

# What could be more perverse than that?

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To cite this article: Jean-Paul Martinon (2025) What could be more perverse than that?, Safundi, 26:1-2, 69-77, DOI: [10.1080/17533171.2025.2488536](https://doi.org/10.1080/17533171.2025.2488536)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17533171.2025.2488536>



Published online: 07 May 2025.



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ROUNDTABLE



## What could be more perverse than that?

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### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 12 March 2025; Accepted 26 March 2025

So, Grant Farred is perverse. He is perverse because he wants to thank the South African teachers who enabled the apartheid regime and gave him an appalling education. How could he do such a thing? What could be more unacceptably perverse, wrong-headed, or ill-advised? It's like a Jew thanking the Third Reich for the opportunity to think a stronger Jewish identity after many had been exterminated in concentration camps. It's like a homosexual thanking the homophobes after they've stomped him for the chance to think up a more resilient queer identity than the faggot he was meant to be. It's like a Tutsi thanking the Interahawame, this Hutu militia that savagely hacked to death most Tutsi families for the opportunity to think themselves as Rwandese, untainted by any colonial ethnography or forced cohabitation. I could go on. The comparisons are endless, each one of them sounding off an infinite number of ever-more worrisome alarm bells as to this odd perversity to thank the oppressors, the racists, the gay-bashers, the traitors of humanity, which also means, paradoxically, thanking the ones who have *not* been given the opportunity of growing up against an enemy, of *not* having been given the chance of a disadvantageous education that fostered independent critical thought. As is well known, being on the side of oppressive power is not conducive of critical thinking. Farred is thus, indeed, perverse for doing what is not called for, what radically goes against common sense, that is, against the uncritical and largely unconscious way of perceiving and understanding a given society as self-evident.<sup>1</sup>

Farred's book, at once a memoir, philosophical analysis, political manifesto, historical account, confession, lexicon, and poetic ode reasserting the value of a botched education is far too complex and multi-faceted to warrant an in-depth analysis in such a narrow remit. The only thing I can do with such a small word count is to simply focus on this one key term included in the title: "perverse" or, as Farred also says, "truly perverse," "what could be more perverse than that?"<sup>2</sup> Before any gratitude, before any word of thanks to all those who were complicit in the

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<sup>1</sup>On the dangers of common sense, see Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, 624–707.

<sup>2</sup>Farred, *The Perversity of Gratitude*, 69.

apartheid regime, I stumble over and over beyond the cover-title on this word: perverse. This perversity dominates every page of Farred's book like an obsessive mantra or earworm. Of course, this word is given a definition. I will come back to this. But notwithstanding this all-too-short lexicon entry and this omnipresence throughout the book, the word, for me at least, jars; it exasperates for it feels like an ill-advised appropriation of a term that, in its narrow definition, has never, I wager, been hurled at him: no one must have said to Farred: "you are a pervert."<sup>3</sup> This is a specific insult that degrades and stigmatizes. And yet Farred uses it, as I will try to show, in a much broader sense (and even perhaps an earlier sense) that bypasses the mere determination of a sexual behavior considered repulsive. How can I make sense of such an extravagant and even perhaps dangerous word right before any expression of thanks? This will be the aim of this short note on Farred's—as always—most formidable and thought-provoking new book.

### Perverse: a definition

The infernal dialectic of perversity that Farred unleashes, one which paradoxically, "resolves nothing, creating instead a new knot of difficulties to be thought"<sup>4</sup> is seemingly pretty straightforward: He is perverse because he acknowledges "the formative pedagogical role played by [his] white South African teachers... Those teachers are [indeed] thanked for having taught gutter education to disenfranchized students named "coloured" (mixed race), "Indian," and 'black' by the apartheid authorities."<sup>5</sup> Farred insists that such gratitude is perverse. For example, he writes highlighting what would be the opposite of perversity, namely, ingratitude: "There should indeed be no gratitude expressed for those institutions, practices, and perhaps most of all, people who engaged in the business of oppressing on the basis of race—of disenfranchizing, disempowering, impoverishing, and discriminating against others because they were not white."<sup>6</sup> Beyond the justifiably pained outrage of Farred's words, this is a classic master-slave dialectic: on the one hand, apartheid teachers and on the other, disenfranchized "coloureds" forced to think and fend for themselves. Just like the sublimation of Spivak's subaltern speech,<sup>7</sup> the resolution of Farred's dialectic is unsurprising: the slave vanquishes the master-oppressor and wins the trophy of meaning. In other words, the "coloured" comes out from under the yoke of the regime, regains some human dignity, and secures thinking as the tool for his empowerment.

