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DAVID FOSTER WALLACE SPECIAL ISSUE

Review of *Freedom and the Self: Essays on the philosophy of David Foster Wallace*

Freedom and the Self: Essays on the philosophy of David Foster Wallace, Edited by Cahn, S. M. and Eckert, M., New York: Columbia University Press, 2015

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In his undergraduate philosophy dissertation Wallace described fatalism as 'a meta-physical thesis characterizing the world as working in a certain sort of way, in which everything that did happen had to happen, everything that does and will happen must happen, and in which persons as agents can do nothing but go with the flow over which they enjoy absolutely no influence' (2011: 143). From the same editorial team that brought this thesis to the masses comes *Freedom and the Self: Essays on the Philosophy of David Foster Wallace*, a collection emphasising Wallace's 'overlooked' philosophical background that continues to 'play a lasting role in his work and thought, including his ideas about the purpose and possibilities of fiction' (Ryerson, 2011: 2).

Considering Wallace's early engagement with technical modal logic alongside his later eudaemonic meditations, the collection cements its foundation on philosophical terms to bolster an appreciation of Wallace's fiction that points to future potentials for more nuanced readings of his works.[1] The first four essays each elucidate significant attributes of Wallace's response to Taylor's "Fatalism". William Hasker's opening piece, 'David Foster Wallace and the Fallacies of "Fatalism"' (1–30), illustrates the 'splendid achievement' of Wallace's System J (the logico-semantic framework created to articulate the flaw in Taylor's argument for fatalism) as a contribution to contemporary Taylor criticism. Nevertheless, Hasker highlights an error in Wallace's argument, though one that does little to diminish his achievement. Conceding that this achievement is merely, thanks to System J, a more effective update of John Turk Saunders's initial criticism, Hasker believes that Wallace 'has failed to grant Taylor's premise P5 *in the sense in which Taylor understood it*' (22). Specifically Wallace refuses to grant Taylor's rhetorical tenacity in upholding our understanding of 'consequences of' as 'conditions for' (Wallace, 2011: 169). This impairs Wallace's argument because, Hasker argues, Wallace's 'admirably explicit' outline of his philosophical project was 'to grant [Taylor] everything he seems to want in the argument' (18; Wallace, 2011: 151). Hasker finds this flaw in Wallace's

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[1] Based on Taylor, S. J., 2015. "getting to the core of things": A Review of Robert K. Bolger & Scott Korb, eds. *Gesturing Toward Reality: David Foster Wallace and Philosophy* and Steven M. Cahn & Maureen Eckert, eds. *Freedom and the Self: Essays on the Philosophy of David Foster Wallace*. *Postmodern Culture*, 26(1).

uncharacteristically careless reading of Taylor's *Metaphysics* 'in which the view [of the distinction between the *act* and the *ability* to act] is attributed by Taylor to his opponents' (27; Taylor, 1974: 64–66). If correct, Hasker illustrates that Wallace's was indeed a formidable mind capable of achieving intellectual success even *in spite of*, through an exceptional misreading, failing to maintain the integrity of his argumentative methodology.

In 'Wallace, Free Choice, and Fatalism' (31–56) Gila Sher highlights the subtle distinctions between logical and semantic arguments: though the former is commonly (and erroneously) attributed to Taylor's 'Fatalism', Wallace was aware that the latter better described Taylor's method. This is crucial, because it is only by considering Taylor's modal operators (as he himself does) as *nonlogical* that Wallace is able to advance the description of them as physical by 'distinguish[ing] between two types of physical modalities' (40). This distinction underpins Wallace's proof that Taylor's conclusion is an ambiguous and therefore insufficient defence of fatalism. Sher concludes that Wallace's sensitivity to Taylor's ambiguity allowed him a bifurcated rendering of the conclusion of 'Fatalism': either the 'context of evaluation' *or* 'the context of occurrence' is dominant; in the latter case, Free Choice is still an active force that denies fatalistic constrictions (43–44). Concluding that attention to detail and innovative technical distinctions at the semantic level allow Wallace to reclaim Free Choice from the clutches of Fatalism results from a comprehensive appreciation of his semantic sensitivity, Sher illustrates the efficacy of engaging with denser works in furthering our understanding of Wallace's relationship with language and philosophy.

