

JAMES TARTAGLIA



# PHILOSOPHY IN A MEANINGLESS LIFE

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A System of Nihilism,  
Consciousness and Reality

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# Philosophy in a Meaningless Life

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# Philosophy in a Meaningless Life

## A System of Nihilism, Consciousness and Reality

James Tartaglia

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*This book is dedicated with love to Zo Hoida*





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## Preface

This book is about the connection between that enigmatic area of human interest called 'philosophy' and the meaninglessness of life; and about why the latter is neither good nor bad, but rather just a neutral fact. I have tried to emulate the great philosophers of the past by aspiring to a systematic treatment of a number of different philosophical issues, within the context provided by my overarching themes of the nature of philosophy and life's meaninglessness. (I call the claim that reality is meaningless 'nihilism' – which I pronounce 'nile-ism' (as in 'annihilation'); I don't say the 'h' in 'which' either.) The main issues I treat are consciousness, time and universals. Covering so much ground in an integrated work is a very unusual approach within the tradition of analytic philosophy, to which I take myself to belong (though I draw extensively from the Continental and Eastern traditions). But however obsolete the acknowledged historical greats and their systems may now be thought to be in some quarters, and however many times they have been criticized, they still undeniably occupy the dominant place within our philosophical culture; almost completely outside the profession, but to a high degree within it as well. And I think that is a good thing. Big ideas are interesting and can change how people think. Without them, the contemporary profession of academic philosophy would have far less to talk about, and what it did say would be of considerably less interest than the sweeping visions which actually, in the vast majority of cases, draw people to philosophy; whether to become students, or just as a casual interest. As such, I thought it best to follow the lead of the greats, rather than more recent, modest and piece-meal trends; on this occasion. I may well not have succeeded; I have certainly not gone as far down the road to a 'system' as the greats would expect of me, given their more demanding sense of the term; and I may not have come up with anything original enough to justify the effort. But nevertheless, that is what I was trying to do, and I think it was a good aim. A really philosophical one; 'philosophical' is a merit-term in my vocabulary.

This book took me ages: I started on 28 June 2004 and finished today. A statement like that would irritate me if I read it at the start of someone else's book, because I'd wonder how anyone could take so long; it seems like a boast. But the explanation is not that it was an incredibly long job requiring massive scholarly commitment – or whatever – but rather that it was an ambition and background theme to my life, during the decade in which my children Dinah and Milford were born. After the excitable first draft I wrote in 2004, I did keep coming back to it (whenever I had the chance and inclination), and it was never terribly far from my thoughts. But I only convinced myself that it was destined to become a reality in 2010; and thereafter had frequent doubts about whether I'd been right, once I got down to the serious business of writing the thing between 2012 and 2014.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank my parents Phillip and Terena Tartaglia for an upbringing that emphasized the importance of ambition, and for providing me every opportunity to realize my ambitions within their power. And I am always very grateful to my teachers in philosophy, Tim Crane and J. J. Valberg, who set me on the right track to start with, and helped me get into the profession. If it hadn't been for Jerry's lectures on Heidegger, I would never have wanted to be a philosopher in the first place; his own original philosophy was to become one of my major influences, as should become clear in this book. And if Tim hadn't thought my essays on (e.g.) Russell's Theory of Descriptions were good, then I would have scrapped the idea of a career in philosophy and looked elsewhere. Thanks are also due to Keele University for giving me three distinct periods of research leave to work on this book; the second was wonderful because I was able to spend it in Ponte de Lima in the Minho (that's where it started to take on its current shape: amid the caipirinhas, arroz de sarrabulho and folklore). And finally, there are a number of people who have directly affected the content here and there – in various different ways – all of whom I would like to thank. They are: Sophie Allen, Sorin Baiasu, Tom Birch, Darragh Byrne, George Carpenter, Thomas Dixon, Zo Hoida, Stephen Leach, Artur Szutta, J. J. Valberg, Damian Veal and Dave Windross.

