

Philosophy and the Fabrication of Truth: Nietzsche, Foucault, Plato, and Baudrillard in the Metaphysical Constructs of Select Cults

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Abstract

Examining cults from metaphysics to epistemology, this study also analyses the construction and dissemination of truth from a cultic belief-system perspective. Cults generally profess to know the ultimate truth—whether metaphysical or esoteric—and, hence, they often take themselves to be the only bearers of knowledge and the true nature of reality. Drawing on postmodern and existentialist theories, this research examines the tension between subjective truth and objective reality, thereby critiquing the creation of cults as their own metaphysical systems and knowledge frameworks. Through a study of cults such as The Branch Davidians (David Koresh), The Rajneesh Movement, and Heaven's Gate, this study will examine how these groups present their worldviews as higher or ultimate truths, using philosophy to support their doctrines. The paper is strongly informed by Michel Foucault's concept of epistemic power: it examines how certain structures control knowledge, how knowledge is constructed, and how it is distributed within society to exert control over cult followers by producing an exclusive truth. In addition, the study shall include hyperreality theory by Jean Baudrillard, which postulates that cults manufacture an illusory picture of reality for their adherents. This paper shall, in studying and commenting on the productive clashes of these cults' manufactured truths with the search for truth in larger philosophical traditions such as Plato's Cave Allegory and Nietzsche's critique of absolute truths, explore how these cults pose questions to the traditional epistemological discussions of knowledge and truth now. Ultimately, cults are the subjects of sociological critique, but cults can also be understood as philosophical examples that challenge metaphysical and epistemological views about truth.

Keywords: cults, metaphysics, philosophy, truth, epistemic power

Introduction

Cults have always existed somewhere between opposing perspectives in human living; they are viewed with both suspicion and curiosity. Different fields have slightly different definitions of what constitutes a cult; there is no single definition of cult. However, most would agree that cultic groups, in general, are characterised by a strong allegiance to a charismatic leader, rigid ideology, and complex social structures that insulate members from the larger world. While the term "cult" carries a pejorative connotation, it is important to acknowledge that not all cults are dangerous and/or destructive; for example,

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most cults likely did not start with any intention of being hazardous. One of the main questions regarding cultic groups is where does belief end and manipulation begin? (Singer & Lalich 2003: 12–15)

The psychological manipulation in a cult-like system is deceptively powerful and sophisticated. Through processes such as love bombing, information control, peer pressure, indoctrination, and fear, cults often create conditions where dissent is impossible. The dependence on the group grows stronger and more complex over time (Hassan 2015: 14). What results is a situation in which, at some point, an individual is unwittingly sacrificing their relationships, careers, income, and entire sense of self to the cult's vision or individual. It can often be very difficult for individuals to extract themselves from the situation, due to the psychological dynamics, even when the individual is experiencing varying degrees of abuse or when the group itself is acting destructively. Comparatively, cults can provoke sociological questions about power, social influence, and the effects of beliefs on behaviour. Cults can stimulate reflection on what we think about free will, and how readily very bright, educated people can be pulled into coercive systems when the conditions are right. We are living through a time where the issue of cults is timelier than ever because of the proliferation of digital disorders and new extensions of cult-like behaviours in digital spaces (Baudrillard, 1994: 121–122).

Cults can be considered a closed knowledge system from an epistemological perspective. This paper will examine how cult leaders claim and enact certain beliefs as “truth” within the cult system, following Michel Foucault (1980: 52, 133). However, the epistemological process, more than rituals and language, selective information, and charismatic authority, is primarily derived from the rejection of any external rational bases of evidence and criteria for knowledge in favour of internally determined criteria based on a cult doctrine. A complete understanding of this spiral and closed-loop epistemology requires exploring postmodern and existential critiques of objective truth. For example, postmodern theorists like Jean Baudrillard assert that in late modernity, actual reality is frequently replaced by representations of that reality and call this concept ‘hyperreality’ (Baudrillard 1994: 1). With the preceding in mind, cults offer practical and fascinating examples of belief systems that animate, not just simulate, realities that are alternatives. Cults do not simply assume the alternative, divergent beliefs and perspectives that form a coherent part of a larger philosophical system– they destabilise, disrupt, and make worlds. They create epistemic closure to the knowledge worlds of non-cults through symbolic language, ritual, myth, and doctrinal reification, closing off other systems of reason and belief as incomprehensible or heretical. The constructed realities of cults are not merely the medium through which cults operate – they are the way that cults enact and distribute power. Cults invert

