

10

Thinking like a Virus: Contagion, Postmodernist Epistemology, and the Ethics of Belief

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Let us open with a simple question: how could postmodernism and its famous rejection of grand narratives possibly inform or advance epistemology, the study of truth itself, grand narrative par excellence? In his seminal work *Knowledge in a Social World*, Alvin I. Goldman goes so far as to accuse postmodernism of being fundamentally veriphobic. Arguing that postmodernists tend to “deliberately bracket questions of truth and falsity, holding that nothing legitimate can come of any attempt to draw distinctions in those terms” (1999, p. 7), Goldman suggests that their enterprise is better classified as social *doxology*, a practice focused not on knowledge but on opinion or belief. Though I would argue that Goldman here drastically misunderstands what postmodernism attempts to achieve, in its veriphobic tendencies, one may nonetheless ponder how postmodernism and its emphasis on fluidity and idiosyncrasies, its fundamental rejection of universalism (a form of universalist statement in and of itself), may actually contribute to the epistemological edifice. In many ways, Goldman’s concern with postmodernist theory lies precisely in the latter’s challenging of such notions as truth and knowledge when such notions as belief and opinion are already readily available (1999, p. 8). But here again, Goldman appears to miss the point. Indeed,

postmodernism is not necessarily intent on negating truth and knowledge, but raises the question, what do both notions allow or achieve, which justified or accepted belief cannot?

Traditional epistemology would tend to suggest that truth bears a usual aura of irreducible transcendentalism or of unquestionable transparency. And this is precisely what postmodernism has striven to expose—that is, the illusionary dimension of said transcendentalism and its intrinsic effects of erasure. In the illusion of transparency lies the effect of a power whose oppressive capacity heavily relies on its ability to erase all signs of its own actual presence, to silence its own site of production. As such, postmodernism does not partake in the veriphobic move which Goldman assumes it does, but proposes instead a fundamental interrogation of the notion of truth and its role. Its suggested dissolution corresponds not to a shying away from truth but to a return to the original foundation of philosophical inquiry, a return to its logical and revolutionary essence. Driven by its desire to “examine the possibility of a point of interruption” (Badiou 2003, p. 49), and remembering that desire invariably precludes the possibility of closure, this postmodernist inquiry amounts to nothing less than an epistemological meta-critique, an assessment of epistemology itself, and an appraisal of its foundations, instruments, and effects.

One may ponder, at this point, exactly what such critique may have to do with contagion and contagion theory, the object of the present volume. I would argue that it is precisely in the drawing of a parallel between epistemological and epidemiological practices and ideological foundations that we may locate the roots of such a critique. The intersection of epidemiology and epistemology is in no way a new phenomenon. Since its origins in late medieval and early modern medical discourse, the idea of contagion as an image system, a metaphorical and rhetorical instrument, has been heavily mobilized by theorists attempting to explain the mechanism underlying the transmission of ideas, beliefs, and emotions. And though its application has tended to be historically rather vague, its enlisting as a metaphorical foundation in the drafting of a new model of epistemic propagation actually allows for the construction of an alternative, comprehensive, and ethically assessable epistemological structure. Embracing the disruptive and transgressive nature of the virus, the fluid and transformative capacity of contagion, this chapter thus proposes to

re-align epistemology and its quest for justified true belief within an ethical field of inquiry in which this quest can be re-framed not as a rooting process but as a decisional moment, one plagued by uncertainty yet itself the founding moment of the possibility of ethics.¹ By re-articulating truth and knowledge as, respectively, illusionary and space of violent oppression, and by re-affirming the performative dimension of belief, this viral epistemic model opens up a new field of ethical assessment located in the irreducible gap haunting every epistemic re-iteration, a gap which, in turn, not only allows for the subversion of the epistemic machine itself but also signals the infinite epistemological responsibility of the subject introduced by each epistemic action.

Much work has already been done, within epistemology, on the social value of truth and knowledge,² and though most traditional studies appear to take the value of truth as a fundamental evidence, one can find in the works of Philip Kitcher and Ernest Sosa two factors which might potentially counter the postmodernist argument for a dissolution of truth and knowledge altogether. First, the idea that truth and knowledge share a vital role in our daily actions, that “to mark something out as an item of knowledge is to indicate that it can be depended on, used in practical activities or in further investigations” (Kitcher 2002, pp. 404–5); second, the notion that truth and knowledge both signal a stability which volition and belief cannot (Sosa 2001, p. 58). What both Kitcher and Sosa appear to suggest here is not so much the necessity of truth and knowledge as their essentially apotropaic function. As Zygmunt Bauman (1994, pp. 3–4) suggests, “human beings exist in [a] never-ending, since never fully successful, effort to escape from Chaos,” and it is precisely this Chaos which we attempt to thwart through the erection of different social structures. In many ways, then, truth and knowledge act as mystical instruments in our quest for freedom, a state itself threatened by the crippling and imprisoning effects of doubt and uncertainty.

