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The journal applies the stringent requirements of a double-blind, peer-review process to the selection of papers to be published.

41 submissions were received from which
39 were sent to the student editorial team
28 passed the initial review and were sent to experts
6 required major revisions and were declined, but encouraged to resubmit next year
8 passed the second review and were sent back to the authors for revision and
7 were selected by the editorial board for final publication

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Contributor profiles

Bas Crousen is a third-year student at UCM, particularly interested in making sense of the world, its issues and developments, though passionate about much more. He studies politics, history and philosophy, and through these disciplines, he takes a critical look at various societal phenomena ranging from war to protesting and from orientalism to gene editing, the subject of the article in this journal. Having written about diverse topics, whether highlighting the link between a current issue and its history or considering its ethical dimensions, he always strives to address the unaddressed.

Carolina Scheuch graduated from UCM in 2024 and is now pursuing the research master's Cultures of Art, Science and Technology at Maastricht University. Her academic work focuses on responsible innovation, more specifically, citizen engagement and inclusion in sustainability initiatives. She is particularly interested in the ethical dimensions of science and technology, and a passionate advocate for social change to create a good life for all. Next to her studies, Carolina is a social media content creator for UM's Special Collections and writer for the Maastricht Diplomat.

Charlotte Heuser is a third-year student, focusing on psychology and quantitative methods. Her aim is to understand how humans think and act by combining natural and social sciences at UCM, an exchange semester at UC Berkeley and beyond. She is particularly interested in cognitive psychology, behavioral sciences and memory research. Educational matters are also important to her. She is part of the EDLAB Student Advisory Board and works as a student assistant researching critical thinking skills development at UCM. Outside of academia, she enjoys reading, coffee and playing soccer.

Ella Naus is a third-year student at UCM. Her academic interests include physiology, biochemistry, and sustainability. Her passion lies in exploring interdisciplinary approaches to environmental and life science challenges.

Joana Arimany Malik is a third-year student at UCM, combining her interests in business and science to explore innovative solutions to real-world challenges. She is driven by a desire to create social impact through strategic thinking and collaboration. Curious and community-minded, Joana enjoys working on initiatives that foster equity, resilience, and meaningful change.

Jule Palm is a white German scholar from Heidelberg. During her studies at University College Maastricht, she pursues the disciplines of sociology, cultural studies, and philosophy. The focus of her work lies on critical privilege studies. Specifically, her writing seeks to inspire critical perspectives on the academic institutional sphere. Jule seeks to pursue a master's degree in Gender Studies. Currently, she is taking part in a collective, sex-positive space to further understand diverse expressions of gender identity and sexuality.

Julian Alessi is a third-year student at UCM. His academic interests include environmental science, sustainable development, and economics. He is passionate about leveraging data, emerging technologies, and novel economic models to drive a more equitable and sustainable future.

Leonhard Cuzmin studies social sciences, focusing on economics and sociology. He believes that understanding complex societal issues is only possible through integrating these perspectives. To do so, he engages with subjects from quantitative economics and statistics to social order and game theory. Leonhard is particularly interested in complex decision-making, group dynamics and coordination, and the multi-level nature of social phenomena. Seeking practical knowledge application, he has also joined UCMSA's Academic Board and Maastricht Student Consulting. Outside his studies, he enjoys social games with fellow students, hiking, and running.

Nik Schulz is a recent graduate of Class 2025. During their studies at UCM, they followed a double concentration in Humanities and Social Sciences. They are particularly interested in cultural history and identity construction, focusing on the intersection between Central and Eastern European Modern History and Queer Studies. Currently, they are pursuing this passion through Central European University's MA History program. Their goal in academia is to create a space for minority groups within mainstream history.

Sofia Savushkina graduated Cum Laude from the UCM class of 2025. Throughout her degree, she focused primarily on philosophy, later discovering a particular interest in epistemology, philosophy of education, and gender studies. She is especially drawn to critiquing and academic discourse through feminist frameworks, engaging with topics such as knowledge production, academic bias, and inclusive educational structures. Additionally, she is interested in the structures of academic philosophy itself – a passion that inspired the paper featured in this issue. Now, Sofia pursues a Master of Science in Education at the University of Edinburgh.

Tom ter Laak is a UCM graduate from the class of 2025. His curriculum centred on conflict studies and international relations, supplemented with relevant subjects like development economics and migration studies. He is particularly interested in the impact of phenomena like nationalism and group identities on conflict and politics, as reflected in his article published in this edition of the journal. In line with that, he is also looking to pursue a master's degree on nationalism and conflict in the near future.

Letter from the Editors

Dear readers,

In times in which students are once again demanding to be heard, we, the Maastricht Journal of Liberal Arts, want to provide students with a voice in the academic realm. In this sixteenth edition, we are delighted to present to you the following seven papers:

Firstly, Charlotte Heuser, Leonhard Cuzmin, and Bas Crousen are discussing for what purposes the implementation of gene editing using CRISPR-Cas9 in human embryos is justified and when gene editing goes too far. They arrive at a nuanced analysis of what they deem “an ambiguous piece of technology”, through a strong evaluation of common arguments surrounding its usage. Then Sofia Savushkina touches upon the exclusionary traditions of academic philosophy and rethinks Dotson’s Culture of Practice in light of its self-contradictory nature. The tension between the universal standard and pluralism Dotson argues for is then further explored through two potential alternative readings which would still permit its usage. Carolina Scheuch dives into the Chola Contravisual (CC) art movement, a Peru based intersectional, queer feminist group also focused on indigenous experiences and epistemologies. The paper showcases how the CC movement pushes against the dominant neoliberal framework in feminism in Peru by producing art, in particular videos and documentaries, and organising community events, set against the background of the problem of femicide in Peru.

Jule Palm focuses on the intersection of remembering and experience by analysing how Félix González-Torres’s artwork “Untitled” (A Portrait of Ross in L.A.) resists the commodification of memory and rejuvenates the discourse on HIV/AIDS. In doing so, the paper provides a thorough analytical view on the politics of memory and memory itself. Nik Schulz analyses the contribution of the esoteric teachings by Giorgi Ivanovich Gurdjieff to the revival of spirituality in the Soviet Union, specifically during the 60s and 70s. While recognizing the difficulty of researching this time period due to the limited availability of sources, they manage to position the Soviet New Age Movement in both its domestic and international contexts. Tom ter Laak, published once again, offers a comparative analysis of Czechia’s and Hungary’s response to European identity denial by lack of correspondence to EU frameworks. He finds that the national identities’ receptiveness to the EU’s European identity and the strength and aim of the EU’s denial explain the differences between the two countries best. Lastly, Julian Alessi, Joana Arimany Malik, and Ella Naus examine the impact of UCM reflection weeks on student well-being, finding significant improvement ($p < 0.001$) using the

Subjective Well-Being scale. Using these findings, they provide practical improvements for universities to implement to improve student health and wellbeing.

However, this editorial letter also gives a voice to us, the editorial board. Firstly, we would like to announce and congratulate two editorial board members, Jule Frank and Nina Sneijers, who have graduated this year. Thank you for your dedicated and reliable work! Secondly, we wanted to raise a discussion we had internally on what makes a good paper versus what makes a publishable paper. This year, a majority of the papers submitted to us have progressed to the second round of reviewers, which signifies to us a very high-quality assortment of papers. When judging whether a paper is publishable, the criteria are different from the evaluation of a paper in a course. For the MJLA, we focus on argumentation, the quality of research, academic integrity and originality, which might not always reflect course criteria. This year, an excellent paper passed the rounds of review, but one that did not meet our standards for publication, requiring major revisions. We hope to see this work re-submitted next year!

A big thank you to all student reviewers, who have thoroughly dissected each and every paper we have received. A similarly big thank you to our staff reviewers, who took their time and expertise to judge the remaining papers. But if there should be a round of applause, one should be given especially for this year's authors: thank you for submitting. Being judged, critiqued and asked to revise is not an easy process.

Our last thanks, however, we give to ourselves and to the reader.
May you learn something new by reading these papers,

The Editorial Board 2024-25

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DISEASES, DISABILITIES, DESIGNER BABIES

When Does Gene Editing Go Too Far?

Authors: Charlotte Heuser, Leonhard Cuzmin & Bas Crousen

Abstract CRISPR-Cas9 has undergone significant developments, becoming the most widely used gene editing technique. While this tool has enhanced the feasibility of gene editing, it has also sparked controversies, particularly concerning its application in human embryos. Naturally, many questions arise, such as for what purposes the implementation of gene editing using CRISPR-Cas9 in human embryos is justified. We aim to answer this question by presenting biomedical background information, discussing arguments, and providing evaluations of these arguments. Finally, we conclude that CRISPR-Cas9 is an ambiguous piece of technology that is generally justifiable to implement for disease prevention, less so for disability prevention, and not justifiable for non-therapeutic purposes.

Keywords: gene editing, designer babies, CRISPR-Cas9, bioethics

1. Introduction

The gene editing mechanism CRISPR-Cas9 has been causing turbulence in the medical community ever since its discovery. CRISPR stands for 'Clustered Regularly Interspaced Short Palindromic Repeats' and Cas9 denotes the derived gene editing tool 'CRISPR-associated protein 9'. This mechanism allows for the editing of DNA by cutting and altering targeted sequences of genetic material (Huang et al., 2021). Praised as a "revolutionary genome editing tool" (Munshi, 2016, p. 777), it has become the subject of extensive research with the goal of curing currently incurable diseases (Gostimskaya, 2022). Recently, in 2023, the United Kingdom was the first country to approve CRISPR-Cas9 as a tool in therapy treatment, marking a major milestone for the technology (Wong, 2023). These developments remain subject to scrutiny, especially when edits of the human germline are involved. This issue gained widespread attention in 2018 when the Chinese scientist He Jiankui deleted the genes responsible for HIV expression in two twin embryos during in-vitro fertilization (Gostimskaya, 2022; Raposo, 2019).

This incident showcased the capabilities of CRISPR-Cas9 and simultaneously caused a large controversy. Criticism came from the scientific community and the public, pointing to the risk as well as the lack of medical necessity of the procedure. Chinese authorities apprehended He because his non-essential application of gene editing was illegal (Raposo, 2019) and many called for a moratorium on human gene editing due to ethical concerns (Gostimskaya, 2022). The case of He's so-called "CRISPR-Babies" (Morrison & de Saille, 2019, p. 2) exemplifies the controversy we address.

Gene editing has grown more relevant and disputed over the past decade. The recent technological development of CRISPR-Cas9 has made gene editing relatively cheaper, safer and more effective (Khan et al., 2018). Despite the controversy surrounding CRISPR-Cas9, a trend toward acceptance for therapeutic purposes can be observed (Martin & Turkmendag, 2021). Due to the topic's relevance, we explore the following research question: For what purposes is the implementation of gene editing using CRISPR-Cas9 in human embryos justified?

The research question raises various biomedical, ethical and socio-economic concerns which we evaluate throughout four sections. The first section comprises scientific background information and presents the basics of genetics and gene editing, providing a better understanding of the topic. Based on this scientific background, we have three main discussion points, namely the application of CRISPR-Cas9 to prevent diseases, prevent disabilities and for non-therapeutic purposes. Non-therapeutic purposes mean that gene editing is employed for improving, enhancing or modifying a characteristic unrelated to health (Lorenzo et al., 2022). A clear definition of disease and disability is also necessary, but such a thing does not exist. Throughout time, many different definitions have been used (Scully, 2004). However, for the sake of clarity, we make the following distinction: diseases involve health impairments that often exhibit progressing symptoms such as breast cancer, whereas a disability pertains to functional limitations, such as Down syndrome.

First, we argue that the implementation of gene editing in unborn children is justified for preventing diseases since the risks and benefits are balanced. Second, we argue that it is comparatively less justified to prevent disabilities since this application may exacerbate inequalities and threaten acceptance of disabilities. Finally, we argue that gene editing in unborn children is not justified for non-therapeutic purposes such as enhancing the natural abilities or looks of humans as this could cause societal, mental and physical inequalities. Hence, CRISPR-Cas9 is an ethically and socio-economically ambiguous piece of technology. The purpose for which CRISPR-Cas9 is employed determines whether the application of the tool is justified.

2. Scientific Background

Before we discuss and answer the research question, we provide a conceptual description of gene editing by outlining the biomedical background, functioning as the underpinning of the paper and its arguments. It should be noted, however, that genetics comes with many intricacies and details that exceed the scope of this paper. Therefore, only the essential information is presented.

Every organism is made up of cells that, in their nuclei, contain deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA) in which the exact instructions necessary for directing activities are contained. DNA has a double helix structure which is composed of the same four chemical units. These so-called bases are adenine (A), thymine (T), guanine (G) and cytosine (C). The first and last two form base pairs meaning they lie opposite one another in the double helix (Genetic Alliance, 2009).

The entire set of genes in an organism makes up its genome which is organized into larger structures called chromosomes. Human cells contain 23 pairs of chromosomes of which one chromosome is inherited from the mother and one from the father. Chromosomes contain genes, the specific sequences of DNA that code for a specific protein. These are indicated by the specific order of bases on one strand of the DNA (e.g. ATTCCGGA). A gene essentially acts as a ‘recipe’, providing instructions that different cell parts, in turn, follow (Genetic Alliance, 2009). Although genes are the functional unit of heredity, only 29% of DNA is composed of genes. The remaining 71% consists of non-coding segments with functions such as contributing to the structural integrity of the chromosome. (Genetic Alliance, 2009).

Although humans are all 99.9% genetically identical there is still genetic diversity which explains the differences among people like blood type or hair color (Genetic Alliance, 2009). This variation is a result of various genetic phenomena. One crucial factor contributing to genetic diversity is genetic mutation – heritable changes to the DNA sequence. Heritability here refers to both somatic cell division and germline inheritance. Somatic cell division encompasses the proliferation of cells in tissues. These cells only repair and reproduce within the same body. Since they are non-reproductive cells they do not pass on any information to the offspring. This means that a mutation, also known as a variant, in a somatic cell is not passed on to the offspring. A mutation in the germline, however, is passed on to the offspring. The germline refers to a group of cells that is involved in the production of gametes, which are reproductive cells. This explains why some genetic diseases are heritable (Jackson et al., 2018).

There are different types of mutations including single nucleotide variants where a single base pair is substituted for another, insertion and deletions where a base pair is added or removed, structural variations that alter DNA structure on a larger scale and repeat variations involving repetition of specific DNA sequences. (Jackson et al., 2018). A mutation, however, is not inherently harmful. Changes in DNA may have no impact, for example when occurring in non-coding segments. Nevertheless, numerous diseases are proven to be linked to genetics, leading to the classification of variants as either pathogenic or benign. Harmful mutations can manifest in various ways, causing a range of health issues, including Down syndrome, various cancers and diseases such as hemophilia A, cystic fibrosis, and sickle-cell anemia (Jackson et al., 2018).

Genetic disorders can have a detrimental impact on a life. Although there are various therapies and treatments that help manage symptoms or slow a disease's progression, genetic disorders are practically impossible to cure as their causes lie within the DNA (Jackson et al., 2018). This is where gene editing comes in. Gene editing is a technique where specific target genes are modified. This can mean adding, deleting or replacing individual or multiple bases. With this groundbreaking technology, researchers have accomplished various remarkable achievements like improving the quality of rice (Huang et al., 2021). In the biomedical field, gene editing can be deployed in diverse ways as well, with the potential to cure or prevent numerous genetic disorders, for instance. A real-life example of this is the revolutionary treatment called exa-cel that functionally cures sickle cell disease which has recently been approved by the FDA (Reardon, 2023). But gene editing, as aforementioned, can also be used for what Lorenzo et al. (2022) call improvement. This can range from improving adaptability to coldness to improving one's intelligence.

Over the last couple of decades, gene editing has undergone significant advancements, witnessing the emergence of numerous techniques, each building on the successes of its predecessor (Huang et al., 2021). The predominant gene editing technique currently in widespread use is CRISPR-Cas9. It has proven to be very promising, and its success can be attributed to multiple factors like its ease of adoption due to its simplicity or its relative preciseness and reliability, compared to previous genome editing tools (Khan et al., 2018).

The CRISPR-Cas9 system originated from a bacteria defense mechanism against viruses. Fragments of the viral DNA, that are injected when a virus infects a bacterium, are captured and stored by the CRISPR system as RNA guides, a copy of the original DNA. When a similar virus attacks again, the CRISPR system recognizes the viral DNA and launches a counterattack. The RNA guides the Cas9 protein to the corresponding viral DNA sequence which Cas9 in turn cleaves, functioning as molecular scissors, to neutralize it (Li et al., 2021).

In recent years, scientists have managed to repurpose this CRISPR-Cas9 system for gene editing. In a lab, scientists design a synthetic RNA guide that guides the Cas9 protein to the target DNA sequence in an organism. The Cas9 protein induces a precise double-stranded break (DSB) at the designated location. A DNA's repair mechanism will be triggered which can be either Non-Homologous End Joining (NHEJ) or Homology-Directed Repair (HDR). Through NHEJ, the DNA seeks rapid repair by rejoining the broken ends, frequently resulting in mutations that render the gene nonfunctional—a desired outcome for achieving gene knockout. HDR is a more precise process where scientists insert a DNA template into the cell with the desired modification. After the Cas9 induces a DSB, the DNA will repair itself after this template. This allows for precise changes to the DNA (Li et al., 2021).

Although CRISPR-Cas9 is a highly valuable tool, it is not perfect yet. A notable challenge is off-target effects, unintended modifications that could lead to potential health risks (Li et al., 2021). Nevertheless, CRISPR-Cas9 has proven to be very promising in the world of gene editing and biomedicine in general.

3. Preventing Diseases

With CRISPR-Cas9, genetic diseases caused by DNA mutations could be prevented, treated and potentially cured. Although this seems desirable, the question remains whether the use of CRISPR-Cas9 to prevent diseases is justified.

Gene editing embryos can help prevent lifelong illnesses and infant deaths caused or exacerbated by genetic abnormalities. Wojcik et al. (2019) describe a significant correlation between infant deaths and genetic disorders and argue that the application of genetic testing and gene therapy before birth should be explored. De Melo-Martin (2022) asserts that such gene editing would also be more effective at guaranteeing that carriers of genetic diseases can have healthy and genetically related children. Current technologies are based on testing in-vitro fertilized embryos before implantation. Under certain circumstances, however, it is impossible to prevent an abnormal combination of genes (de Melo-Martin, 2022). In such cases, the only method of having a healthy child is adoption, which Severijns et al. (2021) describe as unpopular. They believe the lack of genetic relation and the associated bureaucratic processes to be the main factors of this (Severijns et al., 2021). Gene editing could provide more couples with the possibility of having genetically related and healthy children, irrespective of their own genetic disorders.

Aside from infant mortality and reproductive fears, genetic diseases are also a financial burden. Sedrak and Kondamudi (2023) found that annually, approximately 300,000 infants in the USA are born with sickle cell disease (SCD). SCD is calculated to produce a lifetime burden of medical costs of around $1.65 million on average before reaching senior age, according to Johnson et al. (2023). Additionally, insured individuals must pay $44,000, leading to a significant financial burden. Similarly, Duchenne muscular dystrophy is estimated to be present in 0.02% of the US population, according to Venugopal and Pavlakis (2023). It produces approximately $54,270 direct costs and $120,910 total burden per year in the USA, according to Landfeldt et al. (2014). Especially in the second case, a gene edit might be cheaper than the accumulated medical and intangible costs of living with a genetic disease.

However, the potential medical and social benefits of preventing diseases using gene editing come with difficulties. One of the main issues identified with this medical procedure is that unborn children, such as embryos, cannot consent to it. This poses the issue of informed consent (Shinwari et al., 2018). Both Rodriguez (2016) and Biberman (2023) argue for informed consent by the individual, which is impossible to achieve with gene editing in unborn children. Genetic interference can change the human nature of an individual, the genome. Thus, a common point of criticism is that such interference contradicts the fundamental right to freedom of choice (Joseph et al., 2022).

Furthermore, there is a risk of unintended side effects, also known as off-target effects, with CRISPR-Cas9. This is because some DNA sequences in individuals are identical (Rodriguez, 2016). For instance, the so-called CCR5 gene is connected to HIV as well as brain functions. If the gene connected to HIV is being targeted, the gene editing could impact and alter both areas (Raposo, 2019). Hence, there could be unintended alterations of genes and, thus, unintended side effects. These changes can cause mutations and lead to cell transformation or even cell death (Rodriguez, 2016). Total accuracy is therefore not possible to achieve. Lorenzo et al. (2022) argue that scientists must explore the genetic and epigenetic effects of gene editing further before pursuing such applications due to the associated risks.

