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## Critique of Exaggeration

### Thinking Beyond

Cejvan, Ervik

2020

[Link to publication](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Cejvan, E. (2020). *Critique of Exaggeration: Thinking Beyond*. [Doctoral Thesis (monograph), Centre for Theology and Religious Studies]. Lund University (Media-Tryck).

*Total number of authors:*

1

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# Critique of Exaggeration: Thinking Beyond

ERVIK CEJVAN

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Exaggeration is thinking. Thinking beyond takes us nowhere. There, beyond, however, is the point of dissolution. Nowhere to go. Still, I am here. From the nothingness of the void, we return to the emptiness of possibility – the potentiality of freedom – to reconsider that I am here. Thinking beyond takes us back to the things at hand. Nowhere is nowhere to arrive. We remain here. Where does that take us?

# Critique of Exaggeration: Thinking Beyond

Ervik Cejvan



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DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

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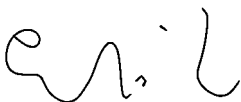
To be defended at LUX on 22 January 2021 at 13.00.

*Faculty opponent*  
Prof. Jonna Bornemark

<b>Organization</b> LUND UNIVERSITY Joint Faculties of Humanities and Theology Author: Ervik Cejvan		<b>Document name</b> Doctoral Dissertation
		<b>Date of issue</b> 21-01-22
		<b>Sponsoring organization</b>
<b>Title and subtitle</b> Critique of Exaggeration: Thinking Beyond.		
<b>Abstract</b> <p>This study examines the function of exaggeration for thinking beyond the current concepts of God and the human. An example of thinking beyond in philosophy is the exaggeration "beyond being" in Plato's <i>Republic</i>. In the philosophy of religion, generally, we deal with the questions of God. The present study discerns as an instance of thinking beyond the thinking about God and the human. The study aims to develop and demonstrate the critique of exaggeration as an approach to the thinking beyond. The critique of exaggeration locates and examines the point at which thinking goes beyond the subject at hand, which is also the subject of clear and distinct understanding. The study takes the starting point in Jacques Derrida's <i>Writing and Difference</i>, and Alexander Garcia Düttmann's philosophical concept of exaggeration for the analysis of exaggeration in René Descartes' <i>Meditations on First Philosophy</i>, George Bataille's <i>Madame Edwarda</i>, and Antonin Artaud's <i>To Have Done with the Judgement of God</i>. The study demonstrates the decisive role of exaggeration in the creation of concepts. Finally, the study proposes the critique of exaggeration as the approach to the eccentric, transgressive, and extravagant discourses in philosophy and philosophising in literature, art, and theatre.</p>		
<b>Key words</b> critique, exaggeration, thinking beyond, Artaud, Bataille, Derrida, Descartes, Plato, creation of concepts, transgression, extravagance, excess		
<b>Classification system and/or index terms (if any)</b>		
<b>Supplementary bibliographical information</b>		<b>Language</b> English
<b>ISSN and key title</b>		<b>ISBN</b> 978-91-89213-25-8
<b>Recipient's notes</b>	<b>Number of pages</b> 148	<b>Price</b>
	<b>Security classification</b>	

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Coverphoto by Jean Baptiste Weenix, portrait of René Descartes (ca. 1647-1649),  
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Joint Faculties of Humanities and Theology  
Centre for Theology and Religious Studies


ISBN 978-91-89213-25-8 (print)

ISBN 978-91-89213-26-5 (ebook)

Printed in Sweden by Media-Tryck, Lund University, Lund 2021



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# Acknowledgements

Thank you, Catharina Stenqvist, for your wisdom and compassion; Erica Appelros and Patrik Fridlund for your support, patience, and trust in me; all good thinkers at the higher seminar in the philosophy of religion and related seminars through the years, in Lund, especially Clara Berg, Ulrica Fritzson, Elisabeth Gerle, Aaron Goldman, K. G. Hammar, Matz Hammarström, Gerth Hyrkäs, Martin Lembke, Per Lind, Jonas Lundblad, Johan Modée, Andreas Nordlander, Tanya Norell, Lovisa Nyman, Carl-Johan Palmqvist, Simon Pedersen Schmidt, Andreas Sealand, Anna Sjöberg, Leif Stille, Jane Svenungsson, Roy Wiklander, and Uppsala, especially, Karin Johansson, Francis Jonbäck, Oliver Li, Ingrid Malm Lindberg, Christoffer Skogholt, Mikael Stenmark, Ulf Zackariasson, Lina Åhlfeldt; all the colleagues at CTR, especially, Agnes Borg, Lisa Buratti, Olivia Cejvan, Johanna Gustafsson Lundberg, Elisabet Göransson, Gösta Hallonsten, David Heith-Stade, Anne-Christine Hornborg, Fredrik Lindström, Paul Linjamaa, Alexander Maurits, Anna Minara Ciardi, Johan Nilsson, Olle Qvarnström, Ola Wikander; the university library, the IT and Media Tryck staff. Thord Svensson, Ingvar Bolmsten, Antoon Geels, I always remember you.

I also want to express my gratitude to the people from the universities elsewhere, especially Stefan Arvidsson, Jonna Bornemark, Stine Holte, Erica Li Lundquist, Martin Lund, Marius Timmann Mjaaland, Åsa Trulsson. I am grateful to Marcia Cavalcante for reading and commenting the draft of my thesis at the final seminar.

Also, thank you, Admir Skodo, for awakening me from my Lacanian slumber; Anders Carlsson and Markus Öhrn of Institutet for letting me on stage; Linnea Carlsson for asking me many questions and listening; Anders Lindström of Aning for inviting me to lectures and seminars; Helena Lie for your generosity and kindness for providing me with optimal working conditions in the last phase of writing; Emir Bosnic for being my role model since childhood; my father for all the books, my mother for never letting me down; my parents in law; my dear friends; Varga and her mother Jenny; Sienna and Leon. Thank you, Olivia. I am fortunate to be here.



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# Introduction

The questions concerning the divine in philosophy have inspired the ways of thinking that go beyond ordinary ways of thinking. Despite that, philosophy is less successful in providing universally satisfying discourses about the divine, not always appealing to theologians and those who seek the divine through experience. The thinking about the divine in philosophy pertains, therefore, less to the question of the divine. It incites a task of critical examination of the ways of thinking beyond in philosophy. Especially interesting for me here is the way of exaggeration. Traditional examples employ exaggeration in the figurative language of hyperbole to overemphasize the divine beyond the human. The hyperbolic expressions facilitate the thinking beyond, for instance, in assigning God superlative attributes, surpassing the human limitations. However, as Thomas Browne points out, the hyperbole “reach not the portal of divinity”:

Created natures allow of swelling hyperboles: nothing can be said hyperbolically of God, nor will his attributes admit of expressions above their own exuperances. Trismegistus’s circle, whose centre is everywhere, and circumference nowhere, was not hyperbole. Words cannot exceed where they cannot express enough. Even the most winged thoughts fall at the setting out, and reach not the portal of divinity.<sup>1</sup>

Adopting Browne’s dictum, that “nothing can be said hyperbolically of God”, confirms the necessity of considering the hyperbolic as the way of thinking, not about God or the divine, but as the way of thinking beyond the human. Thinking God hyperbolically, the human goes beyond oneself, without reaching God. On the side of thinking beyond the human, I propose, we are dealing with exaggeration. The human ability to think beyond is the ability to exaggerate. As we have it in Plato’s *Republic*, 509b-c:<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Browne, *The Works of Sir Thomas Browne*, vol. IV, Ed. Simon Wilkin, F. L. S., London: Henry G. Bohn, 1846, pp. 93-94.

<sup>2</sup> I am indebted to Paul Shorey for the reference to Browne and Plato on the subject of the ‘hyperbole’ in a note to 509c in his translation of Plato’s *Republic*. The elaboration on thinking

[Socrates:] ‘Therefore, say that not only being known is present in the things known as a consequence of the good, but also existence and being are in them besides as a result of it, although the good isn’t being but is still beyond being, exceeding it in dignity and power.’ And Glaucon, quite ridiculously, said, ‘Apollo, what a demonic excess.’ ‘You,’ I said, ‘are responsible for compelling me to tell my opinions about it.’<sup>3</sup>

Thinking beyond – from the good to the good “beyond being” – entails exaggeration. Exaggeration signals a limit or a turning point, to return to the matters at hand. Upon Glaucon’s intervention, Socrates returns to the question of the good as the moral and political question. In this study, I adopt Glaucon’s position toward exaggeration, from which I develop what I designate as the critique of exaggeration.

In this study, I propose the critique of exaggeration as the approach to the thinking beyond.<sup>4</sup> Thinking beyond, as I see it, does not bring on the unthought-of possibilities but unfolds on demand of exaggeration. The critique of exaggeration does not target the attempts to think beyond for going too far but locates and examines exaggeration operating in the thinking beyond. The goal of the critique of exaggeration is to discern the point at which thinking overshoots the clear and distinct understanding, whether there remains something that resists exaggeration. Ultimately, the remainder resisting exaggeration is the matter of a clear and distinct understanding.

For instance, if a philosopher demands that we should accept an absurdity, if we commence an evaluation of it or speculate about the reasons for this utterance,

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beyond and exaggeration I offer here is my own. It was Shorey’s note that made me aware of Browne. Shorey’s annotated translation is accessible on line at [perseus.tufts.edu](http://perseus.tufts.edu).

<sup>3</sup> Plato, *Republic*, transl. A. Bloom, second edition, Basic Books, 1991 (first edition 1968), p. 189 (509b-c).

<sup>4</sup> Although Keith Ansell-Pearson traces the theme and the formulation “thinking beyond the human condition” to Bergson and Deleuze’s reception of Bergson, beside the incidental and partial similarity of the theme, the “thinking beyond”, the subject of my study is *exaggeration*. Ansell-Pearson, as I understand it, does not question the Bergsonian-Deleuzian notion of “thinking beyond the human condition” but proposes it *as* the very task of thinking. I became aware of Ansell-Pearson’s interesting work very late in the present dissertation. For this reason, I do not refer to or discuss Ansell-Pearson’s work. I am nevertheless looking forward to examine the *question* of the “thinking beyond the human condition”, also in Bergson and Deleuze, the two thinkers I am still in the process of reading. I am generally sympathetic to Deleuze’s *creative* approach to the task of philosophy, to which, I believe, my critique of exaggeration may contribute methodical input. See Keith Ansell-Pearson, ‘Beyond the Human Condition: An Introduction to Deleuze’s Lecture Course’, *SubStance* #114, Vol. 36, no.3, 2007, pp.57-71: Keith Ansell-Pearson, *Bergson: Thinking Beyond the Human Condition*, Bloomsbury, 2018.

we already overshoot the matter in hand, namely the clear and distinct understanding of absurdity. We can laugh at it. If we apply the critique of exaggeration, we could discern the point at which the thinking has gone beyond. Thus, we retrieve the clear and distinct understanding that resists exaggeration.

## Hyperbolical (im)possibility

The possibility in the wake of a hypothetical and likely, hyperbolical, event of the “disappearance” of God *or* the human is the possibility of God without the human or the human without God.<sup>5</sup> Whoever disappears will be left without the *other*. Whatever the cause of the disappearance, there will be nothing left to do but remain the *one* alone, for nobody else but oneself. This One, without the other, is not yet neither God nor the human. Unless One is unconscious, unknowing, and unthinking, One could conceive and pronounce oneself as *I am*. As René Descartes ascertains it in the Second Meditation: “...*I am, I exist*, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind.”<sup>6</sup> *Ego*, the subject is also in the verb, *sum*.<sup>7</sup> But “I am”, is unfinished business. “I am” only that “I am” – already a reduction of *what* I am. Descartes makes it clear that exaggeration is the (“metaphysical”) reason why the “I” goes beyond the fact that “I am here”. Proceeding further, the “I” asks: “What then did I formerly think I was? A man. But what is a man? Shall I say ‘a rational animal’? No...”<sup>8</sup> Finally: “But what then

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<sup>5</sup> I draw here on the theme of the “disappearance of an exceeded God or of an erased man” from Jacques Derrida’s ‘Ellipsis’ in the *Writing and Difference*, to which I will return. J. Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, tr. Alan Bass, London: Routledge, 2005, p. 371.

<sup>6</sup> René Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Vol. II, transl. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch, Cambridge University Press, 1984, p. 17. (In the following I use abbreviation CSM II.)

<sup>7</sup> In his early *Ego Sum: Corpus, Anima, Fabula*, (see literature), Jean-Luc Nancy offers a reading of the subject in the *Meditations* extending on the theme of *ego sum*. In my reference to Descartes here, I adopt Nancy’s style of exposition and the focus on the *sum* as fundamental for the self-disclosure of the subject. Presently, I use the example of the *Meditations* in my appropriation of Nancy, however, to introduce the Derridean motive of the present study. I will provide the analysis of exaggeration in the *Meditations* in my own reading. Descartes provides the instance of thinking beyond the normally obvious; of general significance for the consideration of the thinking reflecting on itself as a subject, in a minimal sense of self-assertion as a being, but also, as I see it, of going beyond the thinking subject through exaggeration. The latter is what interest me in this study.

<sup>8</sup> CSM II p. 17.



am I? “A thing that thinks. What is that? A thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, is willing, is unwilling, and also imagines and has sensory perceptions.”<sup>9</sup> In sum, “...my essence consists solely in the fact that I am a thinking thing”;<sup>10</sup> the “unextended substance” whose “essence” is to *think*; the mind freely floating in space, the immortal soul.<sup>11</sup>

Our hypothetical/hyperbolic event of the “disappearance” of God or the human brings forward the milestones of classical metaphysics *ex nihilo*: being, existence, substance, essence, One, God, soul, and so on. To speak with Martin Heidegger in ‘What is Metaphysics?’, the inaugural lecture from 1929, the metaphysics is always already “going beyond beings”, evolves from “nothing”: “Human Dasein can comport itself toward beings only if it holds itself out into the nothing. Going beyond beings occurs in the essence of Dasein. But this going beyond is metaphysics itself. This implies that metaphysics belongs to the ‘nature of human being’.”<sup>12</sup> We could speculate further and beyond, however, not without exaggeration.

## Preparations

So, we are here. God remains God, and the human remains the human. As for the question of the event of the disappearance of God or the human, it resolves the deadlock to remind us that this has already *happened*. Jacques Derrida was the first to recognize it in “the fabric of traces marking the disappearance of an exceeded God or of an erased man”.<sup>13</sup> These are the “traces” on a blank page in a notepad or a book under the page of writing, impressed by the inscription on that page. Any future writing on that apparently blank page will inscribe itself on the marks of these traces, whatever that means for the “deconstruction of metaphysics”. I am interested in the potential and the delimitations of the blankness of the next, unwritten page, inviting the thinking beyond God and the

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<sup>9</sup> CSM II p. 19.

<sup>10</sup> CSM II p. 54.

<sup>11</sup> CSM II p. 18; p. 54.

<sup>12</sup> Martin Heidegger, ‘What is Metaphysics?’ in *Pathmarks*, ed. W. McNeill, tr. D. F. Krell, Cambridge University Press, 1998, 96.

<sup>13</sup> See the last essay in Derrida’s *Writing and Difference* entitled ‘Ellipsis’. Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, transl. A. Bass, Routledge, 1978, p. 371.

human. I want to examine how thinking beyond works, what is at work in the thinking beyond.

The presumptive task of thinking in the wake of the “disappearance” of God and the human, I propose, take us beyond or without the notions of God and the human, beyond, to put it with Derrida, “the theological encyclopedia and, modelled upon it, the book of man”.<sup>14</sup> Significantly, in the chapter entitled ‘Beyond’, Derrida in *The Gift of Death*, locates in the phenomenological, existentialist and hermeneutic traditions “a *thinking* that ‘repeats’, without religion, the possibility of religion”.<sup>15</sup> In reference to Derrida’s previous analysis of Patočka’s discourse on Christianity in the chapter, one can assign a “heretical and hyperbolic” character to this “thinking”. To its heir Derrida accounts “in different respects and with different results, the discourses of Levinas or Marion, perhaps of Ricoeur also” and “a certain Kant and a certain Hegel, Kierkegaard of course, and I might even dare to say for provocative effect, Heidegger also”.<sup>16</sup>

The theme of “heretical and hyperbolic” thinking brings us back to the *Writing and Difference* and Derrida’s essay on René Descartes. Derrida in ‘Cogito and the History of Madness’ provides the conditions for a restauration of the failure of the historical Cogito to remain at the core of “madness”. Derrida’s emphasis of the “mad audacity”, the “hyperbolic exaggeration”, the “absolute excess”, the “hyperbolic project” of the Cogito points out the possibility of thinking beyond God and the human. The historical reasons, however, did not entitle Descartes to realize the excess of the Cogito if he ever wanted to. In line with this, I suggest, Derrida’s essay on George Bataille and the two essays on Antonin Artaud in the *Writing and Difference* rehearse the resonance of the “Cogito’s mad audacity” in their thinking.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 371.

<sup>15</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, transl. D. Wills, Chicago University Press, 2008, p. 50. Translation modified.

<sup>16</sup> Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, p. 50.

<sup>17</sup> Derrida in the ‘Cogito and the History of Madness’ laments the historical situation of the Cogito that did not allow its “audacity” to deliver the full blow against metaphysics. As I see it, Descartes found himself in a position to submit the principles of philosophy to the authority of the Catholic Church; an ambiguous position. The apparent domestication of the Cogito, again, if the potential Derrida sees in the Cogito was ever so important for Descartes as it is for us, did not prevent the manic insistence of the exaggerations from the *Meditations* to operate as the time bomb from within the theological rationality, its belief basis. Descartes always chose the clear and distinct understanding before the belief, whatever that means for the question of *faith*, which does not seem to have bothered Descartes, who may have passed for a Catholic. The last line of Descartes’ *Principles of Philosophy*: “Nevertheless, mindful of my insignificance, I affirm nothing:

Generally, Artaud and Bataille are thinking beyond the metaphysical and theological traditions. They also, as I see it, surpass the “heretical and hyperbolic” thinking by employing the intensity of what Derrida designates as the “absolute excess”. Regarding this particularity Derrida assigns to the potentiality of the Cogito, it is possible to assume that he reads Descartes through the “madness” of Artaud and Bataille, but that is not in focus here. Each for his own (un)reasons, as I see it, Artaud and Bataille want to establish “the disappearance of an exceeded God or of an erased man” through *their* own, I repeat, “mad audacity”, “hyperbolic exaggeration”, “absolute excess”, “hyperbolic project”. Or simply, I propose, through *exaggeration*.

Exaggeration is at the core of Descartes’ *Meditations*. This is evident also without Derrida’s insistence on the “hyperbolic” in Descartes, because Descartes does not hide it. Descartes employs exaggeration in *Meditations* to establish an approach to “metaphysical reasons” for doubt. Descartes stages or feigns the *exaggerated* doubt in order to ascertain many things on the way to the existence of God and the distinction between mind and body, but principally, as I see it, *that thinking exaggerates and thus goes beyond the subject at hand*. In Descartes’ *Meditations*, I suggest, the subject at hand is the unshakable certainty “that I am here”. Metaphysical reasons for doubt cannot upset this fact, not without exaggeration. For this reason, in the end, as Descartes asserts it, “the exaggerated doubts of the last few days should be dismissed as laughable”.<sup>18</sup> In consequence, Descartes concludes, we can rest assured that we can trust our senses and our ability to understand things clearly and distinctly. Beyond that pejoratively, is pure metaphysics. The trusty “good sense”<sup>19</sup> from the *Discourse on Method* is still at work in the *Meditations*.

Derrida is nevertheless first after Descartes to point out the potentiality and limitation of exaggeration. Of course, indirectly, in the ‘Cogito and the History

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but submit all these things both to the authority of the Catholic Church and to the judgment of men wiser than I; nor would I wish anyone to believe anything except what he is convinced of by clear and irrefutable reason.” René Descartes, *Principles of Philosophy*, Transl. Valentine Roge Miller and Resse P. Miller, London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1982, p. 288.

<sup>18</sup> CSM II p. 61.

<sup>19</sup> Descartes’ notion immediately at the beginning of the first sentence of the *Discourse on Method*. “Good sense is the most evenly distributed thing in the world; for everyone believes himself to be so well provided with it that even those who are the hardest to please in every other way do not usually want more of it than they already have.” René Descartes, *A Discourse on the Method of Correctly Conducting One’s Reason and Seeking Truth in the Sciences*, transl. and intro. Maclean, Oxford 2006., p. 5.

of Madness', in his assertions of "hyperbolisation" in *The Gift of Death*, and in his auto-biographic account of "contracting" the "hyperbolism" in his youth, in the *Monolingualism of the Other*. Derrida is nevertheless aware of exaggeration, and allows it to be at play, for instance, in the last line of *The Gift of Death*. Despite allowing Patočka, Levinas, Heidegger and Kierkegaard to "hyperbolize" the theme of the "gift of death" Derrida gives the last word to Nietzsche: "Nietzsche must indeed believe he knows what believing means, unless he means it is all make-believe."<sup>20</sup> There are those who believe that God is dead, and those who believe that God is not dead. Derrida in *The Gift of Death* invokes the examination of exaggeration piling up pro and contra this bottom-line pervading "many discourses that seek in our day to be religious – discourses of a philosophical type if not the philosophies themselves".<sup>21</sup> Derrida's challenge is to recognize exaggeration at work in the discourses on "the gift of death".

Descartes was certain that God exists but he also demonstrated that this question was exhausting the direction of thinking toward the search for truth in the knowledge of the physical things. Bataille believed that God is dead but from the traumatic experience that could find consolation only in Nietzsche. For Artaud, who lived dead and died alive, God was irrelevant.

This study nevertheless throws over the analysis of arguments and beliefs of and about Derrida on Descartes, Bataille, and Artaud to the advantage of the question of the possibility of thinking beyond God and the human as the question of exaggeration. Significantly, this possibility demands a critical assessment. This one, not even remotely systematic as a Kantian *Kritik*, tries to provide the critique of exaggeration. It takes on the question of exaggeration in response to Derrida's call for the examination of the instances of thinking beyond God and the human, as the continuation of the *ellipsis* opening the *Writing and Difference*, as one of its openings, for such a task. Thus, Derrida opens the texts of Descartes, Bataille, and Artaud, for the present study to return to these three thinkers as the thinkers of exaggeration outside the *Writing and Difference*.

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<sup>20</sup> Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, p. 116.

<sup>21</sup> Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, p. 50.

## Thinkers of exaggeration

I develop the critique of exaggeration in my analyses of René Descartes' metaphysical treatise *Meditations on First Philosophy*,<sup>22</sup> Georges Bataille's pornographic story *Madame Edwarda*,<sup>23</sup> and Antonin Artaud's radio-play, *To Have Done with the Judgement of God*.<sup>24</sup> The choice of the present texts relate to Jacques Derrida's essays on Descartes, Bataille, and the two essays on Artaud in *Writing and Difference*.<sup>25</sup> Except for Descartes' *Meditations*, Derrida does not refer to the present texts of Bataille and Artaud.<sup>26</sup> The themes Derrida analyses in the essays nevertheless relate to them – unsurprisingly, because Artaud and Bataille, perhaps Descartes also, were rather *monomaniac* thinkers. In relation to the present texts, I locate an unelaborated subject of exaggeration at play in Derrida's essays. Apart from examining “hyperbolic exaggeration” only in the essay on Descartes, Derrida does not discuss exaggeration in the *Writing and Difference*. My examination of exaggeration moves, therefore, to the texts of Descartes, Bataille, and Artaud, outside Derrida's essays.

Descartes, Bataille, and Artaud, as I see it, are *the thinkers of exaggeration*. The texts I select here are representative of that. They demonstrate the *critical* potential of exaggeration for discerning the point at which the thinking goes beyond the subject at hand. To offer a taste of this potential: Descartes, in the very last line of *Meditations*, points out exaggeration at work in the making of sense under the

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<sup>22</sup> I use and refer to standard English translations. René Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Vol. II, transl. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch, Cambridge University Press, 1984. (Abbr. CSM II) Occasionally, I refer to the older standard translation, *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, Vo. I, transl. Elisabeth S. Haldane and G.R.T. Ross, Cambridge University Press, 1970. (Abbr. HR) I also consult the original Latin and the early French translation of *Meditations*, in *Oeuvres de Descartes*, ed. Charles Adam & Paul Tannery, Paris, Leopold Cerf, 1904; Vol. VII for Latin and Vol. IX for French translation.

<sup>23</sup> For Bataille, *The Bataille Reader*, ed. Fred Botting and Scott Wilson, Blackwell 1997. I also consult French original, in George Bataille, *Oeuvres Complètes*, Tome III, Éditions Gallimard, 1971.

<sup>24</sup> For Artaud, *Antonin Artaud: Selected Writings*, ed. Susan Sontag, Berkely, University of California Press, 1988. I also Consult French original, in Antonin Artaud, *Oeuvres Complètes*, Tome XIII, Éditions Gallimard, 1974.

<sup>25</sup> The essays ‘Cogito and the History of madness’ (Descartes) pp. 36-77; ‘La Parole Soufflée’ (Artaud) pp. 212-246; ‘The Theater of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation’ (Artaud) pp. 292-317; ‘From Restricted to General Economy: Hegelianism Without Reserve’ (Bataille) pp. 317-351.

<sup>26</sup> Derrida in *Writing and Difference* does not refer to Artaud's play but to its themes exposed elsewhere by Artaud, for instance in the review 84. See pp. 230-231.

“pressure of things to be done” as the “weakness of our nature”; the tendency of thinking to go beyond clear and distinct understanding. This operation of exaggeration is also evident in Bataille and Artaud. In Bataille, the anguish “in the presence of GOD” exaggerates the distress from “having too much to drink” and goes beyond the prospect of “pleasure” with Edwarda. Artaud’s reduction of being to excrement exaggerates the relevance of remaking the human into a “body without organs”. The ontological elaboration goes beyond the question of the human capacity to cruelty and thus legitimises it.

An explication of the concept of exaggeration is in place. In the following, I present the philosophical concept of exaggeration by Alexander García Düttmann. I adopt Düttmann’s concept of exaggeration as providing the formula for my critique of exaggeration.

## The concept of exaggeration: Düttmann

Exaggeration in philosophy is not an anomaly:

In philosophy it is possible to differentiate between thinkers according to whether they seek in the exception and exaggeration insight with regard to the rule, or whether they subordinate the exception to the rule, viewing it as nothing but a misleading exaggeration. A thought may acknowledge the necessity of exaggerations or it may ready itself against the danger of their caprice. But that one can think it without exaggeration is just as little established as the inverse proposition, namely that recognition of an exaggeration essential to thought has already to be understood as its justification. Perhaps thought is not *permitted* to exaggerate, precisely because it is not *able* to do anything other than exaggerate.<sup>27</sup>

Düttmann in *Philosophy of Exaggeration* examines the question of exaggeration in philosophy in twelve thematically disparate essays.<sup>28</sup> Elaborating Adorno’s notion

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<sup>27</sup> Alexander García Düttmann, *Philosophy of Exaggeration*, transl. J. Phillips, Continuum, 2007, p.1. Originally in German, *Philosophie der Übertreibung* (Suhrkamp Verlag: Frankfurt am Main, 2004). Düttmann, (b. 1961), the former student of Derrida, is Professor in the Philosophy of Art at Universität der Künste in Berlin.

<sup>28</sup> See the review by Maria Granik in Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews online (published 2008.02.19): <https://ndpr.nd.edu/news/philosophy-of-exaggeration/>.

of exaggeration as constitutive of thinking, Düttmann examines the treatment of the political, historical, esthetical and ethical issues in Arendt, Deleuze, Derrida, Lévinas, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, and other significant thinkers of the past century, with references to Kant, Hegel, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Freud, extending to the instances of exaggeration in art and literature. Düttmann's *Philosophy of Exaggeration* is an excellent piece of learning, a labyrinth of references, witty, rich, heavy, and bold, sometimes dense and intricate. Interestingly, Düttmann mentions Descartes, Bataille, and Artaud only in quotes, in the notes, or in relation to other thinkers.<sup>29</sup>

Düttmann effectively inaugurates a new field of study of philosophy. I want to take this perhaps unintended inauguration on behalf of Düttmann's project of the philosophy of exaggeration a step further and offer, as far as I know, the first study in the philosophy of religion that inscribes itself in the field of the philosophy of exaggeration and vice versa.

It seems, however, that the essence of the *Philosophy of Exaggeration* exists in the Lexical Note on the prefatory page of the book, in which we find Düttmann's philosophical concept of exaggeration. Düttmann's Lexical Note, as I see it, is both a hypothesis and a conclusion of the *Philosophy of Exaggeration*. It establishes, as I see it, a relation between philosophy, thinking, and exaggeration:

The concept of exaggeration is not used in this book simply in the familiar sense. For the conventional use of the word implies that one measures exaggerations against their opposite, namely against appropriateness and adequacy; one thereby already depreciates them. Here exaggeration means, first of all, the strength for a disclosing transgression of a limit, and secondarily the excess that cannot be recovered conceptually. Of course, both meanings also have their negative counterparts. The transgression of the limit may prove inadmissible or obfuscatory, the excess may turn out to be the bad infinite. Exaggeration and exactitude are perhaps no more irreconcilable than exaggeration and justice. Philosophy drives exaggeration to the limit at which it becomes that which drives philosophy.<sup>30</sup>

Düttmann's concept of exaggeration, as I see it, is crystallising in the *formula*: "Philosophy drives exaggeration to the limit at which exaggeration becomes that which drives philosophy." The excess of exaggeration is the limit of philosophy.

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<sup>29</sup> See Düttmann, *Philosophy of Exaggeration*, 2007, the quote on p. 43 for Bataille; p. 149n 6 for Artaud (in relation to Derrida); p. 129 (Kant on Descartes), p. 173n 21 (Adorno on Descartes) for Descartes.

<sup>30</sup> Düttmann, *Philosophy of Exaggeration*, Lexical Note.

At this limit, exaggeration nevertheless “drives philosophy”, to point out this limit or collapse beyond it. Düttmann delimits his examination of exaggeration in philosophy to these two causally determined movements. In the next section I propose the possibility of a third movement of exaggeration as my contribution extending on Düttmann’s philosophy of exaggeration.

However, in my appropriation and extension of Düttmann’s formula, I inscribe “thinking” in the place of “philosophy” in the formula. To paraphrase: *thinking drives exaggeration to the limit at which it becomes that which drives the thinking*. I will provide reasons for this paraphrasing in the next section in reference to Deleuze and Guattari, but already in Düttmann I find an oscillation between philosophy and thinking in relation to exaggeration.

Düttmann discusses the relation between thinking and exaggeration particularly in the essay ‘Thinking as gesture: exaggeration and philosophy’.<sup>31</sup> For instance, in reference to Theodor Adorno, Düttmann discusses exaggeration as “constitutive” for thinking. “Thinking is essentially exaggeration, to the extent that it opens up and discloses a world. Every thought, depending on such a disclosure, must bear the mark of exaggeration.”<sup>32</sup> In reference to Jacques Derrida, Düttmann maintains, thinking is a “gesture” of exaggeration that “provokes philosophy”. “In the end Derrida says nothing – and thereby, *through the nothingness of a gesture of thinking*, provokes philosophy.”<sup>33</sup> This observation of Düttmann accompanies my view on Derrida’s attitude to exaggeration (in deconstruction in general according to Düttmann). Although Derrida, as I pointed out before, does not deal with exaggeration explicitly, he nevertheless points out exaggeration in thinking – as the “nothingness of a gesture of thinking”, most importantly, provoking philosophy, very subtly, almost testing its alertness and rigor, to either assent to or question exaggeration. The general reception of Derrida, as I see it, fall into the former category, which nevertheless confirms, as Düttmann finds in Adorno: “(t)he idea that between thought and exaggeration there is a link that proves to be constitutive of both thought itself and its exposition... an idea Adorno repeatedly formulates without ever systematically developing it.”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Düttmann, *Philosophy of Exaggeration*, pp. 15-28.

<sup>32</sup> Düttmann, *Philosophy of Exaggeration*, p. 20.

<sup>33</sup> Düttmann, *Philosophy of Exaggeration*, p. 25. (Emphasis original.)

<sup>34</sup> Düttmann, *Philosophy of Exaggeration*, p. 15.



## The third movement of exaggeration: back to basics

Extending on Düttmann, I examine the possibility to establish a third movement – to save the thinking at the point of what I designate as thinking beyond, “at which exaggeration becomes that which drives philosophy”. The third movement, I propose, implies a return to the subject without exaggeration. This movement requires the critique of exaggeration. Concretely, in my analyses, I discern the point at which exaggeration collapses the concept. I show that the collapse of the concept is also the collapse of exaggeration. The exaggeration is in the concept that goes beyond the subject. The subject resists exaggeration. The subject is always already at hand. The concept of exaggeration falls away. The subject remains. Hence, the excess of exaggeration drives only the concept. At the point of collapse of exaggeration/concept, thinking can return to the subject. In conclusion, the third movement is possible. It implies the return to the subject itself. The subject is always the subject of clear and distinct understanding.

Here, I adopt Descartes’ principle of clear and distinct understanding as sufficiently ascertaining the thingness of the subject. Clear and distinct, the subject/thing resists exaggeration, and finally, and as such, it is available for examination without exaggeration. I emphasize Descartes’ principle of clear and distinct understanding as a heuristic device for discerning the subject at hand. The clear and distinct understanding, however, does not imply immediate knowledge of the subject. Most importantly, it asserts that the subject persists as a thing on the most basic level of recognition. From this “basic notion” (Descartes), we increase the level of understanding and build the knowledge of the subject on this basis.

In contrast to this, thinking through exaggeration goes violently beyond the subject. The thinking beyond starts on demand of the concept, without basis in any subject/thingness whatsoever. If there is a basis for the exaggerated concept, it lies in a distorted image of the subject, that is, in what is always already an exaggeration. Exaggeration provides only a conceptual image of the concept itself, without the subject, or a concept of the image of a distorted subject. Exaggeration does not sustain the thinking about the subject. It submerges the thinking to the movement beyond the subject. Nothing in the exaggerated concept produce knowledge. Nothing bases a clear and distinct understanding of any basic notion.

