Ocularcentrism: Towards a Mastery over Life and Death

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The window is a curious invention. Often to be taken for granted as an unremarkable element in architectural designs, we may fail to apprehend how passage of lights allowed by the window cells fundamentally provides a material basis for the sustaining of our often visually-dependent bodies within enclosed environments. Should we prolong our stay in such an environment, by choice or otherwise, the window frames would define the limits of our world. The word ‘window’ originates from the Old Norse ‘vindauga’, a compound word that combines wind (vindr) and eye (auga). While the association with the ocular organ is lost in translation today, “our windows to the world” remains a commonplace description for the eye. A more common usage for the word “window” in contemporary imagination is the Microsoft computer operating system Windows, named for its window-like interface. Likewise, computer monitors and other screens like it are a much more apt candidate for the title of “our windows into the world” in modern times, for it is in them that our visual engagement with the world is overwhelmingly mediated. The screen exacerbates the stranglehold of our ocular impulse upon the landscape of contemporary human experiences: through our visual engagements of information in the form of electronic news media whereby the bodily shape of its presenter is of as much interest as (if not more than) the information itself; through the visual emphasis in our conception of entertainment such as the modern day video game industry and its constant attempt in achieving increasingly “lifelike” graphics; even intimacy is not immune to our ocular impulses, how things look became an integral part of desire itself, whereby the widespread availability of pornographic contents on the Internet can be understood as one of its cruder manifestations. Much of the technological innovations are produced by the visually-enabled for the visually-enabled, cashing out on our obsession with how everything looks. It may be said then, quite uncontroversially, that we are living in an ‘ocularcentric’ culture, where seeing is privileged above all the other senses.

1 Wisconsin anchorwoman Jennifer Livingston responded on October 2nd, 2012 to a disparaging letter claiming to be from a viewer complaining about her being a unsuitable role model to her younger female audiences due to her size http://www.businessinsider.com/fat-anchorwoman-speaks-out-2012-10
Like the window, the eye comes with its own frames. Frames that Dionne Brand describes as “perhaps already describing, perhaps not already as if born to it but born in it, already describing the edges of the picture and what must be at the focus…[the eye] is very precise as to how it wants to see the world”. To see is never neutral; it is not a mere passive apprehension of the visual, rather it is simultaneously a projection of the eye’s sphere of influence and an assimilation of the world in accordance to its framed narrative. To see is also to understand, hence the common English expression “I see” as a stand in for “I comprehend,” that is to say, in the words of Luce Irigaray, “I see something, framed as and reduced to an object -conceptual, mental - for my comprehension.” To see is to impose a familiar hermeneutic order onto the object of our apprehension; it is the recognition of something already known rather than the discovery of something new, or as Irigaray would put it, “seeing as understanding corresponds to a second time: we submit ourselves here to a model learned, and memorized.” It is perhaps no surprise that the word “theory” finds its etymological roots in vision, from the Greek word θεωρία, meaning to look at, to behold; to engage in speculative thinking is to impose meaning onto what is seen, and to assimilate that into an already coherent framework of understanding.

Ocularcentrism is the belief that vision, over all the other senses, is the best and most reliable means for making sense of the world. What we must understand by this, is not the privileging of a particular way to observe the world, but the privileging of language, the valorization of a learned code, of the memorization of a standardized form, that has supplanted the need to truly observe. As an example of this, the house next to my London residence was torn down a little less than a month after I had arrived, a house I and my housemates must have walked by every single day for weeks, if not more. Yet when called upon, none of us could describe what it had looked like prior to its demolition. No one could remember what colour the house was or even how many floors it had. It was understood by us as a “house” not through the result of careful visual observation, but through the recognition of a standardized visual form familiar to us, imposed upon us by language. Language, Irigaray will tell us, “will compel us to

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2 Brand, Seeing in Bread out of Stone, pp. 170-171
3 Irigaray, Being Two, How Many Eyes Have We, pp. 143
4 Ibid. (emphasis mine)
see it or catch only a glimpse of it through an idea [in this case, that of a house]...from which we will have to recognize it, renouncing a great part of our sight”. Language does not simply name the objects in the world as they register into our fields of vision; rather, language cuts us off from the world.

