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A Transcendental Approach to Librarianship

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction

of the requirements for the degree

Master of Library and Information Science

by

Ezra Jiseok Choe

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

A Transcendental Approach to Librarianship

by

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Master of Library and Information Science

University of California, Los Angeles, 2021

Professor Gregory Leazer, Chair

The thesis examines a general framework proposed by Paul Otlet, an important figure in information science. Contrary to the “positivist” charge ascribed to him, Paul Otlet’s theory of documentation includes various frameworks alien to contemporary information science. One of the frameworks employed by Paul Otlet is what is classically known as the *transcendentals*, i.e., *truth*, *good*, and *beauty*. I will proceed to show what specific metatheoretical assumptions and commitments are entailed in the *transcendental framework*. Moreover, the thesis will examine the historical emergence and philosophical background of this concept and how it applies to librarianship, especially concerning the role of truth and knowledge organization. Ethical considerations will also be examined especially the responsibility and role of librarians as information professionals. The thesis is an exploration of a general philosophical framework; references to other competing worldviews will be examined.

The thesis of Ezra Jiseok Choe is approved.

Calvin Normore

Jonathon Furner

Gregory Leazer, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2021

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Introduction: The Importance of Philosophy

Why should librarians be concerned with philosophy? As Michael Gorman observes, it seems like the most towering figures in modern librarianship were in fact doers rather than thinkers: “For all of Melvil Dewey’s philosophical underpinnings for his Decimal classification (Aristotle and all that), he was primarily concerned with arranging books on shelves. Antonio Panizzi’s whole career was one of overachievement and bustle – the quintessential Victorian man of action.”¹ It also seems like librarians are concerned primarily with the practical. Gorman continues his observation and notes that the library profession has evolved over centuries with little to no regard to philosophy, overarching principles, and values; the profession seems to constantly affirm the practical, the useful, and the utilitarian.²

To be sure, Gorman overstates the problem, and his concern is indeed outdated to the present-day librarian; indeed, significant and careful attention has been made in the philosophy of librarianship.³ Furthermore, an increasing number of aspiring and practicing librarians are conscious of the fact that questions and problems pertaining to the profession can be considered more broadly into a philosophy of librarianship, i.e., values and virtues, cataloging and classification, pedagogical instructions, critical librarianship rooted in critical theory, overall mission of the librarian, ethical duties and responsibilities, neoliberalism and the workplace, etc.

¹ Michael Gorman, *Our Enduring Values: Librarianship in the 21st Century* (Chicago: American Library Association, 2000), 16.

² Gorman, *Our Enduring Values*, 17.

³ See for example, R. David Lankes, *The New Librarianship Field Guide* (The MIT Press, 2016). See Annie Downey, *Critical Information Literacy: Foundations, Inspiration, and Ideas* (Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2016). For a realist perspective, see Marianne Wikgren, “Critical Realism as a Philosophy and Social Theory in Information Science?,” ed. Birger Hjørland, *Journal of Documentation* 61, no. 1 (February 2005): 11–22, <https://doi.org/10.1108/00220410510577989>.

In other words, librarians are confronted with philosophical issues. Consider, for example, the core values of librarianship adopted by the American Library Association (henceforth ALA) which includes the following: access, confidentiality/privacy, democracy, diversity, education and lifelong learning, intellectual freedom, the public good, preservation, professionalism, service, and social responsibility.⁴ These are indeed values that should be cultivated and exercised throughout the librarian's career, but it also requires careful thinking and reflection to better execute these values on a day-to-day basis. Furthermore, many other questions may arise after reexamining ALA's core values. Indeed, why should these values be prioritized? And why should the librarian conduct their behavior according to those values prescribed extrinsically by an organization (in this case ALA)? Are libraries *qua* institutions a true public good? Perhaps more importantly, *why should we care about philosophy in the context of librarianship?*

In his essay *The Importance of What We Care About*, Harry Frankfurt asks what is required for something to be suitable or worthy as an ideal or object of love, i.e. "how a person is to decide, from among the various things worth caring about, which to care about."⁵ Since caring coincides with those things in which a person conducts his or her life, it seems like at least one necessary condition involves the *importance* of the thing cared about. The person who cares about something extends his or her agency to the thing cared about, and thus the wellbeing and flourishing of the thing cared about is of utmost importance to the person caring since it inevitably affects the person. Moreover, other psychological attitudes like wanting or liking are not to be confused, according to Frankfurt, with caring since caring requires constant and

⁴ "Core Values of Librarianship," Text, Advocacy, Legislation & Issues, July 26, 2006, <http://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/corevalues>.

⁵ Harry G. Frankfurt, "The Importance of What We Care About," in *The Importance of What We Care About: Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge [England]; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 80–94.

consistent attention.⁶ The association between caring and importance is crucial since it distinguishes most other psychological attitudes; most of our wants and desires are inconsequential. Frankfurt explicitly explains this crucial principle regarding the association between caring and importance:

But if there is something that a person does care about, then it follows that it is important to him. This is not because caring somehow involves an infallible judgement concerning the importance of its object. *Rather it is because caring about something makes that thing important to the person who cares about it* (emphasis added).⁷

What follows from this principle is the fact that the person who cares about something is not *indifferent* towards the thing cared about since it makes a difference to the person. Caring involves importance because it makes a difference intrinsically to the person; otherwise, the person will be indifferent.

Also, note the volitional aspect of Harry Frankfurt's concept of care. The act of caring itself makes the intentional object important to the person. Thus, the formation of a person's will is integral to the person coming to care about things, and while this may not be wholly under the person's voluntary control, it is nevertheless often possible for him to affect them.⁸ An interesting parallel is made towards the end of the essay; Frankfurt proceeds to compare this to divine charity which is bestowed to certain individuals regardless of their antecedent values or character, and this in no way makes the choice irrelevant or arbitrary. In his final remark, Frankfurt concludes:

⁶ Frankfurt, 92: "Thus caring about something is not to be confused with liking it or with wanting it; nor is it the same as thinking that what is cared about has value of some kind, or that it is desirable."

⁷ Frankfurt, 92.

⁸ Frankfurt, 91.

When a person makes something important to himself, accordingly, the situation resembles an instance of divine *agape* at least in a certain respect. The person does not care about the object because its worthiness commands that he do so. On the other hand, the worthiness of the activity of caring commands that he choose an object which he will be able to care about.⁹

This is the most contentious part of Harry Frankfurt's overall concept of caring. There seems to be a strong voluntaristic account of caring in Frankfurt, even though it is made clear that caring is not an act of the will. The act of caring supposedly infuses importance in the world; the intentional act of caring marks our interests and our goals, and the importance that our caring "creates for us defines the framework of standards and aims in terms of which we endeavor to conduct our lives."¹⁰ It is important to note, however, that Frankfurt also maintains that a person caring and thereby imbuing importance to a thing is in fact compatible with the claim that what is important for a person may be due to some other considerations independent of our caring. In fact, most people want to care about things that coincide with considerations independent of our caring.

Justification for caring about philosophy of librarianship, I think, should follow something along the lines of what Frankfurt has articulated in his essay, and in his systematic treatment of the subject in *The Reasons of Love*. Librarians and information scientists should consider the various practical implications and the philosophical assumptions pertaining to the profession itself which has been done in various domains and explored by scholars as indicated above. But those considerations and the important implications of the various philosophical frameworks should not be the sole basis and justification for the librarian to care about the philosophy of librarianship. The mere fact that something is important does not warrant the

⁹ Frankfurt, 94.

¹⁰ Harry G. Frankfurt, *The Reasons of Love* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004), 23.

librarian's care; the librarian must choose to care independent of all considerations which makes philosophy important at an individual level, i.e. the librarian who cares. Otherwise, one ends up with the dichotomy of Michael Gorman's doers and thinkers. The relegation of the librarian to being one that is only of practicality is due, in part, to place the reason for caring solely on independent or antecedent considerations, e.g. *diversity* is an important value, therefore I care. This sort of caring is bound to be short lived and relegates the librarians to that of "doers" only. As Frankfurt notes, "...a person often begins to care about something when he recognizes its capacity to affect him in important ways, ceases to care about it when he discovers that it does not have that capacity..."¹¹ The librarian who cares about philosophy of librarianship finds it important by the mere simple fact that he or she chooses to care.

Nothing exemplifies this spirit more than David Lankes's approach to librarianship as expressed in his book *The New Librarianship*.¹² For Lankes, the librarian has a greater urgency to extend care to his or her work because the importance not only extends to the self but to the community. In fact, the core mission for him is that the caring affects people which requires radical positive change. Thus, the purpose of his book is to "prepare librarians to be agents for radical positive change and to directly engage their communities...to use knowledge to achieve their dreams and aspirations."¹³ While I agree in part with Lankes's call for positive change, I disagree with some of his metatheoretical assumptions that undergird his approach to librarianship or what he calls "new" librarianship. In fact, I will argue that some of the things

¹¹ Frankfurt, *The Importance of What We Care About*, 93.

¹² R. David Lankes, *The New Librarianship Field Guide* (Cambridge, Massachusetts ; London, England: The MIT Press, 2016).