the assumptions made by classical Western philosophy regarding reason, truth, and the autonomous knower. This article seeks to understand how cults create and maintain unique “truths”, and what that tells us about the categories of truth and reality in philosophy. With recourse to Nietzsche’s will to power (Nietzsche, 1887: 14–15), Foucault’s regimes of truth (Foucault, 1980: 133), and Baudrillard’s hyperreality, cultic epistemologies are seen as both parodies and destabilisers of traditional views of truth. Instead of understanding cults as simply secular or religious phenomena, this article will understand them as philosophical microcosms in which truth is (re)produced, embodied, and performed (Nietzsche, 1887: 14–15).

Constructing metaphysical and epistemological frameworks

While cults often proclaim that they are the only truly authentic holders of objective or esoteric truth and that their belief system is the only one that provides truth about ultimate reality, these are not just theological or spiritual claims. They are epistemological claims that will reconstruct what counts as knowledge and how knowledge is legitimised. It is an epistemological process. This legitimates the construction of autonomous inclusive frameworks that are alternative metaphysical systems, while delegitimising, in a practical sense, conforming or scientific understandings of reality (Nietzsche, 1887: 37). The charismatic leader is, in both instances, an agent of benevolent divine or positional higher knowledge and, epistemically, the only basis for the cult claims. These dynamics become even more specific to the examination of specific movements or cults and are clear in the example of the metaphysical claims and epistemic closures of Heaven’s Gate, the Branch Davidians under the leadership of David Koresh and the Rajneesh movement. These specific examples of movements demonstrate that regimes of truth are manifested and retained through discourse, charisma and ritual (Nietzsche, 1887: 38).

The Heaven’s Gate cult claimed that Earth was a defective and inferior existence. Heaven’s Gate began with a radical metaphysical claim, which was that a person wanted to escape the defectiveness of this earthly existence and receive salvation. They needed to set aside the materiality of this world and get on their spacecraft, which was based on its own epistemology (Zeller, 2010: 410). Foucault (1980: 133) would refer to these as regimes of truth. Within these group contexts, there is a power structure that produces and endorses a truth regime that requires socially endorsed moral discourse and action. Through this truth regime, it excludes other epistemologies as forms of corruption or ignorance, thus producing a separate regime of knowledge. These regimes produce norms for mundane ways of noticing and anticipated behaviours, much as Kuhn (1962: 42–43) suggests paradigms reproduce ‘normal’ science. In a situated paradigm (a cult), what is excluded is other truth claims, and what is considered truth is both internal and socially maintained by doctrinal

supports and ritual and social norms. So, cults not only seek to support beliefs but also contribute to building large-scale worldviews that function as systems of metaphysical and epistemological claims.

For the Branch Davidians – Waco, Texas – David Koresh's interpretations of biblical prophecy became the foundation for the group's beliefs and effectively reconstructed their followers' reality (Newport, 2006). Rajneesh (Osho), by bringing together Eastern mysticism, psychological interpretations of value, and charismatic legitimacy, produced a belief system that altered their individual self and religious reality (Lalich, 2004). The claims of David Koresh, Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, and Marshall Applewhite all involved privileged access to truth—truth that was a dislocation to their devotees' own frames of reference about self, society, and existence (Lalich, 2004). These leaders were epistemic authorities: the basis for truth was the leader's claims as the final arbiter of what was true in the cult's epistemology.

In Waco, Texas, David Koresh Edgar constructed a metaphysical paradigm based on his interpretation of the biblical apocalypse. Koresh incorporated a title "Lamb of God" from the Book of Revelation, but claimed he had created special privileged epistemic access to (what he referred to as) the special capacity of exegesis (Newport, 2006). With this claim, Koresh did not just re-appropriate an interpretation of a Christological account of Scripture; he had constructed a new onticity: the imminent destruction of the world was redeemable only through Koresh, and the only legitimate revelation of the proposition of salvation. This metaphysical notion permitted radical action and total commitment because the ultimate reality of the followers was mediated through Koresh's totalizing interpretive construct. Likewise, Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh (Osho) repudiated both effective eastern metaphysics and western psychotherapeutic discourse in favour of his own eclectic systematic worldview. This worldview comprised Zen, Sufism, a Nietzschean critique, and sometimes existential liberation and other things; Rajneesh reconstructed the self and the relation to knowledge and truth. He also implied that traditional society was both neurotic and repressive, and that liberation involved transgressing normative morality and claiming ecstatic spontaneity (Lalich, 2004).