From this somewhat cynical conclusion arise two fundamental questions: (1) if truth and knowledge are both tied to action, and through it

¹ The meaning of ethics adopted here is derived from Emmanuel Levinas’s understanding of ethics as the “consciousness of [an] obligation” itself rooted in my encounter with the face of the Other. See Levinas 1969, p. 207.

² For more, see Goldman 1999, Moser 2002, Sosa 2002, or Zagzebski 1996.

to ethics, are they truly necessary to ethically assess said action?; (2) do we, as a culture and a species, have anything to gain from hiding in the light of truth and refusing to confront what we deep down know the Chaos of life to be? In other words, is not the freeing power of truth that which ultimately paralyzes us most?

Over the past 15 years at least, Western discourse has been dominated by debates over such notions as risks, danger, threat, and security. Though the roots of these obsessive compulsions can certainly, in part, be imputed to the September 11, 2001 attacks, one glance at our recent epidemiological history would comfort even the most skeptical among us in the assumption that our world is, indeed, a dangerous one. From the 2003 Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) outbreak in Asia, the 2004 H5N1 and 2009 H1N1 worldwide influenza pandemics, or the more recent resurgence of the Ebola virus in West Africa, each year appears to bring with it a new potential human—and humanity—killer. Within this context, our cultural obsession with security appears all but too comprehensible. As James Der Derian argues, in the face of a danger “one seeks a security, in the form of a pledge, a bond, a surety” (1993, p. 98), a pledge dependent on the stability brought about by such notions as truth and knowledge. As the title of a leaflet produced by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in April 2015 suggests—“What you *need to know* about Ebola” (2015, *my italics*)—knowledge operates, within risk-inducing situations, as an apotropaic instrument, a defense mechanism allegedly protecting individuals against physical and psychological harm.

However, as Alain Badiou argues, this intense desire for stability, this pursuit of a risk-free society runs against the founding force and ambition of philosophy, that is, the “Mallarméan hypothesis that thought begets a throw of the dice” (2003, p. 41). Furthermore, its ultimate end result tends not toward freedom, that which it seeks to affect, but imprisonment in a never-ending circle of re-assessment whose final effect can but be paralyzing. Exposing the apotropaic yet incapacitating effect of this drive is thus not to deny the value of truth. Truth is a stable foundation. In its fundamental relation to time, its repeatability, truth provides us with a secure ground upon which to build the vertical and additive structures of knowledge. Imagine indeed for a second what life would

be if between each breath, the certainty of my biological compatibility with the air I breathe became something I was inclined to doubt; or if, when confronted with a fast and deadly virus, all members of the medical corps were required to not only re-discover the means at their disposal but test and re-test them until all single traces of doubts were absolutely dissolved, every single instance of a reliance on past, universal, or common knowledge abandoned. Faced with the repeated assaults of a reality whose fluidity can never entirely be negated, truth and knowledge appear to be the fundamental foundations of all our actions. But to claim that action heavily relies on the assumption of truth, of a certain stability in and over time, does not actually guarantee that such assumptions will be met. At best, it may suggest the illusion of endurance, the fantasized continuation of the event, leaving us nonetheless pondering, as Ludwig Wittgenstein did (1969, p. 12), whether any certainty “really be greater for being checked twenty time?”

This search for certainty, this quest for truth, would not in and of itself be as problematic as it is, were it not for the fact that it has arguably been limiting the scope and results of epistemology from its inception. Indeed, though numerous theorists have attempted to provide an adequate definition of truth and its meaning, most epistemologists have so far been forced to recognize that truth cannot be explained without recourse to truth itself, thus enclosing any truth-based argument within an inescapable epistemic circularity. The primary objective of any epistemological meta-critique would therefore be to confront this problematic circularity. And I would argue that the answer may not be as complicated as it, at first, appears. In fact, the problem of truth lies in the simple fact that, though epistemology itself is responsible for the creation of the concept it purports to locate or explain, it also has tended to silence its own role in the foundation of this object. In other words, epistemology posits as its ground something it will never entirely be able to prove for the simple reason that it cannot prove the existence of what it itself invented without having recourse to any of the other instruments it used in this object’s construction.

Once we assume the inaccessibility of truth, or rather the theoretical impossibility of a non-circular theory of truth, we are then left to ponder what exactly survives of knowledge, justified belief, or even belief?