Since his book is all about a propensity to think over and beyond systemic unthinking, Farred has no choice, but to carefully avoid tracing the long history of apartheid (starting, for example, from the first expressions of racial discrimination by the Dutch East India Company in 1650s all the way to Farred's own educational experience in Cape Town between 1969 and 1989) and to focus on specific moral

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<sup>3</sup>On this topic, see Eribon, *Insult*, especially, "A World of Insult," 13-139.

<sup>4</sup>Farred, *The Perversity of Gratitude*, 109.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 2.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," 59-105.

epistemics issues that he personally lived through. In doing so, he circumscribes the infernal dialectic at work across centuries and turns it into a more palatable experiential problem, namely, the validation or not of the knowledge acquired during those fateful years. Here is an example of this specific focus on lived moral epistemes: “Instead of forgetting the wrong thing and remembering the right thing, the perversity of gratitude works perversely. While it does not exactly make us forget the right thing—apartheid as a racist oppression—it insists on remembering the wrong thing.”<sup>8</sup> Right thing (fighting apartheid)/wrong thing (apartheid unchecked). Here lies the epistemic dialectic at the heart of Farred’s memoir. Moral thinking does not stem from *the fight* against racism and the ensuing victory, but from *the lived horror* of its implementation and its unthinking. The denigration, the dehumanization, the humiliation, etc. (i.e. the wrong) is what must thereby be remembered for it is precisely what leads from unthinking to thinking. The wrong is indeed the “fertile breeding ground for thinking.”<sup>9</sup> Against this wrong, Farred’s thought “arises”<sup>10</sup> and so, he is thankful. He is perversely thankful that his “will to know [the task of] thinking”<sup>11</sup> is based on the wrong caused, and thereby, on the dismissal almost out of hand, of the right thing, the fight and thereby the implementation of a non-segregationist state.

This is where, in my tangential reading of the word “perverse” in Farred’s book, I encounter his own definition of this word in the section titled “Concept 1.”<sup>12</sup> First, we are given a little etymology. In broad terms, the meaning of perverse is that which is “not in accord with what is accepted or standard,” which dates from the 1560s. However, Farred uses it exclusively in a Hegelian sense, as a stand-in for sublation. For example, he writes that he uses this word in the sense of “laying bare” and then “laying to waste.”<sup>13</sup> Being perverse is therefore, for him, not a type of sexual behavior that is abhorrent, but one which simply lays bare the horrors of apartheid in order to finally lay them to waste. His inferior or barbaric education is thus exposed for what it was and then, with a word of thanks, discarded. There is nothing more noble than such a Hegelian use of the word perverse. There is nothing more laudable than such a deliberate attempt to expose the unacceptable and, in a sublating gesture, to let it go. It reveals a hero who through such a use of perversity, of laying bare and to waste, rises like a phoenix so as to start thinking properly after the beating, the subjugation, the disempowerment. He could also be saying, quoting all-too-famous words: “You may have nearly killed me with your hatefulness, but still, like air, I rise.” Or even better: “Out of the huts of history’s shame, I rise/Up from a past that’s rooted in pain, I rise.”<sup>14</sup> Once the etymology is out of the way, Farred then proceeds to give an extraordinary series of quick

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<sup>8</sup>Farred, *The Perversity of Gratitude*, 5.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 6.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 8.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 20-1.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 20.

<sup>14</sup>Angelou, “Still I Rise,” 255.

definitions, first of the verbal compound “to be perverse,” then of the noun “perversity.” I will highlight them one at a time for they are highly indicative of the project.<sup>15</sup>

(a) “To be perverse is to act against what is expected, what is held as truth by almost everyone.” This is Farred the queer, queering what is expected, normal, acceptable. (b) “To be perverse is to show no regard for accepted wisdom, agreed-upon understanding, and widely held beliefs.” This is Farred the iconoclast, assertively rejecting beliefs and institutions as well as established values and practices. (c) “To be perverse is to refuse to kowtow to the extant epistemology.” This is Farred the unbowed, chin up against a vocabulary wholly designed to diminish him. (d) “Perversity is the anthropology of thinking.” This is Farred the educator, spotlighting his own history to highlight the nasty side of human history in general. (e) “Perversity is, true to its contrary nature, an unruly creature ill-disposed to subjugation.” We now move to the noun. This is Farred the mad Mary Shelley-like scientist who creates and brings to life the “coloured” creature resistant to oppression. I will come back to this. (f) “[Perversity] will not subscribe to the force of history.” This is Farred the philosopher who sees in his own perverse thinking the way to resist the hegemonic logic of historical narratives. (g) “Perversity is a stubborn impatience with what is.” This is Farred the traumatized inner child who can’t stand the scars of his youth. (h) “Perversity is that intellectual force that undoes and destroys in the service of thinking.” This is Farred God-like unleashing the winds of change onto the desolate waste of unthinking. I will also come back to this. (i) “Perversity is the relentless determination to uncover thinking where none is said to be possible.” This is Farred the messiah parting seas and leading the way.

