

THE LIMITS OF REASON

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Website: <https://ucm.es/thelimitsofreason>

Email: thelimitsofreason@ucm.es

Organizers: Gavin Rae and Cillian Ó Fathaigh

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ABSTRACTS (alphabetical order)

The Use of Limits: The Submission of Reason According to Pascal

Thomas Bellon (Aix-Marseille University, France)

The originality of Pascal's notion of "submission" lies in the extension of its political and moral meaning to the epistemological domain of the modalities of application of rational power. Submission is characterized by the admission of reason to external principles or beyond its capacity to grasp. In other words, submission in Pascal's work, before being submission to authority, is presented as submission of reason to principles. Thus understood, the notion of submission acquires a positive connotation: submission is always the fact of reason itself and not of an authority which enslave it. In the collection of the *Pensées* "Submission and the Use of Reason," Pascal develops the idea that access to "true Christianity" supposes a critical activity of reason, i.e., to establish by itself the modalities of its submission by distinguishing the legitimacy of the principles mobilized according to the type of object to which it refers. The submission thus comprises a normative dimension which appears by the characterization of two misuses of reason regarding its limits: the excess and the defect of submission from which result respectively "superstition" and atheism as a form of "tyranny" (§182). Against these "two excesses" (§214), the good use of reason consists in knowing where it must submit and where it must not submit. This implies that it is up to reason itself to define the criterium of its own submission by determining its limits in the very test of its power. Beyond its epistemological significance, submission has a direct apologetic aim. In the context of the *Pensées*, the issue is to distinguish "belief" from "superstition" by showing that submission to the principles of Christian Revelation does not constitute an affront to the free development of thought but expresses the highest degree of rationality: "There is nothing so conformable to reason as this disavowal of reason" (§213). By defining submission as a highly rational act, Pascal prevents the admission of the Dogma of irrationality, while maintaining the distinction between "belief" and "reason," natural and supernatural knowledge. In this regards, I intend to situate submission within the critical device of rationality presented in §201: "One must know how to doubt where it is necessary, to ensure where it is necessary, by submitting where it is necessary. Who does not make thus does not hear the force of the reason." To hear the strength of Pascalian rationalism is to measure its full critical scope, recognizing in particular that submission according to Pascal always proceeds from a just conception of the demands and limits of reason. Submission lives from criticism, far from excluding it.

Reason Unhinged: Errors, Problems, Interruptions, and the Misadventures of Thought

Emma Ingala (Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Spain)

While the story of Western philosophy is commonly told in terms of theoretical milestones, solutions to persistent problems, conceptual innovations, or methodological outbreaks, there is another narrative that places at the core of philosophical thinking a fundamental and constitutive failure. According to this narrative, philosophy is an exercise that only thrives when practiced in the arena of errors, problems, disruptions, or interruptions. In his lectures *Why Philosophize?*, Jean-François Lyotard described the philosopher's attempt to respond to the question 'what is philosophy?' as a Freudian *acte manqué* or parapraxis; that is, an action that fails to achieve its conscious goal usually because an unconscious drive gets on its way. In particular, Lyotard

compares the enterprise of trying to define philosophy with the parapraxis of not being able to find an object that we have put away somewhere. ‘Philosophy misses itself, it is out of order’ (2013, 17), he claims, when we set off to look for it and we are constantly forgetting where it is. In a similar vein, Gilles Deleuze often quoted what he deemed to be one of Leibniz’s most beautiful sentences to outline the fate of philosophical thinking: ‘I thought I had reached port, but ... I was, as it were, carried back into the open sea’ (Leibniz 1998: 149, translation modified). Whenever the philosopher believes she has arrived at a certain conclusion, she sees herself suddenly thrown out again onto the wild ocean of uncertainty. A number of historians of philosophy, such as Gérard Lebrun or Pierre Aubenque, have tried to retell the story of western thought from the perspective of these misadventures. Following their lead, and from the conception of philosophy as a practice intimately linked to failure, the aim of this paper is to rethink the nature of reason and its limits.

