

OFFPRINTED FROM  
THE PROCEEDINGS New Series—Vol LXXVIII  
1977/78

THE  
ARISTOTELIAN  
SOCIETY

Paper IX  
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## IX\*—MOMENT UNIVERSALS AND PERSONAL IDENTITY<sup>1</sup>

By Arnold Zuboff

I believe that if we saw ourselves for what we really are, we would lose every interest in living. If someone can show me I am wrong in drawing this bleak conclusion from the considerations that follow, I shall be as grateful as a philosopher can be when he is made to change a position.

We can come to an appreciation of the inconsistencies of the normal way we view ourselves through a careful distinction of the purely subjective element of an experience from its objective circumstances.

Consider the case of someone holding an apple. A complete description of this would include such things as the spatio-temporal coordinates of the person and the apple and all present and past relationships of person and apple to everything else. But let us focus on the mental properties of the apple-holder. Suppose one of these is his knowing that the apple he is holding is the one that he picked from the tree this morning. Here is a property of this mental subject that ties him to something in his circumstances, since his possessing it depends on the fact that the apple he is holding actually is the apple he had picked this morning. If he had gotten hold of another similar apple without realizing it, he could still *think* he was holding the apple he had picked this morning, but he would not have the property of *knowing* it was that apple. Yet the subjective quality of thinking it was that apple and knowing it was could be precisely the same.

Let's now focus more narrowly on this purely subjective aspect of the apple-holder's experience. How should we speak about this? Most mental language is tied, as is *knowing* above, to various extra-subjective features of experience—to the spatial and historical context of experience. I therefore employ phrases like *purely subjective aspect of . . .* preceding such context-involved descriptions as *knowing he picked the apple* to function like the bracketing of the phenomenologists—to cancel out any contextual

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\* Meeting of the Aristotelian Society at 5/7, Tavistock Place, London, W.C.1, on Monday, 20th February, 1978, at 7.30 p.m.

implications and direct our attention to what the experience is like for the subject, without regard to whether he is actually holding the apple he supposes or is holding another that seems just the same or is hallucinating holding just such an apple. Common to all these would be the quality of the subjective aspect of the apple-holder's experience.

Let's explore a bit the subjective/contextual distinction. Think again of a case where the apple picked this morning has been switched for another which seems just the same. Suppose that the switch is done so that it does not in any way register on the senses of the subject. Would his subjective experience be affected by the fact that the apple he experiences is numerically different from that in the original case? I think most people would agree it could not. If somebody insisted that this change in the identity of the apple would make the experience seem different to the experiencer merely on account of the fact that the context of the experience had changed, I would term this person a *contextualist*. A contextualist gives illegitimate weight to the contextual aspect of experience in deciding the character of its subjective aspect.

The switched apple is a case that shows that the identity of the surrounding objects cannot in itself influence the subjective character of the experience of them. If their effects are carefully substituted for, the subjective quality survives the change. In fact, very different sorts of objects from those in the standard case, such as elaborate light projectors and gadgets creating, for example, the feel of the apple, could produce precisely the same kind of subjective experience. Thus we could imagine ingenious, mad scientists capable of controlling all the forces on all the surfaces of our subject's body, including the patterns of energy at the pupils and eardrums, and thereby empowered to create for him the precise subjective impression of any circumstances they please; and this story will be useful in furthering our investigation. (We could now talk about the subject's brain in a vat, fed stimulations through wires as though from his sense organs, but that this situation preserves all the subjective experience of both the body and its surroundings is perhaps more controversial than that the situation of controlled surfaces would.)

We could say of the objective location of an experience what we have said of the objective circumstance of surrounding



objects; objective spatial coordinates do not uniquely inform an experience. An experience could be subjectively of the same quality and occur subjectively in the same location if it were had here or in a distant galaxy.

Similarly, we may distinguish merely contextual temporal circumstances. Suppose the mad scientists allow the apple-holder to enter into an episode of subjective apple-eating. After he has had the subjective experience of eating half the apple, they freeze him instantaneously and keep him in suspended animation for a billion years. Then they thaw him instantaneously and he carries on, subjectively finishing the apple. Unless they have allowed some registration in him of that enormous passage of time, the whole will be for the subject just as it would have been without the billion-year gap. Again, only a contextualist would insist that the mere existence of such a gap in the temporal context of an otherwise subjectively continuous experience must somehow color the subjective character of the experience.

