

*Ex Nihilo*

*The University of Texas at Austin*

*Spring 2015*

## EX NIHILO

This year's edition of Ex Nihilo lives up to its name in at least two ways: first, both the authors and the staff hail from the same university, and the result is nothing but the product of that institution's creative powers; second, each essay features some degree of novelty in the way it explores its topics through a creative lens. Their being few in number was not a deterrent to selecting only those papers that fit best with this adventurous spirit.

Special thanks are due to Susan Somers, who guided this journal from beginning to end, and to Professor Al Martinich, who offered us valuable input when we needed it most. I would personally like to thank the readers for their insight, the authors for their imaginative contributions, and both groups for their unwavering perseverance. Without even one of these people, this journal wouldn't have been possible.

Chase Hamilton  
Editor-in-Chief

# Ex Nihilo Staff

Chase Hamilton  
*Editor-in-Chief*

Jean Raveney  
*Reader*

Savanna Shaffer  
*Reader*

Cole Watson  
*Reader*



*Jacket design: Lindsay Kelly*

*Adapted from Ex Nihilo by F.E. Hart*

*Sculpture in Washington National Cathedral, 1974-1982*



# Table of Contents

<b>The Systematic Interactivity of Electronic Games and Its Role in Existentialist Aesthetics</b>	<b>1</b>
---	----------

*KF Harlock  
The University of Texas at Austin*

<b>Roman Stoics on Suicide: Looking at Life and Death with Indifference</b>	<b>17</b>
---	-----------

*Edwin Robert  
The University of Texas at Austin*

<b>Supposition and Naming: An Exploratory Linguistic Framework</b>	<b>31</b>
--	-----------

*Oliver Lee  
The University of Texas at Austin*



# The Systemic Interactivity of Electronic Games and Its Role in Existentialist Aesthetics

KF Harlock

## Abstract:

*The system of existentialist aesthetics espoused by Camus, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty privileges linguistic arts over non-linguistic arts, owing to the ability of language to construct “situations,” or narrative contexts in which a character is confronted with existential problems and must overcome them through an assertion of freedom. This paper argues that electronic games, through their unique property of systemic interactivity – the interaction between the player and the rules of the game – present a unique and viable rhetorical instrument for the presentation of existential situations. Following a brief overview of existentialist theories of art, the author clarifies the position of interactivity within those theories, and uses two popular electronic games (Papers Please and Dark Souls) as examples of aesthetically powerful and immersive existentialist situations uniquely derived from interactivity. Future directions for philosophical analysis of electronic games are examined.*

## **Introduction**

Many existentialist thinkers, especially Camus, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty, produced artistic literary work alongside their philosophical writings. Unsurprisingly, their philosophical works often address theories of art and aesthetics. Taken together, these theories comprise a coherent existentialist system of art. One historically controversial aspect of this system is the tendency to privilege linguistic media. One reason given for this priority is that words have the capacity to render existentially significant content. In linguistic media, the meaning of that content is transparent and accessible in a way that content represented by sound and color is not (Sartre 1988, 25-29). However, technological advancements, resulting in new forms of media such as electronic games, can increase the range of possible avenues by which humans convey meaning to one another. While Camus, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty died before the advent and popularization of the electronic game, these games possess a unique rhetorical instrument that they would have found immensely well-suited to their existentialist projects. This rhetorical instrument is the electronic game's "system interactivity," a *unique* mode of interactivity between audience and artwork that is inaccessible by traditional artistic media.

This paper will argue for the serious philosophical analysis of electronic games by demonstrating their aesthetic potential through the framework of existentialist aesthetics. To accomplish this, I will first explore the centrality of language to the "situation," which is an essential component of existentialist art. Then, I will show how the particular modes of interactivity unique to electronic games can create unique and arresting "situations" that could not be achieved by the written word

alone. Next, I will present concrete examples of two electronic games, *Papers, Please* and *Dark Souls*, each of which presents powerful existential themes through the rhetorical instrument of their system interactivity. Finally, I will suggest ways in which the serious analysis of games, justified by their existentialist value, may provide rich projects in aesthetic philosophy.

### **1. Existentialist Aesthetics and the “Situation”**

To begin, a brief explication of existentialist aesthetics is in order. Rather than seeing art as *inherently* valuable – art for art’s sake - the existentialist theory maintains that art has a *purpose*, in that it should present themes of existential significance. As Camus points out, art is not simply aesthetic but rather it concerns “properly naming the world in order to reveal the immense injustice reigning in it, while also retrieving its fleeting and inhuman beauty” (Camus 1992, 272-279). Sartre seems to share this view, claiming that the purpose of his literature is “to reveal the world and particularly to reveal man to other men” (Sartre 1988, 14). Merleau-Ponty goes further, combining literature and philosophy together as mutually viable critical apparatuses: “intellectual works [have] always been concerned with establishing a certain attitude towards the world, of which literature and philosophy, like politics, are just different expressions” (Merleau-Ponty 1964, 27). These quotes explicate the existentialists’ purpose in presenting themes of existential significance. Firstly, these themes place humanity in confrontation with such questions as the nature of being or the limits of freedom. Secondly, because these questions are unique to the phenomenological experiences of humans, artistic themes that invoke them can reveal truths about the human experience.

## EX NIHILO

For the existentialists, the most important artistic tool for presenting these themes is the “situation,” a concept of special significance to their aesthetic theories. The situation is a scenario in which characters confront existential problems and must struggle to assert their freedom. Speaking of his early plays, Sartre explains the relationship between the situation, the existential problem, and the assertion of freedom:

...if it's true that man is free in a given situation and that in and through that situation he chooses what he will be, then what we have to show in the theatre are simple and human situations and free individuals in these situations choosing what they will be. [...] The most moving thing the theatre can show is a character creating himself, the moment of choice, of the free decision which commits him to a moral code and a whole way of life. (Sartre, *Theater* 4).

The situation provides the context in which a character is compelled to choose how to act. Through these actions, the existentialist view of human freedom is realized, in that one is *always* free to choose how to act. Similarly, Camus asks “what in fact is a novel but a universe in which action is endowed with form?” (Camus 1992, 263). For him, a narrative is exactly this expression of free action within the form of a realistic situation.

Additionally, the existentialists assert that the situation is an exclusive feature of the realistic narratives of linguistic art forms. Linguistic art forms - primarily theatre and the novel - are capable of the situational depiction of free action in a way that non-linguistic art forms, such as painting, are not. This means that theatre and the novel are considered more useful for achieving the existentialist purpose of art than painting. In *The Prose of the World*, Merleau-Ponty writes that the materiality of painting is self-limiting. Each new painting communicates with past works through the re-invocation of past themes and

techniques, but in a way in which the meaning of those themes and techniques is already historically determined. Merleau-Ponty says this limits the ability of painting to present existentialist themes: “painting as a whole presents itself as an abortive effort to say something which still remains to be said[...] Painting is unable to speak” (1973, 99-101). In short, the colors which make up a painting have only that meaning which is historically determined. By contrast, language has the capacity to place the cultural past in a dialectic process with the present, because “the past of language is not just a dominated past but also an understood past.” (Merleau-Ponty 1973, 101). Words have this historically determined meaning inherited from the past, but they also have a “critical, philosophical, and universal use... which claims to retrieve things as they are” (Merleau-Ponty 1973, 101). Words have another layer of meaning because language is used not just to recreate the historically determined past, but to understand and re-interpret it. Thus, words have the meaning of “both language itself and the use other doctrines have made of it” (Merleau-Ponty 1973, 101). It is this flexible meaning that makes words uniquely suited for presenting the existentialist situation, and which makes theatre and the novel the most useful arts for the existentialist artist.

## **2. The Rhetoric of Electronic Games: System Interactivity**

In the Existentialist view, then, language is essential to presenting the situation. In my view, this essentiality of language makes it such that the electronic game should be seen as an ideal medium for existentialist art. However, written dialogue or narrative is only incidental to electronic games. Language is still a property they possess, but like representational graphics or sound effects, it is not an *essential* quality of the electronic game. What is essential to the electronic game is the rhetorical instrument it uniquely

## EX NIHILO

possesses: a particular mode of interactivity with users. Interactivity *in general* is not unique to electronic games; in addition to games' unique mode of interactivity, they share a type of narrative interactivity with literature. After all, Sartre identifies a type of narrative interactivity embedded in language and literature:

Reading seems, in fact, to be the synthesis of perception and creation. It posits the essentiality of both the subject and the object. The object is essential because it is strictly transcendent, because it imposes its own structures, and because one must wait for it and observe it; but the subject is also essential because it is required not only to disclose the object (that is, to make it possible for there to be an object), but also so that this object might exist absolutely (that is, to produce it). (Sartre 1988, 52).