Thinking beyond through exaggeration becomes the self-serving goal of going beyond. As we have it in Browne, thinking about the divine through the hyperbole, exaggeration take us merely *beyond*. If the divine is beyond logic, words

and thoughts – “Trismegistus’s circle” is no exaggeration – going beyond, we merely chase an idea of the divine beyond. By exaggeration, we add up to the chain of associations on the level of language. In excess of exaggeration, meaning eventually gets exhausted, the idea collapses beyond recovery. Thus, indeed, we may arrive beyond logic, words and thought. But the “portals of divinity” (Browne) may not *be* beyond. Exaggeration eventually annulling the mind from its conceptual madness, we may, however, realise nothing by thinking beyond, but, at best, a condition for an *experience* of the divine. The experience of the divine corresponds with our bodymental being *in* the world. However, the most important insight we can get through exaggeration is that thinking beyond does not lead anywhere. The best we can do is to reconsider our being-here as the point of departure and the goal of our journey to nowhere.

## Thinking and exaggeration

Following the dictum by Deleuze and Guattari in *What is Philosophy?* that links philosophy with “the creation of concepts”, I propose that thinking is the creative activity of philosophy’s “creation of concepts”.<sup>35</sup> Thus, “thinking” and “philosophy” are interchangeable, as I see it. In extension, thinking is also any creation on the level of language, in poetry, science, literature, and art, especially theatre. Creativity at large is philosophical, because it creates concepts. What, in the vein of Deleuze and Guattari’s *concept* of philosophy as the “creation of concepts” nevertheless singles out philosophy, in the words of translator’s introduction referring to Alliez, is the specificity of “philosophy as a practice of the creation of concepts”<sup>36</sup> – the practice of the creation of *philosophical* concepts, as I see it, for instance, in Kant and Hegel. Not without the exaggeration of the philosopher, Deleuze and Guattari attest: “The philosopher is expert in concepts and in the lack of them. He knows which of them are not viable, which are arbitrary or inconsistent, which ones do not hold up for an instant. On the other

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<sup>35</sup> “(P)hilosophy is the art of forming, inventing, and fabricating concepts.” G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1996, p. 2.

<sup>36</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, p. vii.; Op. Cit. Eric Alliez, *La Signature du Monde: ou, Qu'est-ce que la philosophie de De-leuze et Guattari?* Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1993.

hand, he also knows which are well formed and attest to a creation, however disturbing or dangerous it may be.”<sup>37</sup>

In thinking, I propose, exaggeration (re)directs the thinking beyond the subject at hand. The thinking overshoots the subject through exaggeration. Thinking, as I define it, is the creative activity of the mind *in the field* of the rules of language and the logic of reason – exaggeration intensifies the tension of the field and pushes the thinking beyond its regular operations withing the field. (Here, I create a concept of the field to escape the limits of Kantian scheme, as an expression of the freedom of thinking as creative activity. I may be going beyond the thinking at hand...) Language and logic are still at work in thinking, but its capacity to adjust proportionally to the increasing tension is also increasing because exaggeration conceals itself in thinking. Thinking, then, goes beyond the subject at hand. Thinking does not register the overshooting because as creative activity it interacts with the arising circumstances. To disclose the point of thinking going beyond requires the critique of exaggeration.

To sum up so far. Adopting from Deleuze and Guattari that philosophy creates concepts, I define thinking as the creative activity of philosophy. Moreover, with Düttmann, I emphasize exaggeration as the drive of thinking. Finally, I propose, exaggeration is the drive of thinking. Exaggeration drives thinking as the creative activity of the philosophical creation of concepts. Participating in this flow, thinking exaggerates. Exaggeration is thinking. Exaggeration drives thinking beyond the subject at hand.

In the following, I explain the principles of the critique of exaggeration.

## The critique of exaggeration

One can discern a point at which Plato, Descartes and Kant locate exaggeration in thinking beyond. Plato, Descartes, and Kant view thinking beyond as the discourse of exaggeration, and exaggeration as the way of going beyond in thinking. Each in his own way, they even drive the “metaphysical” questions up to a certain point, at which they refute or suspend them as exaggerations. Thus,

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<sup>37</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, p. 3.

in Plato's *Republic*, Glaucon "ludicrously" responds to Socrates' speech on the *good beyond being*: "Heaven save us, [demonic] hyperbole can no further go."<sup>38</sup>

From this point, in the following, Socrates' abandons the exaggeration of the "good beyond being" and turns to a discourse on political philosophy, in which we find the infamous *allegory* of the cave. Descartes' "reasons for doubt" in *Meditations* are "metaphysical" and justify, initially, the "exaggerated doubt".<sup>39</sup> In the end, late in the Sixth Meditation, Descartes finally refutes the former doubts as "exaggerated" and "laughable".<sup>40</sup> Kant begins the preface to the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) by pointing out the exaggeration in the metaphysical demand on reason "to transcend every faculty of the mind" in order to meet the principles, rising "to ever higher and more remote conditions" of reasoning.<sup>41</sup> Needless to say, Kant's transcendental philosophy does not bargain with the metaphysical exaggerations.

Exaggeration unleashes the idea outside the limits of a certain rationality, for instance, the idea of God outside the traditional religion and theology, as Jacques Derrida in *The Gift of Death* asserts of Patočka's unfolding of the "heretical and hyperbolic" notions about Christianity.<sup>42</sup> Exaggeration does not necessarily compromise the meaning of the subject but overshoots it, aspires *beyond* it.

The thinking that exaggerates will always miss the point, namely that it exaggerates. The critique<sup>43</sup> of exaggeration discloses the point at which

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<sup>38</sup> Translation P. Shorey. Plato, *Republic* (509b-c) in Plato, *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, Vols. 5 & 6, transl. P. Shorey, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press; London, William Heinemann Ltd. 1969. Also on [perseus.tufts.edu](http://perseus.tufts.edu). Generally, I refer to English translation by Bloom (see note 2).

<sup>39</sup> CSM II, p. 25. See also *Seventh Set of Objections and Replies*, Comment to Bourdin, p. 308.

<sup>40</sup> "(T)he exaggerated doubts of the last few days should be dismissed as laughable" (CSM II, p. 61).

<sup>41</sup> Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, transl. J. M. D. Meiklejohn, An Electronic Classics Series Publication, pp. 3-4.

<sup>42</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, p. 49.

<sup>43</sup> I am aware of the important contribution to the question of 'thinking', 'critique', and 'philosophy' in relation to Derrida, offered by Rodolphe Gasché. R. Gasché, *The Honor of Thinking: Critique, Theory, Philosophy*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007. I certainly share the context of Gasché's references to Heidegger and Deleuze concerning 'thinking' and I could profit from providing a detailed definition of critique for my purposes relying on Gasché's exposition of the notion of 'critique' in Kant. I do not consider it necessary, however, to rely on Kant in my use of the term. I try rather to formulate the concept of critique in relation to my task, the critique of exaggeration. The procedure I use is critical in Kantian sense regarding the formal focus on exaggeration as the condition of thinking. In difference to Kant, in my rather instrumental use of critique as an approach, I do not rely on epistemological/transcendental claims. These are, of course, important to take into consideration, especially concerning the possibility that exaggeration participates in the epistemological scheme as a 'faculty'. But this consideration is too gross for this study. This is why I chose to speak about 'thinking' as a creative activity,

exaggeration goes beyond the subject of thinking. Disclosing this point, the critique of exaggeration does not imply a *criticism*<sup>44</sup> of exaggeration that seeks to unfold the argument against it on the ground of the principles of moderate reasoning or evident self-destructive ends of exaggeration. Following Düttmann, the critique of exaggeration points out exaggeration in the thinking beyond, as the “strength” and “excess”.

At the point of transgression, exaggeration, following Düttmann, provides “the strength for a disclosing the transgression of the limit”. The thinking is susceptible to exaggeration, and exaggeration drives the thinking beyond. The critique of exaggeration acts as the strength to disclose the transgression of exaggeration going beyond the subject at hand. At the point of excess, exaggeration goes beyond the concept and destroys it. This corresponds to Düttmann’s exaggeration as “the excess that cannot be recovered conceptually”. The critique of exaggeration redirects the thinking to return to the matter at hand. This move adverts the thinking from the impulse to restore the concept irretrievably lost in exaggeration. It never was the subject of the clear and distinct understanding anyway but the exaggeration of thinking going beyond the matter at hand.

Adopting Adorno’s position, as Düttmann reminds us, of exaggeration as “constitutive” for thinking, I examine this constitution and not merely attack the exaggeration and its hyperbolic expressions. I examine exaggeration in thinking, how exaggeration operates as thinking. Drawing on Düttmann, exaggeration seems to persist as the drive of thinking. Exaggeration conceals its excess in the thinking that creates concepts anyway. Thinking does not seem to immediately perceive the creation of concepts as the production of exaggeration. Exaggeration, to extrapolate on Düttmann, “drives” thinking into “the excess that cannot be recovered conceptually”. One has, therefore, to locate the excess of exaggeration already in the thinking that “drives the exaggeration to the limit”, I propose. At this limit, exaggeration tilts over and “becomes that which drives” thinking. The critique of exaggeration keeps exaggeration at the limit and thus, holds onto

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without relying on epistemological conditions for thinking. My *use* of the term thinking, for that matter, is simple. In conceptual sense, it relies on a straightforward practical aspect I find in Descartes, of thinking as a direction of the intention or the creative impulse, especially, as I treat it here, to exaggerate. Finally, this reduction of the notion of thinking in my use implies a direct connection, I establish relying on Düttmann with Deleuze & Guattari, between thinking as an activity and exaggeration as its drive. In simplest terms: exaggeration is *thinking*.

<sup>44</sup> In my understanding, the difference between the criticism and the critique is the that the former focuses on the literary aspect of meaning in the use of language and style, while the later, in Kantian fashion, considers the conditions of thinking.

exaggeration as “the strength for a disclosing transgression of the limit” before it tilts over into “the excess that cannot be recovered conceptually”. In this way, the critique of exaggeration establishes itself as the strength of thinking that discloses the excess of exaggeration. It enables the recognition of the excess of exaggeration at work in thinking.

Applying the above procedures, as I will demonstrate in my analyses, the critique of exaggeration restores the subject of thinking. For example, this implies a reconsideration of Descartes’ metaphysical project going beyond his scientific project. The former directs the thinking on the path of exaggeration. The latter examines the physical things that appear to clear and distinct understanding. In Bataille, this implies a reconsideration of the excess as the limit of exaggeration. In Artaud, this implies a reconsideration of the “body without organs” as the exaggeration pointing out of the ideological organisation of human life as the obstacle to freedom.

To conclude so far. The critique of exaggeration is the approach to the thinking beyond. The critique of exaggeration does not condemn exaggeration in thinking and does not merely point out the expressions of the hyperbolic exaggeration but locates and examines the movement of thinking through exaggeration. The critique of exaggeration discerns exaggeration in the strategies of thinking beyond and discloses exaggeration in the thinking going beyond the principle or concept it aims to establish. The critique of exaggeration discloses the point at which exaggeration overshoots the subject of thinking. The critique of exaggeration redirects the thinking toward a reconsideration of the things at hand.

## Exaggeration and Philosophy: Resources and their limitations

### Philosophy and the critique of exaggeration

Aside from the stylistic and semantic interests in hyperbole the studies of exaggeration in philosophy are rare. Düttmann’s *Philosophy of Exaggeration* offers a groundbreaking examination of exaggeration in philosophy. As far as I am aware, Düttmann’s study is still one of its kind. One could expect for instance, Peter Sloterdijk to say more *about* exaggeration. Sloterdijk put exaggeration deliberately

into practice, both stylistically and as a provocative and creative stimulus for thinking. Exaggeration in Sloterdijk, however, provides no more than a descriptive term for evaluation of the subjects of his analyses. For instance, in Sloterdijk's *You Must Change Your Life* we find part two of the book entitled 'Exaggeration procedures'.<sup>45</sup> Sloterdijk deals with the relation between practice and work in reference to various spiritual traditions. He does not elaborate theoretically on the procedure of exaggeration. At least in their books, I mention here, Düttmann and Sloterdijk, for that matter, do not refer to each other.

## The sources of hyperbolical disagreements on Derrida and Bataille

Christopher D. Johnson offers a study of the hyperbole in Descartes' *Discourse and Meditations*.<sup>46</sup> Johnson examines the hyperbole in the baroque literature and thought. Johnson's focus on the rhetoric and delimitation to the "baroque" period provide historical context and background but offers little in terms of analysis to my purposes in this study. In that respect, I rely on Giulia Belgioioso.<sup>47</sup> In my treatment of exaggeration in Descartes' *Meditations* I share nevertheless with Johnson some references, particularly to Guérout and Derrida and the themes relating to the metaphysical connotations of exaggerated doubt. Aside from Johnson's interesting interrelation of the instances of the baroque thought and literature with Descartes, I am grateful for Johnson's broad contextual treatment of the hyperbole in Descartes' *Meditations*. But the aim and focus of my examination differs significantly from Johnson precisely on that point. I examine the function of exaggeration in the thinking beyond, in Descartes, Bataille, and Artaud. I do not connect exaggeration to historical or stylistic considerations. In my view, exaggeration goes beyond the hyperbole as a *figure of thought*. In this I rely on Düttmann's formula according to which exaggeration drives thinking. The drive of exaggeration is outside the hyperbole and its use in the history of thought

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<sup>45</sup> Peter Sloterdijk, *You Must Change Your Life*, Polity Press, 2014.

<sup>46</sup> Christopher D. Johnson, *Hyperboles: The Rhetoric of Excess in Baroque Literature and Thought*, Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2010.

<sup>47</sup> Giulia Belgioioso, 'The Hyperbolic way to truth from Balzac to Descartes: 'Toute Hyperbole tend à de nous amener à la vérité par la mensonge'', in José R. Maia Neto, Gianni Paganini and John Christian Laursen (eds.), *Skepticism in the Modern Age: Building on the Work of Richard Popkin*, Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2006, pp. 269-293.

and literature. Connecting exaggeration to thinking, I also lean on Düttmann's discussion of exaggeration as constitutive for thinking.

Joshua R. Ritter, in his doctoral dissertation in communication<sup>48</sup> offers a novel approach to the hyperbole as the rhetorical device. Of relevance for my frame of references, Ritter develops a discussion on the hyperbole in Derrida's analysis of the hyperbolic in Descartes but reduce Derrida's thinking only to hyperbolic effects, with which I do not agree.<sup>49</sup> In my view, the hyperbole is never the means for an end for Derrida. The hyperbolic in Derrida, especially in the *Writing and Difference*, is the effect of the hyperbolic discourses in which he engages, of Descartes, but also, as I see it, of Bataille and Artaud. In that respect, when Ritter accounts Derrida to the thinkers that "address the notion of hyperbole but do not explore the functions historically ascribed to it, which often leads to assertions about hyperbole that are inaccurate",<sup>50</sup> he fails to observe that Derrida's analysis precisely points out the idea of a historical accurateness of the hyperbole as problematic.

In difference to Ritter, I do not perceive Derrida as a hyperbolic thinker but as a thinker whose analyses are sensitive to and motivated by the discourses of the hyperbolic exaggeration, which, contrary to Ritter's reception of Derrida, I claim, are not Derrida's own exaggerations. For instance, quoting Derrida's essay on Descartes in *Writing and Difference* Ritter misreads that Derrida "considers demonic hyperboles to be 'marvelous transcendence,' which he translates from 'daimonias hyperboles'",<sup>51</sup> he strangely neglects Derrida's reference to Plato's *Republic* 509b-c. Moreover, in what Derrida's demonstrates as Descartes' own "'attempt-to-say-the-demonic-hyperbole'" Ritter refers in this quote to Derrida as the way "he [Derrida] describes his project".<sup>52</sup>

Ritter's own project offers "a hyperbole about hyperbole in epideictic, as well as grotesque, form".<sup>53</sup> It provides, as I see it, an example compatible with Düttmann's formula, in my modification, of exaggeration that drives thinking (Ritter does not refer to Düttmann). Of course, Ritter refers to Mikhail Bakhtin's

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<sup>48</sup> Joshua R. Ritter, *Recovering Hyperbole: Re-Imagining the Limits of Rhetoric for an Age of Excess*. Dissertation, Georgia State University, 2010.

<sup>49</sup> Ritter, *Recovering...*, pp. 170-173.

<sup>50</sup> Ritter, *Recovering...*, p. 10.

<sup>51</sup> Ritter, *Recovering...*, p. 172.

<sup>52</sup> Ritter, *Recovering...*, p. 172.

<sup>53</sup> Ritter, *Recovering...*, p. 295.



concept of the “grotesque”. (Bakhtin is also a thinker of exaggeration I unfortunately have to omit in this study; also, Rabelais, whose world of the “carnavalesque” Bakhtin studies.) In relation to the “grotesque”, I hope that Ritter’s study is seriously ironic, as he proposes the “limits of rhetoric for an age of excess”. As Lachmann et al. observe in their study of carnival in Bakhtin: “More important, in any case, for Bakhtin’s argumentation is question of how the body is brought into play in this process, for it is the body that becomes the stage for eccentricity. It is the body that transgresses its own boundaries, that plays up its own exaggeration: the grotesque body.”<sup>54</sup>

The “grotesque body” is always already at play in exaggeration, to put it with Düttmann, again, as “the excess that cannot be recovered conceptually”. We could retrace Ritter’s *grotesque hyperbole*, to the question of how it is “brought into play” by following excess, namely, as the critique of exaggeration can demonstrate it, by thinking beyond “for an age of excess” through exaggeration. It is not the hyperbole that has to be recovered but what it cannot go beyond: the silence that allows for excess, even providing a rhetoric of silence for it, that cannot say the *epideictic hyperbole*. Losing itself in its own carnivalesque exaggeration, it speaks only this exaggeration. Only the critique of exaggeration can restore the voice that can speak this exaggeration as “the strength for a disclosing transgression of the limit” (Düttmann), beyond which the grotesque body falls into the excess of exaggeration without recovery; to return the *age* to the limits that define its beginning and the end – as any carnival ends – to prevent this fall. Even when it is serious, the irony is the laughter of exaggeration. As we can learn from Descartes’ example, the point is to explode exaggeration as laughable.

## Philosophy of religion and the critique of exaggeration

The critical examination of exaggeration and thinking in the philosophy of religion is still sparse. The criticism of the hyperbolic assumptions about religion by Eric Boynton<sup>55</sup> and the criticism of the reduction of religion to the excessive phenomena

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<sup>54</sup> Renate Lachmann, Raoul Eshelman and Marc Davis, ‘Bakhtin and Carnival: Culture as Counter-Culture’, *Cultural Critique*, University of Minnesota Press: Winter, 1988-1989, No. 11, pp. 115-152, p. 146.

<sup>55</sup> Eric Boynton, *Figuring Philosophy of Religion: Reflections on Art and its Significance for Continental Philosophy of Religion*, Ph. D. Thesis, Rice University. Houston, Texas, May 2004. See also Boynton, ‘Derrida and Religious Reflection in the Continental Tradition’ in *Theory After Derrida*, ed. R. Radhakrishnan and K. Baral, Routledge Press, 2009.

by Christina Gschwandtner<sup>56</sup> provide a perspective on the reception of the thinkers from the so-called Continental tradition by the postmodernist strands in the philosophy of religion. For the reasons I will soon explain, Boynton's and Gschwandtner's diagnosis of hyperbolism is significant, but it does not provide the treatment for exaggeration. Hyperbolism is not a contraction of contagious thinking. Exaggeration, as I see it, is the fundamental cause of any thinking. Thinking, here, is a pharmakon. Its activity is to go beyond. But to persist as thinking, it has to reflect on exaggeration as its image in a distorting mirror.

I will revisit Boynton and Gschwandtner after the following account of an indirect approach to exaggeration offered by Stephen H. Webb in his study of hyperbole in religion.<sup>57</sup> Of relevance for the material for my analysis, Webb in *Blessed Excess* deals with Bataille but from the perspective that, in my view, assigns too much importance to the hyperbolic imagination of excess in Bataille as an opening to religious hyperbole. In my reading of Bataille I show that the hyperbolic (exaggeration) aims actually to render excess absurd and fatal. Webb's focus on the tropic, rhetorical and figurative particularities of the hyperbole nevertheless provides an important introduction to the possibility of extending the hyperbolic excess to the examination of the function of exaggeration in the thinking beyond. This is what I demonstrate in the present study, developing the critique of exaggeration as the approach to the thinking beyond.

The goals of my critique of exaggeration may seem similar to the proposals for "moderation" in the philosophy of religion, forwarded by Boynton and Gschwandtner. There are important differences. Boynton and Gschwandtner criticise the "hyperbolic" (Boynton) and the "excessive" (Gschwandtner) tendencies in the philosophy religion. However, neither Boynton nor Gschwandtner examine the function of exaggeration for thinking. They express criticism focusing on the use of the "hyperbolic" language for describing religion philosophically (Boynton) and the preference for the "excess" in the language of religious experience (Gschwandtner), at work in the phenomenological and hermeneutic strands of the philosophy of religion influenced, among other thinkers, by Derrida, Lévinas, Marion, and Ricoeur. Boynton proposes in his

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<sup>56</sup> Christina M. Gschwandtner, *Postmodern Apologetics? Arguments for God in Contemporary Philosophy*. New York, Fordham University Press, 2013. See also Gschwandtner, 'Overwhelming Abundance and Everyday Liturgical Practices: For a Less Excessive Phenomenology of Religious Experience' in *The Future of Continental Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Clayton Crockett et. al. Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2014, pp. 179-197.

<sup>57</sup> Stephen H. Webb, *Blessed Excess: Religion and the Hyperbolic Imagination*, SUNY, 1993.

dissertation that the philosophy of religion relying on Derrida and Marion has to “pull back” from the “hyperbolic” and consider the interpenetration between faith and reason more closely in relation to the expressions of religion. Gschwandtner asks the followers of the same tradition to consider the ordinary, liturgical, experiences of religion instead of thinking about religion “hyperbolically”, drawing on the exceptions of “excessive” religious experiences.

I do not oppose Boynton and Gschwandtner pointing out problematic tendencies in the use of language in the philosophy of religion and sometimes rather spaced out or “apologetic” perspectives on religion. I believe, however, that these problems also pertain to the reception and exchange between different academic cultures, the mimesis of the language and style, and the impending dogmatism associated with the cult of the thinker and the power of transference of the thinker’s charisma. I applaud nevertheless Boynton’s and Gschwandtner’s bold attack on the trendiness of obscurantism, the idolatry of supposedly radical and subversive approaches in the philosophy of religion.

In difference to Boynton and Gschwandtner, however, I do not delimit my critique of exaggeration to an *agenda* regarding the philosophical approach to religion. I propose that any thinking about religion has to take into consideration the way in which the concepts of God and the human are unfolding, also in the instances of the “hyperbolic” thinking about religion and the “excessive” religious experiences. Further, in difference to Boynton and Gschwandtner, as I see it, if religion *stimulates* “hyperbolic” language and “excessive” thinking, it also questions the value of philosophical ambition to render about religion that which can be realized *only* through the excessive experience of religion and/or the experience of excess in religion. Precisely for this reason, the question of excess in *religion* and the philosophy’s attempts to think beyond its own constitutive moderations is even more important to consider and should not be repressed. Religion is not moderate in all its aspects and cannot be approached by moderate means only.

The extremes in religion are not exceptions, I claim, as they are not exempted from any other form of the organisation of human life, and cannot be neglected in belief that religion has something better to offer to the human life than an ethically conscious development in science and politics could offer. Religion is also in constant development, failing and trying better. I do not see religion as the *gift* of the treasure trove of wisdom and purity to humanity. The religious constitution and the organisation of religion are inseparable from any other, cultural, ideological and political form of the organisation of human life, good

*and* bad. Thinking about religion, I propose, should also take into consideration the function of exaggeration for thinking, however, not to promote the hyperbolic excess on rhetorical and stylistic level but to consider the possibility of exaggeration in the philosophical approach to religion and its phenomena. To proceed with such an approach, without falling into the trap of the hyperbolic language and the temptations of the excessive lure, we should take into consideration the function of exaggeration for thinking in general. I want to promote that awareness in my proposal of the critique of exaggeration.

## Outside hyperbole

The studies of the hyperbole as the rhetorical device and the figure of thought and the criticisms of the hyperbolic focus generally on the problem of the excess of the hyperbolic in language. Of course, language and thinking go hand in hand but my view of exaggeration in *thinking* allows the perspective on exaggeration as underlying the hyperbolic intentions of language and exceeding mere hyperbolic expressions. In my view, thinking-exaggeration does not allow the language to make the hyperbolic point but precisely overshoots the hyperbole's stylish making of point through exaggeration. Thinking-exaggeration strives beyond the point and forces the language and thought to *create* meaning in the spaces of its overshooting of meaning in language. The compensatory action of language and thought only manage to give credibility to thinking-exaggeration. The critique of exaggeration in this study targets these compensatory actions in the spaces of overshooting in order to discern and not to recover the absence of meaning. The critique of exaggeration discerns the effort of the processes of compensation to *make* sense of the things out of hand. The making of sense is arbitrary to the effort to point out our hands and *what is* on our hands.

In sum, a focused critique of exaggeration in philosophy is nevertheless lacking. I do not claim that my contribution of the critique of exaggeration is systematic or complete. I hope, however, to turn attention to exaggeration in thinking, as a field of research that could be joined to the questions relating to methodology and critical approaches to thinking in philosophy. In my contribution here, I appropriate Düttmann's concept of exaggeration and Derrida's engagement with the hyperbolic themes in *Writing and Difference*, which, as I see it, point out exaggeration in the thinking of Descartes, Bataille, and Artaud. I want to

demonstrate the possibility of the critique of exaggeration as an approach to the instances of thinking beyond.

## Methodological Considerations

### Approach to analysis

The critique of exaggeration is the approach to the instances of thinking beyond in philosophy. I locate and examine exaggeration in the present texts of Descartes, Bataille, and Artaud. Methodologically, the critique of exaggeration is a reduction. Disclosing the thinking going beyond the subject through exaggeration, the critique of exaggeration reduces exaggeration to the question of a relation or break between the subject of the clear and distinct understanding and its conceptualisation in thinking going beyond it. This approach does not entail the evaluation of the philosophical argument, the interpretation, or the analysis of the stylistic devices like hyperbole. The examination seeks to disclose exaggeration as the drive of thinking and to discern the questions of relevance for a reconsideration of the subject of clear and distinct understanding, without exaggeration.

### Delimitation and potentialities of the approach

Of course, the critique of exaggeration as the approach to philosophy and philosophizing, especially of the radical and subversive type, also in literature and art, could facilitate the evaluation of the argument as well as the narrative and stylistic analysis of a philosophical discourse. This is a matter of order. First, one has to discern the instances of the thinking beyond. Second, locate exaggeration operating in these instances. Third, examine how thinking beyond works through exaggeration. Fourth, analyse how thinking through exaggeration affects the argument. The present study gives only occasionally the examples of the fourth. The main effort in this study is to establish the critique of exaggeration as the approach to the instances of thinking beyond in philosophy and to provide examples of its application to the philosophical content, that is, the outcome of

exaggeration. The present study takes the first step toward a demonstration of the critique of exaggeration.

## The context and the order of analysis

The context of the critique of exaggeration is Derrida's *Writing and Difference*. The analysis of exaggeration moves outside the *Writing and Difference*, to Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Bataille's *Madame Edwarda*, Artaud's *To Have Done with the Judgement of God*. There are four key moments of the analytical procedure in this study. First, I elaborate the concept of exaggeration extending on Düttmann. Second, I examine exaggeration in the present texts, which also provide the delimitation and material. Third, I proceed with the analysis focusing on the unfolding of exaggeration in the instances of thinking beyond. Analysis generates new questions. Fourth, extending on analysis, I elaborate a series of hypotheses ("points" and "openings") for further examination of exaggeration, proposing the critique of exaggeration as an approach.



# Inside and Outside

## *Writing and Difference*

### Introduction

Already Plato in the *Republic* provides a view on the “good beyond being” as an unsurpassable exaggeration. At this point, of exaggeration reaching “demonic excess”, beyond which “the hyperbole cannot further go”, Socrates retrieves the discourse to the matters concerning the good at the level of political life. Derrida in the essay ‘Cogito and the History of Madness’ in *Writing and Difference* links “the demonic excess of hyperbole” of the “the good beyond being” in Plato to Descartes’ “hyperbolic project” of the Cogito. Although Derrida in the essays on Bataille and Artaud does not designate their *projects*, the “general economy” and the “theatre of cruelty” as “hyperbolic”, at stake in these essays, together with the essay on Descartes, as I see it, is the theme of the “disappearance” of God and the human. In these essays, I suggest, Derrida locates a thinking beyond the limits of theological and metaphysical rationality.

Derrida opens for my analysis of exaggeration in Descartes’ *Meditations*, in the hypothesis of a deceiving God as the “metaphysical reason” for the hyperbolic doubt of the certainty of knowledge. Derrida does not say it but, Descartes in *Meditations*, I propose, establishes a discourse of exaggeration. As Derrida points out, Descartes surpasses the delusional claims of the “insane”. I claim that the surpassing is not Cogito’s but on the side of the manic insistence of exaggeration, for instance, “I am a thinking thing”.

In the essays on Descartes, Bataille, and Artaud, Derrida discloses “madness”, in the unfolding of the “Cogito” in Descartes. Indirectly, as I see it, there is also the “madness” of the “general economy” of Bataille, of the “theatre of cruelty”, and “le parole soufflée” of Artaud. These instances, as I designate it, of *thinking through madness*, bind together, not to say confine, Descartes, Bataille, and Artaud in the



book of *Writing and Difference*.<sup>58</sup> Outside this book, I suggest, the theme of the “disappearance” of God or the human binds them together in a book of exaggeration. Exaggeration drives the thinking beyond God and the human, I propose, in the scenarios of doubt in Descartes’ *Meditations*, anguish in Bataille’s *Madame Edwarda*, and cruelty in Artaud’s *To Have Done with the Judgement of God*.

Of the present texts, Derrida engages explicitly only with Descartes’ *Meditations*. The subjects of Derrida’s analyses are nevertheless at play in the present texts of Bataille and Artaud: the “general economy” of death in *Madame Edwarda*, and Artaud’s final execution of the “theatre of cruelty” in *To have Done with the Judgement of God*. As for the *Meditations*, in my critique, I make a shift of focus from the infamous themes of the “Cogito” and “madness” to Derrida’s assertions of the “hyperbolic audacity”, “hyperbolic project”, the “absolute excess”, the “demonic hyperbole”, and the “hyperbolic exaggeration” of the Cogito as pertaining particularly to exaggeration, as I see it.

The *absence* of the “Cogito” in the *Meditations*, however, is notorious. The Cogito is central only to the Part Four of Descartes’ *Discourse on Method*, as the metaphysical principle of the self-assertion of being as thinking, or *cogito ergo sum*. My reference to “thinking” does not pertain to the Cogito. I adopt, to some extent, Derrida’s *exaggeration* of the Cogito. As far as thinking goes beyond God or the human, thinking exaggerates. In relation to this, Derrida’s notions of “an exceeded God” and “an erased man” are arbitrary to the centrality of the theme of the “disappearance” of God and the human as the *delimitation* of exaggeration.

## Exaggeration on our hands

In Derrida’s *Writing and Difference*, exaggeration is never the object of analysis. The themes of exceeding, excess, erasure, and transgression in the eccentric, extravagant, and exorbitant movements of decentring and displacement at work in the material underlying Derrida’s analysis, nevertheless, as I see it, pertain to the question of exaggeration. Derrida, in general, deals with different ways of thinking. The question of exaggeration in Derrida’s *Writing and Difference* is in question; a blind spot, perhaps for Derrida himself. Exaggeration could provide a

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<sup>58</sup> I am grateful to Professor in Philosophy at Södertörn University Marcia Cavalcante for pointing out the madness connection between Derrida’s essays on Descartes, Bataille, and Artaud.

useful analytical concept for Derrida. If he ever wanted a concept at play in his analyses. Play is the mode of Derrida's thinking. Derrida always employs play to destabilize the centrality of the concept in the discourse. Play establishes the critical distance to the discourse. For Derrida, the play is nevertheless always the play with and not without the concept, hence producing quasi-concepts, such as the infamous *différance*. Derrida shares the love of play with Jabès, Descartes, Bataille, and Artaud, and also, as I see it, the plaything: *exaggeration*.

Derrida confesses: "I always exaggerate."<sup>59</sup> Derrida reflects on the history of how he "contracted this hyperbolism"— "at school" but also, he asserts "this excessiveness was probably more archaic in me than the school"<sup>60</sup>

Nevertheless, I need to think back to that preschool past in order to account for the generality of 'hyperbolism' which will have invaded my life and work. Everything that proceeds under the name of 'deconstruction' arises from it, of course; a telegram would suffice for that here, beginning with the 'hyperbole' (it's Plato's word) that will have ordered everything, including the reinterpretation of *khora*, namely, the passage to the very beyond of the passage of the Good or the One beyond being (*hyperbole... epekeina tes ousias*), excess beyond excess: impregnable. Especially, the same hyperbole will have rushed a French Jewish child from Algeria into feeling, and sometimes calling himself, down to the root of the root, before the root, and in ultra-radicality, more and less French but also more and less Jewish than all the French, all the Jews, and all the Jews of France. And here as well, [more Franco phone Maghrebian] than all the Francophone Maghrebians. Believe me, although I measure the absurdity and presumptuousness of these infantile allegations (such as the "I am the last Jew" in *Circonfession*), I risk them in order to be honest with my interlocutors and myself, with this someone in me who feels things in that way. In that way and no other. Since I always tell the truth, you can believe me.<sup>61</sup>

Derrida's self-biographical account of his inclination to exaggerate does not assure us of exaggeration underlying his thinking. Derrida's *predisposition to contract*<sup>62</sup> exaggeration in the other's thought is more interesting; the exaggeration of "someone in me who feels things in that way", for instance, Plato and the *demonic*

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<sup>59</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other or, the Prosthesis of Origin*, transl. P. Mensah, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998, p. 48.

<sup>60</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism*, p. 49.

<sup>61</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism*, pp-49-50.

<sup>62</sup> "But as with illnesses caught at school, common sense and doctors recall that predispositions are necessary for their contraction" (Derrida, *Monolingualism*, p. 48).

