as that which *is* – which can be granted sense through time, and

that can always be brought to presence – philosophy represses or dismisses as accidental all those potentials that are not determined by their relation to actuality: “As soon as a possibility is essential and necessary, *qua* possibility (and even if it is the possibility of what is named, *negatively*, absence, “infelicity,” parasitism, the non-serious, non-”standard,” fictional, citational, ironical, etc.) it can no longer either, either de facto or de jure, be bracketed, excluded, shunted aside, even temporarily, on allegedly methodological grounds” (*Limited* 48).

Before the distinction between the essential and the accidental, the actual and the merely potential, the active and the passive, the in itself and the relational, Derrida posits the “perhaps” (*Politics* 26): a force whose actualisation is open, whose effects and sense one can neither determine in advance, nor calculate on the basis of an already actualised term, a relationality that demands a greater responsibility precisely because of its anarchic potential or “untamed genesis” (*Writing* 157). There are two aspects to this problem in Derrida’s work. The first is critical, insisting that one cannot rigorously and responsibly exclude the possibility of failure or non-realisation from what something is. The second, which I want to explore here, is *why*, or what motivation there might be for this exclusion. In his reading of Edmund Husserl, Derrida suggests that the very practice of meaning must assume presence, the fulfilment of sense and a single horizon of truth that may be actualised for myself and others. There is an intentionality in experience, a striving for presence, which is also betrayed by experience’s own conditions; for the very anticipation of presence tears the present from itself and haunts life with a presence to come, that which can never be realised (*Limited* 56 and *Writing* 168).

There is for Derrida an irreducible death in life, a separation, non-relationality, or *mal d’archive* that does not realise itself. For Derrida, both the Heideggerian and Bergsonian critiques of a vulgar temporality – the reduction of flowing life to one of its actualised moments, or the lamentable forgetting of the open potentiality from which any constituted present is derived – must always appeal to a *proper* life that gives itself to sense, that departs from itself in order to be recovered. This is why Derrida argues that as soon as we establish the *meaning* of time, as soon as we commit ourselves to the *sense* of what something is, we have already departed from life itself. We have already thought of what *is* above and beyond its absolute singularity; we have already regarded the singular as *properly* or *actually* something that has a sense or reason beyond its pure punctuality. Any meaning or definition of life installs death in life, subjecting life to a point, trace or mark that is not life itself but is thought as some “in itself,” some true or proper being from which life might be thought.

Far from lamenting this spectrality of life, Derrida argues that this death is a gift: the capacity of life to be haunted by the thought of life. This is not happiness in the sense of life realising itself, but a thought of a felicity beyond happiness – to think what might become, beyond any already

determined propriety. Accordingly, what Derrida criticises in Heidegger (and to a certain extent in Aristotle) is the privileging of *energeia* over *dynamis*. For whenever time or life is posited as that which realises itself or gives itself in actuality, one thereby negates those potentials that fail to *act* – that is, potentials that tremor or reverberate without realisation.⁷

Now it is this emphasis on pure *energeia*, an act that is not submitted to the contingency of mere or accidental potentiality, that dominates western concepts of the political and humanity (*Writing* 166). Potentiality is considered only as a passage to the realisation and fulfilment of actuality, to the achievement of what something properly is.