It is my contention that our ocularcentric impulses are motivated by a more general attempt to gain mastery over life and death. An encounter with blindness by the visually-dependent, as Tanya Titchkovsky would tell us, could invoke feelings of pity so disproportionately overwhelming in comparison to the actual lived experience of the blind individuals themselves. While the very ocularcentrism of our culture may provide a sufficient account as to why we attribute such a strong sense of tragedy to blindness, I would like to suggest, in its stead, that our anxiety towards blindness is coextensive to a more general anxiety towards death, towards the contingency that afflicts our existence. What is prescribed by the ocularcentric doctrines is not an identification with the living, or the changes inherent to the living world, but with a form that exhibits the semblance of a permanence that could outlast the finitude of the living world. Ocularcentrism is itself a means of coping with such anxieties. Irigaray illustrates this through the example of looking at a tree through the ocularcentric neglect of visual apprehension that language imposes upon us, “we do not see it changing, giving itself a form, forms, under our eye.....language submits the tree to a permanent form that it does not have as living.”

1. On the “Wisdom” of Vision

Vision’s alignment with wisdom and truth is vividly illustrated in the parable of the blind men and the elephant. The story begins with six blind men that learn one day that an elephant has arrived in their village. Not knowing what an “elephant” is, the men gather around in hopes of getting a sense of the beast through their touch. As the men each touch a different part of the elephant, they conclude widely different beliefs as to what an elephant is. While the man

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5 Ibid. pp. 144
6 Titchkovsky, Disability, Self and Society, pp. 9-11
7 Irigaray, Being Two, How Many Eyes Have We, pp. 144
touching the elephant’s leg likens it to a pillar, the others disagree vehemently. Having touched the elephant’s tail, trunk, ear, belly and tusk, they determine instead that an elephant is like a rope, a tree branch, a hand fan, a wall and a solid pipe respectively. In some versions of the story, the men’s disputes were eventually resolved by the arrival of someone who is only known as the “wise man”.8 The so-called “wise man” announces that they are all correct, that an elephant is all the things they have described, and that the nature of the dispute lies in the false generalization based on their narrow perceptions. What is taken to be the moral of this parable is the recognition of kernels of truths in different perspectives, that our different perspectives may constrain how we apprehend the world around us, and in so doing prevents us from seeing the “bigger picture”. Rather than being like the blind men, afflicted by the narcissism of their own subjective experiences, we ought to be “objective” and identify with the “wise man” whose access to vision makes him more trustworthy.

In this parable, wisdom is aligned with vision whereas touch is associated with, if not ignorance, at least a lack of wisdom. The man endowed with vision is wise, he is able to apprehend from afar and see the “bigger picture” that is presented as inaccessible to the blind men, whose touch does not allow for such a distance. The closeness of their touch renders the truths of their account suspicious; their “truths” become, at best, fragmented and incomplete, if not entirely untrue. This is a particularly important thing to understand about vision, as opposed to what is classically understood as the four other senses; a minimal distance is required for us to see. We cannot understand what we are seeing if it is directly touching our eyeballs, whereas the lack of such a distance does not impair the other senses: touch and taste both require direct contact in order to function, while hearing and smell are often amplified by the closing of distances. The necessity of distance in vision renders it the least intimate of our senses. Therefore, to say our culture is ocularcentric is also to say it is one that valorizes distance and separateness over intimacy and closeness. It is only in this kind of a culture that the late arriver in the parable is deemed “wise”; it is by virtue of the distance inherent to his ocular mode of apprehending the world that he is deemed closer to “truth” and “objectivity.”

8 One such version: http://www.jainworld.com/literature/story25.htm
This account of objectivity is entirely consistent with the Western philosophical canon. Whereby, the path to objectivity is mapped out by the maintenance of our distance from the subjectivities of our own perspective. We are meant to understand philosophical arguments through a process of extrapolation, for if we allow anything extraneous to the argument per se to influence how we come to understand its content, we are deemed to have committed a fallacy. To be “objective,” we must maintain a distance not unlike the ocular distance maintained by the “wise man.” The maintenance of this distance, in Western civilization, is increasingly becoming the ways we have come to envision ourselves; i.e., as separated, discrete individuals. Catherine Keller notes, “common sense identifies separateness with the freedom we cherish in the name of “independence” and “autonomy”[…]For [in] our culture it is separation which prepares the way for selfhood.”

