

## Knowledge is Knowing Frankenstein isn't the Monster, Wisdom is Knowing Frankenstein is the Monster: An Exploration on Mankind and Monstrosity

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# KNOWLEDGE IS KNOWING FRANKENSTEIN ISN'T THE MONSTER, WISDOM IS KNOWING FRANKENSTEIN IS THE MONSTER: AN EXPLORATION ON MANKIND AND MONSTROSITY

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## Abstract

Humans construct their identity by constantly measuring themselves against and creating themselves around culturally ingrained systems of rules governing the social, the political, and perceptions of the physical. I call a system of rules a "syntax." When a syntactical system is broken, a monster is born. Our monsters are the litmus and definition of our selves. Using Michel Foucault's *Abnormal* lectures to inform my theory of the self as "syntax," I posit that it is essential to understand the monster in order to exert social change and it is essential to understand what a monster *is* in order to understand oneself.

## Knowledge is Knowing Frankenstein isn't the Monster, Wisdom is Knowing Frankenstein is the Monster: An Exploration on Mankind and Monstrosity

Walt Whitman may have sung the body electric, but when it comes to exploring monsters, it appears that any purview of the field is more a singing of the body eccentric. Monsters are liminal creatures that are created out of institutional and societal constructs that govern conceptions of human bodies; they are embodied forms of a societal system of syntax. These syntaxes are conceptual, unarticulated rules. Humans constantly navigate and explore culturally informed spheres that compose their identity: the physical, the social, and the political. When one of the three syntactical systems that define the body are altered in a way that is not permitted by the constraints by which institutional societal systems enact and define themselves, a monster is born. We create our monsters and our monsters create us, as their

aberrations are what compose the parameters of our societal systems. Michel Foucault articulated the monster's relation to society and power in his *Abnormal* lectures, and stated that it is a "fundamental figure around which bodies of power and domains of knowledge are disturbed and reorganized" (Foucault, 1999, p. 62). Through an exploration of societal, physical, and political syntactical aberrances, one can uncover and alter deeply entrenched systems of knowledge and power that dictate what it means to be a human.

Syntax is the term used for the system of grammar that governs how any language communicates ideas. There must be a system of syntax applied and implicit to every form of human communication for it to be sensible to anyone other than the originator. I posit that it is possible to conceptualize the way humans interpret, create, and articulate ideas about their bodies, their selves, their society, and the power structures that influence and inform all these concepts, as highly complex and interlocking systems of "grammars": a syntax that categorizes how the self and others can be conjugated and changed and still make sense. Syntaxes are internal laws that convey how we can be articulated to each other, as Foucault says: "The frame of reference of the human monster is, of course, the law" (Foucault, 1999, p. 55). These laws can be intuitive or only articulable after conceptual unpacking. For example a physical monster may be a physical monster because it has two heads (humans have one), or because it deviates from an ingrained norm dictating the appearance of a specific social-cultural group (a hairy woman or the exotic "other"). A social monster may be a monster because it preys on its fellow man (like the vampire), or because it upsets syntaxes governing how the self may operate in society, such as the witch, which represents female power in a patriarchal environment. Internal (self-imposed) and external laws create physical, social, and political monsters, and inform human perceptions of monsters, dictating what is and is not permutable or even permissible. "Devices of power, {as} analyzed by Foucault, are constantly crossed by lines of escape" and these lines of escape are syntactical laws broken or obliterated (Nuzzo, 2013, p. 56). The existence and the action of the self creating itself around, against, and due to the societal institutions that exert defining pressure on the self by creating laws, seems to me to create a sort of "system program" or operating system language known as a syntax.