Numerous epistemologists have tried to locate the foundations of truth in some non-transcendental moment or space, whether in experience or in the internal structures of our consciousness. But as most of them will also invariably recognize, both theories falter when confronted with either the skeptical argument doubting one's reliance on man's famously unreliable sensory apparatus or a problematic infinite regressive argument in which the question of origins unfailingly recurs.

Here we may be able to establish a first bridge between epistemology and epidemiology, or more particularly virology. As epistemology finds itself confronted with a belief which seems, in all logic, to emerge *in vivo* or from within the subject—as Davidson (2001, p. 143) argues, beliefs have causes but seemingly no origins outside themselves—virology's concerns target an entity whose status appears to run against all preconceived notions of what life is, or what we make it to be. Indeed, though belonging to biology “because they possess genes, replicate, evolve, and are adapted to particular hosts, biotic habitats, and ecological niches” viruses remain “nonliving infectious entities that can be said, at best, to lead a kind of borrowed life” (van Regenmortel and Mahy 2004, p. 8). Like beliefs, viruses appear to be somewhat autonomous entities able to penetrate the individual subject's organism.

Yet, like beliefs, viruses also prey, and ultimately rely for their existence, on the host cell(s) they come to parasitize, and only conceptually exist outside of it. As J.B. Carter and V.A. Saunders explain (2007, p. 6), new virions are formed by a process of replication taking place “inside a host cell and involv[ing] the synthesis of components followed by their assembly into virions,” to the point that, past said process of adsorption, “the virus as a complete structural entity disappears” (Voyles 2002, p. 22). But more importantly, and though the word's etymology itself would tend to imply the malignant quality traditionally associated with the virus, remnants of past, non-pathogenic, or dormant viruses can be traced in most living organisms, suggesting that “wherever cellular life occurs, viruses also occur” (Voyles 2002, p. 4) and thus confronting virology with its own infinite regress problem. Like the epistemologist whose work seems plagued from the start by the inescapable recursive logic of thought, the virologist's object seems to ask which of the virus or the life it preys upon came first, or rather, how can one posit a virus,

a living–dead entity, without positing life itself, and how could life exist without the virus it seems so intricately tied to.

As is, the interest of the viral metaphor does not simply lie in its mirroring quality. If both virologist and epistemologist appear to be confronted with a similar problematic circularity, the answer to one cannot be found in the other but in the re-framing of both disciplines within cultural analysis. In other words, and following on Peter Sedgwick's argument that disease and treatment do not in fact exist "until man intervenes with his own human classifications" (1973, p. 30), one may be inclined to argue that beyond the materiality of disease, it is in man alone that the existence of such things as the virus, disease, and the life they threaten emerge and reside—that is, the idea that, as Carter and Saunders (2007, p. 6) suggest, in the end, the answer to the question regarding the nature—dead or alive—of the virus depends not so much on the virus as on how one is willing to define life itself.

What the virus, and contagion more broadly, thus question is the simple possibility of definition, or rather, the relevance and accuracy of any attempt at setting boundaries between terms. If the virus exists within the liminal space between life and death, in an in-between which is neither/nor yet always already both, contagion similarly operates as a dissolving force, a process which defies fantasies of control, corrodes internal integrity, and ignores the borders that define and defend identity (Bashford and Hooker 2001, p. 1). As the virus problematizes the possibility of distinction between host and non-host, between life and non-life, contagion more largely exposes the inadequacy of our cultural desire for boundaries. Residing *between*, in the fluid indistinction characteristic of the point of contact where terms blur into each other, contagion uncovers the operations of culture and reveals the illusionary dimension of any and all distinctions. It loudly exposes the fact that, outside man and the boundaries man has erected for himself in order to make sense of the world, the division between organisms, between life and death, but also between concepts such as truth, knowledge, and belief is one whose ontological foundations is inherently void. As Sedgwick argues, we are, after all, "working, at best, with hypothetical constructs of our own devising" (1973, p. 25). Their respective relevance and usefulness are thus only as valid as we make them be, a

validity which, in the case of the virus tends quickly to amount to little if anything at all.

What we are then left with here is a schematic in which, as Davidson suggests, the correspondence between thought, belief, or language, and the world, between a proposition and reality can but be fictional and arbitrary, a difficult position in which “nothing can usefully and intelligibly be said to correspond to a sentence” (2001, p. 154), a term, or a concept. The quest for truth, for an original and initial point of departure, amounts, in the end, to little else than a self-fulfilling prophecy in which end and beginning invariably collide, and in which the object one finds is logically and necessarily the object one was looking for.

