

# Study on the Philosophical Implications of Faust

FEI Yujie, ZHOU Lei

University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China

Faust, as a classic image in Western literature and philosophy, has been endowed with profound philosophical connotations in Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's epic reconstruction. This article starts from Faust's dual identity as a "seeker" and a "paradoxical person", revealing the dialectical unity of his philosophical meaning: In the dynamic process of "infinite pursuit" and "self denial", Faust not only embodies humanity's eternal questioning of the essence of existence, but also reflects the struggle and transcendence of human spirit in the dilemma of modernity. Through in-depth analysis of the five stages of Faust's soul conflict and his contractual relationship with the devil, this article clarifies that Faust is not only a spiritual symbol of the Renaissance to the Age of Enlightenment, but also a mirror of modern society under the guidance of technological rationality.

*Keywords:* Faust, philosophical meaning, soul conflict, devil's contract, modernity

## Introduction

### Research Background and Significance

Faust is a work not only of German, but of world literature (Robertson, 2022). The image of Faust originated from medieval German folklore, initially appearing as a wizard who traded with the devil, symbolizing humanity's thirst for forbidden knowledge and crossing moral boundaries. Through the dramatic adaptation by Christopher Marlowe, Faust became a literary symbol of the "pursuers" of the Renaissance, reflecting humanity's yearning for reason and freedom. Goethe's "Faust", which took 60 years to create, elevated this image into a philosophical fable, making it an important symbol in Western culture for exploring the spiritual dilemma of humanity.

Faust's philosophical research has unique value in understanding the crisis of modernity. In today's world dominated by technological rationality, humanity's blind worship of "progress" and profound loss of "meaning" are like Faust's contract with the devil: While pursuing infinite possibilities, they also face the risk of self alienation. Faust's thirst for knowledge, obsession with power, creation of beauty, and exploration of redemption are essentially eternal questions of humanity about the essence of existence.

### Research Status and Shortcomings

Existing research has mostly focused on Faust's literary narrative (such as narrative structure, character relationships) or religious criticism (such as its association with Christian original sin), with insufficient systematic analysis of its philosophical core. For example, Ye Tingfang's "Goethe and Faust" focuses on literary research, while Nietzsche mentioned Faust's "Dionysian spirit" in "The Birth of Tragedy", but did not engage in

---

FEI Yujie, a third-year student, College of Foreign Languages, University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China.

ZHOU Lei, M.A., lecturer, College of Foreign Languages, University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China.

philosophical construction. The innovation of this article lies in revealing the philosophical unity of Faustian spirit, namely the symbiotic relationship between “pursuit” and “paradox”, starting from the dynamic process of “soul conflict” and the metaphorical structure of “devil’s contract”.

### **Sources of Faust’s Character Image**

#### **Faust as a “Knowledge Hero”**

During the Renaissance, the revival of classical culture stimulated humanity’s thirst for knowledge. Faust’s exploration of alchemy, astronomy, and astrology is a manifestation of this thirst for knowledge (Clason, 2022). He attempted to explore the mysteries of the universe through the “small world” (microscopic knowledge), a pursuit that intertwines with the myth of Prometheus stealing fire: Prometheus brought fire (knowledge) to humanity, while Faust attempted to transcend human limitations through knowledge. However, Faust’s pursuit of knowledge was not purely rational, but mixed with a thirst for “power”—knowledge was both a tool for understanding and a means of controlling nature.

In Faust’s pursuit of knowledge, he constantly denied existing knowledge and attempted to break through cognitive boundaries. This “negative” spirit is precisely the internal driving force of philosophical progress. Hegel proposed the “master slave dialectics” in “*Phenomenology of Spirit*”, which holds that the master realizes self-confirmation through the labor of the slave. Faust attempted to become a “master” through knowledge, but became a “slave” of knowledge. His failure shows that knowledge, if divorced from practice, will eventually become illusory.

#### **Faust as the “Subject of Modernity”**

The Enlightenment era emphasized reason and freedom, but Faust fell into the “paradox of freedom”: He pursued freedom (such as breaking free from medieval theological shackles), but fell into greater nothingness. Hobbes’ description of the “state of nature” in *Leviathan* is a “war of all against all”, while Faust’s conquest of “nature” (such as land reclamation) implies humanity’s transcendence of the “state of nature”, but this transcendence comes at the cost of alienation. Faust’s control over the “big world” (power, wealth) is actually an anxious projection of “uncertainty” by the subject of modernity.