*hyperbole beyond being* (Plato, *Republic*, 509c); any other thinker Derrida interrogates.<sup>63</sup>

We have the reason to believe Derrida when he says that he tells the truth when he says that he always exaggerates. Exaggeration, according to Düttmann, is Derrida's "gesture of thinking" that "provokes philosophy":

In the end Derrida says nothing - and thereby, *through the nothingness of a gesture of thinking*, provokes philosophy. For the structural simultaneity of the structurally non-synchronous or irreconcilable, in which the provocation of deconstruction lies, amounts to a suspension, to a keeping in abeyance that, to be sure, allows the one to assert itself against the hypostasis of the other and vice versa, but that does not itself take the shape of a question or a thesis, a thought with a significant content.<sup>64</sup>

Exaggeration exceeds fixation and centralization of the concept, constitutes the movement of thinking, resisting to stay in place. Exaggeration simultaneously inscribes and erases itself nowhere and everywhere. Thinking "that does not itself take the shape of a question or a thesis, a thought with a significant content", instigates the play of exaggeration, as the "gesture of thinking". On the one hand, the play of exaggeration provokes the rules of philosophical discourse, to produce concept. On the other hand, it provokes philosophy *as* the discourse of exaggeration.

Derrida's "gesture of thinking" "provokes" the possibility of different thinking, but also, as Derrida, citing Jabès, puts in the last lines of the *Writing and Difference*, in the 'Ellipsis', the possibility of thinking on our hands: "*Tomorrow is the shadow and reflexivity of our hands*' Reb Dérissa [signature]". [*"Demain est l'ombre et la réflexibilité de nos mains."*]<sup>65</sup> The play between "demain" and "de nos main" in French original shifts the focus from the future action of "tomorrow" but, literally establishes the difference between the things that slip through our hands, out of hand, and the things we have on our hands, at hand. To this, we could add the following line from Jabès: "The hand is the measure – and excess – of the word."<sup>66</sup> The excess will lead us on the path of exaggeration.

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<sup>63</sup> Derrida's reading of *epekeina tes ousias* seems to take on Glaucon's position. Derrida refers to *epekeina tes ousias*, at least in the 'Cogito and the History of Madness' in *Writing and Difference* and in the *Monolingualism of the Other*, at both occasions in relation to the question of the "hyperbolic" or, as I view it, the *exaggeration*.

<sup>64</sup> Düttmann, *Philosophy of Exaggeration*, pp. 25–26.

<sup>65</sup> Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 378; *L'Écriture et la Différence*, p. 436.

<sup>66</sup> E. Jabès, *The Book of Questions*, Vol. II (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press: 1991), p. 396.

## Disclosing the disappearance of God and the human

Derrida's *Writing and Difference* consists of ten previously published essays. The eleventh essay, 'Ellipsis', was first published in the *Writing and Difference*. The 'Ellipsis' is the book's second essay on Edmond Jabès (1912-1991), the Egyptian born writer and Derrida's friend. The previous essay on Jabès, 'Edmond Jabès and the Question of the Book' is the third essay in the *Writing and Difference*. While in the latter Derrida approaches the specific themes in Jabès, in the 'Ellipsis', in reference to Jabès' text, Derrida inscribes the task of returning to the book of questions.

Derrida dedicates the 'Ellipsis' to his friend, writer and critic, Gabriel Bounoure (1886-1969).<sup>67</sup> Derrida's 'Ellipsis' is a poetic and elliptic piece of writing. It begins with an inscription, like an *exergue*, of a short and intricate text that may pass for a general retrospective reflection on the project of the *Writing and Difference*. Soon, however, the 'Ellipsis' turns to be yet another essay. Immediately following the *exergue*, Derrida jumps to Jabès' *Return of the Book*. Derrida in the 'Ellipsis' turns to Jabès, as I see it, to invite the reader, who is also thinker and writer, to return to the "opening in the text", however, not simply to reread it. Although given the complexity of each essay, it is of course necessary to do so, but not in order to (re)interpret it. I suggest that the 'Ellipsis' opens the *Writing and Difference* for thinking about certain themes, marked "here" and "there" in the book. The beginning of the 'Ellipsis':

Here or there we have discerned writing: a nonsymmetrical division designated on the one hand the closure of the book, and on the other the opening of the text. On the one hand the theological encyclopedia and, modeled upon it, the book of man. On the other a fabric of traces marking the disappearance of an exceeded God or of an erased man. The question of writing could be opened only if the book was closed. The joyous wandering of the *graphein* then became wandering without return. The opening into the text was adventure, expenditure without reserve.<sup>68</sup>

"Here or there" Derrida formulates something of "writing" and "text". "On the other hand," "the opening of the text": "a fabric of traces marking the disappearance of an exceeded God or of an erased man". The traces lead back "to the opening of the text". It is a loop, the text opened by the disappearance... The

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<sup>67</sup> Jabès dedicates *Ehya* (1969) to Bounoure. See E. Jabès, *The Book of Questions*, vol. II, p. 120.

<sup>68</sup> Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 371.

gesture; here... on the one hand; there... on the other. The nothingness; the opening of the text... thinking beyond the nothingness of the opening of the text. The “joyous wandering without return”; “adventure”; “expenditure without reserve” ...

Derrida articulates a gesture of *thinking beyond*, perhaps toward *nothing* – the “nothingness of the gesture” (Düttmann) of thinking *nothingness*. There is nothing to *say* but point out, here are my hands. There, out of hand, is nothing. There is nothing beyond the hands.

Derrida points in between the gestures. The distance between the two hands, one beyond the other, neither of which has nothing to give – nothing to say. Thinking beyond is failing to see what is at hand. Nothing, or just hands. Nothing *more*? Hands fall into the blind spot. Here are the hands. We have nothing on our hands but their ability to hold onto some-thing and finally, the possibility to create, to reach out for a thing, to give, take and so on. Derrida’s instigates a phenomenological reduction that discloses nothing as nothing – nothing on our hands, and our hands as just hands. Nothingness is beyond “God” and “man”.

“Thinking always exaggerates” as Arendt sends in a letter to Jaspers.<sup>69</sup> From the perspective of the critique of exaggeration, the notions of “God” and “man” are the possibilities of thinking overshooting what is at hand – neither “God” nor “man”. Thinking beyond “God” and “man” may also make them disappear in excess of exaggeration. Exaggeration empowers the thinking to exorcize the significance of a concept. In the context of Derrida’s *Writing and Difference*, this movement brings the “force” and “signification” of the opening essay in the *Writing and Difference* to the closure in the ‘Ellipsis’, which in turn opens for the critique of exaggeration.

The enigmatic text of the ‘Ellipsis’ is, as I see it, a programmatic text for the project of discerning the blind spots in the essays of *Writing and Difference*. The reception of this programme has been overshadowed by “deconstruction”. Notably, the “deconstruction of metaphysics” was Derrida’s take on Heidegger’s “destructuring” of metaphysics (in *Being and Time*) as the way to reveal the “repression” of thinking about Being in the “history of metaphysics”. Although

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<sup>69</sup> The letter from Arendt to Jaspers, January 25, 1952. See Hannah Arendt and Carl Jaspers, *Correspondence* 1926-1969, eds. L. Kohler and H. Saner, trans. R. and R. Kimber, New York: Harvest Books, 1993 (1985), p. 175. The quote from Arendt is altered in the English translation of Düttmann’s citation. See Düttmann, *Philosophy of Exaggeration*, p. 77. The English translation by Kimber: “It’s the nature of thought to exaggerate”. I have not consulted the German original.

starting in the “deconstruction of metaphysics” Derrida locates the repression also in other formations, of the eccentric, exorbitant, extravagant, deviant thinking, for instance, in Artaud, Bataille, Descartes – beyond metaphysics.<sup>70</sup>

## Hyperbolic exaggeration

Descartes, Bataille and Artaud break radically with the history of philosophy. Their (hyperbolic) projects deviate from Derrida’s general engagement with Heidegger’s designation of the suppressed unthought in the segments of metaphysics and theology in the history of European philosophy.<sup>71</sup> Descartes, Bataille and Artaud, contribute, as I see it, each with his own thread of exaggeration in “a fabric of traces marking the disappearance of an exceeded God or of an erased man”.

Reading the eleven essays that comprise Derrida’s *Writing and Difference*, however, it is difficult to find the theme of “the disappearance of an exceeded God or an erased man”. A close reading will nevertheless reveal the places in the text where the notions of exceeding and erasure occur in Derrida’s analyses of the discourses pertaining to “God” and/or “man”. The notion of erasure, relating to these discourses is most frequent in the two essays on Antonin Artaud and the essay on Georges Bataille. The formulation “erasing the name of man” occurs, except for the “erased man” in the ‘Ellipsis’, only in the second essay on Artaud, ‘The Theater of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation’ (p. 293). The notion of exceeding occurs significantly in the essays on René Descartes, and again, Bataille, once in the essay on Lévinas and once in the ‘Ellipsis’.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Jones Irwin in *Derrida and the Writing of the Body* examines the influence of Bataille and Artaud on Derrida. See Jones Irwin, *Derrida and the Writing of the Body*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2010. I base my own connections between the three thinkers exclusively in the context of Derrida’s *Writing and Difference*, which is inescapably central also for Irwin.

<sup>71</sup> Irwin discerns generally in Derrida’s *Writing and Difference* an engagement with “avant-garde philosophy”.

<sup>72</sup> The English translation “an exceeded God”; in the French original “d’un Dieu excédé”. The French connotes also ‘exasperated’, in the sense ‘beyond oneself’.

The reference to the noun “exaggeration” occurs only once and only in the essay on Descartes, with the adjective “hyperbolic”.<sup>73</sup> Including this instance, the references to the “hyperbolic” occurs only in the essay on Descartes, all in all seven times in English translation but eleven times in French original, also, only in the essay on Descartes.<sup>74</sup> The reference to “hyperbole” occurs eight times and only in the essay on Descartes, same in the French original. The reference to the verb to exaggerate occurs also only once, in the second of the two essays on Artaud, in Derrida’s citation of Artaud.<sup>75</sup> In the essay on Bataille, and in the two essays on Artaud, however, Derrida does not reflect on exaggeration in their thinking. Unsurprisingly, in order to read Artaud and Bataille one has to decide either to discard their discourse as absurd and obscene, even insane, or to try to read them, as I do, as the discourses of exaggeration. I repeat, Derrida does not refer to the texts of Artaud and Bataille underlying the critique of exaggeration here. The themes and issues in Derrida’s essays on Artaud and Bataille nevertheless pertain to these texts and, as I see it, to exaggeration, which, again, Derrida does not treat explicitly.

Generally, in Derrida’s *Writing and Difference*, it is possible to locate the motive of exaggeration also in the essays on Emanuel Lévinas, Edmond Jabès, and in the ‘Ellipsis’. Perhaps, exaggeration is the reason for Derrida’s “contraction” of the specific thinkers he deals with in the *Writing and Difference*. One could argue, not without suspicion on the border of delusion, that Derrida’s intention in the *Writing and Difference* is to infiltrate exaggeration, his own “hyperbolic project”. I do not, however, reduce the *Writing and Difference* to the question of exaggeration. I do not find exaggeration at work in each essay in this book.

There is, as I see it, a thread of exaggeration that binds Descartes, Bataille, and Artaud together in the book of *Writing and Difference*. The first line of this book of exaggeration is present in the *Writing and Difference* only in the assertion of “the disappearance of an exceeded God or of an erased man”. Outside the *Writing and Difference*, this book consists of Descartes’ *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Bataille’s *Madame Edwarda* and Artaud’s *To Have Done with the Judgement of God*. I also take

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<sup>73</sup> This instance provides the quote in the title of the present section. See Derrida, *Writing and Difference*: “the hyperbolic exaggeration”, p. 58; see also French original “l’exagération hyperbolique”, p. 75.

<sup>74</sup> The question whether the omission in the English translation or transliteration significantly alters the significance of the “hyperbolic” (*hyperbolique*) in the French original is the subject of another study.

<sup>75</sup> “I am exaggerating” (WD 301); See also French original “j’exagère” (ED 350). All in all, only two references to exaggeration in the entire *Writing and Difference*.

the occasion to promote Descartes, Bataille, and Artaud as important thinkers for Derrida's own "hyperbolic project" of *Writing and Difference*.

Initiating the return to the book in the 'Ellipsis', Derrida demonstrates the possibility of a different binding of the essays in the *Writing and Difference*. For instance, the 'Ellipsis' with 'Edmond Jabès and the Question of the Book', makes the return to the book of questions, the task of thinking with Jabès. In the same manner, I bind my little book of exaggeration. Naturally, my recognition, or construction, of the thread of exaggeration in between the essays on Descartes, Bataille, and Artaud, is biased by my previous interest in these three thinkers, notwithstanding Derrida's *Writing and Difference*, and notwithstanding the question of exaggeration. In fact, although I have heard about this book rather early in my philosophical education, I have not read it until I discovered that it contains essays on Descartes, Bataille, and two on Artaud, but also on other thinkers of my interest, Husserl, Lévinas, and Freud. Finally, reading it, I discovered Jabès, and am I still contemplating 'Force and Signification', 'Structure, Sign and Play...', and the 'Ellipsis'.

As a spin off, I would like to propose the present study as the "introduction" to a future edition I hope to prepare, consisting of Derrida's essays on Descartes, Bataille and Artaud in the *Writing and Difference*, and the texts underlying the critique of exaggeration here. This would require also a substantial extension consisting of the analysis of Derrida's essays, which I do not provide here, since they provide the context and delimitation of the material, which is in focus of this study.

## Düttmann with Derrida

In the following, bringing Derrida and Düttmann<sup>76</sup> together, I want to emphasize the proximity and compatibility between Düttmann's concept of exaggeration and Derrida's implicit analyses of exaggeration. This is also relevant for the delimitation of my critique of exaggeration to Descartes, Bataille, and Artaud, and its contextualisation in Derrida's hyperbolic assertion, of "the disappearance of an exceeded God or of an erased man".

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<sup>76</sup> Alexander Garcia Düttmann, *Philosophy of Exaggeration*, transl. J. Phillips, Continuum, 2007. (Originally in German, *Philosophie der Übertreibung* (Suhrkamp Verlag: Frankfurt am Main, 2004).



In the following, I elaborate on Düttmann's concept of exaggeration in my reading of the first lines of Derrida's 'Ellipsis', locating exaggeration at work in "the disappearance of an exceeded God or of an erased man". I do not rely on Derrida's notions of "text", "writing", and "book". I focus instead on Derrida's assertions, which, as I see it, signal exaggeration. Drawing on Derrida and Düttmann together, the purpose of this elaboration is to establish "the disappearance of an exceeded God or of an erased man" as the theme of exaggeration. I repeat the text from the 'Ellipsis' previously cited above, here adding the few more lines:

Here or there we have discerned writing: a nonsymmetrical division designated on the one hand the closure of the book, and on the other the opening of the text. On the one hand the theological encyclopedia and, modeled upon it, the book of man. On the other a fabric of traces marking the disappearance of an exceeded God or of an erased man. The question of writing could be opened only if the book was closed. The joyous wandering of the *graphein* then became wandering without return. The opening into the text was adventure, expenditure without reserve. And yet did we not know that the closure of the book was not a simple limit among others? And that only in the book, coming back to it unceasingly, drawing all our resources from it, could we indefinitely designate the writing beyond the book? Which brings us to consider *Le retour au livre* (The Return to the Book).<sup>77</sup>

In the course of "the joyous wandering of the *graphein*... without return", the thinking indulges in exaggeration, to the point of "the excess that cannot be recovered conceptually" (Düttmann). Derrida discerns this conceptual collapse in the assertion of "a fabric of traces marking the disappearance of an exceeded God or of an erased man", proposing the *return* to the questions concerning God and the human, by locating exaggeration in the places where the "disappearance" marks the absence. Thus, the task is to go back along the line of exaggeration, and not in excess of exaggeration. Then, the return to the questions concerning God and the human implies the retracing of exaggeration in "the fabric of traces", along the line of exaggeration as "the strength for a disclosing transgression of a limit" (Düttmann). Now, the critique of exaggeration implies the location of the point at which the question of God and the human collapses into the excess of exaggeration. Derrida indicates that the "disappearance" provides an "opening into the text". For Derrida himself: "The opening into the text was adventure, expenditure without reserve". In this "opening", I locate exaggeration in the

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<sup>77</sup> Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 371.

thinking beyond God and the human. Thus, Düttmann: “Philosophy drives exaggeration to the limit at which it becomes that which drives philosophy.”

## Exaggeration in Descartes, Bataille, Artaud

In the following three chapters, I develop the critique of exaggeration in my analyses of Descartes’ *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Bataille’s *Madame Edwarda*, and Artaud’s *To Have Done with the Judgement of God*. The order of the three chapters, Descartes first, then Bataille and lastly Artaud, is not accidental. It reflects the intensification of exaggeration from the first to the last, in terms of difficulty to discern the exaggeration from the absurdity, particularly in Artaud. While Descartes makes it clear that he employs exaggeration in *Meditations*, the exaggeration in Bataille, and to higher degree in Artaud, simply affects the reader.

There are only three texts underlying my critical examination of exaggeration. I reproduce the substantial parts of each text to elucidate my analysis. One may object that I should include other texts from each thinker or relate more to other interpretations. It is a widespread tendency in philosophy to comment and interpret second hand rather than to approach the text first hand. The direct approach to the text revives it and opens it for yet unthought-of considerations. In my opinion, a philosophical text is particularly illuminating, if we read it freely, wandering outside the canonisations. Extravagance does not undermine the importance of scholarship but stimulates its creativity.

I want to emphasize that my analysis of exaggeration in the present texts does not pertain to an interpretation of the literal and stylistic aspects. I discern exaggeration as the way of thinking beyond, which I find to be explicitly at work in these texts. Moreover, the present texts provide straightforward and pedagogically suitable pedagogical examples of exaggeration according to my meaning.

## On the philosophy of Artaud, Bataille, and Descartes

The present texts of Bataille and Artaud put at play *and* go beyond the ordinary ways of dealing with the questions in philosophy. Artaud’s theoretical treatises on

theatre, and Bataille's, on eroticism and atheology, are constantly in dialogue with philosophy, however, to put it with Derrida, "on the margins". Artaud and Bataille are challenging as philosophers and pose significant challenges to philosophy. They share with Descartes the challenge that concerns the question of exaggeration in philosophy, as I see it.

Bataille in *Madame Edwarda* unfolds a story of excess attempting to produce the experience of the divine. Except in his theoretical writings, throughout his work, Bataille demonstrates that a "story", mimicking autobiographical narration, provides a stage to play out the failure of philosophy to deal with the intricacies of the singular life. This especially concerns Bataille's meditations on the "inner experience", the subject he shares with Maurice Blanchot.<sup>78</sup> Bataille exposes his affinity for Nietzsche's philosophy in the style of autobiographical self-identification with his thought.<sup>79</sup> At the time of Bataille's "secret society" *Acéphale* (1936-1939), Bataille and his associates in the periodical with the same name, not only wanted to reclaim Nietzsche from the Nazi revisions and travesties, but also establish a religion on the principles from the philosophy of Nietzsche, Kierkegaard and de Sade. As the outer expression of this "esoteric" project Bataille and his associates established *Collège de Sociologie* (1937-1939) that made serious and unique attempts to view the society through the lens of "sacred sociology".<sup>80</sup>

Artaud adds a performative aspect to the exposition of philosophy. The latter is today widespread among the philosophers engaging in the so-called lecture performances. But, as Derrida shows<sup>81</sup>, Artaud wanted to erase the *actor* and allow the *stage* to become overwhelming – a performance of cruelty *of the stage* that puts words in one's mouth and thoughts in one's head that are not one's *own*. The stage imposes postures, disciplines and organizes the body according to the principles of communication in staged relations. The Artaudian stage of cruelty according to Derrida is the metaphysical stage – "it *produces* a nontheological space"<sup>82</sup> – that privileges the chorus over a singular voice, the universal over the particular, the actor who acts out suffering with passion, thus denying oneself the right to expose the audience to *the cruelty of suffering*.

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<sup>78</sup> See Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience*, trans. L. A. Boldt, SUNY Press, 1988.

<sup>79</sup> See Georges Bataille, *On Nietzsche*, trans. S. Kendall, SUNY Press, 2016.

<sup>80</sup> Georges Bataille et al., *The Sacred Conspiracy: The Internal Papers of the Secret Society of Acéphale ad Lectures to the College of Sociology*, eds. M. Galletti and Alastair Brotchie, trans. N. Lehrer, J. Harman, M. Barash, Atlas Press, 2018.

<sup>81</sup> 'Theater of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation' in *Writing and Difference*.

<sup>82</sup> Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 296.

The title of Descartes' treatise, *Meditations on First Philosophy* labels itself as a meditation, through which, as the rest of the title goes, *the Existence of God and the Distinction Between Mind and Body Are Demonstrated*. In Descartes, as I see it, "philosophy" implies is a creative approach to the ordinary/academic/scholastic rules of the philosophical discourse; as for Artaud, Bataille and Derrida. As Giulia Belgioioso emphasizes, Descartes in *Meditations* invents a methodology deriving from the literary hyperbole. Belgioioso traces Descartes' hyperbolic inspiration to the works of the French author and Descartes' friend, Guez de Balzac (1597-1694). As Belgioioso discerns it, Balzac's dictum of "the hyperbolic way to truth" is at work in Descartes' first three meditations.<sup>83</sup>

Descartes' exposition of the philosophical arguments in *Meditations* deviates, even today, from the ordinary scholastic/academic practice. The reason for this lies, as I see it, in Descartes' employment of exaggeration in *Meditations*. As previously in the *Discourse on Method* Descartes in *Meditations* employs the narrative style in the first person singular. The "I" in the *Meditations*, however, is not a storyteller but operates as the basic notion of the first principle of knowledge of the metaphysical and physical things.

The Cartesians are those philosophers whose philosophy pertains to the Cartesian project, whether one takes the side of Descartes as a metaphysician or as a scientist. There is plenty in Descartes' project for variety of (op)positions. The true Cartesians, I suggest, are those who notwithstanding their *opinion* on Descartes, nevertheless philosophize in the *manner* of Descartes' non-academic style and approach to philosophy. In this sense, Artaud, and Bataille, are the heir to Descartes. Cartesian dualism, metaphysics, and rationalism splits Cartesians and breeds resistance toward Descartes in general. Descartes' philosophy itself is diplomatic and even fanatic but always heroically determined to proceed off the beaten path. As Descartes' motto goes, *larvatus prodeo*, he himself always "proceeds masked".<sup>84</sup> This mask is still deceiving us today.

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<sup>83</sup> Giulia Belgioioso, "The Hyperbolic way to truth from Balzac to Descartes: 'Toute Hyperbole tend à nous amener à la vérité par la mensonge'", in José R. Maia Neto, Gianni Paganini and John Christian Laursen (eds.), *Skepticism in the Modern Age: Building on the Work of Richard Popkin*, Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2006, pp. 269-293.

<sup>84</sup> From Descartes' *Cogitationes Privatae*: "Ut comædi, moniti ne in fronte appareat pudor, personam induunt, sic ego hoc mundi theatrum consensurus, in quo hactenus spectator exstiti, larvatus prodeo." (*Œuvres de Descartes*, Ch. Adam and P. Tannery (eds.), X 213, 4-6. There is a vast literature on the subject, for instance Jacques Maritain's *The Dream of Descartes*.



# René Descartes: *Meditations on First Philosophy*

## Introduction

René Descartes' treatise *Meditations on First Philosophy* offers the most obvious example of the employment of exaggeration in philosophy. The fact that it is obvious is nevertheless obscured by the heavy reasoning that demands constant attention by the reader/thinker/meditator. In order to read, one has to follow the text. The text demands a thinking. The direction of thinking, proposed by Descartes in the Preface to the Reader, is to "meditate seriously" with him. Today, the common tendency is to read the *Meditations* as the *classic* in philosophy. The preconceived opinions Descartes strives to destroy by way of the "exaggerated" or "hyperbolic" *doubt* normally do not appeal to a reader who is also not a meditator. We read Descartes elegant prose with amusement, since we know from our classes in the history of philosophy what everybody knows: that Descartes' "demonstrations" of God's existence was rather unsuccessful, that the distinction between mind and body is not only problematic but absurd, and so on. In the end, today we read Descartes' *Meditations* as the flaw. I propose another approach, namely, to turn the attention to the operation of exaggeration in the *Meditations*.

In this chapter, I examine exaggeration in Descartes' *Meditations*, in the First, Second, and Sixth Meditation. In the First and Second Meditation, I locate the initial movement of exaggeration in the establishment of "metaphysical doubt".<sup>85</sup> Exaggeration proceeds further through "withdrawing the mind from the senses",<sup>86</sup> the mode Descartes employs for thinking about "metaphysical things".<sup>87</sup> Exaggeration facilitates the movement beyond ordinary rationality which relies on

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<sup>85</sup> CSM II p. 25; pp. 308-309.

<sup>86</sup> CSM II p. 8; p. 10; p. 37; p. 94; p. 111; p. 115.

<sup>87</sup> CSM II pp. 114-115.

the senses and the clear and distinct understanding. Thus, exaggeration initiates a set of metaphysical relations that nevertheless fall short of providing knowledge of the physical things, except merely ascertaining that they exist.

## The motive for exaggeration

Descartes' *Meditations* include the prefatory Letter to Sorbonne, Preface to the Reader, and the Synopsis. Descartes, in the prefatory Letter to Sorbonne:<sup>88</sup>

I was strongly pressed to undertake this task by several people who knew that I had developed a method for resolving certain difficulties in the sciences – not a new method (for nothing is older than the truth), but one which they had seen me use with some success in other areas; and I therefore thought it my duty to make some attempt to apply it to the matter in hand.<sup>89</sup>

Sending his metaphysical treatise for approbation to the Theological Faculty of the Sorbonne Descartes writes in the prefatory Letter<sup>90</sup> that he will treat the questions of God and the soul from the perspective of philosophy rather than theology. Descartes' turning to "metaphysics" rather than to *theology* in his *Meditations*, and his boosting that he provides the argument able to persuade every sceptic and the infidel of the existence of God, seems not to have appealed to the theologians, who nevertheless engaged critically with his treatise in a scholarly manner in *The Questions and the Replies to Meditations*.

Exaggeration in the *Meditations* provides a way for going beyond the facts for "metaphysical reasons", the possibility that nothing is certain, because God may be the deceiver. Descartes reserves exaggeration for metaphysics. Exaggeration at work in *Meditations*, I claim, is not merely "hyperbolic". The hyperbole could not provide the way of going beyond the physical things as Descartes attempts to do

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<sup>88</sup> For my exposition of the biographical and historical details and their interpretation in relation to Descartes' philosophy I rely on Desmond C. Clarke, Stephen Gaukroger and Genevieve Rodis-Lewis. The first two stress Descartes the scientist, while the latter view Descartes' metaphysical project as significant for his thinking. Daniel Garber Represents also the latter perspective extending to the claim of the significance of metaphysics for Descartes' "physics". See literature.

<sup>89</sup> CSM II, p. 4

<sup>90</sup> "I have always thought that two topics – namely God and the soul – are prime examples of subjects where demonstrative proofs ought to be given with the aid of philosophy rather than theology" (CSM II, p. 3).

in the *Meditations*. Although the motive for doubt feigns the hyperbolic exaggeration of the deceiving God or the “evil genius”, Descartes mobilizes exaggerated doubt in a serious attempt to go beyond every certainty in order to see if there is anything certain at all. “(M)y remarks in the *Meditations* were concerned not with the verbal expression of lies, but only with malice in the formal sense, the internal malice which is involved in deception.”<sup>91</sup> Descartes’ insistence on thinking through exaggerated doubt provides for a reading of *Meditations* as the discourse of exaggeration, or as the exercise in exaggeration. The doubt, however, merely sets exaggeration in motion. In the Second Meditation, upon reducing the subject “I am, I exist” to a “thinking thing” through doubt, exaggeration takes us even beyond doubt, into the *mind* of the “thinking thing”, by “withdrawing the mind from the senses”. “Admittedly, many people had previously said that in order to understand metaphysical matters the mind must be drawn away from the senses; but no one, so far as I know, had shown how this could be done. The correct, and in my view unique, method of achieving this is contained in my Second Meditation.”<sup>92</sup> Further, Descartes, the Synopsis of the First Meditation:

In the First Meditation reasons are provided which give us possible grounds for doubt about all things, especially material things, so long as we have no foundations for the sciences other than those which we have had up till now. Although the usefulness of such extensive doubt is not apparent at first sight, its greatest benefit lies in freeing us from all our preconceived opinions, and providing the easiest route by which the mind may be led away from the senses. The eventual result of this doubt is to make it impossible for us to have any further doubts about what we subsequently discover to be true.<sup>93</sup>

Exaggeration operates in the “extensive doubt” only so that “the mind may be led away from the senses”, beyond the physical things, to reflect, in the Second Meditation, on itself as pure understanding – as the mind that exaggerates that it dreams and imagines that it perceives.

Descartes never promotes exaggeration as the *scientific* approach. The question is even if Descartes even provides the Cogito as the principle of *science*. Descartes seems to abandon the Cogito already in the short metaphysical justification of his

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<sup>91</sup> CSM II p. 102.

<sup>92</sup> CSM II p. 94.

<sup>93</sup> CSM II p. 9.



vision of science in the *Discourse on Method*. If there is Cogito in the *Meditations*, it operates as thinking through exaggeration, going beyond the world on which Descartes founds his science. The fate of the Cogito is the subject of another study. In the present analysis, I focus on exaggeration in the instances of going beyond the fact “that I am here” as established by Descartes in the First Meditation. I read the *Meditations* as the attempt to go beyond this fact through exaggeration, gradually through the exaggerated doubt, and by “withdrawing the mind through the senses”.

Leaning on Giulia Belgioioso’s study of the hyperbolic method in Descartes, and Derrida’s assertion of the “hyperbolic exaggeration” in the *Meditations*, I propose that the function of exaggeration in *Meditations* is to enhance the thinking to go beyond the physical things, however, not only to establish the metaphysical foundation of science but also to provide the foundation of science beyond metaphysics. Once the metaphysical demand is satisfied, its explanation exhausted, going beyond metaphysics as the discourse of rational explanation of the questions of God and the soul, beyond the physical, implies a return to the questions at the level of being-here. Being-here is the starting point for the first philosophy going beyond this position through exaggeration for “metaphysical reasons”. It is also, as I see it, the starting point for “the direction of mind for searching the truth in the sciences”, the actual project of the *Discourse on Method*.

The “method” Descartes discusses in the *Discourse*, I suggest, is not specifically the method of science but the *way to take*. In the *Meditations* “the route which I follow in explaining them [God and the soul] is so untrodden and so remote from the normal way, that I thought it would not be helpful to give a full account of it in a book written in French and designed to be read by all and sundry, in case weaker intellects might believe that they ought to set out on the same path.”<sup>94</sup> In the *Discourse*, Descartes was addressing *everybody* in French, promoting the “normal way” of following the “good sense”. The “method” of the *Discourse* is the *way one takes* for directing the thinking toward the search for truth of the physical things.

The interpretations supposing “rationalism” and “metaphysics” in Descartes rather point out the dominance of these modes of interpretation in philosophy itself. They lack the strength to grasp the hyperbolic subversion at work from within the principles of rational explanation always already going beyond the

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<sup>94</sup> CSM II pp. 6-7.

matters at hand in Descartes' project: the world and the physical things. Going beyond the physical things through exaggeration and establishing the metaphysical foundation for the certainty of clear and distinct understanding, the metaphysics is foundational, however, only as a non-foundation, or as a foundation with which we can dispense, suspend it. The "metaphysical foundation" serves rather as an "Archimedean point" to which Descartes alludes to in the Second Meditations. This shift, I suggest, serves to redirect thinking, out of itself, through the exaggerated doubt arising from the hyperbolic reasons for doubt. The goal is to direct the thinking towards the physical things. The way of the "good sense" Descartes takes toward the knowledge of the physical things, through examination, observation, experiment and calculation, is not the same way of the exaggerated doubt, by which he approaches the questions of God and the soul through rational arguments. In difference to the scholastic rational explanation of *faith*, Descartes tries to provide the rational explanation of the *necessity* of the existence of God and the soul notwithstanding faith. Descartes in *Meditations* offers an approach to the questions of God and the soul by "withdrawing the mind from the senses." Needless to say, this approach is unsuitable for the study of the physical things. In the same way, the metaphysical foundation is not the foundation of the physics. The latter needs no "foundation" but the physical things to examine.

Descartes examines the hyperbolic reasons for doubt through exaggeration, I claim. Finally, driving exaggeration beyond the reasonable limit, not one metaphysical reason for doubt remains at the end of the *Meditations*. At first, this does not indicate anything about the status of metaphysics. Metaphysics is not what he attacks. Descartes demonstrates that the metaphysics holds the potentiality and possibility of the knowledge of the physical things. But, because *it is easier to know God than the things in the world*,<sup>95</sup> to gain this knowledge requires another approach. Thus, the things in the world are not the subject of thinking, as the questions of God and the soul, but require another approach that needs to be *invented*. Whether Descartes' *mathesis universalis* is this invention is the question outside the scope of the present study.

As Descartes demonstrates, to establish "metaphysics" itself means going beyond the physical things by way of exaggeration. Metaphysics is foundational for the physics, however, only if it instigates a *return* to the physical things, once

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<sup>95</sup> CSM II pp. 3-4.

the metaphysical/hyperbolic reasons for doubt are finally discarded as “exaggerated” and “ridiculous”. The doubt in the *Meditations* concerns what is *certain*, not as in the *Discourse*, what is *uncertain* – what nobody would normally doubt. To do so would be “insane”. Thus, the reasons for doubt were exaggerated and ridiculous from the beginning. The demand for considering them *seriously*, however, conceals that they *are* hyperbolic exaggerations. At the same time, the doubt provides the reasons for the necessity of the existence of God and the distinction between mind and body. The questions of God and the soul cannot be the subjects to exaggeration without bringing everything into doubt again – if one could *demonstrate*, despite Descartes proving otherwise, that God *is* a deceiver. Notwithstanding if Descartes was right, he got the upper hand. Nobody, at that time, would dare to endeavor such a proof. Some fearless heretic may have even succeeded, but history has unfortunately obscured that proof if there ever was one in the shadow of Descartes. Descartes establishes nevertheless that the human reason cannot go beyond what is ultimately incomprehensible. Reason can merely point out this incomprehensibility by exhausting the possibility of rational explanation, which anyway provides the rational explanation of the metaphysical necessity of the existence of God and the soul.

Physics, in Descartes, concerns generally, the study of physical things, including the bodies of living beings. Metaphysics is foundational for physics only as far as it suspends itself as a thinking that goes beyond the physical things by way of exaggeration. In the sense of an approach, or “method” towards the knowledge of the physical things, metaphysics remains the *wrong way*. Going through metaphysics, suspending it, by way of exaggeration, however, provides the direction for thinking beyond the metaphysics. The latter implies the search for truth by learning about the world through the examination of physical things.