Speech as Act and Act as Actualisation

The most famous critical articulation of this decision regarding proper life as that which fulfils and realises itself without remainder occurs in Derrida's criticism of Austin, Searle and performativity. When Austin defined language as performative he opened the way for a radical theory of force that would not be submitted to sense, would not be submitted to a realisation of presence. A speech-act does not convey, express or communicate an already present sense; rather, a speech-act is a move or *force* that is best understood for what it does, the relations it inscribes. And, as Derrida notes, to think of a norm or law for any speech act – its proper trajectory and force – we have already opened the individual act to a potential it cannot master (*Limited* 9). Any act that can be recognised and have force as a recognisable move in a context has already been marked by a potential to be repeated, an anticipation of an occurrence which is not already present, which is in excess of its motivating force. In speech-act theory we move away from an inner intention (that is then expressed in speech in order to be grasped in the same form by its recipient) to a recognition that meaning is effected through relation, and that sense is opened by more than the originating move. For any move in a context requires an already existing system which is both altered and repeated in each move of the system. To understand the sense of "I now pronounce you man and wife," or "Would you like fries with your order?" we need to look at context, where context is just the sum of the possible acts that count or would be recognised as a meaningful response. For Derrida this recognition of something like *force* in meaning constitutes the radical dimension of speech-act theory that will then be foreclosed with the distinction between proper and improper, or meaningful and failed or infelicitous speech acts. For how do we decide that a force of speech has failed? Only by granting it a proper trajectory, one that is in line with its originating act or supposedly proper context (*Limited* 15). By contrast, Derrida wants to consider the force of the supposedly infelicitous speech-act, an act which has force that cannot be determined either by its origin (intention) or its destination (its supposed limiting context).

Where Derrida criticises Austin, and Searle after him, is precisely regarding the decision of what counts as a proper act. The exemplary speech-act, one that helps us define or grasp what speech *is*, is the full and successful realisation of the act. It realises its force and has the effect that its agent intended; it actualises the will that subtends the speech as action (*Limited* 19). One excludes infelicitous or unhappy speech acts – those that take the form of quotation and that are empty, or devoid of an effect that is the realisation of the act. Searle cites the example of the customer who asks for a hamburger and who is then offered a concrete-coated or fossilised burger. The request, “I’d like a burger please,” does *not* have to state that it must be less than 100 years old or not coated in concrete. To inhabit a world of speech one presupposes these unspoken but nevertheless presupposed limits; there are many conditions that limit the extension of a concept that we do not have to state and these conditions are the horizon of life, action and expectation within which language works. A concept has fuzzy boundaries, according to Searle, because in addition to what it can do formally in a language there are also expectations of language users, such that it would be perverse or against the very point of language to insist on possible uses that work against life (Searle 1977).

Now, against this, Derrida comes back with a strict lawfulness of potentiality. Whereas Searle insists that we can, more or less, know the limits of what a concept might mean and that it would be contrary, fruitless, anti-social, and philosophically naive to use words according to how they *might* be repeated, Derrida insists that it is because of the very possibility of concepts that they harbour the potential to sustain a force beyond their original act (*Limited* 49). Someone who uses the word “justice” in a way that is *possible* but not one “we” would recognise is, according to Searle, just not playing the rules of the game, and is flouting the very context *that we are*. They need to go back and read their Wittgenstein and realise that meaning beyond use is a metaphysical bug. By taking language out of action *we work against life*; we hinder action; we think of a concept as having a force beyond its context; we fall into the ghostly simulacra of metaphysics.

Why does Derrida so perversely concentrate on the unsuccessful, infelicitous or unhappy act? Partly because he is rigorously considering how language is possible, and one can only speak, act or take part in a context if one’s act is already not fully one’s own but potentially quotable, alienable and repeatable beyond its effective potential. More generally, Derrida articulates the ethical significance of improper potentiality. Despite all the emphasis on language, Derrida is committed to an interrogation of life.⁸ The idea of a speech-act that realises itself and that is properly considered in terms of its effective force is still tied to a metaphysics of life that has already privileged expansion, relation, act and actualisation over the singular (*Limited* 18-9).

Improper Potentiality

It is the thought of the singular and the resistance to life as purposive sense that both unites and divides a number of current theoretical tendencies and provides a way of thinking beyond aesthetic form as the promise of happiness. Both the Aristotelian notion that a flourishing life realises its potential and gives itself form, and the Kantian understanding of aesthetic form as reflective of the subject's unifying power, attribute a forming power to humanity that is best realised in an *art of realisation*. Such an art of realisation must also present itself *as art*, for in *not* being life itself, in adding itself to life, art displays life's power to represent, double and become more than itself. Art gives, discloses, enables, expands or reflects our meaning-disclosive potential; what art must *not* do, if it is to be art, is hinder life. An artwork must be communicative in the most general sense; an artwork that withheld itself, that was neither provocative nor evocative but redundant or deprived of sense, that refused sense, would be a performative contradiction – something like an object placed on view that declared “do not view me” or a poem that read, “do not make sense of me.”