What we say about temporal continuity applies also to temporal order. Let's imagine a case in which these experimenters can anticipate all the internal events in the complete experience of eating the apple. While the subject is in suspended animation, ready to begin, they operate on his nervous system to add to it all the physiological traces that would have been there if he had just gotten through eating three-quarters of the apple. They arrange him in the position he would have been in at that stage and feed him stimulation as from a three-quarters eaten apple and so on. He must then, when they start the action, experience subjectively the final part of the apple-eating episode. Suppose they next treat him similarly so as to cause him to experience the first quarter's eating, then the third, then the second. I claim that the subjective order in this case would be qualitatively indistinguishable from that in a case in which the objective order of events paralleled the subjective. Of course, a contextualist on temporal order must say that somehow it would seem different to the experiencer merely on account of the difference in objective order.

Now we come to more controversial claims. So far I have been describing cases that help us to see the independence of the *quality* of subjective experience from matters of context. Next we turn to the quantity and numerical identity of subjective experiences. Let's imagine that these mad experimenters decide to induce a

series of precisely repeating subjective experiences in the apple-eating subject. At the end of each episode of subjective apple eating they simply operate on his nervous system to remove all traces of his having had the experience and restore his internal condition to just what it was at the beginning of the episode. Then they run him through it again. What difference does it make to the subject how many times this is done? We might think of each repetition as an addition to the quantity of experience of this subject. After all, objectively more time is spent by him in seeming to eat his apple each time the episode is gone through. But this, I would say, is another contextualist mistake. This series of experiences is subjectively no series. There is no repetitive or cumulative quality to it. It is never for the experiencer another time that he eats the apple. It is for him always the same one time.

Our consideration of subjective order in time can help us to think about this quantitative issue. Imagine the subject is now, objectively, being brought through the end of the apple-eating episode. Next he is to be caused once again to experience the beginning in a repetition. The contextualist thinks of this as qualitatively a new start for him. But we know from our investigation of subjective order that this experience of beginning to eat the apple objectively following the experience of finishing it will come before it for the experiencer. Hence it cannot represent the beginning of more subjective experience as a repetition.

I suggest that we can faithfully represent the apple-eater's total subjective experience to ourselves only as that of merely one episode of apple-eating. And which in the series of episodes was the one that he experienced? My answer is that it was indifferently any one of the series that he experienced. The episode considered as subjective experience is like an Aristotelian universal. There must be at least one instance of it if it is to exist; but any instance would do; and it remains numerically the same in all repeated instances of it. The instances all have an objective nature—all have objective histories, times, locations, distinct identities. But their single subjective quality is abstract from all such matters of context. And it is the quality alone that determines the quantity and the numerical identity of the subjective experience by virtue of its status as a universal. To seem one and unrepeated is to be one and unrepeated in the subjective aspect of experience. Thus, if someone is offered a choice between a very pleasant experience to

be precisely repeated a dozen times and a slightly more pleasant one to be had only once, he will do well to choose the latter.

Our next step is startling. Imagine that the experimenters make or find a precise duplicate of the original apple-eater. They freeze him, bring him into the lab, and work on him till he is in the same internal state as the original subject is at the start of his apple-eating experience. Meanwhile they are running the original through a series of precise repetitions. In the interval before the eleventh repetition they slice the original subject and the duplicate down the middle in precisely the same kind of cut. Then they carefully fix the left side of the duplicate on to the right side of the original, so that the result is qualitatively indistinguishable from the original subject. They start the action. Is the subjective experience in any way, either qualitatively or numerically, affected by this new contextual circumstance of half replacement? Is there a feeling of being only half the same person? Is this only half the experience that would have been had by the undisturbed original subject? It certainly cannot seem that way.