If we accept philosophy’s etymological roots as the “love of wisdom,” we must wonder, what kind of wisdom is this? Can this so-called “wisdom” restore for us the loss of intimacy that our contemporary economic and political landscape has plagued us with? Or is it perhaps time for us to examine the ocularcentric stranglehold that has for so long afflicted our conception of wisdom? What motivation is there for the distancing we have simply accepted as the general mode of doing philosophy? This motivation, I suspect, is death. To explore these suspicions, I will have to make a detour in the next section to examine the relationship between civilization and death.

2. Immortality, Necessity and the Horrors of Animality

In examining the pre-philosophic assumptions in Greek society, Hannah Arendt makes a note of the looming fear of death. She refers to it as the “general Greek estimate that all mortals should strive for immortality,” an estimate rooted in the sharing of affinities between human and the divine in Greek mythologies. “To the Greeks, philosophy was “the achievement of immortality;”” as such what it had consisted of includes contemplations of the everlasting (e.g.,

9 Keller, From a Broken Web, pp. 1
10 Arendt, Thinking in The Life of the Mind, pp. 134
11 Ibid. pp. 137
Arendt suspects that from such contemplations came the awareness of a “decisive flaw in the praised and envied immortalities of the gods: they were deathless (a-thanatoi, those who were forever aiene ontes), but they were not eternal.” Their theogony’s telling of a definite temporal beginning had perverted and compromised their permanence. And much like the pre-Olympian gods they themselves had supplanted in order to establish their pantheon, they are not precluded from the same fate. While they are deathless, they are not “birthless,” and as such, what was conceived as the human’s natural aim of achieving immortality cannot be actualized through the Olympian gods.

Arendt suggests that philosophy ultimately retained the achievement of immortality as the natural goal of human transcendence; while no school of philosophy would explicitly claim immortality to be its aim, it manifests in metaphysics’ continued tendency to locate pure knowledge in, much as Plato had, as “concerned with the things that are always the same without change or mixture, or with what is most akin to them.” What had discursively replaced “immortality” was now “necessity,” that is to say, “philosophical contemplation has no other intention than to eliminate the accidental.” What could be more accidental, more contingent, than the very fact of our corporeal existence? What is philosophy’s frantic repulsion of contingency if not the contempt for life itself? As Irigaray would tell us, “life is what grows; it is not a complete totality to which death is opposed.” To subject life to necessity is to live it through the logic of death; it is to disavow the inevitability of growth and the change inherent to it. The logic of death shapes the very movement of civilization itself, which operates through an incessant need to separate from and conceal the fact of our carnal beginnings.

One of the most notable concealments of beginning can be observed in the shift from a polytheistic worldview of divinity to a monotheistic one. There is no theogonic account of the biblical God’s existence; as far as we were concerned he was birthless. Irigaray refers to him as having occupied a place that is left vacant “after nature or Goddess have vanished into the neuter,”. Indeed, the relationship between the divine and nature marks one of the most

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12 Ibid. pp. 134 (emphasis original)
13 Ibid. pp. 139
14 Ibid.
15 Irigaray, *In the Beginning, She was*, pp. 23
16 Ibid. pp. 5
profound differences between polytheism and monotheism. The polytheistic gods are predicated by, if not outright manifestations of, nature (e.g., Apollo, god of the sun, Poseidon, god of the sea, etc.). Whereas the biblical God is radically separated from nature, he “has all predicates appropriate to the suspension of the relation with her – or Her. Most radically, he resists predication, except in a negative way. He remains without any species or genus, and without any particularity.”17 He is akin to a theological actualization of the philosophical notion of “necessity” Arendt had referred to: there is nothing accidental that can be attributed to his conception, his radical separateness from all predications have even led to some attempts to derive his very existence from his definition alone.18 With the inauguration of such a God into our divine imaginary, Irigaray warns us, quite modestly I might add: “From then on, the world is closed upon itself, and the way is prepared for the hell at work today”19

Unlike his polytheistic counterparts, the biblical God’s radical separation from nature deprives from the natural world what was formerly a “sacred” status. Roberto Esposito locates the word “sacred” in two apparently contrasting Greek terms: the affirmative hieros, meaning that which is consecrated and marked off to God or the gods, and the prohibitive hagios, meaning that which is defended against all manners of violations, or as Esposito puts it, “it is everything that is defended and protected from the injury of man through the threat of a sanction or penalty.”20 To be sacred is marked by a radical separation from human contact; it is not merely another “thing” subjected to, what Georges Bataille refers as, “servile human use”21. To subject that which is consecrated to the gods to servile use is an act of profanation. The profanation of nature itself can be marked in the biblical passage, where God finally declares, “let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of