¹³ Lankes. 4.

described in his approach are not worth caring about at all and should bear no importance to the librarian. Though librarians have the right to choose what they care about, librarians should also be prepared to examine various assumptions that are in their own philosophies. The thesis, then, is in part an exploration to of a philosophy of librarianship that I think one ought to care about. The thesis has two sections. The first will section will provide an alternative framework; I have labeled this approach the *transcendental approach* which corresponds to what is True, Good, and Beautiful. I shall explore and contextualize what the *transcendentals* mean in the first section of the thesis in relation to Paul Otlet's view on documentation. After examining the metatheoretical presuppositions of the *transcendentals*, it will become apparent that the *transcendental approach* is in contradiction to a core aspect of Lankes's philosophy of librarianship. The following section will then see how this framework applies in one specific context of librarianship, i.e., the problem of echo chambers and why truth matters in librarianship.

Paul Otlet and the *Transcendentals*

Paul Otlet (1868-1944) is an important figure in information science and has undoubtedly made important contributions to the field. He, for example, functionally anticipated the modern hypertext systems and thought he could give a unique description and classification of reality.

Otlet scholar, W. Boyd Rayward, notes that:

Otlet wrote eloquently of the need for an international information handling system embracing everything from the creation of an entry in a catalogue to new forms of publication, from the management of libraries, archives, and museums as interrelated information agencies to collaborative development of universal encyclopedias codifying all of man's hitherto unmanageable knowledge.¹⁴

Documentation is the process by which codifying all of the particular sciences, a representation and generalization can be made for better retrieval. In effect, the generalization and representation of sciences provides a meaningful and unified whole that transcends mere fragmented knowledge.¹⁵

Otlet's vision, in conjunction, with the monographic principle, i.e. "recording bibliographic references on index card and substantive information on standardized separate sheets"¹⁶, is accused by Rayward of being influenced by positivism and therefore naive. For Paul Otlet, each document contained static information; its factual content was to be abstracted and reduced to its basic elements. In a way, the monographic principle enables information to transcend the limitation of the book as a physical artifact. This reductionistic approach came

¹⁴ W Boyd Rayward, "Visions of Xanadu: Paul Otlet (1868-1944) and Hypertext," *Journal of the American Society for Information Science* 45, no. 5 (1994): 235.

¹⁵ Steffen Ducheyne, "'To Treat of the World': Paul Otlet's Ontology and Epistemology and the Circle of Knowledge," *Journal of Documentation* 65, no. 2 (March 6, 2009): 224, <https://doi.org/10.1108/00220410910937598>.

¹⁶ Rayward, "Visions of Xanadu: Paul Otlet (1868-1944) and Hypertext," 240.

about because he viewed books to be scattered with a tedious vast range of information.¹⁷ Thus, in Otlet's view, all of the world's information contained in documents was to be abstracted into a single mechanical retrieval corpus, a Universal Book, and the means to achieve this was to codify each element into a single index. The restrictive nature of this approach parallels, according to Rayward, the restrictive nature of positivism itself; Rayward explains: "It can be argued that the solutions Otlet's proposal for the problems of information storage and retrieval that were his almost obsessive concern failed because they reflected a naïve view of the nature of knowledge and the dynamics of its growth..."¹⁸ It is important to note that Rayward's criticism is associated with the positivism of Auguste Comte and not the positivism of the 19th and 20th century, i.e., "logical positivism". Generally, the logical positivists subscribe to the principle of verification which says that only propositions that are empirically verifiable are meaningful. Auguste Comte's positivism is more complicated since he viewed human knowledge historically and contextually. He divided human knowledge into three different stages, i.e., the theological, metaphysical (abstract), and the positivist. For Comte, human beings have naturally progressed into the final (positivist) stage. In this stage, the "real business is to analyse accurately the circumstances of phenomena, and to connect them by the natural relations of successions or resemblance."¹⁹ Comte's positivism leaves no room for casual explanation and metaphysical speculation.

¹⁷ Problems such as the (i) incompleteness of books, (ii) errors of books, (iii) fragmentation and dispersion, (iv) repetition, and (v) a mixture of the primary and the secondary (degree of importance). See Rayward, 240.

¹⁸ Rayward, 248.

¹⁹ Auguste Comte, *The Positive Philosophy of Auguste Comte*, trans. Harriet Martineau (London: George Bell & Sons, 1896), 28.

Rayward's positivist reading of Otlet is further reinforced when he characterizes Otlet's views as "view of knowledge was authoritarian, reductionist, positivist, simplistic – and optimistic!"²⁰ To be sure, Rayward's reading of Otlet has some truth to it; it does seem like some aspect of Otlet's concept of a Universal Book parallels the restrictive nature of Comte's positivist thinking. However, it is important to note that some metatheoretical presuppositions in various approaches to librarianship actually converges which can be a source of confusion. What we *prima facie* assume in different philosophical paradigm may actually not be the case. In other words, there is room for nuance when discussing different philosophical paradigms and presuppositions.

In fact, Hjørland warns librarians that people confuse different philosophical paradigms when discussing issues related to Library Information Science; he insinuates that positivists are actually anti-realists: "Although many people confuse empiricism and positivism with realism, *these traditions are by nature strongly antirealist* (emphasis added), which is why a sharp distinction should be made between empiricism and realism."²¹ Indeed, most positivists do not subscribe to a correspondence theory of truth, i.e., know that a proposition corresponds to reality which seems to be an initial assumption many people have regarding positivism. Instead, as James Young notes, some positivists adopt a coherence theory of justification which favors an anti-realist understanding of the world:

Another epistemological argument for coherentism is based on the view that we cannot "get outside" our set of beliefs and compare propositions to objective facts. A version of this argument was advanced by some logical positivists including Hempel (1935) and Neurath (1983). This argument, like Blanshard's, depends on a coherence theory of

²⁰ Rayward, 247

²¹ Birger Hjørland, "Arguments for Philosophical Realism in Library and Information Science," *Library Trends* 52, no. 3 (2004): 488.

justification. *The argument infers from such a theory that we can only know that a proposition coheres with a set of beliefs. We can never know that a proposition corresponds to reality* (emphasis added).²²

To be sure, Hjørland's assertion that people confuse various philosophical paradigms should be critically examined; he does not seem to explicate what exactly the positivist ethos entails. With this in mind, the monograph principle cannot be considered something that exclusively parallels the positivist paradigm. Rather, Otlet operates with a healthy dose of realism which also implies a correspondence theory of truth. To avoid confusion, Rayward and other like-minded scholars need to specifically point out where they see a positivist paradigm in Otlet's Knowledge Organization (henceforth KO) system and how they understand positivism itself. If information scholars do have a problem with universal schemas, they likely have more of a problem with a correspondence theory of truth which undergirds most KO systems. Consequently, Rayward's reading of Otlet may be correct if he an explicit connection between Comte's positivism and a correspondence theory of truth.

Ultimately, Rayward's positivist reading of Otlet is erroneous for several reasons.²³ One reason, as insinuated above, is because Rayward never clarifies or delineates what the positivist ethos entails which would have nuanced the various frameworks Otlet employs in his conception of the world. To be sure, there might be a case for Rayward if he made a more explicit connection between Otlet's monographic principle and the positivism of Comte. However, the most potent reason why one should question Rayward's reading is that Otlet himself employed

²² James O. Young, "The Coherence Theory of Truth," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Fall 2018 (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2018), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2018/entries/ruth-coherence/>.

²³ See for example, Ron Day, "Paul Otlet's Book and the Writing of Social Space," *Journal of the American Society for Information Science* 48, no. 4 (1997): 310–17.

different frameworks to articulate his philosophy; he conceived of human knowledge that incorporated cosmological, objectivist, humanitarian and ontological frameworks. In fact, Otlet utilizes elements of scholastic philosophy that runs counter to the positivist ethos. As Ducheyne points out, “Otlet’s worldview encompassed not only science but also what he called ‘transcendentals’ in *Monde*, i.e. metaphysical and moral elements”.²⁴ These transcendentals such as something, one, good, being, true, and beauty are fittingly called transcendental by the Scholastics because they transcended Aristotelian categories. Transcendentals are beyond any genus or species. This approach would indeed be anathema under positivism, but the very fact Otlet employs them should alarm readers of Rayward’s reductional reading of Otlet precisely because he fails to mention the various frameworks Otlet utilizes in his unified theory of knowledge.

Proving conclusively that Paul Otlet was a *transcendental* thinker is beyond the scope of this thesis. There are some references, however, that would surely raise the positivist’s eyebrow and perhaps substantiate the claim that Otlet was indeed a *transcendental* thinker. First of all, in *Monde: Essai D’Universalisme*, Paul Otlet explicitly names the *transcendental* in his explanation of the subject of Ontology and Being.²⁵ While naming something certainly does not mean Otlet endorsed a *transcendental* mode of thinking, he clearly thought it was important to the subject of ontology and the World (Monde). Furthermore, there are some indications that Paul Otlet implemented the *transcendental* in his very own ontology and world view. In *Encyclopedia Universalis Mundaneum*, Otlet seems to have incorporated not only the *transcendentals* but also

²⁴ Ducheyne, “‘To Treat of the World,’” 235.