Next, in the interval before the twelfth repetition, the experimenters make the same kind of cut down the middle of the subject they had just put together. This time they fix the right side of the duplicate on to the left side of that subject. This leaves the new product qualitatively indistinguishable from either the last subject of a repetition or the original subject. But what we have here, of course, is the duplicate, whose halves we have just re-joined. But this is surely equivalent to our having the last subject, which was equivalent to having the original. This duplicate could have been simply fitted whole into the place of the original. Doing it by halves like this can have no relevance to the quality or number of the subjective experience. It merely helps us to notice the irrelevance to the numerical identity of subjective experience of the objective numerical identity of the subject of experience. For the duplicate could at any time have counted as a full subjective participant in the series of repetitions. And we have already discovered that precise repetitions of subjective experience are merely all instances of the single experience considered as a universal. Any one of the repetitions is as much the single subjective experience as any other. But this means that the duplicate subject's experience is taken in by the single universal involved in the experience of the original subject. The subjective



experience, then, does not belong to one objectively described subject alone, but at once to all subjects wherever and whenever they enter into just that precise kind of subjective experience. For it was not important that the duplicate be brought into the lab, or have any connexion with this experiment. Objective spatial and temporal circumstances can have no such relevance to anything of the character of subjective experience. If the duplicate had come about naturally somewhere across the universe and a billion years before or after the original apple-eater, his experience of eating the apple if qualitatively the same would have been numerically the same too.

Now, many cosmologists believe that there is infinite matter in the universe. We may expect that some tiny fraction of this infinite matter enters into the forms of living things. But a finite fraction, be it as small as we like, of an infinite quantity is still an infinite quantity. We should further expect that another tiny fraction of this infinite living matter exists in the form of physiological systems. And so this physiological matter too is infinite in quantity. There are a tremendous number of possible distinct neural structures and activities; but if we consider only discriminable differences in numbering these, their number is still only finite. This means that at least of those neural structures and activities that the universe tends to produce—those that result from evolution—there are a finite number of kinds but infinite instances. We may expect then that each type of experience corresponding to these physiological structures and activities has an overwhelming likelihood of being instantiated infinite times.

Not in a thought experiment but in our universe as it probably is, the subjective experience that now is yours belongs indifferently to all the scattered individual organisms involved in all the instances of it. But this means that you, capable of identifying yourself only as subject of this, your experience, cannot therein be any one of these rather than any other.

The full awfulness of this discovery comes clear only after we have learned about yet another feature of subjective experience. Such experience often seems to us continuous, so that we could not easily or neatly divide it into segments. But think of three instances of experience that start out precisely alike. One of these we imagine destroyed instantaneously or else simply caused to veer off in its development from that of the other two so that its quality and hence its identity as subjective experience has

changed from that of one of the other two. This is then a change that was shared by all the other instances. Nothing holds that at that moment was very brief.

The moment It could have varied past eternal description, are not what, in which particular instance subjective character does every subjective psycho-physical moment, but its qualitative character. Moments of consciousness essential. There although in cal organis

We suppose life. In fact every life that we think of future—as would anyone that exists in *exist* in its whether it

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changed from that of the others. Now we imagine annihilation of one of the others or else simply a change between them. There is then a clearly defined segment of subjective experience which was shared only by the two that stayed the same after the first change. The smallest such segment I term a "moment" of experience. Nothing much will depend, by the way, on whether we hold that there is such a smallest episode. What I will say of the moment would have the same effect if I were speaking rather of very brief episodes of experience.

The moment of experience has a temporal and causal context. It could have been led into and it could be led out of by countless varied pasts and futures—any that are compatible with the internal description of the moment. Subjective memories, for example, are not subjectively distinguishable on the basis of how, by what, in whom, where or when they were formed in any particular instance involving them. Every past conformable to the subjective character of the moment belongs indifferently to it, as does every future. Neither does the context of instances of other subjective moments, as they may be produced in any one of the psycho-physical organisms responsible for an instance of a moment, have the slightest effect on that moment's own subjective character. For each moment is distinctly a universal. Moments do not, like stages of a physical or a psychological process essentially cohere with others in the history of a single individual. There can be no such subjective individual through time, although in so many of their shared moments these psycho-physical organisms take themselves to be just that.

We suppose ourselves to be tied in each experience to a single life. In fact each subjective experience belongs indifferently to every life that produces it. This means its future is not single. If we think of the subjective moment as somehow possessing a future—as we crucially do think it does and as it cannot—we would anyway find it necessary to ascribe to it any and every future that exists in all of its temporal contexts—or better, that ever *could exist* in its temporal contexts, since it is entirely contextual whether it actually does.