Furthermore, drawing upon Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, Sartre demonstrates the extent to which this type of literary interactivity between audience and text is essential to generating the kinds of meanings which are valuable to the existentialist artist. He says:

On the one hand, the literary object has no other substance than the reader's subjectivity; Raskolnikov's waiting is *my* waiting which I lend him. Without this impatience of the reader, he would remain only a collection of signs. His hatred of the police magistrate who questions him is my hatred which has been solicited and wheedled out of me by signs, and the police magistrate himself would not exist without the hatred I have for him via Raskolnikov. That is what animates him, it is his very flesh. (Sartre 1988, 53).

Games can invoke this type of interactivity through their narrative, in a way that is similar to the novel or play.

However, they also possess an additional means of invoking interaction which is unique to the medium.

“Interactivity” holds at least two distinct meanings within the context of an electronic game. The first means of interactivity, or the “narrative interactivity” which games share with literature, is the capacity for the audience of an electronic game (the player) to change the outcome of a game’s narrative by making different choices within the game. As an example, the player may choose to pay or rob a merchant to obtain a certain item. Each choice the player makes may lead to some narrative change later in the game, such as whether or not the merchant chooses to assist the player in a time of need. The second means of interactivity, or “system interactivity,” is unique to games. It is the capacity for a game to communicate a theme not through narrative tools such as plot or character, but through the interaction between the player and the game’s systems of rules. A game’s rule system is the logic by which all games, electronic or otherwise, operate. The rules govern the player’s attempts to win the game, whether this is something as simple as “pawns can capture diagonally” in a game of chess, “three of a kind is better than a pair” in poker, or the more complex rules which determine conditions of success in electronic games. Just as language can be used to present situations in a narrative, a game’s rule system can be similarly employed to immerse the player in a situation in which he or she has the opportunity to freely choose how he or she will act.

To understand the distinction between narrative and system interactivity, consider a recent analysis of interactivity by Aaron Smuts. Smuts rejects several explanations of interactivity before synthesizing and defending three distinct criteria for meaningful interactivity. He says “X and Y interact with each other if and only if (1) they are mutually responsive, and (2) neither

X nor Y completely control the other, and (3) neither X nor Y responds in a completely random fashion” (Smuts 65). Narrative interactivity may seem to meet these criteria at first glance. But suppose there are a limited number of narrative outcomes (as there must be, for no game designer can write a script of infinite length). A player can approach a game with foreknowledge gained from other players of what choices lead to what narrative outcomes. The player could then manipulate his or her choices to effectively control narrative outcome as he or she wishes – as a result, the narrative interaction fails Smuts’ second criterion. By contrast, in system interactivity, the number of interactive possibilities is not limited to the number of possibilities pre-written by the game’s designer. Rather, a number of possibilities emerge equal to the number of players who are compelled to make choices by the game’s rule system. The following examples will illustrate this point.

### **3. System Interactivity and the Existentialist Situation**

In *Papers, Please*, developed in 2013 by independent game designer Lucas Pope, the player takes the role of a border guard in charge of processing prospective immigrants into the country of Arstotzka, a fictional analogue of the former Soviet Union. The player’s goal is to follow state protocol in assessing whether or not an applicant should be admitted to the country, and then approve or deny them accordingly. At the beginning of the game, these decisions are made by the simple criterion of checking for a valid passport. However, as the game progresses, the criteria become increasingly absurd and bureaucratic. Eventually, the player is compelled to cross-reference dozens of documents for each applicant, and even subject applicants to humiliating procedures such as body scans to determine if their biological sex matches the gender listed on their identification. For each applicant correctly processed within the daily time limit, the player

receives credits which can be used to pay for housing, food, and medicine for his or her family. The player has three “extra chances” each day, after which each incorrectly processed applicant results in credits being taken out of the player’s pay. Without sufficient pay, however, the player faces the possibility of seeing his or her in-game family members become homeless, or starve to death. Because the daily time limit for earning credits never increases, even as the admission requirements become progressively more ludicrous, the game seems to compel the player to become more brutally efficient at their job. As a result, the player will often take less time to consider applicants’ individual circumstances, and will increasingly become a mechanistic part of a grim bureaucracy.

Eventually, the player realizes that the three extra chances are not simply a generic video game convention, but rather, they are a catalyst for existentially significant choices. Because the player is free to make the “wrong choice” by admitting someone who does not have the proper qualifications, or by refusing someone who does have the proper qualifications, he or she can use this opportunity to assert personal moral convictions in the midst of oppressive circumstances. The player may decide to allow an elderly woman with an expired passport through the gates to join her husband, or even admit a formerly exiled revolutionary to create chaos in the Arstotzkan government. Using these extra chances to assert one’s convictions is not without its attendant cost. Every squandered chance makes it more likely that when the player *does* make a genuine mistake, he or she will jeopardize the well-being of their in-game family. Notably, the game never calls explicit attention to this alternative usage of the extra chances, and it is possible to complete the game by “playing it straight” and using the extra chances as a buffer against making genuine mistakes. It is

## EX NIHILO

only through the responsive and spontaneous interaction between the player and the rule system that this avenue of free action emerges out of an otherwise stifling context. This freedom of action turns every paper processed into its own “situation,” and the player faces a huge number of existential choices that make each play-through of the game unique. Moreover, the situations arise from the choices offered by system interactivity; they are not inherent in the two broad tracks – following the rules or losing one’s job – allowed by the game’s pre-defined narrative interactivity. Just as language does for the pre-determined characters of the theater or novel, the rhetorical instrument of system interactivity creates many “situations” in which the player must make conscious decisions of existential importance. The culpability of the player in these situations may make the situations have more of an impact in the sense of making the audience aware of their own freedom.

Another example of how system interactivity produces situations of existential import is Hidetaka Miyazaki’s *Dark Souls*. Released in late 2011, *Dark Souls* is a role-playing game in which players create and assume the role of a nameless adventurer who must navigate a land straight out of the Inferno. The player must slay undead and overcome hellishly difficult circumstances to rid him or herself of a disease that causes one to be infinitely reborn, bearing the scars of countless violent deaths. The game is well-known for its difficulty, but what compounds that difficulty is the interactive component offered by the game’s online multi-player functions. Although the game’s narrative is intended to be played and experienced by one player, other players will at times appear in one another’s game-worlds as “phantoms” with the freedom to interact with one another. While the player’s efforts to overcome the game’s challenges are regulated by a tightly-designed rule system, the interaction with other player’s phantoms is

much less regulated. Whenever a player enters another player's world as a phantom, they can interact with the other player in a variety of ways. The phantom can point out upcoming traps and pitfalls to the player, thereby offering useful advice. They may actively take part in helping the player defeat a difficult foe. Or, they may callously slay the player, setting back his or her progress within the game. With minor exceptions, there is little or no reward for choosing to either help or hinder a player. Unlike other online games, helpful players cannot share in spoils, and a phantom who helps another player defeat a difficult foe gets no direct benefit from it: he or she must still contend with that foe in his or her own game-world. Rather, players are introduced to what seems at first to be a typical online multi-player environment, and upon realizing their freedom to choose, must determine what kind of player they will be and what kind of choices they will make regarding their treatment of other players. Because this is a form of system interactivity, at no point are their actions or values prescriptively determined by the game's narrative or designers. They are always the result of the player's conscious, free choice.

It is worth noting that these games, and many others, possess narratives that can be arresting in a manner similar to the best existentialist literature. Working a tedious job for an oppressive state or facing the eternal recurrence of nightmarish horrors in a quest for mortality would be right at home in the theatrical oeuvres of Sartre, Camus, or Merleau-Ponty. Nevertheless, while the narrative interactivity of these games might be aesthetically effective, the system interactivity is the element truly unique to electronic games. Sartre states in *What is Literature?* that "man is the means by which things are manifested. It is our presence in the world which multiplies relations. It is we who set up a relationship between this

tree and that bit of sky” (48). Likewise, only through system interactivity does the firsthand experience of the existential situation arise, as the player’s interaction with the rule system defines new relations between perceptible objects of narrative and graphical interfaces. As such, system interactivity fulfills the same role assigned to language by Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, but carries that role even further, allowing for the presentation of situations with an infinite number of choices for the player.

### **Conclusion: Significance and Future Work**

Summarizing the argument thus far may help to clarify its philosophical significance. The existentialists argue that the purpose of art is to present existential themes. The best tool for presenting these themes is the “situation,” a particular type of narrative which shows characters choosing how to act and live in the face of existential crises. By making such choices, the character asserts his or her existential freedom by exercising the ability to choose how one will live in all circumstances. The existentialists, especially Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, believe that theatre and the novel are the most useful arts for presenting the situation. In support of this position, they argue that words have greater flexibility to convey shades of meaning than do the rhetorical instruments of other aesthetic works such as the colors in paintings or the sounds in a melody. This flexibility makes words more suitable for creating the situations that are essential to existentialist art. However, electronic games have a rhetorical instrument unique to them which is as useful as words for creating the existentialist situation. This unique rhetoric instrument is “system interactivity,” or the interactivity between the player and a game’s system of rules. Games like *Papers, Please* and *Dark Souls* show system interactivity can create situations wherein the player is compelled to make free choices just as the characters of

existentialist novels or theater make free choices. The difference is that the interactivity compels the player to actively make these choices him or herself, rather than reading or watching a character's choice. In both linguistic media and electronic games, the situation is a representation or "simulation" of a real existential choice. In theater or the novel, one witnesses characters in these representational situations, and extrapolates significance to one's own life, as one faces similar existential choices. In games, however, the player actually experiences the act of choosing and facing consequences within that representation. As such, his or her experience of the situation is much more immersive than with the novel or theatre.