The arguments show a reasonable balance between risks and benefits. Risks include producing mutations, while benefits include a high degree of accuracy, simple construction, and more sensible costs than lifelong treatment (Rodriguez, 2016). Since the potential and benefits outweigh the concerns and risks, using CRISPR-Cas9 to prevent diseases in human embryos is justifiable from an ethical and socio-economic standpoint. The justifiability is, however, more complex to determine for preventing disabilities using CRISPR-Cas9.

4. Preventing Disabilities

The second way gene editing can be employed is for the prevention of disabilities. By targeting the genetic mutations that often cause disabilities, CRISPR-Cas9 could prevent and treat disabilities early on. Also, here the question arises whether this implementation would be justified or not.

Medical professionals could use gene editing to prevent congenital disabilities by altering the responsible gene abnormalities. Especially the burden caused by hereditary developmental disabilities could be alleviated. Ilyas et al. (2020) report a world prevalence of at least 1% for developmental disabilities and a strong interrelatedness with genetic factors. The hereditary genetic factor Fragile X syndrome is a known cause for a variety of disabilities, such as autism disorder or Down syndrome (Cleveland Clinic, 2021). Such disorders generate a significant financial burden on families and society. A study conducted by Genereaux et al. (2015) identified a median cost of CA$44,570 for parents of children with developmental disabilities and a societal cost of CA$27,428 excluding medicare per year in Canada. Similarly, Lindgren et al. (2021) found that in the USA, the annual expenses for emergency care and hospitalization were doubled for children with developmental disabilities. In addition to financial issues, developmental disorders also impact the quality of life of affected individuals. Kyrkou (2018) asserts that having a disabled child challenges the overall physical and mental health of family members. Often, at least one parent gives up work to care for their child, a physically and mentally strenuous task (Kyrkou, 2018). Gene editing could provide a significant social and economic benefit by alleviating the burdens individuals with genetic disabilities and their families encounter.

However, viewing disabilities as a purely negative thing can be seen as problematic. Goering (2015) argues that many perspectives on disabilities and being disabled exist, often differing strongly between disabled and non-disabled people. She attributes this mainly to a lack of relatability by non-disabled people, who often overlook important, potentially positive aspects of living with a disability (Goering, 2015). Similarly, Schramme (2013) quotes a paralysis patient and a psychiatric patient who both acknowledge and emphasize the positive aspects their impairments have had. He also asserts that the plurality of perspectives, factors of evaluation, and individual experiences make a generalized judgment impossible (Schramme, 2013). Accordingly, Shakespeare (2015) asserts that many disabled people do not report a lower quality of life. Therefore, a categorically negative view on disabilities, especially by able-bodied people, is a misconception and ignores the positive accounts of people living with disabilities. These factors make it difficult to achieve an adequate judgment on whether disabilities should be genetically prevented.

Further complications to this judgment come from considering the social model of disability. Goering (2015) asserts that the social environment is what makes impaired people 'different' and 'disabled'. Accordingly, Courtright-Lim (2022) argues that this social component of disability must be examined as a safer, cheaper, and, in most cases, more effective way of dealing with disabilities. She exemplifies this with dyslexia, a common learning impairment that rarely receives recognition for its correlation with improved visual-spatial abilities (Courtright-Lim, 2022). The discourse on disability is centered around a non-disabled perspective, which causes an inaccurate perception and unrealistic judgment of impairments. Consequently, an approach to disability that focuses on the social environment rather than the impaired individual could achieve better results without medical risks and costs.

Concerns about diversity and recognition further question whether gene editing to prevent disabilities can be justified. Sufian and Garland-Thomson (2021) assert that disabled people contribute to a diverse society by enriching it with their perspectives and ideas. According to Sufian (2021), the sentiment of preventing disabilities threatens this fruitful diversity. This sentiment might also threaten the general acceptance of disabilities, as Sufian and Garland-Thomson (2021) assert that aspirations for a future without disabilities question the status of current disabled people. The influence of such ambitions and the overall negative view on disabilities may influence the decisions parents make with regard to their children. Addressing the reproductive application of gene editing, Niemiec and Howard (2020) express concern about a parental perspective that considers certain traits to be undesirable. Such a perspective questions the usual parent-child relationship and could further disenfranchise those living with disabilities (Niemiec & Howard, 2020). Sufian (2021) further argues that it is not possible to embrace disabilities and see them as undesirable at the same time. Fully accepting disabilities as a component of a diverse society cannot coexist with the ambition to prevent them. Therefore, the pursuit of this objective threatens the further disenfranchisement of disabled people. Additional consequences may jeopardize the parent-child relationship and the diversity of society. These implications contradict the ethical report issued by the Nuffield Council on Bioethics (2019), which states that gene editing must not increase inequalities or disenfranchisement.

In addition to all these implications stands the issue of informed consent. For genetic disease prevention, the problem is that an embryo cannot consent. Regarding genetic disability prevention, however, the parents' free choice is endangered as well. While some parents favor gene editing as a viable tool, there is also significant opposition. Elliott et al. (2022) describe a prevalence of conflicted views among parents of children with chromosomal disabilities. A slight majority expressed reluctance or opposition to germline gene editing because they see disabilities either as part of their child's identity or personal development (Elliott et al., 2022). Similarly, Kelly (2009) found that after having one genetically impaired child, most parents either decided against further children or refused prenatal diagnosis, actively declining the option to abort their pregnancy should their child again be impaired. Such choices, however, would become much more difficult should gene editing become a tool for disability prevention. In that case, parents could find themselves under social pressure and confronted with the knowledge that life with a disability will be more difficult due to lower acceptance. Under these circumstances, parents could be compelled to take a decision they disagree with. Any discourse about implementing gene editing as a tool to prevent disabilities must consider that the present issues pose significant social and moral risks to society and its members.

Preventing disabilities is more difficult to justify than preventing diseases. On the one hand, preventing disabilities could improve the lives of humans who would otherwise be born socially, physically, and cognitively disadvantaged. On the other hand, such efforts carry severe negative implications for people currently living with disabilities. For one, future prevention disincentivises present accessibility investments and treating diabilities as undesirable harms acceptance. Next to discrimination concerns, future diversity would decrease, resulting in the loss of many enriching perspectives for society. Additionally, difficulties come from informed consent and the risk of unintended side effects. Furthermore, there is a wide spectrum of disabilities, some of which are more harmful than others. For instance, down syndrome tends to be physically and mentally impairing to the individual (Antonarakis et al., 2020). Despite the social downsides that autism can have, it can also lead to increased cognitive abilities (Tordjman, 2015). Both Albert Einstein and Charles Darwin were believed to have autism disorder (Cascio et al., 2014). Hence, this disability can also lead to great discoveries, for instance in the natural sciences, and its benefits should not be completely disregarded. This leads to the question of which disabilities should be eradicated.

Due to this illustrated uncertainty and complexity, the prevention of disabilities using CRISPR-Cas9 is comparatively less justified than preventing diseases. This is an ambiguous case, in which the risks and benefits are not balanced, and it seems that the concerns outweigh. There is one more application of CRISPR-Cas9, which is arguably less ambiguous and more problematic.

5. Non-therapeutic Gene Editing

The final way CRISPR-Cas9 can be implemented is for non-therapeutic gene editing, which is arguably the most controversial application. Every human trait is determined by the DNA, and certain traits can be modified or enhanced by targeting and altering certain DNA sequences. Through CRISPR-Cas9, humans could modify their offspring to their own liking. This naturally raises the question of whether the application of CRISPR-Cas9 for non-therapeutic purposes is justified.

Much more than for preventing disabilities, the non-therapeutic application of gene editing threatens to increase social division and inequality. As argued by Sufian (2021) on the issue of disabilities, the wish to prevent a trait from occurring necessitates a negative perception of that trait. Consequently, the desire to attain a certain trait necessitates viewing it as superior. As shown in the previous section, these perspectives already endanger social diversity and acceptance of disabilities. Unlike with disabilities, where a majority sees them as negative (Schramme, 2013), society lacks consensus about non-health-related traits. Hair color preference, for example, is distributed unequally, according to Wortham et al. (2018). This lack of consensus might exacerbate the formation of grievances that exceed the dimensions of those related to disabilities. Additionally, Wortham et al. (2018) found that the relative preferences of different population groups closely resemble the relative prevalence of hair colors in these groups. Members of a group will therefore generally gravitate toward their most familiar variation. Therefore, it is possible that conflicts about 'superior' and 'inferior' traits arise, promoting intolerance and group division. Furthermore, Pougnet et al. (2023) bring up the possibility that genetically enhanced children might also face discrimination for the way they were conceived. Because genetic enhancement and the expression of preferences are inseparable, the application of gene editing for non-therapeutic purposes bears significant potential for discrimination and conflict.

There are various examples that emphasize the inequalities and issues deriving from the genetic enhancement of natural looks or abilities. For one, these alterations can lead to socio-economic disparities (Pougnet et al., 2023). Increased physical capacities can have wide-ranging effects. For instance, they could lead to an increased ability to perform labor in craftsmanship or in office work. Consequently, longer concentration spans and more physical strength would advantage gene-edited individuals and enable them to outperform their coworkers. A second example is the ability to outperform fellow humans in sports. Tamburrini (2007) asserts that, especially in competitive sports, genetic privileges would lead to inequalities, unfairness and dispute, while Camporesi and Maugeri (2011) argue that there are too many pre-existing inequalities in sports based on medicine and drugs. Gene editing would exacerbate these problems competitive athletes have to face thus far (Camporesi & Maugeri, 2011).

Both examples are based on one individual being genetically privileged over another. This genetic privilege is not inherent but cultivated through gene editing. The same accounts for changes in the genome which increase cognitive abilities (Stern & Alberini, 2018). Improved cognitive functioning is associated with better concentration and better memory formation (Stern & Alberini, 2018). Improving cognition poses ethical concerns because it can change thought processes and the overall intelligence of a person (Kostick-Quenet et al., 2022). With gene editing in individuals, it would therefore be difficult to decipher which cognitive achievements are attributable toward the individual and which toward gene editing.

Aside from generating further social divide, implementing gene editing for non-therapeutic purposes could lead to eugenic practices. Eugenics is defined as "the practice [...] of controlled selective breeding of human populations [...] to improve the populations' genetic composition" (Reese, 2023, tackling eugenics section, para. 1). They are important concerning the topic at hand because the CRISPR technology can enhance desired traits (Shinwari et al., 2018). Based on this possibility to increase and enhance physical and cognitive abilities, a lot of criticism has been raised. This section focuses on two aspects of this criticism.

First, the fear of the introduction of a societally advantaged masterclass, such as that of the ‘Aryan race’ during Adolf Hitler’s National Socialist regime, arises again (Biberman, 2023). Such attempts in history to create a superior class of people led to societal divide and psychological destruction. Second, genetically engineered humans with enhanced capacities and abilities could have unpredictable consequences for society. Like Shinwari et al. (2018), Rodriguez (2016) acknowledges that with CRISPR-Cas9, the ability to enhance and cultivate specific traits in individuals is growing. This poses a socio-economic issue through which some individuals or groups, such as the financially advantaged, could become genetically superior in terms of physical and intellectual capacities (Rodriguez, 2016).

Some argue that medical enterprises have an obligation to improve the human body if the means to do so are available (Lorenzo et al., 2022). This would align with the argument that the goal of biomedical advancement lies in improving the human condition (Joseph et al., 2022). More, however, argue that the use of genetics to improve non-pathological features is unacceptable as it could lead to deepened inequalities and the practice of eugenics (Lorenzo et al., 2022). It is neither ethically nor socio-economically justifiable to use gene editing to advantage an individual over another. Hence, the answer is that using CRISPR-Cas9 for non-therapeutic purposes of enhancement of natural looks or abilities is not by any means justified.

6. Conclusion

CRISPR-Cas9 is a powerful tool that has made the prospect of therapeutic and non-therapeutic gene editing feasible. These capabilities, however, come with significant social implications, especially when edits of an embryo are involved. Therefore, different use cases and all relevant arguments must be carefully considered to decide when such a gene edit is justified.

Preventing presently incurable genetic diseases has the potential to alleviate massive financial burdens on affected individuals and society. Additionally, parents that carry genetic diseases could, under all circumstances, guarantee a genetically healthy child using gene editing. However, genetic procedures do carry some medical risk that could potentially cause unforeseen harm to children. Some criticism also comes from the lack of informed consent, as an embryo is unable to choose or decline genetic edits. Overall, the expected benefits seem to outweigh the risks. These risks, however, must be acknowledged and individually reevaluated.

The use of gene editing to prevent congenital disabilities promises similar benefits but comes with a much larger number of drawbacks. Many scholars take issue with the general assumption that disabilities inherently detract from life, viewing them to be part of a person's identity. As the wish to avoid disabilities necessitates a negative view, it threatens to further disenfranchise disabled people and detract from diversity. Furthermore, parents might feel pressured to engage in gene editing against their will, should society become less accepting of disabilities, threatening their agency. For these reasons, the use of gene editing to prevent disabilities is much more problematic and necessitates medical professionals to carefully weigh the risks and benefits of every individual case.

Less ambiguous is the use of gene editing for non-therapeutic purposes or genetic enhancement. The lack of consensus about 'good' and 'bad' physical traits could make them an even more divisive issue than disabilities. This threatens to cause group grievances and could develop into eugenic practices. Additionally, physical or mental enhancement could lead to a rise in inequality as the enhanced people would be genetically privileged. The significant issues and lack of specific benefits non-therapeutic genetic enhancement bears make it infeasible for application. George Daley, a leader in stem cell science and cancer biology at Harvard Medical School, drew a similar conclusion: "There are stark distinctions between editing genes in an embryo to prevent a baby from being born with sickle cell anaemia and editing genes to alter the appearance or intelligence of future generations." (Bergman, 2019, para. 23). While CRISPR-Cas9 does have the potential to cure diseases and positively impact medical enterprises, its usage must be regulated, which poses a significant challenge.

Technological advancements cannot be stopped; however, their development trajectory can be influenced and shaped (Biberman, 2023). This requires strong regulations for the use of CRISPR-Cas9 and rules for its implementation that respect the medical, socio-economic, and ethical implications and consequences it can have. Wer conducted such an evaluation and concluded that all uses of gene editing in embryos carry considerable risks, which are only outweighed in specific cases of disease and perhaps disability prevention and never for non-therapeutic purposes.

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TOWARD A CONSISTENT PRAXIS

The Challenge of Self-Reference in Dotson's Culture of Praxis as a Meta-Standard

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Abstract The institutional culture of academic philosophy is deeply exclusionary. By prioritising "traditional" ways of disciplinary engagement, it excludes diverse practitioners and their perspectives. Kristie Dotson challenges this exclusion by proposing that academic philosophy should adopt the Culture of Praxis, a framework that prioritises diverse philosophical traditions and methods. In this paper, I examine Dotson's claim that the Culture of Praxis should function as a meta-standard – a guiding principle for determining the philosophical legitimacy of some work. I argue that Dotson's formulation is self-contradictory, as it imposes a universal standard while simultaneously advocating for pluralism. To resolve this tension, I explore two alternative readings: distinguishing between first- and second-order claims and interpreting Dotson's proposal as a political rather than philosophical claim. Since such exclusionary practices are not unique to philosophy, the paper contributes to the ongoing debates on diversity in academia. The issues of epistemic authority and legitimacy resonate across the humanities and social sciences. By critically engaging with Dotson's work, this paper encourages the reader to rethink inclusivity in academic disciplines more broadly.
Keywords: Diversity, academic philosophy, Culture of Justification, Culture of Praxis, meta-standard, self-reference

1. Introduction

Philosophy, as a discipline, loves to pride itself on rigorous inquiry, critical examination, and outstanding argumentation. While this might be true, philosophy is also incredibly short-sighted, particularly regarding its diversity. A recent analysis of PhD graduates in philosophy from 2017 to 2019 revealed that 85% were White and 70% were men[1] (Schwitzgebel et al., 2021). Despite some progress in the past two decades toward racial and ethnic diversity within philosophy, Hispanic, Native American, and Black individuals continue to be significantly underrepresented. The same holds for gender diversity. Although more women are majoring in philosophy at the undergraduate level, women remain underrepresented across all levels, especially in permanent faculty positions (Schwitzgebel et al., 2021). Apart from the lack of diversity of people, there is also a lack of diversity in philosophical content. A topical blog post by Jay Garfield and Bryan Van Norden (2016) outlined a well-known problem: philosophy departments primarily teach Western European canons and are reluctant to include other non-Western traditions as equal contributors[2]. Garfield and Van Norden argue that this Eurocentrism limits the scope of philosophical inquiry, depriving the discipline of valuable insights from Chinese, Indian, Islamic and other non-Western traditions. The persistent imbalance in both the people and philosophical content suggests that philosophy's ideals of careful examination may not extend to its own institutional culture. Broadening the field's perspectives is essential as it will strengthen the discipline's ability to engage with a wider array of ideas and arguments.

Given the growing interest in diversity within philosophy, various authors have examined how the discipline marginalises minorities, explored the underlying reasons for this marginalisation, and shared their personal experiences within the field (see, e.g., Haslanger, 2008; Antony, 2022; and Gines, 2011, accordingly). One of the influential papers written on the topic includes Kristie Dotson's (2012a) article *How Is This Paper Philosophy?* In it, Dotson claims that professional philosophy is a poor environment for diverse practitioners because it adheres to the Culture of Justification. This concept refers to norms within academic philosophy that prioritise certain types of arguments and methods of disciplinary engagement, often favouring established mainstream traditions. Dotson suggests that the situation can be rectified if professional philosophy adopts the Culture of Praxis that encourages engagement with diverse philosophical canons. In her exchange with Priest (2012), Dotson (2012b) further argues that the Culture of

[1] Data is relevant for the US context.

[2] The idea of the article later developed into a book. See Van Norden, 2017.

Praxis should be understood as a meta-standard, i.e. a standard for standards. However, it is unclear whether the proposed meta-standard can be applied to itself. Thus, the present essay focuses on this ambiguity, investigating the validity of framing the Culture of Praxis as a meta-standard.

I will argue that the formulation of the Culture of Praxis as a meta-standard is self-contradictory. Due to the inadequacy of the formulation, I propose that the Culture of Praxis as a meta-standard should be either further refined to avoid contradiction or rejected altogether. Alternatively, I suggest two other ways to read Dotson's proposal. I should note that I fully support Dotson's and many other scholars' efforts to bring greater diversity to the philosophy field, an issue of significant personal interest to me. Therefore, my argument is not an objection to making the discipline more inclusive. Rather, this paper is a call for a more precise formulation of arguments and solutions regarding the diversity problem.

In Section I, I outline the key distinctions between Dotson's concepts, the Culture of Justification and the Culture of Praxis. I also elaborate on the claims that she is making about these concepts. Section II focuses on Dotson's claim that the Culture of Praxis should be understood as a meta-standard and the implications of that claim. Section III demonstrates that formulating the Culture of Praxis as a meta-standard is self-contradictory. I use the logic of the self-refutation argument to show the inconsistencies within Dotson's account. Lastly, in Section IV, I propose two alternative ways of viewing Dotson's proposal about the Culture of Praxis as a meta-standard that would avoid the self-reference problem.

2. Culture of Justification vs Culture of Praxis

In her analysis of the landscape of professional philosophy, Dotson (2012a) claims that the environment is both unattractive and inadequate for diverse practitioners. She highlights the pervasive influence of the Culture of Justification as a significant cause of this issue. The current field of academic philosophy, she claims, is set up in such a way that it embodies the Culture of Justification. According to Dotson (2012a), the Culture of Justification refers to an environment which ascribes the most importance to justifying one's ideas and projects, i.e. making them congruent with the dominant accepted norms of a given discipline. Culture, in this context, refers to a shared set of values and norms that are held within a discipline and that shape its knowledge. In the Culture of Justification, these norms determine what is recognised as a valid and valuable contribution to the discipline. Therefore, in such an environment, Dotson argues, a paper acquires a positive epistemic status by demonstrating its alignment with these shared norms, thereby satisfying the discipline's demand for legitimation.