There is an amazing epistemological problem arising from this if the universe contains a large quantity of life-producing matter. Psycho-physical organisms can be adequate as information-gatherers and bearers concerning their particular parts of the world. There they are always stimulated by particular surroundings, and



their ancestors have evolved through a particular history as capable of storing and using information to cope with their local world. And so in most of the instances of moment universals the circumstances are viewed as they are for the instance—as single and particular. Since each such instance of a moment has come about in response to a single environment, as part of a single history, everything in it speaks of particularity. Only when creatures back away from all this to see themselves in a cosmic perspective, as in this paper, does it suddenly dawn on them that subjective experiences cannot be particular after all, that each experience of an apple therefore is also at once an experience of countless things with apple-like effects. All judgments of local particulars reached in any way through the quality of our experience—and this is simply *all* judgments of local particulars—are shown useless by this consideration. But judgments about general matters or large particulars like the universe itself, such judgments as those relied on in this paper, are not in this way undermined. Many of these too might be weakened, however, if in an infinite universe we should expect that there would arise even single instances of many types of experiences that, against the tendencies of natural selection, were very misleading about the general character of things. But if the selection is strict enough, even through an infinite experience-producing universe, such general judgments at least would be trustworthy. Perhaps at least logic is safe, as long as it is based on clear and distinct ideas. If the universe contains so little matter that only one or a few histories produced each moment, neither epistemological problem would arise.

But the problem for our notion of what we are is not dependent on the quantity of matter in the universe. It would be contextualist to suppose that it was. Moments are distinct universals even if they exist in only one instance. And, as I shall argue next, our caring about our own future and the futures of others requires that our subjective moments rather cohere to one another, belong to one another, in something like objectively existing streams, as subjective individuals through time.

In fact, the coherence of a series of subjective moments as an individual through time is the sole essence of a person. His body, mind and self, if he has them, are each and all merely incidental to his identity as a person. If I came to think that the stream of those moments cohering in future with this one now would soon

be suddenly diverted into the life of a chimpanzee, then I should think that I therein shall have become the chimpanzee, even if there are to be no accompanying changes at all in the body, mind or self associated with either of us now. As the chimp, I would know nothing of having been human. I would simply be carrying on like a lifetime chimpanzee. The experiences of that chimp would then be mine, because they would be part of the single subjective continuation from this moment. And if I now anticipated such a future diversion of the stream, my self-interested concern now about that future period ought to center wholly on what will happen to the chimp.

Taking ourselves to head into the future as subjective beings is the basis of our motivation. We feel that that which experiences this now, experiences also a single future. Thus its present thought and action extend to that future experience as its own proper concern. We care about others also as subjective individuals through time. The trouble is we don't have any clear understanding of what this could be. It is not through any discovery we can point to that we come to believe that this is what we are. Babies and many animals act as though they anticipate future experience in this same fashion. When philosophers turn their attention to this topic, they seem very confused. What I argue in this paper is that this whole system of seeing ourselves, which underlies our thought and our action, is mistaken and contradictory. When we come to understand the cold reality, we see that there could never be the required coherence of one set of subjective moments through time as well as that nothing else could give us the least satisfaction as a basis for an interest in life.

Consider the nature of the subjective individual. When we think of it one way, the answer to the question of whether any moment will belong to it must be absolute; it is all or nothing. This is necessary to the future being strongly the same with the present, so as to engage our present interest. There can't be moments only partially mine or only mine in a qualified sense. This individual, then, unlike physical objects or psychological processes, which I call *standard individuals*, seems to involve some sort of strict identity of its parts with one another through time. It is therein what I term a *strict individual*. This is already a contradiction. Nothing that exists through time might not be different in different eventualities. But it is also important

that the subjective individual be thought of as capable of going off into alternative futures equally well, so that we may deliberate alternative courses of action. This contradicts the already contradictory all or nothing character of strict individuality, which decrees that such an individual can only advance one way, since its future states belong to it in strict identity. This contradiction of single future and alternative futures lies at the heart of the antinomy of the splitting man puzzle case, as we shall see later. (Most of the other puzzle cases merely bring out the inadequacy of bodily or psychological continuity as criteria of sameness of the person.)

It seems to me there are three distinct ways that we might suppose our lives to cohere as they must to be of any interest to us. None of the three works.

We might think that the principle of connexion is something intrinsic to the character of the subjective moments themselves. But we have seen that moments are merely separate universals. None can be defined essentially in terms of objective locations, times and causal connexions, as can stages of standard individuals. Thus they cannot ever belong to one another in a series or blend. Subjective moments are incapable of forming even standard individuals, let alone the strict ones required as subjective individuals through time.