This idea of performative formative syntax is similar to the ideas of the "body as language," as espoused by literary theorist Terry Eagleton. Eagleton interprets Ludwig Wittgenstein's idea (found in his 1958 piece *Philosophical Investigations*) that "if you want to see the soul, you should take a look at the human body" to mean the body is "as a form of practice" (Eagleton, 2014, p. 11). The body and the way society views the tangible body (which is a massive part of monstrosity) is the practiced form of the "soul." I interpret the soul to mean the societally situated self's reaction to, and thus definitions of and adherence to, the syntax governing the self. When the syntax of self is practiced in a way that is an aberrant from the societally defined syntaxes, then the self becomes a monster. This is seen in every variation of monster, from the case of the hermaphrodite to Frankenstein's monster. (The hermaphrodite practices itself as both male and female and thus in a dual gender syntax not allowed by Western society

conventions, and Frankenstein's monster practices himself as a man but is made of parts from many men and thus is also not permissible by the syntaxes typically governing the self). Eagleton also argues that "practice constitutes the life of the body rather in the sense that meaning is the life of the sign;" a statement that I find is useful to unpack, and also partially to refute in relation to my idea of self-syntax (Eagleton, 2014, p. 11). Practice of the body is wholly constrained by the meaning of the signs of the self and society; the two feed into and create each other. But I also feel that meaning is not so much the life of the sign as much as the life of the sign creates the meaning, as seen in the case of monsters. A monster interacting within the various avenues and facets of the social, political, and physical syntax creates and remakes the way its life is experienced, as do we with it, and so it is not the meaning that is the life of the sign, it is the life of the sign that is the meaning. Wittgenstein's concept<sup>1</sup> that "practice constitutes the life of the body," is a succinct definition of my idea of self syntaxes that dictate where and what and how the body's life will go due to the practice of social, political and physical system of syntaxes that mandate how the body will act. The life of the body may have signs that interact in a way that cannot be encapsulated by syntax or the signs may be transmitted through the life of the body that is not permitted by syntax. Thus that is how one creates a monster such as in the case of a two-headed boy or a person who behaves in such a way that the sign of their gender is in conflict with how their syntax dictates the life of their body will go. Syntaxes are the rules that create the practice or conjugation of self, and thus it is the life of Frankenstein's monster in relation to syntaxes or the life of an indefinitely gendered person in relation to defining syntaxes that creates a hermaphrodite. The life of the sign creates the meaning just like the practice of the body creates the life. Eagleton goes on to say that an adult is able to state their emotions and be understood because they have "a body that has become articulate by being incorporated into a culture" (Eagleton, 2014, p. 11). By speaking the self in a system that is built by (and thus defined by) syntaxes, the body is articulate and able to be understood. As long as a person can speak and exist inside the social, political, and physical syntaxes of one's culture, a person is understandable and not a monster.

These syntaxes/laws governing the self and others can be as simple as a statement like "all humans have one head" to as complex as a nuanced hierarchy of where and when women can occupy spaces in the public sphere. They are the ways we convey the meaning and message of our world to ourselves and others, and are acquired mostly through acculturation and language acquisition, just like the way a child learns the rules of language. The formation and cementing of syntaxes may be somewhat fluid like the gradual changes in a language, but will always stay consistent

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<sup>1</sup> I would add to Eagleton's point that the practice of body is analogous to the life of the sign, and posit (like ethicist Seyla Benhabib) that selves are concrete and that "the life of the sign" or societal/cultural/physical markers are large components of the body's meaning and that the physical manifestations of socio-cultural traits and unavoidable aspects of biology (whether it's race, gender, or disability) have a large bearing on the way the syntax of the self and of others is perceived, interpreted, and created (Benhabib 174). The sign itself gives life to the meaning, and meaning defines and limits the life of the sign, ergo: monstrosity is created when the sign and the meaning cannot co-exist within a self syntax.

within the context of themselves and their basic rules. For example, humans should have one head. Women are not men. To upturn and speak new syntaxes is to create monsters. The crux of monsters in a syntactical sense is that they are not sensible or even present *in* the syntaxes of self and thus they are terrifying. By exploring and exposing engrained syntactical schemas, one can then gain a more nuanced knowledge of society's composition and more accessibility to dismantling oppressive institutions that enforce monstrosity upon outsider groups, whether it be the Inquisition persecuting socially demonized Moors and Jews in Medieval Spain, or the repugnance that those with distorted, too many, or too few appendages can face. "The monster is the major model of every little deviation," and thus for every marginalized group exists a monster as its mascot (Foucault, 1999, p. 56). One can only contest and reject the designation of monstrosity as an outsider group when one knows exactly what syntactical aberrance they have committed, and an exploration of the creation and perpetuation of monsters facilitates that rejection. Ludwig Wittgenstein viewed language as "nothing other than *praxis*: irreducible and heterogeneous socio-cultural verbal practices, in which we are immersed, and into which we are more or less continually being 'reinitiated'" and with this angle one can understand syntax (manifested by language to create the self and the perception of others) as linguistic praxis, the two informing each other implicitly and intimately, and interacting to define monsters (Martins, 2010).

