Praise the Sun[*]

The Metaphysics of *Dark Souls* from the First Flame to the End of Fire

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Introduction

"Praise the sun," a popular refrain in the community surrounding FromSoftware's *Dark Souls* games (2011, 2014, 2016),[1] is a line originally spoken by Solaire of Astora, the beloved character from the first game in the series who delves into the depths of the world in search of his "very own sun."[2] A noble member of the Warriors of Sunlight covenant, he is the first properly friendly non-player character that the player character, the "Chosen Undead," meets. Sometimes, whether through luck or experience, Solaire can be diverted from his ill-fated path and the faithful knight will join the Chosen Undead at the end, a final ally in an ashen world. But sadly, his quest is, more often than not, a doomed one, serving as a microcosm of the narrative in which the player character finds themselves entangled.

More than an affecting story, however, this microcosmic quality of Solaire's tale serves to introduce the broader philosophical project of the *Souls* games. Solaire is first encountered after the defeat of the Taurus Demon in the Undead Burg. The player character sees him staring out over Lordran, the land of the ancient lords, basking in the warmth of the sun before the inevitable fall of dark. He tells the Chosen Undead to call on him in times of need by touching the "brilliant aura" of his summon signature.[3] And then, if prompted once more, he tells the player character to press on so that he might linger there on the walls of the Burg:

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[1]Hidetaka Miyazaki, *Dark Souls* (PS3; Xbox 360: FromSoftware, 2011); Tomohiro Shibuyo and Yui Tanimura, *Dark Souls II* (PS3; Xbox 360: FromSoftware, 2014); Hidetaka Miyazaki, Isamu Okano, and Yui Tanimura, *Dark Souls III* (PS4; Xbox One; Microsoft Windows: FromSoftware, 2016).

[2]"Solaire of Astora," Dark Souls Wiki, *Wikidot*, accessed March 30, 2020, http://darksouls.wikidot.com/solaire-of-astora.

[3]"Solaire of Astora."

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> Oh, hello there. I will stay behind, to gaze at the sun. The sun is a wondrous body. Like a magnificent father! If only I could be so grossly incandescent![4]

With this invocation of the wondrous solar patriarch, Solaire thoroughly situates *Dark Souls* in the domain of philosophy, leading us to ask questions of origins and substance and foundation. It is the task of this paper to explicate these questions as they are asked by the three *Dark Souls* games, to analyze the repetitions and variations between them, and to mount an argument as to the structure of the particular (and peculiar) metaphysics that these games present.

Onto-Politics

In asking these questions, I am inescapably drawn to the thought of Martin Heidegger and the strange question that motivated so much of his work: "why are there beings at all instead of nothing?"[5] He would rephrase this same question, found at the beginning of his 1935 *Introduction to Metaphysics*, just two years later in his *Basic Questions of Philosophy* as the "uncanny fact" that "there *are* beings, rather than not."[6] To ask questions of origins and substance and foundation is to ask the "question of being,"[7] and, as is always attendant on this question for Heidegger, the hermeneutic question, the question of being's meaning. Philosophy is the thinking through of the "terror" that one feels "in the face of what is closest and what is remotest, namely that in beings, and before each being, Being holds sway."[8]

In approaching this thought, however, I am caught fast against another terror, the terror of an accusation, an accusation that has been murmuring in the background of my work for some time: that of Heidegger's Nazism. Every time I reach for a useful quotation or enter into the interpretive method of my schooling, I feel also the need to create distance between Heidegger and myself. With the publication of Gregory Fried's edited collection *Confronting Heidegger*[9], this need becomes a necessity. A collection of essays written in response to Emmanuel Faye's *Heidegger: The Introduction of Nazism into Philosophy* (translated into English in 2009),[10] *Confronting Heidegger* renders an ignorance of Heidegger's politics impossible. Looking back to Faye's original study, we find that Heidegger's early seminars, the same seminars cited above, were delivered alongside several

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[4] "Solaire of Astora."

[5] Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Gregory Fried and Richard Polt (New Haven, CT: Yale Nota Bene, 2000), 1.

[6] Martin Heidegger, *Basic Questions of Philosophy: Selected "Problems" of "Logic"*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz and André Schuwer (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994), 3.

[7] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2010), 1.

[8] Heidegger, *Basic Questions of Philosophy*, 4.

[9] Gregory Fried, ed., *Confronting Heidegger: A Critical Dialogue on Politics and Philosophy* (London, UK: Rowman; Littlefield, 2019).