The intention of this argument isn't to place electronic games at the top of an imagined hierarchy of artistic media. Rather, the argument's significance is that by situating games coherently within a well-established philosophical framework, existential aesthetics' capacity to fulfill a significant aesthetic function as objects of art is clarified. Furthermore, this aesthetic capacity suggests the viability of subjecting electronic games to the same level of critical and theoretical scrutiny afforded to other more culturally-established media such as literature, film, the visual arts, or music. The reasons for doing this are manifold.

Firstly, games are becoming increasingly accepted as pedagogical tools in both scholastic and professional environments. Theorists such as James Paul Gee and Marc Prensky have contributed to a growing body of work which supports the "gamification" of learning. This support for game-based pedagogy holds that the interactivity of games, with its ability to safely explore the consequences of decisions, more closely replicates the ways in which people are required to learn in a post-industrial technological

## EX NIHILO

society such as the United States. As gamification becomes more commonplace, however, critics such as Francesco Crocco have pointed out the dark side of this pedagogical efficacy. Crocco stresses the importance of recognizing that “games, like other cultural artifacts, reify hegemonic assumptions about the world, especially in the deep structure of their rules and mechanics” (Crocco 27). Just as system interactivity has the potential to convey existentialist situations, the rhetorical instrument may also serve as a tool for ideological reproduction. Crocco notes a number of examples of this trend. For instance, pedagogical gaming scholars tend to “uncritically propagate a ‘gaming-to-work’ rhetoric” which sees the potential of gaming pedagogy as little more than the production of skilled laborers (28). More extreme is the United States Army’s development of a first-person shooter, *America’s Army*, as a recruitment tool (27). Regardless of one’s political leanings, the use of gaming’s pedagogical functions as an ideological tool is a culturally significant development. The demonstrated immersive and persuasive qualities of the existentialist situations through system interactivity may even make this a matter of political or ethical concern for some critics. All this suggests that the *philosophical* content of games, such as the themes that emerge from their aesthetic use of interactivity, is worthy of investigation by serious cultural theorists and critics.

Another reason for serious critical and theoretical engagement with electronic games is their growing prominence in 21<sup>st</sup> century literacy. History demonstrates windows of relative popularity and decline for different media. For instance, it may be argued that the theatre enjoys less cultural capital in 21<sup>st</sup> century America than it did in the 20<sup>th</sup> century France of Sartre and Merleau-Ponty. While literary fiction is still a major cultural force, the number of print publishers are on the decline as technology

reshapes the ways in which fiction is published and distributed. Meanwhile, just as film did in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, electronic games have grown in the last four decades from a novel technology to a substantial industry with a great deal of cultural engagement from a wide variety of demographics. As games become more accessible and do more substantial aesthetic work (as shown in the examples of *Papers, Please* and *Dark Souls* above), literacy of games as a mode of artistic rhetoric is becoming more commonplace. While aesthetic philosophy may have been pushed aside in the West by the growing analytic tradition in philosophy, aesthetics has been a domain of philosophical investigation since the Greeks. Thinkers such as Plato, Aristotle, Kant, and Nietzsche have all devoted books to the importance of art for humanity, and the careful philosophical examination of art has dominated the Continental tradition over the last century. Assuming the basic premise of aesthetic philosophy, that art is of philosophical significance for humanity, it follows that today's aesthetic philosophers have a duty to take games seriously.

In short, situating electronic games within the existentialist framework is not just a philosophical exercise. Doing so provides a powerful framework through which to view the cultural importance of games for modern audiences. Rather than mere entertainment, they have the potential to be aesthetically powerful works that help shape culture like more established artistic media. The system interactivity of games is capable of engaging human interest through thematic, pedagogical, or even ideological means. While the academic and scholarly study of games continues to grow, it still mostly occupies a sphere of technical or anthropological interest. Little work has been done on the philosophical aspects of electronic games, such as their introduction of a new dimension of interactivity to

## EX NIHILO

aesthetic studies, their capacity to shape human worldviews or to teach, or even the ethical implications of having near-total freedom of action within a complex simulated environment. Yet, as the framework of existentialist aesthetics demonstrates, electronic games have become cultural artifacts more than worthy of just such serious investigation.

### References:

- Camus, Albert. *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt*. Trans. Anthony Bower. London: Vintage International, 1992.
- Crocco, Francesco. "Critical Gaming Pedagogy." *The Radical Teacher* 91 (2011): 26-41.
- Dark Souls*. Hidetaka Miyazaki. From Software, 2011. Video game.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. "Metaphysics and the Novel." In *Sense and Non-Sense*. Trans. Hubert Dreyfus and Patricia Allen Dreyfus. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964.
- . *The Prose of the World*. Ed. Claude Lefort. Trans. John O'Neill. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973.
- Papers, Please*. Lucas Pope, 2013. Video game.
- Sartre, Jean P. *Sartre on Theater*. Ed. Michel Contat and Michel Rybalka. Trans. Frank Jellinek. New York: Pantheon Books, 1976.
- . *What is Literature? And Other Essays*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988.
- Smuts, Aaron. "What is Interactivity?" *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 43.4 (2009): 53-73.

# Roman Stoics on Suicide: Looking at Life and Death With Indifference

*Edwin Robert*

## Abstract:

*Roman Stoicism saw suicide as a permissible act when done to preserve one's virtue. This paper explores the grounds for their view by consulting the works of Seneca, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius and by assembling the relevant sections of the Stoic doctrine. I reveal that the Roman Stoic's understanding of life is something that requires more than mere existence. While existence is a prerequisite for life, death only ends life by taking away existence. Virtue gives life to existence and, for the Stoic, is best understood as the consistency of one's own rational faculty (nature) with the guiding rationality of the cosmos (Nature).*

## Introduction

In this paper, I explore the Roman Stoic's position on suicide. My purpose is to better understand the core of Roman Stoicism by analyzing its treatment of a controversial issue. My work therefore is partially

exegetical, in that I examine and interpret relevant texts from Stoic thinkers. It is also partly analytical, in that I reconstruct the Stoic's position in contemporary terms and apply it to the issue of suicide. Ultimately, I contend that Stoicism's understanding of virtue permits suicide when committed for the reason of preserving one's status as a virtuous and free individual. In defending this claim, I primarily consult the works of Seneca, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius. Taken together, an examination of their works provides a thorough look into the mind of the Stoic in such a way that is mutually complementary. As Matthew Arnold puts it, "The sentences of Seneca are stimulating to the intellect; the sentences of Epictetus are fortifying to the character; the sentences of Marcus Aurelius find their way to the soul."<sup>1</sup> Moreover, discussing the Stoic's sense of intellect, character, and soul will help illuminate the role suicide played in a Stoic's mind. To accomplish this, I will first outline the central tenets of Stoic philosophy with a particular focus on their treatments of life and death. I will then proceed by examining the role and meaning of virtue for the Stoic. Finally, I will utilize the conceptual tools established in the first two sections to examine the Stoics' evaluations of individual cases of suicide.

## **1. Stoic Elucidation of Life and Death**

The Stoics were value monists who held that there is ultimately one thing that is valuable. For them, this was virtue, and one attained virtue by listening to and acting on one's own nature, thereby living in accordance with the cosmos. Therefore, for the Stoic, existence is not itself good—in fact, existence itself does not count as living. The length of our existence is not important because eventually all people die. Stoics value living well for as long as one is able, and living well consists in living virtuously. As an

---

<sup>1</sup>Arnold (1964), p. 367.

upshot of this position, when the Stoic rationally and virtuously decides that he can no longer live well, he will thus see no reason to prolong the process of his own death. Death is neither good nor bad, which is why for one who is not living well it does not matter when one dies. While we are in existence, Stoic doctrine insists that we be representatives of the order in the universe, and that we do so consistently. To fail to do so would result in one not living well, thereby rendering one's existence irrelevant.

The Stoics believed that everything, including the soul, was material. In their view, when we were born, the universe chose to bring us into the world to serve a specific purpose. As a result, certain pieces of the whole universe were used to create each of us. Furthermore, when we die, those pieces must necessarily return to the whole. To our human perspective, this process happens rather fast, because everything is temporary in the Stoic's view. For example, in his *Meditations*, Marcus Aurelius says: "they endure but for a short season, both praiser and praised, rememberer and remembered."<sup>2</sup> Freedom of the will is what the Stoic emphasizes over everything else. It is up to the individual to make the most of every situation. This is fairly intuitive if we think that the individual has it in his own power to act, or choose, how to deal with a given outcome of a situation. One does not have the ability to change what happened in the past, and one cannot change the future. But in the present, one has the ability to think what one wishes to, concerning the importance of all past actions. This is a feeling which Stoic philosophy claims to be crucially liberating. Marcus Aurelius says "If you suffer pain because of some external cause, what troubles you is not the thing but your decision about it, and this it is in your power to wipe out at once."<sup>3</sup> Because of this, the good lies

---

<sup>2</sup> Haines (1930), viii., p. 21.

