x and the Politics of y, for some x and y

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Abstract

Inauthenticity can be understood as following the herd, in line with a metaphor from Nietzsche. The idea of inauthentic philosophy is explored in an analysis of the titles of articles in philosophy journals, particularly those following the general pattern of 'x and the Politics of y'.

When I was in graduate school, one of my fellow students had proposed an interpretation of Heidegger's conception of authenticity according to which anyone engaged in philosophical activity was thereby acting authentically. That did not seem to be a correct interpretation, and I argued the point accordingly, but the idea of inauthentic philosophy had begun to interest me. Around the same time, I started to notice patterns in the titles of some philosophy articles, notably the pattern 'x and the Politics of y', for some combination of x and y, such as 'Relativism and the Politics of Logic'.[1] These patterns seem to suggest instances of inauthentic philosophy, and this paper explores the extent of two such patterns and their possible link to inauthenticity in philosophy.

For Heidegger, authenticity and inauthenticity are both modes of being characterized according to the alignment of one's self-determination in reference to oneself or to others [1, page 68], particularly others considered as an impersonal aggregate force. This impersonal force can be understood as "They" [1, pages 164ff] in the sense in which one might be told "What will They think if you go out looking like that?" Authenticity tends to align self-determination to oneself, where inauthenticity aligns to "They". However, inauthenticity is the default state, since we have "already been thrown *into a world*" [1, page 236], a world of other people, and authenticity is only achieved with some effort.

However, the notion of authenticity as a philosophical issue does not begin with Heidegger. The idea can be found in the earlier work of Kierkegaard and metaphorically in Nietzsche. For my purposes here, Nietzsche's metaphor will serve better than Heidegger's phenomenological account. In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche disparagingly references a herd instinct in humans at several points [2, pages 62, 114–115, 140, 210]. I will accordingly characterize inauthenticity

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[1] This is a contrived example of a title, as are other titles presented in this paper, unless an associated author is referenced. Titles of articles are considered data for the purposes of this paper, so citations will not be given. Articles are *mentioned*, not *used*.

roughly as following the herd, whereas acting as a maverick epitomizes authenticity. Inauthentic philosophy here designates the act of producing a work of philosophy in following the philosophical herd in some way.

Perhaps philosophers may feel that inauthenticity simply does not apply to them. How could philosophers — genuine lovers of wisdom — be compared to herd animals? Yet the qualification "genuine" would seem to be precisely what is at issue in such a question. Are there philosophers who are not *genuine* lovers of wisdom, who are inauthentic in some way? In what sense could this inauthenticity be understood metaphorically as following some herd?

I propose three areas in which inauthentic philosophy could be understood as following a philosophical herd:

1. *Selection of philosophical topics* — At any given time, there appear to be a number of topics that command a significant amount of attention in a field, as indicated by the frequency with which they are addressed in journal articles and conferences. However, that level of attention might be traced back to some single philosopher, a maverick, who brought a novel topic into philosophical discourse, or at least found a new approach to investigate an old topic. This does not imply that anyone addressing a topic introduced by such a maverick is necessarily following the herd. Certainly if there are problems in any philosophical analysis, those problems would demand a response, regardless of how popular or unpopular the topic may be. However, I have had more than one philosophy professor recommend that I work on a particular topic because it is "hot" and would help to get me published.

2. *Application of techniques* — There are clearly various schools of philosophies, some of which are associated with distinctive methodologies. Adopting a certain methodology does not necessarily qualify as practicing inauthentic philosophy, even if one is not the maverick who was the innovator of the methodology. One can surely make an authentic choice of a method appropriate to a topic or problem. Yet suppose that an innovative technique was recently proposed such that considerable attention has been attracted not only to the topic that occasioned the innovation, but to the technique itself. What might follow is a spate of papers applying the technique to other topics. Again, these applications do not necessarily constitute inauthentic philosophy, but I suggest that practicing philosophy primarily as the application of a philosophical "bag of tricks" would constitute a form of following the philosophical herd, particularly if one such trick is especially in fashion at some point in time.