The three different types of monsters can be categorized into three groups defined by which syntax they disrupt: the political monster, which disrupts the social body/syntax of power and state and how we perceive governing power and our place in it, the social monster, which disrupts the syntax surrounding how we relate to each other and perceive our place in society, and the physical monster which disrupts the syntax that creates ideas about what a "normal" body looks like. When a social, political/legal, or physical law is disrupted, (whether it is metaphysical, judicial, or social) a monster is formed because a syntax defining the core nature of what the self is and is not, is disrupted (Foucault 63).

For the sake of brevity this paper will focus on social and physical monsters. However, first a few clarifications on the political monster are necessary. Foucault considers kings to be political monsters, as their basis for the legitimacy of their laws springs from outside the societal contract and is self-defined. "The first monster is the king" (Foucault 94). The ruler does not refuse to follow the social contract; he or she acts as if they are entirely outside of it. This sort of purposeful disengagement and isolation of self from the institutionally enforced and affirmed rules of government individual to society creates monstrosity since it defies definition and articulation in the political syntactical systems that situate the self as a unit/participant and influencer in the government of their world. The adherence to laws is necessary, whether it is a sense of internally consistent rules for what the self means in a political context, or a literal adherence to civil laws<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> An example of the distress and implied monstrosity that comes out of the removal of self from power constructs is seen in Foucault's early example of the recalcitrant serial rapist early on in his

The social monster is a monster that is representational of a broken social norm that comprises the societal syntax that defines one's place in society in relation to others. This kind of monster is fluid, and its power changes as its presence is enacted on and upon by society. The Person of Color was initially a monster for the Western World, (as seen in the fantastic early descriptions of African inhabitants by explorers, and the white man a monster<sup>3</sup> for the people enslaved. Pliny the Elder, Augustine of Hippo, and theologian Rattramus all spoke seriously of "Cynocepheli" (dog-headed men) in African regions, proving that there was a definite societal zeitgeist (if not syntax) that held that the people of Africa were not the societal definition of "human." This idea is continued in Herodotus' and Pliny the Elder's accounts of the Blemmyae (men with heads in their chests) that were said to inhabit North Africa. The foreignness of the inhabitants of Africa became monstrosity to Westerners once their Otherness became viewed as a direct violation of the social sense of self due to an intense conflation of various socio-political religious Western institutions making up Pliny's, Herodotus' and other natural historians' milieu. Medieval texts such as illuminations of the twelfth century Arnstein Bible (which were influenced by early explorer's reports of strangers in strange lands) depict this situation of monstrous others from the perspective of Western social syntax. The Arnstein Bible has elaborate and fantastical illuminations of new cultures (the "Monstrous Races") which, in the illustrations, all implicitly point to the chaos and confusion of the Western World's attempts to assimilate the 'new' continents found (Wright 10). The cynocephalus and centaurs found in the margins of the Arnstein Bible's pages indicate that the Western world did not have the language yet to discuss and assimilate these other cultures, and so they made them monsters. The social syntaxes of what it means to be "man" in the Western world invariably meant Western and thus the African and Eastern populaces were estranged outside the social syntax. Asma postulates this concept of foreignness as monstrosity and says that since "knowledge is a kind of power," post-colonialist scholars like Edward Said viewed the "early anthropology of the ancients as a thinly veiled attempt to create an 'us versus them' political dynamic," and thus manipulate the knowledge of foreign countries into something monstrous. (Asma, 2009, p. 38). It is easier to convince men to invade a country if they believe they are only stealing land from monsters. Social monsters inform the culture they are situated in, as they are, by definition, birthed by and are "embodiments of a certain cultural moment" (Cohen 4). As Cohen puts it: a monster's "destructiveness is really deconstructiveness" and one can even wager further that in a monster's destructiveness also lays demonstrativeness, as looking at a monster is one of the best ways to decipher the tenuous and hidden web of one's culture in which one is subjectively situated (Cohen 14).