A Feeling of Limits: The Aesthetic Self-reflection of Reason in the Kantian Sublime

Ivan Iyer (Indian Institute of Technology, India)

In his *Critical project*, Kant makes space for objects that are outside the scope of reason and the transcendental conditions of knowledge. These objects which include God, the soul and freedom, come to assume not a mere negative significance as outside the bounds of human knowledge but become regulative ideas of fundamental importance towards making sense of morality and aesthetic feeling. In the *Critique of Judgment*, which he foresaw as a bridge between the realms of pure and practical reason, Kant develops among others, the concept of the sublime. The sublime, Kant argues, is not only an aesthetic feeling of the absolutely large that forces the faculties of reason and imagination towards their limits but in fact reveals a “supersensible” vocation or destination of the subject. However, while this “supersensible” may be interpreted as a realm of ideas that reason has direct access to, it can only be negatively presented or felt. In other words, as an indication of the supersensible, the sublime makes possible an aesthetic intimation of the limits of reason along its seemingly indefinite boundaries, that can be felt but not positively known. This sense of the Kantian sublime as a tensed suspension at the limits of reason has been explored extensively in the work of putatively poststructuralist philosophers such as Lyotard, Derrida, Nancy and Deleuze where it also assumes the role of a critical concept towards exploring questions of subjectivity, morality, freedom and associated notions of transcendence, immanence and alterity. In this presentation, I will attempt to complicate these interventions through a closer look at the concepts of the supersensible and “aesthetic ideas” as they appear in Kant’s third Critique. I will suggest that the experience of the sublime, as a revelation of the supersensible, is nothing but an aesthetic idea of the noumenal self where the subject aesthetically encounters its differential ground which indefinitely escapes it. In other words, I suggest that the sublime is nothing but the aesthetic function of reason towards speaking about its own limits and through aesthetic ideas, reason provides a conceptually indeterminate intuition of this realm, that is simultaneously immanent and transcendent to it. Hence, through my presentation, I will attempt to highlight the ways in which the Kantian sublime allows us to frame the question of the limits of reason as an aesthetic encounter of reason with itself, from within and without.

Reason and Style: The Deconstructionist Tradition of Paradox

Eve Judah (Ecole Normale Supérieure, France)

This paper will examine the pervasive presence of paradoxes and paradoxical styles of writing in deconstructionist thought with a view to gaining theoretical and historical purchase on this phenomenon. It will engage in an ongoing debate surrounding the question of whether paradox is nothing but a poetic figure of speech or rather if it is a mode of thought inextricably bound up with the deconstructionist critique of metaphysical reason. In *Force of Law*, Jacques Derrida writes that “deconstructionism finds its place or rather its privileged instability” in “certain aporias,” citing “the demonstrative and apparently non-historical look of logico-formal paradoxes” as one of the two ‘styles’ appropriate to deconstructionism. In line with Derrida, this paper will argue that paradox is key to understanding deconstructionism in so far as it destabilizes the hierarchical binaries which privilege reason over style, logic over language, all the while remaining a feature or (mal)function of reason itself. In other words, paradox is the defining figure of a position which criticizes reason, paradoxically, from within, through rational means. In this sense, paradox is reflexive or rather reflective, reason’s self-critical glance in the mirror. This paper plays out this core thesis through a reading of the paradoxical life and works of Sarah Kofman, a forgotten deconstructionist remembered, if at all, for her Nietzscheo-Freudian criticism. In Kofman’s work, paradox becomes the expression of a lifelong engagement with the question of philosophy’s “soteriological finality,” its relationship to personal experience, and ultimately what value remains to it once deconstructionism has revealed philosophy to have been always already honeycombed with paradoxes, self-contradiction and circular truths. By interpreting Kofman’s work in terms of its constitutively paradoxical self-referentiality, and the constitutive self-referentiality of paradox, this paper will explore not only the nature of Kofman’s typically deconstructionist paradoxical style, but also the meaning of her atypically intense self-reflectiveness, her insistence on the intrusive “I” of the author. As such, this paper seeks to contribute to and extend deconstructionist critiques of reason/non-reason binary, which it will elucidate through a reading of Kofman’s self-referential process. This paper matters because, though paradox and the paradoxical style remain pervasive in poststructuralist writing, not enough reflexive work has been done which contributes towards the development of a formal theory of paradox, which is what this paper seeks to do.

Thinking and the Danger of Insanity

Erik Kuravsky (University of Erfurt, Germany)

In the middle-late 1930s and the 1940s Heidegger uses occasionally the same term “Verrückung” for both insanity and human transformation into Dasein. Translated as either dis-lodgement, derangement or dis-placing, the term is sometimes used to speak of a radical shift in human essence, taking us beyond the metaphysical forgetfulness of Beyng and into the truth of Beyng. This usage is seen especially in *Contributions to Philosophy (of the Event)*. In other places, however, it is evident that Heidegger speaks about madness, or insanity, either pertaining to philosophy as such, or to concrete thinkers and poets. For example, both Nietzsche and Hölderlin are mentioned as representatives of a unique kind of insanity, which allowed them to play their part in the history of Beyng on the path of overcoming metaphysics. In this article I offer an analysis of the co-belongingness of human transformation and madness by looking into Heidegger’s works in which he explicitly speaks about the philosophical significance of madness. I show that in both cases one departs from the rule of metaphysical reason and reaches into the abyss. The transitional thinker,

however, still relies on some version of metaphysical ground in form of will to power and cannot experience the grounding essence of the abyss. The thinker's madness is then explicated in terms of a subtle, reason-based rebellion against the abyss.