[10] Emmanuel Faye, *Heidegger: The Introduction of Nazism into Philosophy in Light of the Unpublished Seminars of 1933-1935*, trans. Michael B. Smith (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009).

other unpublished seminars of "political education," wherein the "ontological difference between being and individual entities" is equated by Heidegger with the "political relationship between the state and the people."[11] Heidegger's question of being, as I was taught to ask it, follows on the poetry of Hölderlin and the mystical fragments of Heraclitus, sinking its toes into the earth as it reaches for the heavens—a *romantic* Heidegger, if you will. But Heidegger's question of being, to read it now, is just as much a question of the inculcation of a way of thought conducive to Nazi ideology. The thrill of the question of being can also be the thrill of an authentic belonging to a *Volk*, the ecstasy of an individual given over to fascistic totality. It would seem that the "question of being" is dangerous territory.

This is a territory that Jacques Derrida traces in his 1987 *Of Spirit*, a tracing that we must follow here.[12] In chapter five of his study, Derrida examines Heidegger's 1933 *Rectorship Address*, concentrating on this speech in order to draw out the concept of "spirit" in Heidegger's thought. In Heidegger's impassioned rhetoric, Derrida sees him "relaunch[] and confirm[] the essential elements" of *Being and Time* in order to "spiritualize[] National Socialism" through the vehicle of the German university, and then take this relaunching and confirmation and "rename[]" those same spiritualized terms in the "teaching language" of his *Introduction to Metaphysics*.[13] Though the *Introduction*, in Derrida's reading, "marks a political retreat in relation to the *Rectorship Address*,"[14] the fact remains that the thought enacted between these two texts is a duplicitous, even "diabolical" conjoining of "[two] evils at once: the sanctioning of nazism, and the gesture that is still metaphysical."[15] The very "possibility"[16] of the question *qua* question, which is always, for Heidegger, the question of the meaning of being, is doubly bound by the *politics* of the *Address* and the *metaphysics* (that is, the metaphysics of presence) of the *Introduction*, a binding performed by Heidegger's conception of *spirit*. Spirit is thus the ghostly concept that is itself its own haunting, the return of the metaphysics that Heidegger so painstakingly labours to dismantle in *Being and Time*.[17] Just as Derrida so precisely demonstrates in his reading of Emmanuel Levinas,[18] we see in Heidegger's move to a more originary, more authentic being the violent reinscription of the metaphysics he repudiates. And in his wake there marches a *metaphysische Volk* wholly devoted to Being and State.[19]

So, then, what does all of this have to do with *Dark Souls*? Everything, I would

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[11] Faye, xxiv.

[12] Jacques Derrida, *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

[13] Derrida, 41, 39, 42, 41.

[14] Derrida, 44.

[15] Derrida, 40.

[16] Derrida, 43.

[17] Derrida, 40.

[18] Jacques Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London, UK: Routledge, 1987), 97–192.

[19] Derrida, *Of Spirit*, 50.

contend. As Stanley Cavell lucidly argues:

> Descriptive statements . . . are not opposed to ones which are norma-
> tive, but in fact presuppose them: we could not do the thing we call
> describing if language did not provide (we had not been taught) ways
> normative for describing . . . the language which contains a culture
> changes with the changes of that culture . . . that ordinary language
> is natural is to see that (perhaps even see why) it is normative for
> what can be said.[20]

Our *statements* and our *rules* are irremediably yoked. Heidegger's descriptive
work in *Being and Time*, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, and *Basic Questions*
finds its normative reflection in the *Rectorship Address*, which is to say that
his claims about being are inclined toward, and may even be productive of, a
politics. Hume's Guillotine is, in fact, more insubstantial than the metaphor
would imply: it is a ghostly veil obscuring the concretion of the question of
being in the spirit of a given community, providing an alibi for those who wish
to divorce "semantics" from "pragmatics," meanings from their uses.[21] Indeed:

> something *does* follow from the fact that a term is used in its usual
> way: it entitles you (or, using the term, you entitle others) to make
> certain inferences, draw certain conclusions . . . *Learning what these*
> *implications are is part of learning the language*.[22]

Despite what appear to be the best efforts of Heidegger's estate to hide the
semantic-pragmatic coupling at the root of his onto-politics, it is not so easy to
hide the implications that Heidegger intended his students at Freiburg to learn,
if not the many eyes of history. Questions of being are also political questions,
and questions of politics are also ontological questions.[23]

To ask questions of origins and substance and foundation in *Dark Souls* is,
therefore, to drive at the onto-politics that motivates the various characters that
populate the three games, and to examine the "semantic-pragmatic" nexuses
of their speech and actions. When a character like Solaire declares, "The sun
is a wondrous body. Like a magnificent father! If only I could be so grossly
incandescent," the semantic-pragmatic content of his words is not even hidden.
He effortlessly slides from the "is" to the "if only I could be," plainly linking
his description of the sun with a subjective norm. It is *good* to be like the sun,
Solaire tells us. But his story would seem to tell us otherwise. Left to his own
devices, Solaire will plunge ever deeper into the dark places of Lordran, searching
for a sun that he will never find. In a moment of uncharacteristic self-reflection,
Solaire will say the following to the Chosen Undead:

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[20]Stanley Cavell, "Must We Mean What We Say?" in *Must We Mean What We Say? A
Book of Essays* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 1–43, 22, 43.