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"Abnormal" lecture series. The rapist refuses to answer his name in court, "and it is the silence of the criminal monster, or the refusal of the individual to answer his or her identity that is most threatening. For Foucault, it this refusal of identity that is the most threatening" (Wright 147).

<sup>3</sup> The Mahabharata actually speaks of a foreign "large eared" tribe with ears that were so freakishly large that they could sleep in them. This tribe is "presumably" Westerners (Asma 32)

Monstrosity can also arise from biological deviations. Physical syntax interruptions are fascinating because with a change of overarching syntax, which is dependent on the dictations of social institutions being enacted on the physical body and tangible conceptions of embodiment and self, one can see the body differently: one goes from freak show monstrosity to medical curiosity to unfortunate human. (The idea of the life of the sign giving a sign its meaning and meaning of a sign giving life to a sign bears repeating here.) The monstrous body does not change; our syntaxes do. A physical monster, or a monster that is constructed from perceptions of “abnormal” physiology, seems to have largely transformed from monster to object of pity over the course of history. An example of this is the journey that intersex has taken from prodigious to pathology (Pender 150). Foucault, as earlier mentioned, felt that the origin point of monstrosity was the disruption or total disregard for man-made laws that influence mental heuristics and vice versa (as seen in the king as monster.) This seen in the idea of a “hermaphrodite” (which is monstrous) versus the eventual transformation to “intersex,” which is clinical and within the system of permissible physical syntax since its clinical definition also includes explanations of what physically happened and how. The changing of syntaxes, caused by societal institutions being themselves changed, caused intersex individuals to be viewed as abnormal but by no means monstrous. Monstrosity is dependent on the limits of knowledge, and the way knowledge and its power inform syntaxes of self and how syntaxes of self inform knowledge/power. The idea of what is merely abnormal and what is monstrous can be more easily conceptualized as a series of institutionally articulated norms and signifiers that exist in several bell jars of syntax-contained systems that all reinforce each other and keep out any forces that are outside. Monstrosity is looking in, but separate from, the set of rules defining the physical system. When a system of syntax is shattered, (like in the case of the hermaphrodite) the natural and often unknowable world rushes in.

Hermaphrodites presented a problem to most of the Western Classical and Modern world because there was no existing laws or language to talk about a body that existed outside of a society that could only conceptualize two independent sexes. In the West, hermaphrodites were “executed, burnt at the stake, and their ashes thrown to the wind” throughout history in a ritualized execution to delineate the boundaries of the other (Foucault 67). Hermaphrodites are “the mix of two kingdoms” but residents of none (Foucault 66). It is possible that the presence of the female co-mingled with the male in the hermaphrodite was problematic because it suggested equilibrium of the genders and negated patriarchal institutions. This is seen in many of the legal texts surrounding medieval trials of hermaphrodites, where most of the anxiety and fear came from concerns that the hermaphrodite would use their liminal state to achieve benefits associated with both genders and thus “cheat the system” in a sense, or that they would switch back and forth between the genders, or that they would continue to willfully eschew definitions altogether. As Asma states: “One aspect of the monster concept seems to be the breakdown of intelligibility,” and thus that a person is a monster when one cannot perceive the logic or legality of what a person is (Asma 10).

Despite their transformative power of being undefinable and therefore free to self-define, hermaphrodites (later conceptualized as intersex) were considered

monsters. Western institutions somewhat altered themselves to accept that gender could be more of a spectrum than a binary. This came about due to early Modern discourse about sexuality, which took place in a strange tug of war between a silence of straightforward sexual language and a movement to reclaim sexual language in order to convert it to the language of the clinical (Foucault 71). Through the manipulation of language and, by that extent, the manipulation of one's sense of self, humans were able to see gender in a new way where there was not language to describe it before. The process was slow, and Foucault asserts that most hermaphrodites remained "monsters... whose monstrosity nonetheless escapes the convictions and sentencing that were previously the rule" (Foucault 71). The physical factors were no longer the monstrous part of a hermaphrodite; it became a matter of breaking laws of the legal code. They became "defective structures accompanied by impotence," and thus monsters no longer. Errors can exist inside a system because at least an error is easily explained by what went wrong versus what should have occurred according to procedure, but foreign elements cannot. The abjection that society and the self face vanishes once one can explain why there is discomfort and rejection in the face of the alien Other. It is like explaining a joke - when one explains why it is funny, it is no longer funny. When one explains why a monster is terrifying, it no longer possesses the same power.