If this line of argument draws us dangerously close to skeptical territories, it may precisely be in skepticism that we might find the answer to our problems, paradoxical as this might seem. Skepticism has, throughout history, taken many forms and given birth to many different brands of theory. And though most epistemologists may be justified in their reluctance to engage with its standard form, I would argue we may find in the writing of Sextus Empiricus a potential path toward an ethical epistemology. In his *Outlines of Scepticism*, Sextus voluntarily distances his own brand of skepticism from the standardized solipsistic argument supporting the impossibility of any access to truth or knowledge (2000, p. 3). Instead, skepticism, for Sextus, operates according to three axes: investigation, suspension, and aporia (2000, p. 4). Skepticism, he argues, lies in the suspension of judgment which is forced upon the subject when confronted with the possibility of the “both” which traditional epistemology, in its emphasis on a unicity and division, cannot abide. In other words, what Sextus emphasizes here is precisely what a meta-critique proposes to address—that is, the structures underlying the epistemological edifice, or, as he expresses itself, the idea that “what we investigate is not what is apparent but what is said about what is apparent” (2000, p. 8), not truth nor beliefs but the discourse and presuppositions surrounding these conceptions.

However, as others have argued, the major issue underlying Sextus’s brand of skepticism is its ultimate tendency to lead to inactivity, or as Peter Klein suggests, the idea that “if this alternative were chosen, reasoning would come to a complete standstill” (2002, p. 341). And this

argument is one which is difficult to refute. Indeed, the skeptics, in Sextus's definition, appear to essentially reject the risk inherent to philosophical inquiry. And though this argument may hold, I would argue that it also misunderstands the potential of such a theory, its capacity to reveal and expose the decision underlying every belief and, therefore, its call for a necessary re-framing of belief as a political and ethical action. In other words, the skeptic addresses the silenced foundational moment at the heart of epistemology that is the voluntary and arbitrary iteration of belief. Skepticism does not signal the removal of the foundations of judgment, as Wittgenstein suggests (1969, p. 81), but the possibility of its actualization, a rejection of the transcendental, a re-articulation of belief as decisional, and ultimately the inscription of epistemology into the realm of ethics.

This re-framing of belief as action exposes the inherently ethical dimension of any epistemological act and leads us toward what is traditionally labeled virtue epistemology. However, historically, virtue epistemology has paradoxically tended to shy away from engaging with skepticism. As Zagzebski and Fairweather argue, "virtue epistemologists prefer to leave skeptical worries aside in order to pursue a program that is not dominated by these worries" (2001, p. 5). And one might easily understand why they chose to do so as skepticism tends toward inaction rather than action, the primordial object of any ethical inquiry. Virtue epistemology purports to assess the relation between knower and knowledge or, more precisely, between a knower and her alethic ends (Fairweather 2001, p. 64). Through this assessment, it proposes to re-articulate the quest for knowledge as a virtue, an epistemic obligation in itself. Virtue epistemology therefore introduces the notion of responsibility into the act of belief itself. In 1877 already, W.K. Clifford argued that "it is not possible so to sever the belief from the action it suggests as to condemn the one without condemning the other" (1877, p. 291).

More than a relation of co-existence, however, virtue epistemology ultimately posits belief as an act *in and of itself*, an epistemic action whose consequences can themselves be assessed ethically. Whereas traditional epistemology has tended to conceive of knowledge and belief as a state of being, an end result rather than a process, one which precludes any potential form of responsibility as it inherently negates the agency

posited by skepticism, virtue epistemology re-conceptualizes belief as the performative action of an epistemic subject. Yet, the notion of action also suggests agency as well as an agent, a knower whose act of belief can be perceived as controlled and willfully produced, an idea which most epistemologists appear to take issue with.³

Here again, turning to contagion theory may help locate traces of an answer. Indeed, gazing at their common structures, one is forced to recognize that the individual's epistemological system inherent to most epistemic theories operates according to an economy which, in many ways, replicates that of the immune system found in biological writings. Both heavily rely on a critical apparatus whose function is to recognize and appraise every new incursion based on its compatibility with the rest of the system and then authorize or deny it access if such an incursion threatens the viability of the whole structure. Similarly, we find within communities a similar apparatus functioning at the herd level, or a form of "herd immunity" (Wald 2008, p. 48) in which new biological and epistemological entries are granted or refused access based on the pre-existing pattern of immunity of the collective population. Think, for example, of the prevalence of irrational racist agendas within most cultures despite the current climate of globalization and miscegenation dominating most industrialized countries. How can one explain these collective beliefs and their reluctance to variation without recourse to a form of epistemological immune system, a structure whose function it is to assess every "new" belief in relation to the existing epistemic structures of the subject and/or her community?