<sup>3</sup> Farquharson (1944), viii., p. 47.

## EX NIHILO

not in external objects and not in the body, but within us, in the sovereign power of the mind.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Epictetus says, “it’s not the accident that distresses this person, because it doesn’t distress another person; it is the judgment which he makes about it.”<sup>5</sup>

While in modernity, we might think of “existence” and “life” as synonyms, the classical Stoic did not. The Stoic view is quite different because existence for a Stoic is not virtuous or good in-and-of-itself; therefore, it is not necessarily good. Aurelius wonders how one could possibly feel self-important, and he questions how one could feel distress, because the future and the past are unimaginably vast and cannot be bridged in the present.<sup>6</sup> The Stoics were determinists but they were not fatalists. The cosmos (universe) is rational, but humans have the ability not to be. To be irrational is to make oneself a malfunctioning part of the universe. Because there are no other creatures who have the ability to exercise such a rational faculty, the Stoics maintain a certain responsibility to use their rational faculty. They believed that everything that happened was destined to happen and was in accordance with Fate. This means that most of the important events that unfold in our lives have already been determined. However, our attitudes towards what happens and what will happen have not been determined. This is where the opportunity to be virtuous human beings presents itself. The Stoics are known for having devalued the passions. But the Stoics thought that the passions were things external—not things produced by the internal soul. The Stoics believed that the soul, which housed our rational faculty, was the best part of us, as it was the part that we shared with God and with Nature. The

---

<sup>4</sup> Stephens (2011), p. 6.

<sup>5</sup> Carter (1905), p.5.

<sup>6</sup> Haines (1930), v. 23.

best part of man is his reason, because it sets him apart from the animals and aligns him with the cosmos.

Seneca presents a story in which a Roman officer mocks a subordinate who begs him for death. The Roman officer refused the request on the grounds that the subordinate had not begun to live, implying that the subordinate did not have a life to take.<sup>7</sup> Seneca argues that it is the quality of a man's life, and not the quantity, that matters most. In support of this he writes, "We should strive, not to live long, but to live rightly; for to achieve long life you have need of Fate only, but for right living you need the soul."<sup>8</sup> Not to be confused with Nature, Fate in the Roman sense can be explained by the way in which we think about 'luck'. The fortune that befalls us is beyond our control, but we are in control of our attitudes. These assertions are fundamental to the Stoic view, because they permit the Stoic to align himself with Nature, even if his emotions distract him from his duty as a human being; to be rational and to attain virtue. The Stoic wishes to be as consistent with Nature as possible because we are, necessarily, a part of her.

Seneca asks us to think of our existence as a voyage that everyone must make and to think of death as a haven, or a port at the end of our journey.<sup>9</sup> Every ship that sets out on a voyage has a destination in mind that gives reason for the voyage itself. Some ships encounter soft, supporting winds and are carried to their destination without a cloud in the sky. Other ships tarry, perhaps taking the long way around an island, taking in the sights, before finally arriving at their destination. Then there are those ships that set out with a purpose and arrive exactly when they had

---

<sup>7</sup> Seneca (1925), lxxvii., p. 18.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, xciii.

<sup>9</sup> Seneca, *De Vitae Brevitate*.

intended to, in spite of adverse weather along the way. This last type of ship was coherent at the start and consistent throughout. By contrast, though the first ship also arrived in a timely manner, it did not encounter hardship and therefore it had no opportunity to prove itself, to put into practice that which it had been crafted for—after all, it is hardships that show what men are.<sup>10</sup> Just like all voyages end, every human’s existence must end. Similarly, a person who comes into existence is not, necessarily, going to live a good life, or live at all. It is up to each person as a rational being to attain virtue and a life that is consistent with Nature.

## **2. Virtue as Consistency**

To be a good person and to live the good life, we must use our reason coherently and consistently. Doing so allows us to think clearly, and think cautiously of the future, rather than fearfully of it. All that will happen shall happen; and there is nothing we can do about it. Death is a part of life that we must play well. Since death, for the Stoic, is neither bad nor good, what matters is our attitude about death. Epictetus says, “Death will come when God [Nature] wills, there is nothing we can do about it, but let it find us doing our work well and yet ready to depart.”<sup>11</sup> For the Stoic, immoral acts are bad, and therefore ought to be avoided. Since the Stoic position is that the moral act will always be the rational one, the immoral act will always be the irrational one.

When deliberating about which circumstances suicide is permissible in and which circumstances encourage persistence, Marcus Aurelius says, as I mentioned above, “if you suffer pain because of some

---

<sup>10</sup> Matheson (2004), i., p. 24.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, iii., p. 5.

external cause, what troubles you is not the thing but your decision about it, and this it is in your power to wipe out at once.”<sup>12</sup> A new topic of consideration appears at the end of this passage when Marcus argues that if something opposes you to such a degree that you cannot undertake the surmounting of it, then you ought to be content to resign yourself, in a humble acceptance of the opposition’s strength.

Thinking consistently eventually requires determining the most appropriate end to your life when the time comes, and determining how to live well in the meantime. The Stoic must not think of the effects of his individual actions, but instead, he should focus on the sum total effect of his life as a unified act. The Stoic’s entire existence is one piece of the cosmos. This is to say, his acts in summation will present one picture. As a free human being, you are conscious that your existence can be brought to an end whenever you want. If you are not living well, then it does not matter when your existence ends, because for the Stoic you have not even begun to live. If you are living well, you can live no better, for virtue does not stretch or permit varying degrees of itself. You are either coherently consistent with Nature, or you are not.

If at a given time it so happens that you can no longer live well, settling for anything less would be inconsistent with the plan you had rationally set out for yourself. One would have to recognize virtue—and in so doing recognize the value of it, and it alone—and then attempt to convince oneself that the one thing of value is in fact not of value. However, this course of action is not permissible for the Stoic. The Stoic believes that you should make your life as virtuous as possible because you have the rationality faculty to do so. To live well is to live

---

<sup>12</sup> Farquharson (1944), viii., p. 47.

## EX NIHILO

consistently with Nature. You should never give up that which allows you to live well for that which does not allow you to live well. For example, sacrificing a virtuous life that has been lived for the prospect of a non-virtuous life in the future would be inconsistent, and furthermore, morally wrong for the Stoic. Living consistently is all-important because it would be irrational to give up that which has value for that which does not.

If at any time Fate disallows our continued consistency, and we rationally conclude that there is no way to undo the obstruction, and if virtue is not a possibility, then the remainder of our acts would be indifferent at best, and immoral at worst. At the arrival of such a situation, Seneca replies with a rhetorical question: ‘what difference does it make how soon you depart from a place which you must depart from sooner or later?’<sup>13</sup> To Seneca, life is like a play in that its quality is judged by its performance, and not by its duration.<sup>14</sup>

The Stoic argues that fearing death is the most irrational thing one could do, for fearing something beyond your control is irrational. Indeed, the individual has the ability to think that a present circumstance is disadvantageous, but Stoic wisdom allows the individual to understand that Nature would not prescribe something that did not benefit the whole.<sup>15</sup> Instead of worrying, the Stoic becomes cautious. He thinks about his remaining time on earth and how best he can remain virtuous: he determines how to live in the face of death. Suicide assures us that the life we have still remains in our possession. Seneca holds that the freedom to commit suicide is of the utmost importance, claiming that if courage to die is lacking, then

---

<sup>13</sup> Seneca (1925), xciii., p. 2.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>15</sup> Long (1974), p. 180.

life is slavery.<sup>16</sup> Though this may seem extreme, Seneca says that Nature has done us the greatest service by giving us one way into this world and an infinite number of ways out.<sup>17</sup> For if we only had one way out, we would not be free, but rather, bound to servitude. Suicide provides the freedom to make our lives as consistent as possible, for if we were unable to leave this life we would be made to live inconsistently. Francis Holland, in his book on Seneca,<sup>18</sup> says, concerning the Stoic's philosophy that this complete separation in thought of our spiritual selves from our material belongings, the few pounds of matter in which we are clothed, and through which we act and suffer, lies at the root of Stoicism's conception of happiness and wisdom, which indeed in their opinion are the same. In the sovereignty of the mind, we are only as free as we think ourselves to be. We are free, because all our attitudes are in our power, and if we are ready to sacrifice our external possessions, including among them our bodies, rather than lose this freedom, it cannot be taken from us. It is in this way that suicide grants us the freedom to live well while we can, and the freedom from within to disregard every superficial harm that comes from without.