We should not be content to say that power has a need for such-and-such a discovery, such-and-such a form of knowledge, but we should add that the exercise of power itself creates and causes to emerge new objects of knowledge and accumulates new bodies of information. ... The exercise of power perpetually creates knowledge and, conversely, knowledge constantly induces effects of power. ... It is not possible for power to be exercised without knowledge; it is impossible for knowledge not to engender power (Foucault 1980: 52, 131).

Koresh's control over sexuality and Applewhite's regulation of bodily integrity were direct actions of this principle: power creates knowledge, and knowledge creates effects of power. Foucault contends that knowledge is not neutral; knowledge and power are conflated because those who control discourse determine what is considered truth (Foucault, 1980: 52, 94). We can see this occur in cults: the leader or inner circle controls the discourse, frames the narrative, and determines what is true, often using a variety of pedagogical methods, emotional manipulation, and social control to accomplish this task. Followers internalise these frameworks, and, eventually, a docile epistemic body is created, i.e., a group of people whose realities have been altered by the group's epistemic regime. This process thereby effects an ontological bifurcation: the outside world can be construed as spiritually bankrupt, false, and the world inside the cult can be construed as real and redemptive. As Lalich (2004) observes, cultic cultures are epistemologically totalizing. This is especially pertinent because cultic cultures can account for every aspect of lived human experience in a totalizing way with respect to ethics, existential purposes, knowledge and being.

Cult metaphysical paradigms operate as existential maps that substitute order and institutional ways with tightly controlled ideological parameters. As a result, a Manichaeian worldview often emerges where outsiders are lost, deluded, or evil, and insiders are saved, enlightened, and superior. The Manichaeian worldview promotes group homogeneity of ideas while marginalising ambiguity and dissent, i.e., epistemic closure.

Cults leverage their metaphysical and epistemological systems, which portray the world outside the cult as fatally flawed, duplicitous, or spiritually dead, to present an existential urgency or a narrative of salvation through the cult's path towards enlightenment, release, or divine transformation. This Manichaeian metaphysical opposition of good vs. evil, true vs. false, serves to further remove the cult from society, which relies on that internalised truth/epistemic system. By forming their own cohesive metaphysical and epistemological worlds, cults have formed philosophical microcosms, or alternative ecologies or realities, wherein ideas about truth, being, and knowledge can be developed and monopolised. Cults are not merely fringe religions or odd religious phenomena, but ontologically and epistemically discordant alternatives to the mainstream philosophical or scientific worldview.

Charismatic authority and the sacralization of leadership

In cultic systems, charisma is not merely a social phenomenon; it is an epistemological engine. Cult leaders are not only represented as positions of authority; they are the truth. This presence manifests as a particular epistemic absolutism, in which all knowledge and meaning are understood through the

leader. Theorisations of charisma, power, knowledge, and politics – specifically from the work of Michal Foucault, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Jean Baudrillard – will help to illustrate how cult leaders sanctify themselves as ontological centres of their group and convert their individual charisma into sacralised truth. Max Weber’s foundational typology of charismatic authority can account for this claim. It is understood as “resting on devotion to the exceptional sanctity, heroism or exemplary character of an individual person” (Weber 1947: 328). Weber observes that charisma manifests itself in times of crisis; cults ratchet up that crisis to the level of an epistemic revolution. Yet, in truth, within cults, this authority is more than a social meaning; it develops a theological aspect. It manifests as what Nietzsche would refer to as a “transvaluation of values”, wherein the leader presents new moral and epistemic paradigms (Nietzsche, 1887/1989: 20, 38). The charismatic leader exercises what Nietzsche called the will to power, not only to dominate others, but also to create values understood as truth. Koresh’s claim to be the “Lamb of God” and Rajneesh’s new values of morality through ecstatic spontaneity reflect this transvaluation, where the received structure disintegrates and new truths are established.

Cult leaders draw their authority not only from the doctrine but from charisma itself, which followers accept as truth (Foucault 1980: 52, 133). In cults, charisma is a metaphysical necessity; the leader, not just an interpreter of divine will, is the truth. In *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche (1887/1989: 20, 43, 164) noted that when traditional values crumble, new “gods” are made, generally in human form, by the people with the most will to power; cult leaders like David Koresh, Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, and Marshall Applewhite obtained this divine, absolute position not through ideology, but through charismatic performativity and embodied sacralization.