## Way of exaggeration

Although I do not view exaggeration as a “method” of *Meditations*, the employment of exaggeration, as I see it, is significant for the approach to the metaphysical questions going beyond the “physical”, or generally, I suggest, beyond *being-here*. I draw this on Descartes’ starting point in the First Meditation, “I am here.” Being-here, I propose, is a “basic notion”. I use this designation of Descartes’ from the early, unfinished and in his lifetime unpublished *Rules*,

reappearing latter in the *Principles*, extending on the *Meditations*, however, in my reading of *exaggeration* in the latter. Going beyond being-here, as Descartes according to my meaning demonstrates in the *Meditations*, is possible only through exaggeration. Most importantly, Descartes in the *Meditations* demonstrates that going beyond fails to escape being-here because this position *resists* exaggeration.

In her examination of the correspondence between Descartes and Guy de Balzac, Giulia Belgioioso emphasizes Descartes' interest in the use of hyperbole as providing "the way to truth". According to Belgioioso, Descartes' employment of the hyperbole in the first three meditations is methodical rather than rhetorical. This possibility could provide a historical justification to my claim of the significance of exaggeration in *Meditations*. As far as I know, Belgioioso does not extend this observation to asserting a proper hyperbolic method in *Meditations*. It is the task of a future enquiry to examine this particularity of in detail. I base nevertheless my claim of exaggeration in *Meditations* on this observation of Belgioioso, as well as in Derrida's emphasis on Descartes' "hyperbolic project". However, I do not examine the question of a method of exaggeration in *Meditations*. For my purposes here, I want to suggest that Descartes's use of exaggeration is at least *procedural*, in the instances of thinking beyond in the First, Second and the last, Sixth Meditation. In the Sixth meditation, I emphasize Descartes' final move of *discarding* exaggeration.

Leaning on Belgioioso, I propose that Descartes employs exaggeration *in* the hyperbole, outside the figure of the hyperbole, as the force of going beyond the rhetorical level in order to provide a "way to truth". The intensity of exaggeration directs the thinking along the line of exaggeration and makes the hyperbolic statements into the objects of serious consideration. Only if these considerations pertain to truth, they will remain worthy of further consideration, and not merely, as Descartes puts it at the end of *Meditations*, "exaggerated" and therefore "laughable".

In the end, Descartes discards exaggeration. Thus, Descartes designate a point at which the "metaphysical reasons" has to leave the room for the consideration of the physical things. But first, Descartes establishes a metaphysical foundation for knowledge beyond senses. In secret, Descartes seems to hold that it is rather the other way around. By going beyond physics, we arrive at metaphysics. Initially, the exaggerated doubt provided apparent uncertainty of the likely delusional phenomena arising from the impossibility of directly *denying* "that I

am here". Further, going beyond the physical things by "withdrawing the mind from the senses" provided the access to the metaphysical things. The reason why Descartes, as Derrida observes it in a parenthesis, "never confronts the question of his own language"<sup>96</sup> perhaps, has to do with a secret: the truth of metaphysics is ascertained only at the level of the language. To "meditate seriously" implies the attention to the hyperbolic/metaphysical reasons for doubt, to persuade *us* – or merely the theologians of the Sorbonne:

The vital importance of the cause and the glory of God, to which the entire undertaking is directed, here compel me to speak somewhat more freely about my own achievements than is my custom. But although I regard the proofs as quite certain and evident, I cannot therefore persuade myself that they are suitable to be grasped by everyone.<sup>97</sup>

Language and thinking operating through language are susceptible to exaggeration. Exaggeration becomes the way of thinking. It aspires beyond the things at hand. Thinking does not say what the language cannot speak. What for Derrida is the force of "madness" at work in the Cogito could be exchanged with "exaggeration" in the discourse of *Meditations*. "(A)ny philosopher or speaking subject (and the philosopher is but the speaking subject par excellence) who must evoke madness from the *interior* of thought (and not only from within the body or some other extrinsic agency), can do so only in the realm of the *possible* and in the language of fiction or the fiction of language."<sup>98</sup>

Metaphysics cannot serve as the unshakable foundation of the certainty of knowledge of the physical things. If there is any metaphysical foundation of the latter, it is delimited by Descartes before Kant to *epistemology*, in the clear and distinct understanding, or as we have it in the first of the four precepts for Descartes outlines in *Discourse on Method* – "never to accept anything as true that I did not *incontrovertibly* know to be so; that is to say, carefully to avoid both *prejudice* and premature conclusions; and to include nothing in my judgements other than that which presented itself to my mind so *clearly* and *distinctly*, that I would have no occasion to doubt it."<sup>99</sup> Now, only a decision to follow exaggeration going beyond this determination can assign metaphysics the status

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<sup>96</sup> Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 65.

<sup>97</sup> CSM II pp. 4-5.

<sup>98</sup> Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 66.

<sup>99</sup> Descartes, *Discourse on the Method*, p. 17.

of the provider of truth. Descartes in *Meditations* applies the same principle of *optimisation* as in his approach to geometry, to which the precept above refers. Thus, as we had it in the Synopsis of the First Meditation: “Although the usefulness of such extensive doubt is not apparent at first sight, its greatest benefit lies in freeing us from all our preconceived opinions, and providing the easiest route by which the mind may be led away from the senses.” Taking exaggeration as the way to truth, even here, Descartes seeks to provide “the easiest route” – to return to the things at hand.

Descartes is deceiving us that he *thinks* what he expounds in his treatise. The thing of thinking is not only a “thinking thing” but the way of going beyond through exaggeration. There is *more* in the demonstrations of the existence of God and the distinction between mind and the body; the exaggeration at work, metaphysics as a discourse of exaggeration, philosophy *as* exaggeration.

## To establish the truth

Descartes in his scientific works stresses the importance of the *analysis*,<sup>100</sup> to clearly and distinctly *show* something as true or false, for instance through observation, experiment and calculation. Thinking merely enhances the analytic procedures and knowledge producing operations. Every thinking subject is ultimately capable of performing these operations in order to ascertain something as objectively true or false. This is the vision of science, heralded by Descartes. Notwithstanding Descartes’ aspirations, although he provided a short treatise on the metaphysical foundations of his principles of science in the *Discourse*, Descartes in *Meditations* faced a different task. It was more or less self-imposed to validate these foundations – by demonstrating the existence of God and the soul in accordance with the Christian faith.

Descartes in *Meditations* was dealing not only with metaphysics but also with the religious truth demand. Especially, as he points out in the prefatory letter, the question of the immortality of the soul was the task issued by the pope Leo X to the Christian philosophers “to establish the truth”. Descartes, prefatory Letter to Sorbonne:

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<sup>100</sup> CSM II p. 111.

It is of course quite true that we must believe in the existence of God because it is a doctrine of Holy Scripture, and conversely, that we must believe Holy Scripture because it comes from God; for since faith is the gift of God, he who gives us grace to believe other things can also give us grace to believe that he exists. But this argument cannot be put to unbelievers because they would judge it to be circular. Moreover, I have noticed both that you and all other theologians assert that the existence of God is capable of proof by natural reason, and also that the inference from Holy Scripture is that the knowledge of God is easier to acquire than the knowledge we have of many created things – so easy, indeed, that those who do not acquire it are at fault. This is clear from a passage in the Book of Wisdom, Chapter 13: ‘Howbeit they are not to be excused; for if their knowledge was so great that they could value this world, why did they not rather find out the Lord thereof?’ And in Romans, Chapter 1 it is said that they are ‘without excuse’. And in the same place, in the passage ‘that which is known of God is manifest in them’, we seem to be told that everything that may be known of God can be demonstrated by reasoning which has no other source but our own mind. Hence, I thought it was quite proper for me to inquire how this may be, and how God may be more easily and more certainly known than the things of this world. As regards the soul, many people have considered that it is not easy to discover its nature, and some have even had the audacity to assert that, as far as human reasoning goes, there are persuasive grounds for holding that the soul dies along with the body and that the opposite view is based on faith alone. But in its eighth session the Lateran Council held under Leo X condemned those who take this position, and expressly enjoined Christian philosophers to refute their arguments and use all their powers to establish the truth; so, I have not hesitated to attempt this task as well.<sup>101</sup>

Here, Descartes deals with the *demand* for truth. The response to this demand is *faith*. Although theology provides rational explanations of *faith*, it nevertheless rests on the demand of truth. For this reason, faith rests solely on the manic insistence on truth. For Descartes, however, truth does not rest merely on the consistency of the argument but also on experience. In Descartes’ understanding of truth, in the four precepts of the *Discourse*, one has to be able to see or understand clearly and distinctly that something is true. The demand for truth, however, forbids such investigations. It demands “to establish the truth”.<sup>102</sup> Descartes approaches, therefore, the questions of the existence of God and the soul by persuasion of the philosophical argument. Concretely, his non-theological response to the demand for truth becomes a matter of *self-persuasion* through

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<sup>101</sup> CSM II pp. 3–4

<sup>102</sup> I rely for my discussion on the soul/mind and the demand for truth in Descartes’ *Meditations* on C. F. Fowler, *Descartes on the Human Soul: Philosophy and the Demand of the Christian Doctrine*, Springer, 1999.

exaggeration of the uncertainty of the ordinary ways of understanding. Thus, Descartes allows for truth to insist on itself as undeniable – for instance, that I have a body, that I am here – and what remains despite imposing the powerful hyperbolic/metaphysical reasons for doubt. To make the truth known, Descartes establishes the series of obvious untrue statements that provide the basis for obvious exaggeration, initially, the hyperbolic doubts.

The infamous distinction between mind and body concerns the existence of the soul, which Descartes equates with “mind” as distinct from the body, that is, given the argument that, in distinction from the body, the mind/soul is capable to perceive the metaphysical things that are beyond the senses, such as the existence of God. Here, the existence of God has nothing to do with the sensory or sensual/mystic experience of God. Descartes’ demonstration is entirely managed on the level of the idea of the necessity of God’s existence. The conception of the existence is conceived entirely on the level of mind/soul. The mind/soul is not only temporarily in the body. It also exists, in an “incomprehensible” way, which links it to the ultimate incomprehensibility of God. Thus, there is no certain knowledge of God and the soul except faith. It suffices, however, to persuade rationally that the question of God and the soul pertain to the clear and distinct understanding of the *necessity* of the existence of God and the soul, for various reasons Descartes lists in the *Meditations*.<sup>103</sup>

The demand for making known the truth implies persuasion. Descartes way of persuasion does not rely on the rhetorical devices, but on thinking through the hyperbolic statements by way of exaggeration.

Descartes designates the soul synonymously with “mind”. The equation of the soul with the mind has to do with Descartes’ unwillingness to speculate about the

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<sup>103</sup> Descartes, Sixth Meditation: “First, I know that everything which I clearly and distinctly understand is capable of being created by God so as to correspond exactly with my understanding of it. Hence the fact that I can clearly and distinctly understand one thing apart from another is enough to make me certain that the two things are distinct, since they are capable of being separated, at least by God. The question of what kind of power is required to bring about such a separation does not affect the judgement that the two things are distinct. Thus, simply by knowing that I exist and seeing at the same time that absolutely nothing else belongs to my nature or essence except that I am a thinking thing, I can infer correctly that my essence consists solely in the fact that I am a thinking thing. It is true that I may have (or, to anticipate, that I certainly have) a body that is very closely joined to me. But nevertheless, on the one hand I have a clear and distinct idea of myself, in so far as I am simply a thinking, non-extended thing; and on the other hand, I have a distinct idea of body, in so far as this is simply an extended, non-thinking thing. And accordingly, it is certain that I am really distinct from my body, and can exist without it” (CSM II p. 54).



*nature* of the soul. Descartes simply pursue the task of thinking about the soul in response to the demand to make the truth known.

According to the current and approved notions of the soul, the soul is personal, and it persists without the body after death. Descartes' solution was to provide the argument for the existence of the soul as distinct from the body by basing the rational explanation of the distinction in the mind's ability to exist without the body as the "unextended" *substance*. In distinction to the mind, the body is an "extended" substance. The distinction is Descartes' rational and logical *solution* to the demand to make the truth known, however, not without exaggeration, having to find the way to deny the body, which in the end is possible only if it is in some way nevertheless joined with the body.<sup>104</sup>

Most importantly, as I see it, the distinction is established by Descartes through exaggerated doubt leading to "withdrawing the mind from the senses," another level of exaggeration in thinking beyond the physical things. Exaggeration is significant for going beyond the senses to establish the "thinking thing," *the unextended substance whose essence is to think*. Thus, the mind reflecting on itself as the thinking thing links to the qualities of the soul, one of which is that it is distinct from the body, because unlike the body, as the demand for truth goes, the soul is *immortal*.

Famously, Descartes in *Meditations* demonstrates also the existence of God. Descartes motivation to take on this task, as previously regarding the soul, pertains to a ready-made task of thinking. From the passage in the letter quoted above it is clear that, similarly to his response to the current regulations of any discourse on the soul, Descartes' demonstration of the existence of God corresponds to the tenets of the current discourse on God (theology). The letter gives us, as I see it, a dense version of exaggeration at work in the treatise. Its fundamental operation, I suggest, is discernible in this passage. The mask of diplomacy in the letter hides from the sight the tensions that underlie Descartes' motivation to go beyond "the things in this world", which is not the knowledge of God, but the proposition that "God may be more easily and more certainly known" and the *saying* that "God can be demonstrated by reasoning which has no other source but our own mind".

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<sup>104</sup> I rely for this discussion on the accounts critical of the dualist label on Descartes. Lilli Alanen, 'Reconsidering Descartes's Notion of the Mind-Body Union', *Synthese*. 106(1): 3-20. Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1996; Gordon Baker & Katherine Morris, *Descartes' Dualism*. Routledge, 1996; Jean-Luc Marion, *On Descartes Passive thought. The Myth of Cartesian Dualism*, trans. Christina M. Gschwandtner. The University of Chicago Press, 2018 (orig. publ. in French 2013).

For Descartes, this task does not imply logical and rational explanation on the level of the saying but in the distinction between the ways of knowing the “mind” and the ways of knowing “the things in the world”. The “mind” is the primal scene of the *Meditations*. Although the notions of God and the soul in the *Meditations* were *classical* already at Descartes’ time, Descartes in *Meditations* goes beyond the common understanding – even ours today, I dare say – of this classicism. Descartes promotes the reasoning about God by “no other source but our own mind”, however, in distinction from “the knowledge of the world”. Here, Descartes exaggerates the primacy of the mind. He is certainly aware that the knowledge of the world is foundational for the knowledge of God, that is, in minimal sense, because, firstly, as Descartes establishes it in the First Meditation, *the mind knows it is in the world*:

Yet although the senses occasionally deceive us with respect to objects which are very small or in the distance, there are many other beliefs about which doubt is quite impossible, even though they are derived from the senses – for example, that I am here, sitting by the fire, wearing a winter dressing-gown, holding this piece of paper in my hands, and so on. Again, how could it be denied that these hands or this whole body are mine?<sup>105</sup>

Descartes does not *deny* “that I am here” generally. To “see” God with the “mind’s eye”, it takes pains to “withdraw” the mind from the body and the world, to separate the mind from the body. Only by way of exaggeration the mind separates from the world. This separation, or withdrawing, is crucial, because it constantly produces the instances of going beyond the physical things by way of exaggeration. Exaggeration unfolds through the hyperbolic reasons for doubt – *what can I know for certain*, that “I am here”, or that “God exists”? Descartes clearly exaggerates the status of the former certainty when he overshoots it by saying that “God may be more easily and more certainly known than the things of this world”. This is why he initiates the exaggerated doubt of the idiotic knowledge that “I am here”.

I am in the world, that is certain. The question here for Descartes is, *how to make this uncertain*? Descartes plays here on the obviousness of the idea that *God is in our mind*, “fixed in mind since the childhood” as he puts it in the First Meditation. This is easy to *know* without reasoning at all. But, again, what is the status of this knowledge? Is this certain? Only reasoning and its rhetoric can

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<sup>105</sup> CSM II pp. 12-13.

persuade us that this is so, or not, since the beginning of time. Exaggeration, however, takes the meditator beyond the physical condition, to the state of a freely floating mind. Exaggeration pushes the mind beyond the senses, strips everything down, casts out the mind from the world. If there is “me” in the mind *alone*, “I” would certainly be out of mind.

Descartes exaggerates even this abysmal state of mind, this minimal condition for the existence of the “I” – “I” exist, thus “I am”. I am thinking... The first knowledge: “I am, I exist”. Existence is the abysmal void. Now, “I am here”, “I exist”, a tiny “I” in the abyss. Think more... How can I exist? God, who has created me. *Then* “I” see “clearly and distinctly” that God exists necessarily, in this abyss in which “I am”, *but nothing else*. This is as far one can come beyond the physical things. Not that “easy” to know God after all. But “easy” when there is *nothing* else but “I” and God. Taking the point of departure from the *easiness* by which *we know that we are in the world* leads us beyond the world, by exaggeration, “easier to know God”. Exaggeration provides the thinking beyond.

## I am here

Descartes decides to demolish his beliefs and establish a stable foundation of knowledge. Everybody does this sometimes to different degree. Descartes is nevertheless resolute to target the most basic conditions of knowledge, and decides to *doubt* its every prerequisite. Descartes starts by doubting the accuracy of his senses. This is still “natural” doubt and everyone can agree with Descartes that “the senses occasionally deceive us”.

Yet although the senses occasionally deceive us with respect to objects which are very small or in the distance, there are many other beliefs about which doubt is quite impossible, even though they are derived from the senses — for example, that I am here, sitting by the fire, wearing a winter dressing-gown, holding this piece of paper in my hands, and so on.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> CSM II pp. 13-14.

That “I am here” seems impossible and ridiculous to doubt.<sup>107</sup> It is impossible unless we have some hyperbolic reason to doubt it. At this particular point in Descartes’ treatise, the fact “that I am here”, nevertheless poses the obstacle to the continuity of doubt. The doubt reaches a dead end already at the start. And yet, somehow this fact has to be put to doubt. How should one proceed further?

Again, how could it be denied that these hands or this whole body are mine? Unless perhaps I were to liken myself to madmen, whose brains are so damaged by the persistent vapours of melancholia that they firmly maintain they are kings when they are paupers, or say they are dressed in purple when they are naked, or that their heads are made of earthenware, or that they are pumpkins, or made of glass. But such people are insane, and I would be thought equally mad if I took anything from them as a model for myself.<sup>108</sup>

Not that one is like the “insane”. They insist manically: they are as they perceive themselves to be. There is no space for doubt in the state of chronic conviction. The sarcasm appears here and there throughout the *Meditations*. It is almost as Descartes at some stage of writing intended to take into account other “extravagant” and “vulgar” example in search for the best way to doubt the fundamental fact “that I am here”. In line with this, we can view, for example, the strange passage immediately after the treatise on perception in the famous example of the wax, towards the end of the Second Meditation:

But then if I look out of the window and see men crossing the square, as I just happen to have done, I normally say that I see the men themselves, just as I say that I see the wax. Yet do I see any more than hats and coats which could conceal automatons? I *judge* that they are men. And so, something which I thought I was seeing with my eyes is in fact grasped solely by the faculty of judgement which is in my mind. However, one who wants to achieve knowledge above the ordinary level should feel ashamed at having taken ordinary ways of talking as a basis for doubt.<sup>109</sup>

Descartes here indicates his technological interest in “automatons”. Focusing on his condemnation of the “ordinary ways of talking as a basis for doubt”, one can notice that its function is to reject these “ways” “as a basis for doubt”. Descartes here rejects the idea of seeing others as “automatons” in the same way as he rejects

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<sup>107</sup> For Descartes’ notion of the body, see Jean-Luc Marion, *On Descartes Passive Thought: The Myth of Cartesian Dualism*, trans. C. M. Gschwandtner, University of Chicago Press, 2018.

<sup>108</sup> CSM II p. 13.

<sup>109</sup> CSM II p. 21.

the insane as “the model for myself”. The sarcasm is: I do not know if *they* are mad – but *I* have these impossible dreams... Maybe *they* are just automatons... To doubt like this leads nowhere. One has to find the proper “model” and “way” *oneself*, if the treatise is to reflect truly extreme doubt. For a moment, the doubt includes one’s own sanity. Exploring this possibility through hyperbolic exaggerations seems to be the decisive step toward the formation of exaggeration as the force of thinking beyond everything. Thinking-exaggeration is perhaps Descartes’ discovery in search for the most extreme exaggeration. He applies and masters it in the *Meditations* as the mode of metaphysical thinking.

## Of madness and dream

It is important not to confuse the instance of “insanity” here with anything that does not have to do with the search for the extreme way to doubt. I do not speak about delusion, and in fact, not about “madness” at all. I want to claim that “insanity” here functions as a *hypothesis* Descartes poses to go beyond the fact “that I am here”. Indeed, to deny or doubt “that I am here” would be “mad”. As I will discuss it in the following, the hypothesis of “insanity” proposes also a first real instance *beyond senses*. The “insane” is theoretically speaking in a state of mind beyond senses. Descartes wants to go beyond everything. But he cannot decide if the “insane”, as he sees them, with the eyes he at this point do not trust, are really that gone – beyond everything, also, beyond the “good sense”.

Descartes wants to arrive at the state of mind *alone*, but the shortcut through “insanity” does not establish the mind’s reflection on itself alone. Exaggeration operates fully at this stage of meditation. But it does not provide the “model” for going beyond the senses. It provides merely caricatures. “I am made of glass.” The firmness of the manic insistence nevertheless resists exaggeration, but this is precisely why “insanity” does not offer a model for going beyond. The manic insistence is also a thinking, to put it with Derrida: “Whether I am mad or not, *Cogito, sum*.”<sup>110</sup> Descartes nevertheless moves on more successfully in posing the hypothesis of a *dream*. Could this be a way to abolish the fact that “I am here”? That “I” may be *dreaming* all this: “that I am here, sitting by the fire, wearing a

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<sup>110</sup> Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 68.

winter dressing-gown, holding this piece of paper in my hands, and so on.”<sup>111</sup> However, going beyond the obstacle of “insanity”, Descartes proceeds further. Although “insanity” does not provide the possibility of going beyond the senses, exaggeration operates as the force of thinking beyond the fact that “I am here”.

A brilliant piece of reasoning! As if I were not a man who sleeps at night, and regularly has all the same experiences while asleep as madmen do when awake — indeed sometimes even more improbable ones.<sup>112</sup>

This breakthrough makes it now possible to go beyond the fact that I am awake. To be aware in a dream – “I must be dreaming” – leads to awakening. Descartes is aware of this, but also that he exaggerates the possibility that everything he perceives is a dream. Finally, this is a good condition for a metaphysical meditation. The hypothesis of dream sets the stage for a full-blown exaggeration of the the possibility of radical deception; the hypothesis of a deceiving God, or an “evil genius” in the First Meditation. The doubt of the truthfulness of truth establishes the possibility of proceeding further beyond at the beginning of the Second Meditation:

I will suppose then, that everything I see is spurious. I will believe that my memory tells me lies, and that none of the things that it reports ever happened. I have no senses. Body, shape, extension, movement and place are chimeras. So, what remains true? Perhaps just the one fact that nothing is certain.<sup>113</sup>

## The weakness of our nature: to exaggerate

Descartes in *Meditations* provides a perfect example of a *discourse of exaggeration*. For Descartes, “exaggerated” is also “metaphysical”.<sup>114</sup> This, however, does not dismiss metaphysics as exaggeration. Exaggeration is the only *logical* mode of thinking beyond. In line with this, metaphysics pertains directly to thinking’s inclination to exaggerate. The very last line of Descartes’ *Meditations*, I suggest, points out the *making of sense* as the reason for the thinking to succumb to exaggeration:

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<sup>111</sup> CSM II p. 13.

<sup>112</sup> CSM II p. 13.

<sup>113</sup> CSM II p. 16.

<sup>114</sup> CSM II pp. 308-309.

But since the pressure of things to be done does not always allow us to stop and make such a meticulous check, it must be admitted that in this human life we are often liable to make mistakes about particular things, and we must acknowledge the weakness of our nature.<sup>115</sup>

This conclusion follows Descartes' refutation of the previous "exaggerated doubts" as "laughable". The point is, they were exaggerated and laughable from the very beginning. The reasons for proposing them were, however, "metaphysical". The doubting subject, the meditator thinking through exaggerated doubt, nevertheless had to propose these in order to ascertain the reliability of the mind reflecting on itself through "withdrawing the mind from the senses". Without going into the complexity of Descartes' argument and without engaging in the analysis of the validity of his demonstrations of the existence of God and the distinction between mind and body, it will suffice to point out the way Descartes takes to go beyond the fact that "I am here" through exaggeration. The exaggeration, I suggest, is not on the side of the infamous *cogito* but the hyperbolic reasons for doubt. Not through the manic insistence like the "insane", but inferring that everything one perceives may be a dream. There is a possibility that one is indeed not how one perceives oneself to be. Moreover, the apparent truths of the simple mathematical operations may be the deceptions planted in one's mind, by God, who is fixed as the idea and who may be a deceiver, or by some "evil genius". Questioning that "I am here", the meditator has to exaggerate, to *make sense* of these exaggerations. Thus, proceeding, the meditator goes beyond oneself through exaggeration that has become the way of thinking through doubt.

In sum, the exaggerated doubt of the trustworthiness of the senses leads to the hypothesis of a dream. The exaggerated hypothesis of a deceiving God leads to uncertainty concerning the truth of the simple mathematical operations. Exaggeration goes beyond the thinking subject that never moves from the initial position of the certainty, "that I am here" (CSM p. 13). In the end, the meditator returns to this initial position, "and we must acknowledge the weakness of our nature"; *to exaggerate*.

Thinking is the subject to pressure and weakness only when it follows along the line of exaggeration – even in a manner of orderly reasoning, or precisely for this reason. Philosophy insists, sometimes manically, that there is "more," "beyond,"

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<sup>115</sup> CSM II p. 62.

“otherwise” or even “without”; the things out of hand. It provides rational explanations, like a compulsive liar who rationalizes and justifies the narrative to make it sound – and the “lie”, for Descartes, as Belgioioso asserts it, is the underlying force the hyperbolic exaggeration toward the revelation of truth: that going beyond leads nowhere. This is why Descartes remains “here”. But to *see* that the lie reveals something about the truth, demands critical analysis. If a prejudice can stand the trial of exaggeration, it will eventually reemerge as either true or false. The falsity would then be the truth of the preconceived knowledge that effects its refutation. Something one understands clearly and distinctly as false cannot operate as the stable foundation of knowledge. One is, so to speak, certain of its falsity. At the further end of exaggeration, however, it would be false to assume that the exaggeration approaches the things at hand. Exaggeration becomes “laughable”. Therefore, in Descartes, *exaggeration reveals itself as something to discard*.

## I am, I exist

The thinking goes beyond the subject of clear and distinct understanding by way of exaggeration. Descartes also demonstrates how to retrieve the subject of clear and distinct understanding. This involves a procedure of reflecting on mind. The reflection concerns the awareness of what happens to the clear and distinct understanding when the mind is withdrawing from the senses. Let us take the risk of this journey and examine the status of the “I” as we try to think beyond the fact that “I am here”. To examine the status of clear and distinct understanding of this fact at the level of the mind alone, Descartes proceeds by considering the ways in which we may *deny* “that I am here”. In difference from Descartes’ procedure, to begin with, we initiate the hyperbolic doubt concerning the existence of the “I”. We observe the unfolding of exaggeration as the way of thinking in the considerations of the hyperbolic doubt concerning the existence of the “I”.

One has to catch up with exaggeration. “I” is the instance of thinking beyond that confronts “that I am here”. *Here* is where “I” departs on the way of exaggeration by thinking beyond oneself. *Here* is nevertheless always already the place where “I” understand clearly and distinctly that *I am*. *Here* is where “I” undeniably take place. “I” exaggerates the status of its being *beyond* this spatial



condition. That “I am here” *is* undeniable. Therefore, for metaphysical/hyperbolic reasons, to ascertain the existence of “I” *beyond being*, first, we have to demolish the basic notion of “here”. We do this by way of exaggeration of the “I” as the metaphysical question of the possibility of being beyond. We doubt, as it were, for hyperbolic reasons. These were: we cannot trust the senses; we cannot trust the truthfulness of truth. Nevertheless, that “I am, I exist” is resisting deception. Thus, seeing clearly and distinctly, however, only on the level of logical necessity pertaining to an affirmation of an idea, we can establish that “I am, I exist” is the first *metaphysical* knowledge, *beyond* the basic notion “I am here”. That “I am here”, correspondingly, was the first knowledge based on clear and distinct *perceptions*, which we have put to hyperbolic doubt for metaphysical reasons. Thus, at least “I am”. But this is not enough as we do not know *how* “I exist”. Existence becomes now the metaphysical question of an *exo-position*, the dwelling of the “I” beyond the clear and distinct understanding that “I am here”, where “I” formerly and, as we have decided, *falsely* believed that “I” was. But, let us jump forward and reconsider the significance of that former position, because, as we will see, *where I was, I return*.

We know, in the end, Descartes does not establish anything *real* beyond the basic notion “I am here” except for a manic insistence on the real distinction of mind and body. This distinction is real only for metaphysical/hyperbolic reasons for exaggeration of the status of the “I” merely as an unextended “thinking thing”. Thus, our journey along the path of exaggeration beyond the senses will nevertheless end by returning to our basic position – here. The rest are the hyperbolic considerations for metaphysical reasons. In order to engage in them, we have to take the path of exaggeration. We have to go beyond the basic notions that ascertain themselves in the clear and distinct seeing (perception) and understanding (conception) of our place in the world, without exaggeration; the place in the world, *where I was, I return*. (I resist here to dwell on the relevant association to Sigmund Freud’s formula of the phantasmatic displacement of the ego, *Wo Es war soll Ich werden*.)

At this point, it is nevertheless important to note that the first decisive step in *Meditations* implies a decentering of the initial position “I am here” to the position “I exist”. The “I”, put forward on the path of exaggeration, is going beyond its initial, basic and undeniable position “here”. Of course, even the position “I exist” is “here”, in existence. But the existence is not a place and the “I” that exists is not the “I” that sees and understands clearly and distinctly that “I am here”. The “I”

is going beyond by way of exaggeration, on the basis of the *decision* to “deceive myself”;<sup>116</sup> to demolish the physical foundation of being-here. The basic notion “I am here” nevertheless anchors “I am” to its place. The decision to go beyond (being) is possible only at the level of mind, by thinking beyond through exaggeration; the decision to become *eccentric*.

Applying the critique of exaggeration, “here” is the point of departure on the line of exaggeration on which the “I” decenters itself to another point, where “I” *exaggerates* its being of existence: “I am a thinking thing”. This the point at which the thinking exaggerates. For our critical view on exaggeration, the appointment of the “I” to the fundamental metaphysical notion, “I exist”, however, is that “I exist” *as* exaggeration. The position of the existence of “I” is beyond the place of being, “I am here”. “I exist” is the extra exaggeration of exaggeration “I am”. As such it also provides the turning point, away from the being of the mind, back to the senses, returning where I was, where I am, always already, in the world.

## Laughable exaggeration

In Descartes’ *Discourse on Method* and his scientific treatises, the vision of the improvement of life does not involve good explanations of the metaphysical questions. Drawing on the hyperbolic status of metaphysics in the *Mediations*, I assert that for Descartes, the metaphysical questions imply going beyond the physical things by way of exaggeration. Only by way of exaggeration it is possible to think eccentrically, to go beyond the subject of clear and distinct understanding. Descartes demonstrates that the way of exaggeration also leads, luckily, to a dead end. In the end, going too far, the hyperbolic “I” retraces its way back along the path of exaggeration. Back here and again, “I” see the world clearly and distinctly:

I should not have any further fears about the falsity of what my senses tell me every day; on the contrary, the exaggerated doubts of the last few days should be dismissed as laughable. This applies especially to the principal reason for doubt,

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<sup>116</sup> CSM II p. 15.

namely my inability to distinguish between being asleep and being awake. For I now notice that there is a vast difference between the two...<sup>117</sup>

At this point, knowing this, now with certainty, we are ready to throw ourselves into the world and proceed cheerfully *without exaggeration*.

Aside from demonstrating the existence of God and so on, the metaphysical meditation is useful as an exercise in thinking through exaggeration. Metaphysics stands and falls on the decision to proceed further and beyond *the first metaphysical exaggeration* bringing into question the certainty of the first knowledge, the basic notion, that “I am here”. From the imposition of this existential uncertainty runs the entirety of metaphysical exaggerations. The wisdom of the first philosophy is that going beyond, we have to exaggerate.

Descartes in *Meditations* attempts sincerely to save metaphysics. It would indeed be “easier” to know “the things in the world” through mere exaggeration. The things in the world demand the approach of directing the thinking toward the world, not beyond it. Thinking exaggerates, but the existence of the world is always already accessible to the clear and distinct understanding, without exaggeration. As Descartes envisions it in the last lines of the *Discourse on Method*, this is what we should “turn into a practice” “to enjoy the fruits of the earth”:

For these notions [about “physics”, i.e. *medicine*] have made me see that it is possible to attain knowledge which is very useful in life, and that unlike the speculative philosophy that is taught in the schools, it can be turned into a practice by which, knowing the power and action of fire, water, air, stars, the heavens, and all the other bodies that are around us as distinctly as we know the different trades of our craftsmen, we could put them to all the uses for which they are suited and thus make ourselves as it were the masters and possessors of nature. This is not only desirable for the discovery of a host of inventions which will lead us effortlessly to enjoy the fruits of the earth and all the commodities that can be found in it, but principally also for the preservation of health, which is without doubt the highest good and the foundation of all the other goods of this life.<sup>118</sup>

That would be something completely different from living by way of exaggeration out of mind.

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<sup>117</sup> CSM II p. 61.

<sup>118</sup> René Descartes, *A Discourse on the Method of Correctly Conducting One's Reason and Seeking Truth in the Sciences*, trans. I. Maclean, Oxford 2006, p. 51.

## Conclusion

In the Sixth Meditation, discarding the exaggerated doubts as “laughable”, Descartes vindicates the physical things as always already evident *as such*, that they exist. The knowledge of the physical things, however, cannot repose on metaphysical principles but requires empirical examination. Although the metaphysical foundation provides the certainty of knowledge it does not itself provide the foundation for scientific knowledge. Descartes establishes therefore the mathematical foundation of science. In this sense, for instance, depending on the metaphysical *or* the scientific positioning of knowledge, it is possible to view the mind and the body as “distinct” and at the same time as “joined”. Consequently, the metaphysical foundation of certainty is always already at work in the scientific knowledge. In order to proceed with the scientific examination, one does not have to demonstrate it each time. Descartes nevertheless does it to spare us the trouble but also to justify his scientific project in accordance with the academic demands for the claims of natural knowledge.

