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- 1 Steven M. Cahn and Maureen Eckert, *Freedom and the Self: Essays on the Philosophy of David Foster Wallace*.
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- 3 Paolo Pitari
- 4 Independent scholar

5

Freedom and the Self: Essays on the Philosophy of David Foster Wallace is the second collection of essays in *Wallace studies* that approaches the author from a philosophical standpoint, and most of the critics and students who look forward to reading this book have read the first, *Gesturing Toward Reality: David Foster Wallace and Philosophy* (edited Robert K. Bolgerand Scott Korb), published just one year before. If that is the case for you, just know that this book is *very* different. It mostly concerns itself with Wallace's undergrad philosophy thesis, published in 2010 under the title *Fate, Time, and Language: An Essay on Free Will* (also edited by Steven M. Cahn). With such focus, it manages to make us more familiar with a side of Wallace's we readers are not much in contact with: his philosophical background not just in existential terms, but in logical terms also. In this sense, I must say, my main critique to this

collection is that the final two essays would have been much more in context in a book like *Gesturing Toward Reality*. In here, they seem (at least relatively) out of context. My opinions aside, let's look at the content.

6

The first essay, William Hasker's "David Foster Wallace and the Fallacies of 'Fatalism'" treats Wallace's philosophy honors thesis, one devoted "to the issues raised by Richard Taylor's paper 'Fatalism.'" In considering the topic, Hasker chooses this structure: 1) presenting Taylor's argument; 2) presenting "a selection from the criticisms made of it;" 3) presenting "a summary of Wallace's system" and his criticisms of Taylor; 4) comparing Wallace's criticisms to those of the past, showing whether or not they provide innovative ideas; 5) introducing how "these problems present themselves in our own time."¹

7

In short, Richard Taylor deduces fatalism from a set of six universal presuppositions in contemporary philosophy, coming to the conclusion that in modal reasoning the way we think about the past also applies to the future: on the one hand, a captain's order to battle tomorrow will make the occurrence of the battle a necessary condition; on the other - given P5 (the fifth philosophical presupposition)², "in the absence of the necessary condition (i.e. the battle), [...] it is *not in my power* to issue an order to battle tomorrow, [...] *I have no control over* which sort of order I will issue." A fatalist, then, is one who "thinks he cannot do anything about the future. [...] [One who] thinks that even his own behavior is not in the least within his power" (2).

8

Of all the criticisms Taylor had to face, the only one he ever acknowledged was the one brought forth by Steven M. Cahn - editor of this collection! -, who argued that Taylor's "original motivation . . . to support the Aristotelian conclusion that future contingent propositions lack classical truth values" (8) did not yield the results Taylor himself hoped for. Cahn pointed out that Taylor, in fact, was *not* a fatalist and that his paper was written in the form of a *reduction ad absurdum*. The real point of Taylor's argument was not to promote fatalistic thought, but to challenge philosophers to point out relevant differences between what we take for granted (fatalism concerning the past) and what we find disgusting and absurd (fatalism concerning the future). Taylor was right, we're lacking in answers, but his thesis created what seemed to be the monstrous, and irresolvable, problem of fatalism.

9

So Hasker concentrates on Wallace's attempt to offer "new objections that are more successful than those made previously" (16) to the problem of fatalism. When most have tried to reject Taylor's argument by disallowing his presuppositions, Wallace will grant him his presuppositions and "show that the conclusion [Taylor] desires still does not follow validly from that argument" (18). And where philosophers have

usually relied on intuition, Wallace will construct a logical/formal/modal system to ground his thesis.

10

Or at least those were the intentions. There's no way to summarize Wallace's system here, so I'll just leave you with Hasker's conclusions on Wallace's response to Taylor's argument:

11 On the one hand, his creation of System J, and his articulation of his reply to Taylor in terms of that system, must be recognized as a splendid achievement. [...] On the other hand, his claim to have pointed out a fundamentally new objection, quite different from those made previously, and his claim to have granted Taylor's premises and shown his argument to be invalid cannot be sustained (23).