Faust’s “paradox of freedom” reflects the survival dilemma of the subject of modernity. On the one hand, rationality endows humanity with the ability to transform the world. Rationality along with a focus on reason, logic, and an empirical brand of science fortifies our skepticism toward belief in God (Friedlander, 2013); on the other hand, rationality also traps humanity in an “iron cage”. Faust constantly fell into new shackles in his pursuit of freedom, and this cycle is a metaphor for the dilemma of modernity.

#### **Faust as a Pioneer of Existentialism**

Faust denied the “ego” (such as giving up his scholarly identity) and attempted to achieve transcendence through the “greater self” (such as saving all humanity), but each transcendence ended in failure. This “self deception” is not a passive escape, but an existentialist “sincere lie”: Faust reconstructs himself in denial and approaches truth in failure.

Faust’s “self-deception” embodies the existentialist concept of “free choice”. He constantly chooses new identities and goals, attempting to prove the value of his existence through actions. However, every choice ends in failure, which is precisely the “authenticity” of existentialism: Humans need to create meaning in a meaningless world.

## **Pursuit and Conflict: The Five Stages of Soul Conflict**

### **Stage One: The Crazy Pursuit of Knowledge**

Faust's exploration of alchemy and magic was actually a thirst for "certainty". However, knowledge, as a double-edged sword, endows it with both power and alienation. Hegel's "master slave dialectics" is manifested here: Faust attempted to become a "master" through knowledge, but became a "slave" of knowledge. Its failure indicates that if knowledge is divorced from practice, it will eventually become illusory.

During Faust's pursuit of knowledge, he gradually realized the limitations of knowledge. The failure of alchemy and the illusion of magic led him to reflect on the essence of "pursuit". This kind of reflection is precisely the starting point of philosophical awakening. Faust began to realize that true knowledge is not in the "small world", but in the practice of the "big world".

### **Stage Two: The Sinking of Sensory Enjoyment**

The tragic love story between Faust and Margaret is an excessive pursuit of "instant experience". Faust's pursuit of sensory satisfaction is precisely the indulgence of the will to life, and its ending (Margaret's drowning) metaphorically represents the inevitability of nihilism: Fleeting pleasure cannot fill the emptiness of existence. Faust ultimately lost his soul due to infinite knowledge and worldly pleasures (Goethe, Heimberger, & Rao, 2023).

The tragedy of Faust and Margaret reflects the "paradox of experience" of the subject of modernity. On the one hand, sensory enjoyment brings temporary happiness; on the other hand, this happiness deepens the emptiness of existence. Faust fell in love with Margaret's beauty as soon as he saw her, and gradually became addicted to the world and wine and sex (Guo, 2025).

Faust realized in tragedy that the pursuit of "momentary experience" would eventually become a slave to desire. He began to reflect on the essence of "love" and attempted to surpass the limitations of "small love" through "big love".

### **Stage Three: Disillusionment of Political Power**

Faust practiced his political ideals in the court, but fell into a vortex of power. Machiavelli emphasized the "proof of purpose" of power in "The Prince", but Faust's pursuit of power became alienated: He attempted to control the "big world" through power, but became a puppet of power. Its failure reveals that if political power is detached from its moral foundation, it will eventually self-dissolve.

Faust's disillusionment with power reflects the "power paradox" of the subject of modernity. On the one hand, power empowers humans with the ability to transform society; on the other hand, power also traps humanity in an "iron cage". Faust realized in the game of power that the true "big world" is not in the control of power, but in the care for all humanity. He began to reflect on the essence of "power" and attempted to transcend the alienation of power through "labor of love".

### **Stage Four: Creation and Destruction of Beauty**

Faust's participation in the reconstruction of ancient Greek style architecture symbolizes the pursuit of "eternal beauty". Faust's pursuit of beauty was actually a longing for the world of ideas (Martha, 2024), but the architecture was ultimately destroyed by war, symbolizing the fragility of "beauty": The "beauty" created by humans cannot resist the erosion of time.