As these definitions attest, Farred’s attitude is indeed fully perverse in both conduct and opinion. In conduct, he wants to be perverse without being a pervert; he uses perversion as a tool to disrupt discourse (queer), lay bare and destroy (iconoclast), rise and rise again (unbowed), and teach (educator). In opinion, he wallows in his own perversity by determining perversion as a monster (creature), a dialectical tool (philosophy), a tactics (game for change) and for its redemptive and soteriological force (both God and messiah). Obviously, this is all addressed not only to the apartheid teachers of yesteryear but also to his contemporaries, these other South Africans who also think their education sucked but did not engage in thinking as deeply and as provocatively as him. Farred’s addressees are indeed not solely those of a bygone era or worldly philosophers with an interest in social and lived history. His addressees also include those who were at the time also diminished and/or beaten, those who also fought against the regime. So, he takes great pains to do and/or say what he knows to be unacceptable to them and how they can nonetheless still rise, like him, against this formative misfortune and start thinking anew. This is how he brings together all his roles (educator, philosopher, etc.) in order not only to emancipate himself but also enfranchise his contemporaries, to make them proud against all odds after all these years.

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<sup>15</sup>All quotations that follow are in Farred, *The Perversity of Gratitude*, 21.

## Perverse: a history

Of course, Farred knows such a daring idea does not arise in a vacuum. He knows that there is a long history of authors who have also used the word *perverse* in a non-sexual sense and with some equally laudable ends. So, in his infinite respect for lineages of thought and for all the forebearers who thought like him deeply about the human condition, he gives us a few clues or traces of these previous attempts to make sense of this odd and troublesome word: *perverse*. I will only mention three for they are eminently revealing. The first is Augustine, who sees being *perverse* as “the thrill of acting against [God’s] law... getting a deceptive sense of omnipotence from doing something forbidden without immediate punishment.”<sup>16</sup> Two things are key here. First, an appearance of omnipresence. Augustine and Farred are not aiming at a delusional form of sovereignty. Their goal is simply to be granted the right of going against the established order (commandments of church, laws of state, rules of educational institution, common-sense to thank the right and not the wrong people). Second, a determination to be vindicated and proven right. Once he has acquired his right, he wants to criticize without, *at last*, being punished. Farred, more than Augustine, speaks on behalf of the boy he was. His perversity is that of allowing his younger subjugated self to defy the odds and freely denounce what was unacceptable. Alone and valiant, Saint Farred perversely rebels against the ghosts of the past (obviously, unholy) and through an Augustine-like *confessional* narrative leads the way toward a long-overdue confirmation that the boy was right all along.

The second reference for perversity is Shakespeare’s feral, sullen, and misshapen creature Caliban in *The Tempest*. Caliban revolts against the very language that Prospero gives him after landing on the deserted island. Caliban knows how he came to possess the only language in which he can speak his dissent. Caliban’s dependence on and immersion in the language of the colonizer is among the chief sources of his anger at his overlord Prospero. Farred quotes Shakespeare: “You taught me language; and my profit on’t/Is, I know how to curse; the red plague rid you/ For learning me your language.”<sup>17</sup> The perversity is here all laid out and laid to rest: Caliban acknowledges the masters’ language, thanks and curses him for it. Farred follows suit: his subjugated self, who has “learned” from the white racist teachers, acknowledges, thanks, and curses them at once. This is the gift/curse of perversity. Through an apartheid education, Farred indeed receives the gift/curse of a perversity that “contains within it force enough to blow away the smog that is the common sense of a disenfranchized apartheid education.”<sup>18</sup> Such a perversity allows him to be as strong as a “cantankerous gale-force wind”<sup>19</sup> wreaking havoc onto a dangerous lethal logic that is alien to his land alone (for Caliban) or to his land and people (for Farred). The untamed and unbroken Farred is thus Caliban.

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<sup>16</sup>Augustine, *Confessions*, 32.

<sup>17</sup>Shakespeare, “The Tempest,” Act 1, Scene 2, 437-9, 977.

<sup>18</sup>Farred, *The Perversity of Gratitude*, 103.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, 108.