Positive epistemic status, here, is assigned based on the degree to which a work can justify itself as "properly philosophical" by meeting the established criteria (Dotson, 2012a, p. 9). This process requires authors to shape their work around prevailing theoretical and methodological frameworks. Such a dynamic, according to Dotson (2012a), privileges historically recognised philosophical approaches and marginalises perspectives that fall outside these boundaries. As a result, non-traditional methodologies and topics – for example, those grounded in specific cultural, racial, or gendered experiences – are frequently rendered peripheral, struggling or even failing to receive positive epistemic status. Amy Olberding (2015) further noted that such an institutional culture creates a double bind for diverse practitioners. On the one hand, when their contributions align with established norms, they risk being seen as redundant, not adding anything innovative to the discipline of philosophy. On the other hand, when their work deviates from the established norms, it is often dismissed as insufficiently philosophical or even non-philosophical at all.

The essence of the Culture of Justification is reflected in the title of Dotson's paper *How Is This Paper Philosophy?* This question is a manifestation of the so-called "exercises of legitimation" prevalent in the Culture of Justification (Dotson, 2012a, p. 7). The question becomes a framework through which a philosophical work is evaluated and challenges one to prove that their paper or project is congruent with the prevailing disciplinary norms. The problem, I should note, lies not in the question itself, but in the pattern of asking such a question routinely. By implicitly demanding that contributors provide proof that their work aligns with established standards, the Culture of Justification further preserves and reproduces the Western, analytical, and often male-oriented norms that have historically dominated the field. Moreover, Dotson (2012a) notes that the Culture of Justification manifests in the discipline by assuming that these norms are "commonly held" and "univocally relevant" (p.8). As a result, the exclusions perpetuated by the Culture of Justification often go unnoticed, as the prevailing norms remain largely unspoken, implicitly assumed, and widely accepted.

Let us consider an example. Suppose a scholar presents their research based on Indigenous philosophy, which emphasises the value of oral tradition, experiential knowledge, and relational understanding rather than abstract, analytical reasoning. In the Culture of Justification, such an approach might be questioned or even rejected, not for its philosophical insights but because it does not meet the so-called standard of "rigorous" philosophical engagement. In the case of philosophy, "good" and "proper" engagement will often emphasise rationality, individualism, and analytic clarity in the argumentation. The Culture of Justification expects any scholarly paper to exhibit an initial alignment with such traditional methods of disciplinary inquiry. Thus, the Culture of Justification might be seen when non-traditional or marginalised perspectives – such as feminist, queer, or Indigenous philosophy – are subjected to higher scrutiny or dismissed because they do not align with dominant methods of philosophical argumentation.

Given that the Culture of Justification constrains philosophy's diversity in both practitioners and content, Dotson (2012a) proposes that the situation can be rectified by adopting the Culture of Praxis. Such a culture emphasises contributions to philosophical inquiry that are practical, diverse, and relevant to lived human experiences. Rather than valuing adherence to dominant established norms, this approach seeks to foster an environment where multiple canons, methodologies, and interpretations are valued for their relevance to specific social, cultural, or contextual circumstances. Dotson (2012a) outlines two main components of the Culture of Praxis: (1) it focuses on real-world issues pertinent to various communities, recognising that different populations have distinct priorities and concerns, and (2) it recognises multiple philosophical canons and methods of academic validation. We can categorise the first component as pragmatic, and the second component as pluralistic. The pragmatic component emphasises that philosophical inquiry should not only address abstract or historically significant problems but also investigate new and emerging problems and discussions (Dotson, 2012a). More importantly, the pragmatic component outlines the relevance of actively engaging with issues arising from diverse lived human experiences, i.e. real-world concerns and challenges that resonate with individuals across different social and cultural contexts. The pluralistic component ensures a variety of intellectual traditions and contributions that might deviate from dominant paradigms. Dotson (2012a) highlights that this component fosters an environment where incongruence with prevailing norms encourages novel investigations rather than results in exclusion.

Interestingly, Dotson (2012a) notes that the Culture of Praxis would still include some form of legitimising practices but they would function differently. Justification according to dominant norms would not be present. Instead, in the Culture of Praxis, philosophical validation would be based on multiple, smaller, and reflexive canons and the meaningfulness of contribution to a community. By reframing validation to focus on the relevance of contributions, the Culture of Praxis aims to create a space for philosophical engagement that accommodates a wider array of voices and perspectives, making philosophy more responsive to the complexities of contemporary social and cultural life. In this model, diverse philosophy practitioners could flourish without needing to justify themselves against rigid standards. To circle back to the example above, in the Culture of Praxis, a paper based on oral tradition, experiential knowledge, and relational understanding would not be dismissed. Rather, a scholar would be encouraged to present the work on their own terms, based on its relevance to lived experiences and specific cultural and academic context. Thus, the work would be appreciated as it is without the need to be translated into Western theoretical language.

The Culture of Justification and the Culture of Praxis represent two contrasting approaches within professional philosophy. The Culture of Justification emphasises adherence to established, implicitly assumed norms, placing a high value on proving that one's work aligns with those dominant frameworks. In contrast, the Culture of Praxis prioritises contributions that address real-world issues that are relevant to diverse cultural and social contexts. The Culture of praxis values philosophical work based on the unique insights it brings to understanding human experience. In the next section, I further elaborate on the Culture of Praxis but focus on its formulation and implications as a meta-standard.

3. Culture of Praxis as a Meta-Standard

Dotson's paper (2012a) has sparked a significant discussion on the nature of academic philosophy. Here, I want to focus on her exchange with Priest (2012). In his paper, Priest suggests some clarifications of Dotson's claims and proceeds to disagree with some comments she makes about him; however, I will not focus on those. Instead, I want to analyse Dotson's (2012b) reply to Priest. In it, we encounter what I would describe as a refined version of the Culture of Praxis. Dotson (2012b) proposes that the Culture of Praxis should be understood as "a set of values that could act as a *meta-standard*, i.e. at the level of standards for philosophical engagement themselves [emphasis added]" (p. 13). There are some comments to be made about how to interpret this formulation, how it differs from the one presented in the initial[3] paper, and what implications the Culture of Praxis as a meta-standard would have.

I think the formulation of the Culture of Praxis as a meta-standard can be clarified by investigating the following statement made by Dotson (2012b), "a standard for a given practice functions very differently than a set of values aimed at orienting those standards" (p. 10). She makes this claim while defining the point of divergence between Priest and herself. Dotson (2012b) later adds, "I propose a set of values that can orient the creation and application of standards for philosophical engagement" (p. 12). In these passages, Dotson draws an important

[3] By saying "initial paper" I refer to Dotson's article *How Is This Paper Philosophy?* (2012a).

distinction between defining what qualifies as philosophy and orienting how we think about philosophical standards. Defining a standard for philosophical practice involves setting explicit criteria that specify what counts as philosophy. For example, we can talk about defining philosophy as a critique, as problem-solving or as the pursuit of the Truth[4]. On each of these accounts, a certain work acquires a positive philosophical status given it meets the standard of presenting critique, proposing a solution for a problem, or bringing the discussion closer to the Truth (whatever that means) accordingly. In contrast, orienting how we think about philosophical standards involves specifying the standard for criteria which is used to judge what counts as philosophy. For instance, a standard can promote theoretical and abstract approaches to philosophical engagement. In this case, the criteria of "pursuing the Truth" would be seen as proper and good, according to the set standard[5]. Dotson, as we can see, suggests that the Culture of Praxis should be understood as the standard for criteria or meta-standard. The two components it includes are, essentially, a set of values that orient the production of criteria for deciding what can be considered philosophy.

There is one note I want to make before going into the implications of the Culture of Praxis as a meta-standard. Particularly, I want to outline where the two components should manifest. In the initial paper, Dotson (2012a) does not give a clear definition of what the Culture of Praxis is. By analogy with her explanation of the Culture of Justification, I think we can rightfully deduce that the Culture of Praxis is a set of norms and values held within a discipline. The two components that Dotson introduces, a pragmatic and a pluralistic one, in my interpretation, are the values of the Culture of Praxis. This aspect of describing the Culture of Praxis stays the same in Dotson's reply to Priest (2012b). However, between the two papers, there is a difference in her explanation of where the two components manifest. If you read the initial paper closely, you might notice that these two components are not to be manifested in the same way. After her "Comparative Exercise", towards the end of the paper, Dotson states, "This second component of a culture of praxis is *not* a feature of philosophical theories themselves, *unlike* the first component. It is a component that should manifest in disciplinary environments for professional philosophy themselves [emphasis added]" (Dotson, 2012a, p. 26). This suggests that the pragmatist component should manifest in philosophical theories, while the pluralist component should manifest in a disciplinary environment. The second paper, on the other hand, claims that both components should manifest in "standards for philosophical engagement" (Dot-

[4] This is not an exhaustive list.
[5] Note, that I take the concept of the Truth to be very abstract.

son, 2012b, p. 13). So, there is an inconsistency in Dotson's description of components. In the initial paper, it seems, the pragmatist component should serve as a standard for defining what counts as philosophy, rather than a value that orients such standards. Since I focus on Dotson's formulation of the Culture of Praxis as a meta-standard, and as long as that formulation was presented later, I take it that both components are implied to manifest in standards for philosophical engagement, rather than philosophical theories or disciplinary environment[6]. This, I assume, is a part of refining the formulation of the Culture of Praxis.

Taking the presented interpretation of the Culture of Praxis as a meta-standard, let us look at the implications if we were to use it in the field of professional philosophy. Dotson (2012b) notes that in this case, it is appropriate to question whether a certain standard (1) places value on live matters (a pragmatic component) and (2) recognises different philosophical canons and ways of validation (a pluralistic component). First of all, from my interpretation, once we have put these components on the same "level", we create a contradiction. If a standard values criteria that ascribe most importance only to live matters, then it is not pluralistic. If, on the other hand, a standard recognises different philosophical canons, which would include valuing purely theoretical philosophical engagement, then it would not be pragmatic. Therefore, the two components seem to contradict each other; if we adopt one, it appears incompatible with the other. Note that in the initial paper, the pragmatic aspect was applied to philosophical theories, while the pluralistic one was applied to the disciplinary environment. As long as they were described as manifesting in different areas, there was no contradiction. However, since I adopted the refined version of the Culture of Praxis, the contradiction persists. This contradiction will emerge again further in the argument.

4. Self-Referential Trap

So far, we have been investigating how the two components of the Culture of Praxis relate to each other and how they shape the standards of philosophical engagement. Let me briefly recap what we have established up to this point. To improve diversity in professional philosophy, we should adopt the Culture of Praxis. The Culture of Praxis, in this context, refers to the set of shared values that acts as a meta-standard. This meta-standard should be applied to other standards

[6] Moreover, it is unclear whether manifestation in standards for disciplinary engagement and manifestation in disciplinary environments are the same. To me, it seems like it is; but trying to tease out the similarities and differences here is irrelevant to the main argument.

for philosophical engagement, i.e. it should determine the validity of other philosophical standards. The values of the meta-standard include (1) the pragmatic component and (2) the pluralistic component. The pragmatic component emphasises placing value on live matters, while the pluralistic component highlights recognising different philosophical canons and ways of validation. These two components should manifest in standards for philosophical engagement. In the following, I investigate the integrity of the Culture of Praxis as a meta-standard.

To be valid, the call to adopt the Culture of Praxis must itself align with the very standards set by that culture. This means that the Culture of Praxis, as a standard, should (1) place value on live matters and (2) recognise different philosophical canons. If the Culture of Praxis satisfies the standards invoked by itself, then it is a valid meta-standard, and we should accept it. If, on the other hand, the Culture of Praxis does not satisfy its own standards, it should either be reformulated or rejected. The problem I am about to outline is similar to the issue encountered by the verification principle in logical positivism. The verification principle asserts that a statement is meaningful only if it can be empirically verified or is a tautology (i.e. does not provide any new factual information) (Ogan & Ariche, 2018). However, critics outlined that the positivists' statement faces a *self-referential problem*. The verification principle itself is neither empirically verifiable nor a tautology, which undermines its validity. Similarly, in the case of Culture of Praxis, the principle in question must fulfil its own requirements to avoid self-contradiction. For the verification principle, failing to meet its criterion of empirical verifiability renders it meaningless by its own standards. For the Culture of Praxis, failing to meet the criteria of pragmatic relevance and pluralism would render it an inconsistent standard for philosophical engagement, as it would impose a rigid standard while advocating for diversity.

First, let us check the Culture of Praxis against the pragmatic component, which entails placing value on live matters. In the initial paper, Dotson (2012a) describes this component as placing value "on seeking issues and circumstances *pertinent to our living* [emphasis added]" (p. 17). In the second paper (2012b), she shortens the definition to placing value on "*live* matters" (p.13). Live matters refer to investigations of current, emerging, or historical, long-standing questions and discussions, emphasising the relevance of philosophical inquiry to real-world issues. According to Dotson, the Culture of Praxis seeks to address the need for a more inclusive environment in professional philosophy. The aim is to make the field more accessible and welcoming to diverse practitioners, many of whom feel excluded by the environment of the Culture of Justification. As I have outlined in the introduction, the diversity issue in professional philosophy has been a hot point for discussion over the last two decades. Therefore, the diversification goal aligns directly with the notion of live matters, as the question of inclusivity and representation in philosophy is not only a current issue but also one that impacts the future development and accessibility of the discipline. By encouraging standards that promote a broader range of contributions and engage with socially and culturally relevant issues, the Culture of Praxis does indeed place value on live matters. Thus, as a meta-standard, it meets its own first criterion.

Second, let us check the Culture of Praxis against the pluralistic component, which entails recognising different philosophical canons and ways of validation. This means that instead of enforcing uniform criteria, the Culture of Praxis should accommodate a range of different approaches, methods, and standards and allow flexibility in their application. In theory, the Culture of Praxis aims to achieve this by promoting inclusivity and encouraging diverse ways of engaging with philosophical issues. However, as a meta-standard, the Culture of Praxis prescribes that all standards within philosophy must align with the two core values, pragmatism and pluralism, thereby enforcing a universal framework. For example, if a philosophical community values abstract theoretical inquiry without direct application to live matters, the Culture of Praxis would still require these approaches to align with its values. Such a situation creates tension. While the Culture of Praxis promotes inclusivity and diversity, it also imposes its own values on the discipline, potentially excluding forms of philosophical inquiry that do not align with its emphasis on relevance to real-world concerns. It does not fully accommodate philosophical perspectives that diverge from its foundational value of live matters. Therefore, the Culture of Praxis fails to meet its own standard of pluralism.

Thus, while the Culture of Praxis meets the first criteria for pragmatism, it does not satisfy the second criteria for pluralism. Formulation of Culture of Praxis as a meta-standard does not fulfil its own requirements and, therefore, is self-contradictory. By establishing itself as a meta-standard, the Culture of Praxis imposes a univocal standard on the very pluralistic principles it seeks to support. It follows that either the Culture of Praxis is not to be held as a meta-standard, or its two components should be reformulated so that the meta-standard meets its own criteria. I want to emphasise that the problem, in my view, specifically arises when the two components are put on the same "level", in the case of meta-standard, both are applied to standards for philosophical engagement. Before the introduction of the Culture of Praxis as a meta-standard, there was no contradiction or problem of self-reference.

5. Two Alternatives

To resolve the revealed tension and explore ways of upholding the Culture of Praxis as a meta-standard without falling into contradiction, we can consider two alternative readings of Dotson's proposal. These interpretations, in my view, may allow the Culture of Praxis to serve as an orienting framework without conflicting with its own pluralistic aims. In the following, I propose that the issue can be resolved by (1) either distinguishing between first- and second-order claims or (2) interpreting Dotson's proposal as a political claim rather than a philosophical one.

5.1 First- and Second-Order Claims

The self-reference problem arises when a claim about the values for the standards for philosophical engagement does not satisfy its own standards, undermining the claim's validity. In our case, the question arises: how can Dotson justify the claim that we should adopt the Culture of Praxis as a meta-standard without falling into the trap of self-reference? One way Dotson can avoid the potential self-referential problem of her meta-standard is by distinguishing between first-order and second-order claims. First-order claims, in this context, refer to direct assertions about the discipline. For example, the statements about what counts as philosophy or philosophical engagement. Second-order claims, on the other hand, are, in a way, meta-level claims that reflect on first-order claims or the nature of concepts involved in them. For instance, these could be claims about the legitimacy of statements about what counts as philosophy. Dotson could argue that while she supports pluralism at the level of first-order claims (i.e. a variety of philosophical practices and approaches), she maintains a more limited, non-pluralistic stance at the second-order level. That is, while there may be a multitude of diverse practices and content in philosophy, there must be a commitment to certain meta-standards about what constitutes a valid standard for philosophical engagement. So, she could assert that the adoption of the Culture of Praxis does not require pluralism about the very norms that determine what counts as valid philosophy. Instead, the Culture of Praxis could be understood as a framework for evaluating and shaping first-order philosophical practices. This slight refinement to the formulation of the Culture of Praxis as a meta-standard would allow Dotson to uphold the pluralism of philosophical standards without undermining her own claim.

5.2 Philosophical or Political?

Alternatively, Dotson's proposal could avoid the meta-standard formulation issue by positioning the Culture of Praxis as a political, rather than strictly philosophical, claim. In this context, the Culture of Praxis would be understood not as a metaphysical claim about how to shape standards for philosophical engagement, but rather a normative one that aims to transform the institutional environment of philosophy.

In fact, in the second paper, Dotson (2012b) emphasises that she is dealing with "the institutionalisation of philosophical engagement" (p. 10). Such a claim implies that there are political underpinnings for proposing the Culture of Praxis as a meta-standard. By interpreting Dotson's proposal within a political framework, we focus more on its ethical appeals. Namely, the Culture of Praxis, as a political statement, calls for the restructuring of philosophical debate and the reorganisation of academic institutions, focusing on their inclusivity and diversity of intellectual contributions and contributors it should embrace and accommodate. The move from philosophical argument to political position would mirror claims in other political contexts. For example, when someone advocates for religious tolerance of diverse religious practices, they are making a political claim rather than a religious one. Similarly, Dotson's proposal might be interpreted as a call to revisit the social and institutional mechanisms that govern professional philosophy nowadays. The distinction that she draws between Cultures of Justification and Cultures of Praxis emphasises that the current field of philosophy is set up to exclude diverse practitioners. Her thorough analysis of Cultures of Justification reveals how exclusivity is not an inherent property of philosophy but a product of political and historical forces that decide which voices are given authority and credibility. Therefore, by reading the Culture of Praxis as a political statement, we can allow for some inconsistencies within its description and explanation, and instead focus on what such a statement tells us about the potential future directions for institutional change.

6. Conclusion

In this essay, I focused on analysing the validity of formulating the Culture of Praxis as a meta-standard. I started by outlining the difference between the Culture of Justification and the Culture of Praxis. I highlighted that while the Culture of Justification is concerned with aligning philosophical projects with the prevailing norms within a discipline, the Culture of Justification is aimed at promoting philosophical contributions that are practical, diverse, and relevant to lived human experiences. Then, I presented my interpretation of the Culture of Praxis as a meta-standard, based on Dotson's reply to Priest (2012b). I explained that, thus understood, the Culture of Praxis is supposed to orient the production of standards for philosophical engagement, i.e. to be a standard for standards. Next, I have outlined a self-referentiality problem of the Culture of Praxis as a meta-standard, akin to the classic problem of positivism. I argued that while the Culture of Praxis meets the first criterion for pragmatism, it does not satisfy the second criterion for pluralism. Therefore, as long as the meta-standard does not fulfil its own requirements, it is self-contradictory. Lastly, I proposed two alternative ways to read Dotson's proposal of the Culture of Praxis that would avoid contradiction. Namely, (1) distinguishing between first- and second-order claims and (2) interpreting the Culture of Praxis as a political statement rather than a philosophical one.

Personally, I find the second way of interpreting Dotson's argument more appealing. Rather than trying to tease out the particulars of her statements, one can embrace the passage behind them. Dotson's proposal is profound and extremely relevant to the current field of professional philosophy. If the discipline of philosophy does not start moving toward greater diversity, the implications of a lack of diversity can be far-reaching. In my view, studying philosophy is about discovering, investigating, and challenging the ideas of other people. When we engage with the ideas and perspectives of others, we might re-evaluate our own assumptions and give rise to novel understandings and arguments. To engage with diverse perspectives and experiences is to broaden one's collection of ideas. Consequently, a lack of diversity in the discipline risks limiting its scope of inquiry. As long as philosophy's central focus is on examining different ideas, confining them to only Western European perspectives is detrimental to the discipline as a whole. Diversifying philosophy is essential since it allows for a deeper understanding of the multifaceted network of experiences, ideas, and arguments within the discipline. To diversify philosophy is to enrich philosophical discussion as a whole.