12 The second essay, Gila Sher's "Wallace, Free Choice, and Fatalism," starts by noting that Wallace, in his 2005 commencement address later published under the title *This Is Water*, extolls the value of "freedom of choice regarding what to think about" and focuses "on how, in order to cope with life, we have to decide actively to see it in ways that will not let it crush us." Sher's shrewd (because unusual in *Wallace Studies*) intuition is that "the view that *we cannot change reality, we can only change the way we think about it* is, in a way, a form of *fatalism*" (32). And yet, twenty years earlier Wallace argued against Taylor's argument, which "supported fatalism in a rather unusual way, namely, on general logical and semantic grounds" (32). In this sense, Sher's "goal in this paper is to reconstruct Wallace's critique of Taylor's argument for fatalism in a clear and concise way, so that it is easy to see its main line of reasoning and potential power" (32).

13

Here's how Wallace reflects on Taylor's argument: it is clearly logically valid in the sense that its conclusions rightfully result from its premises; but these premises, i.e. the six "universally accepted" philosophical presumptions, are not purely logical: the truth-value of premises 1 and 2 "is not attributable to pure logic" (35). It then follows that Taylor's argument is not a purely logical one. "Wallace, therefore, *rightly* understands Taylor's argument as (or as intended to be) a "semantic," or a logico-semantic, argument rather than either a logical or a metaphysical argument" (35, my emphasis) and concludes that "if Taylor and the fatalists want to force upon us a metaphysical conclusion, they must do metaphysics, *not* semantics" (36). This is why Wallace methodologically proceeds by pointing out and outlining the "implicit nonlogical modalities, causal relations, and time indices" (42) that affect Taylor's system and provide "fertile ground for ambiguities and equivocations" (42). These lead Wallace to successfully prove (in Sher's estimation) that "Taylor's premises do not *force* fatalism upon us" (46).

14

The third essay, M. Oreste Fiocco's "Fatalism and the Metaphysics of Contingency" is a brilliant, precise, and enlarging discussion on the

subject of the first two essays. It brings the matters of fatalism, Taylor, and Wallace into the wider context of Western metaphysics and the history of philosophy in general. This is important – Fiocco thinks – because the whole discussion at hand contains various misunderstandings. The key here, again, is that “Taylor . . . does not accept fatalism. [...] Following Aristotle, [...] *he deniesthat every proposition whatsoever is either true or, if not true, false*” (62, my emphasis). Therefore, Fiocco states: “many of those who have been critical of Taylor . . . have simply misunderstood his project and the basis of his Aristotelian argument” (63).

15

These misunderstandings are to be traced back to two different conceptions of metaphysics, the contrast of which affected many strands of philosophy. When Taylor’s argument first came out (in the ‘60s), “it was orthodox that the only modalities pertinent to philosophy were *linguistic*. [...] On this understanding, much of the basal structure of reality . . . is a result of the interaction with the world of the minds of conscious beings” (64-65). Taylor instead stood on an understanding of the world rooted in Aristotle. In this, “the basal structure of reality is entirely independent of the minds of conscious beings” (65), reality is clearly not linguistic, but it is neither based on causal nor physical modalities, and this is where – Fiocco contends – all of Taylor’s critics have failed to engage with his argument, including Wallace, who “recognizes the need . . . to get clear on the modality relevant to Taylor’s discussion,” but makes the same mistake his predecessors had made: that of considering the pertinent modality as physical and causal.

16

Nonetheless, “he examines with more determination than his predecessors” the modal connections inherent to Taylor’s argument and in so doing “enables one to discern the crux of Taylor’s Aristotelian argument” (72): Taylor assumes that the world is ontologically homogeneous, meaning time is not a matter of concern. Wallace sees ambiguities in Taylor’s treatment of time and formulates *The Taylor Inequivalence*; successfully showing “that there are two [inequivalent] ways of understanding [Taylor’s] conclusion, one consistent with contingency, one not” (76). This should, in theory, disprove fatalism. And yet, Fiocco warns us, Wallace “has not undermined Taylor’s argument” (76), because Taylor and Wallace start from “incompatible assumptions about the nature of contingency” (77), one physical-cum-causal, the other Aristotelian.