17 Ibid. pp. 8
18 That would be St. Anselm’s ontological argument for the proof of Gods’ existence: 1) God is the greatest thing that can be conceived of; 2) It is greater to exist both in the mind and in reality, than in the mind alone; The acceptance of these two premises alone renders God’s “existence” tautologically true, for if he doesn’t, something greater can be conceived. It’s not hard to see that something must have gone awry in the conception of this God, if his “existence” can be “proven” in terms of tautological necessity.
19 Irigaray, In the Beginning, She was, pp. 5
20 Esposito, Immunitas, pp.54
the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.”

The conception of a divine image in humanity in the biblical account sanctifies human life at the expense of the natural world. The human domination of nature, I contend, is one of a master-slave dialectic. The relationship between a master and a slave is by no means a one-sided domination. While it is true that the master asserts domination over the slave, binding the slave to labour, and forcing them into servile use, the master-slave relation itself also imposes a particular subjectivity onto the master. Bataille notes, “no one can make a thing of the second self that the slave is without at the same time estranging himself from his own intimate being, without giving himself the limits of a thing.”

In order for the master to remain as “master,” he must confront the fact of his radical dependency on the slave, for it is only in his relation to the slave that he can be called the master. And what necessarily must be maintained in this relationship is the distance between the master and the slave, for “the individual who employs the labor of his prisoner severs the tie that links him to his fellow man.” The master-slave dialectic profoundly depends on this severance, on the maintenance of this distance. To say that the human domination of nature is also one of master-slave dialectic is to suggest, for what is equally a perceived necessity, to maintain a distance from the object of domination.

The evidence of the alleged distancing from nature can be traced in the movement of civilization itself. Civilization, or what Bataille refers to as “the transition from animal to man”, is posited upon an aversion of our animal needs. One measure of civilization is located in its sanitation efforts: how well we can conceal our own waste, how well we can cover over nature. This disdain for our own waste is uniquely human; no other animals are disgusted in the same way, and human infants’ failure to share this disgust is often regarded as evidence of their immaturity. Bataille poses the question concerning the naturalness we ascribe to such aversions in a format reminiscent of the Euthyphro dilemma: do we know “if excrement smells bad because of our disgust for it, or if its bad smell is what causes disgust”? We cannot possibly

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22 Genesis 1:26 (Authorized Version)
24 Ibid. (emphasis mine)
26 Ibid. pp. 62
answer with certainty, but it is a question worthy of our attention considering how “we have fashioned this humanized world in our image by obliterating the very traces of nature; above all we have removed from it everything that might recall the way which we came out of it.”\textsuperscript{27} It certainly does not help that our reproductive organs are also the site of waste emissions. This frantic denial of the carnal relations of our birth is not unlike the neutering of divine theogony in the shift towards monotheism. Bataille suspects this repugnance towards nature is in fact the repugnance towards the mortality associated with our animality, whereby “the nature of excrement is analogous to that of corpses.”\textsuperscript{28} And cleanliness marks a path toward human transcendence, or as the saying goes: “cleanliness is next to godliness.”

This transcendential assumption of civilization can most readily be observed in the education of children. The path to adulthood is mapped out as a process of ‘becoming human’. But for Bataille, there is nothing natural or even consensual about this process; instead it is one of traumatic conditioning:

We busy ourselves in terrifying them as soon as they are old enough to take part (little by little) in our disgust for excrement, for everything that emanates from warm and living flesh[…]We must \textit{artificially} deform in our image and, as our most precious possessions, instill in them the horror of that which is only natural. We tear them away from nature by washing them, then by dressing them. But we will not rest until they share the impulse that made us clean and clothe them, until they share our horror of the life of the flesh, of life naked, undisguised, a horror without which we would resemble the animals.\textsuperscript{29}

Those who fail to separate themselves from nature and share our civilized disgust are deemed “primitive” or “savage,” terms central to discourse that attempts to justify colonial interventions. (We may even successfully convince ourselves that we are acting out of altruism as we bring civilization to “these people,” to make them more “human.”) To be civilized is a flight from nature, for “man is the animal that negates nature: he negates it through labor, which destroys it and changes it into an artificial world; he negates it in the case of life creating activities; he