Thus, demonstrating the ever-pervading metaphysical foundation of knowledge, with God as the guarantee of certainty, and in this way proceeding toward “the search for the truth in the sciences”, Descartes renders the metaphysical reasoning arbitrary to science by effectively demonstrating that it implies a different approach: exaggeration. If the foundation of the scientific knowledge is to build upon the metaphysical foundation, it has to establish itself through exaggeration for “metaphysical reasons”. At the same time, it involves a crucial step of finally discarding exaggeration as the approach to the scientific examination itself. Science approaches physical through clear and distinct understanding. The “foundation” of science does not consist of “principles” but is constantly build and expanded by the knowledge of the physical things. It is also “unshakable”, because, in difference to metaphysical things, the physical things are always already *here*. The physical things cannot be put to doubt – not without exaggeration for “metaphysical reasons”. The doubt is not only “exaggerated” but it drives and is driven by exaggeration. Descartes demonstrates exaggeration at work in the thinking beyond the physical things or, “metaphysics”. The metaphysical implications fall away as they cannot hold against the physical things *resist* exaggeration, because we understand clearly and distinctly that they are here.

Seeing my hand, I cannot deny that I see my hand. I can exaggerate and propose that in reality, to which I have no direct access unless I establish the metaphysical

foundation for the certainty that I *really* see my *hand*, I may, perhaps, insist unconditionally, that my hand is made by glass, or there may be nothing at all since I may be dreaming that I see my hand, and so on. Descartes nevertheless proceed through exaggeration up to the end of the Sixth Meditation. In the Sixth Meditation, Descartes goes from “metaphysics” to the physics (physiology and neurology), proceeding at this point, however, without exaggeration. Here, Descartes renounces the initial and for the unfolding of the metaphysical discourse foundational exaggeration of the uncertainty regarding the fact “that I am here”. We are back at the beginning of the unfolding of exaggeration in the First Meditation. The uncertainty regarding the fact that I am here instigates exaggeration establishing the hypothesis of madness and dream leading further on to the hypothesis of the deceiving God or an “evil genius”. Ascertaining the existence of God in the Third and the Fifth Meditation, in the Sixth Meditation Descartes returns to the question of the body – without exaggeration.

# Georges Bataille: *Madame Edwarda*

## Introduction

In response to a Hegelian idea of *maintaining the work of death*, George Bataille in *Madame Edwarda*<sup>119</sup> unfolds the scenario of *excess* as the means of going beyond the philosophical explanation of God and the mystical experience. Bataille in *Madame Edwarda* wants to establish the “assenting to life up to the point of death”<sup>120</sup> of *eroticism* as the motive that both underlies and transcends the aspiration to understand and know God or the divine, however, only in order to repress the “irony” of life as the “waiting for death”.<sup>121</sup> The idea of God and the human becoming divine is always already going beyond this irony, establishing nothing beyond a caricature and the “tragic” laughter in the face, not of God or the divine, but the failure to see “*what is happening, what is*”.<sup>122</sup> Thus, *Madame Edwarda* demonstrates that the figuring of excess manages only to exaggerate the brutal facts of life without truly going beyond the limit of death. Excess not only produces a comical effect, missing the irony but renders ridiculous any attempt to go beyond the absurdities of life itself. The “anguish” of *dying* as the process of

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<sup>119</sup> First published underground 1941 under the pseudonym Pierre Angélique and 1937 as the publishing year. Bataille added the preface to the third edition 1956. In this publication, Bataille signs the preface with his own name but the story still goes under the pseudonym Pierre Angélique. Bataille’s name appears as the author of the story for the first time in the posthumous edition 1965, under the editorship of Jean-Jacques Pauvert, three years after Bataille’s death. I refer to the English translation of the preface and the story in Fred Botting and Scott Wilson, *The Bataille Reader*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1997, pp. 221-236. In the following I abbreviate the references in notes ME followed by page.

<sup>120</sup> “Eroticism, it may be said, is assenting to life up to the point of death. Strictly speaking, this is not a definition, but I think the formula gives the meaning of eroticism better than any other.” Georges Bataille, *Eroticism: Death and Sensuality*, San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1986, p. 11. Originally published as *L’Erotisme* (Paris: Les Editions Minuit, 1957).

<sup>121</sup> ME, p. 236.

<sup>122</sup> ME, p. 224. (Emphasis original.)

life “waiting for death” is itself either the realization or the repression of the “assenting to life in death” of eroticism.

The attempt to go beyond God and the human in *Madame Edwarda* takes us to the point at which we return to the question of death and incite another exaggeration of “excess” in attempt to go beyond death. This is how the life maintains the work of death, and with Nietzsche, important for Bataille, the death of God. The possibility of excess is a madman’s delirium. Opening the eyes and seeing “what is happening, what is” means also awaking to life without exaggeration. Exaggeration falls short before the simplicity of an insight that life itself *ironically* remains a “waiting for death”.

## The story

*Madame Edwarda* is the story about the events in the wake of the delirious encounter between an unnamed drunkard (I call him Angélique after the pseudonym) and a prostitute Edwarda in a brothel. The story gets an unexpected turn once “GOD” enters the stage. “GOD” is initially a figure of anguish, the obstacle to Angélique’s prospect of “pleasure” with Edwarda. The recollection of feeling “painfully forsaken, as one is in the presence of “GOD” leaves Angélique in distress. From this point on, the obscene, vulgar, and *trivial* events play out through exaggeration, leading to the subtle death of GOD and Angélique’s ecstasy into life, “waiting for death”. The figure of GOD emerges through anguish, close to death. GOD embodies the (im)possibility of eroticism: “assenting to life even in death”. Life in death is strictly speaking impossible. Of course, one may choose to assent to “madness” of unknowing and mystical ecstasy. Rather than approaching Bataille’s eroticism as a form of mysticism, and instead of viewing its (im)possibility as excess, I suggest that eroticism amounts to go beyond the madness of thinking about death and/of God.

Bataille in *Madame Edwarda* proposes, however, the option for accepting death in life. This provides a more nuanced perspective on Bataille as the thinker of excess. Bataille does not insist on excess, I claim. Excess is what he discerns operating in the “general economy” of death in life. On the one hand, death drives life to excess, through exaggeration beyond death, to go beyond oneself. On the other hand, at the further end of exaggeration, there is an affirmation of death *as*

the limit, that suspends exaggeration. It provides the basis for a return to the question of life and death without exaggeration.

## Telling things raw

The opening scene of *Madame Edwarda* announces a story of excess, setting the stage for the pornographic events around the Boulevard Poissonnière and the Rue Saint-Denis in Paris: “In my hand I held my straight-risen sex” (p. 228). Bataille paints a pathetic and straightforward portrait of a heavily intoxicated, impulsive and desperate man. Although Bataille does not name the protagonist of this story, I call him Angélique, after the pseudonym Pierre Angélique under which Bataille published *Madame Edwarda*. Bataille disrupts the story early at the beginning, inserting a parenthesis in which he reflects on his “way of telling about these things” – “raw” and without “detours.”

(The beginning is tough. My way of telling about these things is raw. I could have avoided that and still made it sound plausible. It would have seemed ‘likely’, detours would have been to my advantage. But this is how it has to be, there is no beginning by scuttling in sidewise. I continue...[sic!] and it gets tougher.)<sup>123</sup>

Bataille announces more excess to come, more exaggeration. It is possible to account for a certain procedure, if there is such in the story, that aims to subvert the reader’s expectations. The pornographic framing of the story certainly ads to this. Proceeding, we are in a brothel, the *Mirrors*, where Angélique meets a prostitute, Edwarda. Angélique’s boastful virility, displayed moment ago, however, did not seem to last long. Bataille tells what insists on being told along the lines of the impending pornographic scenario in a *raw* manner, without detour. What also goes irreversibly in the story, it seems, is the virility as the very condition of telling raw pornographic details, at least on the behalf of the male gaze. For this reason, it is perhaps not surprising that the story in the following moves away from “the wasteland where the game was played,” toward a scene of *existential anguish* emerging seemingly out of place.

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<sup>123</sup> ME, p. 228.



I became unhappy and felt painfully forsaken, as one is when in the presence of GOD. It was worse and more of a letdown than too much to drink. And right away I was filled with unbearable sadness to think that this very grandeur descending upon me was withering away the pleasure I hoped to have with Edwarda.<sup>124</sup>

Surpassing, not to say transgressing, the usual depravities of the pornographic genre, this scene *recapitulates a divine experience*: “I became unhappy and felt painfully forsaken, as one is when in the presence of GOD. It was worse and more of a letdown than too much to drink.” The decentring from the prospect of pleasure with Edwarda to the anguished recollection of being “in the presence of GOD” redirects the story away from the previous anticipation of the unfolding of events. The sudden *anguish* “in the presence of GOD” – to speculate here on delusion or a mystical experience, would simply exaggerate the fact that Angélique is *drunk*. Already here we have a formula how exaggeration of Angélique’s condition operate in the story. The fact that he “felt painfully forsaken” is “worse” “than too much to drink”, because it exaggerates the fact that he is *drunk*. Even if we are dealing here with a “presence”, it only overshoots this fact, making it “worse and more of a letdown”. But if we leave the story for a moment, it is possible to view this episode from the perspective of the decisive role of Nietzsche for Bataille. Bataille takes Nietzsche’s words “God is dead” seriously. Hence, it is possible that, for Bataille, “the presence of GOD” simply refers to the “presence” of a *dead* GOD. Here, then, the question of presence and absence does not play along with the haunting feeling of being “forsaken” that paralyzes Angélique. For Angélique, *there is only anguish* “in the presence of GOD”. The anguish cannot be objectified – perhaps, it paradoxically objectifies *nothing*. This is why GOD’s *presence* can only emerge as something rather *obscene*. Bataille, in the preface: “At the further end of this pathetic meditation – which, with a cry, undoes itself, unravelling to drown in self-repudiation, for it is unbearable to its own self – we rediscover God. That is the meaning, that is the enormity of *this insensate* – this mad – book: a book which leads God upon the stage” (p. 226). Rushing forward, the scene of Edwarda’s enunciation “I’m GOD” is impending.

To resume the story so far. The story does not say anything about the eventual original event Angélique seems to recollect “in the presence of GOD”. The anguish, which, as it does, comes out of nowhere, is made present for whatever

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<sup>124</sup> ME, p. 229.

reason, as GOD. We can only speculate if the life of Angélique in this book is one single *loop*, where the end leads to the beginning and so on, eternally recurring, perhaps, again, not without reference to Nietzsche. The *atheology* of GOD in *Madame Edwarda* is partially exposed in Bataille's *Inner Experience* (published 1943) which he wrote in the same period of time, together with *Guilty*<sup>125</sup> – the project of *La Somme athéologique* – and where he speaks of “the experience of the divine so mad...”<sup>126</sup>

Excess is pivotal in *Madame Edwarda*, as elsewhere in Bataille, not only because Bataille is a thinker of excess. Here it is evident from Bataille's emphasis on excess in the preface. Introducing the character GOD into a pornographic scenario, is excessive, or too kinky, even for the pornographic genre. It provides a haunting element, the anguish, which makes the story almost gothic. If there is any resemblance to *God*, of religion or theology, the story goes beyond it. The same goes for the initial pornographic scenario, turning gradually into a *meditation* on GOD. Along the lines of the story, one can observe a decentring from pornography to a mystical testimony of *eroticism*. At this point, it is possible to locate exaggeration of Angélique's condition to overshoot the pornographic setting, where the story begins, toward the serious considerations of the themes of sexuality, madness, and death.

## A comical episode

Distressed by the all too sudden “burst” with Edwarda, and her depreciating reaction, Angélique “became unhappy and felt painfully forsaken, as one is when in the presence of GOD.” Angélique does not dwell too long in his melancholic state but dismisses his feeling of distress as “ridiculous” (*absurde*). But Angélique does not laugh. He *passes out*. This far, Angélique's feeling of “a letdown” is indeed caused by “having too much to drink.” So much, in fact, that he finally collapses: “Everything swam out of sight. Madame Edwarda was gone, so was the room” (p. 229). Here, the (mad) experience of the divine enters the stage.

The story “gets tougher”. Bataille remains faithful to the formula he sets in the beginning: not to deviate from *telling things raw*. Bataille takes up the thread at

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<sup>125</sup> Georges Bataille, *Guilty*, transl. S. Kendall, SUNY Press, 2011.

<sup>126</sup> Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience*, transl. L. A. Boldt, SUNY Press, 1988, p. 33.

the point where Angélique perceives “this very grandeur descending upon me” as “ridiculous.” This is a turning point at which “the presence of GOD” incites the events “worse and more of a letdown than too much to drink”. Following the event of Angélique’s collapse, one could expect that the story takes a direction more “likely” to come in the wake of “the pleasure I hoped to have with Edwarda”. This seems to be ruined forever by “too much to drink.” Instead, Bataille “leads GOD upon the stage.” Angélique’s collapse, as I see it, is decisive for the next turn in the story, in which another exaggeration of Angélique’s condition takes over the story, while Angélique is *unconscious*. It is important to say, I do not intend to view *the* unconscious here, or play on Lacan’s “God is unconscious”. I do not offer a psychoanalytical interpretation of the story. I am dealing only with this particular episode in the story in which Angélique finds himself face to face with GOD while he is unconscious, that is, *passed out*. To speak about the unconscious God, or about mystical ecstasy here, would indeed amount to yet another exaggeration of Angélique’s condition. Angélique is now unconscious, most “likely” by intoxication. We are at the *scene* of impending excess. After all, when Angélique comes back to his senses, the entire episode *will be written off*.

## Unconscious in the presence of GOD

“I was pulled out of my dazed confusion by an only too human voice” – Edwarda’s voice. Now, however, “GOD” is far from forsaking him: Edwarda *is* “GOD”. The way in which she reveals this is “raw”:

And so, Madame Edwarda’s ‘old rag and ruin’ loured at me, hairy and pink, just as full of life as some loathsome squid. ‘Why,’ I stammered in a subdued tone, ‘why are you doing that?’ ‘You can see for yourself,’ she said, ‘I’m GOD.’ ‘I’m going crazy –’ ‘Oh, no you don’t, you’ve got to see, look...’<sup>127</sup>

In this sequence, Edwarda is GOD. GOD commands Angélique to look and kiss Her. An act of communion. The sexual scene here turns to anguished sensuality – *eroticism*. What was almost becoming a mystical experience, is abruptly disturbed by “another voice”, calling *up*.

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<sup>127</sup> ME, p. 229.

I heard another voice, a woman's but mannish. She was a robust and handsome person, respectably got up. 'Well now, my children,' in an easy, deep tone, 'up you go.' The second in command of the house collected my money. I rose and followed Madame Edwarda whose tranquil nakedness was already traversing the room.....the mirrors wherewith the room's walls were everywhere sheathed and the ceiling too, cast multiple reflections of an animal coupling, but, at each least movement, our bursting hearts would strain wide open to welcome 'the emptiness of heaven.'<sup>128</sup>

The call of "another voice," disrupts the unconscious events, which were initially instigated by Edwarda's voice while Angélique was unconscious. Whatever the psychology we employ here to *explain* what is happening when Angélique faints, *in the story* it is nevertheless arbitrary to the fact that the event is an instance of excess, that is, exaggeration. In order to be told, this event was pushed on-to *another scene*, in the state *beyond senses*. This is a remarkable parallel to Descartes' way of meditation by withdrawing the mind from the senses. Also, as in Descartes, the meditation is unfolding through exaggeration of Angélique's/meditator's condition – out of senses.

It is also possible to view Bataille's Madame Edwarda as a transgression of Descartes' *Meditations*.

But as for GOD? What have you got to say, Monsieur Rhetorician? And you, Monsieur Godfearer? – GOD, if He knew, would be a swine. O Thou my Lord [in my distress I call out unto my heart], O deliver me, make them blind! The story – how shall I go on with it?<sup>129</sup>

And the note (on swine) which, in a sense, is the real ending of *Madame Edwarda*:

I said 'GOD, if He knew would be a swine.' He (He would I suppose be, at that particular moment, somewhat in disorder, his peruke would sit all askew) would entirely grasp the idea ... but what would there be of the human about him? Beyond, beyond everything ... and yet farther, and even farther still ... HIMSELF, in an ecstasy, above an emptiness ... And now? I TREMBLE.<sup>130</sup>

Unlike Descartes in *Meditations*, who found God through exaggeration, Bataille seeks to go beyond God through exaggeration. Descartes' God is the guarantee of

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<sup>128</sup> ME, p. 229.

<sup>129</sup> ME, p. 236.

<sup>130</sup> ME, p. 236n 4.

knowledge. Bataille goes beyond knowledge and knowing. Going “beyond, beyond everything...”. Both in Bataille and Descartes, the knowledge of GOD is basically reduced to “existence”. Bataille’s GOD is comparable to Descartes’ God, if the idea of God in Descartes operates beyond the senses. GOD happens *only* when Angélique is beyond himself, if intoxication is the same as ecstasy. Like *Madame Edwarda*, Descartes’ *Meditations* is a story of an “inner experience”. Bataille, like Descartes, is thinking beyond through exaggeration – Bataille through excess beyond doubt, Descartes through doubt as the excess.

## The disappearance of GOD

The moment Angélique comes back to his senses, GOD disappears. We are back at the real place “where the game was played”, at the *Mirrors*. Finally, *in absence* of GOD, Angélique finds satisfaction with Edwarda. “Making that love liberated us at last. On our feet, we stood gazing soberly at each other: Madame Edwarda held me spellbound, never had I seen a prettier girl – nor one more naked.” GOD is gone, and Edwarda is as she is. This scene provides the closure of Angélique’s prospect of “pleasure” with Edwarda. The interruption instigated by the GOD event contrasts this down to earth and boring part of the story. Life is simple. Not all the time.

Soon, the *spectre* of GOD begins to haunt Angélique. Edwarda runs out in the night, taking Angélique with her. At first, she plays a dark hide and seek games with him, but suddenly turns “lunatic.” In Angélique’s eyes, this is GOD “gone crazy”. Edwarda feels better after a while. They take a taxi, but they are not moving. Instead, Edwarda seduces the driver and has sex with him in the back seat. Sitting beside them, Angélique witnesses the spectacle of Edwarda’s coming to life.

That would be all of the story. In the following, let us take the closer look at the unfolding of exaggeration in the story. We find the instances of exaggeration operating in *Madame Edwarda* in the subtext of parentheses and meditations Bataille inserts here and there in the story.

## Through a glass darkly and seeing clearly

Exaggeration provides the course of action for the restless and frivolous thinking, susceptible to seduction, but the thinking has to prevail in the last instance, more precisely, to see things clearly; “*what is happening, what is*”, as Bataille puts it in the preface. Exaggeration has the power to explode the mind but the mind has also the power to explode exaggeration. This is a matter of choice between assenting to the “madness” of exaggeration or bursting out in laughter in the face of the caricature emerging through exaggeration. The point is to look at the things through the right *optic*. This is for instance what Bataille emphasizes in one of the parentheses inserted in the text as meditations on the events in the story:

(Let me explain myself. No use laying it all up to irony when I say of Madame Edwarda that she is GOD. But GOD figured as a public whore and gone crazy – that, viewed through the optic of ‘philosophy’, makes no sense at all. I don’t mind having my sorrow derided if derided it has to be, he only will grasp me aright whose heart holds a wound that is an incurable wound, who never, for anything, in any way, would be cured of it ... And what man, if so wounded, would ever be willing to ‘die’ of any other hurt?)<sup>131</sup>

“(T)hat, viewed through the optic of ‘philosophy’, makes no sense at all.” This is precisely the point. We should not *make sense* of it. Or, as we have it in the significant parenthesis, at the end of the story, that would be “madness”:

(Continue? I meant to. But I don’t care now. I’ve lost interest. I put down what oppresses me at the moment of writing: ‘Would it all be absurd? Or might it make some kind of sense?’ I’ve made myself sick wondering about it. I awake in the morning – just the way millions do, millions of boys and girls, infants and old men, their slumbers dissipated forever ... These millions, those slumbers have no meaning. A hidden meaning? Hidden, yes, ‘obviously’! But if nothing has any meaning, there’s no point in my doing anything. I’ll beg off. I’ll use any deceitful means to get out of it, in the end I’ll have to let go and sell myself to meaninglessness, nonsense: that is man’s killer, the one who tortures and kills, not a glimmer of hope left. But if there is a meaning? Today I don’t know what it is. Tomorrow? Tomorrow, who can tell? Am I going then to find out what it is? No, I can’t conceive of any ‘meaning’ other than ‘my’ anguish, and as for that, I know all about it. And for the time being: nonsense. Monsieur Nonsense is writing and understands that he is mad. It’s atrocious. But his madness, this meaninglessness –

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<sup>131</sup> ME, p. 233.

how ‘serious’ it has become all of a sudden! – might that indeed be ‘meaningful’? [No, Hegel has nothing to do with a maniac girl’s ‘apotheosis’.] My life only has a meaning insofar as I lack one: oh, but let me be mad! Make something of all this he who is able to, understand it he who is dying, and there the living self is, knowing not why, its teeth chattering in the lashing wind: the immensity, the night engulfs it and, all on purpose, that living self is there just in order... ‘not to know’. But as for GOD? What have you got to say, Monsieur Rhetorician? And you, Monsieur Godfearer? – GOD, if He knew, would be a swine. O Thou my Lord [in my distress I call out unto my heart], O deliver me, make them blind! The story – how shall I go on with it?)<sup>132</sup>

Framing the word philosophy in single quotation marks, and critiquing its *optic*, Bataille asks philosophy to *look and see*. Rather than philosophizing *Madame Edwarda*, Bataille asks us in the Preface: “to open wide the eyes, to see forthrightly and fully *what is happening, what is*” (p. 224, emphasis original). Philosophy stares “through a glass darkly”, waiting for the illumination to come. Seeing, however, *what is happening, what is*, the dark and impenetrable surface, thinking should reflect on itself, mobilize its strength and break out from the excessive darkness of the looking glass. Look, not beyond, but to *see*. This is what GOD illuminates: “‘You can see for yourself,’ she said, ‘I’m GOD.’”

Not without irony, Bataille proposes two possible ways of thinking beyond God: either to assent to the madness of exaggeration, or to reproach the story by stripping it bare from exaggeration. Sarcastically, Bataille poses the question of GOD as a challenge to “Monsieur Rhetorician” and “Monsieur God Fearer.” Yet, of this GOD there is nothing to *know*, as for Bataille, as he puts it in the preface, God is always already a *surpassing* of God:

But what mysticism could not say (at the moment it began to pronounce its message, it entered it – entered its trance), eroticism does say: God is nothing if He is not, in every sense, the surpassing of God: in the sense of common everyday being, in the sense of dread, horror and impurity, and, finally, in the sense of nothing ... We cannot with impunity incorporate the very word into our speech which surpasses words, the word God; directly we do so, this word, surpassing itself, explodes past its defining, restrictive limits. That which this word is, stops nowhere, is checked by nothing, it is everything and, everywhere, is impossible to overtake anywhere. And he who so much as suspects this instantly falls silent. Or, hunting for a way out, and realizing that he seals himself all the more inextricably

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<sup>132</sup> ME, pp. 235-236.

into the impasse, he searches within himself for that which, capable of annihilating him, renders him similar to God, similar to nothing.<sup>133</sup>

Apparently thinking beyond God, Bataille in *Madame Edwarda* fabricates a caricature of the thinking about God. An attempt to render this caricature philosophically has to involve a thinking beyond God. Bataille's *atheology* does not attempt to think beyond but to awaken us from the slumber of thinking God beyond God, to laughter, as one laughs at the caricature in the distorting mirror. *Madame Edwarda* is the distorting mirror of the philosophical explanations of God and the ecstasies of mystical experience. In the end, it all comes down to seeing things through the right optics. This means, *with the eyes wide open*. Thus, seeing clearly and distinctly, means also seeing exaggeration at work in thinking "excess". To persist as the instrument of clear and distinct seeing, thinking has to reflect on exaggeration as its image in a distorting mirror.

## Exaggeration at work in excess

Bataille's *Madame Edwarda* is a story of excess. The intensity of excess disturbs *what is happening*, *what is*. One cannot think excess without falling in it. Bataille, in the preface:

Our minds' operations as well never reach their final culmination save in excess. What, leaving aside the representation of excess, what does truth signify if we do not see that which exceeds sight's possibilities, that which it is unbearable to see as, in ecstasy, it is unbearable to know pleasure? What, if we do not think that which exceeds thought's possibilities?... [sic!]<sup>134</sup>

Followed by the note:

I regret having to add that this definition of being and of excess cannot repose, upon a philosophical basis, excess surpassing any foundational basis: excess is no other than that whereby the being is firstly and above all else conveyed beyond all circumscribing restrictions. Being is also, doubtless, subject to certain other limits:

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<sup>133</sup> ME, p. 226.

<sup>134</sup> ME, p. 226.



were this not so, we should not be able to speak (I too speak, but as I speak, I do not forget that not only will speech escape me, but that it is escaping me now).<sup>135</sup>

The culmination of excess *affects* the “mind’s operations” and decentres the “philosophical basis” of thinking. Thinking falls prey to the intensity of “the attractive, if not the horrible, attraction, if not horror”, goes beyond toward “*more than what is*” through exaggeration. Horror, madness, laughter are the forms of “what is” that go beyond sober reasoning of philosophy, excess and exaggeration altogether. Let us take a close look at this. Bataille warns, “excess cannot repose, upon a philosophical basis”. For instance, the “anguish” “in the presence of GOD” goes beyond the initial failure, Angélique’s unhappy encounter with Edwarda. This failure could provide the “philosophical basis” for a psychologization of male desire, frustration and intoxication and so on but the excess of the apparition of GOD in the story and the anguish before this “presence” – especially if one believes that God is dead – goes beyond it. Excess is the figuring of “*more than what is*”, of going beyond the initial situation, however, through exaggeration.

At the same time, the figuring of excess is the limit of exaggeration in the face of horror, madness, and laughter. Exaggeration serves the thinking beyond and the figuring of excess provides the imaginary possibility, or the “inner experience”, of going beyond. But horror, madness, and laughter are not the figures of excess, and although exaggeration may incite them as reactions to excess, these phenomena cannot be exaggerated themselves. In this sense, excess is the limit of exaggeration, because “what is” itself *resists* exaggeration. Moreover, “what is” goes beyond the exaggeration and its figuring of excess, because “what is” escapes the thinking that seeks “more than what is” through exaggeration. Exaggeration and its figuring of excess simply overshoot “what is”, the subject at hand.

Also, *death* itself cannot be the subject of exaggeration. Despite that, or precisely for that reason, death incites the figuring of excess through exaggeration. For instance, the unfathomable GOD is “beyond all circumscribing restrictions”. “You can see for yourself,” she said, ‘I’m GOD’’. GOD goes beyond the “restrictions” imposed to thinking by the idea of (the death of) God. Bataille in *Madame Edwarda* attempts to go beyond the death of God and nevertheless bring God “on stage”. The subject of death is central to *Madame Edwarda*, as the quote

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<sup>135</sup> ME, p. 236n 1.

from Hegel at the heading of the Preface reveals: “Death is the most terrible of all things; and to maintain its works is what requires the greatest of all strength.”<sup>136</sup>

Düttmann’s formula of exaggeration can be useful here to discern Bataille’s response to this assertion of Hegel in *Madame Edwarda* – in the unfolding of thinking beyond the death of God, but also beyond GOD. Taking the “strength” in the quote to designate for Bataille the strength to remain faithful to Nietzsche’s idea of the death of God. Consequently, thinking beyond the death of God could be possible only by exaggeration. In fidelity to Hegel, however, the task is to maintain the work of death. Thus, thinking beyond God’s death has to proceed through exaggeration, which in effort to preserve the demands of both Nietzsche and Hegel, has to be an exaggeration that provides, with Düttmann, “the strength for a disclosing transgression of the limit”. Then, imposing the death of God as the limit for thinking about and beyond God, it amounts only to exaggeration to speak about God otherwise than dead, or the impossible experience of speaking one’s own death. In *Madame Edwarda* this implies that in the face of the death of God, GOD is the limit of thinking beyond (the dead) God. GOD is the figure of excess through exaggeration of the possibility of GOD despite the death of God. GOD is a *revelation* of a ridiculous caricature, as Bataille puts it at end in the concluding note of the story; a masquerade of a *man* wanting to be a stand-in-for-her-divine. Edwarda – *She* is GOD. But, He, the player, God-*impostor*: “I said ‘GOD, if He knew would be a swine.’ (He would I suppose be, at that particular moment somewhat in disorder, his peruke would sit all askew)” (p. 236). But He believe *She* is GOD. What He do not know, do not want to know, is that He *is* She – his own ridiculous creation of GOD. To reveal this as madness and to assent to it, is better than to see through one’s own delusion, that He is just a “swine”.

Finally, as exaggeration, GOD is “the strength for a disclosing transgression of the limit”. Any transgression aiming beyond this limit is possible through exaggeration and also disclosed as an exaggeration. In this way, in fidelity to Nietzsche, *Madame Edwarda* preserves the death of God as the limit of

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<sup>136</sup> This obscure quote, the source of which I was unable to trace, after trying to localise it, seems to be the case of Bataille’s use of Hegel’s signature and his travesty of the last meaning of §590 in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*: “The sole work and deed of universal freedom is therefore *death*, a death too which has no inner significance or filling, for what is negated is the empty point of the absolutely free self. It is thus the coldest and meanest of all deaths, with no more significance than cutting off a head of cabbage or swallowing a mouthful of water.” G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, transl. A. V. Miller, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977, p. 360. Bataille’s (sug)gesture of Hegel does not make sense to philosophy.

transgression. At the same time, in fidelity to Hegel, *Madame Edwarda* preserves the work of death following in the wake of the death of God. Unless one finds oneself temporarily in a rather pathetic and tragi-comical state beyond oneself, drunk and horny, GOD and the anguish in “the presence of GOD” cannot be taken seriously. The mystical ecstasy in *Madame Edwarda* does not go beyond that. This is the limit of exaggeration in *Madame Edwarda*: the limit of the figuring of excess, of GOD as the figure of excess, the excess as the limit.

Maintaining the work of death in *Madame Edwarda* is possible merely on the level of the operation of exaggeration as the strength of a disclosing – the travesty of God as the human distorted image of *what is happening, what is*. In the end, the death of God remains as the dream of the possibility beyond God and the human. Or, the possibility of living this dream is assenting to *madness*. The latter implies the maintaining of the work of death by dying oneself. Dying goes beyond the possibility of exaggeration. Excess is the limit of exaggeration truly going beyond what cannot be the subject of exaggeration. This is also the problem and the solution of the “assenting to life to the point of death” of eroticism. For instance, the temporary reviving of the dead God in the story examines the possibility of “life in death”, of which Bataille develops the reflection on eroticism in the Preface. Eroticism involves the repression in “the attitude traditionally observed towards pleasure”:

The author of this book has himself insisted upon the gravity of what he has to say. Nonetheless, it would seem advisable to underscore the seriousness of it, if only because of the widespread custom of making light of those writings that deal with the subject of sexual life. Not that I hope - or intend to try - to change anything in customs that prevail. But I invite the reader of this preface to turn his thoughts for a moment to the attitude traditionally observed towards pleasure (which, in sexual play, attains a wild intensity, an insanity) and towards pain (finally assuaged by death, of course, but which, before that, dying winds to the highest pitch).<sup>137</sup>

Eroticism in *Madame Edwarda* goes beyond mere pornography. Exaggeration drives the prospect of “pleasure with Edwarda” toward the anxiety “in the presence of GOD”. Exaggeration is obvious in Edwarda’s enunciation: “I’m GOD”. In the scene of Angélique kneeling before Edwarda, we see a caricature of a man in “distress”. This caricature is foundational for the subsequent displacements of the

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<sup>137</sup> ME, p. 223.

ordinary events in the story as the events of anguish “in the presence of GOD”. Exaggeration affects the reader, to feel like Angélique, or to laugh at his caricature – or grimace – of anguish. In the end, the little death of GOD restores GOD’s absence. GOD dies, and Edwarda is brought back to life, and she will be as she is. Bataille, in the preface:

It is not a protest against the profound general inclination that I have in mind: this inclination is another expression of the human destiny which would make man’s reproductive organs the object of laughter. But this laughter, which accentuates the pleasure-pain opposition (pain and death merit respect, whereas pleasure is derisory, deserving of contempt), also underscores their fundamental kinship. Man’s reaction has ceased to betoken respect: his laughter is the sign of aversion, of horror. Laughter is the compromise attitude man adopts when confronted by something whose appearance repels him, but which at the same time does not strike him as particularly grave. And thus, when eroticism is considered with gravity, considered tragically, this represents a complete reversal of the ordinary situation.<sup>138</sup>

In the story, the intensity of exaggeration gives way to *laughter*, which cannot be the subject to exaggeration. If anything in the story, this laughter is the most serious, as far as the laughter “is the compromise attitude man adopts when confronted by something whose appearance repels him, but which at the same time does not strike him as particularly grave”. The repression imminent in the laughter is also the reason for thinking beyond the “gravity” of eroticism. Eroticism maintains the work of death through the fact that oneself is always already dying – “this represents a complete reversal of the ordinary situation”. The idea of eroticism offers nevertheless the way to go beyond the “gravity” of that fact, figuring excess through exaggeration. We are not moving in circles but disclosing the economy of thinking beyond death as the economy of exaggeration. The repression drives the thinking beyond through exaggeration.

## The Question of Life and Death

In *Madame Edwarda*, “the presence of GOD” exaggerates the possibility of God’s presence in the wake of God’s death. Bataille’s lesson is that thinking beyond death in general amounts to the figuring of excess through the exaggeration of

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<sup>138</sup> ME, pp. 223-224.

death as the possibility of life. Exaggeration collapses eventually when the death itself resists exaggeration and poses itself as the limit of thinking. At this limit, Bataille instigates a turn to the *irony* of life. Going beyond death is a possibility of delusion supported by exaggeration. In the end, Bataille *suspends* exaggeration as the way of thinking beyond death. Instead, Bataille offers the ironic possibility of the *prolonged ending*, of “waiting for death”. But this prolonged ending is contrasted by the alternative, or eccentric ending of *Madame Edwarda*, in a footnote. The footnote goes beyond not only the ending of the story, but the story itself. It retrieves nevertheless the theme of the impossibility of maintaining the work of death. “Beyond, beyond everything... and yet farther, and even farther still... HIMSELF, in an ecstasy, above an emptiness... And now? I TREMBLE.”