But it is just *this* work of art that Derrida asks us to consider. The refusal to admit an ineradicable death in life – that which cannot be overcome or returned to the force of existence – must always regard the punctual, disengaged and singular as completing itself in life. Now there are two ways we can approach this: the first, following Derrida, would be to valorise a form of modernism – say, that of Mallarmé – which presented the text not as an actualisation of life, but as itself an opening of relations, distances or events irreducible to life (*Dissemination*). The second, which I wish to pursue here, is to look at literature less as a liberation from sense than as the diagnosis of the allure of sense.

Conclusion

Derrida's insistence that we think beyond meaning – beyond relations that can be brought to sense or presence – presents itself as a resistance to a philosophical tendency, a reaction to 2,000 years of stultifying metaphysics that has tied textuality or relationality to *what is*. But is the striving for meaning, however illusory or at odds with life before sense, however reactionary, a *philosophical* tendency? Derrida often suggests that the tendency to metaphysics is necessary and essential to experience, and that any attempt to think the *meaning* of life cannot avoid being at odds with life. Life itself harbours its own death, its potential to transgress itself. But Derrida also argues for certain literary experiences that exceed synthesis and move beyond ontology or the positing of that which “*is*,” to an untamed singularity or genesis, a potential *not* acting towards a realisation beyond itself which would also be its fulfilment. What I want to argue here is that well before Derrida seized upon modernism as an event that could not be reduced to the striving for sense, literature had already exposed the enigma of sense: that we live life with a sense of sense, but that this sense has an

ultimately fantasmatic or aesthetic core, the image of a self-realising, expansive and innocent totality *that is also an unthought, dead or immobile* decision within life.

Consider both the style and semantic tendency of Henry James' fiction. I would argue that James presents a striving for the sense of life and exposes the aesthetics of this imaginary. Thematically, James' fictions frequently devolve upon an enigmatic, unified, enclosed, beautiful and dazzling character, a character whose world is the object of fascination for those around her. The beauty at the heart of the story lies in the fantasy of a self-fulfilling presence, a character whose capacity to perceive is continually expansive, enhancing and open to a life that offers itself as a halo of sense. One falls in love, not with the other, but with the other's power to perceive: what makes the central female character alluring in *Portrait of a Lady* is her openness to life, her capacity for wonder, such that the world is not something set over against oneself to be mastered, but a medium through which one enhances one's capacity to perceive further. James' characters are almost exemplary of pragmatist "life;" one is not a point of knowledge or thought that must then grasp the world; one is nothing other than an ongoing, developing and life-furthering perception, not yet subjected to the doubt or loss of faith that one's world might not be *the world*. James' plots, however, have more to do with other characters' fascination, with narratives circling around a presumed wonder, an imagined life that is as yet uncorrupted by exchange, calculation or submission to the vagrancy of linguistic negotiation. James is already aware that the self of perceptual life-enhancement is a fantasy and a lure.

The most famous example of this is *The Turn of the Screw* where an original image of childhood moral beauty – an image that is suggestive of a sense that can never be fulfilled, that is not yet exposed to the adult world of manipulation and speculation – itself provokes a series of speculations and surmises. Indeed, the surmise or supposition – the provocation that there is "a" sense without any possibility of such a sense being fleshed out – is crucial to the classic James sentence. Frequently the object of a sentence is a hidden or absent sense, with phrases multiplying the levels of speculation. Consider the following, narrated by the governess who not only perceives the enclosed innocence of the children but must also interpret and negotiate those characters who surround the innocents: "Mrs Grose's large face showed me, at this, for the first time, the far-away faint glimmer of a consciousness more acute: I somehow made out in it the delayed dawn of an idea I myself had not given her and that was as yet quite obscure to me. It comes back to me that I thought instantly of this as something I could get from her; and I felt it to be connected with the desire she presently showed to know more" (ch. 5). The governess perceives the other's vague sense, a sense that she senses she ought to realise but which is not yet fully realised by the other. At the level of style, James' sentences expose an essential lack of fulfilment or non-actualisation both at the heart of speech and of experience. A character expresses a sign that, at the level of syntax, is partial