Foucault postulates that society views monsters with a legal frame of reference (Foucault 55). His view of monsters was of a "legal notion," a syntactical aberration whose exact divergence can be traced, the hole in the ripped fabric of society (and its larger underpinning of nature) located. To Foucault, there was a sense in the senselessness of the monster. Its form of monstrosity could always be explained by the nature and location of the injury to the syntactical body. This can be seen in the example of the witch, as discussed above. A monster is a monster because of the rarity of a true rupture in the syntaxes that we make ourselves up by, and the extremity of limits that a thing must push in order to overturn laws that define what is possible and permitted (Foucault 56). Monsters are mostly ineffable, a creeping dread under a bed or unspecified menace inside the woods. They are powerful sites of societal articulation because they derive their own self-made voices because there is no one else that is able to describe and define them. The issue is that when one attempts to describe a monster, one typically ends up saying what it is *not*, and not what it *is* since the monster is an aberration outside of the rules that construct the conceptions of what it is to be a human operating inside of a complex set of syntaxes. Frankenstein's monster is not syntactically a human, so then what is he? Folk wisdom often repeats that monsters like Frankenstein's monster are signs and portents of malignant things to come, as evidenced by even the word's etymology: "monster" comes from the Latin verb "monere," as in to warn. I posit that monsters are portents but are indeed signs: signs of syntax broken. Monsters reveal cultural conceptions because they exemplify what is not permitted. People conceived of as monsters, like hermaphrodites, in reality are forced to display their syntactical wounds openly and in order to survive must heal the wounds into scar tissue of a new syntactical system consisting of self and self newly situated in society. Monsters can be interpreted as portents, but their bodies in practice are signs



calling for maintenance and reinforcement of syntactical systems of self. Within these rules of ourselves, exist the conventions and mechanisms to communicate what we define ourselves as to our self and others. Frankenstein cannot communicate what he is (indeed, most of the angst of his story is his quest to be understood but the rules that make up what he is are too strange to be comfortably integrated into the context of society's syntactical system) and thus he is a monster since he is unable to assimilate his strangeness into something that reliably follows rules set forth by institutions of Victorian science and religion about what the self is. "It is the failure of Victor Frankenstein and society in general to provide a place {for Frankenstein's monster} in the human family that turns the creature into a monster (Asma, 2009, p. 11)." Just as we are "constructed," by syntaxes implanted by society, so is the monster (Asma, 2009, p. 11).

Perhaps it is not the monster itself we fear, but instead what the monster can alter about the institutions that compose the basic definitions of our meaning. Society situates the self in bell jars: tight definitions of ourselves in our society. I find the metaphor of bell jars apt because they are glass objects placed over fragile things to preserve them. As indicated in this paper, the syntaxes that compose the self can be very fragile indeed. The monsters peer into this glass cage and their reflection and presence highlights that we exist within an artificially constructed world. Monsters give society meaning, they are sites of articulation that point to themselves and say that this is the exact point where society cannot safely look. By this inscribed signage system of the monstrous body, they create us as much as we have created them, from out of each Other comes each one of us. We are not afraid of monsters because they are monsters, syntactical aberrations from the heuristics that construct ourselves and our lives; we are afraid of them because we are afraid of the manifold ways we can be ourselves, and afraid of acknowledging anything other than our own present possibility. To return to Walt Whitman's "I Sing the Body Electric:" "And if the body does not do fully as much as the soul? / and if the body were not the soul, what is the soul?" The physical nature of the body contributes much to the idea of monstrosity, but it appears that it is the internalization of the rules that govern how one is to be embodied as human, the functional soul, that truly renders a man a monster or a human being.

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