²⁵ Paul Otlet, *Monde, Essai d’Universalisme* (Brussels.: Editions Mundaneum, 1935.), 10.

other frameworks: there are various notes and drawings mentioning the *transcendentals* in the context of documentation and universal knowledge.²⁶

It is precisely in this context that I shall articulate the philosophy of the *transcendental* which is just one of many aspects of Otlet's vision of Universal Knowledge, and the metatheoretical assumptions that are entailed in this worldview. What should be noted, however, is that a transcendental framework should not be confused with the transcendental idealism or German Idealism movement associated in the 18th and 19th century. In Kant, transcendentalism refers a more particular type of knowledge – an *apriori* knowledge through which one can judge rightly. What Otlet has in mind are classical notions of *transcendentals* that cannot be categorized in Aristotelian ten-fold division of categories. In classical philosophy, these *transcendentals* that are well known and are usually identified as: *verum* (true), *pulchrum* (the beautiful), and *bonum* (the good).

So, what exactly are the *transcendentals*? It should be noted that the genealogy of the term *transcendentia* is of curious origin. The first systematic treatment of the *transcendentals* is presented in Phillip the Chancellor's (1160-1236), but he himself never uses the term *transcendentia*. Succinctly put, transcendentals are objects of desire that all human beings aim for. The desire is directed towards “something” or *aliquid* and therefore is the object of intention. These objects of desire however are common to all being and thus cannot be situated to one category. In fact, Thomas Aquinas identifies *aliquid* as a transcendental. The transcendentals are common to all beings either absolutely or in relation to something.²⁷ “Something” refers to the

²⁶ Here, I am exclusively relying on Ducheyne, “‘To Treat of the World,’” 235–39.

²⁷ Aquinas Thomas, *Truth*, trans. Robert W. Mulligan, James V. McGlynn, and Robert William Schmidt (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co, 1994). Aquinas notes: “Second, some are said to add to being because the mode

latter kind, for “something” means for some other kind – that things are some sort of being and is distinct from one being to another. The former kind indicates a being that is absolute (*ens in se*); this would include transcendentals such as one (*unum*) and thing (*res*) and by extension, *verum*, *bonum*, and *pulchrum*. Now, such categorization of the transcendental is a medieval innovation, but the seed of that idea can be traced to Plato, and more concretely the *Symposium*, where Socrates responds to Agathon.²⁸ Indeed, Socrates notes that the Good and the Beautiful are both desired by everyone.²⁹ This implies that the faculties of the soul correspond to some aspect of the transcendentals. For example, the intellect can love (*eros*) truth implying some sort of wisdom the soul possesses (i.e. philosopher). The will is directed towards the Good. This also implies the transcendentals don’t add anything to being. Since the cognitive faculties perceive being in various aspects, a thing that is said to be good is by extension true and beautiful since all these terms are co-extensive. Umberto Eco explains it this way: “The transcendentals add nothing to being. Nor do they in anyway diminish its totality and extension. They inhere in being coextensively and can be desired in every being, and they determine the character of beings both in themselves and in relation to other beings.”³⁰ Since transcendental notions add nothing to being, and are extensionally the same, *verum bonum*, and *pluchrum* are convertible (interchangeable) and can be predicated *salva veritate*.

they express is one that is common, and consequent upon every being. This mode can be taken in two ways: first, in so far as it follows upon every being considered absolutely; second, in so far as it follows upon every being considered in relation to another.”

²⁸ See 201c of Plato, John M. Cooper, and D. S. Hutchinson, “Symposium,” in *Complete Works* (Indianapolis, Ind: Hackett Pub, 1997), 457–505.

²⁹ The relationship between *kalon* and *agathon* in the Platonic corpus is unclear. Barney suggests that this question should not be settled metaphysically but in relation to the *psyche*. See Rachel Barney, “Notes on Plato on the *Kalon* and the Good,” *Classical Philology* 105, no. 4 (October 2010): 363–77, <https://doi.org/10.1086/657026>.

³⁰ Umberto Eco, *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Hugh Bredin (Harvard University Press, n.d.), 21.

At first glance, it seems like the transcendentals are entirely redundant and somewhat trivial. If all these transcendental notions add nothing to being, have the same extension and thereby coextensive, what is the point of articulating an elaborate system of the transcendentals as in the case of Thomas Aquinas and Phillip the Chancellor? Furthermore, would not the notion of the transcendentals be a tautology? The key to this question is the recognition that things can be extensionally the same yet intentionally different. In other words, they are not synonyms. As mentioned above, the transcendental does not add anything to being, but they could be understood in different ways, i.e. being, truth, goodness, and beauty are convertible because they are extensionally the same but is intentionally different when the same thing is considered in different ways.

Jan Aertsen explains how this is possible: “Although *ens* and *verum* are convertible, they are not synonymous. It is not redundant to say that every being is true. ‘True’ expresses something that is not expressed by the name ‘being’; it adds something to being, namely, a relation to the intellect.”³¹ Now, I did mention above that the transcendentals add nothing to being above; here we seem to have a contradiction. Aertsen explicitly mentions that *verum* does add something to being, namely, a relational aspect to the intellect. This relation, however, cannot be a real relation because a real relation belongs to one of the ten categories, while a non-real relation can run through all categories; this is precisely the type of theory of relation to apply to the transcendentals since it cuts across all categories.³² We are still, however, confronted with the problem of how precisely *verum* can add something to *ens*, namely a relation to the intellect

³¹ Jan A. Aertsen, “Truth as Transcendental in Thomas Aquinas,” *Topoi* 11, no. 2 (September 1, 1992): 167, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00774421>.

³² Thomas et al., *Truth, q. 21 a. 1 ad. 3.*: “Every real relation is in a definite category, but non-real relations can run through all beings.”

that does not fit in a definite category. Aquinas answers this question by parsing out the various ways something can be added to another. In *De Veritate* Q. 21. A. 1 (Does Good Add Anything Into Being?), Aquinas makes those distinctions clear and explains how something can be added according to a relation of reason or concept:

Something is said to add to something else in concept only. This occurs when something which is nothing in reality but only in thought, belongs to the notion of one thing and not to the notion of the other, whether that to which it is said to be added is limited by it or not. Thus *blind* adds something to man, i.e., blindness, which is not a being in nature but merely a being in the thought of one who knows privations. By it man is limited, for not every man is blind. But when we say “a blind mole,” no limitation is placed by what is added.³³

As noted in the example Aquinas provides, an addition of things occurs conceptually when something is added which is not in nature but merely a being in thought; the privation example he cites is an example of a conceptual reason based on negation. Aquinas will note that a transcendental like *unum* fits in this negative kind since what is added is just a mere negation, namely *unum* connoting undivided being. But *ens* and *verum* can be predicated positively, and I have mentioned already that *verum* is said to add something to *ens* (relation to the intellect) even though extensionally they add nothing to being; how is it that they can add something to being positively as a mere relation of concept?

In the same passage, Aquinas explains the relation of concept (reason) this way: “A relation is merely conceptual, according to the Philosopher, when by it something is said to be related which is not dependent upon that to which it is referred, but vice versa; for a relation is a sort of dependence.”³⁴ In other words, the dependency relationship that occurs in a relation of

³³ Thomas.

³⁴ Thomas. Q.21 A.1

concept only occurs unilaterally. Aquinas immediately provides an example in the context of cognition, i.e., intellectual knowledge in relation to a sensible object. While knowledge depends on the sensible object and is therefore a real relationship, the sensible object does not depend upon the intellect at all, and therefore is a conceptual relation, i.e., the object is only considered in relation to intellectual knowledge. For Aquinas, this principle holds true for “all other things which stand to another as measure and thing measured or as perfective and perfectible.”³⁵ Aertsen commenting on this passage notes that “what is measured is really related to that which measures, but the measure is not dependent on what is measured.”³⁶ Now, applying this concept to the relationship between the *verum* and *ens*, it is evident that the thing (*ens*) is the measure of truth of the intellect. The thing (*ens*) in relation to the intellect is real because the intellect is really related to the thing, but the relation to the intellect that *verum* adds to *ens* is a relation of reason which is like the unilateral and nonmutual relation between a measure and what is measured.³⁷

What follows from this coextension of the transcendentals is that the intellect is not an empty blanket; the transcendentals, in some ways, are innate ideas (common principles) that are necessary for the intellect to abstract intelligible species from phantasms which informs the passive intellect to render the agent’s potency to actualize understanding. They serve as a sort of measure to render understanding possible. Now, what is of crucial importance when discussing the transcendentals is that they must be discussed within the context of the *psyche* and the

³⁵ Thomas. Q.21 A.1

³⁶ Aertsen, “Truth as Transcendental in Thomas Aquinas,” 168.