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid. pp. 79
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid. pp. 63
negates it in the case of death.”30 The construction of this artificial world through labour is the very hallmark of the modernist enterprise. One of the ways ocularcentrism manifests within modernity is through the disciplinary practices attendant to the impetus of “civilization” and its vision of a universalized rationality, whereby “the forms of animality were excluded from a bright world which signified humanity.”31

3. Labour, Arguments, and the Immunitary Apparatus

The relation between immortality and labour is not a recent idea; its influences can be identified in the works of Ancient Near Eastern writers. The Epic of Gilgamesh tells the story of King Gilgamesh of Uruk (in Mesopotamia) and his quest for immortality. The death of his companion Enkidu instilled in him the fear of his own death, and so Gilgamesh ventures away from Uruk in hopes of finding a cure to overcome his mortal condition. But his quest ultimately ends in failure; a grief-stricken Gilgamesh decides to return to Uruk. As the city appears in the horizon, he gazes at it and says to the ferryman Urshanabi:

“Go up, Urshanabi, walk on the ramparts of Uruk. Inspect the base terrace, examine its brickwork, if its brickwork is not burnt brick, and if the Seven Wise Ones laid not its foundation! One ‘sar’ is city, one sar orchards, one sar margin land; (further) the precinct of the Temple of Ishtar. Three sar and the precinct comprise Uruk.”32

As though finally coming to terms with humanity’s finitude and precariousness, he takes comfort in the accomplishments of their labour. Gilgamesh chooses to identify not with the product-less labours he had “wastefully” invested in his quest for immortality, but those that had resulted in the majestic city of Uruk. Through such accomplishments, Gilgamesh believes that some kind of foothold can be claimed in human history after all. This view of labour, Arendt notes, coheres with what she calls “the modern public opinions”, one shared by Smith and Marx, which views “unproductive labour as parasitical, actually a kind of perversion of labor, as though nothing

30 Ibid. pp. 61
31 Ibid. pp. 61-62 (emphasis original)
32 Pritchard, The Epic of Gilgamesh, pp. 72 Speiser Translation (Empasis Original)
were worthy of this name which did not enrich the world.”

The value of labour is in its product, it is valuable only in so far as it can yield some rigidly specifiable result. Whereas the labouring condition itself is slavish in nature, as long as no product can be immediately apprehended, the labouring process would remain to be seen as form of alienation.

The distance Gilgamesh stood from outside the city as he laid out his gaze, I believe, is significant. The magnificence of labour as inscribed in products can only be acknowledged through a distance. The identification with products over processes in this labouring paradigm shares the ocularcentric disdain for intimacy. For Bataille, the introduction of labour itself “replaced intimacy, the depth of desire and its free outbreaks, with rational progression, where what matters is no longer the truth of the present moment, but, rather the subsequent results of operations.”

An illustration of this can be obtained through the philosophical reconfiguration of the “argument.” As opposed to a dialectical process between interlocutors engaged in conflicts (both perceived and actual), philosophy would reconceive of argument in the form of product: a conclusion followed by its premises, removing from the argumentation process its intimate involvement with people. And ascribing to them a form that allows for the ease of visualizable reproductions (having been reduced and re-framed as an object of immediate comprehension, as though replicating the gesture of ‘I see’), but in so doing, our ‘seeing’ itself becomes constrained. “And we lose here the possibility of a free perspective, and even of a perception of volumes. The objects constrain us to perceive their forms according to a pre-given intention”.36

That is not to say that philosophical arguments no longer occur dialogically, but when they do, they must still cohere to the product-like model in the form of a “rational progression”, as though to actualize some linear projection of a unified goal. For the pragma-dialectical school of argumentation, such a goal is towards the “resolution of disputes” for achieving the