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CHOLA CONTRAVISUAL: NEW FEMINISMS

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Abstract In 2023, Peru made headlines for experiencing a gender-based violence crisis, with 21.194 cases reported in January and February and one woman being killed every three days in March alone. Feminist movements vow to address the ongoing crisis, yet in Peru, traditional feminism tends to marginalize indigenous, poor, LGBQTIA+ women, who are most affected by gender-based violence. Chola Contravisual (CC) is a feminist art collective based in Huancayo that challenges societal norms, stereotypes, and inequalities through their artwork. Through an intersectional and queer theory lens, I analyze how CC responds to traditional feminisms. Because they saw themselves, and other womxn with multiple subaltern identities under- or misrepresented within institutionalized feminist movements in Peru, they decided to form their own new feminism. Their methods do not follow a Eurocentric logic of knowledge production but seize indigenous ways of knowing, making their work meaningful especially because these people have been previously ignored and silenced in Andean communities and traditional feminist movements.

Keywords: coloniality of gender, gender-based violence, feminist movements, decolonial queer theory, intersectionality

1. Introduction

In 2021, at least 4.473 women were victims of femicide across Latin America (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, n.d.). Discrimination and violence are even more prevalent for people identifying as LGBTQIA+ (Lanham et al., 2019; Muñoz & Waters, 2021; De Souza & Sélis, 2022; Malta et al., 2023). In 2023, Peru made headlines for experiencing a gender-based violence crisis, with 21.194 cases reported in January and February and one woman being killed every three days in March alone (James, 2023; Giardino, 2023). Sadly, the problem is not new. Gender-based violence has been an issue for a long time, femicides are endemic, and numbers are increasing (Quispe et al., 2023).

Gender is not the only determinant for becoming a victim. Peru has a history of violence and discrimination against poor indigenous women especially (Johns, 2015). A recent study reports that 62.5% of native women have experienced violence by an intimate partner in Peru and identifies legacies of colonialism, systemic inequalities, and discrimination as contributing factors to the high rates of gender-based violence among indigenous women (Calderón et al., 2023). Well-known is also the forced sterilization of over 20.0000 indigenous women during the Fujimori regime (Vasquez del Aguila, 2020; Ko & Ñusta, 2020). Based on past experiences and basic human rights, the right to control sexuality is especially high on indigenous women's agenda (Bant & Girard, 2008).

Indigenous, poor, LBTQIA+ women comprise the most marginalized group in feminist movements. They hold multiple intersecting identities and social justice movements that are representative of only one of those identities often have conflicting agendas. For example, traditional development policies often render these women invisible; their rights and context-specific needs are neglected in favor of what is considered their basic needs (Bant & Girard, 2008; Garner, 2021). Traditional feminist movements and initiatives in Peru also fail to recognize how race, gender, class, and sexuality interact and therefore fail to represent this liminal group. For example, for indigenous, rural women, control over their sexuality, reproductive health, community and dignified representation are more important than family planning, birth control, and individual autonomy (Bant & Girard, 2008; Quiroz-Pérez, 2017; Stavig, 2017). Peru has no laws that protect queer or transgender people and violence against them is prevalent (Rose, 2019). Sexual and gender dissidents are not protected because Peruvian legislation favors heteronormativity.

Chola Contravisual (CC) is a feminist art collective based in Huancayo that challenges societal norms, stereotypes, and inequalities through their artwork. Their mission revolves around deconstructing systems of oppression, freedom of expression and amplifying the voices of indigenous women and lesbian, bisexual, trans, intersex, and queer (LBTIQ) people. They address the intersection of gender, race, class and sexuality through a queer lens that acknowledges the fluidity of identities. In a 2021 interview, co-founder Geraldine Zuasnabar criticises the colonial epistemologies of other feminist movements in Peru. The intersection of gender, race, class and sexuality that tends to be neglected in traditional feminist movements becomes especially clear in Zuasnabar's answer to what Pride means to her: "we want to put on the agenda not just the right to marry; we want to stop being killed" (Mama Cash, 2021, para.4). This quote highlights the risks of being a queer, indigenous woman in Peru and how this priority is much more pronounced for queer, indigenous women than in traditional feminist agendas.

The emergence of CC is a response to feminist movements in Peru, that failed to represent liminal groups. I explore how CC contributes and challenges traditional feminism in Peru by posing the research question: How does CC respond to traditional feminism in Peru? First, I explain intersectionality and decolonial queer theory. Then, I provide an overview of feminism in Peru, highlighting the most relevant gaps for my argument and defining what I mean by traditional feminism. Consequently, I analyze CC's mission and methods and how they appear in the miniseries "Mejor Chola Que Mal Acompañada" [Better Chola than Badly Accompanied]. Finally, I conclude with a short reflection on how CC advances new feminisms.

2. Intersectionality, Queer Theory and Decolonial Theory: an Inclusive Framework

As can be seen from the struggles faced by LBTIQ, poor, indigenous women in Peru, tracing issues such as gender-based violence to one identity marker alone is not sufficient. The forced sterilization of over 20.0000 indigenous women happened amid some big achievements for the women's rights campaign in Peru (Stavig, 2017). The PNSRPF 1996-2000, a family planning program that was meant to advance the rights of all Peruvian women, was used as justification to sterilize poor, indigenous women (Stavig, 2017; Garner, 2021). These women were stereotyped as overly fertile due to their race and culture, and population control was considered crucial to curb poverty (Stavig, 2017). Only in 1999, a report revealed that through systematic misinformation and coercion, sterilization had been conducted as a form of birth control especially on rural indigenous women (Stavig, 2017). Traditional feminism failed to account for identity markers, that could exacerbate human rights violations of liminal women. This is an example of how fixed identity categories can become the basis for oppression (Gamson, 2003). Poor, indigenous women's identity was situated under the umbrella of gender and intragroup differences were suppressed in favor of one unified goal (Crenshaw, 2005). As such, the traditional feminist agenda obscured the role of race and class in women's oppression. For a long time, this failure went unrecognized, the forced sterilization remained undiscovered because poor, indigenous women lacked a voice in feminist movements.

Therefore, taking an intersectional approach is crucial to understanding the issues faced by LBTIQ indigenous women in Peru. Intersectionality acknowledges that individuals hold multiple intersecting identities that shape their experiences (Crenshaw, 2005). It highlights how these intersections create unique forms of privilege or oppression and rejects single-axis approaches to social issues, recognizing that experiences are shaped by multiple factors and differ across different sections of the population. It also emphasizes the need for inclusive activism that addresses the diverse needs of marginalized groups (Crenshaw, 2005). Because poor indigenous women and poor, indigenous LGBTQIA+ people hold multiple subordinate identities, their specific needs are often neglected, rendering them invisible in activist movements (Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008). Instead, these movements prioritize the needs of the dominant prototype of their group (e.g. white urban women). This is also due to colonial legacies that privilege specific prototypes over others, most prominently whiteness, heterosexuality, and masculinity.

Deep-rooted colonial epistemologies, meaning ways of knowing, shape ideas of gender and sexuality in Peru. The family planning program can be considered a result of heteronormative ideas of women's role, at the same time imposing what a family should look like. The resulting human rights violation and ongoing lawsuits additionally dictate who is considered worthy of claiming reproductive rights. Heteronormativity describes cultural and legal norms that assume that there are only two genders, which are reflected in biological sex and naturally attracted to each other (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009). The colonial construction of heteropatriarchal hegemony others people who do not fit the binary categories, which serves to justify their exploitation (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009; Tamale, 2020). Binaries are used to dehumanize people by putting them in opposition to each other (white/non-white, heterosexual/homosexual, natural/unnatural, right/wrong), thereby creating dominant and subordinate groups. Colonialism imposed Eurocentric gender structures on indigenous peoples in Peru, that still sustain systems of oppression based on the coloniality of gender (Lugones, 2007). The coloniality of gender refers to persisting colonial gender hierarchies and norms that oppress indigenous women and LGBTQIA+ indigenous people by presenting them as abnormal and delegitimizing existing indigenous understandings of gender diversity (Lugones, 2007).

Queer theory also critiques the fixed, binary understanding of gender and sexuality as imposed by heteronormativity (Alsop & Lennon, 2002). It challenges the norms and assumptions that dictate what is considered "normal" in terms of sexual orientation and gender identity, advocating for fluidity and an end to hierarchies. At its core, queer theory aims at disrupting the dominant system of heteropatriarchy (Gamson, 2003). As such, it aligns with decolonial discourses, serving to dismantle power structures and reveal the social construction of binaries. In combining queer theory and decolonial theory, we gain a deeper understanding of how rigid identities serve to sustain the oppression of liminal groups. Decolonial queer theory leaves room for decolonial queer thinkers and situated critiques of power relations, making the struggles of racialized queers more visible, and advocating for complete liberation from imposed systems (Belizário, 2016; Bacchetta et al., 2020).

Internalized colonization reinforces the coloniality of being, the idea that colonial legacies still hold authority in shaping our understanding and ways of knowing, establishing what is seen as natural and socially accepted (Tamale, 2020). Decolonial epistemologies entail deconstructing the coloniality of being, and therefore of gender and of power. They challenge, for example, the dominance of the English language, the scientific method, or written forms of knowledge production, which are considered superior. Colonialism rendered non-Western epistemologies inferior, thereby installing and justifying systems of Western hegemony, such as patriarchy and heteronormativity (Grosfoguel, 2013). Resisting naturalized epistemologies of domination is crucial to unveiling power dynamics and deconstructing gender and racial hierarchies. In combining intersectionality, queer theory and decolonial theory, CC addresses gaps in traditional feminist movements. Using a framework of decolonial queer theory allows me to analyze the work of CC and understand the collective's approach as a response to traditional feminism.

3. Feminist Movements in Peru

The Peruvian women's movement emerged in the 1970s and 1980s during the armed conflict with the terrorist group the Shining Path. The conflict resulted in women's issues being sidelined and hence, the separation of feminist movements from political parties and the mobilization of educated, middle-class women (Quiroz-Pérez, 2017). The two most important feminist movements of the

70s were the Flora Tristán Centre and Manuela Ramos Movement. With the re-establishment of democracy, Western neoliberal values were disseminated that foregrounded political autonomy of feminist movements again. This movement achieved institutionalization with the establishment of the Ministry of Women and Vulnerable Populations to address national policies for women (Grabe, 2022). The women participating in this movement were mainly middle-class urban women and they advanced policies such as the PNSRPF 1996-2000 (Quiroz-Pérez, 2017; Stavig, 2017). Women also managed to establish themselves in academia. The institutionalization of these feminist movements was facilitated by their class and education and failed to represent Peruvian women of other classes and ethnicities or misrepresented them by viewing their needs through a Western developmental lens (Bant & Girard, 2008; Quiroz-Pérez, 2017; Grabe, 2022). The coloniality of gender and of power permeated these feminist's agenda, that assumed their own goals to be universal and imperative to all women.

In 2015, a law aiming to eradicate violence against women has seen some success, supported by the collective mobilization of all women during the "Ni una menos" marches in 2016 (Dunning, 2020). In 2019, the ministry published the National Gender Equality Policy aiming at tackling gender-based structural discrimination and inequalities (Grabe, 2022). Following this policy, Congress passed a Gender Parity Law in 2021, introducing a women's quota for Congress. These achievements, while ground-breaking, do not address structural inequalities faced by indigenous, poor LBTIQ women. If anything, they exacerbate these inequalities by putting more privileged women in power. Liminal women, then and now, do not identify with the institutionalized forms of feminism (Quiroz-Pérez, 2017). While white, middle-class feminism foreground autonomy and political power, collectivistic values and reproductive, sexual rights are more important for indigenous women (Quiroz-Pérez, 2017; Bant & Girard, 2008). Their understanding of themselves as women comes from their community and indigenous context and heritage, often challenging Western ideals and representations of individualism and emancipation.

Up until today, Peru's feminist front consists of mainly middle-class urban women from Lima. However, due to social media and increased public media coverage, indigenous women collectives are gaining momentum through their radical role in protests and unapologetic appearance as native women (Rodríguez-Ulloa, 2023; Quiroz-Pérez, 2017). The protests against President Dina Boluarte who came to power after the attempted coup by former President Pedro Castillo, showcased many Andean women taking a stance against the government (Gamarra, 2023). Peru having her first female president could be seen as a win for feminists, but for indigenous women, Castillo being ousted from power and Boluarte taking over without being officially elected, is a sign that rural indigenous presidents, like Castillo, are not accepted in positions of power and that their democratic voice is not valued. Castillo was arguably a mediocre president, but he was democratically elected and supported by an indigenous majority. Indigenous people are demanding a new constitution, indigenous women in their traditional attire marching towards the capital and clashing with police forces have become symbols of resistance (Gamarra, 2023; Rodríguez-Ulloa, 2023). Cholas, a term widely used in South America to refer to women of mixed European and indigenous heritage (mestizas), are being celebrated in the context of the protests for their strength and role in challenging the state.

Indigenous women have always been active in protecting their land and caring for their communities, but their role is often erased in dominant feminist discourses (Quiroz-Pérez, 2017). The articulation of racism within feminism never came to fruition because of a lack of intersectional approaches within the movement and persisting colonialities that privileged a minority of women. Increased visibility for cholas has brought attention to their struggles. So has the creation of new feminisms, that advocate specifically for marginalized women and for decolonial approaches. CC is one of them, using audiovisual media activism, and workshops in their community house "La Munay" to educate and amplify the voices of previously underrepresented LBTIQ Quechua women.

4. Chola Contravisual

CC introduce themselves as:

"a collective of Quechua feminists who seek to achieve dignified, free and happy existences for women and gender non-conforming individuals. Our core business is audiovisual creation, education and cultural management. We promote, in articulation with various networks in Peru and Latin America, innovative experiences of feminist art, based on community processes that activate deep political transformations, networks of affection, creativity and collective action in favor of the autonomy and liberation of women and dissidences"
(Chola Contravisual, n.d.a, homepage)

Their mission revolves around redefining dominant feminist narratives and dismantling naturalized power structures (Mama Cash, 2020). Their critique of traditional feminism addresses the underlying coloniality of gender and of power that defines current feminist agendas. They therefore seek to challenge the acceptance of colonial systems that are entrenched in Peruvian thought and political (in)action. CC advocates for new notions of gender, sexuality and bodies that represent LBTIQ womxn (Chola Contravisal, n.d.b). Their members include professional artists and musicians and their work centers around organizing community activities and producing videos and documentaries (Collantes, 2020). Hence the choice of the collective's name, which represents resistance: The term chola is often used pejoratively and here reclaimed by mestiza womxn while contra means counter, connoting the opposition to dominant visual culture upon which differences based on looks (like race and gender) have been constructed and are challenged by CC through visual means. CC's financial autonomy can be seen as a sign of their distancing from institutionalized feminist movements in Peru, a distance articulated by Zuasnabar as rejection of white, elite, urban feminism (Mama Cash, 2020; Collantes, 2020). This is also achieved through their location being in Huancayo, an Andean town, and their activism in Andean communities, amidst the people they seek to represent, thereby advocating for a decentralization of power and knowledge production.

An exploration of CC's miniseries "Mejor Chola Que Mal Acompañada" demonstrates their approach. The miniseries consists of six short episodes reflecting on being an Andean, chola, feminist and diverse womxn in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic (Chola Contravisual, 2020). Peru experienced a surge in gender-based violence during the pandemic, making addressing underlying systemic issues more prevalent for vulnerable womxn (Muñoz & Water, 2021). The name of the miniseries appeals to indigenous womxn's resistance to dominant gender expectations: it is better to be a chola, albeit marginalized, than badly accompanied. The name also pays homage to the victims of domestic violence. The episodes discuss race, cultural heritage, the body, liberation, social issues faced by rural womxn, and the meaning of freedom and death. They focus on evoking emotions and creating a connection with the viewer through affective ways of showing and telling. Criticisms of colonial constructs, capitalism and a state that misrepresents them are interwoven with images of everyday life, raising existential questions about crucial differences.

In episode 1, while showing close-ups of the protagonist hands making tea, we hear them say: "One day I discovered, or they made me discover, that my skin color was not beautiful" (Chola Contravisual, 2020a, July 8, 0:25). Here, they address how their skin color marks their bodies and how their alleged racial inferiority, experienced through being called ugly, is constructed. They refer to those enacting coloniality as "they", challenging the naturalization of entrenched colonial conceptions, like brown skin being ugly or dirty. The protagonist was made to discover by encountering coloniality in their everyday life, internalizing oppressive narratives that now pervade mundane activities, like making tea and gardening. Race as a theme is also indirectly addressed in episode 3, where the protagonist is shown digging in soil with their bare hands, then looking in a mirror, comparing their skin tone to the color of earth (Chola Contravisual, 2020c, September 8). They note that it is the color of skin, not dirt. By reflecting on brown skin's naturalness and comparing it to the color of earth, they reclaim stereotypes associated with their skin tone, deconstructing binary colonial constructs of natural/unnatural (Chola Contravisual, 2020c, September 8).

Delving into emotions is presented as an avenue to resist coloniality (Chola Contravisual, 2020c, September 8, 1:35). Emotional, empathic ways of making sense of experiences furthermore challenge the Eurocentric notion of objective, written, rational knowledge being superior to other practices of knowledge production (Lugones, 2007; Tamale, 2020). Emotions are evoked through affective filmmaking techniques, such as close-up shots that create an intimate relationship with the protagonist as they a filmed during private moments, even in the shower. Additionally, personal stories and childhood memories provoke empathy, humanizing the protagonist by portraying them as a person with a past, a present, and a future. The protagonist also does not shy away from showing emotions through facial expressions and exclamations, such as "Damn, that makes me so mad!" (Chola Contravisual, 2020d, September 8).

CC challenges the coloniality of gender by highlighting issues rural indigenous womxn face and how their labor is obscured by urban capitalism. In episode 4, we see the protagonist grocery shopping and preparing a meal. They raise the question, why people thank God for their food while it is the hard work and wisdom of campesinas [countrywomxn] that produces crops, bringing attention to the precarity of female farmwork that is essential to sustain human life (Chola Contravisual, 2020d, September 8).

Throughout the miniseries, space for multiple identities is created by using x in place of gendered terms in both spoken language and subtitles. On their "about us" page, CC introduces themselves as "nosotrxs", thereby challenging gendered language binaries (Chola Contravisual, n.d.b). Spanish is a gendered language, which tends to reinforce gender binaries and therefore other dichotomies, such as human/non-human. By removing the gendered marker in "nosotros/ nosotras" [us] and replacing it with a neutral x, they signal the rejection of the coloniality of gender and advocate for fluid, non-binary identities. They emphasize that all womxn, regardless of their sexual orientation, need to be included in feminist movements and deserve to see the fruits of feminist activism (Collantes, 2020). They thereby deconstruct naturalized identities imposed by colonialism that place racialized women in a dehumanizing position (Lugones, 2007). This persisting colonial conceptualization of gender, race, and sexuality makes liminal women more prone to gender-based violence and other forms of exploitation, central issues for CC.

The coloniality of power is challenged by recounting indigenous teachings of their grandmothers to care for the dead, a collectivistic practice, that is impeded by the pandemic but is nevertheless important to indigenous descendants (Chola Contravisual, 2020b, September 8). Community and the power of collective are emphasized throughout, but especially in episode 5. The protagonist voices that singing and creating with their friends is healing; singing brings liberation (Chola Contravisual, 2020e, September 8). By reclaiming subaltern forms of activism and expression and knowing through feeling, through the senses rather than academic inquiry they foreground decolonial epistemologies. This includes reclaiming the erasure of native languages, for example by calling projects Quechua names and representing Quechua artists on their page. Proudly speaking Quechua throughout the series and proclaiming choosing to not belong in the miniseries undermines the authority of coloniality still persisting in traditional feminist movements (Chola Contravisual, 2020a, July 3). Andean music underlines this sentiment by platforming indigenous art.