While Koresh’s exegetical work is certainly recognised, equally essential to legitimising his authority claims was his performative charisma. On multiple occasions, Koresh would write and perform spontaneous musical improvisations with his followers, mostly songs about spiritual warfare, divine love, and apocalyptic victory. These acts juxtaposed worship and adoration altogether – he was no longer just a leader; he was a messianic performer. This practice relates to Baudrillard’s concept of hyperreality (1994: 2–3), in which signs and performances replace reality. Koresh’s musical persona became a sign of divine election, reinforcing his legitimacy not through theological reasoning, but through emotional immersion and symbolic performance of experience. Furthermore, Koresh delivered carefully curated confessions and ceremonies of “spiritual marriages”, in which he claimed divine authorisation to marry as many women as he desired, even if they were married. These acts were justified not as morally wrong but as socially significant, sacred rites. Building on Foucault’s (1980: 94) work on power/knowledge, Koresh was able

to control not just discourse, but sexuality and the body, making his control totalized. He did not simply dictate beliefs; he controlled access to intimacy, reproduction, and desire, which inscribed authority directly onto bodies.

Rajneesh made the act of absence a source of charisma. For long stretches, he would not utter a word while his followers kept making new commentaries, books, and philosophies, their proposals based on prior spoken work. This is the inversion of the philosophical teacher in accordance with Nietzsche: no longer does the teacher purvey the truth, the teacher produces a void out of which meaning is produced (Nietzsche 1887/1989: 15, 20). While he was quiet, Rajneesh introduced Sheela Silverman (Ma Anand Sheela) as the public face of the movement, although followers accepted that Sheela could only speak spokesperson for the guru. The Rajneesh model thus created an institutional and instituted authority based on a delegated charisma where the 'delegated' charisma itself retained sacralised power. Rajneesh retained a form of authority over the Rajneesh system through ritual greetings, the ritualised viewing of previously recorded video of Rajneesh speaking, and aesthetic, global communes, all evoked with images of Rajneesh. Rajneesh, in this sense, retained a saturated field of semiotic power and signification, akin to Baudrillard's (1994) notions of simulacra. Rajneesh's absence became more real than his presence, which was both dispersed and converged through the iconographic repetition of his image. This illustrates Baudrillard's account of simulacra, where images and representations no longer point to an absent reality but generate their own reality, sustaining authority through repetition.

Applewhite's charisma was not obviously flamboyant but was based upon anti-charisma – a composure and almost bureaucratic demeanour, which conjured trust without leading to actual compliance. Applewhite presented himself simply, dressed plainly, and spoke plainly and assuredly, establishing an exoteric/aesthetic of rational transcendence and therefore distinguishing himself as a humble messenger of supposedly alien truth. Applewhite's plain presentation was an obvious contrast to the outrageous claims he made to the group. Famously, as Foucault (1980: 94, 131) writes about institutions, power can be hidden in the most mundane of meanings. In Applewhite's mannerisms, intonations, and the detached manner he invoked, each called individuals into participatory frames, where the implausible became plausible at some sort of ritual-like occasion. One of the most sacralising experiences Applewhite organised was the group surgical decision to become castrated (not for practice, but for genderless and ultimately spiritual purity), which was another example of total submission to Applewhite's cosmology. It was an example of bodily integrity becoming a sacrifice on a metaphysical level. This exemplifies how epistemic closure operates: standard categories of evidence are replaced by an internally consistent cosmology, clearly establishing Foucault's point that truth is sustained by power structures, not correspondence to reality.

Cults sacralise authority not solely through persuasion or a doctrine's religious or theological content, but through an immersive sensory and symbolic environment. This closed loop of authority is consistent with Nietzsche's insight that truth is sometimes "a mobile army of metaphors", and the cult leader, in this case, is the general commanding that army of metaphors (Nietzsche 1887/1989: 46-47).

Cults and the crisis of modern truth

Cults generate alternative truths, but they are also transgressive, disruptive, and even parodic of the epistemic structures of modernity. The proliferation of charismatic cults (mostly in the last century) can be understood as a cultural counter to the decline of institutional science, secularism and epistemology of rational enlightenment more generally. Cults seek to delegitimize these totalizing truth-making institutions and, beyond spiritual consolation, provide alternate modes of knowing and knowledge construction. Cults and the tensions with secular culture are perhaps most simply explained through contemporary critiques of truth as they are done by post-modern theorists. Lyotard (1979) and Baudrillard (1994) claim that the modern "grand narratives" of scientific rationalism and liberal humanism have both largely lost their coercive power and potential, leaving a sterile wilderness, of sorts, void of coordinating truth. The Rajneesh Movement is an exemplary case because it mixes psychology, mysticism, and anti-institutional critique that comes very close to postmodern pastiche. For if postmodernity is not an irrational system, it is an anti-modern rationality (Lalich, 2004).