### **3. Suicide**

One ought not to commit suicide out of fear, especially not a fear of death. But rather, one ought to commit suicide to quit life, if they so choose.<sup>19</sup> In this case, the individual will not fear being inconsistent, as he will be acting rationally, but he will be cautious. In this caution, there is foresight and planning rather than anxiety. This preparedness enforces the mindset that the Stoic is required

---

<sup>16</sup> Seneca (1925), lxxvii., p. 14.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, lxx., p. 24.

<sup>18</sup> Holland (1920), p. 165.

<sup>19</sup> Seneca (1925), p. 5.

## EX NIHILO

to have upon his required departure. Seneca, in elaborating more on how he wishes us to view suicide, says to he who is hesitant to fulfill life's honorable duty to end his own life, that dying is undeniably a duty of everything that has come into existence.<sup>20</sup> Everything that is visible is tangible, and all that is tangible was made from matter. The matter chosen to create certain tangible objects will one day dissolve into the earth. Thus, all that has come into existence will one day dissolve back into the earth that created it. In the same passage, Seneca asserts how foolish it would be to waste away wishing to live a thousand years from now in either direction. What he means by this is that both the amount and the occasion of the time spent here is irrelevant. The only thing of importance is that we live virtuously while we are here. To ensure his virtue persists, the Stoic is required to end his own existence because it alone is of no value by comparison. Epictetus also provided reasons for suicide by comparing our existence to staying at an inn at which we are guests; since we must leave sometime anyway, it does not matter much when.<sup>21</sup> Since we did not ask to be at this inn of existence, necessarily others will come after us too who, like us, will not have requested boarding. From this, he claims that we should leave when we deem it appropriate: for if we do not, we will crowd the inn and make it less enjoyable for those who are now boarding, and for those who will in the future.

Suicide is made permissible for the Stoic when one's consistency, once established, is no longer possible. The Stoic knows that he is using his highest (human) faculty to rule over his lowest (animalistic faculty), thereby setting him apart from animals to assure himself that he does not behave as one. Consider the most famous Stoic suicide, that of Cato the Younger. He fought for the

---

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>21</sup> Epictetus (2004), Disc. ii., p. 23, and Disc. iii., p. 22.

traditional Roman principles, and when, despite his fight against Julius Caesar, he faced the possibility of existing under tyranny, he chose to live (that is, to remain consistent) and die by his own hand. Cato, rather than lose his freedom, chose to use his last bit thereof to guarantee that he made the rest of his existence worthwhile—as he had done with his existence up until that point. Cato did not experience a fear of death, only the reality in which his freedom would be lost. Owing to the result of his final action, we can infer for Cato that there was something more important than existing, and that was his virtue, and the freedom required to exercise it. Therefore, nothing is more important than the preservation of virtue. Nothing else is worth living for but consistency. To remain in existence without virtuous consistency is not living, as it is to the detriment of one's nature.

Seneca thinks that the right time to commit suicide is when there is an absence of advantages. However, if the Stoic is always thinking ahead, trying to make his life virtuous, then the question will arise of when the right time actually is. I understand “advantages” to mean rational thought in general, as opposed to mere objects, which we are able to specifically think about rationally. For the Stoic, that which is advantageous is that which yields virtue. Thus when there are no advantages, there can be no virtue and vice-versa. Certainly the Stoic thinks that you should not “wait and see” if your condition proves curable,<sup>22</sup> for when

---

<sup>22</sup> Seneca (1925), p. 7. “That is why I regard the words of the well-known Rhodian as most unmanly. This person was thrown into a cage by his tyrant, and fed there like some wild animal. And when a certain man advised him to end his life by fasting, he replied: “A man may hope for anything while he has life.” This may be true; but life is not to be purchased at any price. No matter how great or how well-assured certain rewards may be I shall not strive to attain them at the price of a shameful confession of weakness. Shall I reflect that Fortune has all

## EX NIHILO

you finally convince yourself that it is not, the reason that convinced you will be the realization of your lost, or diminishing, rational ability: and by that point it is too late. The question then becomes, do you either leave this world sooner rather than later, or do you wait until you begin losing your faculties? If you wait too long then your death may not be a free, rational choice, but may be the result of a psychological impulse or passion. This would mean that your final act would not be your own, and therefore would be without virtue. This would be a lackluster finale for one's "closing act".

The question of the appropriate time to quit life is not so pressing in the works of Marcus Aurelius and Epictetus as it is in Seneca. Both find great solace in knowing exactly what amount of suffering they can tolerate, and likewise, what amount of suffering they should tolerate. Marcus takes from Epictetus the metaphor of life being a smoky room, "if the smoke is moderate I will stay: if excessive, I go out: for one must remember and hold fast to this, that the door is open."<sup>23</sup> In a fashion similar to Seneca's thoughts on life being a performance, Epictetus asserts that life can be a play of sorts, with God (Nature) as the director who will sound the divine sign to return whence you came when it is your time to die. To explain this he provides another analogy, this one features a sailor who is on shore leave from his ship. The sailor may choose to do anything while he is on shore but when the captain sounds the signal, the sailor must obey and return to the ship. He may choose to gather water, to pick seashells or even to collect some greens, but no matter what, when the sign is given, he must drop all of these things and return

---

power over one who lives, rather than reflect that she has no power over one who knows how to die?"

<sup>23</sup> Epictetus (2004), p. 25.

to ship.<sup>24</sup> Listening to this call is not the end, obeying it may be your final act, but what better finale is there than listening for, hearing, and obeying the command of the creator of all? Death is a change of that which is not now, not into what is not, but into what is not now.<sup>25</sup>

In modern conceptions, the conservation of matter explains this, both Marcus and Epictetus see death not as any destruction, or annihilation, but as a dissolution—a change which is necessary for the continuation of the cosmos. Though this change may leave our sense-perception, it will also rid us of all the terrible things we are subjected to in this life. All of the wretchedness of the body with its diseases, deficiencies, and detriments which fill with smoke the room housing our rational faculty will be gone from us when we die. Thus we ought to see death as a relief. The freedom to die, whenever good reason permits, within the Stoic doctrine is like having a fire escape<sup>26</sup> outside of one's smoke-filled room—one may exit whenever one wishes. The cosmos brought us into that room and Fate started a fire. Though we took notice of the fire and though our body began to burn and our lungs filled with smoke, we remained at work, as humans, doing the best we could: exercising prudence, resignation, and magnanimity. The time of our exit matters little, as it was ordered from the beginning that we *would* be leaving, it is a privilege of ours to be able to decide *when* and *how*.

---

<sup>24</sup> Carter (1905), p. 7.

<sup>25</sup> Epictetus, Disc. iii., p. 24.

<sup>26</sup> See Stephens (1997).

**References:**

- Arnold, Matthew. *Essays in Criticism: First and Second Series*. New ed. London: Dent, 1964.
- Aurelius, Marcus. *Meditations*. Trans. C.R. Haines in *Marcus Aurelius*. Loeb Classical Library, 1930.
- Carter, Elizabeth. *The Enchiridion or Manual of Epictetus*. London: C.W. Daniel, 1905.
- Epictetus. *Discourses*. Trans. P. E. Matheson. Mineola, N.Y., Dover Publications, 2004.
- Farquharson, A. S. L. *The Meditations of the Emperor Marcus Antoninus*. Oxford: Clarendon. 1944.
- Holland, Francis, and Lucius Annaeus Seneca. *Seneca, Etc.* Longmans & Co., London, 1920.
- Long, A. A. *Hellenistic Philosophy; Stoics, Epicureans, Sceptics*. New York: Scribner, 1974.
- Seneca, Lucius Annaeus, and Richard M. Gummere. *Epistles*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1925.
- Stephens, William O. "Epictetus on the Irrationality of Fearing Death and Reasons for Suicide" presented at the Meeting of the Society for Ancient Greek Philosophy, October 26, 1997, Binghamton University, Binghamton, New York.
- . *Marcus Aurelius a Guide for the Perplexed*. London: Continuum International Pub., 2011.

# Supposition and Naming: An Exploratory Linguistic Framework

*Oliver Lee*

**Abstract:**

*Traditionally, supposition is taken as an auxiliary speech act in the philosophy of language. This paper proposes a framework of speech act that turns this tradition on its head in order to explore the nature of linguistic acts in general as well as some underlying grounds for debates on a variety of philosophical issues. On this framework, there are: 1) namings, which map concepts to words, 2) suppositions, which request listeners to assume the truth of propositions, and 3) assertions, which press the truth of a proposition. Accordingly, there are 3 kinds of truth assertions may fall under: definitional truth, suppositional truth, and synthetic truth. I argue that suppositions can explain scientific models, fiction, and modality. Moreover, the fact that namings map words to concepts and not words to things in the world avoids several difficulties of definite descriptions. This framework is then used to frame the debate within philosophy of mathematics and metaethics and demonstrates that they strongly parallel each other.*

## **1. Introduction**

In this paper, I explore a broad account of the source, nature, and content of linguistic expressions. The account I put forth suggests that supposition and naming are central linguistic acts from which most other features of language can be explained. This schema is surprisingly resilient – not only is it internally consistent, but it yields a great deal of explanatory power when applied to a variety of philosophical dilemmas. Meticulously exploring this framework is therefore a fruitful task. To that end, my proposal is intentionally provocative and far-reaching, and sometimes even defiant of the surrounding topic literature – I believe that in outlining the details of this ripe possibility, we might learn more about the linguistic phenomena of naming and supposition, as well as what they can explain when applied to other topics, even if the account doesn't turn out to be robustly true.