17

In fact, Taylor’s two foundational ideas are an Aristotelian conception of metaphysics (reality based on the nature of things in themselves) and his denial of synchronic possibility. The proper interpretation of his argument, for Fiocco, turns on this latter notion. Taylor presupposes that states of affairs at a present moment must be as

they are, in other words: necessary. Wallace and pretty much all of Taylor's contemporaries found this reasoning faulty.

18

But what Taylor wanted to show was that his Aristotelian understanding of the world, when tied to the six popular philosophical assumptions we referred to multiple times, was incompatible with contingency. Specifically, he argued that certain propositions about the future turn out to be indeterminate and, therefore, at least one of contemporary philosophy's popular assumptions turns out to be mistaken.³ This is the one essay that explains most clearly how and why Taylor wasn't a fatalist. In doing so, though, Fiocco could have been more precise on the difference between Aristotelian and physical-cum-causal views of the world; this point, I think, comes as rather cloudy, and it being the point of departure of his argument, one is left with the sensation of having understood *almost* everything.

19

The fourth essay, Maureen Eckert's "Fatalism, Time Travel, and System J," connects Taylor and Wallace to David Lewis's theories about time travelling. The connection is found in Taylor's responses to what is termed "Ability Criticism." This is the criticism of the fifth premise of Taylor's argument - "no agent *can* perform any given act if there is lacking, at the same or any other time, some condition necessary for the occurrence of that act" (my emphasis) - brought forth by Aune, Saunders, and Abelson on the different meanings of *can*. These critics argued that Taylor's argument fails because individuals retain the *ability to do* even if circumstances do not permit certain actions to occur; but Taylor was able to dispense with "Ability Criticism" by showing that whatever argument his critics were implementing could as easily be applied to fatalism about the future as to fatalism about the past. In other words, that if one were to apply his critics' argument, one would have to argue that people could change the past.

20

And, Eckert tells us, the problem of disambiguating the senses of "can" is not so easily solved. Taylor noted that his critics differentiated between three senses of "can": (1) "what is within one's power to do, (2) what is possible for one to do, and (3) what is within one's ability to do" (96). Taylor got rid of (3) (= Ability Criticism), but that still left open the question of specifically defining the other two senses of can.

21

"David Foster Wallace exploits this remaining ambiguity in his attack on the fatalist argument, disambiguating these two remaining senses of 'can' through distinguishing between physical possibility and what he terms 'situational physical possibility'" (96). This is where Eckert introduces David Lewis.

22

"In 'The Paradoxes of Time Travel,' David Lewis attempts to dissolve [the 'Grandfather'] paradox with the intention of showing that

[time travel] is possible" (97); the "Grandfather Paradox" is the following: if a person has successfully travelled back in time, owns a gun, and is aiming that gun at her grandfather, "there is nothing *at that time* that would prevent her from killing her grandfather" (97). In other words, a person is moving through a continuous now (we always live in the present), which means she *can* kill her grandfather (Lewis calls this notion of time "personal time"). On the other hand, if we consider the concept of "objective time," that person has travelled to the past, and by killing her grandfather "she would then eliminate a necessary condition for her existence—there would be no future her that *can* travel back in time to commit the act in question" (97). In this analysis, (1) Lewis's "objective time" equals Wallace's "physical possibility," a realm in which the time traveller *can't* kill her grandfather; (2) Lewis's "personal time" equals Wallace's "situational physical possibility," here the time traveller *can* kill her grandfather.