³⁷ Aertsen, 168.

various inclination within the soul. In this picture, the intellect is ordered to truth; it really seeks to understand – to read within and to understand the world. In fact, to be an intellectual is just to exercise the capacity to reason and to “read from within”. All rational creatures have a natural desire to know and seek truth. This, I think, is the basic presupposition when discussing the transcendentals, hence, the scholastic adage: “*ratio humana essentias rerum quasi venatur* (the human mind hunts, as it were, the essences or natures or things)”.³⁸ Likewise, the good is something that all creatures will; it seems like the intentional aspect of the transcendental can be distinguished by which part of the soul it corresponds to. This, of course, does not mean the intellect grasps immediate and direct intellectual insight into essences or that an agent knows exactly what good to desire. As Peter Coffey noted in his scholastic manual, *Ontology*, “we understand it only by degrees, we explore it from various points of view, abstracting and generalizing partial aspects of it as we compare it with other things and seek to classify and define it...”³⁹ In fact, most of our quiddative knowledge of things comes through the senses are imperfect and comes with degrees. Indeed, some scholastics, thought that *de re* knowledge of real essences were not possible.

Proving why agents have a disposition and inclination towards the transcendentals is something, as I see it, very difficult. There are, indeed, various psychological and evolutionary explanations as to why a person inclines to certain beliefs and what he or she thinks is true. In the case of the broad Aristotelian tradition, it does seem like there is a broad consensus that there is a natural desire inherent in man that moves the agent towards an end. The famous line at the

³⁸ Peter Coffey, *Ontology: Or, The Theory of Being* (Theophania Publishing, 2011), 36.

³⁹ Coffey, 36.

beginning of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* indicates such confirmation, but Aristotle does not give a conclusive proof as to why this is the case. Rather, Aristotle talks about the effects of knowledge, which in turn gives us delight and points to our innate tendency to know. It is also worth noting that this is not mere curiosity.⁴⁰ It is better understood, according to Jonathon Lear, as precisely the natural capacity to be puzzled: "We cannot remain content – we are literally discontent – until we have an explanation as to why the heavens are as they are."⁴¹ While Aristotle accepts *a priori* this natural tendency, Aquinas, does give three reasons as to why this is the case. It would be helpful to briefly examine the first two since it pertains to the *bonum* and *verum*.

In his commentary of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, Aquinas gives some helpful insights into thinking about how all human creatures desire to know. The first reason is that each thing desires its own perfection. What is potential is always ordered to something actual, and since the intellect is in a state of potentiality, it will only become actual once knowledge is acquired.⁴² The second reason is quite similar to the first. Aquinas observes that each thing wants to perform its own proper operations and that it has a natural inclination to do so as "something hot is naturally inclined to heat, and something heavy to be moved downwards."⁴³ Since the proper operation of a person is to understand, he or she, by virtue of the intellect, desires to exercise his or her power to obtain knowledge. In other words, exercising the intellect and bringing the act it into fruition

⁴⁰ Curiosity was actually seen as a vice in the scholastic tradition.

⁴¹ Jonathan Lear, *Aristotle: The Desire to Understand*, Repr (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 3.

⁴² See Thomas, *Commentary on Metaphysics: Aristotle Commentaries*, trans. John Patrick Rowan, Latin/English Edition of the Works of St. Thomas Aquinas, volume 50 (Steubenville: Emmaus Academic, 2019), *lectio 1.2*.

⁴³ Thomas, *Commentary On Metaphysics, lectio 1.3*.

simply means that one is being more human. For Aquinas, the fulfillment of this natural desire for knowledge is also good since it is acting in accordance with its own nature, i.e. human kind.

With this in mind, what are there are implications for this metaphysical picture, and can any normative principles be derived from it? For one, this framework clearly presupposes a realism about things in the world, i.e., a reality that is extramental and mind independent. The monograph principle is a clear indication of Paul Otlet's metatheoretical assumptions of his theory of truth; it parallels a correspondence theory of truth whereby a proposition represents something truly extramental in the world. A correspondence theory of truth is the view that propositions represent the world, and by virtue of such correlation, one can discern the truth or falsity of those propositions. Sentences are that which expresses propositions. While sentences are linguistically bound, propositions are not linguistically bound by socio-linguistic conventions. A "dog" or "*canis*" are linguistic tokens or what is more appropriately called truth-bearer⁴⁴, and they are different insofar as the former is English and the latter is Latin, but they share the same meaning which in turn corresponds to the world, namely, the facticity of a dog. Consider the propositions: "That pug is blue." The fact that the pug is blue (in the world) causes the sentence/truth bearer "That pug is blue." to be true. Subsequently, the immediate implication of correspondence theory of truth is that there are truthmakers. We can define truthmakers this way:

Def 1: A thing x is a (classical) *truthmaker* for proposition p iff (i) necessarily, if x exists, then p is true and (ii) necessarily, if x exists and p is true, then p is true at least in part in virtue of x 's existence.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Under a transcendental approach, a single concept can be true since *verum* is co-extensive with *ens*.

⁴⁵ Robert Koons and Timothy Pickavance, *The Atlas of Reality*, 1st ed. (Wiley-Blackwell, 2017), 18.

Truth and being are coextensive, but they differ intentionally since truth adds a relational aspect to being. As noted above, Paul Otlet cannot be described as a positivist since positivism as a philosophy itself leans on anti-realist tendencies. Moreover, Otlet himself championed knowledge as an image and a mirror to the World. As Ducheyne explains, “In order to count as an adequate image of the world such representations had to be isomorphic to their target: the world.”⁴⁶ I think it is clear and evident that a *transcendental* picture of the world assumes some version of a correspondence theory of truth, and therefore champions a truth-oriented disposition. There are, of course, various nuances concerning the correspondence theory of truth, and the pressing question of whether Aquinas actually held to modern theory of correspondence theory of truth. For one, modern correspondence theory has a clear distinction between truthbearers and truthmakers; they are ontologically separate. For modern correspondence theorist, propositions are the sole truthbearers which refers to things in the world. A *transcendentalist* like Aquinas holds that things can be both truthbearers and truthmakers. Things can be truthmakers insofar as they measure the agent intellect to which an *adequatio* relation is formed, and things can also be truthbearers insofar as they are endowed with the act of being (*esse*).⁴⁷ As such, being or things in the Thomistic realist picture, are both measures and is being measured. With this acknowledged, I wish to examine some counterpoints to this general framework that I am advocating for, especially the worldview articulated by Lankes.

⁴⁶ Ducheyne, ““To Treat of the World,”” 234.

⁴⁷ For this very point, See Joshua Lee Harris, “Does Aquinas Hold a Correspondence Theory of Truth in De Veritate?,” *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 88 (2014): 12, <https://doi.org/10.5840/acpaprocc2015123034>.

Michael Buckland, who takes a similar view with Lankes, notes that, “The characteristics of the universe (shapes, forms, patterns, physical processes, and so on) are what they are, and so issues of truth do not arise.”⁴⁸ However, without a commitment to a broad correspondence theory of truth, it would be hard to see why information professions should promote information literacy at all; to promote information literacy is to subscribe to a certain notion of truth. In an age of misinformation and the notion “fake” news and bullshit⁴⁹ on popular level discourse, the need for truth-oriented information seeking behavior is more crucial than ever before.

Buckland’s general form of argument is enhanced by Lankes’s picture of knowledge in his *New Librarianship Field Guide*. For Lankes, librarians are not in the information business, but are in the knowledge business. Knowledge does not equal to absolute truth; he wants to stir librarians into a particular vision of knowledge. For Lankes, knowledge creation is done through conversation; consequently, librarians are in the conversation and learning business. The worldview, as Lankes describes it, rests on what is known as conversation theory, which is detailed in *Atlas of New Librarianship*. His intention is made clear about what the new librarianship entails: “The worldview of new librarianship put forth in this Atlas is founded on Conversation Theory. It is also informed by other key theories and concepts such as Motivation Theory, Sense-Making, and Post Modernism. All of these combined approaches call out for a

⁴⁸ Michael K. Buckland, *Information and Society*, The MIT Press Essential Knowledge Series (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2017), 18.

⁴⁹ See Harry G. Frankfurt, “On Bullshit,” in *The Importance of What We Care about: Philosophical Essays*, 14. print (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2007), 133.: “The contemporary proliferation of bullshit also has deeper sources, in various forms of skepticism which deny we can have any reliable access to an objective reality and which therefore reject the possibility of knowing how things truly are. These “anti-realist” doctrines undermine confidence in the value of disinterested efforts to determine what is true and what is false, and even in the intelligibility of the notion of objective inquiry”.

new social compact among librarians and those they seek to serve.”⁵⁰ It is helpful to see Lankes explicit commitment and what it entails since it displays the fundamental problem of basing librarianship on a questionable foundation.