33 Arendt, The Human Condition, pp. 86
34 Ibid. pp. 87
36 Irigaray, Being Two, How Many Eyes Have We, pp. 145
37 The pragma-dialectical school of argumentation was an approach to argumentation first pioneered by Franz van Eemeren and Rob Grootendorst, one that focuses on the practical (hence “pragmatic”) task of arguing as it occurs in a social process between two interactants (hence “dialectical”). They draw heavily from the works on speech acts in Austin and Searle, and attempt to model argument in relation to standards of rationality and orderliness. Michael Gilbert in Coalescent Argumentation (1997) writes: “not surprisingly, a great deal of what ordinary people might
“intersubjective acceptability for the discussants.”38 Under this framework, arguments function largely in the same way as the image of labour Arendt had outlined: arguments are meant to be productive, for variants of “arguments” that fail to be so are perversions of the argumentation process itself; arguments are only valuable in so far as they can promulgate “truer” perspectives while dispelling “false” ones. In order to achieve this, a necessary distance must exist between the arguments and the arguers. “Good” arguers must distance themselves from their own perspective, and be able to distant their opponents from the arguments they are making. Getting “personal” is one of the worst faults in an argumentation procedure.

Why are emotional investments so demonized in argumentation procedures? Are arguments themselves not personal engagements? For me to genuinely disagree with you, to genuinely disagree with something you did or said, does that not say something about me? Do the perspectives and beliefs that inform the genuine disagreement I have with you not constitute, in part, who I am and what I value? It is my contention that disagreements - even what is perceived as disagreement as a result of misunderstandings - intimately privies us to the values shared by those engaged in the process. There is some level of intimacy involved between the dissidents. An intimacy that, as dictated by the norms of argumentation, must not be recognized at all cost; any such recognition must be the subject of ridicule. This often comes in familiar expressions such as: “Why are you so into it?” or “Don’t be so serious,” or even, “I was only playing devil’s advocate.” Those who are socially marginalized may be given added incentives to maintain this distance from their own intimate engagements with what in fact matters for them: “you are only saying that because you are bitter/poor/homosexual/black/female/disabled/etc.” Identifications with socially marginalized positions serves not as a way to contextualize or provide better understanding for the background of the arguments, but as a way of delegitimizing and explaining away what was said. To advance an argument involves, in a way, subjecting oneself intimately to the gaze of the other. Something, which for all intents and purposes, we may wish to distance ourselves from.

38 Van Eemeren and Grootendorst, Rationale for a Pragma-Dialectical Perspective, pp. 280

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The ocularcentric impulses that emerge as a way to mediate such a dilemma, I believe, follows closely with what Esposito describes as the as the logic of immunization: “immunity is the refractoriness of an organism to the danger of contracting a contagious disease.” As a means of preservation against viral incursion and other threats to the body, we may choose to administer small dosages of deadly elements by means of vaccination. By appropriating controlled quantities of infectious elements, the body internalizes them as a mean of warding off its more virulent forms. Esposito presents the logic of immunization as pervading upon all aspect of existence. Most prominently, it features in how laws operate in a community. Esposito notes that while “law is absolutely necessary for the community to survive, it actually relates to the community through its inverse side: to keep community alive, it tears it away from its most profound meaning.” In protecting society from threats of violence, law may appropriate the very object it attempts to ward off into its arsenal in the form of police forces and the death penalty. Having done so, while attaining the means to “protect” its citizens, the community also becomes its very negation: as a perpetrator of violence, reproducing the object it was meant to ward off in controlled forms, such as by ways of police brutality against unarmed citizens, often those deemed as in some way foreign to the dominant establishment. The process of immunization sacrifices various core-values in the object immunized, and allows all manners of its perceived violations to occur in controlled dosages hence preserving, in actuality, only a barren form of itself, as the mere “interface of its own immune system, the margin without depth along which immunity folds self-reflexively back on itself.”

Ocularcentrism is one of many immunitary apparatuses; it acts particularly as a way of coping with intimacy, and to immunize the horrors and vulnerabilities that may come with it. The reconfiguration of arguments can be understood as one example of this at work. The way “arguments” are taken up in non-philosophical discourse is with a sense of inherent negativity. “Arguments” are contrasted from “discussions,” whereby the latter are preferred over the former, and the former are seen as though it is the result of something going awry with the latter. Being predicated upon conflicts, arguments are automatically designated to be heated, confrontational,

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39 Esposito, Immunitas, pp. 7.
40 Ibid, pp.22. (Emphasis mine)
41 Ibid. pp. 51
and riddled with battlefield descriptions. At the same time, it is because arguments are such intimate forms of interaction that allows for all these associations. What the philosophical reconfiguration has done is essentially a form of immunization. As though to mitigate the very negative reputation argumentation has, the reconfiguration functions to preserve the image of arguments in a positive light, and it does so through depriving arguments from the intimacy of its engagement - the very intimacy that had made the act of arguing meaningful in the first place!