I begin by briefly setting the groundwork and laying out the speech acts my framework relies on. I then consider in detail the linguistic possibilities available under my framework, addressing along the way cases that may cause trouble. Finally, I apply the framework to debates in both the philosophy of mathematics and metaethics in order to both demonstrate its explanatory power and suggest alternative ways of understanding the debates' grounds.

## **2. The Framework**

The framework I consider describes the mechanics of three kinds of speech acts: naming, supposing, and asserting. It assumes that concepts are kinds of mental models. Concepts are the mind's way of creating internal representations of the mind-independent world, although concepts can also be representations of things that do not actually exist in the mind-independent world. For the sake

of brevity, I am bracketing off further discussion on particular perceptual theories as well as the origins of concepts.<sup>1</sup> Those who object to these presumptions will not be hindered by reading this paper as an exploration of the consequences of accepting them.

The most basic speech act possible is what I refer to as “naming”, which creates a mapping between a word and a concept, and in the process circumscribes the concept. No other speech act is possible before the act of naming, since linguistic acts rely on words with meanings. In simple cases, naming can be done implicitly and non-verbally.

The act of “supposing” constructs, describes, and holds up to the mind’s eye a named concept without evaluating that concept’s truth, usefulness, or anything else. Linguistically, a supposition can be created by implicitly or explicitly prefacing any proposition (excepting propositions about definitions) with the phrase “let us suppose that...”.<sup>2</sup> Even though suppositions contain propositions, the supposition itself is not truth-apt because it is a type of request or command. They can, however, be easily turned into truth-apt assertions by stripping away the implicit “let us suppose that...”. In order to be meaningful, every word and term in a supposition must be adequately defined by acts of naming. Otherwise, the supposition has no meaning. Thus, naming always comes prior to supposition.

“Assertions” are statements that are uttered with the intention to lead hearers to a belief. Assertions are the only speech acts that are truth apt. Similarly with suppositions, the words and terms in assertions must be defined for it to

---

<sup>1</sup> However, there is some related discussion in Section 3.1.2.

<sup>2</sup> If a proposition about definition is prefaced with “Let us suppose that...” then that effectively turns it into an act of naming, not supposition. The linguistic form suggests that it should be a supposition, but it is not.

## EX NIHILO

have a definite truth-value. For this paper, I will explore assertions under a correspondence theory of truth.<sup>3</sup> Thus, an assertion's truth turns on its correspondence to certain facts. In my proposed framework, there are 3 possibilities for an assertion's correspondence, and so 3 ways assertions can be true: (1) "Definitional truth" is when an assertion purports to refer to the definition of a word. Definitional assertions are true if they successfully correspond to a previously established convention of naming. (2) "Suppositional truth" is when an assertion successfully corresponds with a previously established set of suppositions. Claims about the validity of an argument are types of suppositional assertions – one presumes the truth of the premises in order to see what they entail. (3) "Synthetic truth" is when an assertion successfully corresponds, in one way or another, to the real world.

Now I'll explore each of these types of assertions, along with their relationships to the other parts of the proposed framework, in further detail. *Figure 1* may prove to be a useful map along the way.

### **3. Usages and Relations Between Speech Acts in the Framework**

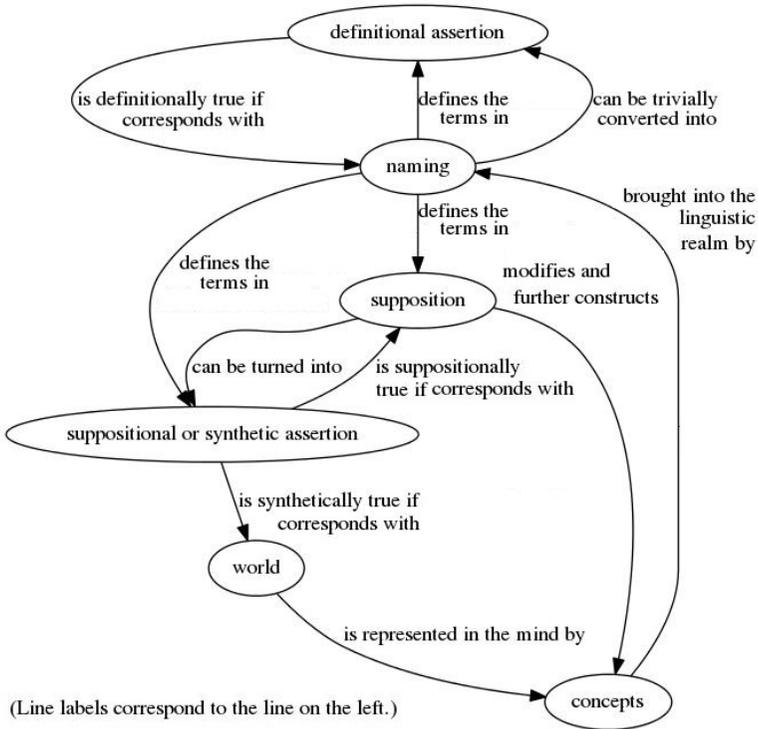
#### **3.1 Synthetic Truth for Assertions and Synthetically Asserted Suppositions**

##### **3.1.1 True and False Suppositions**

---

<sup>3</sup> Again, while controversial, critics need only read the paper as an enormous conditional: if these assumptions turned out to be true, then here's what a plausible framework would look like.

Figure 1: Diagram of Framework



As previously mentioned, suppositions are not truth-apt, but they can be easily turned into assertions by stripping away the linguistic (and usually implied) “let us suppose that...”. Suppositions can be asserted, or become assertions, thusly. As shorthand, when I say that a supposition is true or false, I mean that the assertion that is obtained by stripping away the “let us suppose that...” from the supposition is synthetically true or false; note that this shorthand if taken at face value is incoherent. In other words, to say that a supposition is true is to say that what was supposed to be true in reality *actually is* true, and there is no longer any need to merely suppose.

## EX NIHILO

It is important that many models and theories we use to understand the world are suppositions. For example, the mathematical formulations that define quantum mechanics, the Kinetic Molecular Theory of gases, the trajectory of a ball in a frictionless environment, and the price of a product in a free market are all models that start out by supposing the truth of certain propositions.

A “model”, therefore, is a supposition (or list of suppositions) that can be turned into a synthetic assertion. In the case of a model that is true, a true assertion under it is suppositionally true; it is also synthetically true since the model itself is synthetically true. If the model is synthetically false, then assertions under the model are still suppositionally true even though they’re synthetically false.

Besides models, suppositions also come into play when we speak of fiction, counterfactuals, valid arguments (the premises being supposed), and possibly mathematical axioms depending on one’s stance in the philosophy of mathematics.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, Kripke’s stance that modality and talk about possible worlds are constituted by acts of stipulation and counterfactuals fits naturally with my framework.<sup>5</sup>

### **3.1.2 Synthetic Truth By Way of Supposition**

It seems that some assertions can be synthetic without being suppositional. For example, “The sky as I currently see it is blue” seems like it doesn’t need any kind

---

<sup>4</sup> I explore the status of mathematical axioms in further detail in Section 4.1.

<sup>5</sup> Kripke (1972, pg. 44) writes: “Possible worlds’ are stipulated, not discovered by powerful telescopes. There is no reason why we cannot stipulate that, in talking about what would have happened to Nixon in a certain counterfactual situation, we are talking about what would have happened to him.”

of suppositions – one only needs to have the words “sky” and “blue” named, and one can assert certain simple things about them that follow directly from the named concepts.

What separates assertions that require first being suppositional before being synthetic from assertions that can directly be synthetic is that the detour to supposition is often used when explicit abstraction is required. Depending on one's perceptual theories, all of one's concepts are abstractions out of the sensory morass that is fed into one's mind from the real world. Some basic mental abstractions and models of the world (such as our instinctive understandings of spatial relations, categories of things, time, of the behavior of solid objects, our image of physical mundane objects that we see or interact with, color, perhaps even counting numbers) are passive and instinctive, and are built into mental concepts themselves, perhaps incapable of being broken down further, and these concepts are brought into the linguistic realm by acts of naming. The higher-level complex concepts are composed by assembling lower-level atomic concepts through active, as opposed to involuntary, supposition.