[21]Cavell, 11.

[22]Cavell, 11.

[23]For an incisive critique of the outcome of the elision of this onto-political hyphenation, see
Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London, UK: Verso Books, 2016).

> Ah, oh... hello there. Forgive me, I was just pondering... about
> my poor fortune. I did not find my own sun, not in Anor Londo, nor
> in Twilight Blighttown. Where else might my sun be? Lost Izalith,
> or the Tomb of the Gravelord...? But I cannot give up. I became
> Undead to pursue this! But when I peer at the Sun up above, it
> occurs to me... What if I am seen as a laughing stock, as a blind
> fool without reason? Well, I suppose they wouldn't be far off! Hah
> hah hah![24]

Later, far inside the burning desolation of Lost Izalith, the player-character finds Solaire once more, but this time the knight is devoid of any of his usual optimism: "...Why? ...Why? ...After all this searching, I still cannot find it..."[25] If the Chosen Undead pushes on, they will find Solaire in a side passageway, a horrifying insect—a sunlight maggot—attached to his head, glowing with a preternatural light. He attacks on sight, screaming as he does so, "Finally, I have found it, I have!... My very own sun... I am the sun!... I've done it... I have... Yes, I did it... I did!... Ohh, ohhh... Hrgrraaaooogh!"[26] Solaire's quest, motivated by his own stalwart commitment to brilliant sunlight, culminates in an utter loss of self. His faith is shown to be nothing more than an ontological mania, an obsession with luminous being, and his covenant a dead and persistently duplicitous religion.

As noted above, this ending is effectively unavoidable for most new players.[27] Solaire's downfall can only be diverted through an obscure series of steps, the first of which is hidden behind one of FromSoftware's famed "illusory walls." If the player character does in fact find this hidden path, entering into a covenant with a dying matriarch on the other side of it and offering her thirty pieces of humanity (no small offering in the economy of play), a back entrance to the passageway in which Solaire is found will become passable (though the game will not tell you so), and the Chosen Undead can slay the sunlight maggots before they have a chance to possess Solaire. If all of this is accomplished, Solaire will then be found in the same place, but this time sitting on the floor in utter despair: "Was it all a lie? Have I done this all, for nothing? Oh, my dear sun... What now, what should I do...? My sun, my dear, dear sun..."[28] This is not necessarily a kinder ending, though it is the only way that Solaire can join the Chosen Undead as they face Lord Gwyn, Father of Sunlight, the final boss of the game, that divinity which Solaire so doggedly pursued.

In this paradoxical chiasm—the oblivion of Solaire's success and the hope of his failure—FromSoftware is trying to say something, inviting us to *learn their language.* The following pages will demonstrate the implicit metaphysical critique of *Dark Souls* as it is carried through the subsequent two games, a critique made

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[24] "Solaire of Astora."

[25] "Solaire of Astora."

[26] "Solaire of Astora."

[27] This was intentional on the part of the developers. See Hidetaka Miyazaki, "Game No Shokutaku Interview," December 2011, http://soulslore.wikidot.com/das1-game-no-shokutaku.

[28] "Solaire of Astora."

explicit by the conclusion of the series.

The Metaphysics of the Sun

The dominant ideology in Lordran—the religion preached by the Way of White and the code of honour and cooperation espoused by the Warriors of Sunlight—is founded in the eminence of the sun and personified in the figure of Lord Gwyn. Of the beings who emerged from the Dark and claimed the Souls of Lords, Gwyn was the most powerful—or, at least, the one most interested in ruling. Prior to the events of *Dark Souls*, Gwyn, with his armies of Silver Knights and the aid of the other Ancient Lords, led an insurrection against the rule of the Everlasting Dragons, casting them down with brilliant bolts of lightning and so bringing about the Age of Fire. Gwyn, Lord of Sunlight, was the chief instrument of that original disparity which gave rise to life in all its dynamism and process, supplanting the eternal regime of stasis. Whole orders, institutions, cultures, and nations formed in and through his power. The very fabric of the world relied on him for its continuance.