One is of course tempted to assume that Bataille here opens for the possibility of *mysterium tremendum*, however, not without irony again. Going “beyond, beyond everything”, one only remains *trembling* – the same miserable state that incites the desire for ecstasy or the experience of the divine, or intoxication and erotic obsession. I am nevertheless tempted to see in this note another exaggeration at work in thinking beyond, which falls short without even taking us beyond whatsoever. Trembling, I go beyond everything only to find myself trembling. Going beyond is the possibility of the failure of exaggeration to take us there. As in Descartes, going beyond, in the end, one remains only *here*. This, however, is an important insight. There are phenomena of life that resist exaggeration at least on the material level of being and existence. We get nowhere beyond thinking through exaggeration. Maybe the immediacy of life is unbearable – *there is more than what is happening, what is*.

Thinking beyond death and accepting life as prolonged ending pertain to the task of thinking about the *general economy of death*, however, not in terms of cogitating activity that could maintain the work of death – everything dies anyway – but as an attitude toward the phenomena of life that make us alive *in the face* of death: horror, madness, laughter, nakedness. The experience of these phenomena, at least in Bataille, sometimes operate as the forms of the experience of the divine, sometimes compensate for the absence of the divine experience. Finally, for Bataille, the experience of the divine is a *torment*:

I live by tangible experience and not by logical explanation. I have of the divine an experience so mad that one would laugh at me if I speak of it. I enter into a dead end. There all possibilities are exhausted; the “possible” slips away and the impossible prevails. To face the impossible – exorbitant, indubitable – when

nothing is possible any longer is in my eyes to have an experience of the divine; it is analogous to a torment.<sup>139</sup>

The torment is the “mad” experience of the absence of God and the arising of whatever figure of excess enouncing “I’m GOD” – the dead end of the impossible. *Madame Edwarda* is also the story of escaping the torment, retreating from the impossible by going through it, beyond it, through exaggeration. For Bataille, this means going beyond both the presence of God and the death of God. Going beyond means taking the presence and absence of God to the extreme through exaggeration, only to render, at the peak of exaggeration, “an experience of the divine” as a “tangible experience” of *laughter* and *madness* that escapes the “logical explanation”. It nevertheless reveals the resistance of life to the experiences of exaggeration, and the thinking beyond as the exhaustion of exaggeration – beyond the impossible.

## Conclusion

In Bataille’s *Madame Edwarda*, exaggeration unfolds in the testimonies of a drunken, pathetic and delirious mind. Exaggeration folds, in the meditations in the subtext. In the folding, exaggeration is finally dismissed as an explanation of what is happening in the story. The limits of the story are defined by the lines following the alternate movements of the unfolding and folding of exaggeration. The unfolding and folding of exaggeration play trial and error in the attempt to escape the experience of limit. Exaggeration is unfolding and folding to a point at which exaggeration reaches the limit of the possible. The choice, at this limit, is to assent to the impossible or not. Assenting to the Impossible, beyond God and the human, is an experience at the price of assenting to *madness*. Philosophy cannot think beyond without falling in exaggeration. Philosophical attitude to exaggeration should involve the recognition of the beyond as the source of its idea, and its remedy.

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<sup>139</sup> Bataille, *Inner Experience*, p. 33.



# Antonin Artaud: *To have Done with the Judgement of God*

## Introduction

In Artaud's radio-play *To Have Done with the Judgement of God*<sup>140</sup> exaggeration drives the cruel expositions of the confinement of human life to the restrictions of language and thinking. Artaud condemns the artificiality of principles that try to control the vitality of life through ideological, scientific, religious and philosophical manipulation and deformation. The vitality of life consists in its capacity to expand beyond the language and thinking that define it. Life resists exaggeration because exaggeration is the failed strategy of language and thinking to establish something larger and crueller than life itself. Artaud demonstrates this in the identification between suffering and cruelty as the raw forces of life that triumph over any judgement. As the raw forces of life, suffering and cruelty are beyond judgement. Therefore, suffering and cruelty *affect* us. Positioning himself in this force field and using its power, Artaud renounce "the judgement of god"; exposing the idea of god as the failure of thinking to establish for itself a position beyond life, from which it attempts to delimit life from the above. Without success, thinking collapses in exaggeration. Artaud drives his own thinking into this collapse through exaggeration. But, in the end, Artaud allows life to come forth and through the force of its own cruelty demolish the thinking beyond and its exaggerations. Thus, Artaud demonstrates that life is not a question but the question of proper action.

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<sup>140</sup> Antonin Artaud, *Antonin Artaud: Selected Writings*, ed. Susan Sontag, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1988, pp. 555-575. For original text in French and the related material see Antonin Artaud, *Oeuvres Complètes*, Tome XIII, Éditions Gallimard, 1974. I refer to the English translation in Sontag's collection.



This intensity plays out in Artaud's exaggeration that poses the "body without organs" as the solution to suffering – by instigating yet another act of cruelty. The lesson: although cruelty and suffering cannot be exaggerated, the body subjected to the pressure from cruelty and suffering is susceptible to exaggeration, for instance in the attempt to free the body from cruelty and suffering, by making it into a "body without organs". The excess of this exaggeration dissipates if we do not accept it as a solution but as a dead end of any treatment of suffering that propose as the solution the annihilation of the subject of suffering. There is also an exaggeration of a moral dilemma at play here. Who is to come first? The one who puts oneself in charge of disorganization, or the one who lie down on the autopsy table for the last time? The solution is the dissolution of the non-solution. It takes us back to the question of suffering, to which we will always return from the beyond where we try to escape it in vain, because, suffering resists exaggeration.

## The play

Heading the script of his radio-play, *To Have Done with the Judgement of God*, Antonin Artaud inscribes an instruction within the arrangement of apparently nonsensical syllables. The instruction: "Everything must be arranged to a hair in a fulminating order." The syllables: "kré/puc te/kré/puk te/pek/li le/kré/pek ti le/e/kruk/pte" – usually populate Artaud's later writings, and there are others in the script of the play (p. 555). In the original audio recording from November 1947, we can hear their vocalization, by Artaud and his collaborators.<sup>141</sup> The play never had the premiere on Radio France as scheduled on January 2, 1948. Artaud died two months later. "Everything must be arranged to a hair in a fulminating order." A *violent condemnation* is an exaggerated act; the action toward the object of its frenzied fury. *To Have Done with the Judgement of God* acts through exaggeration, on and beyond metaphysics, science, religion, God, and the human. The action begins by introducing a discourse on two Americas.

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<sup>141</sup> <https://ubu.com/sound/artaud.html>

## The Americas

Artaud spent the second half of his life, between 1938 and 1948 in psychiatric hospitals, in Rodez and at Ivry-sur-Seine. The beginning “I learned yesterday...” is an ironic remark on the inexhaustible possibilities to learn something new each day about the world directly from the insightful richness of the mind of the “mad”. Artaud, however, is not born yesterday. In a parenthesis, “(I must be behind the times, or perhaps it’s only a false rumor, one of those pieces of spiteful gossip that are circulated between sink and latrine at the hour when meals that have been ingurgitated one more time are thrown in the slop buckets)” (p.555). Artaud inserts a description of the place where all this plays out, in the psychiatric hospital. At the same time, Artaud provides a concise analysis of the condition of everyday routines in the hospital as a micro level of the economy of waste that mirrors the macro level of waste in the great madhouse of society, in which the false rumors and gossips that feed everyday waste of time in the name of entertainment are even more exaggerated than the most delusional world views of the “insane”.

“I learned yesterday one of the most sensational of those official practices of American public schools which no doubt account for the fact that this country believes itself to be in the vanguard of progress” (p. 555). In this introductory piece of the play Artaud provides a critical analysis of the socio-bio-political confusion and indoctrination that leads the world today with the America heading first. “It seems that, among the examinations or tests required of a child entering public school for the first time, there is the so-called seminal fluid or sperm test, which consists of asking this newly entering child for a small amount of his sperm so it can be placed in a jar and kept ready for any attempts at artificial insemination that might later take place” (p. 555). Dealing further with the “warlike” character of American people and the strategies of American war economy, Artaud throws some sarcastic remarks: “All this is very well, but” (557). Artaud turns against this state of things in the world and declares his admiration for another people of another America: “I prefer the people who eat off the bare earth the delirium from which they were born. I mean the Tarahumara eating Peyote off the ground while they are born, and who kill the sun to establish the kingdom of black night, and who smash the cross so that the spaces of spaces can never again meet and cross” (p. 557). Artaud is not simply the maddest madman proposing yet another incredible America. Artaud lived with Tarahumara people in Mexico, between 1936 and 1937. “And so, you are going to hear the dance of *TUTUGUR*” (p. 557).

## The Rite

The second act. The stage is set for 'TUTUGURI: The Rite of the Black Sun', a piece that inaugurates the victory of life over the sun. "Now, the essence of the Rite is precisely /The Abolition of the Cross /When they have stopped turning they uproot the crosses of earth and the naked man on the horse holds up an enormous horseshoe which he has dipped in a gash of his blood" (p. 559). Inaugurating the ultimate expression of Life, the action moves toward *the pursuit of fecality*.

## The Pursuit of Fecality

There where it smells of shit it smells of being. Man could just as well not have shat, not have opened the anal pouch, but he chose to shit as he would have chosen to live instead of consenting to live dead.<sup>142</sup>

From the life's victory over the sun, Artaud throws us back to the question of life under the sun. What we learn is that excretion sustains life. The excrement is the foundation of being. A line of exaggeration takes on. As the rite establishes it, the life is the mystery of life from the beginning. The mystical beauty and strength of a life that re-enacts itself through a rite contrasts to a life which is the subject of language unfolding the mythical stories about its origin, and thinking unfolding the metaphysical speculations that take these stories seriously. The story of the origin of excretion and its decisive relation to the question of life and death, is the exaggeration of language and thinking as the orifices excreting the stories and the concepts of life.

Because in order not to make caca, he would have had to consent not to be, but he could not make up his mind to lose being, that is, to die alive. There is in being something particularly tempting for man and this something is none other than CACA. (*Roaring here.*)<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Artaud, p. 559.

<sup>143</sup> Artaud, p. 560.

Exposing the origin and the conditions of being, Artaud establishes a line of exaggeration that diverts the current ontological preconceptions toward redefining the task of ontology as the “pursuit of fecality”. What is tempting is to speak and think about “being” beyond life. The object of temptation is “being”, the product of the excretion of language and thinking.

To exist one need only let oneself be, but to live, one must be someone, to be someone, one must have a BONE, not be afraid to show the bone, and to lose the meat in the process.<sup>144</sup>

Fulminating, Artaud establishes a fundamental difference between the being of excretion and the life of devouring meat. The bone is the essence of life. The excrement is a condition of being. The exaggeration here establishes the difference between the excremental being of the organs and the physical life of the body of bones and meat. The new Artaudian constellation, the distinction between being and life begs for the explanation of an event that subjected the body to the organs. Of, course, this has to be a mythical explanation. Artaud offers an account alluding to prehistoric times that provide the reasons for life’s current confinement in the excremental economy of being.

Man has always preferred meat to the earth of bones. Because there was only earth and wood of bone, and he had to earn his meat, there was only iron and fire and no shit, and man was afraid of losing shit or rather he desired shit and, for this, sacrificed blood. In order to have shit, that is, meat, where there was only blood and a junkyard of bones and where there was no being to win but where there was only life to lose/ o reche modo to edire di za tau dari do padera coco/ At this point, man withdrew and fled. Then the animals ate him. It was not a rape, he lent himself to the obscene meal. He relished it, he learned himself to act like an animal and to eat rat daintily. And where does this foul debasement come from? The fact that the world is not yet formed, or that man has only a small idea of the world and wants to hold on to it forever? This comes from the fact that man, one fine day, *stopped* the idea of the world. Two paths were open to him: that of the infinite without, that of the infinitesimal within. And he chose the infinitesimal within. Where one need only squeeze the spleen, the tongue, the anus or the glans.<sup>145</sup>

The life that once was monolithically all bone, iron and fire get caught in the desire for meat, which is also the desire to reproduce, more meat. The life is

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<sup>144</sup> Artaud, p. 560.

<sup>145</sup> Artaud, pp. 560-561.

thrown out in the excremental being that rejects it. Eating and excretion – mating and delivery of the fresh meat, establishes the human as a link in the food chain; charging and discharging, consuming, like any other *erotic animal*. The life in the world inaugurated in the rite of ‘Tutuguri’ stops, due to “the fact that man, one fine day, *stopped* the idea of the world.” The thinking then turned to the idea of god, to create the world of being beyond the world.

And god, god himself squeezed the movement. Is God a being? If he is one, he is shit. If he is not one, he does not exist. But he does not exist, except as the void that approaches with all its forms whose most perfect image is the advance of an incalculable group of crab lice.<sup>146</sup>

By way of exaggeration, Artaud reduces ontology to psychiatry. The idea of God’s existence is a paranoid delusion supported by a delirious conception of “a void that approaches”; of being which is nothing and nowhere, the lifeless world. Artaud offers here an intimidating image of God’s omnipresence as a (de)void-being. The delirious idea of God’s existence exaggerates the rational explanation of God’s existence, reducing it to a task of guarding against the opposite opinions, which, in turn guard against its own opposite.

As “to exist one need only let oneself be” exaggerates the concept of existence as the empty compensation for the failure to rely on being since the being itself is nothing beyond the intellectual production of its concept; “one need only to squeeze the spleen, the tongue, the anus or the glans.” “And god, god himself squeezed the movement.” Along the line of exaggeration, everything that exists, is *out there*. Everything is essentially *squeezed out*.

Artaud will soon submit the excretion of being to *execration* “in a fulminating order.”

‘You are mad Mr. Artaud, what about the mass?’/ I deny baptism and the mass. There is no human act, on the internal erotic level, more pernicious than the descent of the so-called Jesus-christ onto the altars./ No one will believe me and I can see the public shrugging its shoulders but the so-called christ is none other than he who in the presence of the crab louse god consented to live without a body, while an army of men descended from a cross, to which god thought he had long since nailed them, has revolted, and, armed with steel, with blood, with fire, and

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<sup>146</sup> Artaud, pp. 561-562.

with bones, advances, reviling the Invisible to have done with GOD'S JUDGMENT'.<sup>147</sup>

The abolishment of the primordial cross in 'Tutuguri', provides a course of action toward the abolishment of the cross of "christ" altogether with "baptism and the mass." The insistence on a fundamental transformation as an act of cruelty persists. Like killing the sun in the Rite, the insistence on transformation demands an act of cruelty: "armed with steel, with blood, with fire, and with bones... to have done with GOD'S JUDGMENT."

To sum up the movement of exaggeration so far. 'The Rite of Tutuguri' aims for an order larger than life, which always already exceeds the human excremental being. The body of this life is all bones, iron and fire. As far the transformation of life in 'Tutuguri' cannot be sustained without basically providing a new cosmic order, Artaud turns to the question of the present conditions of human life, which he finds bound to excremental being. In order to release the life from these bounds, yet without releasing another movement contributing to further excretion of being, one has *to have done with the judgement of God*. Following the closure in 'Tutuguri', whatever the significance of the act or event of *having done with the judgement of God*, Artaud arrives at another closure.

Enclosed in the two closures, remains *the insistence on a radical transformation of human life*. In the first instance, the Rite provides a model, however, not without exaggeration of the current excremental state of life. Hence, in the second instance, by way of exaggeration, Artaud instigates another opening in 'The Pursuit of Fecality' and renders the excrement, "CACA", as fundamentally "tempting" condition of the current order of being. Along the line of exaggeration, Artaud urges scatology in the place of ontology, imposing in 'The Pursuit of Fecality' the excrement to consideration of conditions and obstacles to the transformation of human life and revitalisation of its primordial force in Tutuguri. Thus, up to now, a radical transformation of human life is rendered possible by taking a course of action along the line of exaggeration, toward "the abolishment of the cross" and "to have done with God's judgement." Yet, as this is what has to be done, in the next part of the play, 'The Question Arises...': *how?*

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<sup>147</sup> Artaud, p. 562.

## The Question Arises

What makes it serious is that we know that after the order of this world there is another. What is it like? We do not know. The number and order of possible suppositions in this realm is precisely infinity! And what is infinity? That is precisely what we do not know! /It is a word that we use to indicate *the opening* of our consciousness toward possibility beyond measure, tireless and beyond measure. /And precisely what is consciousness? That is precisely what we do not know. It is nothingness. A nothingness that we use to indicate when we do not know something from what side we do not know it and so we say consciousness, from the side of consciousness, but there are a hundred thousand other sides. /Well? /It seems that consciousness in us is linked to sexual desire and to hunger; but it could just as well not be linked to them. One says, one can say, there are those who say that consciousness is an appetite, the appetite for living; and immediately alongside the appetite for living, it is the appetite for food that comes immediately to mind; as if there were not people who eat without any sort of appetite; and who are hungry. For this too exists, to be hungry without appetite; well!<sup>148</sup>

It is an exaggeration to say: “What makes it serious is that we know that after the order of this world there is another.” *The questions arise*, and rendering the questions concerning this exaggeration backwards, we may ask: Is there another world after the order of this world? Do we know this and how do we know it? Is this serious at all? These questions are not worthy of speculation, as they are, also redundant for Artaud, as I will show in the following. In this part of the play Artaud rather attempts to denounce any philosophical dwelling on the previous parts of the play. Artaud here instigates what Düttmann designates as a *gesture of thinking that provokes philosophy*. “What makes it serious,” however, is that any such philosophical dwelling would catch nothing but a “fart” of Artaud’s *play*, a sarcastic play along the line of exaggeration, the temptation of “CACA.” Examining Artaud’s *To Have Done with the Judgement of God* philosophically amounts thus to yet another pile of shit the philosophers say. For in the first sentence of the passage quoted above, Artaud provides a line of reading it *backwards*. I render this passage as a turning point, a significant step toward a *suspension of the line of exaggeration* hitherto operating in the play.

Hence, reading this passage backwards, we find the first instance of a move toward the suspension of exaggeration at the end of the passage: “to be hungry without appetite.” This is what occurs, as Artaud puts it in the beginning of the

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<sup>148</sup> Artaud, pp. 562-564.

play, “when meals that have been ingurgitated one more time are thrown in the slop buckets.” Notwithstanding this connection, it refers to the question of appetite in the discourse on fecality. In order to live, you have to eat, and you eat because you are hungry. Then, you defecate. It a conscious choice to eat *in order to live*, with or without appetite – because you are hungry. Being hungry is “linked to consciousness,” and “to sexual desire” – “but it could just as well not be linked to them.” “Well” because, “there are a hundred thousand other sides of consciousness” “to indicate when we do not know something from what side we do not know.” What we do not know is a “nothingness” of consciousness. There is only consciousness, of which we know nothing, but that it offers a “possibility beyond measure, tireless and beyond measure” indicating “*the opening*,” toward “infinity” – not just the opening of the “anal pouch.” Infinity, as “the number and order of possible suppositions” “we do not know” and what it is like, a possibility “that after the order of this world there is another.” “What makes it serious, is that we know” *of this possibility*.

At this turning point, turning the previous passage in reverse, we may come back to the first line with another insight, namely that what up to now Artaud had exposed along the line of exaggeration was mere fact that he is *alive*, despite the fact that he had lived for many years “between sink and latrine” in the asylum. In order to stay alive, “he chose to shit as he would have chosen to live instead of consenting to live dead.” And he was “hungry without appetite.” Conscious of the fact, however, that he is alive, Artaud sees “*the opening*” toward a possibility “that after the order of this world there is another,” without exaggeration – a society in which he might *live* among friends.

Well? /Well the space of possibility was given to me one day like a loud fart that I will make; but neither of space, nor possibility, did I know precisely what it was, and I did not feel the need to think about it, they were words invented to define things that existed or did not exist in the face of the pressing urgency of a need: the need to abolish the idea, the idea and its myth, and to enthrone in its place the thundering manifestation of this explosive necessity: to dilate the body of my internal night, the internal nothingness of myself which is night, nothingness, thoughtlessness, but which is explosive affirmation that there is something to make room for: my body.<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> Artaud, p. 564-565.



Artaud announces, “a loud fart that I will make.” This is not only an affirmation of his body in “the space of possibility” but also an act of denunciation of the “words invented to define things that existed or did not exist in the face of the pressing urgency of a need... to abolish the idea... and its myth”; like the other’s idea and the myth Artaud puts at play here: that of the paranoiac and the psychiatrist, of America and of opening “the body of my internal night, the internal nothingness of myself which is night, nothingness, thoughtlessness.” In Artaud’s radio-play, “the body of my internal night” provides the opening for *the return of Artaud le Mômo*, for Artaud who takes place, Artaud who is not just put in place in the asylum but a thundering Artaud out of place (out of asylum). Artaud le Mômo is not “the idea and its myth” of an *insane* Artaud. Artaud le Mômo touches *our own* “internal night... nothingness, thoughtlessness,” by taking our mind astray along the line of exaggeration.

Now that we have adjusted our minds along the line of exaggeration, Artaud, for his part, is on the way to *explode* it, “like a loud fart.” This is what Artaud le Mômo does in the end, playing “feigned or sarcastic awkwardness” as Derrida puts it.<sup>150</sup> Mômo is the role Artaud plays in *To Have Done with the Judgement of God* along the line of exaggeration. At this point of raising questions, however, Artaud takes the opportunity to speak for himself, “of my bodily suffering.”

And truly, must it be reduced to this stinking gas, my body? To say that I have a body because I have a stinking gas that forms inside me? /I do not know but I do know that space, time, dimension, becoming, future, destiny, being, non-being, self, non-self, are nothing to me; but there is a thing which is something, only one thing which is something, and which I feel because it wants TO GET OUT: the presence of my bodily suffering, the menacing, never tiring presence of my body; however hard people press me with questions and however vigorously I deny all questions, there is a point at which I find myself compelled to say no,/ *NO* then to negation; and this point comes when they press me, when they pressure me and when they handle me until the exit from me of nourishment, of my nourishment and its milk, and what remains? That I am suffocated; and I do not know if it is an action but in pressing me with questions this way until the absence and nothingness of the question they pressed me until the idea of body and the idea of being a body was suffocated in me, and it was then that I felt the obscene and that I farted from folly and from excess and from revolt at my suffocation. Because they

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<sup>150</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Artaud the Moma*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2018, p. 47. Also, on Derrida’s discussion of Artaud’s designation as Mômo in reference to a Greek god of sarcasm see p. 27.

were pressing me to my body and to the very body and it was then that I exploded everything, because my body can never be touched.<sup>151</sup>

Artaud at this point makes clear that the arrangement of the play “in a fulminating order” in the first place exposes his “suffering.” Although the *psychiatric treatment* was able to “abolish the idea and its myth”, it could not abolish the fact that Artaud is alive, that his body “can never be touched.” “I farted from folly and from excess and from revolt at my suffocation,” *exploding* the exaggerations of the abolishment of “the cross” and “God’s judgement” – “the idea and its myth” – in order to return to *my body of suffering*, “to make room for: my body.”

The remaining *body of suffering* cannot be reduced to a “stinking gas.” Although this body “farts” it does so in capacity of its integrity as a body that cannot be touched by any exaggeration imposed upon it to obscure its suffering – the body of a madman, the body of a sick mind: “however hard people press me with questions and however vigorously I deny all questions, there is a point at which I find myself compelled to say no.”

The suffering of “my body” explodes every exaggeration. He who speaks in tongues “o reche modo to edire di za tau dari do padera coco,” and suggests that God’s being is “shit,” he who denies “baptism and the mass,” does so in order to impose the cruelty of his suffering on the audience by way of exaggeration. He does so by arranging everything “to a hair in a fulminating order” that drives exaggeration to extremity, to a closure that cannot be accepted as a solution to a problem raised in the discourse along the line of exaggeration – unless one accepts madness as the explanation of bodily suffering without accounting the external pressure as the cause of its suffering.

The exaggeration is indeed *at play*, but only to be exploded by the integrity of the body of suffering. This *body that cannot be touched* draws the limit of what can be exceeded without exaggeration, the limit that explodes exaggeration. In ‘Conclusion’, the last part of the play, Artaud will, however, instigate such an exaggeration, of a “body without organs.” Prior to this, in ‘Conclusion’ however, Artaud will denounce previous exaggerations, leaving us to decision whether we assent to further mutilation of the body of suffering or raise questions about it, without exaggeration. To this extent, Artaud employs exaggeration methodically, as a course of action toward certain goal – denouncing exaggeration, in order to turn the attention to the body that resists exaggeration. He nevertheless instigates

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<sup>151</sup> Artaud, pp. 566-568.

exaggeration to redirect the attention from a body of a madman to the other's madness suffocating it. To that extent, the play ends here. The rest is 'Conclusion.'

## Purpose of the broadcast

- And what was the purpose of this broadcast, Mr. Artaud? /- Primarily to denounce certain social obscenities officially sanctioned and acknowledged: /First: this emission of infantile sperm donated by children for the artificial insemination of fetuses yet to be born and which will be born in a century or more. /Second: To denounce, in this same American people who occupy the whole surface of the former Indian continent, a rebirth of that warlike imperialism of early America that caused the pre-Columbian Indian tribes to be degraded by the aforesaid people. /Third: - You are saying some very bizarre things, Mr. Artaud. /Fourth: - Yes, I am saying something bizarre, that contrary to everything we have been led to believe, the pre-Columbian Indians were a strangely civilized people and that in fact they knew a form of civilization based exclusively on the principle of cruelty. /Fifth: - And do you know precisely what is meant by cruelty? /Sixth: - Offhand, no, I don't. /Seventh: - Cruelty means eradicating by means of blood and until blood flows, god, the bestial accident of unconscious human animality, wherever one can find it. /Eighth: Man, when he is not restrained, is an erotic animal, he has in him an inspired shudder, a kind of pulsation that produces animals without number which are the form that the ancient tribes of the earth universally attributed to god. This created what is called a spirit. Well, this spirit originating with the American Indians is reappearing all over the world today under scientific poses which merely accentuate its morbid infectious power, the marked condition of vice, but a vice that pullulates with diseases, because, laugh if you like, what has been called microbes is god, and do you know what the Americans and the Russians use to make their atoms? They make them with the microbes of god.<sup>152</sup>

In 'Conclusion,' Artaud persists in exaggeration and at the same time denounces it. There is no contradiction here, because Artaud, at this point, *having raised the question* previously, had already made clear the goal of this broadcast: *to make room for my body*, the return of Artaud le Momo, the trickster. The 'Conclusion' Artaud provides here is for those still in the mode of 'The Pursuit of Fecality.' There is nothing behind the mask of exaggeration. Yet, the mind's lack of resistance to exaggeration, at the point at which it insists on meaning of the enormity it cannot

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<sup>152</sup> Artaud, pp. 568-569.

grasp, makes it ready to consider “the microbes of god” as a *plausible* explanation to “atoms.” “Not just anyone goes mad,” as Lacan puns it, but considering plausibility of this statement *or denouncing it* in both cases means assenting to the madness of exaggeration, contrary to the place of “microbes”, “atoms” and “god” in the signifying chain. Artaud precisely shakes this order, in order to instigate a gesture of plausibility, not because he thinks this way, but *to make us think* along the line of exaggeration, to render plausible anything that makes sense, as far the mind is persuaded to make up something out of nothing.

Herein lies the power of exaggeration, and Artaud knows how to use it *methodically* – to render thinking as an activity that always already exceeds the situation of the body; to turn the thinking back to the body from which it tries to escape the suffering, while the mind tries to make sense of it. There is no substantial dualism here, between the mind and the body. At stake in Artaud’s play is nevertheless the body of suffering that tries to reach the audience by way of exaggeration, however, asking for a judgement, which is not a *judgement of God*, but a judgement that dares to let the suffering in, its “night, nothingness, thoughtlessness.” At this point: “Cruelty means eradicating by means of blood and until blood flows, god, the bestial accident of unconscious human animality, wherever one can find it.” This means, *eradicating god as far it instigates a discourse* of “human animality.” “Man, when he is not restrained, is an erotic animal, he has in him an inspired shudder, a kind of pulsation that produces animals without number which are the form that the ancient tribes of the earth universally attributed to god.” Anyone can say this, and nobody would take it seriously, unless you are inclined to believe that Artaud is mad and that there is something in his madness that resists exaggeration. Artaud knows this, that exaggeration is close to madness; to model madness on exaggeration and the other way around. You are not mad as far you are playing along the line of exaggeration, as far your aim is to *denounce* exaggeration. Then, there is a method to your madness, even if your madness is the other’s temptation to eradicate *your night* by naming it madness and not exaggeration. “- You are raving, Mr. Artaud. You are mad. /- I am not raving. I am not mad. I tell you that they have reinvented microbes in order to impose a new idea of god” (p. 569).

Artaud proceeds along the line of exaggeration because what is at play in the ‘Conclusion’ is not the methodical use of exaggeration but the exaggeration as the force of manic insistence – “I am not mad.” Along the line of exaggeration, you will find the reason for everything. Here, it is not a question whether Artaud was

mad or not, but the way in which he allows madness to signify a resistance to exaggeration in the attempt to explain the exaggeration, render it plausible, as in “a new idea of god.” Artaud, hence, provides a grimace of madness to instigate a discourse of exaggeration without method.

Remember that Artaud’s *method of exaggeration* was to lead the thought into extremity in order to impose the cruelty of his bodily suffering on you, the audience, to take it with loathing or compassion. In the next step, Artaud unveiled his *bodily suffering* as the reason for exaggeration, not his mind, which was the target of the treatment. He was, and maybe remained *mad*, but because of the *pressure on his body* – fulminating, roaring.

The exaggeration of everything in Artaud’s radio-play – being, life and God throughout the registers of myth and fecality – then provided a way to make his suffering at least *audible*. Making it palpable would be too cruel. It would perhaps require of the audience to live and experience the life in the asylum, and that would have been the “play.” Further, in his radio-play, Artaud pointed at his body that cannot be touched by exaggeration. Artaud’s body takes place in suffering that cannot become the subject of exaggeration but may become a body that farts – exploding the exaggeration *in order to make room for my body*.

Now, in the ‘Conclusion’ this body *speaks exaggeration*, in order to madden the audience, to demonstrate the fragility of the sound mind under the pressure of exaggeration.

They have found a new way to bring out god and to capture him in his microbic noxiousness. This is to nail him though the heart, in the place where men love him best, under the guise of unhealthy sexuality, in that sinister appearance of morbid cruelty that he adopts whenever he is pleased to tetanize and madden humanity as he is doing now. He utilizes the spirit of purity and of a consciousness that has remained candid like mine to asphyxiate it with all the false appearances that he spreads universally through space and this is why Artaud le Mômo can be taken for a person suffering from hallucinations. /-What do you mean, Mr. Artaud? /-I mean that I have found the way to put an end to this ape once and for all and that although nobody believes in god any more everybody believes more and more in man. So, it is man whom we must now make up our minds to emasculate. /-How’s that? /How’s that? No matter how one takes you, you are mad, ready for the straitjacket.<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> Artaud, pp. 569-570.

Persuasion, insistence – *manic insistence* – brings us to the point at which exaggeration assents to madness in order to bring the message out. Here, it is crucial to render madness at stake as a force of manic insistence, persisting along the line of exaggeration, as opposite to the previous methodical use of exaggeration.

- By placing him again, for the last time, on the autopsy table to remake his anatomy. I say, to remake his anatomy. Man is sick because he is badly constructed. /We must make up our minds to strip him bare in order to scrape off that animalcule that itches him mortally, god, and with god his organs. For you can tie me up if you wish, but there is nothing more useless than an organ. /When you will have made him a body without organs, then you will have delivered him from all his automatic reactions and restored him to his true freedom. Then you will teach him again to dance wrong side out as in the frenzy of dance halls and this wrong side out will be his real place.<sup>154</sup>

Nothing here offers a solution, because “we must make up our minds” – “to strip him bare in order to scrape off that animalcule that itches him mortally, god, and with god his organs. For you can tie me up if you wish, but there is nothing more useless than an organ.” *You can tie me up if you wish*, this is what *the other* demands as a solution – “to scrape off that animalcule that itches him mortally, god, and with god his organs.” Cruelty here is not anymore Artaud’s cruelty, imposing his bodily suffering on the audience, just in case we do not know the feeling of suffocation upon the other’s pressure on my body. The cruelty here is precisely the point of other’s cruelty to which we ought to say *NO*: “my body can never be touched.”

“When you will have made him a body without organs...” everything is lost: “this wrong side out will be his real place.” The exaggeration here is wild and overwhelming. The point is to withdraw the mind from considering the exaggerated and hence absurd solution Artaud speaks of here, however, by lending his voice to voice the other: “I say, to remake his anatomy. Man is sick because he is badly constructed.”

Now, to the point. If there is any lesson the movement of exaggeration teaches us in Artaud’s play, if not Artaud himself, it is to resist this exaggeration: “then you will have delivered him from all his automatic reactions and restored him to his true freedom.” Is this not what Artaud was subjected to himself? Having been

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<sup>154</sup> Artaud, pp. 570-571.

delivered from the automatic reactions – to say *NO*. The *ideology* of “man is sick because he is badly constructed.”

“For you can tie me up if you wish, but there is nothing more useless than an organ.” Artaud speaks the other’s discourse, however, not without the *awkward sarcasm* of Artaud le Môme. Respond with a fart, explode it. There is no such living thing as the “body without organs.” The body without organs is itself the excremental rest of the excess of exaggeration. Again, *the question arises*: Can you assent to such a cruelty without exaggeration?

## Thinking through cruelty and exaggeration

Unfolding a discourse on being through scatological exaggeration, Artaud insists on a fundamental repression of the ontological status of the excrement. In the context of Artaud’s play, the excrement pertains to the metaphysical outlook beyond being. Artaud’s metaphysics is always already a discourse of exaggeration. The excrement evolves from the status of a primal organic object to a transcendent object. The human excrement is the only organic object which is entirely useless, valueless, and necessarily, disposable. We simply have no idea what to *do* with it but to discard it. It comes from us, it is produced in us, and yet, we have no control of the organic processes of its production. We can control the urge for its evacuation, only to a certain degree. We cannot keep it, and once we lose it, we do not care for its whereabouts. If it leaves a trace, we are keen to erase it rather immediately. In this sense, the excrement is beyond being already at the moment of its appearance in the world.