3. *Allegiance to doctrine* — As a philosopher develops a body of work on a topic, that philosopher might inevitably be understood as professing a certain doctrine, and might even explicitly make such a profession. That doctrine may indeed develop out of authentic inquiry. However, one of my philosophy professors, in response to a challenge concerning the presuppositions that underlie any argument, shrugged and said that all that

one can do is to pick a position then argue to the best of one's ability. If a philosopher thus picks a position, perhaps some form of realism, for example, it is likely that this philosopher would continue to argue for that position come what may, to preserve allegiance to the cause of realism, possibly even to maintain one's credentials with other realists. Authentic philosophy, though, would appear to require following an inquiry wherever it might lead, even to a repudiation of the positions one has previously taken.

Attempting to quantify the extent of inauthenticity within philosophy is fraught with problems. Even judging the authenticity of a single work of philosophy is problematic, let alone investigating inauthenticity across a segment of philosophy. To evaluate the authenticity of a work of philosophy is to evaluate the philosopher who produced it. Even if that were feasible, it comes dangerously close to committing some form of *ad hominem* fallacy.

As noted above, at one point I began to notice a pattern of titles for philosophy articles in the form 'x and the Politics of y' for some x and y. The apparent profusion of articles with a common pattern for titles led me to wonder whether those articles represented authentic philosophy or whether they were mainly following some philosophical herd. Such inauthenticity might relate to the selection of philosophical topics or to the application of certain techniques in these articles, as discussed above, or at least to a particular way in which the topic was framed.

While it is not feasible to judge authenticity in these cases, it is certainly possible to chart the actual extent of this pattern in philosophy titles and to investigate the way in which the pattern is deployed.

Accordingly, I assembled a dataset of titles assigned to philosophy articles, mined from *PhilPapers* [3] between February 28 and March 11, 2020. My resulting dataset contained 1,513,614 records associated with 1,404 journals, published between 1844 and 2020, up to the point when the data was mined. Books and manuscript titles in *PhilPapers* were excluded from the investigation. However, where books were reviewed in journals, the corresponding book titles might thereby be included in the titles of the review articles derivatively. I chose to retain these titles in the dataset, since the journal chose to publish a book review including that title.

Language	Pattern	Number of Titles
English	x and the politics of y	764
French	x et la politique de/des/du y	17
Spanish	x y la política de/del y	11
German	x und die Politik der/des y	6
Italian	x e la politica della/di y	2

Table 1: 'x and the Politics of y' in various languages

3

Translated appropriately, the general pattern 'x and the Politics of y' might appear in non-English titles as well. Table 1 summarizes the patterns used to search in various languages and the number of titles matching those patterns.[2] Since the majority of titles are in English, in what follows, I restrict my investigation to English titles, to permit a comparison of the terms standing in the x and y positions of the pattern without worrying about issues of translation.
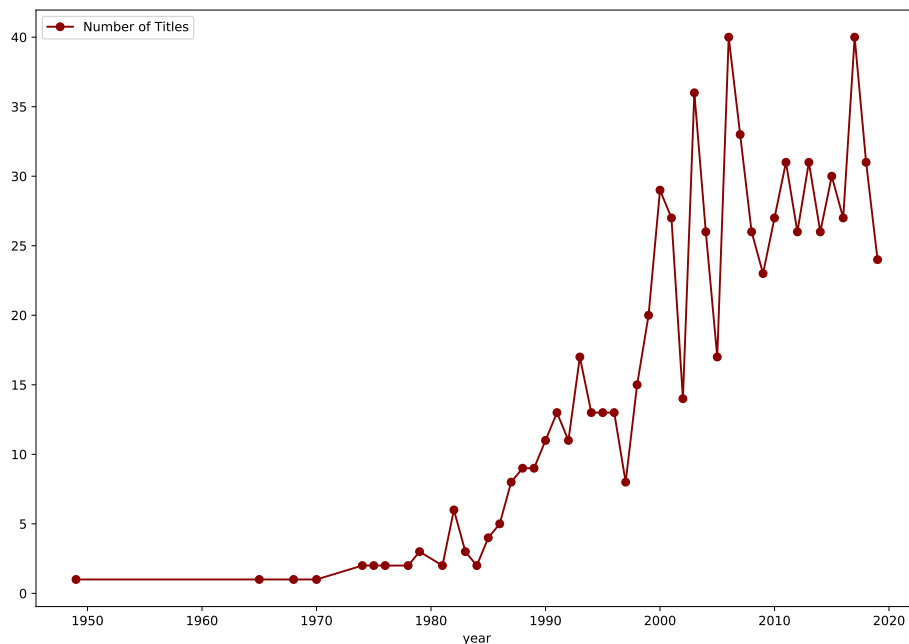