For example, concerning the relationship between knowledge and truth Lankes makes this concerning remark: “Note, knowledge is not equivalent to absolute truth. Truth is an area of pursuit reserved for philosophers and priests (and apparently for Melvil Dewey as well). Instead, librarians are interested in what people believe, and how this will impact what they do.”⁵¹ The first problem with this statement is that truth, in whatever form, is not something that is reserved for “philosophers and priests” but is something that everybody naturally aims via the power of their intellect. To believe that truth is confined to a group of people is naive; rather, it is a proper to think of all people of having the capacity to ascertain truths since the intellect is a proper operation of all individuals. To be sure, Lankes is correct to state that knowledge is not equivalent to truth; truth is a necessary condition not a sufficient condition for knowledge. Lankes, I think, can concur with this basic observation. Furthermore, he is correct to point out that truth has a role to play in knowledge formation. Even if Lankes acknowledges this however, Lankes’s adoption of conversation theory cannot accommodate the role of truth in knowledge formation. For Lankes, knowledge is a set of interrelated agreements that drive people to act; the agreements are formed by *conversants* using *language* and are held over time in people’s memories.⁵² Succinctly put, conversation theory is a form of relativism; knowledge is constructed through conversation and dialogue. But unlike Socratic *elenchus*, the aim of

⁵⁰ R. David Lankes, *The Atlas of New Librarianship* (MIT Press, 2011), 22.

⁵¹ Lankes, *The New Librarianship Field Guide*, 2016, 26–27.

⁵² Lankes, 28.

conversation is not necessarily oriented towards truth; the primary aim is to see how knowledge is acquired.

Suppose a freshman student argues that a research paper requires no documentation. For Lankes, “simply telling them they’re wrong and showing them the peer-reviewed literature to that effect won’t work. You must build from what they do now (a reflection of what they believe) and help move them to where you want them to be.”⁵³ To be sure, understanding and empathizing with people from different worldviews is needed in order to have a fruitful conversation and relationship. But, in this picture one can already see that Lankes presuppose a particular truth about research, namely, that documentation is necessary and essential; conversation theory cannot accommodate such a notion of truth even if Lankes acknowledges the importance of acquiring true beliefs.

Lankes also makes a categorical mistake by confusing knowledge and opinion. Dialogue and conversation may lead to clarifications and perhaps to knowledge, but knowledge creation via conversation does not equate to knowledge itself. Take for example this disconcerting conversation Lankes had with a conference participant:

“So if two men having a conversation about a topic they know little about, can we truly say that knowledge is created?”

“Yes,” I said.

“For those two people, if they are willing to act on the agreements they have developed, it is knowledge.”

“But what if they are idiots?”

“It is still knowledge, although I would imagine that their knowledge would change if they tried out their agreement and it didn’t work.”

⁵³ Lankes, 39.

OK, I realize I have just lost most of the positivists in the crowd, but please give me a moment to explain.⁵⁴

One thing that is certain from this conversation is the fact that Lankes fails to distinguish between knowledge and opinion.⁵⁵ If this is the very basis for the new librarianship, librarians are in trouble. The agreement made between the two people mentioned above is nothing more than an agreed set of opinion. Moreover, the conversation Lankes had with a conference participant seems to indicate the different types of doxastic attitude people may have when conversing with others. While certain doxastic attitudes may be needed for one to possess knowledge, it is not knowledge itself. Furthermore, in this passage, it seems to me that Lankes is thinking more in terms of a hypothesis, i.e. a thesis that can be tested out empirically and confirmed through conversations. Hypotheses strictly speaking is not knowledge.

What would be more fruitful for Lankes, I argue, would be to expound on the various doxastic and epistemic attitudes a person may have, e.g., opinion, assent, belief, faith, assent, etc., and assess how they independently contribute to knowledge formation and creation. Epistemology is such large branch of philosophy with so many different categories: *warrant, justification, belief, unbelief, assent, faith, properly basic, judgement* etc. *Memory, conversant, language, and agreement* are also terms that relate to epistemology, but regrettably, Lankes does not expand upon these categories enough. I think it is fair that one should expect at least a general account of various doxastic and epistemic attitudes and how they specifically contribute

⁵⁴ Lankes, *The Atlas of New Librarianship*, 117–18.

⁵⁵ This same observation was made independently in Lane Wilkinson, “The Atlas of New Librarianship (Essential Readings in the Philosophy of LIS),” *Sense & Reference* (blog), May 13, 2011, <https://senseandreference.wordpress.com/2011/05/13/the-atlas-of-new-librarianship-essential-readings-in-the-philosophy-of-lis/>.

to knowledge, especially if one were to situate the librarian as one who is in the knowledge business and therefore in the conversation business.

There is another caricature in the brief dialogue quoted above. As discussed in the context of Rayward and Otlet, Lankes also uses the term “positivism” pejoratively without any context or arguments. This does a tremendous disservice to librarians advocating for a more inclusive and nuance picture of knowledge. While a systematical treatment of the relationship between positivism and the library as an institution is not within the scope of this thesis, scholars should be more careful to ascribe the positivist charge against positions that *prima facie* seems narrow. Alternatively, a realist approach requires a more modest approach to librarianship; librarians can recognize that conversation and other doxastic and epistemic attitudes can contribute to knowledge, while also affirming that knowledge requires truth. Knowledge creation itself via conversations and agreements does not equate to knowledge. While Lankes acknowledges this, his conversation theory actively undermines truth claims and creates inconsistencies in his work since a clear and proper distinction between knowledge and opinion is not made. Notice that, in the realist approach, none of the categories important to conversation theory is pushed aside. *Agreement, memory, and language* undoubtedly plays a role in acquiring knowledge, but the sum of these parts does not equal to knowledge. On the other hand, Lankes constructivism via conversation theory gives him leeway to adopt a nonchalant attitude towards any concept of truth which is deeply troubling and counter to the *transcendental* ethos:

There are critics of constructivism. They argue that it denies the existence of a true reality – that philosophically there are issues with creating a world view of complete relativism.... Despite the ongoing philosophical debates, many constructivist principles are employed routinely and successfully but perhaps are not representative of pure constructivism. In the context of the new librarianship, we do not necessarily have to enter into the philosophical debate about constructivism because we are looking more

narrowly at its concrete applications as a learning theory and its application within the cosmos of librarianship.⁵⁶

Here, I find Lankes's comment anticlimactic. If one is envisioning a new librarianship based on a worldview, philosophical debate about constructivism should be the main conversation!

Moreover, Lankes's statement quoted above directly contradicts the purpose of his work. Within the same work, Lankes has a section entitled *Importance of Worldview* where his main thesis is stated; he writes, "Throughout this Atlas, I attempt to articulate a worldview so that we cannot only determine where we are but what our options are and where we can go next... The worldview must be based on theory and deep concepts."⁵⁷ If the very worldview that one is championing is being challenged, a proper defense and justification of its use in librarianship is warranted and necessary. Instead, Lankes offers nothing substantial to the problem and evades it by noting that philosophical debates have little bearing in practical matters.

However, this does not, mean that the realist picture entailed by a *transcendental* picture of the world is not without problems, especially concerning the subject of truth. In the library and information science literature, discussion of the philosophical problem of truth is scant at best. However, one that is closely aligned with Lankes's approach can be found in Labaree and Scimeca's article *The Philosophical Problem of Truth in Librarianship*. In this article, Labaree and Scimeca argue that information professionals should suspend the very idea of truth⁵⁸, and they give positive reasons against librarians who adopt a correspondence theory of truth.

⁵⁶ Lankes, *The Atlas of New Librarianship*, 216–17.

⁵⁷ Lankes, *The Atlas of New Librarianship*, 18.

⁵⁸ Robert V. Labaree and Ross Scimeca, "The Philosophical Problem of Truth in Librarianship," *The Library Quarterly* 78, no. 1 (January 2008): 63–64, <https://doi.org/10.1086/523909>: "The suspension of truth becomes a methodology for the practice of librarianship, not only in collection development, preservation, and provision of access to information but also in reference services."

I would now like to first briefly explore why Labaree and Scimeca finds the correspondence theory of truth problematic in the context of librarianship which in turn supports the main argument for why librarians should suspend the very notion of truth. For Labaree and Scimeca, there are two problems with a correspondence theory of truth: (i) the problem of fictional entities and (ii) the claim that correspondence theory of truth is exclusively a European view. Regarding (i), consider for example the sentence: “Hamlet was poisoned by Claudius”.⁵⁹ None of these characters correspond to the world since there are fictional entities. Since Labaree and Scimeca conceive of correspondence as a strict ontological verification in the actual world, i.e., a strict one-to one correspondence or isomorphism between propositions and the world, Labaree and Scimeca conclude that correspondence theory cannot account for truths about fictional entities. Now, the authors recognizes that there are possible solutions to this problem through an appeal to possible worlds semantics: “Within this framework, every literary work constitutes a determined possible world where both true and false statements can be made.”⁶⁰ But does one need to make an appeal to possible worlds to solve this problem? Perhaps the problem lies with Labaree and Scimeca’s rigid attachment to isomorphism. Moreover, truthmakers need not to be exclusively situated in the thing themselves. I have mentioned above that in the Thomistic picture, truthmakers and truthbears can alternate depending on the context since artifacts are produced by the artificer – it can serve both as truth makers and truth bearers. We can also extend authors and other creators in this category and thus situated truths about fictional entities through the artificer since the art produced by them depend on the artificer or the artist.

⁵⁹ Labaree and Scimeca, 58.

⁶⁰ Labaree and Scimeca, 58.