A useful analogue for a moment would be the abstract description of a single set of positions of chessmen, such as might be sent by one player to another at some point in a game played by mail. If all one possessed to go on was a description of this sort, just as all we possess to go on is the abstract quality of our experience, there would be no sense whatever to the thought that this one set of positions belonged to only one abstract game, where an abstract game is a series of other abstract descriptions of sets of positions following on one from another. Similarly, the moment universal does not intrinsically belong to some one order of other moment universals. So this moment universal, which is all we have to go on, is not tied into a series of other moment universals by virtue of its or their intrinsic nature.

But perhaps the coherence exists in the experience by virtue of the connexion of certain subjective moments with some single thing that produced them. Perhaps, though these moments don't cohere intrinsically, because they all got produced by the same



individual body, mind or self, they do belong to one another. But there is no way the contextual circumstances of a moment's production can give it anything beyond its subjective properties. A moment produced again and again by various objective individuals does not possess any of their individuality and cannot be essentially joined to other moment universals by virtue of the contingent relation they have to such objective individuals producing them. This is equally true if only one individual produces a moment, as in a universe with little matter. Countless different individuals could just as well have produced that and the other moments, and that alone makes a coherence of the moments through even just a sole individual production impossible.

Think of a particular chess game played on a particular board with particular chess pieces, which is the analogue of experience instanced in the particular organism. Let's say that the single abstract set of positions we spoke of earlier is part of this game in its abstract description. This can hardly now make it the case that if we get the description of the set of positions alone, which is like our experience of this subjective moment, we can discover either that in this instance a game is played on just this board with just these pieces, involving at some point these abstract positions or that the set of positions somehow belongs with the other sets of positions that come up in this game. We'd have to get a look at the game for that, but all we have is the abstract description of the one set of positions.

But finally, if we agree that subjective coherence of a moment series is impossible either of these ways, we might still make a third attempt to give coherence to our lives. Maybe the continuity that matters consists merely in the continuity of body, mind or self, the moment producers. If we simply consider ourselves to be a single organism, for example, why could we not therein *have* all the moments produced by that organism? Wouldn't this be coherence enough?

But there is only one way we can ever identify ourselves. That is through subjective experience. And subjective experience is universal. Its relation to anything possessing it is contingent. This means two things. First, it makes no sense to think of ourselves as one producer of our experience rather than another that would do as well—actual or possible. We certainly couldn't discriminate one of these from another through our experience anyway. And

second, even if this identification had significance, it would gain us nothing because the experience itself, which is all we would have available to us of ourselves, would not cohere subjectively as we have already seen. That a body or mind or self continues on into the future is cold comfort, even if we arbitrarily and ignorantly identify ourselves with some one such particular, if its continuity cannot be translated into the sort of continuity of subjective experience that we can truly possess, where one moment belongs to another. That each of two moment instances somehow belongs to some third thing like a body is not interesting.

This would be as though we had only the one set of chess positions and thought that through this alone we could identify one particular game to which this belonged and that the game as a particular one could somehow uniquely possess all the abstract sets of positions involved in it, so that these all singly could not still just as well be part of other chess games.

Only a non-contextual, subjective continuity could interest us; but all the subjective beings are merely moment universals.

The splitting man puzzle cases show us another reason why bodily and psychological continuity are inadequate as the support for our interest in the future. The psycho-physical organism, as a standard individual which can change by degrees, can branch off into its future like an amoeba. We may not be clear about whether the result of human fission would be two of the same organism or two new individuals—but there is nothing deeply puzzling about this aspect of the case. It is when we imagine projecting ourselves into our own future as subjective beings in the case that the notorious antinomy emerges. Imagine that the night before you split you are settling down to sleep. You know that the next day the one who awakens on the left will be going off to something painful, the one on the right will be enjoying himself. Where will you be awakening? What kind of day will you have? Well, you can't have two simultaneous experiences, you feel, so you cannot be both. One rather than the other seems totally arbitrary—after all, you could easily have been either if the other had not survived. Are you not perhaps annihilated in this, since the other interpretations seemed wrong? But why should you disappear merely because there is *another* person who would count as you on his own?