The deprivation of intimacy is done through the distancing between arguers and arguments. Informal logic students are taught that what they are engaged with in the process of arguing is no longer “people”, but artifacts simply referred to as “arguments.” Artifacts that can then be mapped out, schematized, framed as, and reduced to, a format that can with ease be visually captured and reproduced. “Your argument” then takes on a life all on its own, as entirely distinct from “you,” and hence engaging with one’s “argument” no longer requires the same kind of care or callousness as one does with people. An “argument” has become a thing, a servile order of existence to that of people, and all manners of violence and domination that order of existence that can be subjected to becomes fair game.

Understanding such immunitary logic comes to be presented as the kind of education a “civilized” individual would have to go through as an indicator of their emotional maturity. The very suppression of intimacy, of emotion, has been reconceived as its natural maturation! But embracing such perversions seems to be only the most natural response, for Irigaray would explain to us:

> Whoever lives outside of this logic economy would be ignorant. This means anathematizing the one who refuses to enter into our systems, without wondering about the origin and the scene of the deception, and of leading the other to opt for a common path instead of searching for his or her own way. A common meaning begins to predominate. And whoever fails to perceive it will be described as sleeping, as mad; which does not rule out that this very one in fact remains in contact with life.  

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Irigaray, *In the Beginning, She was*, pp. 25 Irigaray is more specifically talking abstractly about the exuberant movement of life being subjected to the totalizing logic of death. I have quoted her here because I find the philosophical enslavement of the argumentation process to be a vivid application of her principle.
To continue being immersed within such a “contact with life” is a form of immaturity, or even madness. The failure to distinguish arguments from arguers is a failure to enter into the ocularcentric economy, a failure to acknowledge the “autonomy” and “independence” of ideas from their bearers, and a failure to engage in the contemplation of everlasting, of “necessity”; what Hannah Arendt described as philosophy’s solution to the aim of achieving immortality.

Taking for granted that no dissociation of arguments from their arguers is ever complete, the immunitary logic carries with it the reproduction of what may only be described as a controlled form of “slavery”. Bataille describes slavery as being reduced to the order of things, whereby “the slave bound to labor and having become the property of another is a thing just as a work animal is a thing.” The immunitary stranglehold philosophy has placed on argumentation can be understood as a way of dissociating from people, what would have been an intimate part of themselves, and making this extension of themselves into an object of analysis. Reducing their arguments into a dissociated format subjected to the dictates of ocularcentrism, to a format that is acceptable to the least intimate of our senses.

Philosophers would most certainly object to such a violent characterization of argumentation. “But what about the principle of charity?” they might ask. The convention that we must always be charitable to our opponent’s argument, to always view them in their best light - surely the existence of such a rule would preclude the sort of violence I have ascribed to their reconceptualization? Michael Gilbert would not exonerate philosophy on such grounds. In examining the principle of charity, he notes that the name itself should give us insight into its real nature: “Charity is given to those who are needy, who cannot compose a defensible argument on their own behalf, and who, save for our generous largesse, would appear stupid, shallow, or inept and most certainly be defeated and humiliated”. Charity is a patronizing gesture, its provision more than anything serves to reinforce and solidify the existing structural and institutional organization that is characterized by the unequal distribution of powers and privileges. To resort to charity as a plea of conscience is very telling. Philosophy’s domination of the process of argumentation is entirely analogous to the domination of life under “civilization”.

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44 Gilbert, Coalescent Argumentation, pp. 43
4. Conclusion

Our identification with ocularcentrism is quite possibly the most pronounced feature in the domination of life. To identify with the eye is to identify with both the distance and separation inherent in the least intimate of our senses. In a culture that is ocularcentric, what is sacrificed is intimacy. As a way of preserving life, even in its most barren form, intimacy is to become collateral damage to the immunitary apparatus. For what is contained in intimacy is an excess in respect to form. An explosive fluidity that resists the predication of rigid outlines: “The world of intimacy is as antithetical to the real world as immoderation is to moderation, madness to reason, drunkenness to lucidity.”45 Having immunized intimacy, we no longer identify with the living world, but in fear of its exuberant outbreaks; we instead identify with the non-living and the comfort of its consistency.

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