His apartheid teachers are his Prospero. No magic (for Caliban) or logic (for Farred) will coerce him into submission any longer. Caliban-Farred who is equally not white, who is “not honour’d with a human shape,”<sup>20</sup> surges from Cape Town island’s harsh confines as the free-thinker that he was always meant to be.

Surprisingly, the third author influencing his thinking is Žižek who presents perversity as a radical political act, taking Judas as a prime example. “Without Judas’s betrayal, there can be no crucifixion; without the crucifixion, there can be no resurrection; and without the resurrection, there can be, of course, no promise of eternal life.”<sup>21</sup> Farred also follows suit. He becomes the Judas of apartheid in as much as he not only exposes again the horrors of the apartheid education, but also lays it to waste, thus allowing all future generations of South Africans the possibility of salvation. Farred gives South Africa not the promise of an eternal life, but at least the possibility of its own resurrection in terms of education. A much more modest maneuver, but a messianic one, nonetheless. All young South Africans are now indebted to the traitor Farred for his perverse gratitude, for exposing and destroying what led him to become an exceptional thinker. Just like Judas, he points the way to the youth of today. In doing so, he thereby refuses to be a mere follower. He is not Andrew the Apostle, Jesus’ first disciple. Just like Judas, Farred settles himself in a disposition of contrariness, unshackled from beliefs, commands, or faith-led hopes, and rebelliously points the way to all those who from this day forth also refuse the shackles of unthought. As such, he is the betrayer who speaks on behalf of those who risk missing out on a proper education.

The consequence of such a perverse attitude and position and of all these references—too many to mention here—is perhaps two-fold. First, there is a personal one, which characterizes Farred’s Saint-like perverse disenfranchized mind. He writes: “The disenfranchized self must know that its being in the world is unthinkable outside of apartheid... [it] owes itself to apartheid. What could be more perverse than that?”<sup>22</sup> The sentence, which I use as the title of this short note, comes after this extraordinary ontological statement that Farred’s subjectivity (more than his identity) is entirely structured by apartheid. If there is Farred, there is apartheid. The two go hand-in-hand, as it were. So, the perversity is to some degree *also self-directed* not just to his younger self, but to his self today. He perverts what he exposes and discards, which is nothing less, however odd this sounds, than his self. He reiterates this more forcefully one more time: “This is what it means to live the condition of knowing that there is no possibility of being (as a disenfranchized being) outside of apartheid. What could be more perverse than that?”<sup>23</sup> Again, the sentence returns: his own self is perverse precisely for laying bare what he has already laid to waste as his old apartheid self. This is no self-immolation. This is done, of course, in view of further thinking. The auto biographer simply auto deconstructs himself so as to breathe and think again, so as to continue with the confessional auto

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<sup>20</sup>Shakespeare, “The Tempest,” Act 1, Scene 2, 283, 976.

<sup>21</sup>Farred, *The Perversity of Gratitude*, 30.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 69.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 68-9.

biography, Farred's inspirational gift of thinking. The first consequence of his perverse strategy is thereby a sublation of his very own subjectivity, which can perhaps be summarized in this telegraphic way: the becoming of the Judas of Apartheid leads to the becoming of Saint Farred, emancipated, free, self-determining, life-affirming. This consequence can only thus end with a formidable one-word sentence: "Perverse."<sup>24</sup> Nothing more needs to be said for it is the one-keyword of the holy man, uncrown- ing even poor Augustine who dared not go this far.

Then there is the more general consequence, the one that universalizes Farred's own perverse and re-enfranchised self. He writes: "To live under apartheid was, on a daily basis, because of the potential humiliations that attended the most routine exercise (going to school, visiting a hospital, taking public transportation, and so on), to understand the imperative for thinking in order to stay alive in the world of apartheid. Again, the perversity announces itself, this time rendered as a maxim: Apartheid was made for thinking. Rendered temporally, apartheid is the time for thinking."<sup>25</sup> Quite formidable words that can only make anyone shudder uncomfortably. How can oppression, violence, subjugation, and disempowerment give space and time for thinking? There is here again a split in thought: On the one hand, the "legal" world of the oppressor fosters no thought (e.g. the Nazis blindly obeying duly elected Hitler's rhetoric and perceiving evil as a mere banal daily necessity, the Apartheid regime following suit). In oppressive situations, unthinking is paramount. Any such "rightful" context can only thus stifle thought. On the other hand, there is the "wrongful" context that invites thinking. This is how apartheid can also become the time for thinking. Because it is not an equitable context or an egalitarian universe, thought thus becomes possible. To generalize this, one could say that thought really only arises when it is most relentlessly confronted with unthought, with the imposed "rightful" order. This is how to "be perverse" becomes, in Farred's words, a potential universal maxim that can then be used as a means for liberation and empowerment (this is also why the verbal form of "to queer" (this or that) has such a long-lasting and global appeal).