M. Oreste Fiocco is similarly appreciative of Wallace's semantic distinctions. Where Sher focussed on the treatment of personal agency in both Taylor and Wallace, Fiocco is concerned with what kind of philosophical structure permits such agency. For Fiocco, this is *contingency*, 'the presence of nonactualized possibility in the world' (57). In 'Fatalism and the Metaphysics of Contingency' (57–92) Fiocco considers Wallace's critique of Taylor's argument 'significant' because it foregrounds '*synchronic possibility*, the idea that incompatible states of affairs are possible at a single moment'. Synchronic possibility, Fiocco believes, 'provides the basis of distinguishing

two systematic accounts of truth', namely 'modality and time: two metaphysics of contingency' (58). In the first – modality – contingency is located *at* each moment, thus permitting synchronic possibility; in the second – time – contingency is the result of moments succeeding *toward a future*, where 'possibility arises not *at* this moment but *from it*', thereby *denying* synchronic possibility (79). From these definitions, Fiocco illustrates that, while Wallace foregrounds this notion of synchronic possibility, 'Wallace and Taylor are actually making incompatible assumptions about the nature of contingency; each is presupposing a totally different view of the modal features of the world in time' (76). Fiocco criticises Wallace's assumption that Taylor accepts synchronic possibility, arguing that Taylor instead subscribes to a temporal (not modal) metaphysics. This should prove greatly interesting to Wallace scholars: synchronic possibility evidently plays a significant role in Wallace's own understanding of contingency. Fiocco writes that the 'importance of synchronic possibility to Wallace's thinking [. . .] is apparent from the "visual apparatus" he presents to illuminate his discussion' (81; Wallace, 2011: 184–186). Here Fiocco cites Wallace's inclusion of a graphical timeline in his thesis, which charts the convergence and divergence of incompatible realities at single moments of contingency, where free will determines which realities would then be actualized (Wallace, 2011: 186). '[A]lthough the focus is on the relations among worlds at moments'. Fiocco writes, 'an essential feature of these moments is that there are many possibilities at any given one' (81).

Editor Maureen Eckert then considers Wallace's philosophical work alongside its narrative consequences. In 'Fatalism, Time Travel, and System J' (93–108), Eckert considers Wallace's 'System J [. . .] useful for exploring [David] Lewis's account [in 'The Paradoxes of Time Travel' (1976)] of the shift of context driving the Grandfather Paradox while pushing further into matters of modality' (100). Eckert also explains System J, supplementary to Hasker's earlier illustration.[2] In Wallace's 'semantic

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[2] Readers of *Fate, Time, and Language* will note that this definition is an expansion of her brief sketch of the strategy provided in her introduction to Wallace's thesis (Eckert, 2011, 135–9).

machinery', Eckert writes, '[s]ituations are joined in "mother-and-daughter" relations that compose causal paths'. Eckert notes that '[t]his model permits a fine-grained tracking of situational physical modalities and, ultimately, their relationships over time, preventing the crucial scope errors that the fatalist argument trades upon' (102). Using Wallace's model, Eckert shows how we are justified in presently judging the obvious impossibility of a certain event which occurred yesterday (e.g. that Big Ben was destroyed by a North Korean missile) but we are 'not entitled to conclude that yesterday' the order for such an event could not be given (103). A corollary is, Eckert notes, 'the most radical feature of System J': the model 'allows for *no alternative presents in the context of an actual given present*' (103). This feature of System J permits, in Eckert's own Lewisian example, 'no way [for] a time traveller [to] actually and physically return to a past moment in personal time' whilst defending the impossibility's *conceivability* (105). With liberated imagination and contingent reality thus demarcated, Eckert concludes with thoughts of Wallace's evolution from philosopher to author. Is it problematic, Eckert wonders, for an author-to-be 'to sever fictional realms from the actual physical world so cleanly *and* decisively'? (106) The semantic system Wallace constructed, System J, appears to do exactly this, yet Eckert finds the system's elegance equally appealing to both philosophers and authors (106). Wallace's formal system, like his fiction, is thus an elegant means to locate true freedom of choice, to demystify by debunking rhetorical sleights, such as Taylor's, that defend a fatalistic universe or one with a Lewisian, violable past. Eckert, then, at last widens the discussion of the legacy of Wallace's early work on Taylor's "Fatalism" to the narrative concerns of his fiction, as he exchanged philosophical semantics for semantically sensitive narratives.