The most potent objection, however, is the postmodern objection against the correspondence theory of truth, which simply asserts that the correspondence theory is mostly a European notion of truth and rooted is rooted in the false assumption of the possibility of universal truth. Like Lankes, Labree and Scimeca notes that such an assumption "...implies that all veridical propositions can be verified and accepted by everyone regardless of language or culture." Furthermore, in agreement with the postmodern ethos, the Labaree and Scimeca reiterates the Eurocentric aspect of the correspondence theory of truth: "What the postmodernists have protested is simply that this supposed universalism is strictly a European view of the objectivity of truth, given that this view has yield power over intellectual discourse, and thus is not necessarily shared or even comprehended by other traditions."⁶¹ This raises some important issues for librarians since the mission of libraries are to acquire and disseminate information regardless of their objectivity.

The danger, as Labaree and Scimeca argue, is that by appealing to the objectivity of truth implicated by a correspondence theory of truth, a justification for censorship can be made. Indeed, they cite one historical example – Bishop Diego de Landa and the Mayan codices.⁶² The learned Bishop's zeal led him to eradicate things that did not conform to what he thought was true, burned many codices/documents that could have been used for historical scholarship. Because there is always the potential for suppression and censorship, Labaree and Scimeca suggests that one should suspend any notion of truth and view information exclusively through a historical lens. In fact, they suggest that this is necessary for librarians to grow in knowledge:

⁶¹ Labaree and Scimeca, 58.

⁶² Labaree and Scimeca, 59: "...used their supposed objectivity of truth to eliminate or eradicate anything that did not fall into their intellectual or cultural perspectives. Librarianship has an ethical obligation to challenge attempts to destroy or censor information, regardless of the truth value of that information."

“The answer is that the suspension of truth is necessary for the growth of knowledge. Without this suspension of truth in librarianship, the accumulation of past and present knowledge could be compromised. This compromise can take various forms, such as eliminating whole collections or suppressing information that does not share the present majority view...”⁶³ The problem with Labaree and Scimeca’s argument, however, is that this is a *non sequitur*. As anyone who subscribes to a realist theory of truth would know, there are many reasons why our behavior and attitudes may not necessarily conform to what we may think is true. A librarian knows that building a healthy collection includes things that are not solely based on truth; there are other values as well, e.g., aesthetic, historical lessons, etc.

Another issue pointed out by philosopher and librarian Lane Wilkinson is that Labaree and Scimeca fail to distinguish first-order propositions and second-order propositions about propositions; the authors critique is only directed towards the former, but they fail to take into account the latter. This further supports the idea the authors have a narrow conception of the correspondence theory of truth as mentioned above Wilkinson explains, “...a realist about truth will say that even though the proposition ‘the earth is flat’ is not true, the second-order proposition ‘some humans believe the Earth is flat’ is absolutely true.”⁶⁴ Undoubtedly, there are people in the world that believe the Earth is flat, and indeed, libraries may have collections that reflect that belief. However, the value and worth of a collection is not reduced to factual claims, i.e., first-order propositions found in different resources, but also to the truths we can learn about the acquisition of knowledge. Hence, when we conceive of the different categories Lankes uses

⁶³ Labaree and Scimeca, “The Philosophical Problem of Truth in Librarianship,” 63.

⁶⁴ Lane Wilkinson, “Notes on ‘The Philosophical Problem of Truth in Librarianship’ by Labaree and Scimeca,” *Sense & Reference* (blog), March 17, 2017, <https://senseandreference.wordpress.com/2017/03/17/notes-on-the-philosophical-problem-of-truth-in-librarianship-by-labaree-and-scimeca/>.

to describe conversation theory and how knowledge is created, the realist can acknowledge the importance of those various categories (epistemic and doxastic attitudes) which informs the acquisition of knowledge but does not reduce to knowledge itself.

With regards to the charge of Eurocentrism, I readily admit that there might be a genuine concern for diversity.⁶⁵ Various other information professionals, certainly Lankes, have pointed something similar to this. One of the problems leveled against a realist approach to Knowledge Organization and Otlet's universal schema is that it negates cultural and contextual aspects of knowledge. For example, since language evolves and like terms mean different things in different domains, the use of an authoritative vocabulary becomes highly problematic. Furthermore, it is also likely that like terms mean different things in the same domain over time. The problem is further actualized when we consider controlled vocabulary which must accommodate for a multiplicity of meaning. As Michael Buckland explains: "Attempts at controlled or stabilized vocabulary must deal with multiple and dynamic discourses and the resulting multiplicity and instability of meanings. Most bibliographies and catalogs have a single topical index, but include material of interest to more than one community."⁶⁶

There is a genuine concern here because librarians do want to actively be inclusive to diverse communities of knowledge. The temptation, however, is to assume that there are *equally valid* ways of knowing the world. In his book *Fear of Knowledge: Against Relativism and*

⁶⁵ One could argue that other non-Western traditions held to a similar concept to the correspondence theory of truth, e.g. Confucius and his doctrine of the rectification of names. Even Aquinas, a western figure, diverge from the traditional correspondence theory of truth found in modern analytical philosophy as mentioned above.

⁶⁶ Buckland, *Information and Society*, 105.

Constructivism, Paul Boghossian gives a helpful diagnosis as to why scholars have adopted a constructivist theory of knowledge which champions equal validity:

How did so many contemporary scholars come to be convinced of a doctrine as radical and as counterintuitive as equal validity? It's an interesting question whether the explanation for this development is primarily intellectual or ideological in nature; there is undoubtedly an element of each. Ideologically, the appeal of the doctrine of equal validity cannot be detached from its emergence in the post-colonial era. Advocates of colonial expansion often sought to justify their projects by the claim that colonized subjects stood to gain much from the superior science and culture of the West. In a moral climate which has turned its back so decisively on colonialism, it is appealing to many to say not only – what is true – that one cannot morally justify subjugating a sovereign people in the name of spreading knowledge, but that there is no such thing as superior knowledge only different knowledges, each appropriate to its own particular setting.⁶⁷

The appeal of the equal validity doctrine is a concern for post-colonial projects that have sought to colonize subjects through objective knowledge. However, like the case of Bishop Diego de Landa, the recognition of knowledge and objectivity does not mean that certain actions naturally follow from such facticity. Moreover, a person who subscribes to a realist conception of truth can also provide positive reasons as to why certain justification for colonial expansion and racial superiority in history are indeed objectively false. Furthermore, adopting a constructivist view in the vein of Lankes's conversation theory actually does harm to those who are disenfranchised since there is no privileged way to know whether something is true or not. All that is entailed in this framework is that we "agree to disagree". It is, as Boghossian rightly insinuates, a double-edged sword: "If the powerful can't criticize the oppressed, because the central epistemological categories are inexorably tied to particular perspectives, it also follows that the oppressed can't criticize the powerful."⁶⁸ Rather, adopting a realist theory of truth enables librarians to actually

⁶⁷ Paul Artin Boghossian, *Fear of Knowledge: Against Relativism and Constructivism*, Reprint (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2013), 5–6.

⁶⁸ Boghossian, 130.

help people recognize that they need information in order to actually address social ills and problems, for the intellect must know what is true in order for our will and passions to follow suit. The librarian is the person who fosters those dispositions conducive to knowledge so that those epistemic virtues empower people to seek what is always good and true. In retrospect, there is nothing novel or “new” about Lankes’s philosophy of librarianship, nor does the concerns brought about by Labaree and Scimeca prevent librarians to seriously consider the idea of truth or to adopt a specific theory of truth. What is in fact needed is a more solid foundation that informs the library profession.

In this section, I have shown that Lankes’s overall approach to the philosophy of librarianship is significantly flawed and that the *transcendental* approach is a better alternative. I have also criticized Labaree and Scimeca’s view of the correspondence theory of truth in the context of librarianship. In the following section, I shall explore the practical side of the *transcendental* approach in the context of echo chambers and the problem it poses for information professionals. Since a *transcendental* approach recognizes the innate desire for truth and goodness, the librarian will bear some responsibility for helping people escape echo chambers. Ultimately, the librarian will have to recognize that the movement towards truth entails other propositional and psychological attitudes which the librarian needs to be aware of.

Echo Chambers: Escape and Responsibility

Epistemic vices such as *bullshit*⁶⁹ and *misinformation* are ubiquitous in the broader socio-cultural world. What explains this post-truth phenomenon? Is it solely because people are indifferent to how things really are? While this may indeed be one part of the narrative, Nguyen suggests an alternative reason for the post-truth phenomenon. In his article *Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles*, Nguyen suggests that people's interest or desire for the truth remains intact. The problem of echo chambers, he thinks, is due to the manipulation of *trust* that prevents people from considering views outside their own. The social epistemic structure in which members trusts are manipulated is what Nguyen terms *echo chamber*: "Once again, this account of echo chambers suggests a less damning and more modest explanation. An echo chamber doesn't erode a member's interest in the truth; it merely manipulates their credence levels such that radically different sources and institutions will be considered proper sources of evidence."⁷⁰

Epistemic bubbles differ from echo chambers. Epistemic bubbles form due to an inadequate coverage (information) through a process of exclusion by omission. Moreover, omission need not be malicious or intentional. On the other hand, echo chambers operate in a broader infrastructure which actively seeks to manipulate the trust of members. Nguyen's formal definition of this phenomenon is as follows:

...an epistemic community which creates a significant disparity in trust between members and non-members. This disparity is created by excluding non-members through epistemic discrediting, while simultaneously amplifying members' epistemic credentials. Finally, echo chambers are such that general

⁶⁹ Harry Frankfurt describes bullshit as, "...indifference to how things really are..." See Frankfurt, "On Bullshit," 125.