Exercise Reason: William James and Motor Influence on Decisions

Andrea Maria Nencini (Sapienza University of Rome, Italy)

In his 1983 study on the brain's readiness potentials, the psychologist Benjamin Libet, illustrated in a decision-making scenario, how the consciousness of a voluntary decision is always anticipated by its motor execution (~ 350 ms). That is, when we think consciously about doing something, our brain is already doing it. This discovery, backed up by other studies in the following decades, clearly reshaped the debate on agency, supporting deterministic stances, as in the work of the philosopher Daniel M. Wegner, *The Illusion of Conscious Will* (2002). Interestingly, philosophers that had treated the subject of "habit" had always encountered the problem of falling into procedural automatisms when attempting to educate humans toward more rational ways of thinking. If animals were trapped in the deterministic world of instincts and stimulus-response, men, thanks to rationality, had instead the freedom of reshaping their behaviours by the means of exercising good attitudes. The problem was that in the long run, the repetition of such virtuous actions would necessarily lose its critical or rational aspects for the merely procedural ones, producing in this way the so-called "second nature." Coupling these observations with the results of Libet's experiment, this paradox could be attributed to the actual preeminence of motor components in all kinds of decisions, rational or not. Indeed, in his 1887 article "The Laws of Habit," William James had already claimed such predominance of the motor aspect in shaping habits. He explained that exercising a procedure would create a physiological slope that, on the one hand, would make every action easier to perform by increasingly reinforcing sensory-motor neural connections, but on the other, would create the paradox that the more a pattern, whether physical or mental, was repeated, the more it would become difficult to modify, eliciting its automatic reproduction. Nevertheless, James offered an interesting optimistic approach in its factual considerations on how to exploit this deterministic constraint, in order to train new attitudes. This contribution intends to explore James's insights on the matter, confronting them with the latest results about the effect of motor repetition on decision-making, so as to highlight possible challenges and resources for the current debate on rationality

Ethics of Care and Rationality: A Closer Look

Stefano Pinzan (Vita-Salute San Raffaele, Italy)

The ethics of care was developed as a new moral perspective in open contrast to modern theories (represented in particular by Kantian and utilitarian theories) and their conceptions of the moral agent and moral experience. Modern moral theories, indeed, focus on individuals who are thought of as independent and indifferent to each other. Moral experience is analyzed in relation to an abstract, rational image of the moral agent, whose emotional life is characterized negatively, emphasizing the selfish element of self-love that requires the intervention of an ideal of rational control that asks us to exclude emotional influence by achieving autonomy. Thus, in order to achieve full moral flourishing, it would be necessary to reach a condition of full autonomy, autocracy and independence with regard to others and our emotional life. The ethics of care, on the other hand, relies on two fundamental aspects, according to Pulcini: "The dependence and

vulnerability of human beings and the importance of the affective dimension in ethical choices.” The affective dimension, regarded as a danger to the autonomy of the agent by modern theories, proves instead to be essential for grasping the constitutive nature of our vulnerability and also offers the pathway to an awareness of the vulnerability of others and thus to the profound interdependence that exists between human beings. Moreover, emotions make these nexuses between people normative nexuses, thereby providing, as Gilligan notes, a true ethics of responsibility. Consequently, precisely due to the crucial role of the affective dimension, the moral agent shall be described as an emotional subject or subject inclined towards the other, as Cavarero argues. The aim of my paper is to show that, despite the crucial role of the affective dimension, the ethics of care must still value the presence of reason in the form of a critical-reflexive instance. Most care theorists seem indeed to be aware that our emotions can still lead us astray and confuse us. This is part of a realistic reading of emotional life that is not overly optimistic and, therefore, aware of the partialities in which the moral agent and her conduct may incur. It appears necessary to have a critical look at our emotions, to understand them so as to be able to distinguish between them and to implement a counterbalancing dynamic. I will try to argue this thesis by critically analyzing the theoretical approach of Michael Slote, who completely rejects the presence of any critical-reflexive moment, leading his whole theory back to empathy and empathic caring. I intend to show how this absence of reflective scrutiny can lead to unjustifiable biases and errors in deliberation and moral approval in the agent.