But, as the introduction to *Dark Souls* goes on to tell us, "soon the flames will fade and only Dark will remain."[29] Gwyn's light, born of disparity, can not go on forever, and by the beginning of the game "there are only embers, and man sees not light, but only endless nights."[30] It is this crisis that frames the player character's quest. I have previously examined this narrative framing with respect to the question of environmental collapse, using *Dark Souls* as a means to think about the global crisis of our own time.[31] The work now to be accomplished is to translate this thinking from the pragmatic and political realm to the semantic and metaphysical realm, thereby demonstrating the continuity between these domains, a continuity maintained in *fact* (that is, in the gameworld) by Gwyn as icon, and which now, with his fading, presents itself as an opportunity. The hyphenation of the political and the ontological in *Dark Souls* brings about its own dissolution, opening itself to new possibilities of being and becoming.[32]

The beginning of *Dark Souls* presents the player character with a crisis, and in so

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[29]"Opening (Dark Souls)," Dark Souls Wiki, *Fandom*, accessed May 12, 2020, https://darksouls.fandom.com/wiki/Opening_(Dark_Souls).

[30]"Opening (Dark Souls)."

[31]Eric Stein, "The Fire Fades: Navigating the End of the World in FromSoftware's *Dark Souls*," International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts, Orlando, FL, March 19, 2020, https://www.academia.edu/42195654/.

[32]The *hyphen* is the hyphen of the "relative-absolute" or "duel Unity" critiqued in François Laruelle, *Philosophies of Difference: A Critical Introduction to Non-Philosophy*, trans. Rocco Gangle (London, UK: Continuum, 2010), 162, 16. For Laruelle, onto-political hyphenation belongs to the *real-syntax matrix*, which is the *metaphysical decision* performed by (and indeed necessary to) all philosophy whereby the philosopher and his object are *split*. In this early work, Laruelle is quite pessimistic regarding this split, viewing it as the final barrier to the overcoming of metaphysics that even deconstruction could not surpass. For a positive praxis, critical adoption, and creative exploration of the hyphen, see Fred Wah, "Re-Mixed: The Compound Composition of Diamond Grill," in *Diamond Grill*, 10th Anniversary (Edmonton, AB: NeWest Press, 2006).

doing, it also presents the player character with a *question*: narratively, will they (and how will they) respond to the fading of the flame; mechanically, will they (and how will they) play the game? On its face, this ludonarrative structure cannot be said to be unique to *Dark Souls*, and we might say that this structure is a basic characteristic of games more generally. Quite simply, this structure is the structure of *aesthetic opening*.[33] What distinguishes *Dark Souls*, then, is the *coherence* of its particular use of this structure. As Alfred North Whitehead succinctly phrases it, coherence "means that the fundamental ideas, in terms of which the scheme [here being the game] is developed, presuppose each other so that in isolation they are meaningless."[34] FromSoftware is a uniquely proficient game development studio in this regard. Even the famously unfinished Lost Izalith manages to contribute to the overall coherence of the game, presenting, in its failure (both within the game and without), the severity of the crisis facing the player character. The *question* of *Dark Souls* demands a response.

Gwyn synthesizes the concepts of *power*, *light*, and *goodness* (a synthesis achieved for the player through the opening cinematic and Solaire's passionate words), concretizing these thematic, formal, and ideological elements in his person. Gwyn *is* the sun, insofar as he is the agent of its dominion and the Age of Fire is his handiwork. If we cast our attention back across the history of philosophy, we find that the semantic-pragmatic content of this iconism has a clear precedent in Plato's oft-cited Allegory of the Cave, the founding image of western philosophy and, consequently, the founding image of the metaphysics of presence.[35] In Plato's tale, we encounter a group of people "living in a cavernous cell down under the ground."[36] These people are bound so that they are forced to look straight ahead, staring at the cavern wall. Behind them there is a partition and behind that a fire burning. In the midst of this strange structure other people walk about, "carrying all sorts of artefacts," the shadows of which are cast by the firelight on the cavern wall, putting on a sort of shadow-play for the imprisoned people.[37] In Socrates's words, the prisoners are "no different from us . . . the shadows of artefacts would constitute the only reality people in this situation would recognize."[38] But what happens, Socrates asks, "if they were set free from their bonds and cured of their inanity?"[39] Socrates imagines one of the prisoners being freed and forcibly turned around so that he must confront the greater reality of the fire. The same prisoner is then "dragged forcibly away from

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[33]For this sense of opening, see Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London, UK: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), and Kostas Axelos and Stuart Elden, "Mondialisation Without the World," *Radical Philosophy*, no. 139 (April 2005), https://www.radicalphilosophyarchive.com/issue-files/rp130_interview_axelos.pdf.

[34]Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*, ed. David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne, Corrected Edition (New York, NY: Free Press, 1978), 3.

[35]Plato, "Allegory of the Cave," in *Republic*, trans. Robin Waterfield (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2008), 240–49.

[36]"Allegory of the Cave," 240.

[37]"Allegory of the Cave," 241.

[38]"Allegory of the Cave," 241.