Artaud insists, however, not without exaggeration, that the organs are parasitic. This insistence is crucial for Artaud’s exaggeration, of a radical internal dualism between the body and its organs. According to Artaud’s scheme, the automatic functions and processes of the organism do not belong to the body. The organs intrude and invade the body. The parasitic force of this conquest of the body and its subjection to organization is God. The parasitic and organic alterity is beyond being and its detachment from being subjects the body to cruelty. On the basis of this, we can speak of an ontology of cruelty. Here, Artaud’s lesson is precisely to resist the temptation to philosophize cruelty and to turn our attention to cruelty as the powerful reminder such philosophizing has for the unfolding of the excremental ideas *about* God and the human. According to the etymological

dictionary, cruelty is “the indifference to, or pleasure taken in, the distress or suffering of any sentient being” (etymonline.com). The rules of the propriety of language forbids the speech and thus, also the thinking, to speak and think God otherwise than *beyond being*. Artaud speaks of God also beyond being, but from the perspective of cruelty. Artaud locates the beyond in the physical experience of cruelty of the other’s violent intrusion.

Exaggeration brings forth the *improper* speech, which activates the *resistance* of the proper speech that safeguards the propriety of *silence*. The silence suppresses a voice that resides in it. Artaud stirs the silence and discloses this voice with a *scream*. The scream is the first sound of this voice, which breaks the silence and articulates a speech: “o reche modo to edire/di za/tau dari/do padera coco.” This voice penetrates the language. It screams from the depths of silence, that of which the speaking *must* remain silent. Exceeding the silence of the proper speech, it screams the unspeakable. Therefore, everything it articulates is improper. Its obscenities are repelling and it does not participate in the making of sense. Rather, it articulates an explosion to free oneself from the other’s grip “with a loud fart”.

## Trigger warning

To caution a “trigger warning” before approaching Antonin Artaud’s *To Have Done with the Judgement of God*, is not to engage in it at all and miss the point. Provocation is not the goal of the blasphemy, the audacity, the madness, the obscenity, the cruelty of Artaud’s action, so one should not be upset – for that reason. Artaud’s exaggeration *is* a “trigger” *and* a “warning”. The really disturbing message is the possibility to recognize in the question of the function of the rejection of waste the fundamental repression resurfacing as a cruel fact of life; that we are not in control our body, that it is the subject to every form of intrusion and parasitic organization: metaphysical, biological, libidinal, social. Something embodies us and we do not know what we are.

The sight and smell of bodily waste is perhaps the most primal experience of the transcendent. At the same time, the idea of transcendence attempts to escape biological conditioning. Waste is nevertheless an intimate and despised product of transformation produced by our bodies, entirely ours and valueless. Its production is nevertheless a fundamental guarantee that we function properly. The repetitive routine of its evacuation is something we just do, why we also do



not reflect on it. We learn to do that as a daily routine from the young age, not without resistance and difficulties. A small child is rationally questioning the spectacle of the potty training. It learns eventually to let it go. The bodily waste, this entirely useless product, we necessarily evacuate, separate from and reject is nevertheless something the *organs* of our bodies decide to *do*, absolutely without our consent and beyond our control. We carry on, we do not want it back and give it for free; we feel relived afterwards. Artaud assigns the status of ontological fundament to this daily oblivion, which, every time it reoccurs, we recall to “forget”.

Artaud locates the fundamental problem of human freedom in the biological organization of our bodies. Appropriating the patterns of a paranoid and delusional mind Artaud asks, basically: for whom does the body produces waste oneself has no use for? The place of this particularity in a general scheme of things, ecologically speaking, is not in question here. This question is strictly restricted to a problematic relation between the biological condition of the human body and the idea of the human being as fundamentally capable of *control*. As we know from the Stoics, the only thing we can control is our own *mind*. But for Artaud, as Derrida discusses it,<sup>155</sup> there is a certain *otherness* in one’s mind that *steals* one’s thoughts and imposes its ideas on us; a *fixed idea* of God. For Artaud, God is in charge of our organs, the organization of our bodies, and the alienation from our bodies. God captures and sustains the body as the instrument of production. God is the consumer of the body and its products, also words and thoughts.

Artaud was not insensitive to religion – he was fanatically religious, especially in the young age; in 1937 he tried to *return the cane* of St. Patrick to Ireland. Artaud’s experience has finally led him to perceive God as a thief, impostor, arche-intruder, parasite, who does not exist, except as *the delirious void* – “the void that approaches with all its forms whose most perfect image is the advance of an incalculable group of crab lice”. At stake here is not merely Artaud’s delusion, but a profound *experience* of being reduced to the organs of the body and their function, as the object, or case, of the psychiatric treatment; denied one’s *voice* as either mute, raving or murmuring, denigrated one’s *thoughts* as delusions, discarded one’s *mind* as insane. Atop of this, as Sylvère Lotringer discusses it in *Mad as Artaud*, the conditions of the survival in the asylums during the Second World War, where Artaud was interned, were almost as unbearable as the

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<sup>155</sup> In ‘La Parole Soufflée’ in the *Writing and Difference*.

conditions in the concentration camps. If we were to ask Artaud, if God was *there*, in the midst of the horror of the rotten asylums, in which the patients were left inside the walls, naked, hungry and sick, I guess, he would have said that God was there: *in the latrine*.

Now, it is possible that the triggers are going off here and there in response to Artaud's "scatotheology" as Derrida calls it. The immediate abjection of Artaud's play should be treated as the sound sign but also as the symptom of *the suppressed materiality of the idea of God*. This may be further denied by the business of metaphysics. Metaphysics never *locates* any principle down-here, or at the places where we do not look, in the discarded and the abject. In Artaud's play exaggeration conditions the metaphysical explanation, as the possibility of a fundamentally repelling nature of *truth*. Artaud's exaggeration actually brings up this possibility.

## Conclusion

Exaggeration drives Artaud's action to a point at which we will have to stop: the "body without organs". In their literal appropriation of the latter, this is where Deleuze and Guattari go beyond, proposing a recipe "how to make"<sup>156</sup> such a thing – not without exaggeration. At the apex of Artaud's play, however, the point is to resist this temptation. The "body without organs" is the problem, not the solution. Artaud's exaggeration precisely questions the attempt to *remake* the human body, to go beyond body. Instead, Artaud's exaggeration points at the instrumental status of the body, for *use* and exploitation. The body is subject of intrusion, the means of production for other's consumption. At the core of this condition is the excremental abject and its repression that keeps the exploratory organization at work. In Artaud, exaggeration goes beyond repression. The excrement is the primal transcendent object beyond the body.

Artaud contemplates the human waste as the most suppressed ontological segment of being. For Artaud, the being is *not* in the world that, phenomenologically speaking, appears before us, into which we are entangled. Being is *where we do not want to be*, where we separate from what we reject.

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<sup>156</sup> Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi, London: Continuum, 2004, p. 161.

Acting on the language of metaphysics, Artaud discloses the suppression of the body in the metaphysical scheme of things as the condition for thinking beyond the body and how this suppression participates in the formation of ideology and its proximity to delusion. Artaud's exaggeration questions the organization of human life in which the repression of the production of waste on the organic level of the body corresponds to the production of waste on technological level. The automatic operations of the organs put the body to work, to produce waste. The body does not own the means of production and does not enjoy its product. This alienating organization is always upon the body. The freedom seems to offer itself in the "body without organs", however, not without exaggeration. If we are to appropriate Artaud's exaggeration as a critical formula, we do not have to follow his thinking along the line of exaggeration. With Artaud, we have to consider that any thinking beyond is the act of cruelty by exaggeration.

# Conclusion

Descartes' "thinking thing", Bataille's "GOD", and Artaud's "body without organs" are the figures of thinking beyond through exaggeration. Descartes, Bataille, and Artaud drive exaggeration to the limit. They do not, however, allow exaggeration to drive the thinking. This intervention is significant for locating the subject at hand that resists exaggeration. Descartes discards exaggeration explicitly at the end of *Meditations*, by casting aside the *exaggerated* doubts as "ridiculous". Bataille points out the transgression of the limit by viewing the possibility of the experience of the divine as the aspect of assenting to either death or madness. Artaud points out the excess of exaggeration by imposing the "body without organs" as the warning of the impending triumph of science, religion, and philosophy.

In my critical view, the function of exaggeration is not to take us beyond but to establish a turning point. Exaggeration facilitates the exhaustion of the notions of God and the human. In the conceptual void, aiming for the exhaustion of the defining ontology, the thinking subject overshoots itself through exaggeration. This critical point, as I see it, is crucial also for Descartes, Bataille, and Artaud. This is, I claim, precisely their lesson: exaggeration is imminent in the subject thinking beyond itself – the subject does not have to think or become otherwise, beyond itself. The subject is always already at hand. For Descartes, this is "the fact that I am here," for Bataille, the inevitable "irony" of life "waiting for death," for Artaud, that "my body can never be touched".

Returning to and emphasizing the subject at hand, the critique of exaggeration is a reductive operation aiming to resolve the amalgamation of the thinking *as* subject and the subject *as* thinking. The identity of I am and thinking is an exaggeration. It was Descartes who in the *Discourse on Method* inaugurated the possibility of overshooting through exaggeration: *cogito ergo sum*. In the Second Meditation, establishing the subject through exaggeration, the "thinking thing", Descartes opens the field of the infinite creativity of thinking. The "thinking thing" is beyond God and the human. It can think whatever it wants. At the same

time, the thinking alone overshoots the subject of the previous revelation, that “I am, I exist”, as it could have sufficiently ascertained the primal objective of doubt that “I am here”, namely, because I am, clearly and distinctly from the beginning. As a “thinking thing”, however, “I am” capable of creating any concept for “metaphysical reasons”. Moreover, by “withdrawing the mind from the senses”, thinking alone can demonstrate, rationally and orderly, the existence of God and the distinction between mind and body.

Exaggeration nevertheless drives the thinking beyond “I am here”, beyond this place where I find myself as I am; my body – the senses, the mind, the organs of my body. I become the subject of thinking beyond the fact that I am here. Now, I am in between the mind and the body, and I see clearly and distinctly that God exists. This does not, however, change the fact that Descartes never moves from his primal position. “I am here”, “sitting by the fire”. I want to demolish the metaphysical foundations of the sciences of physical things (physics). Also, Bataille confesses, “Edwarda *is* GOD” but only at the price of madness – because, God is dead. Artaud leaves the human on “the autopsy table to remake his anatomy” and to “scrape off” “god, and with god his organs”, insisting, not without exaggeration, on the “body without organs”.

# Points and Openings

## Introduction

In the following, I discern *points*, in which I recapitulate, discuss and extend the previous analyses, and propose *openings* for further considerations of the critique of exaggeration in other instances of thinking beyond in the present material, which I do not treat fully or not at all. There are, of course, other resources to include. I try to keep the frame of reference in connection to the material of this study. First, however, I want to take the opportunity to share some reflections and evaluate my procedure so far, as well as to discuss the reasons for the style and the structure of the present chapter.

The essayistic style I adopt in my analyses becomes to certain extent more freely wandering in the following sections of the present chapter, especially on the “points”. I also give in for the temptation to propose the “points” aphoristically. My intention with this mode of presentation is to consider the potential of the concise pieces of reasoning, insights, associations, and themes as a series of hypotheses opening for future examination of exaggeration. Some of these pieces I initially discarded as superfluous or as side-tracks from the previous expositions, analyses, and discussions in the study. I put them to use here, however, not due to my idleness but because I see their relevance for my proposal. Also, the points and openings I offer here enhance my previous reasoning in the study here and there. I emphasise that the tentative character of the content in the present chapter intends merely to point out the places and open the spaces of enquiry into which I invite future examinations, as the proposal for further research.

The occasional tiering repetitive or even circular tendencies in the previous chapters, such as my excessive reuse of formulas and key concepts, are sometimes only a slip. As I have noticed, these insistences may not function pedagogically. Methodologically, however, they nevertheless provide a conceptual blueprint on which I structure disparate material and its different themes in a consequent if not

entirely consistent manner. My use of formulas and formulaic repetitions, as I see it, assists the anchoring of the analytical reasoning to the contextual and conceptual frame.

In relation to Descartes, Bataille, and Artaud, not without inspiration from Derrida – not for the sake of deconstruction – I want to revive the possibilities of the “margins of philosophy” to intervene in the current moral and ideological dilemmas. I know this is risky to promote in a dissertation. But I hope that my readers will find no difficulties to “meditate with me”, to put it with Descartes, provided that I keep my reflections clear and distinct. I have no intention whatsoever to be provocative, but I value the thinkers who “provoke philosophy”. My involvement with the provocative ways of thinking may have affected my mode of expression. I believe that one has to approach the instances of thinking I deal with on the level of their expression, of course, with analytical and critical distance. The present text is, in a way, a recantation of my (constitutional) tendency to exaggerate.

One has to allow the intensity in the thinking to come forth. I do not mean to be apologetic. It is easy to judge and reject or to adore the thinker. Descartes, Bataille, and Artaud, also Derrida, and Düttmann, offer challenging analyses on the verge of academic decency, which confront the one-sided manners of avoiding controversies. I hope my demonstrations of the critique of exaggeration show that the controversial themes are not always simple to discard. I claim that they imply what Shakespeare in *Hamlet* designates as “madness with method”. As Adorno in ‘The essay as form’ asserts in the last line in reference to Nietzsche: “Through violations of the orthodoxy of thought, something in the object becomes visible which it is orthodoxy’s secret and objective aim to keep invisible.”<sup>157</sup> None of the thinkers I engage with are merely expressing their opinions. Their thinking is personal, but they do not seek attention as many influencers today. Their thinking expresses philosophical engagement. They think the unthought and speak the unspeakable. The controversy is the other’s resistance to thinking.

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<sup>157</sup>Theodor W. Adorno, *Notes to Literature*, Volume One, New York: Columbia University Press, 1991, p. 23.

## Points

### Thinking beyond and the critique of exaggeration

If *being* human is beyond concept, and the human has somehow to become beyond in order to be authentic, we waste time trying to improve our understanding what it means to be human. The unfathomable beyond, however, is not where the human somehow realizes oneself. Thinking beyond does not take us beyond but collapses thinking into the excess of exaggeration – the “body without organs” in Artaud, “GOD” in Bataille, “the thinking thing” in Descartes. Thinking about God and the human demands a thinking beyond the things at hand: beyond the clear and distinct understanding in Descartes, death in Bataille, and freedom in Artaud. The critique of exaggeration discloses exaggeration at the point where exaggeration conceals itself as thinking and the thinking goes beyond the subject at hand.

Exaggeration conceals and discloses the thinking going beyond. The concealing exaggeration collapses concepts. The disclosing exaggeration retrieves the clear and distinct understanding that resists exaggeration. The concealing exaggeration makes nothing of the beyond into something. The disclosing exaggeration reveals something of the beyond as nothing. The concealing exaggeration attempts beyond the clear and distinct understanding. Any discourse attempting to establish existence on the principles of logic and language is a discourse of exaggeration, going beyond the clear and distinct understanding of the fact that resists exaggeration. This is perhaps the most important lesson of Descartes’ *Meditations*. Following Descartes, the critique of exaggeration remains in place: *here*. From here, we do not go beyond but look at the world clearly and distinctly.

The thread of exaggeration in Descartes, Bataille, and Artaud, leads us back to the question of God and the human, not as the possibility of thinking beyond but as the task of pointing out the exaggeration in the thinking beyond God and the human. Examining exaggeration in Descartes, Bataille, and Artaud, the excessive nature of their projects becomes rather obvious. They are the thinkers of exaggeration. This is true, however, only if we are looking into the abyss they open. There is also the bottom line, not to throw ourselves in the abyss. This decision prevents the fall into the abyss of exaggeration. Descartes, Bataille, and Artaud take us in a labyrinth. If we follow them there, we will get lost unless we



hold on the tread of exaggeration. Reaching the Minotaur's nest, the excess of exaggeration, we escape by retracing our steps back along the line of exaggeration.

Exaggeration in Descartes, Bataille and Artaud disclose the capacity of thinking to go beyond itself, its search for itself beyond itself. Exaggeration slips the things out of hands and we find ourselves emptyhanded. At this point, thinking should become the demand for the return to the things at hand.

Unfolding natural philosophy in the disguise of metaphysics, Descartes establishes the empirical foundations of science through metaphysical reasons for exaggeration of the uncertainty of clear and distinct understanding. Exaggeration effectively demolishes the metaphysical foundation of science. Bataille, taking Nietzsche seriously, discerns the repression of the death of God at the basis of the impossibility of eroticism, "assenting to life to the point of death". Death is the absence of life. The fainted Eros, the unconscious god, the burning desire and lust for life knocked out. But first and foremost, clearly and distinctly, death resists exaggeration. Artaud resurfaces the repression of exaggeration at the basis of human relations offering the final solution to annihilate suffering: "body without organs" – the final product of the technologies of cruelty, psychiatry, and war.

Thinking attempts beyond in excess of exaggeration. Recognizing, however, the excess of exaggeration critically, it is possible to make the distinction between the beyond as the thing of thinking and what the thinking beyond leaves behind – the task of thinking: what is on our hands.

Exaggeration drives thinking beyond. To paraphrase Düttmann: thinking drives exaggeration to a point at which exaggeration drives thinking; beyond. In short, exaggeration takes on exaggeration.

The attempt to think beyond establishes exaggeration as thinking. The reason for this seems to be the experience of the incompleteness of being human, and the ultimate incomprehensibility of God. The desire for wholeness, which is offered by the idea of God, exaggerate our incompleteness.

We are completely born, completely alive, and completely dead. In this chain of events, it is difficult to establish what is "human". Birth, life and death manifests in various ways in every subject to those events, to a rose, and to a star. The human is thus undefined in the field of opposites, conflicting experiences, why it is only a name for a specie. We are the subjects to birth, life, and death, of which we know almost nothing. Already here, thinking God and the human, provides the examples of exaggeration of who we are in our existential nakedness. We have nothing on our hands. Thinking, nevertheless, we create concepts. Every

concept overshoots the nothingness of nothing. Thinking exaggerates nothing into something.

The idea of God and the idea of the human are always already exaggerations. God and the human exaggerate the fact that we are emptyhanded. Holding nothing out to nothing, on our hands and in between, their ungraspable shadows – we have nothing on our hands. Whatever we catch, grasping, turns into sand. Whatever we hold liberates itself from our grasp. From the beginning, in the middle, and in the end, at birth, in life, and in death, we find ourselves emptyhanded. We desire to be human; someone to sustain us, God. We exist. We envision our desire *to be* as we experience the lack of the permanent, the unchanging, the unshakable, the eternal, the indestructible – foundation. We are thinking and we exaggerate: there is *more* than this. Our empty hands hold the possibility of infinite creation: God, the human, the universe. We should not identify ourselves with our creations but *be* this empty and pregnant possibility. *Free*, above all. We exaggerate the significance of this or that identity, which obscure the simplicity of the fact that we are born, we live, we die. This happens to us anyway.

## The human beyond

Exaggeration heralds the possibility of transformation. At the same time, unless exaggeration becomes the subject of critique, thinking beyond annihilates philosophical elaboration. It is, of course, possible to imagine the existence “beyond being”; the Cartesian “thinking thing”, or the Batailleian “sovereign”, or the Artaudian “body without organs”. Exaggeration, however, does not bring us beyond imagination. The questions concerning the divine insist on thinking beyond the human. The concepts of the human and the divine proceed from the same thinking along the line of exaggeration. On the one hand, the idea of the divine instigates going beyond the human. On the other hand, thinking beyond the human takes us to the idea of the divine. On both hands remains the question: what it means to be human without exaggeration? – the question of the critique of exaggeration. The critique of exaggeration offers an approach to the questions concerning the religious experience and the knowledge of the divine.

The disappearance of God or the human, or both, is likely to happen through the enforcement of censorship, by burning of books or the totalitarian restrictions of the use of words. Such an event could provide the revolutionary opportunity

for thinking *beyond* God and the human. For those who can read the marks of the traces in the blanks, the possibility to deconstruct a reappearance of God and the human could nevertheless arise. Nothing, however, would be different. The thinking would overshoot the subject, as we are used to in our habitual thinking *about* God and the human.

The subject is whatever is at hand. But what *is* at hand? For instance, “I” am always at hand. When I *think* about or beyond God and the human, I go beyond the fact that I am the thinking subject. The subject at hand is the thinking subject, unaware that it is thinking beyond itself. The thinking subject is the *unawareness* of the I going beyond itself through thinking. Absorbed in the thinking activity, it goes beyond the awareness that it is thinking. The awareness that *I am* thinking makes the difference. I am aware that I am thinking unless I go beyond the awareness that I am thinking.

Exaggeration insists on thinking beyond. Exaggeration is the unawareness of the thinking subject that it thinks beyond itself. Exaggeration is always already at hand, a ready-made.

Thinking beyond God and the human does not transcend God and the human but goes beyond the awareness of exaggeration in any thinking about God and the human. Bringing into the operation of thinking the awareness of exaggeration at work in it is the task of the critique of exaggeration. The critique of exaggeration does not target the eccentricities unfolding in the instances of thinking beyond God and the human but examines the use of exaggeration in these instances that aim to disclose exaggeration always already at work in the thinking about God and the human. Disclosing exaggeration, they attempt to incite a task of thinking that takes a fact as the principle of understanding what is at hand in a situation that demands a decision or a response out of hand.

The fact does not ascertain itself, through the immediacy or clear and distinct appearance but in its capacity to remain monolithic through withstanding exaggeration. It is a fact on which one can rely if it withstands exaggeration by being imposed as the starting point of a thinking about God and the human. It is a fact if it remains even beyond God and the human, even, forgetting that it is put to exaggeration, if it transcends exaggeration, becoming as it is. The fact on our hands is the fact that I am – the subject to exaggeration. Thinking about God and the human goes beyond the fact that I am. I am insane, I am tormented, I am deceived. But if I remain as I am, this is the beginning of the task of thinking *without* God and the human; to examine what I am, how I am, as I am – the

naked fact: *I am*. How to be *that*, and what it means that it is the fact that I am here, everchanging and responding to different situations in time and space? Am I without everything that defines me? Am I without exaggeration? I may find that I am a “thinking thing” and that “God is not a deceiver”. Thus, I deceive myself. I may find that life is a “long weary waiting for death” because “God is dead”. Thus, I am tormented. I may find that God has to be “scraped off” “with the organs”, because they intrude my “body without organs”. Thus, I am insane. Among these conflicting ontologies, I find that *I* alone remain without exaggeration.

The beyond does not allow any elaboration because the beyond is beyond the possibility of thinking beyond without exaggeration. The beyond is beyond nonexistence and existence. Nothing can be said or thought about it without exaggeration. Attempting beyond, the thinking goes beyond the fact that *it exaggerates*. At the same time, exaggeration and its delimitation effectively exhaust the anticipations of the beyond as the domain of possibility. The potentiality of exaggeration to enhance the philosophical analysis with a critique of thinking is inherent in the delimitation of the critique of exaggeration to the instances of thinking beyond. The possibility of thinking beyond God and the human entails the question of exaggeration as the condition of transcending, not the current concepts of God and the human but for establishing, not something beyond but exaggeration as the condition for thinking beyond God and the human, the thinking beyond as the critique of exaggeration.

## Think more

That exaggeration is at work in Descartes, Bataille and Artaud, is rather obvious – Descartes does not hide it in *Meditations*. If we read Descartes, Bataille, and Artaud, with a critical distance that allows the preconceived sense of absurdity to become the horizon of reflection on the complexity of problems they raise, it soon becomes clear that these three thinkers, each in his own way, approach this complexity, not by inscribing their thinking in the ordinary/academic manner of philosophical exposition, but by way of exaggeration. This is why it seems that Artaud is mad, Bataille obscene, and Descartes odd. But for them, exaggeration is only the means, not the end. Along the line of exaggeration, they point at the absurdity of certain concepts, questions and problems of philosophy, or Derrida would perhaps say, of “metaphysics”. These complexes pertain to certain

delusional formations that underlie the ideas of God and the human. Having become the ideas legitimized by reason, internalized as reasonable, they occupy our mind and morality. Trying to improve or change these habitual formations of thinking would amount only to laughter; like the crowd of atheists laughing at Nietzsche's Madman, who, lighting the lamp at midday, cried that God is dead. So, what to *do* with this insight, in the margins of philosophy? Derrida is that intellectual hero who offers, well, more in the margins but in the *Writing and Difference* he also provides an "opening into the text". In this opening, the text is not inscribed. The *traces* are in the text. The trace stimulates thinking, and also – Derrida does not say it – exaggeration; "the joyous wandering of the *graphein*... without return".

For Descartes, Bataille, and Artaud, thinking about and beyond God involves a *staging* of the idea of God in a scenario that threatens the collapse of the bodymental basis of human existence: in Descartes, the paranoiac proposition of the existence of a deceiving God and the insistence that the senses cannot be trusted, instigates radical doubt regarding the possibility and certainty of knowledge; in Bataille, the experience of anguish in "the presence of GOD" plays out in a brothel; in Artaud, God's intrusion into the body, in the form of a microbic invasion, causes the disorganisation of the mind. In all three instances, the staging of God in the scenarios of existential collapse unfolds a thinking beyond God and the human through exaggeration, in effort to establish the disappearance of God or the human. On the one hand, thinking beyond, the thinking subject overshoots itself though exaggeration, and God and the human remain. On the other hand, driving the "exaggeration to the limit", to speak with Düttmann, they demonstrate the inherent movement of exaggeration in thinking about God and the human. At this, second point, it is possible to establish a thinking about the subject of thinking as the subject of exaggeration. *Thinking* is the subject's failure to perceive oneself and the subject at hand in a situation demanding a response. This, perhaps, implies that the subject, following Hume, is *the flow of experience*. The attempt to pronounce and conceive something of this experience will lead to thinking, and inevitably, exaggeration. What to do with this?

Hypothetically, an inexpressible experience may arise as a kind of spiritual/mystical insight or even as a wisdom (*gnosis*) beyond words and thoughts. It may also imply a collapse of communication in the intensity of an inexpressible experience, except in the form of the manic insistence "I am not mad". Perhaps,

this is not impossible. Here is nevertheless the point at which thinking overshoots the subject at hand. The critique of exaggeration discloses this going beyond, for instance, in the attempt to think *the* impossible as the possibility beyond the possible; the inexpressible experience as the experience of impossibility to grasp the impossible and so on. That amounts only to exaggeration. We move in a circle, the loop of the collapse of conceptual elaboration. *How* we can speak-experience remains unsolved. More thinking!

## Without exaggeration: aphorisms

The critique of exaggeration targets the tendency/fallacy of thinking beyond the clear and distinct understanding.

Thinking about the human without exaggeration leaves the idea of the divine outside the scheme of thinking about the divine. The divine is the triumph of the divine transcendence, the absolute excess beyond being, or the annihilation of the human beyond being.

The divine is beyond exaggeration. The human thinking beyond does not reach that far, exaggeration providing the outmost possibility of going beyond, however, not enough far beyond.

The divine reflects the human image in the distorting mirror, reflecting a caricature of the human gone beyond oneself in order to establish the idea of the divine. Going beyond leads nowhere – being here then is beyond words and thoughts as is the divine, without exaggeration. The divine mystery, of course, drives the thinking beyond, the words to stumble upon the inexpressible.

Thinking beyond inspires poetic jaculations. Philosophy becomes the exercise in poetics. Nothing against poetry, but there has to be thinking that does not rely on the inspiration by the Muses. Philosophy weighs the gravity of poetic word drifting beyond the concept. Hence, to philosophy, the critique of exaggeration.

Exaggeration drives the thinking beyond the reasonable limits. The demarcation of the reasonable limit, I propose, pertains to the point at which exaggeration drives thinking.

Exaggeration is always already at play in the thinking beyond the human experience and comprehension – the absolute excess. The idea of God as the absolute excess, to the point of its disappearance as the concept, justifies annihilation as the pinnacle of its revelation.

Exaggeration poses God beyond the human self-understanding and the experience of being *in* the world. Exaggeration in the thinking about God proposes yet unrealised possibilities of becoming and transformation of human life. The visions beyond being are without prospects for the improvement of the current conditions of life.

The vision beyond being realizes only the excess of exaggeration. Exaggeration plays on the imaginary, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual level, inspires and motivates escapism, utopic idealism, and religious faith; the nihilistic fascination with passion, violence, destruction, and death as the sources of aspiration toward becoming *nothing*.

Exaggeration incites visions of human transformation, draws maps for the human becoming beyond the present state of being. The realization has to rely on the real change by transmuting imagination into the actuality of the physical being. Traditionally, this is the claim of theurgy and alchemy.

The divine transcendence guards the true beyond, like the blazing light blinds the sun. Exaggeration reflects the human caricature of the divine beyond the mirror. The distorting surface of the reflection beyond the human is the furthest the human can get, in our mind. At this limit, the human being either accepts the deformation as transformation, or laugh, upon the reflection. The tragic laughter, to put it with Bataille.

With Descartes in *Meditations*, we may know God more “easily” than “the things in the world”. Cartesian science promotes the thinking beyond the human in order to learn to know oneself. Not as God, but as the human, without exaggeration.

Exaggeration does not merely go beyond without return. It also collapses at the point of its excess. This collapse is the crucial turning point, back to the clear and distinct understanding. Exaggeration submerges thinking into the assumptions of the necessity of going beyond the present conditions in order to realize a radical vision. Thinking nevertheless goes beyond the possibility of realization and succumbs to exaggeration. Descartes, Bataille, and Artaud, directly or indirectly point out the radical vision itself as the exaggeration of the present conditions of thinking – metaphysics, excess, cruelty. None of the three thinkers promote exaggeration as the prospect for overcoming of the conditions of thinking.

Thinking beyond is either a possibility of the beyond or the subject to the critique of exaggeration. The critique of exaggeration is a way to disclose the operations of exaggeration in the thinking beyond. Thinking cannot reach *that*

far out, without evading the language and the mind itself. The critical task is to discern the point where thinking falls in exaggeration. By assenting to exaggeration, thinking becomes a manic insistence. The critique of exaggeration asks for the subject of clear and distinct understanding that *resist exaggeration*.

## Openings

### Plato and exaggeration: *Republic* 509b-c

‘Therefore, say that not only being known is present in the things known as a consequence of the good, but also existence and being are in them besides as a result of it, although the good isn’t being but is still beyond being, exceeding it in dignity and power.’ And Glaucon, quite ridiculously, said, ‘Apollo, what a demonic excess.’ ‘You,’ I said, ‘are responsible for compelling me to tell my opinions about it.’<sup>158</sup>

Since Plato proposed the idea of the good “beyond being”, in the *Republic*, thinking beyond has constantly tried to reach this beyond. The failure to reach beyond repeats a thinking that makes no difference – otherwise, we would already be there. Plato knew this: to think beyond is *ridiculous*: “And Glaucon, quite ridiculously, said, ‘Apollo, what a demonic excess.’” “‘You,’ I said, ‘are responsible for compelling me to tell my opinions about it.’” The philosopher knows how to think in excess of exaggeration but the one who only thinks exaggeration, misses the point. It is the task of the critique of exaggeration to mark the point of the excess of exaggeration as the point at which we have to stop. Why? Bataille knew. It is ridiculous. Thus, we are missing the point, what the discourse tries to say, namely that it cannot articulate wisdom as knowledge without exaggeration. The wisdom of exaggeration, or the exaggeration of wisdom initiates the task of unthinking. In philosophy, the beyond is a starting point for the unfolding of the notion of transcendence.

Approaching “beyond being” from Glaucon’s perspective discloses exaggeration that drives thinking. The context of the above passage concerns the question of the *ideal city* – this is the thing at hand in the present section of Plato’s

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<sup>158</sup> Plato, *Republic*, transl. A. Bloom, second edition, Basic Books, 1968, p. 189 (509b-c).



*Republic*. Following Glaucon's intervention, Socrates turns to a proper discourse on political philosophy. Socrates abandons the discourse of exaggeration on the idea of the good beyond being and approaches the question of the ideal city, this time through allegories, such as the infamous one, of the shadows on the wall in a cave. Nothing, however, says that Socrates' idealist propositions provide the blueprint for the city. Socrates speaks of the political architecture of the ideal *city* as an analogy of the ideal architecture of the individual life. One can read the entire discourse dialectically, as a model for a reflection on the conditions of leading philosophical life in the current political or, aphosophical, organisation of the city/state. In Plato's *Republic*, this does not imply that the philosopher should strive "beyond being", or live outside the city.<sup>159</sup> The better possible life depends on the human conduct, politically, ethically and so on. The pretence of explanation "beyond being" conceals the exaggeration of the good as something passively received from the unfathomable abyss "beyond being". A philosopher should engage in the critique of ideology and also in the critique of exaggeration in the discourses beyond being underlying ideology. A philosopher should focus on the blind spots the eyes fixed on the commerce of the city fail to see, such as the task of knowing oneself, but also discerning the impact of ideology on the political life of the city and the conduct of the individuals.<sup>160</sup>

The simile of the sun and the good in the *Republic* goes too far from the subject of the *good*. Astronomical and optical speculations will not bring us to the insight concerning the *best* outcomes of human action. The sun is not beyond being. The light of the sun "surpasses", "in dignity and power", the capacity of the eye to look at it straight, to see the *sun* clearly and distinctly. In the same way, if we look at the idea of the good beyond being, it is blinding. Exaggeration blinds the view, provides the blind spot. We throw ourselves beyond the sun in the infinite space.

The beyond promises the infinite possibility. Otherwise, we could not stand the limitations and even boredom of everydayness, if there was no thought of

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<sup>159</sup> Plato nevertheless considers the possibility of an eccentric outlook in philosophy in the *Phaedrus*, by staging the dialogue between Socrates and Phaedrus outside the city. My exposition here may entail other similar interpretations, but as Descartes puts it "nothing is older than the truth" (CSM II p. 4). For my understanding of Plato, especially through my intense reading of the *Phaedrus*, outside this project, I am generally indebted to the scholars such as, G. R. F. Ferrari, Reginald Hackforth, Martha Nussbaum, John Sallis and Paul Shorey.

<sup>160</sup> In his rewriting of Plato's *Republic*, Alan Badiou shows the potential of interpreting its discourse as the critique of ideology. See, Alan Badiou, *Plato's Republic: A Dialogue in Sixteen Chapters*. Columbia University Press, 2013. See also, Chritchley's critique of the "demonic excess" in Simon Chritchley, *Tragedy, Greeks and Us*. Profile Books Ltd, 2020.

something more or beyond, that exceeds the dull repetition, that makes the beyond worth thinking. The ideal life beyond is the exaggeration of everyday life. If we are capable of receiving the good as the divine gift of the good beyond being, we always already simply profit from the beyond. No enquiry is necessary. This is the surplus value of the beyond as a guarantee of what is always already here. As a *concept*, however, the beyond is without value. It means nothing. Thus, the beyond is profitable if we abstain from thinking beyond.