Observing the shift from philosophy to creative writing, Eckert lays the foundation for Daniel R. Kelly's 'David Foster Wallace as American Hedgehog' (109–132). Kelly declares that 'much of what Wallace talks about under the monikers of free will and choice' must be understood in their ethical, existential, and everyday senses (128n2). Kelly takes this colloquial (i.e. non-Logical) understanding of free will to be the 'one big thing' Wallace 'knows'. By contextualizing Wallace's understanding

of free will by referring to his major primary works – essays on Dostoevsky, Kafka, television and contemporary American fiction, in addition to *Infinite Jest* – Kelly is able to persuasively conclude that '[t]he reason [Wallace's] Kenyon address feels like a skeleton key to his entire body of work is that it makes [one] point [. . .] directly' – namely that 'Wallace's most fundamental piece of advice' for regaining free will from a noisy, faith-lacking, hedonistic American culture 'can be distilled down to two simple words: *wake up*' (124).

Encouraging further study into a corollary of considering free will as 'Wallace's hedgehog's "big subject"' – the 'secondary shadow' of 'fraudulence' as explicated in his later work, specifically 'Good Old Neon' (2004, 179) – Kelly seemingly anticipates the collection's final essay. In 'David Foster Wallace on The Good Life' (133–168), Nathan Ballantyne and Justin Tosi aim to 'contrast what Wallace says with some popular positions from moral philosophy and contemporary culture', on what philosophers call the *good life* (133), namely 'ironism', 'hedonism', and 'narrative theories', thereby locating Wallace's implied eudaemonic theory. Such triangulation leads Ballantyne and Tosi to conclude that 'Wallace suggests [both] an attractive method for pursuing moral questions [n]ot unlike Wittgenstein' and 'also offers clear proposals about the content of a good life' (135). While they acknowledge that it is beyond their means to fully articulate his method and content of a good life, Ballanytne and Tosi believe that their 'reading of Wallace will begin to sketch answers' (135) to questions about the details of his artistic ethics – a call for further interdisciplinary engagement between Wallace Studies and Philosophy. Perhaps the essay's biggest problem, however, concerns the attempt to identify and define Wallace's stance on 'narrative theories' of life. While convincingly illustrating how Wallace rejects the 'weak' formulation of story-based ontologies, Ballantyne and Tosi are less successful explaining his opinion of the 'strong thesis': 'The strong thesis features a subtle and complicated understanding of the self', they write, and '[w]e're not ultimately sure how Wallace would engage with the view' (157). This is a curious conclusion as Wallace's early works, namely *The Broom of the System* and 'The Empty Plenum', clearly stem from a deep interest in the strong narrative theories of Wittgenstein

and Derrida. What makes the essayists' omission more glaring is their subsequent comment that Wallace's 'humane recommendations about how to approach reflection on the good life' is 'a sort of Wittgensteinian methodology' – the ambiguous description tantamount to an obfuscation of Wallace's ultimate consideration of Korsgaardian narrative theories (159). Nevertheless, this final essay does provide an early engagement with Kelly's proposal that 'fraudulence' is antithetical to Wallace's free will: Ballantyne and Tosi's identification of fraudulence in narrative theories of the good life indicates a promising site for future scholarship.

A tightly structured, well-informed and, at times, highly fertile collection, *Freedom and the Self* is a rigorous philosophical addition to Wallace Studies. Answering *Fate, Time, and Language*'s call for Wallace's philosophical arguments to 'be taken seriously and subjected to careful scrutiny', *Freedom and the Self* is a sincere 'tribute to a philosopher of consequence' (Cahn & Eckert 2011: viii). Readers of *Freedom and the Self* may be frustrated that this ostensible 'assessment [. . .] of Wallace's philosophical thought' (Cahn and Eckert, 2011: vii) restricts itself, for the most part, to Wallace's only explicitly philosophical offering – his undergraduate thesis. Yet the collection illustrates the significant benefits of serious engagement with Wallace's dissertation, which allows the development of his fundamental creative inspiration – 'what it is to be a fucking *human being*' (McCaffery, 1993: 131) – to be seen from its genesis.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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