[39]"Allegory of the Cave," 241.

there up the rough, steep slope ... without being released until he's been pulled out into the sunlight."[40] This would certainly be a traumatic experience, but, after some adjustment, the freed man would be able to "feast his eyes on the sun—not the displaced image of the sun in water or elsewhere, but the sun on its own, in its proper place."[41] As Plato writes in the earlier Simile of the Sun,[42] the "sun is the child of goodness ... a counterpart to its father, goodness. As goodness stands in the intelligible realm to intelligence and the things we know, so in the visible realm the sun stands to sight and the things we see."[43] Thus, we see that the passage from the cave to the sun-drenched world is a passage into *goodness*, *intelligence*, and *sight*, all of which are blessings of the *father*, the good as such. Furthermore, it is only in this collocation of terms in the domain of the sun that the necessary linkage of goodness, truth, and knowledge is made possible.[44] Finally, then, it is not merely the "known-ness of the things we know" (i.e., an objective and true knowledge of things) that is at stake here in Socrates' speech, but the "reality" and "being" of things as such, emanating from the "goodness" that "surpasses being in majesty and might."[45] This is, quite simply, the *metaphysical gesture* par excellence.

The domain of the sun is the *proper place* of the eye, knowledge, reason, truth, power, presence, being, reality, all of which borrow their substance and structure from the good, the sublime father.[46] In *Dark Souls*, Gwyn is this father, the first to emerge from the cave (the Kiln of the First Flame), the first to bring the power of the sun to the world, establishing the rule of fire. Time itself is a consequence of his original violence against the Age of Ancients, and the subsequent history of the age of disparity that follows can be traced back to Gwyn as *origin*, as *originary presence*. This is the power and presence that Solaire seeks, the same power and presence that is fading by the time of the player character's quest, a fading that is the crisis (on every level of reality: personal, political, ecological, ontological) necessitating the action that constitutes gameplay. In the opening to their game, FromSoftware constructs the figure of the greatest hero to have ever lived,[47] only to have him be consumed by the very force he embodies. Gwyn, in desperation, returns to the Kiln, the cave of his birth, hoping to reignite the flame and perpetuate the flickering age of fire. In the end, all he can achieve is the incineration of the proper place of his power.

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[40]"Allegory of the Cave," 242.

[41]"Allegory of the Cave," 242.

[42]Plato, "Simile of the Sun," in *Republic*, trans. Robin Waterfield (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2008), 232–37.

[43]"Simile of the Sun," 235.

[44]"Simile of the Sun," 236.

[45]"Simile of the Sun," 236.

[46]For a critique of the logic of the "proper place," see Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven F. Rendall (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988).

[47]Gwyn's sunlight spears are a potent metaphor for the violent logic of heroism. For a critique of this logic, see Ursula K. Le Guin, "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction," in *Dancing at the Edge of the World: Thoughts on Words, Women, Places* (New York, NY: Grove Press, 1989), 165–70.

The Philosophy of Dark

Though FromSoftware's storytelling is notoriously obtuse, remaining mostly hidden in item descriptions and architectural details, the collapse of Gwyn as a metaphysical icon (a semantico-pragmatic figure) is, by the conclusion of the game, quite clear. Though the hollowed Lord Gwyn remains a formidable foe, the track that plays during the battle is carried by somber piano, a stark contrast with the bombastic operatics of most of the other boss-battle tracks in the game. This is not intended to be some epic final confrontation but a sorrowful last rite. The Chosen Undead must *put down* the mindless divinity, ending the old sunlight king's eternal curse. The sorrow of this meeting is only redoubled if the player character successfully diverts Solaire from his doomed quest, so allowing for the warrior of sunlight to join the fray. The *true* end of Solaire's quest is to kill the very sun, the very god, the very father that he sought.[48] And this inversion is indicative of an inversion, a torsion, at the heart of the Chosen Undead's quest as well, an inversion in the very metaphysical ground of the game.

On a "normal" playthrough (typically a first playthrough where many of the above noted secrets go unfound), the player character will arrive at the Kiln of the First Flame alone and eventually kill Gwyn. They will then approach the bonfire in the middle of the Kiln, light it, and allow it to consume their body, drawing on the strength of their soul (bolstered by the myriads of enemies slain along the way) *to link the fire* (the title of the first ending to the game). This choice rekindles the flame across the land, restoring the Age of Fire—for a time. Indeed, this choice is merely a repetition of the choice that Gwyn made, the prolongation of the age for fear of the age to come.