The thinking at the limit attempts beyond.<sup>161</sup> In relation to the common ground of agreement, the common sense, language and so on, thinking at the limit tends toward eccentricity, extravagance, exorbitance. Reaching the limit, however, the thinking exaggerates. Exaggeration either proceeds beyond or returns to the things at hand without exaggeration. This affirms Düttmann's rhetorical question closing the last essay of the *Philosophy of Exaggeration*: "Does not the philosopher who sets about freeing words from their 'metaphysical' employment and returning them to their 'everyday' use, also seek to overcome the non-identity of the everyday by uncovering a clarity and richness in the latter that are not at variance with the way it actually is, but rather consist in it?"<sup>162</sup>

Exaggeration incites abstract ideas. The abstract idea demands thinking beyond the things at hand. The abstraction, stimulating the thinking beyond, conceals the exaggeration at work. Exaggeration, in turn, conceals the arbitrariness of the abstract idea. The disclosure of exaggeration dissipates the abstract idea as a mere exaggeration. If we take this disclosure seriously, we establish the equation between the beneficial action and the experience of this action as beneficial. If we need the exaggeration of the good beyond being to establish that, the only function of this exaggeration is to point out action and its effects as the real focus for reflection on what is good. Because, *the* good is beyond being, which also means, without action and without beneficial/satisfactory effect.

On our hands we have exaggeration, not the question beyond being but the task of the critique of exaggeration. We get a simple scheme. Here, we have things at hand. Beyond are the ideas of things out of hand. No-thing, however, including the idea of a thing, *is* beyond what is at hand. This provides a hypothesis for the critique

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<sup>161</sup> At the limit is also the Derridean theme. I do not take directly from Derrida here, although I certainly share with him the inherent logic of limit. See Jacques Derrida, 'Faith and Knowledge: Two Sources of "Religion" at the Limits of Reason Alone' in *Acts of Religion*, ed. G. Anidjar, Routledge 2002, (orig. French 1996; in English 1998).

<sup>162</sup> Düttmann, *Philosophy of Exaggeration*, p. 148.

of exaggeration in any thinking beyond the things at hand. It states that imposing the here-being as the possibility beyond the things at hand is an exaggeration.

## Derrida: Artaud

In his radio-play, *To Have Done with the Judgement of God*, Antonin Artaud insists on going beyond metaphysics, science, religion, God and the human. Exaggeration is the most obvious mark of Antonin Artaud's thinking, unless we label Artaud as merely *insane*. In Artaud's exaggerations Derrida seems to recognize an already deconstructed metaphysics. One could also say that Artaud offers a different approach to the "deconstruction" and "overcoming" of metaphysics, simply, by viewing it as the discourse of exaggeration. Artaud does not attempt the destructuring and deconstructing of metaphysics, as Heidegger, and Derrida. In relation to Derrida's project, it is nevertheless possible to view the "deconstruction of metaphysics" as the overcoming of Heidegger's writing of metaphysics through Artaud. Moreover, Derrida in *Writing and Difference* seems to account for the different writing of metaphysics also in Bataille and Descartes. It is possible to speak about a deconstruction of metaphysics in Derrida *without* Heidegger, but *with* Descartes, Bataille and Artaud.

Curiously, considering the French original title *Pour en Finir avec le Jugement de Dieu* the references in the *Writing and Difference* to "finir" occur most frequently in the two essays on Artaud – is this outrageous play of Artaud what motivated Derrida to write on Artaud, and at the same time demonstrate the art of *how to avoid and speak of...*? Indeed, to avoid and speak of, for instance, Artaud's ontology of the *excrement*, into which, by the *cruelty* of logic, Artaud inscribes God. It is uncertain whether Derrida's position in *Writing and Difference*, in relation to Artaud's exaggeration is that of Socrates, who in Plato's *Republic* was persuaded by Glaucon to speak beyond being, as Derrida *might* have been by Artaud, to the point at which "the hyperbole can no further go", or if Derrida takes the position of Glaucon and reacts to Artaud's *piling up*. Artaud's exaggeration, as I see it, not only goes beyond the possibility of philosophy but also beyond the thinking beyond.

In reference to Edmond Jabès, Jacques Derrida in the 'Ellipsis' establishes the theme of *the return to the book of questions*. Derrida instigates the task of locating and thinking the unthought in the history of philosophy, and in the margins of philosophy; the philosophical themes in literature and religion, and the literary

and religious motives in philosophy. For Derrida, thinking has to traverse the impulse to simply overcome metaphysics and theology as the bastard form of philosophy and return to the questions at hand. Derrida's hyperbolic provocation, "the disappearance of an exceeded God or of an erased man", marks the unthought in the places of absence and disappearance; the missing links; the seeds in the fields of annihilation. If Derrida in *Writing and Difference* seems to promote exaggeration in philosophy, by proposing the possibility of "the disappearance of an exceeded God or of an erased man", he promotes a return to the places of disappearance as the marks of exaggeration.

## Heidegger: Going beyond Descartes

From the darkness of doubt, the meditator finds oneself without the other as *ego sum* – from the beginning: "I am here quite alone."<sup>163</sup> One *is* but not yet a human, not God; merely a mind unknowing God. However, already in the First Meditation the meditator finds that "firmly rooted in my mind is the long-standing opinion that there is an omnipotent God who made me the kind of creature that I am".<sup>164</sup> This leads the "I" in the Third Meditations to explain that God exists necessarily. In the Fourth Meditation the *ego* alienates itself from the *sum* as it assigns its existence to God and proceeds to ascertain its relation to the "other things" of which it gradually becomes aware: "It is true that, since my decision to doubt everything, it is so far only myself and God whose existence I have been able to know with certainty; but after considering the immense power of God, I cannot deny that many other things have been made by him, or at least could have been made, and hence that I may have a place in the universal scheme of things."<sup>165</sup> The initial hyperbolic possibility of the "disappearance" of God or the human leads anyway to the assertion "it is so far only myself and God".

At the beginning of the *Meditations*, Descartes proceeds by reducing the here-being of the meditator's self-consciousness to the flow of dream in which nothing is certain. This hyperbolic reduction produces in effect the "disappearance" of God or the human, in line with the ambition Descartes put forward at the beginning of the First Meditation: "I realized that it was necessary, once in the course of my life, to demolish everything completely and start again right from

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<sup>163</sup> CSM II p. 12.

<sup>164</sup> CSM II p. 14.

<sup>165</sup> CSM II p. 39.

the foundations if I wanted to establish anything at all in the sciences that was stable and likely to last.”<sup>166</sup> Willingly or unwillingly, Descartes in *Meditations* responds nevertheless to the demand for the existence of God and the soul. The aim to “demolish everything completely” seems strangely distant. Descartes, in the end, affirms current beliefs by demonstrating the necessity of the existence of God and the soul. On the way beyond God and the human, however, the thinking goes freely beyond, proposing, for instance, the hyperbolic hypothesis of the deceiving God and the “evil genius”. From the infinite potential of openness everything arises *ex nihilo*. Whatever comes from thinking beyond is possible to arrange logically and become meaningful.

In the *Discourse on Method*, Descartes promotes another way, to paraphrase the rest of the title, of directing the thinking toward the search for truth by learning about the physical things. In the *Meditations*, the thinking goes beyond the physical things to support beliefs, to see if they hold. Yet, Descartes rejects all beliefs in the very first sentence of the First Meditation: “Some years ago I was struck by the large number of falsehoods that I had accepted as true in my childhood, and by the highly doubtful nature of the whole edifice that I had subsequently based on them.”<sup>167</sup> Depending on how we view the significance of “firmly rooted in my mind is the long-standing opinion that there is an omnipotent God” – as the logical necessity rather than as the foundation of knowledge – it is possible to take another way in the *Meditations*.

Heidegger’s assertion, that “going beyond is metaphysics itself”, is also Descartes’ approach to “metaphysics”, as I see it.<sup>168</sup> Without going into the vast area of scholarship on Heidegger’s reading of Descartes,<sup>169</sup> for my purposes here, I use the few remarks of Heidegger on Descartes to emphasize the relation between thinking and exaggeration, as I see it, in the notion of “going beyond”. I view Heidegger’s approach to the question of “metaphysics”, and in Descartes, as the articulation of exaggeration in thinking. For Heidegger, going beyond belongs to Dasein, and Heidegger is right, Descartes does not share his insistent search for Dasein in the repressed segments of metaphysics. For Descartes in *Meditations*, going beyond implies the use of exaggeration to escape the dominant theological rationality.

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<sup>166</sup> CSM II p. 17.

<sup>167</sup> CSM II p. 17.

<sup>168</sup> Martin Heidegger, ‘What is Metaphysics?’ in *Pathmarks*, ed. W. McNeill, tr. D. F. Krell, Cambridge University Press, 1998, 96.

<sup>169</sup> See literature for Mathew R. Shockey.

Two years before the lecture on metaphysics, Heidegger in *Being and Time*, published 1927, raises the tone against Descartes on the subject of “worldliness”, focusing on Descartes’ separation between the *res cogitans* and *res extensa*. Although Heidegger is right “that Descartes not only goes amiss ontologically in his definition of the world, but that his interpretation and its foundations led him to *pass over* the phenomenon of the world as well as the innerworldly beings initially at hand,”<sup>170</sup> he reads Descartes merely through “metaphysics”. Descartes in *Meditations*, I suggest, approaches the “first philosophy” through the “metaphysical reasons” for doubt. The “excess” of doubt goes beyond the certainties of everyday life, for instance that “I am here”.<sup>171</sup> With Descartes, going beyond becomes the question of thinking *and* exaggeration—as Heidegger points out, “to *pass over*”. However, exaggerating, Descartes points out the metaphysics going beyond, as Heidegger says: “the phenomenon of the world as well as the innerworldly beings initially at hand”.

## Going through exaggeration beyond madness

In the following, leaning on Derrida, I propose a theoretical outlook on my critique of exaggeration in Descartes’ hypothesis on “madness”. In his essay on Descartes and “madness” (*folie*) in *Writing and Difference*, Derrida discerns a certain “economy” of “the absolute excess”, or to put it in my terms, the excess of exaggeration in the thinking beyond, in a sentence where the infamous word *différance* appears, perhaps, for the first time: “The economy of this writing is a regulated relationship between that which exceeds and the exceeded totality: the *différance* of the absolute excess.”<sup>172</sup> Although Derrida in the context of his essay refers to Descartes’ *Meditations*, particularly the First Meditation, he also seems to speak of his own writing about Descartes’ writing. Moreover, Derrida seems to propose a direction for the reading of his own writing, at least in the *Writing and Difference*. Derrida’s essay of course *differs* from Descartes’ *Meditations*, in which Derrida, however, goes beyond Descartes to the point of the “absolute excess”.

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<sup>170</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, transl. J. Stambaugh, SUNY Press, 1996, p. 88.

<sup>171</sup> See Martial Guérout, *Descartes Philosophy Interpreted According to the Order of Reasons*. Vol I. *The Soul and God*. Transl. Roger Ariew. University of Minnesota Press, 1984. (1952), 20-2. Derrida in the essay on Descartes in the *Writing and Difference* refers to Guérout to justify his claim on the hyperbolic function of the hypothesis of dream that exceeds the “madness” of the “mad”. See Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 62.

<sup>172</sup> Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 75.

But what is *différance*? The *différance* is not a concept but a formula of different writing; *différance* in its most basic form, is a different writing of ‘difference’.<sup>173</sup> Not entirely so, but in this sense, one could say that Derrida’s project in the *Writing and Difference* is about writing difference; providing different writing by going beyond the texts he reads, in this case, Descartes’ *Meditations*. The difference emerging between the two texts is the opening “into a text”, which instigates eventually another different writing; without origin and without end. But this movement, as Derrida emphasises in the ‘Ellipsis’, requires “the return to the book”. This means that the different writing is not a writing upon any reading but a disciplined reading of the book from which certain questions arise. For instance, the question of the absolute excess of thinking and the thinking of the absolute excess in Descartes’ *Meditations*.

In the following I designate the absolute excess as the excess of exaggeration to point out the possibility of reading absolute excess as the excess of exaggeration. For my purposes, this elucidates also my analysis of exaggeration in *Meditations*, we will see, up to a certain point, which also Derrida discerns, and on which I also appoint Derrida. In his essay on Descartes, Derrida unravels the thread of “hyperbolical exaggeration” (p. 58) and the “demonic hyperbole” (p. 69), posing the question of the point of the excess of exaggeration – the point as a mark, perhaps of the limit, and the point as meaning. At this point, going beyond Descartes, Derrida locates the meaning of the excess of exaggeration. At least, Derrida points out the direction in which the force of exaggeration drives signification toward the fundamental possibility of thinking further beyond; in excess of exaggeration “marking the disappearance of an exceeded God or of an erased man”.

In Derrida, I suggest, writing signals exaggeration as thinking, up to the point of “the *différance* of the absolute excess”. This is also the point Descartes reaches beyond “madness” in the *Meditations*. For Descartes, as I see it, “madness” is the state of the manic insistence on exaggeration. Descartes goes beyond this state by way of exaggeration going beyond the clear and distinct understanding. To Derrida’s “that which exceeds” I assign the excess of insanity, and to “the exceeded

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<sup>173</sup> On the exposition of difference and *différance* and related themes in Derrida, also relating to Derrida’s reception, see Rodolphe Gasché, *Inventions of Difference: On Jacques Derrida*. Harvard, 1994; also by Gasché, *The Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection*, Harvard, 1986.

totality”, thinking beyond through exaggeration.<sup>174</sup> The two intensities - the excess of “madness”, and “the exceeded totality” in the thinking beyond defer one another, as I see it, to a point at which the excess of exaggeration finally discloses the thinking beyond as “insanity”. This, in turn, correspond to what Derrida formulates as “the *différance* of the absolute excess”, or in my extrapolation, the different thinking of the excess of exaggeration. Or, as Derrida, speaking for Descartes formulates it: “I philosophize only in *terror*, but in the *confessed* terror of going mad. The confession is simultaneously, at its *present* moment, oblivion and unveiling, protection and exposure: economy.”<sup>175</sup> The “economy” involving “oblivion and unveiling, protection and exposure” is also, as I see it, the economy of exaggeration. In difference to Derrida, or in my different writing of Derrida’s discourse on the hyperbolic excess, that is, exaggeration, in the thinking beyond, I discern exaggeration *as* thinking.

Derrida’s proximity to Descartes’ attempt to establish a shortcut to the beyond by venturing into the excess of exaggeration through “madness”, is at once “madness” of going beyond and the “absolute excess” of actually going beyond. This, as we see from the example of Descartes’ hypothesis on “madness” is strictly speaking, impossible. The “absolute excess” collapses any further possibility to go beyond. Of course, Derrida knows that the infinite excess is, again, strictly speaking, impossible. Elsewhere, not without the influence from Bataille, however, Derrida also proposes *the* impossible as the task of thinking. I believe Derrida knows that thinking the impossible the limit of exaggeration. The impossible is a point at which exaggeration reaches the “demonic excess” (Plato, Republic 509c, transl. Bloom), beyond which “the hyperbole can no further go” (Plato, Republic 509c, transl. Shorey).

Especially in *The Gift of Death*, as I find it, Derrida speaks of the “hyperbolic” as the mode of disclosure. In the context of *The Gift of Death*, this would mean something ultimately *unjust*, that is, ultimate in the sense of being the divine gift or the gift of God, and *unjust* in relation to life: the gift of death is the right to put to death. Derrida, as I see it, attempts to say this in *The Gift of Death*. On the one hand, it is possible to discern exaggeration through, in Derrida’s terms,

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<sup>174</sup> I play here on the citation above: “The economy of this writing [*Meditations*] is a regulated relationship between that which exceeds and the exceeded totality: the *différance* of the absolute excess.” (WD 75) For a groundbreaking exposition of *différance* from the perspective of “economy”, supervised by Derrida, see Irene E. Harvey, *Derrida and the Economy of Différance*. Indiana University Press, 1986.

<sup>175</sup> Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 76.



“hyperbolization”. On the other hand, exaggeration also conceals something absolute, that is, humanly unbearable and in the end, fatal. At the same time, we know that people kill each other because they believe they have the right to do so. Seen from the perspective of this *real* excess, in order to say something philosophical about it, is strictly speaking impossible. That would be unjust, leading to philosophical positions that actually may defend this “right”. The temptation to speak the impossible incites the empty but fascinating idea of the impossible, without its connotations of the real/impossible/excess. To think *the* impossible is to fall in love, not with wisdom, but with the demonic excess of exaggeration. The demon of exaggeration drives people “mad”. They think they are philosophers of the *divine* madness but they are *mad*...

The above deviation is nevertheless relevant in relation to the general problematic here, namely the constant repression of the excess of exaggeration in philosophy. To say like Heidegger, generally, that metaphysics represses thinking in the history of philosophy, is to miss the point. One could say that this is Heidegger’s own repression of exaggeration. As I see it in my reading of Descartes, and also Derrida, metaphysics is going beyond through exaggeration. As the discourse on nothing (Heidegger) metaphysics is a discourse of exaggeration. I do not mean to say that we should discard Descartes’ *Meditations* but only that after the centuries of reading it as *the* metaphysical treatise, we miss its enormous importance and relevance for understanding the operations of exaggeration as the force of thinking in philosophy – notwithstanding Descartes’ real or feigned intention to provide the metaphysical foundation of science.

## Düttmann with Descartes: to Belgioioso’s emphasis of the hyperbolic method

In the following I establish a dialogue between Düttmann and my analysis of exaggeration in Descartes. To begin with, in Düttmann’s reference to Adorno, I consider the notion of exaggeration as constitutive for thinking:

The idea that between thought and exaggeration there is a link that proves to be constitutive of both thought itself and its exposition, is an idea Adorno repeatedly formulates without ever systematically developing it. Because this link purportedly grounds thought’s relationship to truth, the lack of a systematic development cannot be explained as the result of a simple omission on the part of the philosopher. The question must be raised whether Adorno’s idea does not itself

represent an exaggeration. Does the exaggeration of thinking not frustrate the attempt to develop a thought systematically? Does the absence of a systematic development of the idea that thinking constitutively depends on exaggeration not lie in the essence of exaggeration itself, in the impossibility of justifying an exaggeration?<sup>176</sup>

Thinking maybe recognizes exaggeration immediately but it does not abstain automatically from thinking along the line of exaggeration. Moreover, thinking does not always recognize exaggeration immediately. But then, according to Düttmann:

Every justified exaggeration is no longer an exaggeration. Once justified, exaggeration is either an external device or a necessary limitation of thought. In both cases it ceases to be an exaggeration *constitutive* of thought and its claim to truth; indeed, it ceases to be an *exaggeration* that could be regarded as constitutive of thought and its claim to truth. As external device it may serve the purpose of rhetorical emphasis, yet strictly speaking its function cannot be justified from the point of view of thought. Thought as such stands in no need of rhetorical emphasis, since the latter has no bearing on whether a thought is true or false. Here exaggeration does not constitute the thought. As soon as exaggeration has been justified as a rhetorical device, it also ceases to be an exaggeration. It has been domesticated. A necessary limitation, however, belongs to thinking itself. The moment this belonging has been critically elucidated, the necessary limitation cannot be viewed as an exaggeration active in *every* thought.<sup>177</sup>

Düttmann's view on exaggeration as the rhetorical device emphasises what I observe as two different operations of exaggeration in Descartes' *Meditations*, namely, the difference between the operation of exaggeration as the rhetorical device and exaggeration in the thinking beyond. In the *Meditations*, I find exaggerations that emphasize sarcasm. Only at this level and in these instances, as I see it, we can speak of the occurrence of the rhetorical exaggeration in the *Meditations*. The rhetorical exaggeration occurs in Descartes' ambition to "demolish" and "build" up the conditions for knowledge "anew" "from the foundations"; being "cast" into the "excessive darkness" of doubt although the meditator has decided to plunge oneself into the sea of uncertainty voluntarily; of being "dazzled by the sight" upon seeing "clearly and distinctly" that God exists but having to return back to the matters of life here and now; of the (dis)appearing

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<sup>176</sup> Düttmann, *Philosophy of Exaggeration*, p. 15.

<sup>177</sup> Düttmann, *Philosophy of Exaggeration*, p. 15.

“spectre” or “phantom” the meditator only at the end of the *Meditations* was able to recognize as such, as well as the difference between “being awake and asleep”. Also, in the last lines at the very end, in considering “our infirmity” before the demand for “making up the mind”.<sup>178</sup> Although here, as I see it, Descartes sums up the operation of exaggeration that redirects the thinking back to the basic notions that *resist* exaggeration, why we inevitably return to them (to exaggerate again).

Aside from the sarcastic exaggerations, Descartes employ exaggeration as the way of thinking beyond. This difference is important for Belgioioso’s emphasis on the methodical function, as Belgioioso asserts it, of Descartes’ innovative use of the hyperbole. Another argument for the methodical exaggeration at work in the *Meditations* is following. Unlike the sarcastic exaggerations, as I find it, the methodical exaggeration does not make a rhetorical emphasis. As a method it leads nowhere but back to basic notions that were put to doubt for hyperbolic reasons. The point is, the basic notions resist exaggeration. The methodical exaggeration exhausts itself by annihilating the hyperbolic reasons for doubt. Thus, going beyond the subject of clear and distinct understanding, which resists exaggeration, thinking reaches the point at which the clear and distinct understanding gets blurry – the eyes get blind and the “eye of mind” takes over. Finally, with Düttmann, the methodical exaggeration in the *Meditations*, then, only provides the conditions for thinking as a “gesture”:

The exaggeration that no longer measures itself against something given or presupposed, something to which it could be reduced and which would ensure its intelligibility, is neither an indication of truth nor a symptom of madness and delusion, it is neither thinking nor its opposite. Rather, it is thinking as gesture. Why is such an exaggeration constitutive for every thought aiming at truth? Why is thinking a gesture? Because with every new and inaugurating thought the world is experienced differently, and because in opening up and disclosing a world, thinking has already and irrecoverably been driven beyond itself. (PE 20)

It seems, nevertheless, that thinking does not miss the opportunity to exaggerate. Like the human capacity for cruelty, thinking makes violence against the “good sense” (*bon sens*).

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<sup>178</sup> Quotes from Haldane translation.

## From excessive darkness to dazzling light: the irony of the greatest joy

We find the other examples of the rhetorical exaggeration in the *Meditations*, as Descartes brings at play the language of spiritual insight. In at least two instances in the *Meditations*, in places that may have strategic significance, Descartes covers the theme of the spiritual journey from darkness to light. When I claim that these are the rhetorical exaggerations, I do not mean to denigrate the possibility of a strain of mysticism in Descartes. Descartes' famous dreams from his youth are not without esoteric significance. They indeed decide which path he will follow in life – *larvatus prodeo*, as it were. In the *Meditations*, however, I suggest that the function of the allusions to spiritual insights is to legitimate, for the watchful eyes of the theologians of the Sorbonne, the sincerity of Descartes' attempt to see God clearly and distinctly. In this sense, they are rhetorical exaggerations, also because Descartes goes beyond them too, to deal with the hyperbolic reasons for doubt through exaggeration beyond the hyperbolic possibility of an "evil genius".

Descartes, meditating on the darkness of doubt at the end of the First Meditation:

But this is an arduous undertaking, and a kind of laziness brings me back to normal life. I am like a prisoner who is enjoying an imaginary freedom while asleep; as he begins to suspect that he is asleep, he dreads being woken up, and goes along with the pleasant illusion as long as he can. In the same way, I happily slide back into my old opinions and dread being shaken out of them, for fear that my peaceful sleep may be followed by hard labour when I wake, and that I shall have to toil not in the light, but amid the *inextricable darkness* of the problems I have now raised.<sup>179</sup>

Haldane translates it as "excessive darkness". The darkness at the beginning of the spiritual journey establishes the decision to proceed on a path of renunciation of the world toward the divine light. The function of darkness is to annul, as Descartes declares at the beginning of the First Meditation, everything he took for granted – everything, in the hyperbolic sense, even that he exists as he perceives and conceives himself to be. For this hyperbolic reason, this spiritual gesture is a gesture of rhetorical exaggeration. For those who in this gesture see the irony, its objective is not to ridicule the spiritual aspirations. The irony is precisely

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<sup>179</sup> CSM II p. 15. (My emphasis.)

connected to Descartes' ambition, as he declares it at the beginning of the prefatory letter to Sorbonne, to provide a philosophical, not theological argument to the questions of the existence of God and the soul. The rhetorical exaggeration emphasises the irony of the theologian's bookish experience of the divine. The irony is at a safe distance as it dwells in the excessive darkness of doubt – the realm of the theologian is the knowledge of God in the light of the mystery of faith. The spiritual insight of the philosopher who meditates on God connects directly to God. As Descartes states in the First Meditation, God is fixed in his mind, in the faculty of clear and distinct seeing by the "mind's eye". Although there is certainty in this, Descartes famously doubts that what he sees and understands is true. A deceiving God lures in the excessive darkness of doubt.

Finally, at the end of the Third Meditation, Descartes bathes in the divine light—God is not a deceiver, and he can trust that God the mind sees is not just a fixed idea:

But before examining this point more carefully [that God 'cannot be a deceiver'] and investigating other truths which may be derived from it, I should like to pause here and spend some time in the contemplation of God; to reflect on his attributes, and to gaze with wonder and adoration on the beauty of this *immense light*, so far as the eye of my darkened intellect can bear it. For just as we believe through faith that the supreme happiness of the next life consists solely in the contemplation of the divine majesty, so experience tells us that this same contemplation, albeit much less perfect, enables us to know the greatest joy of which we are capable in this life.<sup>180</sup>

Haldane translates it "dazzling light". The literary quality of these passages, among others in the *Meditations*, are dramatic and inspiring. Descartes unfolds the melodrama of the ambivalent sentiments of religious humility and enthusiasm. The impending joy of the spiritual insight on the journey from darkness to light is, after all, bliss. And why not, as Bataille maintains, mad and tragic laughter. There is irony in this. Perhaps, this irony, which betrays itself in the primacy Descartes does not hide to give to the leisure and the wonder of the *world*, is the sign of wisdom. The wisdom seems to lead by way of exaggeration from the "dazzling light" down to earth and "the greatest joy of which we are capable in this life". It is common in the wisdom traditions to return to everyday life upon the realisation of enlightenment. Perhaps the most famous example is the Zen

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<sup>180</sup> CSM II pp. 35-36. (My emphasis.)

saying of the master to his disciple who asks for advice what to do when the *satori* is achieved – wash your cup.

## At play in Descartes

Descartes' ambition, put forward in the *Discourse on Method*, to improve life, "especially health", bespeaks the work he hoped to undertake. Descartes' *Meditations* serve this ambition by pointing out the task of guarding the clear and distinct understanding of the "good sense" he puts forward in the *Discourse*, from the persuasive rationality of exaggeration. Descartes in *Meditations* demonstrates the latter by proceeding through the exaggerated doubt for "metaphysical reasons", and by "withdrawing the mind from the senses" – far off from the "good sense". Dealing with the questions of God and the soul, "the route which I follow in explaining them is so untrodden and so remote from the normal way, that I thought it would be not helpful to give a full account of it in a book written in French and designed to be read by all and sundry, in case weaker intellects might believe that they ought to set on the same path."<sup>181</sup>

Exaggeration is at play in the *Meditations*. Demonstrating this involves Descartes' cogitations of the "I am" (*ego sum*). "I am" operates as the secret agent of a *coup d'état* on the apparent metaphysical foundation of physics. The question "What am I?" is going beyond the position "I am here". As the reduction of the place and the sense of being here establishes "I am" alone, it precedes the existence of God. Following the assertion "I am, I exist" in the Second Meditation, Descartes proceeds to contemplate God's existence. "I am" has the power to pronounce "God exists" or not to pronounce it. Pronouncing "God exists", Descartes erases "I am" as self-arising existence. The question "What am I?" brings forward the notion of the "I" as the "thinking thing"; the exaggeration finds its rational explanation as an "unextended substance" whose "essence is to think". If we take on this nature of the mind, we could proceed by contemplating its status as *divine*, transcending the immediacy of finding ourselves *here* as human beings.

At play here is the exaggeration overshooting "I am" and imposing the "substance" of the "thinking thing" in its place, or rather, beyond its place. The thinking thing positions itself beyond the "I". It initially formulates the exaggerated

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<sup>181</sup> CSM II pp. 6-7.

uncertainty of its bodily mental condition, and the exaggerated uncertainty of the existence of the physical things. The obscure domain of the “mind’s eye” exaggerates the “natural light” of clear and distinct seeing with the *eyes*. Even the “insane” know their mind. Indeed, because they know *only* their mind, they are insane. They do not look at the things in the world clearly and distinctly but insist on thinking that they are “kings when they are poor” and so on.

## I remain

The general reception of Descartes’ *Meditations* treats it as a “metaphysical treatise”. The critique of exaggeration discerns it as a discourse of exaggeration – of thinking beyond “I am here”, however, only to point out the unmoving thinking subject that stays in place. “I am here” is the totality of perceptions and conceptions, its position in space and its relation to the external objects. This is the subject at hand in *Meditations*, and if we will, its task of thinking. “I am here” is the first principle of certainty. The “first philosophy” takes the initial step of thinking beyond the subject at hand, beyond certainty; moves beyond this certainty, towards the creation of concepts that make everything uncertain. Of course, this exaggeration is there for “metaphysical reasons”.

Beyond the subject at hand, exaggeration goes beyond the clear and distinct understanding. Exaggeration is the principle of René Descartes’ “first philosophy” in *Meditations*, going beyond the fact “that I am here”. Through the increasing exaggeration, the reasoning leads finally to the notions of the existence of God and the distinction between mind and body. In the end, the “that I am here” remains immediately certain. This “demonstration”, however, falls into a blind spot.

That I am here is certain. As Descartes initially takes on the thread of exaggeration in *Meditations*, beginning to think – What am I? Does anything exist; the deceiving God? – I repress the fact that I am here. I am not beyond being and non-being. I am here, thinking beyond myself, a thinking thing. As long as I think, even if I think that I am beyond, the fact remains that notwithstanding that I am thinking beyond myself, I remain here.

A reading of Descartes’ *Meditations* without exaggeration: “I am here” is the one and only principle of first philosophy. “I am here” is the task of thinking from the position of the critique of exaggeration. Thinking beyond this fact is to exaggerate.

## Conclusion

In this last chapter I propose a series of hypotheses in bits and pieces of reasoning on the themes from the previous analyses. Some of them make point, extend or fall outside the point. The latter provide openings, the attempts to analysis, however, mostly to propose themes, if not by content then in the context of an enquiry of the function of exaggeration, if not for philosophy, but for the creative activity of thinking, or philosophising. The value of the latter is corresponding to a rather loose attitude to the pressure to make sense of things without close examination. As Descartes knew, the pressure brings forward the weakness of the mind: it becomes susceptible to exaggeration, that is, automatically, it thinks. This automatization is problematic as it provides certainty for our preconceived notions. We should not trust what we know. This implies a direction of thinking toward the flexibility of learning, which itself provides the conditions for invention – not fabrications as these belong to the order of automatising of thinking.

The risk of extravagance and eccentricity this may entail, however, should be prevented by an insight I hope to provide of the significance of exaggeration for thinking and its operations; the temptation of thinking to pile up, in Artaudian sense of exaggeration. Presenting these series of hypotheses, or the hypothetical potentialities in essayistic and aphoristic style, I want to allow for the creativity of thinking to emerge in protest to provocation, if not of exaggeration, but to think by association. In this way I hope to instigate a mode of critical reflection in the reader who is also a thinker, entailing the operation of the critique of exaggeration as the matter of accepting only what one understands clearly and distinctly. I myself may not be clear and distinct entirely but this may be a defect on my behalf, constitutionally so to speak. If *it* is distinctly articulated in my thinking, as any other extreme formations, it maybe provides a clear case in the light of the day of the underlying condition, which in some of us is a slumber of unknowing, and in others a sleep of reason. Does it create monsters? Not without exaggeration.





# Epitaph

Exaggeration is the reflection of thinking in the distorting mirror. Thinking thinks what it sees and it goes beyond the things at hand that are always already available to experience, to living. The creation of concepts, as the creative activity of thinking is on the surface of the distorting mirror. The thinking as reflection reflects the emerging condition of the surface. It does not know that it is distorted. The possibility of examination and the critique, in the sense of an enquiry in the conditions of thinking, its constitutions and phenomena – the ways of thinking – is the matter of positioning thinking in the openness of the world that we reflect; the light of the world touches the surface of the mirror and illuminates it. What is that we understand clearly and distinctly? Not the things we see in our mind but what comes to us in an unceasing flow of the phenomena that incite response and our participation in the world: the natural light.

Illumination is constant because we are in the world. If we hold merely on its reflection on the surface of our distorting mirror, approaching the world, we do not see that the world comes to us. This is how, when we think, we think beyond the things in the world, which are all this natural light. We see with our mind's eye, which is blind. It creates its own bright ideas. Proposing how things are, not seeing that they are, as they are, thinking exaggerates for the simple reason that it does not reflect itself in the world but the world reflecting on its distorted surface. If exaggeration is a key condition for thinking then every thinking, creating concepts, is thinking beyond the things at hand, beyond the subjects of clear and distinct understanding through exaggeration. This dogmatic scheme is itself an exaggeration because it is creatively conceptual. It revives nevertheless a blind spot of the possibility to view Descartes' idealism of the direct transmission of the world to our ability to be in it as the one of its phenomena, which implies that we have to absorb, merge ourselves with the world. The mastery of the world is an exaggeration. It implies the mastery of our mind's inclination to go beyond the things at hand by exaggeration, thinking only – is a distortion of the possibility of participation and openness without tears.

Now, it seems that thinking is not a problem but our modes of reflection. No news. At the same time, our modes of reflection, or as Descartes designates it, direction of thinking, is crucial, not as a matter of a rigid method but as the way which we take when are thinking. The fact that we think all the time, and as Artaud and Bataille demonstrate, we are able to go far beyond the scandalous expositions of this capacity, is precisely what we should watch constantly, however, not as a pressure but as an awareness of this possibility. Awareness is a position of openness and curiosity about the wonders that await us, if we just turn our heads from the displays of the distorting mirror. Time to leave the cave. Plato knew, not by going beyond but seeing the possibility of going beyond as a reason for suspicion. Does the power of the demonic excess of exaggeration provide the endless possibilities to absorb the world or excrete it?

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