It is precisely in this collectivity that lies, I would argue, the solution to the above-mentioned issue—that is, the agentic relation which virtue epistemology appears to posit between the individual subject and the community she is part of. Contagion, as Marsha Rosengarten argue, traditionally presupposes "at least two distinct bodies, in some way self-identical in themselves and different from each other" between which "some movement of substance or influence [...] must occur" (2001, p. 169). Contagion invites the drawing of lines of contact between territories and signals the often-illusory nature of the boundaries we culturally impose

³ For examples, see Zagzebski 2001 or Feldman 2002.

upon the world. And though the current reigning image system governing contagion theory often conceives of it in military terms (Montgomery 1991, p. 347), emphasizing division and conflict, this perspective may in and of itself be perceived as an apotropaic or defensive mechanism erected against what contagion threatens most—that is, the idea of boundary itself. Indeed, more than anything else, contagion exposes and reveals our inherent vulnerability. As Bashford and Hooker suggest, it “reaches over domains of nature and culture which we often want to understand, or have an investment in understanding, as separate” (2001, p. 4). In its essence, it problematizes the possibility of ontology itself, the boundaries we set up in order to define, the categorical imperative essential to structuration, signaling instead dissolution, fluid and continuous transmission, a move toward what has been labeled the posthuman and its biotic community of interconnected “subjects.”⁴

How might this a re-conceptualization, that is, one rooted in notions of fluidity, movement, permeability, and instability impact epistemology? Its first effect is the implicit dissolution of the possibility of an externalist/internalist argument. As the boundaries of the subject dissolve, the strict separation posited by both theories between individual/internal and collective/external belief or knowledge finds itself re-framed as an interactive and co-dependent territory in which, as Clifford suggests, “no one man’s belief is in any case a private matter which concerns himself alone” (1877, p. 292). There is, of course, nothing new in suggesting the collective nature of our belief structure, the reliance of our thinking process on the existence of a collective language. However, few epistemological studies have actively engaged with what I would argue to be the inherently collective and interactive dimension of belief. In his work *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein suggests such a re-conceptualization when he argues that “to know” is to always already claim a recognition by a collective of our position as “knower” (1969, p. 73), something echoed in Gerhart and Russell’s definition of knowledge as “created understanding” (2002, p. 202) or in Davidson’s articulation of objective truth as a product of communication (2004, p. 7). What all three studies imply is

⁴The use of quotation marks here signals contagion’s dissolution of the notion of subjectivity itself, or at least the enclosed and autonomous subject posited by humanist theory.

the rooting of truth and knowledge's transcendental dimension in a form of collective consciousness or, at least, acquiescence, the positing of a fundamental and essential distinction between individual and collective forms of belief, a distinction between, respectively, belief on the one hand and knowledge and truth on the other.

As was previously mentioned, claims to knowledge and truth raise more problems than they actually solve. As Wittgenstein argues, to know “seems to describe a state of affairs which guarantees what is known, guarantees it as a fact” (1969, p. 3), ultimately canceling all distinction between what is known and this knowledge, the object and the state referring to it. Any claim to “knowledge” thus signals the impossibility of error, error being the privileged territory of belief. In other words, knowledge cannot abide error without being immediately transformed into something else. Postmodernist readers will instantly perceive how problematic this notion may be. Indeed, postmodernism's primary claim has tended to be a positioning of truth and knowledge as violently normative notions, a normative dimension surprisingly often openly recognized by epistemology itself. From its traditional reliance on an “ideal” epistemic agent—or as Bonjour puts it, one “with faculties that are identical to those of a *normal* human being” (2002, p. 255, *my italics*)—to its object itself—that is, a quest for an ideal and unique end—epistemology is suffused with normative principles whose primary effects are the silencing of any alternative claims to its own precious creations. For most epistemologists, this reliance on unicity, standards, and hierarchical assessment may appear innocuous, or even necessary,⁵ and one may be tempted to see in such a claim a fundamental feature of any quest predicated on truth and knowledge. However, the ethical postmodernist reader might see in this precisely what Wittgenstein already recognized when he suggested that this process amounts to little more than using one language-game in order to combat another (1969, p. 80).