As I have previously discussed,[49] the second ending to *Dark Souls* tells a different story. Through some minor sequence-breaking (simpler to achieve, in fact, than the completion of Solaire's quest, but nevertheless unlikely for new players to stumble across), the Chosen Undead can find themselves in the Abyss at the heart of New Londo Ruins, the last great kingdom of humankind, where they will meet the second of two primordial serpents in the game: Darkstalker Kaathe. Kaathe, unlike his kin above, Kingseeker Frampt, provides the player character with a much different motivation for their quest:

> The truth I shall share without sentiment. After the advent of fire, the ancient lords found the three souls. But your progenitor found a fourth, unique soul. The Dark Soul. Your ancestor claimed the Dark Soul and waited for Fire to subside. And soon, the flames did fade, and only Dark remained. Thus began the age of men, the Age of Dark. However... Lord Gwyn trembled at the Dark. Clinging to his Age of Fire, and in dire fear of humans, and the Dark Lord who

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[48]Until the release of *Dark Souls III*, a popular (and convincing) theory maintained that Solaire was in fact the amnesiac, exiled firstborn of Lord Gwyn. Though the introduction of the Nameless King in *Dark Souls III* soundly punctures this theory, the symbolic weight of this conclusion remains.

[49]Stein, "The Fire Fades," 2020.

would one day be born amongst them, Lord Gwyn resisted the course of nature. By sacrificing himself to link the fire, and commanding his children to shepherd the humans, Gwyn has blurred your past, to prevent the birth of the Dark Lord. I am the primordial serpent. I seek to right the wrongs of the past to discover our true Lord. But the other serpent, Frampt, lost his sense, and befriended Lord Gwyn. Undead warrior, we stand at the crossroad. Only I know the truth about your fate. You must destroy the fading Lord Gwyn, who has coddled Fire and resisted nature, and become the Fourth Lord, so that you may usher in the Age of Dark![50]

If the player character links the fire, they will reinstantiate the onto-political regime of the sun that had already been artificially extended by Gwyn, and not only that, *perpetuate the enslavement of humanity.* This is the truth Kaathe shares. "Lord Gwyn resisted the course of nature," and the course of nature is for dark to replace fire. The Chosen Undead need not fear this outcome because, as Kaathe makes clear, the Chosen Undead is a *child* of the dark. They belong to a different metaphysical regime entirely.

If the player character listens to Kaathe, they can choose, upon defeating Lord Gwyn, not to link the fire but to turn their back on the flickering flame and leave the Kiln. If they do so, a different ending cinematic will play, the Chosen Undead walking out into a new world, presumably free of flame, of which they are the new lord. Kaathe provides the deconstructive critique that the above articulation of the metaphysics of the sun requires, the backstory through which a critique of the proper place of fire can be undertaken. Gwyn as solar patriarch embodies the *spirit* of the metaphysics of presence, haunting the player character's every action. Kaathe's tale strikes at the very core of this spirit: Gwyn's *goodness.* Without goodness, the onto-political edifice of Gwyn's power—this superposition of goodness, fire, sunlight, reason, kingship, truth—crumbles. The rule of the gods is finished; the wrongs of the past are righted.

But are they? If one remains within the scope of the first *Dark Souls*, these are the only two options the player character encounters. Every time a player completes the game, they must confront this same binary choice: fire or dark. And then new game plus begins. The same quest, the same choice, only *tougher.* In a game that is about cycles at every level (from the bonfire and death mechanics to the thematic and metaphysical stakes that we have been discussing here), the cycle of the game itself, this meta-ludic repetition, is necessarily implicated. *Dark Souls* becomes a game about *decision*, a decision that simultaneously effaces itself through its interminable repetition.

With *Dark Souls II*, however, this decision is made explicitly thematic, *precisely by taking it away.* In the original ending to the game (prior to its remaster and remix in 2015's *Scholar of the First Sin* edition) the player character, the

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[50]"Darkstalker Kaathe," Dark Souls Wiki, *Wikidot*, accessed March 9, 2020, http://darksouls.wikidot.com/darkstalker-kaathe.

Bearer of the Curse, arrives at the Throne of Want, replacing the Kiln of the First Flame from the previous game. Upon defeating the final bosses of *Dark Souls II*, the player character takes the throne, but is not given a choice. Light, dark: these are sublated in *want*. This is to say that the *decision* is shown to be precisely that: a *decision*, an existential *choice*.

In *Dark Souls II*, countless ages have passed since the Chosen Undead made their fateful choice: link the fire or become the dark lord. Kings and their kingdoms have risen only to fall, and the first flame has roared to life only to fade once more. Age follows age, and the cycle of fire and dark continues on, repeating itself over and over again. Powers inevitably crumble, and their remains are heaped upon each other, becoming the dungeons for new fated adventurers to traverse in search of their own power.