The Ontogenesis of Reason: Castoriadis on the Limits of Identity Thinking

Gavin Rae (Universidad Complutense de Madrid)

In this paper, I seek to examine the ontogenesis of reason by appealing to Cornelius Castoriadis’s critique of ensemblist-identitarian logic. According to Castoriadis, ensemblist-identitarian (or ensidic) logic is premised on an ontological privileging of determination, a privileging of which arose with the Ancient Greeks. The basic premise of this form of logic is that only that which is determined or determinable accurately describes what is. This gives rise to a privileging of identity and, epistemologically, a privileging of thinking in terms of fixed categories, number, and formal logic. Castoriadis has two problems with this: First, that it is based on a categorical confusion, insofar as it takes a dimension of being for being *per se*. Second, it is unable to account for the genesis of ensidic logic; as a determined identity, it is simply taken to exist outside of time. Castoriadis, however, insists that being is fundamentally chaotic and, as such, perpetually moving. One consequence of this is that the genesis of ensidic logic and its dominance must be accounted for. To do so, Castoriadis claims that ensidic logic is grounded in and an expression of a “prior” non-ensidic diversity, which he describes through the metaphor of magma. However, although it might be thought that, with this, Castoriadis is simply affirming a non-ensidic form of logic (or diversity over identity), he makes two moves to complicate the relationship between magmatic and ensidic logic: First, they do not form a binary opposition; ensidic logic is an expression of magmatic “logic,” itself an expression of being’s chaos. Second, thought, while magmatic non-ensidic diversity must express itself ensidically. By way of conclusion, I argue that this leaves us in a purposefully paradoxical position, wherein Castoriadis decentres ensidic logic from its long-held foundationality, while also warning us that any knowledge can only be based on the parameters of ensidic logic. Rational (i.e. ensidic) thought must then always function in and as a double-bind,

“one” that is aware of its limitations and its dependence on a non-ensidic dimension, while always also bracketing that awareness to present itself as universal.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty and the Kin(Aesth)etic Logos

Ainhoa Suárez Gómez (Independent Scholar, Mexico)

In the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Maurice Merleau-Ponty argues that if the lived body is to be studied it is necessary to approach it beyond the “attitude of verification and reflective operations” of objective thought. Alternative to the typical mindset of rational thinking, he argues, there is a preobjective and non-conceptual sense-giving understanding of both our body and our being in the world. This signifying phenomenon with a structuring power allows the subject to situate herself in a horizon that acquires a certain familiarity through her bodily motor dynamics. Corporeal movement thus becomes a primordial and most basic “anchorage” in the world. It gains not only a physical dimension, but also an expressive one manifested through the embodied subject’s interpretation of her being in the world. According to Merleau-Ponty this interpretation does not need to pass through the conceptual register in order to become meaningful, for it is based on a logos that is different from the rational logos. Most studies on the Merleau-Pontian redefinition of logos discuss it in terms of an opposition between a rational logos and a sensible logos. Here I argue that it is possible to find a redefinition of rationality that takes into account the knowledge obtained from the experience of the lived body. I offer a reading of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology in which the body is grasped as a moving and expressive entity capable of producing a corporeal kinetic and kinaesthetic logos; a kin(aesth)etic logos that, as I seek to demonstrate, operates at the base of human communication and knowledge processes

Orders of reason, reasons of order

Francesco Tibursi (University Niccolò Cusano, Italy)

We are accustomed to think of rational order as the highest form of order; the irrational appear as disorder and every order, even when not wholly rational, would imply some degree of rationality. Thus, we tend to see our world as “irrational” or “not yet fully rational.” This is the heritage of the modern age, where reason was the criteria of knowledge and of social order. In my paper I would like to historicize this concept from a social theory perspective, assuming that order is an instance preceding to rationality and that there could be qualitatively non-rational orders. In fact, if we think of order as a reciprocal disposition of things to each other, it could be possible for an order to be non-rational, without implying that any amount of non-rationality is a form of disorder. I would like to try to conceive social order as an independent concept, which stands in a horizontal and dialectical relationship to reason, starting from some categories of classical sociological theory, in particular from Weber, Simmel and Luhmann’s thought. I will follow two interpretative perspectives: the first considers the subjective condition, in which rationality as an individual expression never assumes a fully universalizable shape. In fact, even assuming the case of rational individuals, reason is nevertheless limited to the subjective condition of the individual, so it appear as the manifestation of social plurality. The second considers the objective structure of society, where the reciprocal arrangement of the elements includes non-rational factors (aesthetics, for example), which *do not* deny reason and establish a “horizontal” relationship with it. I will therefore try to represent social order as *also* rational and, furthermore, I will try to highlight how reason acts

in relation to a heterogeneous object of knowledge, whose understanding does not imply a reduction to reason itself, but a dialectical and complex relationship with it.