In his defense of epistemology, Goldman argues the violence postmodernism has tended to associate with the epistemic quest to be misdirected. As he suggests instead, appeals to truth used as instruments of power or domination do not “imply that truth is either nonexistent or deserving of neglect,” but rather that “most of these appeals, in the domains just

⁵ See Goldman 2002, Foley 2002, and Fairweather 2001.

surveyed, were false, inaccurate, and even fraudulent,” and that ultimately “the way to combat such appeals is to *correct* the errors and inaccuracies” (1999, p. 34). Violence and oppression do not derive, for Goldman, from truth or knowledge but from false claims to said truth and knowledge. However, Goldman here once again misunderstands the nature of the violence and oppression which postmodernism has tended to perceive in *any* claim to truth and knowledge. A return to contagion theory and its metaphors helps us expose more clearly the violence contingent in these processes. Indeed, in many ways, the claim implied in epistemology’s quest for truth mirrors the underlining ideology guiding our contemporary public health programs and measures. As Marcel Verweij and Angus Dawson suggest, “calling something a public health issue seems to imply that it concerns us all” (2007, pp. 18–19). Public health’s claim to universality, to the collective welfare or to a mythical “public good” indeed often bypasses, or clearly nullifies, any claim to private and individual safety. Its reliance on a continuous threat to the community allows the establishment of security measures which more often than not act as a naturalization of its own powers of oppression, silencing in the process the numerous decisions which have shaped its ideological basis and which underline its self-sustained structure of re-duplication. Like epistemology, it tends to cancel its own definitional role in the establishment of the structures which it then calls forth as the unfortunate but natural and necessary bases of its own normalizing effects.

The issue with such claims to truth and knowledge, security or health is thus not in their usage—that is, in something exterior to themselves—but in the exclusionary nature of the claim itself. Truth and knowledge are inherently normative notions and, as Judith Butler argued, norms are, by essence, exclusionary concepts whose existence relies on the simultaneous and inevitable production of an outside, a domain of abjection (1993, p. 3), a silent exteriority to which any contravention to the norm is invariably relegated. Due to their self-proclaimed unicity, knowledge and truth cannot but be product of the violent erasure of all alternative voices, a reduction of all forms of otherness to sameness—that is, the anti-ethical movement par excellence.⁶

⁶ As Simon Critchley explains, the ethical is “the location of a point of alterity [...] that cannot be reduced to the Same” (1992, p. 5).

If positing any claim to both truth and knowledge necessarily forces us to assume a problematic position of authority, can we imagine an alternative epistemological model which would retain its capacity for assessment yet forbid these reductive practices? I would argue this model to be fundamentally impossible, since assessment, hierarchy, and singularity by essence appear to imply the forceful imposition of a domain of abjection. However, in this last section, I propose to explore the possibility opened up by skepticism and contagion theory for the constitution of a potential epistemological meta-critique—that is, a positioning of the epistemological enterprise as a cultural, ethical, and political process in and of itself. Like Sextus himself, I need here to premise this proposition with a concession, a recognition that my position itself cannot constitute another truth claim without running precisely against what it purports to undertake. As such, it should not be taken as a model claiming transparency, nor does it assert its own superiority to any other epistemological structure. Instead, it proposes to recognize its own ethical positioning, its own responsibility as a model of thought, as a belief system itself product of a series of decisions and further beliefs.

The model I propose to adopt in many ways takes its roots within coherence theory, which argues that, beliefs being what they are, “nothing can count as a reason for holding a belief except another belief” (Davidson 2001, p. 141). Coherence theory proposes to re-articulate the individual subject’s belief system as an extended network of interrelated beliefs, as a dynamic process of back-and-forth dialog between beliefs which can, in turn, assess every new addition; in other words, an epistemic immune system. Moving toward a form of posthumanist epistemology, this model appears to disrupt the vertical hierarchy upon which traditional epistemology relies and to replace it instead with a rhizomatic structure within which, as Clifford argues, “no real belief, however trifling and fragmentary it may seem, is ever truly insignificant” (1877, p. 292). Within this structure, the multiplicity of beliefs which constitute the system, and upon which the system ultimately relies for its definition, continuously make and *re*-make each other according to a mutational dynamic predicated on randomness and disorder. Like the virus whose process invariably involves grafting, assimilation to the point where recognition and distinction are rendered impossible, and mutation, beliefs function as an

interruptive and transformative force whose effects are largely unpredictable and whose original foundations are themselves impossible to locate.

This re-framing of belief as a mutational force and of our belief system as an interconnected network in constant flux may present some problems to traditionalist epistemology as it appears to suggest that, in the absence of any foundation in truth, experience, or common knowledge, one may be at a loss when confronted with another coherent structure whose product runs counter to our own (Schelling 2011, p. 107). Fiction and non-fiction would blur into each other and any distinction between them would be made fundamentally impossible. And indeed, the post-modernist critic may agree that fiction and its antithesis do partake of the same essence, and that, within a rhizomatic structure, one cannot rightfully elevate any belief above another. The question then arises of how one might assess belief, or a belief system, in the impossibility of any recourse to absolute and universal truth. If, as Badiou suggests, “the return to ethics necessitates the return of an unconditional principle” (2003, p. 54), how does one ethically judge in the absence of this principle?