That this problem arises only in considering the identity of subjective experience is evidence of its distinction from bodily and psychological identity. These latter involve nothing but standard individuals. The contradiction I mentioned earlier between the strict character of subjective individuality and the possibility of subjective alternatives shows itself here. I can imagine my subjective stream going off to either left or right. But then again it could not go off both ways (which calls into question whether it really could have gone off either) because I must possess my future strictly, as a single line of moments. I could not really have been otherwise than as I am now. The reason for this inability to branch is both the all or nothing character of the subjective individual, not allowing for degrees of change leading to qualified identifications, and also a contextualist error. When instances of subjective experiences are objectively simultaneous, then the subjective experiences themselves need not be numerically distinct. To think they must is a contextualist mistake. It is only their difference in quality that distinguishes them numerically. When we look at the splitting man case we are forced by this contextualist prejudice about simultaneity of instances to recognize fully that there is distinctness in identity between the subjective experiences (though if they were qualitatively the same, of course, we would be wrong in this). But this same distinctness exists among the moments in the usual cases of experience. The conclusion there should be the same.

My view solves the problem, but at enormous cost. We do not look for continuing subjectively into the future. There is a dividing organism. This produces instances of moment universals that have no more essential connection to one another before than after division. They contain the expectation of continuity, each individually, but as always this is mistaken. There are simply instances of moments of falling asleep the night before, and then instances of moments of waking on the right and other instances of moments of waking on the left. There is no one contradictory thing, a subjective individual, that could only run into the future one way, although it could possibly have run into it another.

Why do we believe so strongly in the existence of this contradictory entity? I have described the mistake as that of the confusion of the subjective and the contextual, of the reality of



subjective experience with the circumstances of its production. I also mentioned that the particularity of the circumstances of production in instances of subjective experience selects for forms of experience that reflect the particularity.

But there is also the tremendous survival value for the psychophysical organism of its taking itself the wrong way. Creatures that got the metaphysics right, not just intellectually but deep in their constitution, where our faith in subjective continuation is installed, would not bother in one stage about future ones. They would not, as we do, just always regard future pains and pleasures, successes and frustrations, as belonging to the same subjective individual. The present experience would dissolve from its future. In so far as they experienced subjectively, such beings would not hold themselves to be continuous at all—or located in one vicinity of space and one period of time—leading a life. Such creatures would make no sense motivationally. They surely would not survive as we do by planning for the future in terms of interest. There could be no interest there in themselves or others. So the only creatures around that survive through anything like our motivational system are creatures who make this mistake.

The fact that this view of ours has survival value independent of its being true in itself casts great suspicion on it. Contrast it with our intellectual beliefs. The survival value of these generally increases when they better reflect the real state of things. Creatures that form such beliefs stay around because in their reflection of the way things are they assist these creatures in dealing with their world. And the creatures usually do form these beliefs in some interaction with the world, in discovery, which helps secure their accuracy. We never make any such discovery concerning personal identity. Other animals and infants in their least considered acts will show they view the matter as do most philosophers—who simply assume that there is some legitimate basis for our interest in the future. The survival value for the organism when it comes to this belief, as contrasted with the intellectual, has nothing to do with the belief's reflecting the way we really are. It would be coincidence if the metaphysics were right. And this crucially undermines the strength of our confidence as evidence of the continuation of the person.

In this paper the intellect turns in attack on its more primitive brother in the mind. The advantage is that of the older power. It

is more than just belief, it is a manner of existence that reaches into every part of us. But if the intellect is right, none of this conflict or anything else matters to anyone. There is no full-blooded person in all the world and it is impossible that there should ever be one.

We are not advised to do anything by this view—there is nobody of any worth to whom it would advise. It is not important whether it is believed or not, according to the view. For the view destroys all importance. But then that it does this is not important—unless the view is wrong.

#### NOTE

<sup>1</sup> Gilbert Harman and Thomas Nagel have most influenced my thinking on this topic. Through the years I have had very rewarding discussions about it with Wayne Bachner, Bert Barth, Bonnie Breier, Carol Cameron, Bill Gohean, Fred Kirshnit, Nigel Quigley, Graham Roupas, Jerome Shaffer, Larry Stanton, Laney Zuboff and Mark Zuboff. Of great help to me in writing this paper have been Anita Avramides, G. A. Cohen and Colin McGinn.