23

For Wallace, therefore, the key to undermining Taylor's argument is in the analysis of the senses of *can*. Specifically, Wallace wants to show that premise five is incoherent with Taylor's conclusion, therefore rendering his argument invalid. With System J, Wallace builds a theory which grants "alternative *logically* possible presents" (104) but no alternative "physical and actually possible" (105) presents to show that while it is true that in Taylor's conclusion no agent could perform any given act if there wasn't, *at the same time*, the condition necessary for the occurrence of that act, it is *not* true that no agent could perform any given act if there wasn't, *at any other time*, the condition necessary for the occurrence of that act.

24

The fifth essay, Daniel Kelly's "David Foster Wallace as American Hedgehog" provides the necessary context as to why and how this discussion relates to larger matters in *Wallace Studies*. Kelly looks for Wallace's "one big thing" amongst his wide range of interests and, of course, Wallace's one big thing is free will/choice. But Kelly's essay lacks the philosophical/logical imprint that so peculiarly characterizes the book and therefore, to me, ends up not being a convincing addition to the collection mostly, I think, with regards to selection and placement: it might have worked best as an introduction.

25

That said, the essay notes that Wallace's concerns - "language and meaning; choice and the will; the self, selfishness, solipsism, and their prospects for being overcome -, all emanate from a core concern with, roughly, what it means 'to be a real human being' (MacCaffery 1993)" (109). This is why, Kelly goes on, both in all of the fiction and non-fiction Wallace confronted "the ways in which problems connected to choice presented themselves to those of us living in the turn-of-the-millennium United States" (111).

26

As we all know, this was Wallace's main concern. Reflecting on human beings and their need to find meaning, Wallace structured his ideas "into a schema made of three distinct, general components: (1) the primal *need* or basic *impulse* to give away or invest, (2) a sort of *resource* that is 'given away' or type of *currency* that a person is driven to invest, and (3) the objects at which the impulse might be directed, the *vessels* with which the resource might be filled, into which the currency might be channeled" (114).

27

In contemporary times, human beings try to find a balance between these three components, but the sheer amount of options and information is overwhelming; plus the very idea of what Wallace called "choosing our Temple" is regarded with deep suspicion. "Ideological passion disgusts us on some deep level" (120), and this creates a split inside us, between our innermost need of giving ourselves away and our intellectual cynicism about such a notion. Finally, all of these problems (which Wallace directly discusses in "E Unibus Pluram") are shown to lead to hedonism and addiction, seen as a "kind of flight from the pressures of choice" (123). In the end, Wallace's message, for Kelly, "can be distilled down to two simple words: *wake up*" (124).

28

The sixth and last essay, "David Foster Wallace on the Good Life" by Nathan Ballantyne and Justin Tosi, follows Kelly's approach in the sense that it aims at reconstructing Wallace's main philosophy in his life and career, but it does so by offering both new themes and connections and new approaches to previous conversations in Wallace studies. In this case, the authors "argue that his writings suggest a view about what philosophers call the *good life*" (133). They proceed by comparing Wallace's oeuvre with "popular positions from moral philosophy" and by presenting Wallace's reactions to "three positions about the good life." The first of these positions is *ironism*, which "involves distancing oneself from everything one says or does and putting on what Wallace often calls a 'mask of ennui.'" The second is *hedonism*, which states that "a good life consists in pleasure." The third is *narrative theories*, according to which "a good human life is characterized by fidelity to a unified narrative" (134).

29

(1) For Richard Rorty, "a society of ironists can remain committed to humane values by distinguishing between public and private justification" (138). Even if the ironist is "never quite able to take [him]self seriously," he can, nonetheless, commit to something just as e.g. people would commit to Christianity in the Middle Ages: without the need to ask *why*. Wallace totally disagrees; to him a good life is one of serious commitment, one that takes itself seriously. Irony is to him just a flight from responsibility, a childish attempt to be beyond criticism. It leaves a huge black hole inside the individual.