⁷⁰ C. Thi Nguyen, "Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles," *Episteme*, September 13, 2018, 11, <https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2018.32>.

agreement with some core set of beliefs is a prerequisite for membership, where those core beliefs include beliefs that support that disparity in trust.⁷¹

Given all this, how can one tell if someone is in an echo chamber? And how can one escape it? Is it even possible?⁷² Henceforth, these types of questions will be labeled the *escape route question*. Another important problem to address is the *responsibility question*⁷³: to what degree are non-members responsible for helping members of an echo chamber? The paper attempts to address some of questions associated with two problems with a special focus on the role trust advocated by Nguyen himself, i.e. *trust as an unquestioning attitude*. I argue that the escape route is very much intertwined with the responsibility question, and that an adequate solution requires non-members, especially information professionals like librarians, to be active in reaching out to members of an echo chamber. The implication of this view is that non-members bear some responsibility in cultivating trust in members inside an echo chamber and that both members and non-members require a cultivation of the virtue of both *understanding* and *trust* which undoubtedly plays a role in an agent's acquisition of knowledge. In this section, I will proceed to (i) discuss Nguyen's concept of trust *qua* unquestioning attitude, and then (ii) I shall attempt to answer those problem of the escape route and responsibility question in more detail. As we shall see, librarians who affirms a realist conception of truth must actively attempt to address both problems.

⁷¹ Nguyen, 5.

⁷² Nguyen, 3: "I will argue that for those trapped within an echo chamber, prospects for detection are poor and the escape path daunting".

⁷³ Nguyen's version of the *escape responsibility question* focuses on the responsibility of epistemic agent embedded within a structure and the blameworthiness of their beliefs. My question focuses on the role of non-members in helping people in echo chambers.

The role of trust is essential to the concept of an echo chamber; it plays an important role in the very function of an echo chamber, namely because trust is manipulated. It also serves as a key ingredient for the possibility of an escape. As Nguyen notes, “Since echo chambers work by building distrust towards outside members, then the route to unmaking them should involve cultivating trust between echo chamber members and outsiders.”⁷⁴ Since it is an important feature of an echo chamber and to the escape problem, a general overview of Nguyen’s account of trust is in order.

The first feature to highlight in this account is that trust can be directed to non-agents, i.e. artifacts of various kinds. Most account of trust in the scholarly literature presupposes intentionality, i.e., the person who trust ascribes some agential state to the trusted.⁷⁵ A person x trusts a person y iff it ascribes some agential state to the trusted. Those agential states include different attitudes such as belief, motivation, goodwill, etc. Depending on the scholars, different agential states are emphasized or rejected. For example, Baier’s account ascribes goodwill to the trusted, whereas Onora O’Neill rejects this ascription.⁷⁶ Irrespective of the finer details within the agential-state account of trust, the assumption operating in this account remains one of intentionality.

If trust is not exclusively ascribing an agential state to the trusted, then what else could it be? In my reading of Nguyen, trust seems to imply some sort of virtue or disposition. Whether this is acquired or embedded in our nature is not entirely clear; I think, however, it is rightly said

⁷⁴ Nguyen, 18.

⁷⁵ See for example, Annette Baier, “Trust and Antitrust,” *Ethics* 96, no. 2 (1986): 231–60.

⁷⁶ See forthcoming C. Thi Nguyen, “Trust as an Unquestioning Attitude,” in *Oxford Studies in Epistemology* (Oxford University Press, n.d.), 4.

to be embedded in our nature since, for Nguyen, trust turns out to be a response to our essential cognitive and practical finitude. It is analogous to a characteristic trait required for flourishing. He notes, for example, that to trust something is to have a general disposition not to question, and that while such disposition can be overwhelmed or disrupted, one still can maintain the disposition so long as one is generally disposed to not question.⁷⁷ To not to trust is to lose this disposition itself. Furthermore, Nguyen indicates that the ability to lose this disposition explains “how trust can exist on a spectrum: dispositions come in degrees.”⁷⁸ With this account in mind, one can now see how trust is situated towards non-agents. It is more than *mere reliance*; it requires an agent to adopt a disposition of unquestioning such that non-agential objects will continue to function and operate without the imputation and ascription of any agential state.

Furthermore, the idea that trust is to have a disposition of unquestioning attitude implies that one could actual be *betrayed* by both agents and non-agential objects. In fact, the most important feature of Nguyen’s account of trust is that it involves an integration of non-agential objects which is the reason why an agent can feel betrayed by an object. For Nguyen, trust involves not only the aspect of not questioning things, but it also involves the precise “mechanism for integrating other people and objects into our own functioning.”⁷⁹ By trusting, the person who is trusting lets something external inside as an extension of the self and enables the external person or thing to immediately play a role in the individual’s cognition and activity. Nguyen continues to explain that our response of betrayal towards objects, is a “*close cousin*

⁷⁷ Nguyen, 10.

⁷⁸ Nguyen, 10.

⁷⁹ Nguyen, 5.

(emphasis added) of the betrayal we feel towards our own recalcitrant failing parts.”⁸⁰ Betrayal is the failure of a part to integrate to a functional whole. How literal one should see this integration is another crucial open-ended question: what precisely is this relation between a part to a whole (mereological)? And to what degree does a failure of one’s part warrant the reproaching of the part for their failures on grounds of functional unit? Clearly, there is a causal relationship between the failure of a part to the whole, but to say that such intrinsic part, such as an agent’s memory, betrays the agent differs substantially from how an extrinsic part betrays an agent. Intrinsic parts like an agent’s memory or arm depends wholly on the agent whereas extrinsic parts do not necessarily depend on the agent. To be sure, both intrinsic parts and extrinsic parts are non-agential; however, intrinsic parts are constituent members of a whole. They serve as integral parts. It seems quite odd to say that extrinsic parts betray a whole since they do not serve as integral/constituent members of a whole. A clarification on how extrinsic parts can be integrate into one’s agency and act as if there are integral parts would be beneficial for explicating how non-agential extrinsic parts or objects can betray an agent.

One useful way to think about integration and the response of betrayal towards objects is to simply think of it as an analogically instead of understanding betrayal that univocally, i.e., one that has the same attribution of the meaning of betrayal between agential and non-agential objects. By Nguyen’s own admission, being betrayed by objects is not the same as being betrayed by other people. His primary motivation is to find some common feature of the term “betrayal” when applied to non-agential objects and agents such that trust as an unquestioning attitude becomes more than something that involves mere reliance, and betrayal meaning

⁸⁰ Nguyen, 5.

something more than mere disappointment. He writes, “I am looking for the underlying similarities between trust in people and trust in objects that makes us so willing to reach for the same terms in both circumstances. Trust involves something more than mere reliance, and betrayal involves something more than mere disappointment – though those somethings might turn out to come in a variety of flavors.”⁸¹ Given all this, it is clear why it is hard to convince members of an echo chamber to escape. Criticizing the very things echo chamber members place their trust in becomes, to some degree, an attack to the members personal agency and to some extent, their personhood.

Now that the Nguyen’s future of trust has been outlined, how can this inform and aid in solving the escape route question? There are, of course, multiple problems that need to be confronted if the escape is to be successful. For one, we have little reason to suspect that members of an echo chambers actually realize that they need or let alone desire to escape. That is, epistemic agent may not want to undertake a social epistemic reboot.⁸² Another problem is that it may be implausible for a people to escape certain types of echo chambers given certain dangerous circumstances. *A fortiori*, if the echo chamber is something of the scale of a country like North Korea, it would seem virtually impossible for members to escape given not only the psychological trauma incurred by escaping, but by the very fact that the Kim Regime controls every aspect of North Korean lives. So, in short, the most pressing problem is the question of

⁸¹ Nguyen, 7.

⁸² Social reboot is the process whereby an agent undoes the influence of historical ordering (belief acquisition) and temporarily suspending credential beliefs. Agents that undergo a reboot starts afresh socially and trust that things are as they seem and learns to trust in the testimony of others. See, Nguyen, “Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles,” 18.

people recognizing the need to escape the echo chamber, and the problem of a grand-scale system that amplifies members' epistemic credentials.

My proposal for this problem is by adopting a virtue ethics framework that may aid in mitigating the escape route problem; it requires both members and non-members to cultivate specific virtues. Virtues are also closely related to the *transcendentals* since they help bring about these goods: truth, good, and beauty. Virtues, in the broadly Aristotelean tradition, are to be understood as habits or dispositions that need to be exercised in order for a good to come into fruition. Moreover, Ernest Sosa, who spearheaded contemporary discussions of virtue ethics, equates virtues and dispositions with competencies: "A competence is a certain sort of disposition to succeed when you try. So, the exercise of a competence involves aiming at a certain outcome. It is a competence in part because it is a disposition to succeed reliably enough when one makes such attempts."⁸³ The outcome in the context of virtue epistemology is obviously truth, and it is part of the librarian's duty to nurture these virtues that lead a person to truth.