Concepts, namings, and suppositions therefore have a close relationship. A concept contained in a naming can be supposed to be synthetically true or existent. Named concepts can be extended or further specified with explicit suppositions, and this new extended concept can be given a new name. One can just work with the concepts given in the namings and synthetically assert directly. If one needs more than that, then one may want to extend the concept with further and explicit suppositions, and make assertions suppositionally under the suppositions before asserting the suppositions themselves. One can also create namings that map to complex compound concepts and remove the need for explicit suppositions although this generally makes things more confusing.

## **3.2 Naming**

### **3.2.1 Reference to concepts**

One important difference between my proposed framework and many others is that naming, on my view, maps a word to a concept instead of mapping it to a thing in the world.<sup>6</sup> However, this difference can go a long ways toward resolving problems that other theories struggle to deal with, especially problems about definite descriptions. On my view, a definite description is a type of naming. Therefore, even if it successfully refers to something in the world, its contents are still only concepts. For example, “the 42<sup>nd</sup> president of the U.S.” picks out Bill Clinton, but “Bill Clinton is the 42<sup>nd</sup> president of the U.S.” is not a definitional assertion – it is a synthetic assertion. “President of the U.S.” is a concept, and being 42<sup>nd</sup> in a series of things is another concept; the two of them put together is another one. “The 998<sup>th</sup> president of the U.S.” is also a concept – a perfectly coherent one, even though it does not pick out anything in our world (at least, not at the present time), but that is no problem in my framework since concepts can be fictional. On their own, both “the 42<sup>nd</sup> president” and “the 998<sup>th</sup> president” would be perfectly fine things to name, but if one were to assert “the 42<sup>nd</sup> president is currently alive” then one would utter a synthetically true statement, while “the 998<sup>th</sup> president is currently alive” would be a synthetically false statement.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Millians are the primary proponents of the view that names map words to their referents rather than to concepts, but the view also finds sympathy amongst some Fregeans and causal-historical theorists (Donnellan 1972; Kripke 1972).

<sup>7</sup> This analysis is largely sympathetic to Kripke's stance on rigid designators as given in *Naming and Necessity* (1972). Definite descriptions do not mean the same thing as their referents. However, while Kripke reaches this conclusion using modal concepts (Bill

One interesting consequence of this framework is that it seems to eliminate the need for Fregean senses to do the work in resolving issues involving confusion between concepts. Since things in the world are not directly named – only concepts are – then “the morning star” and “the evening star” refer to different concepts; they don’t directly refer to the thing in the world that we call “the planet Venus”. For example, “the morning star” might be characterized as the concept of that bright dot in the sky that appears in the morning, and “the evening star” the bright dot in the evening. To link together these two concepts with the concept of planets, then assert that these two things are planets, and that they are after all the same planet – these are assertions that are synthetically true, not meaningless tautologies. Combining all of that, we arrive at the concept of the planet of Venus; before we had not constructed this concept, or if we had some conception of Venus, then now that conception has been modified and re-circumscribed. The point is that concepts by nature are inherently phenomenological and are agnostic with respect to the real world, and so are distinct from synthetic assertions.<sup>8</sup>

### **3.2.2 Naming’s Arbitrary Nature**

---

Clinton is not necessarily the “42nd president”), I reach the similar conclusions without them – “Bill Clinton” and “the 42nd president” are distinct because they are not the same concept, even if they happen to be the same object in reality.

<sup>8</sup> Jeshion (2004) draws a distinction between ostensive and descriptive names. Some might use this distinction to motivate a type of naming that refers directly to objects – descriptive names cover all the conceptual cases, leaving ostensive names to refer to the world. However, my framework permits names to refer by ostension to concepts rather objects. When a child is born, what is pointed to and named is the concept of the actual child, not the actual child itself. Both types of naming refer to concepts, so this distinction is no objection to my view.

## EX NIHILO

The statement, “all bachelors are unmarried men” could be interpreted, depending on the context, as either a naming or as a definitional assertion. This is a pragmatic ambiguity, but the two acts are very different. When naming, the words “I define that...” are implicitly or explicitly placed in front of the proposition. When definitionally asserting, the words “according to convention...” are implicitly placed in front of the proposition.

A language’s convention is a long list of implicit or explicit namings. All definitional assertions are true or false in relation to a pre-determined convention. Entries in dictionaries are to be taken as definitional assertions, not namings, because dictionaries are generally taken as describing and reporting convention, and not as setting the convention. By contrast, a technical manual that explains to users the use and maintenance of a novel technology and defines terms in some kind of glossary, on the other hand, should probably be taken as giving namings. Thus, at least at first glance, naming can be done completely arbitrarily – the author of the manual could have put in *any* name.<sup>9</sup> I’ll now buttress this argument with further analysis.

Assertions can be suppositional and synthetic at the same time, as explained in the previous section, but if an assertion is definitional – that is, true or false with regards to a naming convention – then the assertion can *only* be

---

<sup>9</sup> It is possible to take a naming and turn it into a definitional assertion simply by changing how one interprets the statement, but this is a pointless exercise. If one has a convention, then takes all the namings in the convention and turns them into definitional assertion – in the process removing the convention – then now all one has are some definitional assertions that have no truth value, because definitional assertions have no truth value in the absence of a convention. If one does not remove the convention then the list of definitional assertions are all true, but uninterestingly so.

definitional. Suppositions can be made to be truth-apt, as has been described in previous sections, but this is not the case with namings. This is because suppositions can be made into synthetic assertions, but namings at most can be made into definitional assertions. Synthetic assertions can then correspond with the real world, but definitional assertions only correspond back to namings.

At its heart, the matter here is that suppositions describe concepts whether or not the concepts actually exist in the real world, but namings do not describe anything at all. Suppositions have content that one can compare to the mind-independent world, but namings do not have such content. Suppositions, even the most fanciful ones, have the possibility of corresponding to something in the mind-independent world (even if they don't successfully correspond as a matter of fact), but namings cannot possibly correspond to anything because they *create* a correspondence. The mapping itself is not in the mind-independent world. At most, one might hold that a naming is a mapping between a word and something in the world, but even then this mapping is still not *in* the world. The upshot is that no external fact-of-the-matter can constrain a naming – it is always up to an individual and his or her private concepts to lay down a new correspondence.

The fact that naming is arbitrary and non-cognitive is further evidenced by the fact that there are so many languages in the world, all with their own conventions. The semantic conventions of languages (that is, the link between concepts and words) are totally arbitrary. There is no metaphysical or physical substrate that says that, for example, “bachelor” is a better word to use to describe an unmarried man than “单身人”, or that “water” is a better or worse word to use to describe the chemical substance H<sub>2</sub>O than “qwerty” or “mickeymouse”. If I wanted, I could

## EX NIHILO

commit an act of naming that goes as follows: from here on out, whenever I say “mickeymouse”, I mean H<sub>2</sub>O, and normal English convention is to be disregarded. Pragmatically speaking no doubt clarity of communication would suffer, but philosophically speaking, I would not be incorrect or any the worse.

### **3.2.3 Convention**

Convention has little or nothing to do with social agreement. I can, for example, create jargon to refer to concepts in my private notes. Real communication, however, requires more than just one person – the speaker and the audience all need to have the same convention. Nevertheless, all that is required for successful communication between people is that everyone communicating is aware of the convention. Our word-concept mappings need to be the same for us to share a concept.

However, there remains the question of how we can possibly know that other people's mappings are in fact the same as our own mappings. For me, a word maps to a certain concept, but how do I know that the same word refers to the exact same concept in someone else's head? How do I know that our naming conventions are really the same?

This is the problem of the indeterminacy of translation as presented in Quine (1960). I believe that my framework's understanding of concepts helps resolve this difficulty. Indeterminacy is overcome by fundamental human similarities in our perception of the world, and with enough interaction with each other, we can create shared conventions where the mappings in all of our conventions are approximately the same. Furthermore, the concepts that are mapped to by namings in the heads of two people trying

to communicate do not have to be exactly the same, they only need to be essentially the same. How similar the underlying concept needs to be is to be determined by the exact architecture of the concept itself, a case-by-case determination. For example, for the concept evoked by "Venus", probably most essential thing that we ascribe is that it is a planet. In my conceptual model of Venus, I know that it's the 2<sup>nd</sup> planet from the sun, it's a rocky planet, it has the most similar size to earth out of all the other planets, it's very bright in the night sky, and it is the evening star as well as the morning star. But to people who don't know those things, I can still talk to them about Venus. These bits of knowledge seem to be peripheral to the essence of Venus. My conception of Venus is not exactly the same as someone else's, but as long as they are similar enough then communication can happen. Thus, how concepts are similar and what a concept's "essence" amounts to is a matter of individual concepts.

### **3.2.4 "Failure to refer"**

Because the act of naming maps a word to a concept, and not a word to a thing in the world, it is possible and perfectly valid for namings to map words to things that don't exist in the real world, such as fictional kings, dragons, etc. As long as the concept is articulable and one has not forgotten to have a naming in place that maps this concept to a word, propositions using the word will not fail to refer. Under a fiction where there is a current king of France, then "the current king of France is bald" is either suppositionally true or false, and there are no problems with reference.