Faust's creation and destruction of beauty reflects the "aesthetic paradox" of the subject of modernity. On the one hand, beauty is the embodiment of human spirit; on the other hand, beauty is also destroyed by time.

Faust realized in the destruction of beauty that the true “eternal beauty” does not lie in the material world, but in the creation of the spiritual world. He began to reflect on the essence of “beauty” and attempted to create “beauty” beyond time through the labor of love.

### **Stage Five: Redemption of Love and Self actualization**

Faust achieved spiritual sublimation through the “labor of love” (land reclamation), which is the victory of the “philosophy of action”. Heidegger proposed in “Being and Time” the concept of “being born to death”, while Faust faced death anxiety in labor and transcended nothingness through action. Its redemption is not a religious “promise to the other side”, but an existentialist “transcendence of this side”: creating infinite meaning in limited life.

Faust’s “labor of love” embodies the “paradox of redemption” of the subject of modernity. Labor is a necessity for human survival and it has also been alienated as a means of survival. Faust realized in his labor that true “redemption” does not lie on the “other shore”, but in the creative practice on this shore. He began to reflect on the essence of “labor” and attempted to achieve self-redemption through the “labor of love”.

## **The Deal With the Devil: The Duality of Contract Philosophy**

### **The Essence of Contract: A Game of Finite and Infinite**

The contractual clause between Faust and Mephistopheles (“If you feel satisfied, your soul belongs to me”) is actually a philosophical confrontation between “the moment” and “eternity”. Pascal proposed the “betting theory” in his “Record of Ideas”, which suggests that human bets on the existence or non-existence of God should be based on the possibility of infinite returns. Faust’s choice to bet against the devil was actually a struggle against “limited life”: He attempted to break through the limitations of life through contracts, but fell into deeper paradoxes.

Faust’s contract embodies the “contract paradox” of modernity. On the one hand, contracts give humans the possibility to fulfill their wishes; on the other hand, contracts also trap humanity in the control of the “devil”. Faust realized in the contract that true “infinity” is not in the devil’s promise, but in the creative practice of humanity itself. He began to reflect on the essence of the “contract” and attempted to transcend its alienation through the “labor of love”.

### **The Devil’s Role: The Dual Incarnation of Reason and Irrationality**

Mephistopheles is both the embodiment of Faustian desire and the negation of reason. Nietzsche proposed the theory of the “superman” in “Thus Speaks Zarathustra”, believing that transcending traditional morality is a necessary condition for becoming a “superman”. Mephistopheles’ challenge to Faust was actually a catalyst that propelled him beyond the “ego”: He exposed Faust’s arrogance, forcing him to confront his own limitations and move towards deeper self-denial.

The role of “negationist” in Mephistopheles reflects the “irrational” dimension of the subject of modernity. On the one hand, irrationality is a component of the human spirit; on the other hand, irrationality is also suppressed by reason. Faust realized in the challenge of Mephistopheles that true “transcendence” does not lie in blind worship of reason, but in the dialectical unity of reason and irrationality. He began to reflect on the essence of “reason” and attempted to achieve a harmonious coexistence of reason and irrationality through the “labor of love”.

### **Consequences of Contracts: Dialectics of Freedom and Alienation**

The “exception clause” (commitment to “labor of love”) retained by Faust in the contract reveals humanity’s desire for redemption. Kant proposed the “absolute imperative” in “Foundations of Moral Metaphysics”,

believing that moral behavior should be based on the principle of universality. Faust's pursuit of redemption was both a response to moral laws and a rebellion against contract alienation: He proved in labor that human value does not lie in "possession", but in "creation".

Faust's "exception clause" embodies the "redemption paradox" of the subject of modernity. On the one hand, redemption is the spiritual sustenance of humanity; on the other hand, redemption has also been alienated into blind worship of the "other shore". Faust realized in his labor that true "redemption" does not lie in the promises of the "other shore", but in the creative practice of the "this shore". He began to reflect on the essence of "redemption" and attempted to achieve self-redemption through the "labor of love".