30

(2) Hedonism is completely and utterly rejected by Wallace (in *Infinite Jest* people stare at a screen until death by watching a movie so pleasurable it ends up killing them). But thinkers such as Epicurus or Bentham defended a theory called *value hedonism* according to which “what makes pleasure valuable is not the feeling or sensation itself, but our enjoyment of the sensation. It’s the *attitude of enjoyment* that is crucial” (141) to living a good life. In other words, it’s not pure sensational pleasure that counts; it’s finding pleasure in life itself. This is better, because it permits (unlike ironism and “pure” hedonism) people’s commitment to something, but it is still unacceptable for Wallace because it constitutes a total egotistic approach to life. “On these theories, other people are no more than *mere objects* in the state of affairs you value” (144). The only value your friends have is directly proportionate to how they affect *your* pleasure and *your* happiness. It’s a totally self-centered view on life.

31

(3) The basic idea under narrative theories is that “someone has a good life *only if* she has a narrative outlook on her life. [...] She must see her life as making sense as a single story in which she is the main character.” Narrative theories are subdivided into two categories, the “weak” thesis affirms that “*having a narrative is a necessary condition for a good life,*” and the “strong” thesis that “*a person simply is the thing described by a narrative*” (146). These theories avoid some of the pitfalls of hedonism, they allow for a deeper and richer definition of human life, where people can value commitments in friendships, family, work, and ethics in general. But, first, Wallace rejects the “weak” thesis. Not only people do not need narratives; narratives can be very dangerous:

32 To judge one’s life in terms of narrative success is to adopt a certain perspective. This perspective involves thinking of oneself as a character in a story, and evaluating that character in terms of her or his compliance with the story’s demands. If this sounds alienating, there’s a good reason. (156)

33 In other words, narratives can turn us into spectators (rather than participants) in our own lives. We become the audience of ourselves, hyper-self-conscious. We distance ourselves from ourselves, we become our own judges, we see ourselves falling short. This is the case in short stories like “Good Old Neon” and “The Depressed Person” where the protagonists hold fix idealized versions of themselves and self-destroy for not being able to achieve them. But narratives, seen through the “weak” thesis, also create another problem: “we tend to overvalue uniqueness or specialness in narratives, and this leaves us feeling inauthentic” (151). We “confuse uniqueness with authenticity” and end up reaching for emptiness or for versions of ourselves that turn us into frauds. Uniqueness has nothing to do with value, and our culture has forgotten that.

34

The “strong” thesis, instead – of which the major theorist noted is Christine Korsgaard –, states that narratives constitute us, that “a person is *identical* with her narrative. [...] If you are your narrative, there’s no way your narrative can alienate you from yourself. There’s no *you* without it” (157). But, again, Wallace is in disagreement (and again “Good Old Neon” is cited as a perfect example). It seems obvious, to Wallace, that “we are not merely our narratives, [...] because no narrative—perhaps nothing ever explicitly thought in words—can capture who we are. Although narratives can usefully express to others and to ourselves what we care about, they are never *who we are*. Selves are ineffable” (159).

35

All of these comparisons lead Ballantyne and Tosi to the following conclusion – which, in a way, seems to become the whole collection’s conclusion: Wallace, despite having a sincere attraction toward theories, nonetheless finds them unsatisfactory. “Wallace recognizes that theories of the good life, when taken to be more than limited sketches of reality, tend to result in our being judgmental or cruel *to ourselves*” (162-163). Theories are not reality, they’re just maps.

36

This collection presents, dissects, and explains that side of Wallace we students of literature knew was there but never really understood. It does it especially well by concentrating on a single specific matter and offering different points of view, thereby providing the reader not with an arbitrary reading/thesis/summary but with various elements he/she must work with in order to grapple with this philosophical conundrum. It is by the strength of its method, therefore, that *Freedom and the Self: Essays on the Philosophy of David Foster Wallace* successfully manages to engage and lead students of literature into a field not their own and enable them to understand logic and exactly why logic matters: it is one of the bases of David Foster Wallace’s existential troubles.

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