Applewhite appropriated scientific terms to bolster credibility and thus create the hyperreality Baudrillard explains. Therefore, Heaven's Gate epistemology comfortably fits within Baudrillard's (1994: 121-122) "third-order simulacra" category in which representations no longer reference a reality but replace it completely. The world we lived in became a simulacrum, and the cult's cosmology became real, reversing the hierarchies of epistemic kinds.

While the number of sources might suggest pluralism or open-mindedness, the Rajneesh Movement, led by Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh (Osho), was in fact quite controlled. In a Nietzschean way, while Rajneesh rejected a notion of objectively true content, he still respected himself as a creator of values (Nietzsche 1887/1989: 20, 43). The movement rejected moral absolutes and replaced them with charismatic absolutes that, yet again, explain that a will to truth is also a will to power.

David Koresh's teachings created an alternative temporal framework: the apocalypse was not abstract or symbolic- it was imminent and literal. This reconstruction of time and history meant that any external dissent, including government intervention, was seen not as legal oversight but as satanic

opposition. Koresh's truth system excluded empirical verification and replaced it with charismatic scriptural revelation, demonstrating Foucault's idea that knowledge is always embedded in power relations (1980: 52, 94).

In *The Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche posed the question of whether "truth" is merely a moral preference contingent on historical succession (Nietzsche 1887/1989: 15–16). Cults radicalise this point by converting truth into will: the leader's interpretation becomes the truth, and all alternative positions become moral or spiritual failures. Nietzsche perceived the "death of God" as an existential crisis for Western civilisation, but cults can create new gods, allowing greater control with less contestation.

Additionally, Plato's 'Allegory of the Cave' can be rethought through cult epistemology. In the standard reading, truth is enlightenment: move from illusion to knowledge – that painful journey back to the forms. Cult followers believe they have already exited the cave of the mainstream illusion – now they live within the light of the exclusive truth. The world outside can then be conceived of as the cave, full of ignorance and corruption. This inversion can make epistemic dialogue almost impossible, since cult members believe they have achieved the philosophical end Plato identified by a different means.

These examples illustrate how cults destabilise not only traditional epistemologies but also modern philosophical frameworks. As Lyotard (1979) suggests, the collapse of grand narratives leaves a void that cults fill with totalizing cosmologies; as Baudrillard argues, representations in cult practice replace reality itself; and, inverting Plato's allegory, cults position themselves as enlightened while construing the wider world as trapped in illusion.

Therefore, cults present fundamental problems for epistemology and meta-philosophy. They are internally coherent (if authoritarian) epistemic communities and raise larger questions concerning what modern society is willing to consider knowledge. Cults are social phenomena that stand out in an age of relativism, disinformation, and hyperreality. They are parodic caricatures of social epistemological problems. Cults simply raise troubling questions: What is truth? Who defines truth? and What happens when that whole system of belief is totalizing, that the questions cannot even be asked?

Rituals and the internalisation of cultic reality

While the metaphysical and epistemological elements of cults construct a top-down, controlling framework for how truth is claimed and enforced, these elements do not exist without their actualisation – the embodiment of truth in and through the body, ritual, community, and aesthetic experience. Cults make truth visible, tangible and sensorial. The ritual, which may take the form of dance, costume, chant, spatial practices, etc., is not simply a fanciful embellishment to doctrine but is the unfolding of truth which performs the sacred. Building on Turner's (1969) assertion that ritual, rather than just

performing belief, exists in a process that continually reproduces and perpetuates belief. For cults, ritual generates the atmosphere where truth can be felt rather than heard or read.