### **The Modern Enlightenment of Faustian Spirit**

In the modernity dominated by technological rationality, humanity's obsession with the "infinite pursuit" is like a contract between Faust and the devil. The Faustian dilemma in modern society reflects the alienation of human spirit by technological rationality. On the one hand, technology endows humans with the ability to transform the world; on the other hand, technology has also trapped humanity in an "iron cage". The tragedy of Faust warns people to maintain a questioning of the "essence of existence" in technological development and avoid becoming a vassal of technology.

Faust's conquest of "nature" (such as land reclamation) symbolizes the control of modern technology over nature. Humanity needs to maintain a questioning of the "essence of existence" in the development of technology, in order to avoid becoming a vassal of technology. People should have an insatiable spirit, always relentlessly pursuing, practicing, and advancing (Zhang, 2024).

The dialectical relationship between technological rationality and human alienation reflects the survival dilemma of the subject of modernity. On the one hand, technological rationality drives social progress; on the other hand, technological rationality also leads to the alienation of human nature. The tragedy of Faust warns people to maintain the guidance of humanistic spirit in technological development and avoid excessive expansion of technological rationality.

Faust achieved redemption through the labor of love, which has profound implications for modern society. In alienated labor, humans need to rediscover the essence of "love": Labor is not only a means of survival, but also a way to create meaning. Faust's "labor of love" is actually a philosophical practice of "action": Through creative labor, humanity transcends alienation and achieves self-redemption.

The labor of love and the redemption of modern society reflect the transcendence of human spirit. On the one hand, labor is a necessity for human survival; on the other hand, labor has also been alienated as a means of survival. The tragedy of Faust warns people to maintain the pursuit of "love" in labor and achieve self-redemption through creative practice.

### **Conclusions**

Faust, as the unity of the "pursuer" and the "paradoxical", has a philosophical meaning that the human spirit, in the dialectical movement of "infinite pursuit" and "self-negation", not only defines itself through action, but also approaches the essence of existence in negation. His tragedy and redemption are actually metaphors for the dilemma of modernity: Under the guidance of technological rationality, humans both crave to transcend limitations and fall into deeper existential anxiety.

Faust's persistence in the pursuit of infinity reflects the anxiety of existence and the desolation of meaning in modern society. In today's era dominated by technological rationality, humanity needs to re-examine the essence of "pursuit": Pursuit should not be blind consumption of "new experiences", but a profound questioning of the "meaning of existence". Faust's "labor of love" provides a possible path of redemption for modern society: Through creative practice, humanity transcends alienation and achieves self-redemption.

This article proposes the dialectical relationship between the Faustian spirit and the dilemma of modernity, revealing its theoretical value as the prototype of modernity spirit. By integrating the history of philosophy and literary criticism, this article provides a new perspective for understanding the complexity of Faustian spirit and calls on people to re-examine the essence of "pursuit": In the era dominated by technological rationality, humanity needs to transcend alienation with "labor of love" and create meaning in action.

### References

- Clason, C. R. (2022). Faust, a tragedy, Part I: 285 a new translation with an introduction and notes by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (review). *Goethe Yearbook*, 29, 285-286.
- Friedlander, F. (2013). Emotions and rationality as a basis for humanism: Can humanism encompass both intellect and spirit? *Essays in the Philosophy of Humanism*, 21(2), 117-124.
- Goethe, E. A., Heimberger, A. B., & Rao, G. (2023). Aspirin and immunotherapy: A Faustian bargain? *The Journal of Clinical Investigation*, 133(9), e169598.
- Guo, Y. C. (2025). Exploring the characterization of Margaret in Cournot's opera Faust from the perspective of musical performance). *China National Exhibition*, 34(1), 160-162.
- Martha, B. H. (2024). "Wie alles sich zum Ganzen webt,/Eins in dem andern wirkt und lebt! (How everything weaves into a whole./One works and lives in the other!)": Goethe's Faust I as aesthetic experiment. *The German Quarterly*, 97(3), 319-336.
- Robertson, R. (2022). Goethe's Faust II: The redemption of an enlightened despot. *Publications of the English Goethe Society*, 91(1), 43-57.
- Zhang, H. X. (2024). Faustian spirit and Chinese youth. *Journal of Henan University of Science and Technology (Social Sciences Edition)*, 42(1), 13-18. doi:10.15926/j.cnki.hkdsk.2024.01.003