The re-framing of belief as an act, as the action of a somewhat independent agent, precisely allows here the emergence of a potential exit strategy for epistemology in a re-conceptualization of belief as performative. This shift would indeed trigger five necessary re-articulations which allow us to drastically re-think our understanding of epistemic processes:

1. Performance presupposes a form of agency arising *in* and *through* re-iteration.
2. Performance compels a shift away from universalism, idiosyncrasy, and pluralism.
3. Performance signals a shift from atemporal fixity to fluid and temporal mutation.
4. Performance thoroughly dissolves the foundations of epistemological, legal, and moral apparatuses and replaces them with a mythical original moment of re-iteration.
5. Because of its own reliance on a decisional moment, on a localizable act of belief, performance opens up a space of ethical responsibility and vulnerability which not only negates immunity but can itself be assessed on the ground of a similar decisional logic.

Most coherence theories inherently posit, and the suggestion of an epistemic immune system would tend to support it, the contingent presence *before* any iteration of belief of a detached and independent epistemic subject. As we saw earlier, though, this kind of argument invariably leads us to an infinite regress argument of the kind which plagues epidemiology and traditional epistemology alike. To posit a system whose operation includes the absorption and recognition of external elements always already bears the question: where does such a re-cognition take its roots in? In order to be *re*-cognized, one has indeed to have been previously encountered outside said recognition. As Donna J. Haraway suggests, there can be “no exterior antigenic structure, no ‘invader’ that the immune system had not already ‘seen’ and mirrored internally” (2004, p. 104). Yet, how could one encounter a belief one does not recognize and still trigger the epistemic operations necessary for the transposition of the encountered data into a recognizable belief?

Traditional epistemology therefore posits an agent and a belief, an entity recognized by said agent as epistemic in nature, which both appear to emerge simultaneously to their respective conceptualization *as* epistemic subject and material. In and of itself, this issue might easily be negligible were it not for the ethical implications invariably entangled within issues of epistemic agencies. Coherence theories of belief appear to take the agent’s belief and belief system to be themselves always already both part and product of a wider social structure yet seem to simultaneously locate the foundation of these structures in said agent, therefore entering a never-ending causal loop.

Performance theory may here offer the first solution to such an infinite regress problem. Indeed, as Judith Butler argues (1993, p. 124), performance unfolds as the re-iterated moment of emergence of subjectivity itself. That is, the agent whose epistemic action we are here concerned with does not pre-exist this action but re-emerges through each of its iteration as a newly founded agent. What simultaneously arises in each act of belief is not only the belief itself but the subject, the position of subjectivity, invariably attached to this belief, the conditions of its own re-iteration. In each iteration, and because, as Jacques Derrida argues, “iterability requires the origin to repeat itself originarily, to alter itself so as to have the value of origin” (1990, p. 1009), foundation and repetition

(e-)merge and co-emerge. Each performative epistemic act calls forth its own originary moment as it repeats it and gives it a new birth, a new origin.

This re-conceptualization of belief and the epistemic structure supporting it thus necessarily dissolves the possibility of any epistemological foundational ground, as every act of belief both re-instates these foundations *and* simultaneously establishes them anew. In *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein dares arguing that “when we first begin to believe *anything*, what we believe is not a single proposition, it is a whole system of propositions” (1969, p. 21). However, what a performative theory of belief suggests here is not only the co-emergence of both belief and the structure responsible for its possibility but also its invariable repetition, re-emergence, in *each* act or iteration. In this space of re-iteration, in this open moment of ambivalence, it is both the belief itself and the networked structure which makes this belief possible, which sees its foundation repeated, or re-founded.

In his article on the relation between law and violence, Derrida exposes the problematic ethical dimension of this re-positioning of the act of decision as the re-iteration of an originary decisional moment. As he argues, “since the origin of authority, the foundation or ground, the position of the law can’t by definition rest on anything but themselves, they are themselves a violence without ground” (1990, p. 945). However, as Derrida continues, this groundlessness does not negate the possibility of an ethical appraisal. To posit every decisional act as the re-iteration of an original violence is not to label it unjust. Rather, it is to claim that this decision always already “exceed[s] the opposition between founded and unfounded, or between any foundationalism or anti-foundationalism” (1990, p. 945). Like the virus whose essence signals both the possibility of life and its extinction, every epistemic act carries in itself the potential to be both just and unjust, justified and unjustified, as well as, ultimately, the condition of the possibility of justification itself.