Figure 1: Number of 'x and the Politics of y' titles by year[3]

Figure 1 charts the occurrence of titles matching the pattern over time. The first occurrence in the dataset was from 1949, with the title 'Alexander the Great and the Politics of "Homonoia"'. The next occurrence was 16 years later. The usage of the pattern began to accelerate in the 1980's, but appears to have leveled off in the past 10-15 years.

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[2]Methodology Note: Analysis was performed in Python with data processed using the `Pandas` data analysis package. The pattern 'x and the Politics of y' was converted to a regular expression checking for a match on '&' in addition to 'and' to include possible variants of the pattern.

[3]Incomplete year 2020 is excluded from this chart, but not from the subsequent analyses.
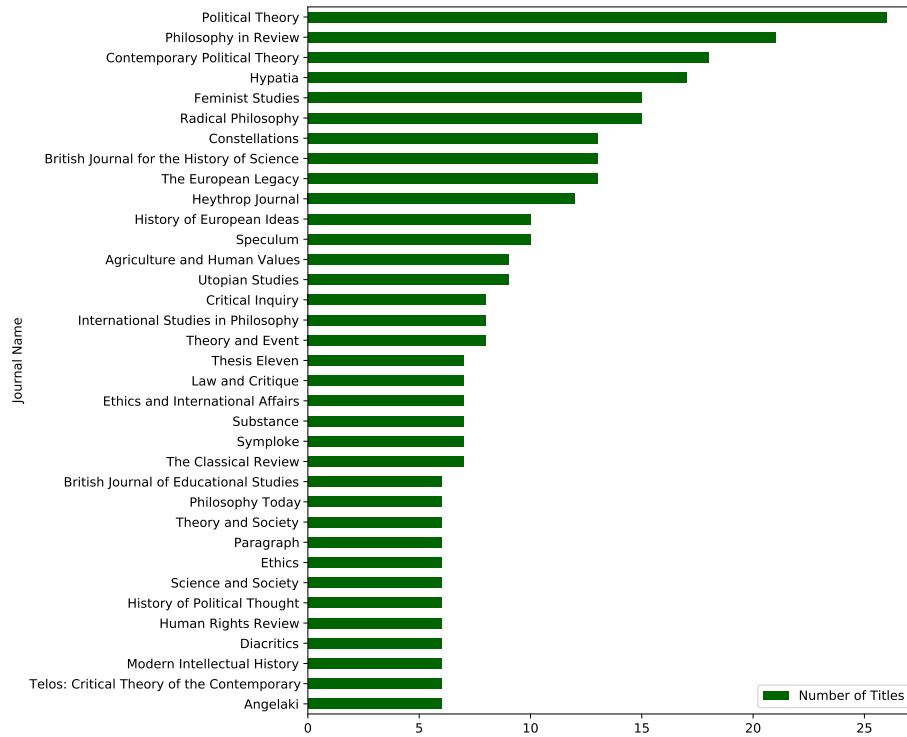
Figure 2: Top journals publishing 'x and the Politics of y' titles

Figure 2 charts the top journals publishing articles with titles matching the pattern 'x and the Politics of y'. Overall, 261 journals in the dataset published such articles. Given the word 'Politics' in the pattern, it seems natural for journals specializing in political theory to appear in this chart. What is somewhat surprising is the number of occurrences of the pattern published in the *British Journal for the History of Science*.