and enigmatic. This is then “read” by another character *as partial*, such that the next phrase builds on a lacuna; and these exchanges of sense are narrated from the point of view of a character who must present their significance: what does all this suggestion *mean*?

We could say that this is the opposite of what David Lewis refers to as keeping score in conversation, where if participants make a supposition that goes unchallenged, it is therefore present as presupposed. For Lewis, if I say, “How many hours of teaching have you managed to reduce your workload to?” I assume that teaching is a burden, and if a straight answer to this question is offered – “I’m down to eight hours a week this year” – then the sense remains present, even if never explicitly stated. By contrast, Jamesian conversation presupposes non-sense, or absence of sense, where a lacuna or enigma is first stated, only to remain both unfulfilled *and* to create further signifiers that remain as seemingly potential but devoid of actualisation.

This ties in with a thematic or semantic component, where James – especially in *The Turn of the Screw* – places an unstated fantasy at the heart of the story: the image of the unique wholeness of the child. The governess’s speculation and horror, the wild supposition and imputation of motives to other ghostly figures all centre on an avoidance of the possibility that the child might – arbitrarily and due to no external cause – have acted against life and goodness. The inadmissible evil is the child’s linguistic or symbolic complexity, the idea that the child might – as James’ sentences do – play with the power of suggestion, might not only harbour an inscrutable sense but also be capable of initiating intrigue. What horrifies the governess is not that the children are victims of an impropriety, but that such an impropriety or corruption does not fall upon them by chance, that the child chooses – for no reason and against his integral innocence – the negation of life: “What was so unnatural for the particular boy I was concerned with was this sudden revelation of a consciousness and a plan” (ch. 15). Against the possibility of an arbitrary evil that can never be stated, the story multiplies suppositions and interpretations.

What James’ story diagnoses is a certain style of life and happiness. There is an original investment in a concept of integral and uncorrupted life – the child whose world must be devoid of any reaction against life, whose innocence is most evidenced in the child’s freedom from interpretation. While the governess excels in interpretation the child remains not fully aware; his world is “all in all,” not yet corrupted by the vagaries of semantic distance. The “revolution” occurs when the governess realises that, far from the child being an enclosed world whose beauty is merely an image, Miles becomes aware of his position within the whole story of speculation, intrigue and manipulation. The “catastrophe” or curtain on the “dreadful drama” occurs when Miles asks whether he will return to school (in so doing he shows that he is aware, not only of how the governess’s wild speculations

will be perceived by her employer, but also that he is fully cognisant and skilled in all the manipulations of class and propriety):

Transcribed here the speech sounds harmless enough, particularly as uttered in the sweet, high, casual pipe with which, at all interlocutors, but above all at his eternal governess, he threw off intonations as if he were tossing roses. There was something in them that always made one 'catch', and I caught at any rate now so effectually that I stopped short as if one of the trees of the park had fallen across the road. There was something new on the spot between us, and he was perfectly aware I recognised it, though to enable me to do so he had no need to look a whit less candid and charming than usual. I could feel in him how he already, from my at first finding nothing to reply, perceived the advantage he had gained. (ch. 14)

This moment of horror occurs when the governess suspects that Miles has been *guilty of surmise*, speculating upon what she might think. Innocence has been represented as a mode of meaning, where the child is not submitted to suspicion, or to a world that is not apparent, full and self-evident. Evil is *suggestion*: not this or that meaning, but a signifier without sense, that allows the mind to think beyond life, the proper and recognition. The adult world is one of unfulfilled sense, where one is exposed to acts of speech that *do not act*, but remain as potentials whose force one cannot determine.