Transgressing Economies: Inheriting Jacques Derrida's *écologie de la mémoire*

Sam La Védrine (Independent Scholar, England)

Given that empirical and existential reasons for addressing the climate emergency are more apparent daily, revision of a latent environmentalism within post-structuralism is well underway, especially in the works of Jacques Derrida. This paper will, however, attend to a little recognised detail, therein. In the decade before his death, Derrida occasionally referenced what remained one of his work's unrealised formulations: a self-professed therapeutics with the striking if ambiguous genitive, '*écologie de la mémoire*' [ecology of memory]. Appearing in discussions of forgiveness both in 1994 and 2000, its most curious expression arguably fell between those dates, yet only appeared long afterwards. Following its unnamed prefiguration in the closing séances of *Hospitalité* [1995-96], a subsequent seminar series, *Le parjure et le pardon* [1997-99] (both recently published), had described it as an economy breaking with calculation, consciousness, and general memory, a pivotal work of mourning navigating the possibility of forgetting pardon's inherent and seemingly necessary paradoxes. This description inspires a first, simple question: what did Derrida mean by an *ecology* which was an economy? Identifying a paradox of economical thought which distorts the singular within the general, memory's ecology seemingly marries Derrida's lifelong concerns—especially aneconomy, dialectics, and limits—to his late ones. My reading of this formulation will review how Derrida used it in discussing figurations of pardon's mutation, sublation, and transformation, and speculate on how this complex critical ecosystem may have evolved in his work. This will address two objectives: one, connect economy's paradox back to an irrefutable justice posited in *Spectres de Marx* and forward to the reprised question of animality in *La Bête et le souverain*; and two, apply an ecology of memory, as a therapeutics, to contemporary problems of that sign's common signification, namely, exception from climate emergency responsibility, and designation of aetiological fault. I will argue that classical, economical accounts of reason are inadequate when faced with phenomena like endangered biodiversity, unsustainable production, the global energy crisis, and their purported resolutions. Alternatively, Derrida's ecology of memory points towards an irrational drive which challenges economic reason's colonisation of rational thought and disinherits its inheritance by being unreasonable. Yet, this paper will acknowledge this injunction's aporia: in order to retain ethical efficacy, this same drive must regard the climate emergency as simultaneously unpardonable now, *and* responsible for an inevitable pardon-seeking justice of the future; adopting Derrida's exhortation, it must occupy the interruption of pardon's aneconomic motion.

From the limits of reason to the extension of epistemology to the passions in David Hume

Julia Vincenti (Aix-Marseille University, France)

The skeptical empiricism of the first book of the *Treatise of Human Nature* condemns the human mind, says Hume, to "no choice left but betwixt a false reason and none at all." This observation is based on the exposition of two fundamental limits of reason. The first limit is internal, the ideas of the understanding only are copies of impressions that are themselves exclusively subjective. The second is external, since the imagination produces competing judgments that do not necessarily respect the observable recurrences in the experience which characterize rational judgements. The

first limit implies that reason cannot extend beyond subjectivity, the second implies the existence of contradictory judgments from competing associations. Within these limits, how does Hume manage to maintain a notion of reason? I will show that a careful reading of the three books of the *Treatise* as a whole suggests that Hume proceeds to a redefinition of the extension of the notion of reason by the integration of what is traditionally opposed to it. This redefinition is primarily based on the acknowledgement of the fictitious nature of subjective beliefs, opening them to constant correction through the cumulative experience. I will argue that Hume's skepticism does not concern the possibility of knowledge but the pretentious immutability of rational judgments. Hence, subjective fictions are not without a positive content. The redefinition is secondly based on the acknowledgement of the submission of the reason to the passions as a potential benefit. I will argue that the affective state of individuals guides the attention paid to phenomena and that thus the calm and social passions contribute to the maximization of the judgments' coherence. The moderation of Humean skepticism, and thus the overtake of the very real limits of reason, is not only an languishing attitude opposed to abstruse reasoning, but moreover a consequence of the opening of epistemology to the vectors of coherence which the passions are. Finally, I will argue that Hume manages to grasp the affect as a product of the circumstances surrounding the subject, that is to say as a phenomenon and thus an object of a theory of knowledge. In doing so, he can substitute to classical epistemology a "science of man," based on a dialectical relation between the limits of an isolated and fanciful reason secretly corrupted by the imagination and the study of affective dispositions that gives it its strength of precision and correctness.