### **Perverse: parthenogenesis**

I want to expand a little on this issue with one of Farred's most unusual allegory, one which extends his subjectivity not so much in a spatial and therefore universal sense, but temporally, across time, and more specifically beyond generations. Here is the allegory: He again equates the force of his perversity with that of a southeastern gale known to Capetonians for the way it cleanses the town, "as if preparing the clearing for the fecundity that breeds thinking."<sup>26</sup> Yet another jaw-dropping sentence that raises more questions than it can answer. The perverse clears *for* the fecundity that breeds thinking; perhaps the most heteronormative perspective on perversity ever uttered. Instead of the

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<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 69.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 97.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 109.

dead end caused by perversity, a dead end that is not productive of thought, that only reinforces the circularity of need and satisfaction, a circularity that forces the pervert to always wallow in his own fetishism, Farred's perversity gives instead room for fecundity to breed. However, Farred is not a Platonic mid-wife bringing thoughts into light through an intuitive knowledge; he is alone a breeder of thoughts. Thanks to apartheid, Farred brings thoughts into the world, he "generates more, and often unexpected strands of perversity—strands that can often be traced to thickets of impropriety, where perversity thrives."<sup>27</sup> Hence the comparison with a freed Caliban. Alone, Caliban indeed breeds more Calibans, "flying hither and thither, roaming the wide world, each determine to produce a language that can bear the weight of thinking."<sup>28</sup> This perversity is not therefore seen in allegorical terms as a rather unpleasant heterosexual coupling with apartheid that somehow gives birth to thought. This is on the contrary, an allegory that once disenfranchisement has been sublated, a parthenogenesis, a breezy breeding occurs without fertilization. Judas turned Saint Farred self-breeds thought. I wonder what his son, Ezra, who is the main addressee of a previous book,<sup>29</sup> will one day have to say about this: Dad, you've laid bare and to waste your "self" in order to self-fertilize at last without apartheid. No productive masturbatory autism here, just plain asexual (or virgin-like) reproduction, the invention of a new self.

Of course, all this discourse on perversity is a discourse on pleasure and power. If apartheid causes perverse thinking to proliferate, then one may wonder how such a violent, racist, and racialist regime and educational system could ever breed the traitorous and saintly Farred to think over and beyond himself. As he says, these hegemonic contexts were uninterested in any form of emancipation for the subjugated and disenfranchised. So, by virtue of the very power-structure immanent to apartheid, Farred's perverse thinking can only arise from that lowly position he was humiliated to take. Again, this all-too dialectical formula is a classic S&M scenario whereby it is the sub (e.g. the subjugated, but also the submissive) that is provoked into an obligatory speech act, which under obvious imperious compulsion, breaks the sub/dom order and speaks. However, this also means that the productive force of the perverse thought that Farred breeds is *not just* due to the nefarious apartheid regime, it also resides in the belief produced by *the injunction that it is necessary to speak*, an injunction that Farred alone can attest to in his own (queer) parthenogenetic thinking. Consequently, if apartheid proceeds by way of an invitation to speech, it also provokes "in" the sub *another* speech to be born, one that is *not* of apartheid, one that is unique to Farred. It is at this point, more so than between 1969 and 1989, that this perverse thought truly enters reality. This is where Farred gets his perverse contemporary kicks and empowers himself *notwithstanding* apartheid. This is when Farred gives birth to his non-apartheid and nonracialized self,

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<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 109-10. "Thickets of impropriety" is another expression worth unpacking, which I sadly cannot do here. In a nutshell, it probably refers to spaces of resistance, to what Schmitt calls the "underground lair" in which the resistant fighter works in hiding, thinking and opening up the possibility of a new earth order. See Schmitt, *Theory of the Partisan*, 77ff.

<sup>28</sup>Farred, *The Perversity of Gratitude*, 110.

<sup>29</sup>Farred, *An Essay for Ezra*.

a self cleansed of that dirty history, holy because wholly human at last. This is where his Sainthood truly comes into its own ecstatic realized self. Through this combo pleasure/power, Farred thereby also invites us to think for ourselves over and beyond *our very own* apartheid. Can we follow in his saintly steps? This is the invitation. To say that I recommend reading *The Perversity of Gratitude* is thereby an understatement. It is imperative for anyone perverse enough to follow Farred's southeastern gale, to self-think for themselves if they truly want to be like him, the rarest of humans who alone rose above all systemic unthinking.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

### Notes on contributor

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