If *Dark Souls* presents the player character with an alternative to the metaphysics of presence signified by Gwyn, the sun, and fire through a philosophical, or more precisely, *deconstructive* critique of that iconism, *Dark Souls II* argues that such alternatives are just as compromised, just as corrupt, and just as *contingent* as that which they presume to overcome. When the Bearer of the Curse finally comes upon King Vendrick, lord of Drangleic, the player character is expecting a fight similar to the one with Lord Gwyn. But the scene is not so spectacular. Vendrick circles his final resting place, a withered husk clad in nothing but a loincloth and his crown, dragging his sword behind him, mindless and without hostility (so long as he is not attacked). Where Gwyn is the final challenge for the Chosen Undead in *Dark Souls*, Vendrick is an optional boss for the Bearer of the Curse in *Dark Souls II*. The king of the land, the mightiest warrior, the greatest soul, and the player character can quite safely pass him by. For fear of his *decision*, and for fear of the one (his queen, Nashandra) who would have made it for him, Vendrick *fled*. He refused to choose. After so much time, perhaps he saw the futility of his efforts, the futility of want.

The Bearer of the Curse takes Vendrick's ring from the back of his tomb so that they can progress through the game. Unlike Vendrick, *they* have the power to take the throne and become the "true monarch."[51] To do so is to "carr[y] the weight of their souls," to accept the burden of the decision precisely by sublating it in *want*—which is to say, in the existential nihility of power and desire without reason.

This *nihilism* has been described by François Laruelle as the core problematic of philosophy, a problematic that is taken to its end or *purified* in the "philosophies of difference" (which he traces through the work of Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Jacques Derrida, and Gilles Deleuze).[52] Nietzsche's *inverted Platonism* reinscribes the *unitary* and *universal* in the space of difference, which is equally to say that it inscribes difference in the space of the unitary and universal, elevating difference to the place of *veritas transcendentalis* (a new being, a new

[51]"Nashandra," Dark Souls II Wiki, *Wikidot*, accessed May 27, 2020, http://darksouls2.wikidot.com/nashandra.

[52]Laruelle, *Philosophies of Difference*.

presence, a new spirit). Laruelle contends that Heidegger, Derrida, and Deleuze (a truncated list of the school of difference) conduct their work in this same space, doing so through a myriad of interminable variations, but all to the same end. The absolute purification of the transcendental, the site of philosophy, as the "relative-absolute," is in fact the most purified transcendentality insofar as the *relativity* of this absolute is the very *unity* of the philosophical *cut* that potentiates philosophy, and so, the metaphysics of presence *and* difference, in the first place.[53] The deconstruction of metaphysics arrests itself in process by referring itself to itself *as* the transcendental, colonizing the proper place of power through an absolute, self-positing nihility. Thus, insofar as this relative-absolute can be defined as *difference-differencing*, it can never be accomplished, because it always requires a new being, a new presence, a new truth to deconstruct, so that it can thereby continuously reinscribe itself in the place of its nihilating power. For Laruelle, this gesture is the most metaphysical of them all, the most pure and the most terrible. It is this self-same gesture with which *Dark Souls II* concludes.

We are not trapped here, however. If the metaphysics of the sun and the philosophy of dark can be understood as *unifying logics*, the sublation of differences in a higher, unitary logic (a logic that is, in its very movement, the annihilation of *real value* in an empirico-ideal synthesis), then it is necessary to escape this *monism* and seek a *plurastic* logic beyond. This is where *Scholar of the First Sin*, and eventually *Dark Souls III*, will lead us.

There Is No Path

Dark Souls establishes Gwyn as icon and edifice in order to deconstruct the sublimity of his kingship. Darkness is posited as the alternative to Gwyn's luminous regime but, we have seen, this positing implicitly establishes a *duel matrix* that interminably repeats itself in cycles of violent overcoming.[54] *Dark Souls II*, then, makes the nihilism of this repetition explicit, denying the goodness or truth that either side might claim in opposition to the other. Light, dark—the choice matters little, because the cycle will always repeat. The metaphysics of the sun founds itself in a transcendental presence; the philosophy of dark foregrounds the split within the same, the presence of the other to the self, the original difference that is prior to the dominion of the solar ruler, thereby annihilating the claim to authority of the sun; the cycle repeats, and the alternatives eventually become indistinguishable, a false choice to be chewed on, worked over, struggled with *ad infinitum*.

In *Dark Souls II: Scholar of the First Sin*,[55] however, the player character is presented with another ending. Where before the only option available was to

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[53]Laruelle, 162.

[54]The *duel* in Laruelle is the *split logic* of the unitary, the universal that always manages to incorporate its other into itself.