This re-framing of epistemic action leaves us confronted with what Simon Critchley appropriately labeled “the anarchy of ethical responsibility” (1992, p. 234). It compels us to re-think not only our own responsibility but our collective means of assessment of this responsibility. Indeed, if each iteration of belief bears within it the (crushing) weight

of its own ethical responsibility, it also implies a similar burden weighing upon the collective body whose function and role it is to assess the compatibility of the individual's belief and belief system. If the individual agent's responsibility lies in the re-assessment, in each and every iteration of belief, of her own ethical responsibility in this iteration, a similar process must be involved in the collective assessment of her belief's position within the collective's own belief structure. This re-conceptualization thus posits a collective network of beliefs within which the individual agent's belief system not only emerges—inasmuch as we assume thought itself to emerge within and through a collective process delimiting the conditions of its possibility—but can also be ethically assessed. However, to presuppose this structure to be itself fixed in nature would once again be to return to the universalism which has tended to normalize (in all its implied violence) the study of epistemic responsibility. Instead, the rhizomatic networked structure posited by a performative and coherence theory of belief intrinsically implies the potential of each belief to produce structural mutations of the collective system. Like the virus whose introduction can cause fundamental mutations in the host (Carter and Saunders 2007, p. 6), every belief contains within itself the possibility of a collective epistemic shift.

Within this framework, the collective network is thus ethically compelled to continuously re-evaluate its own foundations. What this repetition entails is a necessary opening up of a space of suspension. By grounding its own structure in what Derrida calls, borrowing from Montaigne, the “mystical foundation” of authority (1990, p. 943), a performative theory of belief intrinsically posits at its core a moment of pure undecidability, a space of equalitarian co-existence, which it appears to close yet nonetheless retains the haunting memory of. Since every decision contains within itself the traces of its own alternative, every epistemic action is stained by the remaining memory of the in-existent, an opening up to an epistemic pluralism it never entirely manages to discard. Like a virus whose mutational force may remain dormant for years, waiting for a potential re-activation (Carter and Saunders 2007, p. 3), every belief emerges as the mutual and impossible co-presence of a positive and a negative. As such, the performative process involved in every epistemic action seems to echo the complex biological process involved in viral

contagion—that is, a process ripe with potentialities in which every form of bodily communication opens up a potential space of mutation. As new organisms enter the body of the biological subject in a state of pure potentiality—every new organism contains within itself the potential to be either rejected as threat, assimilated as benign or, more perniciously and like the retrovirus, wrongfully incorporated only to later reveal its actual nefarious effects—every belief iteration contains within itself the dual and simultaneous possibility of its own acceptance and rejection. And it is precisely this infinite and irreducible co-presence which requires it to continuously re-iterate itself in order to contain an epistemic plurality whose abiding presence threatens the possibility of judgment.

Returning now to my original claim that postmodernism cannot simply be reduced to a veriphobic exercise, I would like to argue that here lies postmodernism's most important contribution to epistemological theory that is—its ethical duty to reject any and all claims to transcendentalism. By positing a performative theory of belief grounded in a rhizomatic network in which every iteration always retains within itself the haunting presence of the undecided, the theory I have put forth here forces us to confront the normalizing and violent effect of any claim to and quest for a unique and exclusionary truth. It signals an open path toward what Badiou calls a “philosophy of singularity” (2003, p. 53), though one which, unlike Badiou's, invariably recognizes the singular as that which cannot be thought, as that which forever remains outside the prospects of epistemology, as the unthinkable, that which one can desire, since desire always precludes possession, yet never fully grasp.

To re-configure belief according to a performative logic then unfolds as the epistemological equivalent to the epidemiologic shift from a politics of public health—in which both notions of public and health carry heavily normative connotations—to idiosyncratic strategies founded in individual rights and the irreducibility of our ethical relation to the Other, a relation rooted in responsibility and vulnerability. And though it may appear so, this re-claimed form of political ethics does not actually necessarily negate the possibility of collective action. Instead, it forbids the collective from dissimulating, or silencing, its own responsibility, its own arbitrariness, under the guise of common belief. As Badiou argues, within this idiosyncratic approach, “we must make our

own decision and speak in our name,” we cannot “hide behind any great collective configuration, any supposed force, any metaphysical totality which might take a position in one’s stead” (2003, p. 54). What this re-conceptualized form of epistemology suggests is the necessary re-thinking of the collective and its own belief system as a plurality, a multiplicity of idiosyncratic structures which never elevates itself to any transcendental status but always remains a congregation of ethical and epistemological responsibilities whose relations can never move beyond the rhizomatic structures which conditions them.

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