CC is reclaiming subjectivity by representing themselves in ways they see fit (Collantes, 2020), achieved through embodied activism (Martin, 2022). The body as a site of oppression, a biological entity used by the colonial system to categorize and justify exploitation, is reclaimed by enacting resistance (Martin, 2022; Garner, 2021). Violence against the body, be it femicide or forced sterilization, is used to disempower and silence womxn. The body as biological marker is used to classify and oppress people deemed unnatural or inferior by the coloniality of gender and of power (Lugones, 2008; Tamale, 2020). CC embodies activism through dancing, making music, performing sexuality and gender and practices of caring for each other and their community (Collantes, 2020). The protagonist of the miniseries is shown doing activism through mundane practices, she is embodying activism through her thinking and questioning, singing and unapologetically being an Andean, chola, feminist and diverse womxn (Chola Contravisual, 2020a, July 3).

5. New Feminisms: Towards an Intersectional, Decolonial, Queer Movement

CC responds to traditional feminism by challenging and contributing to it through an intersectional, queer, decolonial lens. Because they saw themselves, and other womxn with multiple subaltern identities under- or misrepresented within institutionalized feminist movements in Peru, they decided to form their own new feminism. They reject the generalizing term "nosotras" and replace it by "nosotrxs" to include the experiences of all feminized bodies. They also reject gender binaries and heteronormativity that serve as tools of coloniality to oppress subaltern people. Other artwork on their website portrays Andean sexual dissidents and their Pride march serves to unite gender non-conforming and other liminal identities. As such, they embrace fluidity but organize around identities for political purposes, to point out the pain that is collectively incurred through categorization (Collantes, 2020). Their methods do not follow a Eurocentric logic of knowledge production but seize indigenous ways of knowing. They support LBTIQ people through workshops and a community house located in Huancayo. Their work is meaningful because these people have been previously ignored and silenced in Andean communities and traditional feminist movements but face the most violence.

CC's work gained momentum due to the increased visibility of rural, indigenous women, enabled through digital media. Their digital art bridges art, technology, and politics, becoming a site of resistance to unrelenting oppression. As traditional feminist movements, which claim to represent all women, fail poor, indigenous LBTIQ people, CC artists unapologetically embrace their multiple intersecting identities and show them to the world. While doing so, their message remains tightly interwoven with the fabric of everyday life, grounded in the lived experiences of the mundane, highlighting the intrinsicality and "naturalness" of their ways of being, thereby contesting Western gender binaries. It also serves to showcase the insidious nature of oppressive power that is deeply entrenched in ways of thinking and being, permeating daily activities. Drawing on indigenous epistemologies, CC shows us alternatives to contesting power that are better attuned to the needs of the most marginalized.

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RESISTING THE COMMODIFICATION OF MEMORY

AIDS Memorial Culture in Félix González-Torres' Candy Works

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Abstract At the center of this paper lies a pile of candy whose properties can inspire resistance against the commodification of memory. As popular media discourses often historize and depoliticize the immediacy of HIV/AIDS, the candy piles of Félix González-Torres manage to do the opposite. It practices remembrance of the pandemic in the 1980s, while resisting state control over remembrance narratives, and rejuvenation of the discourse on HIV/AIDS. This paper wants to interrogate the particular methods of González-Torres' work that realize remembrance on its own terms. Partly through embracing the themes of ephemerality, queerness, loss, illness, and transience.
Keywords: memory, queerness, ephemerality, visual arts, HIV/AIDS

1. Introduction

HIV/AIDS is still affecting many lives with an estimated 40 million HIV+ people in 2022 (WHO, 2023). Although, compared to the 1980s, the cultural conversations, protests, and immediacy on this issue shrank in the West. Most of the contemporary media around HIV/AIDS historicizes the virus in connection with the AIDS pandemic in the 1980s (Stamm, 2020, p.621). This process can be analyzed as a commodification of memory, which means that cultural memory is stripped of its political power, and its questioning nature, to be made into an easily consumable product (Mbembe, 2002, p.22).

Still, activist groups and artists are challenging the process of forgetting the complicity of the state and mainstream society when acting on the crisis. They highlight the ongoing urgency of the issue and keep evaluating the actions of the past, questioning the structures of the now. Félix González-Torres series 'Candy Works' is an example of such efforts (Wyrick, 1993, pp.44). Despite the death of the artist in 1996, his artworks still circulate in public spaces today. One of them is *"Untitled" (A Portrait of Ross in L.A.)*, which shows a 175lb heavy pile of colorful candy piled up in the exhibition space. It has an unusual quality- spectators are not prohibited from taking away pieces of candy thus the work is in everlasting transformation of depleting and replenishing. The work is in reference to Félix's partner Ross Laycock who died of AIDS in 1991, the year the work was created, and thus conveys a powerful message about memory of loss, and love in relation to HIV/AIDS.

Félix González-Torres work, due to its contemporary circulation, and depth, seems not to fall into the same issue of commodification as other cultural productions do. This leads to the need for further inquiry, which is the research question of this paper. It asks, how does the work *"Untitled" (A Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* resist the commodification of memory? This paper attempts to answer this question by highlighting three characteristics of the work, for one its ephemeral qualities, second, its political meaning and virality, and third, its power of longevity and regeneration.

2. Resistance in Remembrance

2.1 Ephemeral Traces

Since the world is finite and there is limited space in archives, cultural memory undergoes a selective process of what is worthy of remembering. Thus, discarding a memory in favor of another becomes a political choice. Often this process has negative implications for marginalized groups whose histories, cultures, and voices are being displaced by hegemonic cultural memory. But even if the memory that challenges dominant cultural narratives is archived, it is threatened to lose its political power. Mbembe (2002) describes, if memory is archived it is "*(...) removed from time and from life, (...) to establish an unquestionable authority over them and to tame the violence and cruelty of which the 'remains' are capable, (...)*" (p.22). The consequence of archiving is that the memory falls into the hands of the state, the monopoly of power, and thus the consumption of that memory is controlled. It is turned into a product of digestible mass consumption only possible through commodifying memory by stripping it of its viral political threat to disrupt the present order and thus questions the legitimacy of the state (Mbembe, 2002).

Exemplary of such process is the HIV/AIDS pandemic which, especially in the Western context, is regarded as an issue of the past. Mainstream media situates compelling stories around HIV/AIDS, such as *It's A Sin* (2021), *Pose* (2018), or *Dallas Buyer Club* (2013), in the 1980s, which makes the issue at hand appear like something that is overcome and finished. The events of the past still reach into the future, but the people in power are not being held accountable for the deaths of millions, and the threat of HIV/AIDS today is still largely overlooked. Such paralysis regarding the real-life, political implications of HIV/AIDS could be seen as an effect of this commodification.

This leads to the question of what the artist Félix González-Torres is doing differently compared to popular media when thematizing HIV/AIDS. The use of medium and technique might be the first, and most obvious difference. As a visual artist, there are fewer limits compared to the creators of movies who focus on maximizing story, entertainment, and profit. Instead of film, his work transports its themes regarding HIV/AIDS through a minimalist and timeless tool: candy. *"Untitled" (A Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* consists of a 175lb pile of colorful, individually wrapped, identical, candy pieces. The candy is arranged in precise piles or geometrical shapes like rectangles on the floor. This clean-cut arrangement transports a sense of rigor through its accurate appearance. However, this rigor is broken through when spectators decide to take pieces of the candy. Through this slow process of depletion intricate feelings, those of loss and incompletion, rise to the surface. The performance cycle of the work - the arrangement of the candy, the shrinking of the piles through spectators, the expression of emotions through this deterioration, and regeneration through the refilling of the piles - reinforces this. *"Untitled" (A Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* breaks through the rigor and disintegrates into ephemeral traces of the work itself (Kee, 2019).

Ephemera is concerned with things that are fading away, in transition, almost ungraspable, so how can something so translucent be a part of cultural memory which often relies upon archives storing material evidence? Even though through the act of performance, eating the candy, the work itself is destroyed traces of it always remain. May it be the colorful wrapping paper that is discharged, the remaining taste of sugar in one's mouth, or the satisfactory feeling of eating candy. Such traces, remainders after performance, can be understood as evidence that has taken on a different mode of materiality. A kind of materiality that is connected to lived experience instead of a material object (Muñoz, 1996).

In the specific case of *"Untitled" (A Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* such lived experience is loss caused by the death of a lover. This plays into the autobiographical interpretation of the work that connects it to Ross Laycock, Félix Golzález-Torres partner who died of AIDS in 1991. As the title suggests, the pile of candy can be understood as a portrait of Ross during his suffering. For one representing sweet, colorful candy almost reminds of endearing nicknames for a lover, while the depletion of the pile indicates the process of being consumed by the illness and dying. The spectator becomes a witness to this loss, and subsequently also a witness to the devastation HIV/AIDS caused. (Rounthwaite, 2010). Being a witness to the pandemic plays into the responsibility of survivors and strengthens the experiences of marginalized groups who were especially vulnerable. Thus, the ephemeral qualities of the work, which transport memory of lived experience are a way to tell stories around Queerness without falling into the trap of commodification (Muñoz, 1996).

Preserving memory of Queer life does not need to be done through hegemonic media and under the authority of the state. As both not only spin hollow representations of Queerness for neoliberal campaigns, but, have first and foremost relentlessly been the institutions of oppression against Queer life. The ephemeral is a way to avoid the appropriation of a minoritarian culture and allows perseverance without institutional collaboration. Instead, it offers intimate witnessing of traces of a life, a life that maybe was as sweet, desirable, and playful as candy. But there is more, as the spectators are not just witnessing the work but also taking part in the lived experience. By extracting the candy, they are affecting the loss. Becoming entangled in the piece, even complicit in it, the spectator cannot part from what they have taken in. Through the indulgence of the candy, they are infected with an indelible experience because they have affected the erasure.

2.2 A Viral Effect

This consequence highlights the second central quality of the work to resist the commodification of memory, and that is the work's political message transported through its virality. When encountering the work, the spectator is facing a dilemma: do they take the candy going against the norm of museums not to touch, let alone eat the displays or do they refuse the sweet taste of the colorful treat? It is a decision between authority and desire, but the predicament reaches even further when confronted with the object represented by the candy. The spectator is then faced with the choice of indulging a piece of an HIV+ gay man's body. Choosing to do so implies a political stance, especially, when keeping in mind the historical context of the work which is set in the early 1990s. At that time the Queer body was associated with disease, a moral disease but also in the literal sense the infection with HIV/AIDS. Equating Queerness with illness assumes that non-Queers are protected from contracting, infecting, and dying. Not only accepting the death of human beings as a consequence but also wanting the erasure of Queerness itself (Chambers-Letson, 2009).

This sentiment is not unique to HIV/AIDS during the 1980s and 90s but the blossoming of a long-reaching marginalization of Queerness within the Western context. Despite the faint wish of liberal ideology to prove progress the persecution of Queer practices, expressions, and lives under the narrative of moral and mental disease remains a contemporary reality. Thus, the artwork is not a relic of the past, telling a story of loss and survival during the 1980s HIV/AIDS pandemic. It is loaded with political immediacy because the debate on illness and Queerness is a contemporary one. The choice to eat, indulge, and infect is ideological. The candy pile allows the spectator to spread that ideology just like a virus by literally taking something into the body, leaving an irreversible mark, an ephemeral trace.

The agents of González-Torres ideology carry the traces of experiences with them, eventually dispersing them around the world. For this purpose of distribution and to effectively infect as many as possible, the artwork must be easy to replicate. Candy is a mass-producible medium, factory-made and cheap (Chamber-Letson, 2009). At first, this might seem counterintuitive to promote mass consumption, because the main point of critique of this paper is the commodification of memory, which is aimed at making memory consumable. However, it is necessary to distinguish if consumption presupposes eradicating the political or if the political is the center of this consumption. Also, the question of who controls consumption arises. In the case of Candy Works, the aspect of a mass-producible medium democratizes consumption. This is opposed to the creation of a popular show whose production has many more barriers.

In terms of circulation and longevity, which are important aspects to keep in mind when creating art concerned with cultural memory, mass production can be favorable. This is mainly because a delicately crafted unique even if durable cannot be in multiple places at once. Furthermore, there might be the danger that a singular artwork gets stuck in the past as a relic in the archives. Félix González-Torres wanted to avoid this status at all costs, stating that if his works lost their contemporary cultural relevance they should not be manifested (Chambers-Letson, 2009). Thus, by using a common mass-produced medium with ephemeral qualities this archiving is avoided. When displayed it can be assured that the pile of candy still radiates with political meaning, because if not then it is just a simple pile of candy.

The understanding of art as a political vehicle was central to González-Torres' artworks. As a member of the art collective Group Material, he was also committed *"to the creation, organization, and promotion of an art dedicated to social communication and political change"* (Wyrick, 1993, p.45). The collective operated from 1987, the start of González-Torres artmaking until 1991, combining activist aspirations with the profession as an artist. Before Candy Works, which was created in 1991, González-Torres created artworks addressing the HIV/AIDS pandemic in collaboration with the other artists in the collective. Being aware of this context helps to further underline that the spread of political ideology is a central idea to the work in question. Shaped by collaborative art activism González-Torres' proposal of the HIV-infected body as edible candy wants to provoke a political dilemma (Wyrick, 1993).

2.3 Perseverance Without an Archive

To keep this political virality alive, the aspect of longevity comes into play. As already mentioned, the work strives to avoid archiving and should only be manifested if it is culturally relevant. Thus, it is resisting the commodification of memory because it keeps its political power by making the dilemma of ingesting the HIV+ body a contemporary debate. Central to this longevity is using a mass-producible medium, but the work is also protected by other mechanisms giving it infinite life. These are the instructions given through the certificates of authenticity and ownership.

Usually, certificates of authenticity and ownership are transferred from the artist or previous owner to the new owner when a work is sold. It is a document assuring the new owner that the work bought is original and confirming its present value. But in the case of González-Torres' artworks the certificate's meaning gets extended. The owner of one of his candy works is not just buying a prestigious artwork but also the responsibility that comes with owning this ephemeral piece (Kee, 2019). These responsibilities are outlined with a set of instructions that accompany the work when purchased. In the conceptual art world, such instructions that communicate the artist's intention and give orders on whom to take care of the work are not unusual.

One of the instructions for the work *"Untitled" (A Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* reads that the owner should regularly maintain the piles. This assures that one central quality of the candy works is cared for which is the aspect of "endless supply" (Kee, 2019). The pile of candy even though it is depleting, should never be fully consumed, the loss is never totalizing but always impending. To fulfill the instructions and prevent the vanishing, workers must routinely refill the pile, simulating that there is an endless supply. This goes against the common understanding of reality that no amount is infinite, proving or at least hoping that some things can live forever. Thus, regeneration becomes a central theme to the work simultaneously with loss (Chambers-Letson, 2009).

Connecting this wish for an endless life with the autobiographical interpretation of the work one can assume that replenishing the piles is an attempt to restore Ross Laycock, González-Torre's partner. The artist himself describes the slow death of Ross as a disappearance. In an interview, he narrates:

"(…) this beautiful, incredible body, this entity of perfection just physically, thoroughly disappear right in front of your eyes. (…) Just disappear like a dried flower. (…) I would say that when he was becoming less of a person I was loving him more. Every lesion he got I loved him more. Until the last second. I told him, "I want to be there until your last breath," and I was there to his last breath. (...)"
(Bleckner & Gonzalez-Torres, 1995, p.47)

Processing this painful experience González-Torres states that the work stems from his fear of losing everything, losing his partner. Thus, the work he has created is infinite, and cannot disappear. However, the work is not a representation of a moment frozen in time forever cherishing the love that was but instead the never-ending moment of disappearance (Rounthwaite, 2010). Thus, not just the forever disappearance in the archives but also the plain fear of losing a loved one is trying to be prevented by instructing an endless supply of candy.

Another central quality of the instructions is their great flexibility. An authoritarian quality operating with rigor to dictate how the artwork should be displayed is missing from González-Torres instructions. Rather, they are especially keen on seeing the work as a changeable, flexible, and ephemeral situation. For example, one of the instructions is that the size of the work should be based on standards depending on the context the work is displayed. Such flexibility allows for authentic reinterpretations in different spaces. Furthermore, not even the specific type of candy is fixed. Sometimes it is pointed out what color the candy should be, but a product-specific instruction is missing (Kee, 2019). The flexibility of the instructions lets the work live on because it can adapt to future contexts.

Taking the right measurements for it to prevail thus becomes the responsibility of the owner. This extends the understanding of the owner to also being the caretaker of the work. Creating a collaborative endeavor between the artist followed by his intentions, and the new owner/caretaker navigating the contemporary context. Commitment and integrity, as well as trust, are key in this collaboration, sometimes even requiring the neglect of economic interest for the maintenance of the artwork (Kee, 2019). In this way the artwork can continue faithful to original intentions but flexible to the current context, transporting its story of loss and love through time and space.

Other contemporary artists have also picked up this ambition, reinterpreting how this infinite aspect outside of storage in the archive can be achieved. This poses new questions and pathways for navigating the endeavor of memory as a collective effort. Reckitt (2011) asks

"Can a creative gesture begun by one artist be passed like a baton through the years to be continued or completed by another artist in another time so that it never has to end but fulfills Félix Gonzalez-Torres 's ambition to become 'endless copies?" (p.59).

This leads to the imagination of how memory could be reimagined to be protected, reproduced, and reinterpreted by many, instead of a single authority. Implying that the changing of memory might be preferable to its commodification which takes away crucial political meanings.

3. Wrapping It Up

The central aim of this research paper was to inquire what the work *"Untitled" (A Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* does to resist the commodification of memory. Many mainstream pop-cultural productions around the HIV/AIDS crisis tend to historicize the events ignoring important questions of responsibility and immediacy of the topic (Stamm, 2020). As outlined, the work transcends specific contexts in contrast to some of these productions through the themes of the ephemeral, the political, virality, regeneration, and longevity. Their interplay creates a complex situation in which the need for archiving is rejected and even made obsolete.

Through the ephemeral qualities the telling of Queer lived experiences about loss due to HIV/AIDS is possible. Using the ephemeral protects Queerness from commodification because it is not graspable and essentialized but allows for a trace to be sufficient evidence for the events that have occurred (Muñoz, 1996). Set in the context of Queer experiences of HIV/AIDS the work is already politically loaded due to embodying the consequences of the inactions of heterosexist society. This oppositional standpoint can be spread, like a metaphorical virus, through the traces of the experience the work leaves (Chambers-Letson, 2009). This independent action, to infect, the work itself implies an autonomous nature separate from the artist, leading to the final aspects of regeneration and longevity. The work is detached from the control of the past and instead opens for reinterpretation and alterations. This keeps the artist's wish for longevity alive knowing that the only way to achieve this is by moving on from the past (Kee, 2019)

Taking the merging of these themes into consideration, they together form a shield against the commodification of the loss González-Torres tried to process through the creation of Candy Works. An act of staying loyal to his lost partner, the Queer community he was a part of, and his political ideology expressed through his activism and work in Group Material (Wyrick, 1993). The simple pile of candy on the ground even when telling a story of loss, also promises hope. Not just through its reoccurring regeneration but also because its existence is a resistance to the popular forms of telling stories of Queer lives with HIV/AIDS and proposes remembrance outside of the archive.

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GURDJIEFF IN THE SOVIET NEW AGE

Esoteric Resistance and Spiritual Rebellion

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Abstract The Soviet Union's totalitarian ideology suppressed religious and spiritual practices. Due to the state's repression towards the Orthodox Church, people found reassurance in underground esoteric movements which offered alternative paths to spirituality. Gurdjieff's emphasis on inner transformation provided a non-institutional spiritual framework that resonated with Soviet dissidents. This paper examines the influence of Gurdjieff's teachings on the Soviet spiritual underground and how Gurdjieff's teachings on self-fulfilment intensified resistance towards state atheism. Furthermore, by contextualising the New Age Movement in the Soviet Union, this study provides new insights into how it operated beyond the Western world and adapted to a repressive ideological environment.
Keywords: Gurdjieff, New Age Movement, Soviet Union, Esotericism

1. Introduction

Giorgi Ivanovich Gurdjieff (1866-1949) synthesised his esoteric teachings under the title: 'The Work.' He was born into a Greek-Armenian family in Gyumri, Armenia. However, during his life, the city was under the Russian Empire and named Alexandropol. During his life, he claimed that he had discovered secret knowledge during his travels to 'the East.' In his book, *Meetings with Remarkable Men* (2015 [1963]), he introduces his travels to Western and Central Asia, Eastern Africa, Tibet, and Siberia. However, the book has been deemed a rather unreliable autobiography. He presented his studies and teachings mostly towards 'the Western world'. Gurdjieff targeted mainly European and American people who were receptive to his 'exotic Eastern' spirituality. Furthermore, he was also actively spreading his teachings within imperial Russia until the Revolution of 1917 (Sutcliffe & Willmett, 2020).