By presenting this fantasy of enclosed moral beauty as a certain style blind to its repression of the possibility of a potential that is not always already oriented to life, fulfilment and realisation, James offers a critique of the pragmatism that still dominates our present. To see all speech as action, as an expression of and striving for life – to see speech as act, force and intention – one must repress the inertia in speech, the essential possibility of that which remains without relation. Seeing language and literature as performative – as directed towards action, recognition, context, and liberated from the ghost of some extra-contextual sense – remains tied to a metaphysics of life that is only accidentally corrupted by the partial, the fragmentary, the inert, and the singular. By contrast, a truly literary theory needs to confront the absence of sense around which the necessary fantasy of meaning circles without exit.

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Endnotes

¹ In addition to Rorty's quirky inclusion of Derrida within a post-metaphysical pragmatist tradition one might also think of Jürgen Habermas' less friendly inclusion of Derrida within a style of thought that has reduced all thought and life to literature and literary mediation.

² William James' pragmatism diagnoses the loss of happiness in modernity as a consequence of life's primary status as action; as soon as we become disengaged from life, the over-developed intellect deflects life from its immanent power. According to James, "We live in a world of realities that can be infinitely useful or infinitely harmful. Ideas that tell us which of them to expect count as true ideas in all this primary sphere of verification, and the pursuit of such ideas is a primary human duty. The possession of truth, so far from being here an end in itself, is only a preliminary means towards other vital satisfactions" (James, *Pragmatism* 78).

³ This idea is expressed most forcefully in A.J. Ayer's late essay on the meaning of life. For Ayer it is intensity or striving, not mere pleasure, which leads to what we would think of as a meaningful life. Accordingly, he argues that the lives of those who lived through World War II were *good* lives (Ayer 1990, 193).

⁴ Mill's utilitarianism distinguishes between an actively sought happiness and a contingently received pleasure, and correctly notes that this conception marks the traditional philosophy of happiness: "If by happiness be meant a continuity of highly pleasurable excitement, it is evident enough that this is impossible. A state of exalted pleasure lasts only moments, or in some cases, and with some intermissions, hours or days, and is the occasional brilliant flash of enjoyment, not its permanent and steady flame. Of this the philosophers who have taught that happiness is the end of life were as fully aware as those who taunt them. The happiness which they meant was not a life of rapture; but moments of such, in an existence made up of few and transitory pains, many and various pleasures, with a decided predominance of the active over the passive, and

having as the foundation of the whole, not to expect more from life than it is capable of bestowing” (Mill 284).

⁵ “In what does the unity of an individual life consist? The answer is that its unity is the unity of a narrative embodied in a single life. To ask ‘What is the good for me?’ is to ask how best I might live out that unity and bring it to completion. To ask ‘What is the good for man?’ is to ask what all answers to the former question must have in common. But now it is important to emphasize that it is the systematic asking of these two questions and the attempt to answer them in deed as well as in word which provide the moral life with its unity. The unity of a human life is the unity of a narrative quest” (MacIntyre 218-9).

⁶ On the distinction between these two kinds of potential, see Agamben, who distinguishes between potential for change (accidental potentials) and the potential for something to be, or not be, what it properly is (179).

⁷ So, when Heidegger argues that we can fall into inauthenticity or forget our potential only because we also have the potential *to act*, and that this activation must be wrested from a tendency to inertia, Derrida intensifies the positivity of inertia and death. Death is not that limit towards which my life must be oriented such that it is definable *as mine*; death or the thought of my non-being, absence or *impotentiality* opens thought to the responsibility of what is not its own.

⁸ This would be why Derrida takes the concept of autoimmunity from biology – which he does *not* take to be coterminous with life – to characterise life in general. That is, just as those features that are confined traditionally to “writing” characterise experience in general, such that experience can no longer be referred to in its usual sense of consciousness and presence (*Limited* 10), so the structure of autoimmunity that marks biology destroys the enclosure of biology within itself and thereby demands a more rigorous concept of life that also includes death.