There was some duplication of titles found in the dataset, not only exact duplicates, but duplicates due to variants in punctuation. To eliminate or at least to reduce these duplicates, the x and y terms from the pattern 'x and the Politics of y' were extracted, then duplicates identified by x term, y term, and journal were removed. This still permitted some duplication of titles, so long as the duplicate titles were published in separate journals, as in the case where different reviews of the same book were published in different journals.
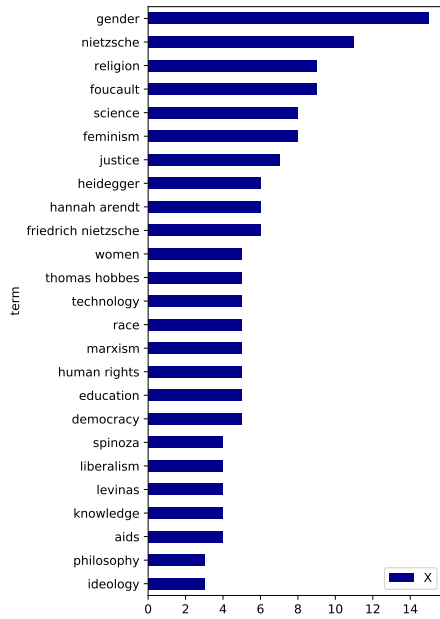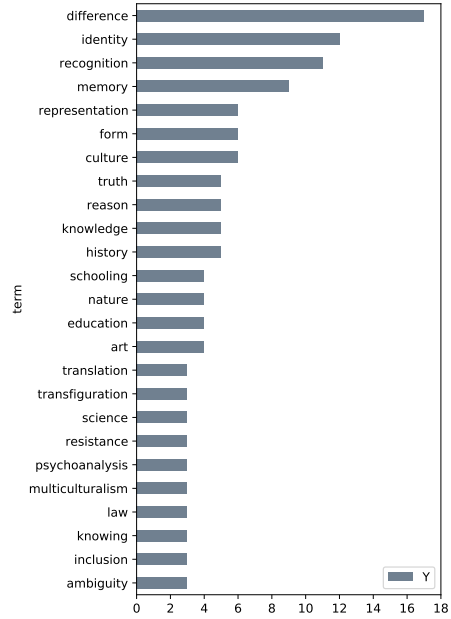
Figure 3: Top terms appearing in x

Figure 4: Top terms appearing in y

Figures 3 and 4 chart the top terms appearing in the x and y positions, respectively. In many cases, the x term contained several terms, as in 'Relativism, Skepticism, and the Politics of Dubious Philosophy'. These multiple terms were separated to permit a comparison of individual terms used within the x and y positions of the pattern.

Note that terms are identified here as literal text rather than grouped according to meaning. Accordingly, 'friedrich nietzsche' is a different literal term than 'nietzsche', so if these were combined, 'nietzsche' would be the top x term.[4]

Additionally, note the appearance of names of philosophers in the x term, but not in the y term. Consequently, it appears that it is solely the politics of abstract ideas that are of interest in these articles, rather than the politics of individual philosophers.

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[4] I am fairly certain that Nietzsche himself would not be pleased by this dubious honor.
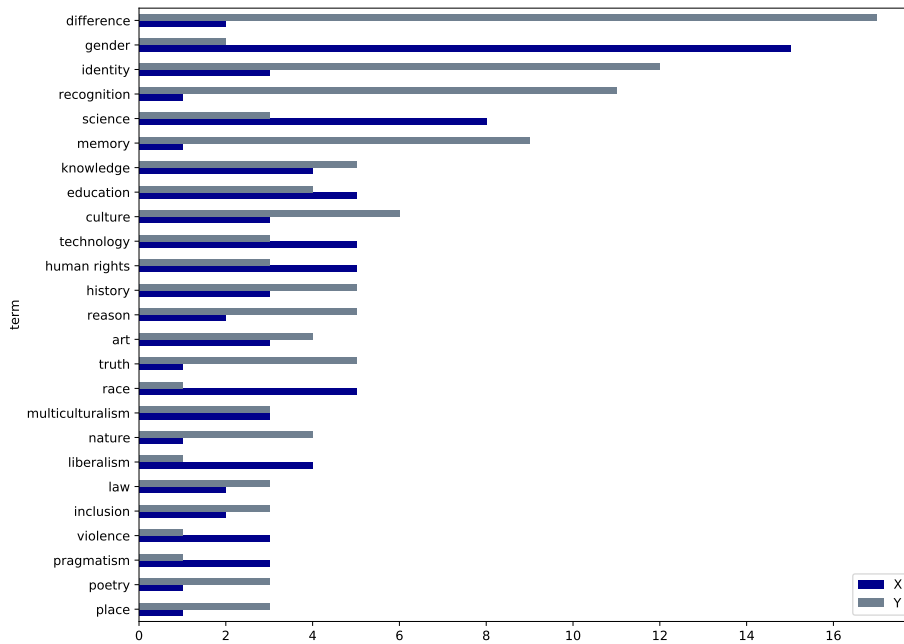
Figure 5: Top terms appearing in both x and y