With the Bolshevik Revolution, Gurdjieff went into exile to Paris, where he was able to continue his teachings. Even though he could not live through the spiritual revival of the 1960s and 1970s of the New Age Movement, his teachings of 'The Work' were used on the other side of the Iron Curtain. His esoteric teachings helped secret societies practice alternative spirituality during these times, even with state atheism being a fundamental doctrine of Soviet ideology. In the 1960s and 1970s, a thaw in the Soviet Union helped Gurdjieff's ideas spread. People of the U.S.S.R. were able to rediscover Gurdjieff's teachings of 'The Work' (Puttick, 2000; Menzel, 2013).

This essay will analyse Gurdjieff's teachings and the spiritual revival in the Soviet Union in the 1960s and 1970s. For this, a research question was formulated: 'How did Gurdjieff's teachings contribute to the revival of spirituality in the Soviet Union?' To address the research question, the paper will first introduce Gurdjieff's esoteric teachings. Then, the atheistic environment of the Soviet Union will be presented to showcase how Gurdjieff's ideas and the Soviet Union co-existed within the spiritual revival of the New Age Movement in the 1960s and 1970s. Finally, a conclusion of the findings will be given.

2. G. I. Gurdjieff

George Ivanovich Gurdjieff's 'The Work' or 'The Fourth Way' is a spirituality that explains that a person's soul, after being born, is stuck in the Modern world's fixation on 'personality,' leaving one not really conscious. The core of his teaching, 'The Work,' is that Gurdjieff is a holder of a deeper knowledge, a state which he also called 'being,' that others can also accomplish. He intended to unite spiritualism and science by capitalising on the West's obsession with Orientalism (Gordon, 1978; Petsche, 2011). Gurdjieff built up a system of "neutral scientific observation of one's self" (Anderson, 1991, p.55). He built the 'Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man' on the idea that most humans live in a state of 'autonomous existence,' living in a constant state of sleep. The ego, according to 'The Work,' controls all actions of a person, but the problem with an ego-based existence is that it can only react to external forces. As such, people need to wake up from the state of sleep to reach their full potential (Gurdjieff, 1933; Petsche, 2011; Sutcliffe & Willmett, 2020).

> A modern man lives in sleep, in sleep he is born and in sleep he dies. About sleep, its significance and its role in life, we will speak later. But at present just think of one thing, what *knowledge* can a sleeping man have? And if you think about it and at the same time remember that *sleep* is the chief feature of our being, it will at once become clear to you that if a man really wants knowledge, he must first of all think about how to wake, that is, about how to change his *being*. (Ouspensky, 1950, p.73)

A person, according to Gurdjieff, is born with a state of enlightenment but gets trapped and encapsulated by personality, which creates a 'false-I' in which people believe that they are conscious. However, a person can escape from this by 'working on' themselves, and they can develop their 'real I,' their 'essence'. To break away from the ego, according to 'The Work,' is to create a 'soul'. However, this practice or work can only be achieved by active effort and struggle. The person needs to recognise that spiritual growth requires persistent effort and overcoming internal obstacles. Gurdjieff claims that struggle is a necessary component of transformation (Ouspensky, 1977; Sutcliffe & Willmett, 2020).

> I decided to do this without fail so that this initial chapter of mine, predetermined as I have already said to awaken your consciousness, should fully justify its purpose, and reaching not only your, in my opinion, as yet only fictitious "consciousness," but also your real consciousness, that is to say, what you call your subconscious, might, for the first time, compel you to reflect actively.
> (Gurdjieff, 1950, p.25-26)

The awakening, according to 'The Work,' is done by integrating the three traditional ways of spiritual development: the way of the fakir (physical discipline), the way of the monk (emotional devotion), and the way of the yogi (mental concentration). Thus, Gurdjieff aimed to create a 'Fourth Way;' which is the way his student Ouspensky (1977) referred to the teachings of 'The Work.' By integrating these approaches, Gurdjieff aimed to create a more balanced and comprehensive path to spiritual growth. This also shows that Gurdjieff's spirituality tapped into perennial philosophy by showcasing that there is a common core shared by other spiritualities (Ouspensky, 1977; Sutcliffe & Willmett, 2020).

To 'awaken' according to Gurdjieff, one needs to practise a state of consciousness. This practice was mainly done in groups where people could help each other achieve 'awakening'. These groups engaged in physical work, ritualised eating and drinking, movements known as 'sacred dances,' and many 'inner exercises' (Cusack, 2016; Ouspensky, 1950; Petsche, 2011). This method claims to connect the body and the mind. He claimed that through self-observation, self-knowledge is gained. This knowledge can then be used in the practice of self-remembrance, which leads to the state of consciousness, or enlightenment, according to Gurdjieff. However, it was emphasised that self-knowledge is key since if one tries to seek change before understanding oneself, one will fail to achieve anything. This sense of 'working on oneself' is where the name 'The Work' comes from (Gurdjieff, 1950; Ouspensky, 1977; Sutcliffe & Willmett, 2020; Wellbeloved, 2013).

The aim of 'The Work' is to show people how they can meet their own needs. It is an individual process since all individuals will have a different encounter with consciousness, but it is not individualistic. 'The Work' is "'self-oriented' and must be practised by the 'individual,' it is not 'individualistic'" (Sutcliffe & Willmett, 2020, p.10) since the practitioners must also interact in a group "to come to know themselves and their particular foibles (their 'chief feature'), and through this encounter to support each other to 'wake up' through negotiating their interpersonal frictions" (Sutcliffe & Willmett, 2020, p.10). According to 'The Work', this type of group work can help break free from the prison constructed by the so-called 'false-I' with the help of the guru, Gurdjieff, who was seen as the 'escapee.' This escape is assisted under the authority of an 'escapee'. This could solely be Gurdjieff, even though he claimed that others could also reach consciousness (Sutcliffe & Willmett, 2020; Ouspensky, 1950; Wellbeloved, 2013).

'The Work' also believes that Gurdjieff is the only enlightened or conscious being. This hierarchy then created schisms within 'The Work'. Nonetheless, Gurdjieff's work kept on affecting the world and even though he was exiled from Russia during the Revolution of 1917, his work kept the spiritual scene of the country alive even under the atheist Soviet Union. Even though Gurdjieff developed his teachings in pre-revolutionary Russia, he continued to have an impact on the area during the Soviet era because of the New Age Movement (Menzel, 2013; Sutcliffe & Willmett, 2020).

3. Soviet Atheism

The introduction of official atheism into the state's ideology under Stalinist Soviet Communism severely damaged the nation's spiritual life (Kungurtsev & Luchakova, 1996). Stalinism became a totalitarian ideology, aimed to "defend the interests of the state and to extend its influence into all spheres of personal and social life" (Van Den Bercken, 1985, p.269). Hence, people living under the Soviet Union could not hold any ideological debates in public. Otherwise, they could find themselves ostracised by the state, since it enforced its ideological devotion with political force. The Stalinist rule over the Soviet Union hindered the spiritual life of many (Van Den Bercken, 1985).

When talking about Soviet atheism, it is important to note that it is not the same as Western atheism. The former bans religions altogether, whereas the latter claims that there is no God. The role of state atheism was to eliminate any competing ideas. A totalitarian ideology like Soviet Communism is unable to acknowledge opposing ideologies since intellectual plurality would have destroyed the government's legitimacy. The totalitarian control would cease to exist, and the Soviet Communists would lose their authority over the country. Religion was seen as a competitive ideology since spiritual seekers were seen by the Communist Party leaders and the KGB as individuals who would rather not give up their beliefs at the altar of the Soviet ideology due to their sacrosanct devotion. Thus, many religious or spiritual figures became 'enemies of Soviet power' and were persecuted (Kungurtsev & Luchakova, 1996; Van Den Bercken, 1985).

Stalinist Russia faced aggressive atheism and persecution of believers. The 1920s witnessed the targeting of occultist leaders and members, and by the 1930s, the nation had lost all of its former secret societies (Krasztev, 2019). Khrushchev, who followed Stalin after his death in 1953, continued to maintain an aggressive anti-religious sentiment. However, he was met with 'disappointments and failures' since, parallel to this harsh policy, he also started a strong de-Stalinisation. This reform put a halt to the blind dedication towards Stalinism and let spirituality back into people's lives. By the time Khrushchev wanted to change that, he could not do much about it (Gordeeva, 2017; Judt, 2011; Shlikhta, 2023).

When Brezhnev took over in 1964, his policies throughout the 1960s-1980s included reorientation to manage the Church's power and visibility, rather than attempting to eradicate them due to the comprehensive effects of de-Stalinisation that caused disenchantment with Stalin's Communism. Furthermore, Brezhnev also realised that he could not hold onto the Soviet Union in the same way as Stalin's time. As such, his doctrine issued peaceful coexistence with the satellite state and the only time the mother country would intervene was if the political authority of Communism would be questioned. The conditions of Khruschev's de-Stalinisation and Brezhnev's moderate relative tolerance towards religious groups assisted alternative spiritualities to rise during the 1960s and 1970s (Menzel, 2013; Michnik, 1986; Shlikhta, 2023).

The 1960s and 1970s also saw the religious revival through the New Age Movement; "a social phenomenon, which has emerged during the 1970s and which has adopted and further developed a secularized esoteric belief system" (Hanegraaff, 1999, p.146). Within the New Age Movement, the underground cultic milieu became aware of itself. Groups of people independently worked towards the same goal of individual spirituality and self-improvement (Chryssides, 2007; Hanegraaff, 1999; Partridge, 2004; Possamaï, 2007). The countercultural revolution and its break from the traditional way of life reached beyond the Iron Curtain. This movement helped non-conformist ideologies spread and independent religious communities started to erupt, led by Soviet intellectuals. Occultist dissident groups started to form and silently fight against the regime within the framework of the New Age Movement (Kungurtsev & Luchakova, 1996; Partridge, 2004; Tchepournaya, 2003).

Even though there was a massive repression of religion under the Stalinist era, the occult traditions never died. This continued practice could aid occultists' claim that spiritual yearning is a part of human nature that cannot be silenced by external forces, like the Soviet state atheism (Clark, 2001; Kungurtsev & Luchakova, 1996; Menzel, 2013). One figure that played an important role in Soviet spiritual revival was Gurdjieff. Although by the spiritual revival of the 1960s and 1970s, Gurdjieff was already dead and was mostly famous outside the Soviet Union, his teachings sparked interest within the region due to the historical factors that were listed before (Sutcliffe & Willmett, 2020). Gurdjieff's teachings returned to the underground spiritual mainstream during the 1950s, when some of his students were released from the GULAG. This led to the formation of underground spiritual movements based on Gurdjieff's teachings on self-fulfilment (Gordeeva, 2017; Menzel & Hagemeister, 2012).

4. Gurdjieff and the New Age Movement in the Soviet Union

The rediscovery of alternative spirituality within the U.S.S.R. was aided through the New Age Movement. The New Age Movement in the Soviet Union resulted in an underground circulation of knowledge of alternative spiritualities, to which Gurdjieff's teachings had a great influence on. His works and teachings were redistributed in the form of samizdat (Menzel & Hagemeister, 2012). These illegal pieces of literature were smuggled into the country and reproduced uncensored on private typewriters. Books and manuals were printed and redistributed illegally within the Soviet spiritual underground. As such, they became highly useful in assisting the innate religious yearning that many spiritual leaders claimed to satisfy (Gordeeva, 2017; Kungurtsev & Luchakova, 1996; Martin, 2023).

The members of these communities of dissidents had to remain in secrecy since even after the thaw of de-Stalinisation that brought relative freedoms towards spiritual yearning, structural opportunities for religious organisations remained limited due to the ingrained Soviet atheism. As such, to avoid getting caught, only a select few could join the underground network. Prospective members were brought in by members of the underground. Due to the repression, one had to earn the members' trust (Tchepournaya, 2003). These communities could mostly be found in urban areas, around the big cities, where samizdat knowledge could come together and be spread (Krasztev, 2019). There, they could read and discuss the texts and practice 'The Work' through engaging in the 'sacred dances' and 'inner exercises' of self-observation to result in 'waking up' (Cusack, 2016; Menzel, 2013). Furthermore, it is also important to mention that no centralised movement of 'The Work' existed, but rather these underground communities were fragmented and local circles (Sutcliffe & Willmett, 2020).

Members of the spiritual underground mostly included intellectuals and artists who had greater access to the knowledge circulation that the samizdat brought in. Those who could join the underground were able to spread the teachings of Gurdjieff towards the general public (Menzel & Hagemeister, 2012). Gurdjieff's teachings were appealing to Soviet intellectuals and artists because of their intent of waking up and struggling to remain conscious, which corresponded to the political environment of the thaw during the 1960s and 1970s. Artists integrated specific elements of 'The Work' into their art, namely of shock and provocation. These subtly spread 'The Work' even to those who did not have access to the underground (Menzel, 2013). Gurdjieff's teachings gave people access to peek over the Iron Curtain. However, this struggle did not directly confront Soviet ideology since 'The Work' emphasised spiritual growth while remaining active in daily life (Menzel & Hagemeister, 2012; Michnik, 1986).

The nature of 'The Work' also helped with the redistribution of its teachings. It was relatively compatible with the Soviet doctrine, which made it easier to spread even within Soviet atheism. Gurdjieff advocated for the combination of science and spirituality that resonated with the Soviet state ideology. That ideology is heavily based on reason, science and progress, which Gurdjieff also supported. Many followers of 'The Work' could find peace with their spirituality since it also advocated rigidly for the importance of science and reason. Thus, fear of state scrutiny could be avoided relatively more by practising 'The Work' due to its relative compatibility with Soviet Communism. The scientific nature of Gurdjieff's teachings helped circulate 'The Work' in the Soviet Union. Furthermore, the flourishing of the New Age Movement during the 1960s and 1970s also greatly influenced the spreading of 'The Work' (Gordon, 1978; Menzel & Hagemeister, 2012).

The spiritual revival and rediscovery of Gurdjieff were also influenced by the New Age Movement. In the Soviet Union, it manifested differently than in the West (Menzel, 2013; Menzel & Hagemeister, 2012). In both cases, the movement involved an awareness of sharedness and the countercultural revolution. However, in the West, this awareness presented itself in realising the common goal of individual spirituality and self-improvement. Furthermore, the countercultural revolution entailed breaking from mainstream religious traditions (Chryssides, 2007; Hanegraaff, 1999; Partridge, 2004). Moreover, it preached spiritual privilege, and the middle class got involved with alternative spirituality, breaking from the exclusivist traditions. However, the New Age Movement had a different meaning within the Soviet Union (Goldman, 2012).

The New Age Movement in the Soviet Union manifested itself differently. The shared goal was to work towards dismantling state atheism. People within the U.S.S.R. used individual spirituality and self-improvement since they were not allowed to be part of the Orthodox Church (Martin, 2023; Shlikhta, 2023; Van Den Bercken, 1985). The countercultural revolution inspired youth to reject the traditional way of living, which in this case was Soviet atheism and struggle against it. This dissatisfaction with institutional control over the spiritual life found solace in embracing alternative spirituality. The struggle to remain awakened in a dictatorship was also distinctive to the Soviet Union since the West was living under democratic governance (Gordeeva, 2017; Menzel, 2013; Ouspensky, 1950). Furthermore, in the U.S.S.R., the spiritual privilege of the middle class and breaking from the exclusivist aspect of alternative spirituality was also not the case. Soviet intellectuals were leading the movement since they had the privilege to interact with the samizdat and be part of intellectual circles.

The underground spiritual movement created a 'second cultural reality.' Within this movement, people could shake off state atheism. Gurdjieff's teachings of 'awakening' and becoming 'conscious' through 'self-observation' and 'self-remembering' also resonated with the New Age Movement and took a unique shape in the Soviet Union. There, these ideals were also in sync with the de-Stalinisation and disenchantment from the Soviet ideology. As such, Gurdjieff's ideals acted as the nest for spiritual reckoning and with that a soft resistance towards the government (Gurdjieff, 1950; Menzel & Hagemesiter, 2012; Sutcliffe & Willmett, 2020). Nevertheless, Gurdjieff's 'The Work' provided individual development that was safe enough to practice since they were somewhat compatible with the Soviet state ideology. However, Gurdjieff also advocated for its teachings to be individual but not individualistic. Hence, his followers gathered in secret circles to practice 'The Work' inherently worked towards the spiritual revival of the Soviet Union (Gordon, 1978; Gurdjieff, 1950; Menzel & Hagemeister, 2012; Ouspensky, 1977).

5. Conclusion

G.I. Gurdjieff's 'The Work' influenced the spiritual revival of the Soviet Union in the 1960s and 1970s within the New Age Movement due to the de-Stalinisation and disenchantment with Soviet Communism that occurred in the previous decade. His teachings of awakening and struggling towards maintaining consciousness resonated with the New Age Movement and the Soviet people who wanted to awaken from the dictatorship (Sutcliffe & Willmett, 2020). Furthermore, seeking alternative spirituality due to the dissatisfaction with institutional control over the spiritual life became more common. However, the New Age Movement manifested differently in the Soviet Union due to its geopolitical condition. Behind the Iron Curtain, the common goal in seeking alternative spirituality was to struggle against state atheism, whereas in the West it was the seeking of individual understanding of spirituality (Gordeeva, 2017; Menzel, 2013; Ouspensky, 1950).

Nevertheless, there is one great problem in the research of the Soviet spiritual life of the 1960s and 1970s: the secrecy that surrounded these underground movements prevents us from studying it in depth (Krasztev, 2019; Tchepournaya, 2003). Furthermore, the Soviet archives are currently under a seal placed by the government. These archives are also written in Russian, so specialists in this area would need to either be native or speak the Russian of the time. Both are tricky since free academic knowledge is not supported by the government, and attaining that level of Russian as a native speaker takes a lot of time. Nevertheless, from previous research, one can say that Gurdjieff's figure was of importance in the Soviet spiritual revival (Afinogenov, 2020; Grimsted, 1991; Kramer, 2012).

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NON-EUROPEAN EUROPEAN UNION MEMBER STATES

An Analysis of the Effect of European Identity Denial by the European Union on Czechia and Hungary

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Abstract This paper explores the European Union (EU's) influence on its member states' national identities through its membership criteria using a case study of the Czech Republic and Hungary. Recognising the EU as the primary authority—or even gatekeeper—of Europeanness and the European identity, the paper compares how the EU acts as an identity denier toward Czech and Hungarian national identities and how that subsequently impacts these two nations' self-perception and political behaviour in a European context. Ultimately, it concludes that there are two determinants explaining the difference between the Czechian and Hungarian reactions to this denial: the national identity's receptiveness to the EU's European identity and the strength and aim of the EU's denial.

Keywords: European Identity, Identity Denial, Hungary, Czech Republic, EU Conditionality

1. Introduction

In July 2025, the attorney general of the European Court of Justice accused Hungary of violating EU-values by banning LGBTQ+-related content from schools and television (Ockhuijsen, 2025; Rankin, 2025). Viktor Orbán's government is accused of violating EU law and being uncooperative more often, but the accusation that Hungary violates fundamental EU values is quite interesting. After all, it is a more value-laden and emotive accusation that implies that Orbán's Hungary is in some way not European enough in the eyes of the EU. What it means to belong to Europe though, is arguably an unanswered question and the EU's biggest challenge: although many argue that the EU has outlined its understanding of Europeanness through its liberal democratic membership criteria, it is clear that this version of European identity is not shared by all (McDougall, 2007; Mos, 2020). Hopes of member states' national identities converging and accepting the EU's values have proven illustrious. A list of member and candidate states, among which Hungary, identify as European despite not fitting the EU's understanding of Europeanness.