However, while "the current king of France" refers to a concept, it fails to refer to anything in the real world. This means it fails to correspond with anything in the real world, so is synthetically false (although it may still be

suppositionally true). Therefore, this framework seems to favor Russell's (1905) particular stance on the matter, where "the current king of France is bald" is robustly false rather than undefined, because the statement should be read as "the current king of France exists *and* is bald". Russell's stance was in part designed to avoid undefined truth values in propositions; while my framework is not motivated by Russell's concern, it seems to play along well with it.

### **3.2.5 The Logically Impossible**

According to Goldstein (2013), any successful stipulation needs to be, implicitly or explicitly, an if-then conditional: that which is to be stipulated is the antecedent and the existence of that which is stipulated is the hypothesis. For example, the following stipulation is improper: "let the number that is the largest integer be called N". It should instead be: "If there exists a number that is the largest integer, then let that number be N." The stipulation simply fails if that which is to be stipulated is logically incoherent. What Goldstein calls stipulating, my framework calls naming.

For any proof, Goldstein is correct to demand that the named concepts be logically coherent and possible before the argument may proceed. Thus far, my framework says nothing against his view. The question, however, is whether some logically impossible concept can be named in the first place. If they can be named, then it remains true that even if they do not exist, are not coherent and cannot be used in proofs, they may still be used as the objects in acts of naming.

This framework would seem to suggest that the act of naming a logically impossible or incoherent concept is perfectly acceptable. It seems clearly false that logically impossible concepts are genuinely inconceivable in the

necessary sense, for if they were truly inconceivable then we would never have conceived of them, and we therefore could not be talking about them, which we now are. The set of all sets that do not contain themselves is logically incoherent, but we have a name for it anyways – people call it “R” or “Russell's set”.

Admittedly, whether or not logically impossible things are conceivable is a ripe topic of philosophical debate. If it turns out that I am wrong about conceivability, then this edge case of naming will have to be reconsidered, but only with regards to *conceptually* impossible worlds, not impossible worlds in general.

Having sufficiently detailed the framework, I'll now turn to applying it to two philosophical debates in order to see if we might understand better their grounds.

## **4. Applications**

### **4.1 Formal Systems and Mathematics**

Axioms in a formal system are generally thought of as either suppositions or namings and rarely as assertions. Accepting the axioms has certain logical consequences, but nothing purely deductive forces one to accept the axioms themselves. Thought of this way, an axiom itself has no truth value (namings have no truth value and only a supposition's *content* has truth value) and one can take them or leave them as a purely logical exercise. However, the theorems that are derived from the axioms do have truth values. Theorems, therefore, are true or false based on how they correspond to the supposed set of axioms.

The predominant views in the philosophy of mathematics can be formulated in terms of my framework. Mathematical naturalists or empiricists and Platonists would say that although some mathematical axioms may be

## EX NIHILO

mere namings, there are still many axioms that are suppositions – synthetically true ones at that. A Platonist in particular would say that the supposed axioms that are true correspond to entities in a real platonic realm.<sup>10</sup> A naturalist would say that axioms correspond to features or consistent patterns in our own conventional real world.<sup>11</sup> These two positions are both forms of mathematical realism. Realists would claim that mathematical theorems are not only suppositionally true, but also synthetically true. Theorems are assertions that are suppositionally true because they are deducible from supposed axioms, and synthetically true because the supposed axioms themselves are ultimately synthetically true in some way.

A formalist, on the other hand, would say that axioms are namings<sup>12</sup>. Formalists and similarly inclined philosophers of mathematics would be mathematical antirealists. Another kind of mathematical antirealist would be a fictionalist, who would say that some axioms are suppositions, but all the suppositions are false.<sup>13</sup>

Formalists may wish to create a new class of speech acts not covered in this framework if namings prove to be insufficient. It seems to me that the rules in a formal system, or even in a game such as baseball or chess, are not quite namings, but neither are they suppositions, and they are certainly not assertions. For example, consider the finite state machine *M* that accepts all strings of the form “a\*”. “Accept all strings of the form 'a\*’” is clearly a kind of imperative, so it is not a truth apt assertion. Its contents cannot possibly be turned into an assertion, and it is not asking you to pretend that any proposition or other is true,

---

<sup>10</sup> See, e.g., Gödel (1964).

<sup>11</sup> See, e.g., Colyvan (2001).

<sup>12</sup> See, e.g., Zach (2006).

<sup>13</sup> See, e.g., Field (1980).

so it is not a supposition. It is also not quite definitional since it does not seem to be creating any mapping from a word to a concept. It can be argued that this rule may be restated as, “let us define 'in the language of machine M' to be any string of the form 'a\*’”. This seems to map a term, 'in the language of machine M', with a concept that one has constructed, “any string of the form 'a\*’”. This mapping is coherent but it doesn't quite seem to capture the essence of a rule. In any case, let us name that this class of speech acts described here, which we may or may not need, is called “rulings”. More on rulings would be a good topic for future consideration.

## **4.2 Metaethics**

As will be revealed by my framework, moral systems turn out very similar to mathematical systems. All normative ethical theories always reduce down to a set of ethical axioms about what is good and what is bad, what is morally right and morally wrong, and how to evaluate such matters. These ethical axioms mean that assertions made under the axioms can be definitionally or suppositionally true or false.

A moral realist would say further that not only can assertions on ethical matters be definitionally or suppositionally true, but also that the moral axioms themselves are true suppositions, and moral assertions are therefore synthetically true.<sup>14</sup> Of course some axiomatic suppositions can be false but at least there exist some that are true – in other words, there are features of the world that moral axioms describe. Moral axioms are therefore not arbitrary – some ethical rules might turn out to be meaningfully wrong.

---

<sup>14</sup> See, e.g., Shafer-Landau (2003).

## EX NIHILO

On the antirealist side, an error theorist would claim that moral axioms are all false suppositions; they are, at best, fictions.<sup>15</sup> Ethical assertions therefore can be suppositionally true but are ultimately synthetically false. Another possible position holds that moral axioms are kinds of naming, where certain things in the world are mapped to the word “good” and other things are mapped to the word “bad”. Ethical assertions can be definitionally true, but they cannot be synthetically true or false since namings are non-cognitive. This position is probably best described as a kind of ethical subjectivism. I think it is fair to describe this sort of subjectivism as a roundabout variety of non-cognitivism because even though ethical assertions are truth-apt, the axioms that they rest on ultimately are not. In any case, with all kinds of antirealism, in order to have a meaningful ethical discussion, it is necessary to agree in advance upon some axiomatic moral conventions (at least implicitly), otherwise disagreements will not be very meaningful since there is no way to judge between different sets of moral axioms.

A traditional non-cognitivism such as expressivism which holds that all ethical assertions are not propositions and should actually be read as expressions of approval or disapproval does not actually fit into the logical space of this framework the way that it has been laid out thus far.<sup>16</sup> The idea that ethical assertions cannot be true or false contradicts my formulation of assertions. However, space may be made to accommodate the traditional non-cognitivist. This framework does not purport to enumerate all possible speech acts. The expressivist statement “boo, murder” can be regarded as a different kind of speech act that this framework has not covered – call it “expression”.

---

<sup>15</sup> See, e.g., Joyce (2001).

<sup>16</sup> See, e.g., Gibbard (2003).

How to fit such a speech act into this framework would be another rich topic for future research.

## **5. Conclusion**

By making supposition and naming primary linguistic acts in our conceptual scheme, I demonstrated that a variety of topics both inside and outside of the philosophy of language could be neatly tied together. The strength of my framework is that it makes use of a relatively few conceptual tools to explain a wide range of phenomena. However, as demonstrated in the final sections, there is room for incorporating more linguistic acts as needed.

**References:**

- Colyvan, Mark. *The Indispensability of Mathematics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.
- Donnellan, Keith S. "Proper Names and Identifying Descriptions." *Synthese* 21.3-4 (1972): 335-58.
- Field, Hartry. "Science Without Numbers." *Journal of Philosophy* 79 (1980): 523-534.
- Gibbard, Allan. *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings: A Theory of Normative Judgment*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990.
- Gödel, Kurt. "What is Cantor's Continuum Problem?" *Philosophy of mathematics* (1964): 258-73.
- Goldstein, Laurence. "To Let: Unsuccessful Stipulation, Bad Proof, and Paradox." *American Philosophical Quarterly* 50 (2013): 93-99.
- Jeshion, Robin. "Descriptive Descriptive Names." In Marga Reimer & Anne Bezuidenhout (eds.), *Descriptions and Beyond*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004.
- Joyce, Richard. *The Myth of Morality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- Kripke, Saul A. *Naming and Necessity*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972.
- Quine, Willard V. O. *Word and Object*. Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2013.
- Russell, Bertrand. "On Denoting." *Mind* (1905): 479-93.
- Shafer-Landau, Russ. *Moral Realism: A Defence*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003.
- Zach, Richard. "Hilbert's Program." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2003).