The Rajneesh Movement and its Dynamic Meditation can be considered an example. A multi-phased ritual, potentially physically exhausting to the body, involving fast-paced breathing, an expressive explosion, and silence, Osho claimed, was intended to eliminate the psychological barriers (that the ego creates) and to embody "truth" through direct, embodied experience (Lalich, 2004). In this sense, participants were encouraged to let go of any thought processes that might mediate or fetter their subjective states. This technique represents the Baudrillardian simulacrum, where absence and repetition produce a reality effect that is more real than presence and create the guru as a sign that produces its own truth. Likewise, Heaven's Gate adhered to a uniform way of dress and way of life, including identical clothing, vegetarianism, and a genderless appearance, to give coherence to a collective identity and to reject the individualist and worldly stain (Zeller 2010). By imposing an ascetic aesthetic, Heaven's Gate diverted other distractions, allowing all affective and cognitive pedagogies to be focused on metaphysical preparation for the "Next Level". In terms of cult cosmology, the body then assumed the dual role of symbol and conveyer of truth, being purified and governed for docility. The disciplinary apparatus surrounding the body aligns with Foucault's notion of bio-power, in which the body becomes an instrument of political and spiritual regulation (Foucault 1980). Branch Davidian Koresh also demonstrated embodied belief through the militarisation of the Branch Davidian compound, strict definitions of gender roles, and control over normative sexuality. Koresh proclaimed sexual monopoly over Branch Davidian women and dictated this as part of prophetic tradition (Newport, 2006). These bodily arrangements did not merely represent or infer theological sensibility; they were the theology itself. In other words, this surrender of bodily autonomy embodied metaphysical surrender as the religious submission to Koresh was evident in the surrender of embodied discipline, rendering epistemic authority inseparable from somatic experience.

From Nietzsche's point of view, these aesthetic and ritual strategies continue to demonstrate and exert a "will to power," not only over knowledge, but ultimately over the perception of knowledge. Nietzsche (1887/1989) asserted that because values become embodied through repetitive, ritualised activity, truth is created through the sedimentation of action rather than rational search. In cults, the leader's value system becomes colonised through aesthetics and ritualised performance to such an extent that the reality it creates is so total that it does not need to enforce it, since followers internalise and perform it without thought, as habitus. The body does not resist; it conforms to a new habit of being because it does not remember and does not know another

way of being. This is where Baudrillard's (1994: 2-3) hyperreality also returns, since the cult rituals simulate a sacred experience that eventually supersedes and holds more value than the symbol. For example, the Rajneesh festivals no longer represented a symbol of enlightenment, a way of being; they became the enlightenment symbolised and enacted, and Baudrillard's account of hyperreal symbols explains that these signs refer to nothing outside themselves; they become generators of meaning.

Through ritual, symbols, and shared spaces, cults transform knowledge into feeling. They turn truth away from being a process of epistemic discovery into an aesthetic and somatic (embodied) experience. This puts great pressure on Western epistemology, which prioritises conscious processes and reason (logos) over pathos. But the force of belief could be heightened by sensation rather than understood through new reasoning. In this sense, cults are systems not just of epistemic community, but a sensorial totality where taste, colour, sound, movement, and clothing come together to make claims of truth. Foucault (1980: 92-94) forewarned that such systems can produce their own genealogy of discursive regulation, line of intimidation, surveillance and disciplinary control. Cults leverage this phenomenon by subsuming the dialectical space separating belief and being. In the cultic world, to know is to feel, to obey, and to act.

Cults, in addition to their internal dynamics, represent the vulnerabilities of contemporary society: the loss of shared epistemic criteria, the gravitational pull of mega-media, and the yearning for absoluteness when confronted by moral ambiguity. They also catalyse scholarship at the crossroads of philosophy of religion, social epistemology, and critical media studies, especially as cultic formations proliferate in a digital, algorithmically mediated age. Future research might, for example, trace how charismatic micro-influencers potentially reproduce these dynamics at scale or whether ritual and repetition migrate into virtual or augmented reals.

Above all, cults indicate that truth cannot be extracted from power, performance, and embodiment. Informed by thinkers such as Nietzsche (1887/1989), Foucault (1980/1989) and Baudrillard (1994), they show that truth is made, performed, and ritualised. By reframing cults as alternative epistemologies rather than a form of social aberration, this paper contributes to contemporary debates on truth-formation and postmodern metaphysics. In many ways, cults serve as microcosms of philosophy, where the ambitions of metaphysics become humorous and futility is exposed. In this sense, cults can represent more than mere sociological oddities. Instead, they can be situated as contending epistemologies that reveal the inseparability of truth and power, the making of knowledge through discourse and ritual, and the mockery of philosophy's own metaphysical projects. The study of cults situates them in a wider-angled view of philosophy and demonstrates that cultic practices can be

conceptualised as labs for larger epistemological and metaphysical questions that have purposefully been pondered.

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