This paper tries to shed light on some of the consequences of that discrepancy between self-perceived Europeanness and EU-defined European identity. The research question is therefore: "Why did Czechia and Hungary respond differently to the denial of their European self-identity resulting from differences with the European identity embedded in the EU's membership criteria?" The relevance of Hungary is clear, as it has become the leading challenger to the EU's values (Mos, 2020). Czechia is selected as a case study as it provides for a compelling subject for a comparative study between the two states for various reasons. Firstly, Czechia and Hungary were both part of the Habsburg Empire for a very long time which had the twin effect of fundamentally reshaping their cultures, political systems, and the functioning of governance, while simultaneously inspiring a nationalist-like movements for political autonomy and cultural distinctiveness (Cohen, 2007; Vermes, 2014). More importantly, both countries fall within Kundera's (1984) conception of Central Europe, a region that is historically and culturally deeply tied to Western European civilisations but was politically separated from Western Europe in the Cold War era. From a Western perspective, they have ended up on the 'wrong side of history.' Kundera (1984) suggest that this has fostered a feeling of injustice or cultural displacement for Central European societies, leading them to reaffirm their Europeanness by emphasising those cultural and historical ties that previously tied them to the West (Kundera, 1984). Though this paper does not apply Kundera's (1984) framework, his argument highlights a crucial similarity between Czechia and Hungary beyond having a similar historical trajectory: a deep-rooted sense of historically and culturally belonging to Europe. Simultaneously, Czechia is considered as having Europeanised way better, which makes the two countries compelling subjects for a comparative study about the different successes and limits of the Europeanisation of their identity (Baun et al., 2006; Petrovic & Solingen, 2005).

The paper first outlines a theoretical framework explaining the importance of Europeanness, the EU's role in defining it, how the EU defines it, and how this can lead to identity denial. After analysing the case studies, the paper concludes that there are two determinants explaining the difference between the Czechian and Hungarian reactions to this denial: the national identity's receptiveness to the EU's European identity and the strength and aim of the EU's denial. In doing so, this paper is situated in the overlapping zone between the academic disciplines of political science, international relations, and political sociology. It draws upon the discipline of political science in the sense that the paper requires an understanding of the how the EU operates as a political entity concerning things like integration, membership criteria, and competencies. At the same time, since the paper concerns the interaction between international actors and states, it falls within the discipline of international relations. Finally, the paper draws upon the field of political sociology to understand the political identities and preferences of the Czech and Hungarian societies in a European context. These three disciplines provide the basic understanding required for this paper's analysis on European identity denial on Czechia and Hungary.

2. Theoretical Framework

A shared identity is important because it is a necessity for successful European cooperation. As constructivist scholars emphasise, a common identity is necessary for collective action (Cook-Huffman, 2021). Conceptualising European integration as large-scale collective action including many states and peoples, it becomes evident that this also holds up for the EU; if the EU is to cooperate and fight challenges collectively and effectively, this must be supported by a common identity.

'Europeanness' is not a straightforward geographical description. This identity is linked to perceived wealth, development, and civilisation. States thus often want to be recognised as European. This status partially stems from material factors—like European wealth or development—but largely results from Orientalist beliefs, which portray Europe as the peak of civilisation and development while non-Europeans are seen as barbaric and underdeveloped (Arat-Koç, 2010; Said, 1993). Simultaneously, Europeanness has become strongly associated with EU membership (Guibernau, 2011; Mayer & Palmowski, 2004). In day-to-day discourse, the terms 'Europe' and 'European Union' are used interchangeably despite clear geographical differences (Kip et al., 2010). Similarly, former communist-led states portray their accession into the Union as their 'return to Europe', indicating that even states often define Europeanness by EU membership (Brodský, 2003; Khorishko & Horlo, 2021). Therefore, the EU has effectively become a gatekeeper of Europeanness; it has a lot of authority in recognising claims to Europeanness by granting membership or candidacy (Guibernau, 2011; Mayer & Palmowski, 2004). Thus, the EU has also acquired an important stake in defining Europeanness. That constitutes this paper's first core premise: through the importance of EU membership to Europeanness, the EU has become an authority in recognising and defining Europeanness.

Identity construction inevitably involves defining membership criteria (Demmers, 2016). The EU's membership requirements, the Copenhagen criteria, stipulate that member states should have a functioning democracy, a strong rule of law, and respect for human rights and minorities, (Dudley, 2020; Haar, 2024). By defining these liberal democratic membership criteria, the EU has essentially defined the EU identity as one of liberal democracy. The Copenhagen criteria further require member states to accept the obligations of membership as defined in the Treaties, indirectly meaning that they have to give up certain sovereignties to EU competencies (Haar, 2024). Therefore, scholars argue that some degree of supranational governance is also part of the EU's identity (Coman & Leconte, 2019; Timmermans, 2016). Shortly, the EU's identity is characterised by liberal democracy, the rule of law, respect for human rights, and, to a limited extent, supranational governance. This is the second premise. In line with premise one, the EU has thus by extension defined European identity as liberal democratic and supranational through the Copenhagen Criteria. It is noteworthy that the EU has other ways to delineate its version of European identity beyond these criteria, such as academic and educational programmes, cultural heritage policies, and even the depictions on Euro coins and bills (Calligaro, 2013). However, the debate over how the EU *communicates* its understanding of European identity is outside of the scope of this paper.

Defining these criteria also means implicitly defining the out-group as the opposite of these characteristics, a process called Othering (Demmers, 2016; Joffe, 2007). The EU has thus also defined its Other as a lack of commitment to liberal democracy and supranational cooperation (Arat-Koç, 2010; Tzanelli, 2008). Though Othering is not always explicit, the EU sometimes Others explicitly, for example, when it tells a state that it is not abiding by the Copenhagen criteria, essentially saying that the state is an out-group member (Arat-Koç, 2010;

Warkotsch, 2008). Due to its influence in defining Europeanness, the EU is capable of Othering states not just as non-EU, but as non-European (Arat-Koç, 2010). This constitutes the third core premise.

However, the EU's version of Europeanness is contested. Despite agreement that EU membership is crucial to Europeanness, some actors define it not through the EU's political values but through ethnicity, religion, geography, or simply other values (Katzenstein & Checkel, 2009; Paasi, 2001). Thus, the understanding of European identity as defined by the EU, constituted by the Copenhagen criteria, is not widely accepted. This manifests itself in states that self-identify as European and feel they belong in the EU, while not fitting the Copenhagen criteria. Building on premise three, the EU is Othering these states as non-European, effectively amounting to identity denial (Arat-Koç, 2010; Salminen, 2022). Thus, the EU denies the Europeanness of self-identified European states that do not fit the Copenhagen criteria.

Gustafsson (2015) proposes four possible reactions to identity denial on a state level. Firstly, a state can accept the denial and change its self-identity. In reality, this is an unlikely strategy; few politicians will openly contradict national self-identity. Secondly, a state can accept the denial and make an effort to conform to its self-identity. This constitutes a form of normative power: upon being denied European self-identity, a state will reform to better fit the Copenhagen criteria and gain recognition as European (Haukkala, 2008). Thirdly, a state can refute the denial and try to convince the denying party that its self-identity is actually correct. Finally, a state can refute the denial and start othering the denier, denying the denier's self-identity, and convincing third parties that they are correct.

3. Analysis

3.1 Czechia

Czechia is considered to have successfully integrated into the EU and Europeanised its governance (Baun et al., 2006; Petrovic & Solingen, 2005). Czechs saw their accession as their 'return to Europe' and a confirmation of their Europeanness (Brodský, 2003). However, the EU did critique Czechia on its adherence to the Copenhagen criteria, effectively denying Czech Europeanness. How does this denial rhyme with the successful Czech Europeanisation?

Post-communist Czech national identity centred on a sovereign Czechia, belonging to a democratic and civilised Europe (Brodský, 2003; Chlup, 2020). This identity and simultaneous appeal to Europeanness was built on two fundaments: history and Othering. Historically speaking, Czechs substantiated their Europeanness through centuries of cultural, religious, and philosophical exchanges they had with Western Europe (Brodský, 2003; Esparza, 2010). Moreover, Czechs emphasised their brief democratic experience during the First Czech Republic (1918-1938) to highlight their Europeanness (Brodský, 2003; Esparza, 2010). The inclusion of sovereignty in the national identity stemmed from the lack of sovereignty Czechia had during prior centuries, being dominated by Austria-Hungary, Germany, and the Soviet Union (Chlup, 2020; Meredith, 2022). The Othering of the Soviet-communist past further consolidated the national identity. Czechs sought to define themselves as the opposite of this traumatic historical period and, since the EU was essentially the opposite of the Warsaw Pact, democracy and Europeanness were further highlighted (Brodský, 2003; Katzenstein & Checkel, 2009). Since 2000, Czechs have, however, increasingly defined national identity ethnoculturally, emphasising language, background, and cultural practices, instead of through political participation in democracy (Nedomová & Koštelecký, 1997; Vlachová & Řeháková, 2009). Religious identity is consistently excluded from Czech national identity because it is a highly secular country (Buben & Kouba, 2023; Vlachová, 2019). All in all, Czechs felt they fit the mould of Europeanness and EU membership based on these identity elements.

However, the EU challenged Czech Europeanness through the Copenhagen criteria twofold. Firstly, the EU was outspoken about the lack of political rights for Roma minorities (Blitz, 2011; Marden, 2004). Their treatment directly contradicted the emphasis on liberal democracy and human rights in the Copenhagen criteria. As per the theoretical framework, the EU's critique of the adherence to the membership requirements is effectively a denial of Czech Europeanness as constructed by the EU. Secondly, Czechia has consistently been highly Eurosceptical and has obstructed further European integration, for example by not adopting the Euro (Esparza, 2010; Kopecký, 2004). Admittedly, the EU cannot force a member state to participate in further integration beyond past steps of integration. However, as supranational governance became one of the EU's self-identity characteristics, such sovereigntist attitudes have been criticised by Brussels as being anti-European (Coman & Leconte, 2019).

In response, Czechia adhered to a weakened mix of Gustafsson's (2015) second and third strategy. In line with strategy two, Czechia gave into the denial and tried to live up to the EU's version of Europeanness by implementing various policies supporting liberal democracy and human rights (Bönker, 2020; Sirovátka & Bartáková, 2011). However, these reforms have been fairly shallow and declaratory, as societal and institutional discrimination has not changed substantively, implying that the effect of strategy two has been limited to the governmental level (Cashman, 2017; New & Merry, 2010). When it comes to the issue of sovereignty, Czechia has not budged to normative power: the desire for sovereignty is so strong that Czechia has continued to be quite obstructionist to this day (Aydin-Düzgit et al., 2020; Kratochvíl & Sychra, 2019). Since Czechia has upheld its claim to Europeanness, this comes down to strategy three, which means refuting the denial and continuing the claim on the denied identity, though Czechia has not sought to convince the EU that its self-identity is right.

Czechia's combination of these strategies is largely explained by the discrepancies between its national identity and the EU's conception of European identity as well as by the EU's relative acquiescence. The liberal democratic reforms demanded by the EU likely found fertile ground in Czechia because they aligned with Czech democratic self-identification and the Othering of their communist past. The fact that support for European integration is the weakest among communist parties and strongly supported by the anti-communist ones confirms this (Baun et al., 2006). However, the fact that few Czechs had actually experienced liberal democracy at the time that post-Soviet Czechia began its approach to the EU and that they increasingly defined Czech identity through an ethnocultural lens might have undermined true substantive liberal democracy, explaining why strategy two was chosen but failed to deliver fully. The EU's supranational character has, however, found strong opposition in Czechia because it is diametrically opposed to the emphasis on sovereignty (Kratochvíl & Sychra, 2019). The fact that Czechia chose the relatively soft strategy three instead of the antagonistic fourth strategy can be explained by the fact that the EU's denial of Czech Europeanness based on sovereigntist tendencies has been relatively limited, probably because the EU has little legal basis to infringe upon sovereignties outside the Treaties. All in all, Czechs only succumbed to normative power if the EU's demands were in line with the national identity. Moreover, Czechs did not stop considering themselves European despite the discrepancy between EU's conception of European identity and Czech identity.

4.2 Hungary

Despite Hungarian leaders' proclamation of a 'return to Europe', Hungarians were highly sceptical of integration (Khorishko & Horlo, 2021). Today, nationalist Prime Minister Orbán actively obstructs the EU and forwards another conception of Europeanness (Coman & Leconte, 2019). Where do the fault lines between Hungarian nationalism and European integration lie?

Post-1989, the state's identity was defined as a sovereign and civilised nation for ethnic Christian Hungarians (Örkény, 2005). Hungarians saw their civilisation as developed and as old as time, though it had been suppressed by the Ottomans, Habsburgs, and Soviets, which is why they thought highly of sovereignty (Kovács

& Leipnik, 2008; Örkény, 2005). The criteria Hungarians ascribed to Hungarian identity were highly ethnocentric, bordering xenophobia, thus focusing on race, language, and religion, which in the Hungarian case was Catholicism (Bozóki & Ádám, 2016; Örkény, 2005). In line with this ethnocentric view, Hungarians valued liberal democracy and universal human rights lowly (Örkény, 2005). This also explains the resistance against EU membership: the sovereigntist, ethnocentric national identity is difficult to combine with the supranational, liberal democratic nature of the EU (Örkény, 2005).

However, the Hungarian political elite convinced the Hungarians of European integration through three narratives. Firstly, they used the perception of the great, historic Hungarian civilisation along with the entrenching of Orientalist beliefs to assert a claim to Europeanness: Hungary was civilised, just like Europe, while the East was barbaric and uncivilised (Kovács & Leipnik, 2008; Lindquist, 2019). Secondly, they presented accession as consolidating Hungarian sovereignty instead of limiting it, arguing that it protected Hungary from influence by Russia and Turkey, respectively the Soviet and Ottoman successors (Batt, 2001). Thirdly, accession was presented as a solution to the 'Greater Hungary' problem. Many ethnic Hungarians did not live within the Hungarian state but in bordering ones, which nationalist Hungarians saw as a rift in their great nation. EU membership would soften the borders with neighbouring countries and was presented as a way to 'reunify' the Hungarian nation (Batt, 2001; Cram, 2009). Through these narratives, EU accession and the Europeanisation of governance were presented as strengthening the Hungarian nation, despite the differences between national identity and the EU's Europeanness (Cram, 2009).

This creative, but perhaps contradictory narrative unravelled when Orbán came to office and undid many of the Europeanising reforms. Orbán won the elections with an ethnonationalist message, capitalising on discontent with the ruling pro-EU parties (Anghel & Jones, 2024; Fabry, 2019). Subsequently, Orbán upended the rule of law and liberal democracy, mobilising people for illiberal policies by invoking the Christian ethnonational identity and discriminating against those who do not fit this mould (Bánkuti et al., 2012; Scheppele, 2022). To no one's surprise, the EU has been very critical of this violation of the Copenhagen criteria, taking Hungary to the Court of Justice of the European Union, withholding funding, and threatening to take away Hungary's voting rights in the Council (Anders & Priebus, 2021; Camut & Moens, 2023; Zam cki & Glied, 2020). Following the theoretical framework, this amounts to a denial of Hungarian Europeanness as conceptualised through the Copenhagen criteria.

Orbán did not budge to the EU's normative power, rather picking Gustafsson's (2015) fourth strategy. He has forwarded his own version of Europeanness, arguing that he is fighting for 'true' European values (Coman & Leconte, 2019; Lindquist, 2019). According to Orbán, Christian and familial values—quite conservative values opposing the EU's multiculturalism and liberal democracy—are truly European values (Fekete, 2016; Sadecki, 2022). He also argues that true Europeanness is defined by national pride and sovereignty instead of supranationalism and poses that the Hungarian model of ethnocentric governance is better than liberal democracy because it supposedly ensures true representation of the nation (Coman & Leconte, 2019; Lindquist, 2019). Additionally, they Other and depict the EU as a threat to this 'true' Europeanness (Coman & Leconte, 2019; Lindquist, 2019). Hungary has thus not withdrawn its claim to Europeanness, but formulated its own understanding of it, ironically by using the same terminology of democracy and sovereignty (Mos, 2020). Facets of Orbán's contested version of European identity are echoed and reaffirmed by various other actors, ranging from the PiS Party in Poland to the FPÖ in Austria, and on international conservative political platforms, such as the Conservative Political Action Conference (Coman & Leconte, 2019; Mos & Macedo Piovezan, 2024; Sadecki, 2022). The Hungarian strategy is thus to reassert Hungarian Europeanness by forwarding another definition of it, to Other the EU as not truly European, and to seek third-party support for the Hungarian argument.

The reason Hungary went this route was likely because the other strategies were not feasible due to the discrepancy between the national identity and the EU's Europeanness. Strategy one, giving up a claim to Europeanness, is not possible because it would undermine the national identity based on the great Hungarian nation belonging to civilised Europe. Strategy two, accepting the EU's normative power and reforming, is not feasible because of the direct contradictions between the EU's criteria and Hungarian national identity. The pre-Orbán government managed to strike a bridge between this national identity and the demanded EU reforms, but this ultimately did not undo the underlying contradiction between ethnocentric sovereigntism and liberal democratic supranationalism. Strategy three was not feasible because Hungary was not going to convince the EU that it actually was living up to the EU identity without reforms; the illiberal system led by Orbán is simply too different to the Copenhagen criteria. Moreover, a weakened version of strategy three like the one Czechia took, basically amounting to just staying silent over the denial, is not possible because the EU's denial has material consequences through the sanctions. That leaves the fourth, aggressive and revisionist option.

5. Discussion: Implications & Conclusion

In reaction to the EU's effective denial of self-identified Europeanness, Czechia chose a strategy of succumbing to normative power (strategy two) and ignoring the denial without changing course (strategy three), while Hungary and its allies actively started forwarding its own definition of Europeanness and denying the EU's Europeanness (strategy four). Two main determinants of strategy choice can be distilled from the analyses above: the national identity's receptiveness to the EU's European identity and the strength and aim of the denial.

The first determinant is the national identity's receptiveness to EU values and reforms, the ability to accept those without changing the national identity. The Czech case highlights this perfectly: the EU found fertile ground for liberal democratic reforms because Czechs self-identified as democratic. However, the EU's criticism of Czech sovereigntism largely fell on deaf ears, as Czechs simply self-identified with sovereignty. Thus, Czechs only adopted the EU's version of Europeanness if it did not contradict their national identity. Additionally, the Czech national identity is not staunchly religious or ethnocentric, making it harder for politicians to mobilise people against liberal democratic values. This also allows us to understand why Hungary's reaction was more revisionist: its national identity was too contradictory to the EU's identity and simultaneously provided a perfect ethnocentric platform to generate hostility against the EU's values.

The second determinant is the strength and aim of the EU's denial. In Czechia, verbal disapproval only became tangible, material denial on the issue of liberal democracy, which was exactly where Czech national identity was receptive to such pressure. On the issue of sovereignty, where Czechia was not receptive, strong denial was not possible: the EU does not have the legal basis to impose further integration. In the Hungarian case, the strength of denial and non-receptiveness of the national identity combined for the worst: the EU sanctioned Hungary exactly on those points at which the national identity was directly opposed to the EU's values. Thus, the strength of the denial, resulting largely from the legal bases on which the EU can operate, combined with the elements on which the denial is taking place are important determinants of the difference between Czech and Hungarian strategies.

These conclusions have a few implications for the interaction between Europeanness and European integration. National identity is seemingly more rigid than presumed and nations will not simply overrule their identity for a European one. National identity is perhaps better seen as a precondition of the adoption of a European identity as conceived by the EU, rather than something susceptible to Europeanisation. This is not to argue, in a discriminatory or deterministic manner, that certain identities do not belong in Europe or the EU because they are diverging from the EU's version of Europeanness. National identities can change over time and nationalist politicians come and go. However, these acknowledgements do not take away the risk, even the likelihood, that a state with a 'divergent' national identity to the EU's Europeanness can undermine the formation of a shared identity among EU member states. After all, it is all too easy for politicians to invoke and uphold this national identity, especially when facing one of today's many crises, which in turn causes friction with the EU's liberal democratic and supranational values. Thus, the EU should deeply understand the national identities of its candidate members and evaluate whether they are fit to join the European Union in the near future, so as to not undermine the Union's common identity construction.

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AN EXPLORATION OF REFLECTION WEEK AT UNIVERSITY COLLEGE MAASTRICHT

Does Reflection Week Improve Student Well-being?