[55]Tomohiro Shibuyo and Yui Tanimura, *Dark Souls II: Scholar of the First Sin* (PS4; Xbox One; Microsoft Windows: FromSoftware, 2015).

take the throne, the manifestation of the fundamental unity-in-opposition of light and dark, their sublation in *want* (the more primordial universal term), now, through a series of interactions with Aldia, the titular "scholar," the player character can make a choice *other* than the false choice of the first game (or the original non-choice of the launch version of *Dark Souls II*). In a half-symmetry with the "The Dark Lord" ending of *Dark Souls*, the player character can turn their back on the throne, refusing the choice it presents. But where in *Dark Souls* this gesture was merely a *turn*[56] from one absolute to an other, in *Scholar of the First Sin* this turn is the very refusal of the title of *monarch*, the auto or superposition of power that we elaborated above through the analysis of Gwyn. "There is no path," Aldia says, in the final voiceover of the game.[57] Where before light and dark were destined to be united in the choice that precedes them—the very structure of *disparity* as such, as presented in the opening to *Dark Souls*—now the nihility, the groundlessness, of that choice is properly surpassed, the *duel* of light and dark recognized in its "unreason."[58] "Beyond the scope of light, beyond the reach of Dark. . . what could possibly await us?"[59] In *Dark Souls III*, FromSoftware makes their most conclusive statement on the matter.

Eons more have passed. The vicious passing of the ages has taken its toll. With each kindling and fading of the fire the prolongation of disparity becomes more difficult, more tenuous, more excruciating. The Lords of Cinder, those heroic beings destined to link the flame, abandon their duty. The undead—regular humans—are sacrificed to the fire in greater and greater numbers for want of a mighty soul to accomplish the deed. The player character, the Ashen One, is awakened, a reconstituted sacrifice, summoned by the bells to hunt down the Lords, return them to their thrones, and link the fire.

Upon the completion of their quest, the Ashen One can choose between three different endings (the availability of which depend upon certain actions taken over the course of the game). As before, the standard choice is to link the fire once more, a repetition of futility. The second choice requires the player character to follow an intricate series of steps, culminating in the ritual sacrifice of a kind and genuine NPC ally. We see the fundamental *duel* of the series once more. But the third ending presents the true alternative, the pathless path, the *beyond* of unreason without power, without authority, without decision. This

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[56] For Laruelle, the *turn* is a fundamental structure or moment of the relative-absolute, that which unites the same and the different in a higher unity.

[57] "Aldia, Scholar of the First Sin," Dark Souls Wiki, *Fandom*, accessed June 1, 2020, https://darksouls.fandom.com/wiki/Aldia,_Scholar_of_the_First_Sin.

[58] That is, the "principle of unreason" as articulated in Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier (London, UK: Continuum, 2009), 60. The principle of unreason is the *absolute* contingency of facts, including the fact of the scission, the hyphenation, the decision itself. Meillassoux also describes this principle as the "non-facticity of facticity" (79), that the very *thrownness* whereby the subject is inserted in the world—the basis of phenomenological first philosophy or fundamental ontology—is itself *contingent.*

[59] "Aldia, Scholar of the First Sin."

ending, the "End of Fire," sees the Ashen One take the power of the flame and not simply *abandon* it but actively *give it away*, allowing the Fire Keeper, the woman divested of all agency, all authority, so that she might serve the seekers of flame, to usher in a pluralistic and contingent future.

> "The First Flame quickly fades. Darkness will shortly settle. But one day, tiny flames will dance across the darkness. Like embers, linked by lords past. Ashen one, hearest thou my voice, still?"[60]

The flame, engine of disparity, source of Gwyn's might, is finally decoupled from the decision of its inception, the decision itself depositioned. The sun gives way to a *universe studded with eyes*,[61] the glimmering of a myriad of flames free from the doom of lords and heroes. This future is a future of unreason in the immanence of a *black universe*.[62]

The universe to come, the universe that was always here, is *unknowable* in the sense that philosophy would traditionally intend: it cannot be posited as an object of knowledge. But it is precisely in this non-positing, in the opacity of non-decision (which is *not* the interminable oscillation of *in*-decision), in the *unilateral determination* and *absolute contingency* of the real,[63] that a logic of real multiplicites might be unfurled, beyond the piercing, metaphysical rays of light *and* dark.

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[60]"Fire Keeper," Dark Souls III Wiki, *Fextralife*, accessed June 1, 2020, https://darksouls3 .wiki.fextralife.com/Fire+Keeper.

[61]Michel Serres, *Eyes*, trans. Anne-Marie Feenberg-Dibon (London, UK: Bloomsbury, 2015).

[62]François Laruelle, "On the Black Universe: In the Human Foundations of Color," in *Dark Nights of the Universe* (Name Publications, 2013), https://www.recessart.org/wp-content/uploads/Laruelle-Black-Universe1.pdf.

[63]These are key ideas throughout Laruelle, *Philosophies of Difference*.

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