Some terms appear in both the x and y positions, such as 'science', 'education', and 'knowledge'. Figure 5 charts the top terms of the 62 total terms appearing in both positions within the dataset. This suggests that articles might plausibly be written by arbitrarily taking terms from this list and assigning them to the x and y positions of the pattern 'x and the Politics of y', such as:

- Violence and the Politics of Pragmatism

- Human Rights and the Politics of Poetry

- Memory and the Politics of Technology[5]

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[5]In devising these contrived titles, I was obliged to revise some of my earlier attempts as I found that my random association of x and y terms actually already appeared as published articles.

Consider now a different pattern for titles, this time taken in reference to the title of Donald Davidson's 1973 paper 'On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme'. This pattern appears in two forms: 'the Very Idea of x' and 'x: the Very Idea'.
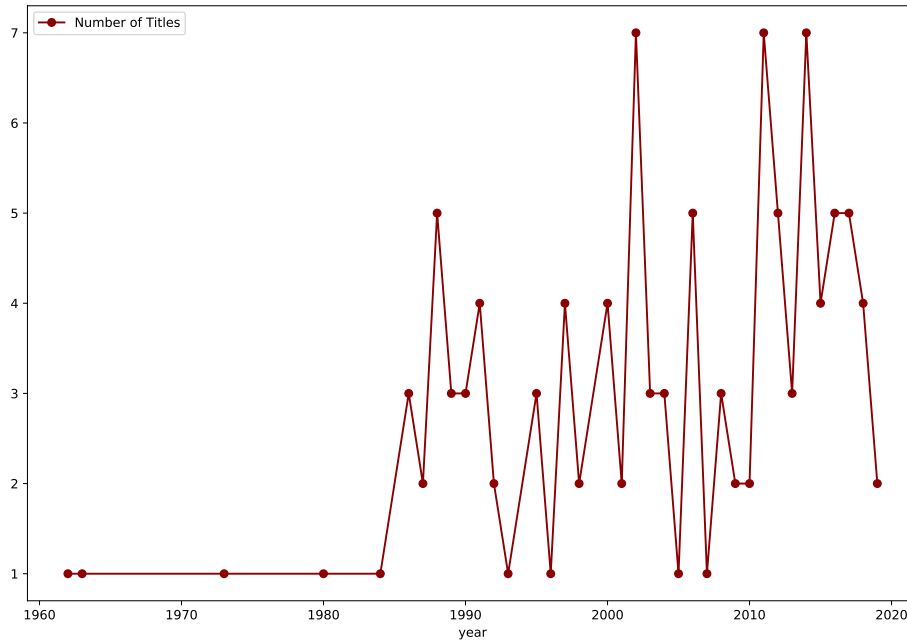

Figure 6: Number of '...Very Idea...' titles by year

Figure 6 charts the occurrence of titles matching this pattern in either form over time. As with 'x and the Politics of y', this pattern shows a slow start for many years, but unlike the previous pattern, this one never seems to have gathered much momentum.

What is interesting about this pattern, though, is the relations or lack thereof among the first three instances:

- 1962 — Norwood Hanson: 'The very idea of a synthetic-apriori'

- 1963 — A. R. Louch: 'The very idea of a social science'

- 1973 — Donald Davidson: 'On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme'

Louch's 1963 paper does not seem to have any relation to Hanson's paper published in the prior year. Rather, Louch's title is a direct echo of Peter Winch's 'The Idea of a Social Science', the title of a work that Louch critiques. Further responses between Winch and Louch occurred in following years as 'Mr. Louch's Idea of a Social Science' and 'On Misunderstanding Mr. Winch'. Thus,

8

this early instance of the 'Very Idea of x' pattern seems clearly to have resulted from an authentic interchange between two thinkers.