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Abstract Student well-being has become a global priority, and many universities are seeking to implement strategies that promote student well-being to enhance the overall mental and physical health of their student community. This study explores how University College Maastricht (UCM) reflection weeks impact student well-being. A randomized group of 45 (N = 45) UCM students completed the Subjective Well-Being scale (SWB) before and after their reflection week to assess their psychological well-being, relationships, and physical health. Utilizing a paired-sample t-test to compare pre- and post-reflection week scores, the results revealed a significant increase in well-being ($p < .001$). These findings support the use of structured breaks to positively influence student well-being and provide further practical insights for universities striving to enhance students' physical and mental health. This study addresses gaps in empirical evidence regarding reflective practices and their ability to strengthen academic performance.

Keywords: academic performance, breaks, student well-being, Subjective Well-Being Scale (SWB), University College Maastricht (UCM)

1. Introduction

According to previous research, student well-being is imperative for academic performance and overall success, becoming a top priority for universities worldwide (Howell, 2009). Universities have implemented a variety of practices to support and promote students' physical and mental health (Stanton et al., n.d.). One such practice is breaks as a way to alleviate student stress and anxiety (Hay et al., 2022). At University College Maastricht (UCM), student well-being is promoted by (more) frequent so-called "reflection weeks"–a week-long break *after* exams, between periods (Maastricht University, 2023). Anecdotally, reflection weeks are greatly appreciated by students, but their effectiveness as a stress intervention strategy has not been properly investigated and validated. This study aims to remediate this lack of evidence and to provide a better understanding of how breaks positively impact university students.

2. Literature Review

A study by Agnew et al. (2019) explored the perceived effect of fall break on student well-being in university. Randomly selected Conestoga College undergraduate students were asked to complete, once before and after the fall break, a two-part survey about their perceived levels of stress (Agnew et al., 2019). Additionally, focus group sessions were held to further explore the effects of the fall break on student well-being.

The study revealed that the fall break significantly decreased students' stress levels and gave students an opportunity to manage their academic workload, socialize with their friends and family, and recover by participating in leisure activities (Agnew et al., 2019). However, these positive outcomes associated with fall break may be limited due to the timing and density of assignments even while on break, requiring students to effectively manage their time. Consequently, balancing academics with leisure can increase a student's perceived stress levels (Agnew et al., 2019).

Although conclusions from the Agnew et al. (2019) study can help theorize the impact of UCM's reflection weeks on the well-being of its students, a fall break, such as studied by Agnew et al. (2019) takes place in the middle of a fall semester, whereas a UCM reflection week concludes each six-week period *after* exams. An investigation of UCM reflection weeks would provide more data on the impact of frequent post-exam breaks on student well-being.

In a study led by Omer (2023) from Nijran University, he explored the optimal length and frequency of breaks required to enhance student well-being. A closed-ended questionnaire consisting of questions related to self-experiences was administered to students, teachers, and administrators of Nijran University (Omer, 2023). The study's results agreed with those in other studies: shorter breaks that lasted several days were the most effective in supporting student well-being. However, Omer (2023) recommended more research into how students actually spend their vacation time for proper insight into well-being levels post break and how they relate to certain activities engaged in during the break.

This study of reflection weeks at UCM not only records how breaks influence student well-being but also how they spend their break, helping surface optimal activities that most enhance student well-being. Like the Omer (2023) study, a closed-ended questionnaire was used to help collect a large amount of data in a short amount of time. In another study similar to Agnew et al. (2019) and Omer (2023), Hay et al. (2022) explored if the week-long fall break after Thanksgiving at Brock University reduced anxiety and stress for its students. Adopting a mixed-methods approach, Hay et al. (2022) distributed a survey across campus, asking students about their workload and perceived stress levels through a Likert scale. Additionally, undergraduate students were interviewed in focus groups about their lived experiences and how the fall break influenced their mental health (Hay et al., 2022). To interpret the data, Hay et al. (2022) utilized a two-way ANOVA for the survey and a thematic analysis for the focus group interviews.

Many students used the break as an opportunity for schoolwork or relaxation. On average, students had a 23.2% reduction in their perceived levels of stress, which was attributed to the break. Notably, the Hay et al. (2022) survey findings aligned with those from the focus group. Despite these findings, Hay et al. (2022) stressed that the break does not *fully* alleviate feelings of stress related to academics. Therefore, Hay et al. (2022) recommended that more comprehensive support measures be implemented, allowing students to potentially experience a greater improvement in their overall well-being. Like Hay et al. (2022), a Likert scale (i.e., Subjective Well-being scale (SWB)) will be applied to effectively analyze and interpret the gathered data.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a quantitative approach. Using the statistical software program Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) (version 29) from International Business Machine (IBM), a paired-sample t-test was applied to compare the well-being scores of the same UCM students pre- and post-reflection week. The aim of this study is to reject the null hypothesis–the mean difference between the well-being scores of UCM students before and after the reflection week equals 0 (H_0: μ_D=0)–and find sufficient evidence in support of the one-sided alternative hypothesis–the mean difference between the well-being scores of UCM students after and before the reflection week is greater than 0 (H_A: μ_D>0).

Before and after reflection week, a survey on Qualtrics (2024) version XM was distributed to UCM students through WhatsApp (version 24), an online messaging platform (WhatsApp Incorporations, 2024). As shown in the Appendix, this survey consists of 24 close-ended questions, with underlying dimensions in psychological well-being, physical health and well-being, and relationships (Pontin et al., 2013). Well-being was evaluated using the Subjective Well-Being scale (SWB), with answering options ranging from (1) 'not at all'; (2) 'a little'; (3) 'moderately'; (4) 'very much'; and (5) 'extremely' (Pontin et al., 2013).

As the study also recorded what activities students engaged in during their reflection week, a list of eight general activities were included on the survey: physical exercise (in/outdoor), meditation and mindfulness, healthy eating, quality sleep, socializing, creative activities, traveling, and self-care. The option to select "others" or "none" was also provided, in the case that a student participated in an activity not shown. Data collection on how UCM students spent their reflection week allowed for this study to observe underlying relationships between student well-being after break and their reflection week activities. However, as this is not the study's main focus, more research into this relationship is strongly encouraged.

3.1 Assumptions

When conducting a paired sample t-test, there are several assumptions that must be checked to confirm if the test is valid. According to Penders (2019), the dependent variable must have a quantitative level of measurement (Penders, 2019). In this study, the dependent variable is well-being, quantified through the Subjective Well-Being scale (SWB). Although the SWB scale operates on a Likert scale, using *multiple*–in which a total score is calculated–of them allows the composite score to be treated as quantitative (Penders, 2019).

The second assumption is that the two sample groups compared in the study are dependent on each other (Penders, 2019). In this study's research design, the measures are repeated, making it a within-subject design where the participants that answered the pre-reflection week survey are the same in the post-reflection week survey. However, there is the possibility that participants who completed the post-reflection week survey may not be the same as those who participated in the pre-reflection week survey, as there were more survey invitations than responses. To mitigate this inconsistency, the survey was closed after the 5-day window before reflection week–ensuring that only the well-being scores of participants in that week-long period were recorded. When the follow-up text was sent to the same 55 (N = 55) individuals, it was *highly* stressed that only those who had completed the pre-reflection week survey should engage with the post-reflection week survey. After the 5-day window post-reflection week, only 45 (N = 45) responses had been collected, making it reasonable to assume that those who filled out the post-reflection week survey were the *same* as the ones who completed the pre-reflection week survey. Although this cannot be confirmed with absolute certainty, these measures helped guarantee that no further responses could be recorded, and that study participation remained consistent.

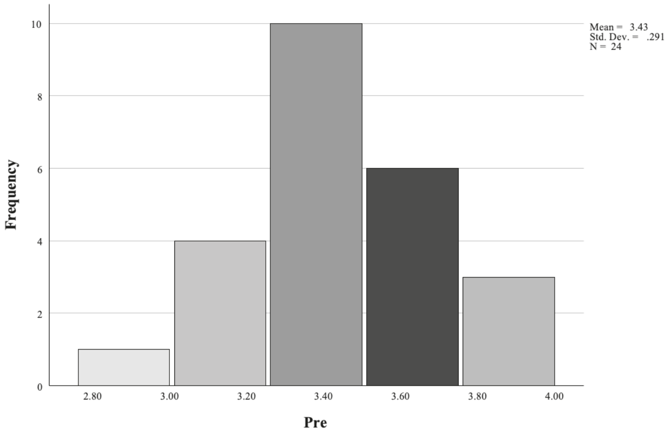
The third assumption is that the difference scores between the two samples are normally distributed at the population level (Penders, 2019). As the study's collected sample of 45 participants (N = 45) is greater than 30 individuals, the Central Limit Theorem (CLT) may be applied, stating that sampling distribution is approximately normal.

3.2 Data Description

Originally, this study planned on receiving 55 (N = 55) participants. However, only 45 (N = 45) of the randomly selected students responded, equating to a response rate of 81.82%. As the survey was not mandatory, this study acknowledges that students may have chosen to not participate due to time limitations either because of a stressful workload or other time-consuming responsibilities. Additionally, as this study entailed participants completing the survey within a week prior to UCM's reflection week, some may have simply missed this time window.

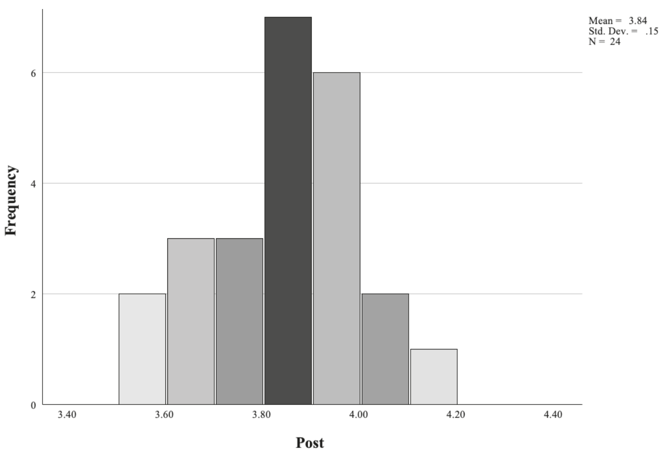
This study consisted of an independent, categorical variable measuring the before and after reflection week and a dependent variable quantifying the well-being score of UCM students through a Likert scale. To statistically analyze the dependent variable, the mean of each question was recorded from both the pre- and post-survey. Notably, the participation count remained the same between each respective survey (N = 45). Below, Figure A displays a histogram of the mean scores obtained from the pre-reflection week survey.

Figure A: Histogram showing the mean scores for each of the 24 SWB questions pre-reflection week (IBM Corporation, 2023)



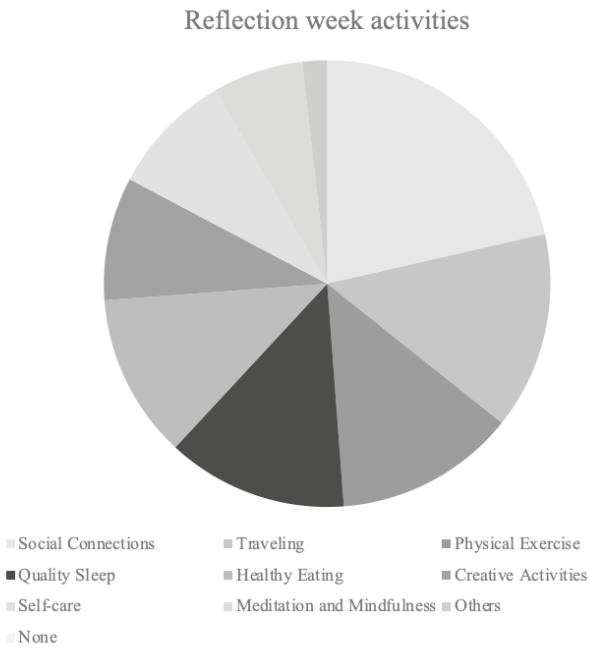
Based on the histogram in Figure A, the shape of the distribution of the mean scores pre-reflection week appears unimodal–with only one distinct peak visible and reasonably symmetric. The histogram does not demonstrate any obvious cases of outliers or extreme skewness. With the SWB scale using a Likert scale, participants were only able to answer survey questions on a scale ranging from 1 to 5, making outliers essentially non-existent and *extreme* cases of skewness unlikely (Penders, 2019). Additionally, Figure B shows the mean scores of the post-reflection week survey.

Figure B: Histogram showing the mean scores for each of the 24 SWB questions post-reflection week (IBM Corporation, 2023)



Similar to the histogram of the mean scores in the pre-reflection week in Figure A, the post-reflection week histogram is also unimodal and symmetric. For the same reasons as Figure A's histogram, there are no apparent outliers or extreme cases of skewness present in Figure B. Additionally, Figure C shows a pie chart of the activities that participants engaged in.

Figure C: Pie chart showing the proportions for each of the reflection week activities (IBM Corporation, 2023)



4. Data Analysis

This study utilized a paired sample t-test to effectively compare the mean difference between the well-being scores of UCM students pre- and post-reflection week. According to the results demonstrated below in Table A, the average well-being score of UCM students before reflection week (*M* = 3.429, *SE* = .059) was less than their score after (*M* = 3.840, *SE* = .031). This difference of .411 in student well-being scores, 95% CI [.314, .509], represents a large and significant effect, d = 1.781, $t(23)$ = 8.725, p < .001.

Table A: Displays the results of the paired sample t-test between the well-being scores of UCM students pre- and post-reflection week

Paired Samples Statistics

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Post	3.8404	24	.14985	.03059
	Pre	3.4292	24	.29062	.05932

Paired Samples Correlations

				Significance	
		N	Correlation	One-Sided p	Two-Sided p
Pair 1	Post & Pre	24	.615	<.001	.001

Paired Samples Test

		Paired Difference				
					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Lower	Upper
Pair 1	Post - Pre	.41125	.23092	.04714	.31374	.50876

				Significance	
		t	df	One-sided p	Two-sided p
Pair 1	Post - Pre	8.725	23	<.001	<.001

Paired Samples Effect Sizes (Post - Pre)

				95% Confidence Interval	
		Standarizer	Point Estimate	Lower	Upper
Pair 1	Cohen's d	.23092	1.781	1.124	2.423
	Hedge's correction	.23881	1.722	1.087	2.343

5. Discussion

5.1 Key Findings

In this study, the null hypothesis being tested was that the mean difference (μ_D) between the well-being scores of participants post- and pre-reflection week equals 0 (H_0: $\mu_D = 0$). With the test direction being one-sided, the alternative hypothesis was that the difference between the well-being scores of participants post- and pre-reflection week is greater than 0 (H_A: $\mu_D > 0$). After conducting a paired sample t-test, a p-value of less than .1% ($p < .001$) was calculated, meaning that the probability of obtaining the observed results–given the null hypothesis is true (H_0: $\mu_D = 0$)–is lower than .1% ($p < .001$). This result is significant, and the study finds evidence to reject the null hypothesis, demonstrating that UCM reflection weeks *do* have a positive influence on student well-being.

From the paired-sample t-test, the mean difference in the well-being score between post- and pre-reflection week was .411 ($\mu_D = .411$). However, the magnitude of this difference was evaluated using Cohen's d, with .2 being a small, .5 medium, and .8 a large effect size. Based on the results, the effect size is 1.781 ($d = 1.781$), which means the mean difference score of .411 ($\mu_D = .411$)–between post- and pre-reflection week–represents a large effect.

5.2 Limitations

It is important to interpret this study's findings within the boundaries of its limitations. As discussed in section 3.1, a central weakness of this paper is that the pre- and post-tests were not linked on the subject level. Another statistical limitation is that the use of a one-sided paired-sample t-test could compromise the study's validity, as it increases the risk of bias towards a specific outcome. This means that because the study only tests if reflection weeks improve student well-being, significant findings in the other direction–reflection weeks negatively influencing student well-being–may be overlooked (Penders, 2019). Additionally, there is an increased chance of a Type 1 error–incorrectly rejecting the null hypothesis when it is actually true (Penders, 2019). This could mean that the study's null hypothesis–there is no difference between the mean well-being scores of UCM students before and after reflection week–is falsely rejected. These limitations may make the study's findings less robust, failing to account for a range of other possible outcomes and accurately demonstrating the *true* influence of reflection weeks on student well-being.

Additionally, as this study was limited to one month, only *one* reflection week and its impact on student well-being were measured. Consequently, this study's outcomes are strictly relevant to only this particular reflection week. This means that this study could potentially fail to demonstrate the *sustained* impact of reflection weeks on student well-being, undermining the generalizability and validity of the findings. Furthermore, considering only one reflection week makes the study vulnerable to confounding variables, including seasonal variation and personal circumstances.

In this study, only a sample size of 45 ($N = 45$) students was obtained, making the study susceptible to various biases, including selection, participation, and response. These may have influenced the study's findings and jeopardized the validity of subsequent inferences.

6. Conclusion

Promoting and supporting student well-being has become a priority for higher education institutions. When a student thrives mentally and physically, it translates into better academic performance and overall success (Howell, 2009). With student well-being a commonly accepted priority, intervention strategies like breaks have been adopted, allowing universities to provide time and space for students to rest, relax, and take an intentional break from the rigors of their academic programs (Hay et al., 2022).

This study's purpose rests on the premise of contributing to the ongoing conversation surrounding the best way to promote student well-being by specifically exploring breaks at UCM. According to the study's results, reflection weeks positively influence student well-being, with a p-value of less than .1% ($p < .001$). As this finding is statistically significant, the null hypothesis was rejected.

This study's positive findings offer policymakers evidence for considering the implementation of reflection-week-style breaks in a university's academic calendar. It is the responsibility of future research to continue this exploration and investigate the impact of breaks on student well-being. By adequately doing so, student mental health issues may be appropriately addressed, and the benefits of specific intervention strategies like breaks fully understood.

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Appendix

Pre- and Post-UCM Reflection Week Survey

In the study, a survey consisting of 24 mandatory questions from the Subjective Well-Being scale (SWB) questionnaire was distributed to participants. Questions were answered via a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5 with the options ‘not at all,’ ‘moderately,’ ‘very much,’ and ‘extremely,’ respectively. The questions are the following:

1. Are you happy with your physical health?
2. Are you happy with the quality of your sleep?
3. Are you happy with your ability to perform daily living activities?
4. Do you feel depressed or anxious?
5. Do you feel able to enjoy life?
6. Do you feel you have a purpose in life?
7. Do you feel optimistic about the future?
8. Do you feel in control of your life?
9. Do you feel happy with yourself as a person?
10. Are you happy with your looks and appearance?
11. Do you feel able to live your life the way you want?
12. Are you confident in your own opinions and beliefs?
13. Do you feel able to do the things you choose to do?
14. Do you feel able to grow and develop as a person?
15. Are you happy with yourself and your achievements?
16. Are you happy with your personal and family life?
17. Are you happy with your friendships and personal relationships?
18. Are you comfortable about the way you relate and connect with others?
19. Are you happy with your sex life?
20. Are you able to ask someone for help with a problem?
21. Are you happy that you have enough money to meet your needs?
22. Are you happy with your opportunity for exercise/leisure?
23. Are you happy with access to health services?
24. Are you happy with your ability to work?

The Maastricht Journal of Liberal Arts is a peer-reviewed journal which encourages and rewards excellence in bachelor research. The articles are carefully selected from a large number of submissions and represent the best research conducted by University College Maastricht students. The topics tackled in the published papers are wide-ranging, as is to be expected of a multi-disciplinary journal, and their scope and methodologies reflect the different disciplines studied at the college.

Submitting an article to a peer-reviewed academic journal is usually an intimidating undertaking for the most seasoned of researchers. For bachelors' students it is an especially daunting prospect. Every researcher knows that criticism and praise from the academic community is both a challenge and a spur to greater achievements. The earlier a scholar can experience this vital element of academic endeavour, the better they will be prepared for a future career in research.

Students are represented on the editorial board and have carefully performed their tasks as editors in maintaining academic standards and selecting the very best papers for publication. Thus, the journal provides students with both the invaluable experience of submitting papers to peer review and also allows them to participate fully in the editorial process.

The sixteenth edition of the Maastricht Journal of Liberal Arts sets out to demonstrate the academic prowess of both University College Maastricht and its students. Not only are the students of the college hard-working scholars, but they are also diligent and inspired researchers. Therefore, the editorial board is proud to present the sixteenth edition, and is sure that the academic community will recognise the added value that the published papers make to the subjects they discuss and analyse. It is the goal of every academic journal to promote the highest standards of research and to promote originality and excellence to the wider academic audience, and the Maastricht Journal of Liberal Arts follows in this tradition.