In fact, Nguyen already seems to presuppose a virtue ethics framework since he thinks that trust is a disposition of an unquestioning attitude and that such disposition comes in degrees. Moreover, in discussing the escape route question, Nguyen observes that,

"In order to motivate the social epistemic reboot, an echo chamber member *needs to become aware* (emphasis added) of how much they are in the echo chamber's grip, and forming a trust relationship with an outsider might mediate that awareness. But how that

⁸³ qtd. in Alvin Goldman and Bob Beddor, "Reliabilist Epistemology," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Winter 2016 (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2016), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/reliabilism/>.

trust could be reliably cultivated is a very difficult matter, and a topic for future investigation.”⁸⁴

The potential solution, as indicated by Nguyen, is the mediation of a trusting relationship between members and non-members through which echo chamber members become aware of their embedded situation. In order for this trusting relationship to form, i.e. members and non-members adopting an unquestioning attitude towards each other require another virtue in conjunction to trust. This virtue is the intellectual virtue of *understanding* which acts as a mean between an excessive level of judgement and the deficiency of gullibility and naivete.

There are two senses of the virtue of understanding. One is to think of it as a reliable disposition to obtain certain epistemic goods, e.g., truth. A paradigmatic proponent of this view is advocated by virtue ethicists like Thomas Aquinas. In the *Summa*, he explains that virtues “perfect...the intellectual part; they may indeed be called virtues insofar as they confer aptness for a good work, viz., the consideration of *truth* (since this is the good work of the intellect).”⁸⁵ In the proceeding article, Aquinas, following Aristotle, identifies three intellectual virtues: wisdom, science, and understanding. All of these virtues, as stated are virtues that “perfect the speculative intellect for the consideration of truth.” Understanding as a distinctive intellectual virtue knowledge that is obtained *per se notum* (known through itself). That is, true proposition is known through the intellect by understanding. It is thereby universal, but what is known *per se notum*, does not mean is that it is immediately clear to everyone.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Nguyen, “Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles,” 18.

⁸⁵ *ST I-II Q.51, A.1*; Thomas and Thomas, *Summa Theologiae*, trans. Laurence Shapcote, John Mortensen, and Enrique Alarcón, Latin/English Edition of the Works of St. Thomas Aquinas, Volume 13-20 (Lander, Wyoming: The Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2012).

⁸⁶ For similar contemporary views, see Alvin I. Goldman, “The Unity of the Epistemic Virtues,” in *Pathways to Knowledge* (Oxford University Press, 2002), <https://doi.org/10.1093/0195138791.001.0001>.

The other sense of understanding is in the context of understanding other people.⁸⁷

Understanding in this sense is the disposition to be charitable and to take into account the various motives, experiences, and circumstances of others. Philosopher Xingming Hu explains how this sense of understanding is implicit in our everyday conversations:

One might be an understanding person without actually understanding why S did X... e.g., “Siyi is a very understanding person. If I talk to Siyi, she will understand why I did that”. We think the character trait that an understanding person has helps her to actually understand why others certain things did, that is, to achieve understanding as an epistemic good.⁸⁸

Understanding in this sense requires the ability to put aside our own beliefs and desires, and to temporarily integrate those another person’s beliefs and desires as if they were our own; it requires the individual to adopt a charitable stance and to strip away the various implicit assumptions and cultural ideas that are embedded in another person’s worldview. Furthermore, just like how trust comes in various degrees, understanding comes in various degrees for it is impossible to completely understand another person, especially in one sitting. Like any other virtues, it requires continual effort in order to actualize the virtue.

In the context of the escape route question, it is imperative that one possess this virtue before encountering echo chamber members, and most especially before attempting to build trust. Understanding is a prerequisite in order to build trust which may potentially lead members to escape a particular echo chamber. As a virtue, it enables a person to examine the various causes of another person entering into an echo chamber, e.g. a desire for a community, in a

⁸⁷ Understanding in this sense is very similar to empathy; I however, want to emphasize the dispositional status of this virtue and that it requires cultivation.

⁸⁸ Xingming Hu, “In What Sense Is Understanding an Intellectual Virtue?,” *Synthese*, October 19, 2019, 7, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-019-02437-w>.

charitable fashion taking those factors into account whilst in dialogue. Negative speculations on why a person joined an echo chamber, e.g., because he or she is racist, is to be immediately put to the side or at the very least minimalized.

Notice that in this picture, the understanding condition is mostly a duty for nonmembers or outsiders. Members of an echo chamber have an unusual level of trust since the enforcing of trust between insiders actively reinforces epistemic discredit of outsiders. Member's trust for the insiders is given an abnormally higher degree of credence. Thus, the echo chamber itself is not only a systematic hijacking of not only trust but also the virtue of understanding. It is therefore hard to expect members of an echo chamber to exercise the virtue of understanding. The point here is that trust within an echo chamber is amplified to excess which leads to gullibility, while the virtue of understanding does not exist at all in an echo chamber. It therefore requires the initiation of outsiders to reorient insiders to trust and make progress in the rebooting process. We see here how the acquisition of true knowledge may require more than the standard true belief, and that it involves other epistemic and attitudes and virtues.

This leads me to the second answer I propose regarding the responsibility problem. The claim I want to make is that people, due to the initiation requirement of outsiders, should have a sense of responsibility, even a duty and obligation to help members escape echo chambers. This is especially true for information professionals and librarians; if we are truly in the knowledge business, truth and the conditions that are necessary to acquire truth should be a grave concern for librarians. These duties can be either active or passive depending on whether individuals have the necessary virtue of understanding. My argument for this claim is by way of analogy.

But first, I must refer to two texts where Nguyen makes references on how trust and rebooting are akin to a relationship between a toddler and parents. In *Trust as an Unquestioning Attitude*, Nguyen provides an example of a paradigmatic instance of trust – a toddler’s trust in the father or mother. He writes, “My toddler’s trust is one of the paradigmatic instances of trust – but is not best explained in terms of his attributing some commitment or benevolence to me. It is something more primitive than that. His trust, I suggest, is constituted by his unquestioning acceptance of my food offerings.”⁸⁹ In *Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles*, Nguyen points out that social epistemic reboot requires the agent to start afresh in their belief re-acquisition process by way of reexamining all testimonial sources without presumption. The way he describes the rebooter is interesting: “Our rebooter must take on the social epistemic posture that we might expect of a *cognitive newborn* (emphasis added): one of tentative, but defeasible, trust in all apparent testimonial sources.”⁹⁰

I find Nguyen’s description of social booters as “cognitive newborns” particularly intriguing because, although it is only an analogy, newborn toddlers require the care of parental figures who are obligated to take care of the toddlers. To be sure, Nguyen means by this phrase something to the effect of trusting that things are what they seem they are. The difficulty here is how will the cognitive newborn know which people to trust in order to avoid the problem of gullibility. Furthermore, we know this difficulty can further cause echo chamber members to be further entrenched within because members may choose individuals that actually enforce their preconceived beliefs, i.e. the problem of *runaway echo chambers*. Due to this epistemic trap, the issue of gullibility, and the initiation phase required by understanding outsiders, it is incumbent

⁸⁹ Nguyen, “Trust as an Unquestioning Attitude,” 23.

⁹⁰ Nguyen, “Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles,” 17–18.

upon outsiders to actually take part of the undoing of echo chambers. Just like how toddlers trust their parental figures, and how newborn toddlers require the care of parents and basic necessities, it is the duty of nonmembers to, at the very least, direct and associate themselves with “cognitive newborns” to a relationship of mutual trust.

Admittedly, this argument from analogy is weak since analogical reasoning itself is bound by various issues, e.g., criteria to evaluate what makes a good analogy as opposed to a bad one. Whether this falls into the informal fallacy of false analogy is also up for debate, but I think the analogy still stands; parental obligations for newborn toddlers obtain and, *in like manner*, outsiders’ obligations for “cognitive newborns” obtain. What these obligatory duties entail and who is specifically bound by these duties are also questions that need to be explored. For example, it would make sense for information professionals like librarians to bear more responsibility and duties than other professionals since the job entails teaching some form of information literacy. Regardless of those details, this much is clear: outsiders have obligations and duties towards insiders, and this effort is one of mutual cooperation involving trust initiated by the virtue of understanding.

For librarians, adopting a *transcendental* attitude requires us to take seriously the universal desire of truth intrinsic to all human persons while acknowledging all the other elements that aid in the acquisition of knowledge, i.e., empathy, trust, and understanding. Part of information literacy is precisely to help patrons acquire true beliefs. Nguyen’s responsibility question calls for librarians to consider those epistemic and doxastic attitudes since they play a crucial role in the acquisition of knowledge. While truth may ground the reason for escaping echo chambers, it is only by cultivating trust and understanding that such a good can come about. It is thus incumbent on librarians to build trust and understanding with patrons, and while

librarians are not directly responsible for a person being situated in an echo chamber, the librarian is responsible to *care* when encountering persons that need help escaping echo chambers just like how *parental* figures *care* for their newborns.

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