Ten years later, Davidson's paper cites neither Hanson nor Louch's previous papers. It is not clear whether Davidson was aware of Louch's paper, but it seems that he at least ought to have been familiar with Hanson's paper. Given the close relationship between Hanson's and Davidson's topics, it seems plausible to consider Davidson's title as a reference to Hanson's earlier title, though perhaps an unconscious reference.

By 1980, when the next instance of the pattern occurs in the dataset, 'The very idea of pure procedural justice', there does not seem to be any relation to the prior occurrences. Rather, 'the Very Idea of x' seems to have been established as a pattern that titles may adopt, regardless of the topic, doubtless due to the impact of Davidson's article. From that point forward, I think the question of inauthenticity regarding these occurrences may indeed be asked. In fact, by 1988 a further variant emerged as 'x and the Very Idea of y', somewhat reminiscent of 'x and the Politics of y'.

Other specific patterns might be investigated, but I think these two are sufficient. However, with the dataset at my disposal, out of sheer curiosity I also wondered whether any general patterns could be detected in the titles of philosophy articles. Consequently, I performed a part of speech analysis on the dataset to identify the most common grammatical pattern.[6]

The two most common grammatical patterns for titles were the following, each of which accounts for approximately 1.2% of English titles in the dataset:

Article-Noun-Preposition-Noun — e.g., The Logic of Skepticism, The Ambiguity in Thomism, A Critique of Neo-Anti-Relativism

Noun-Conjunction-Noun — e.g., Automation and Experimentation, Relativism and Doom, Horror and Horoscope

With regard to the question of inauthenticity, there do not seem to be any grounds for considering these titles as following the philosophical herd by virtue of falling under these common grammatical patterns. Rather, the first pattern either identifies some aspect of a topic that will be investigated in the article, or characterizes the article itself. The second pattern merely identifies two topics that will be investigated in tandem in the article.

I offer no conclusions here, since I think there are none that can properly be advanced on the basis of this investigation. The titles assigned to philosophy articles do not of themselves prove whether the author is following some philosophical herd or not, though the ability to detect patterns in philosophy titles beyond common grammatical patterns might raise a concern.

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[6]Methodology Note: Titles were analyzed with the `langdetect` package to filter only English titles, then part of speech tags were analyzed using the `spacy` package.

Rather, I present this investigation as a challenge. If authenticity is important in philosophy, then philosophers need to be aware of areas in which philosophers may work inauthentically, such as the three areas I identified above. The assignment of titles to philosophical works might be used as a final opportunity for self-evaluation by a philosopher. If I am inclined to assign my work a title that follows a well-worn pattern like 'x and the Politics of y' or 'The Very Idea of x', perhaps my work itself constitutes the manifestation of some philosophical herd instinct.[7]

However, it is not clear that the structures of contemporary professional philosophy betray any interest in authenticity at all. Securing a tenure track appointment requires convincing a hiring committee that you are "one of them", which requires both that you are working on some issue that *they* recognize as important and that you have a sufficient number of publications. Getting articles published in journals require that you meet the standards of editors and reviewers, namely that you submit work on topics that *they* consider important, and in some cases even that you align to positions that *they* endorse. This seems to be a structural formula for following the philosophical herd.

This structural situation might be the subject of a further study. I do not know how the analysis might proceed, but I have a perfect title for it: 'Authenticity and the Politics of Philosophy'.

References

[1] Martin Heidegger. *Being and Time*. Trans. by John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson. New York: Harper & Row, 1962.

[2] Friedrich Nietzsche. *The Gay Science*. Trans. by Josefine Nauckhoff & Adrian Del Caro. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

[3] *PhilPapers*. URL: https://philpapers.org (visited on 02/28/2020).

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http://www.markressler.com/doc/X-and-the-Politics-of-Y.pdf

[7]There is a different issue concerning the assignment of rather frivolous or even flagrantly silly titles, but I currently have no algorithm to investigate silliness.