James Tartaglia, Royal Sutton Coldfield, 1 March 2015

## Note to Reader

I have referred to endnotes in two different ways:

When there is extra commentary, discussion, or illustration of the point in the main text, I have used superscript, as so.<sup>1</sup>

When I am simply providing page numbers or other bibliographic information, I have used subscript, as so.<sub>2</sub>

# Introduction

The popular image of the question ‘what is the meaning of life?’ within contemporary secular culture is a comic one. The comedy is tinged with embarrassment and disdain, and from Monty Python to Douglas Adams, has traded on the supposedly hopeless obscurity of the question. This is a product of a wider cultural phenomenon in which terms such as ‘deep’ and ‘profound’ are increasingly sneered at – even by philosophers – except when applied to the achievements of science, since science has come to dominate our intellectual aspirations. The question of the meaning of life, however, is closely associated with religion, which has often been at odds with science. And another reason for its bad reputation is that there are pathological connotations to obsessing over it. According to clinical psychologist Raymond Bergner, worrying about the meaning of life is a ‘relatively common’ problem for people, which arises as ‘part of a broader clinical syndrome, such as depression, alcoholism, posttraumatic stress disorder, or obsessive-compulsive personality disorder.’ To treat it, he recommends promoting new patterns of behaviour, while discouraging clients from seeking an intellectual solution.<sup>1</sup> Against this backdrop, it is hardly surprising that the question has been shunned, since it seems as ‘deep’ and ‘profound’, but also as thoroughly non-scientific, as any question could be. And the defensive strategy that has been developed is to laugh at it; which always works well when dealing with something that has touched a nerve.

We are invited to laugh on the grounds that the question is hopelessly obscure. For if nobody really knows what it means, there is no need to take it seriously; it can safely be left to those silly philosophers to pontificate over endlessly and pointlessly. However most philosophers do not bother with it these days either, and it was philosophy that supplied the intellectual ammunition for dismissing the question as obscure, uninteresting or just plain unanswerable; for even the philosophical profession has not been immune from this anti-philosophical cultural trend.<sup>2</sup> A conspicuous tragicomic element of the trend, in fact, has been the phenomenon of philosophers turning against philosophy; a dominant theme within the profession since the nineteenth century, with some of its most influential figures showing little or no reticence about this – on the face of it – absurd agenda.<sup>3</sup>

However the question is as serious as your life and its intention is anything but obscure; though the form it has acquired has potential to mislead, which some have willingly latched onto. For asking ‘what is the meaning of life?’ leads immediately to a question everyone understands, namely ‘why do human beings exist?’ These questions are distinct because the former presupposes there *is* a reason we exist, in order to consequently ask what ‘meaning’ – in the sense of value – this reason provides to human life. But before you can begin to ask this *philosophically*, you must first ask whether there is any reason we are here at all; which is why the question ‘what is the meaning of life?’ leaves space for ‘there isn’t one’ as an appropriate response. If you forget to ask

this – and thereby forget that aspect of the question's significance which has accounted for its longevity – then it is transformed into either a theological question concerning which particular meaning God has invested in life, or else the distinct question of what we value about our lives, to which innumerable, comparatively more anodyne answers are possible: loving relationships, the pursuit of knowledge . . . many things seem clearly valuable in this mundane sense. But the sense intended by the traditional question makes essential reference to the reason human beings exist; otherwise it would never have gained its reputation as one of the 'great imponderables'.

Now there are undeniably many different senses of the word 'meaning'; as some philosophers would interject at this point, and so the question clearly has plenty of scope for obscurity.<sup>4</sup> But this is irrelevant, because there is only one obvious philosophical question in the area, to which senses such as 'value', 'significance' and 'purpose' are easily related. The question did not drop from the sky as an enigma to be deciphered, but is rather a natural question which we know human beings have been asking since at least the beginning of civilization and were probably asking long before that (see Chapter 3). The question boils down to: what is the value of human life which accounts for us being here? Or less carefully but more naturally: what are we here for? We know the meaning of computers in this sense; they accomplish tasks for us, and that is why we made them. So given that people exist, and care about their existence more than any other kind, we naturally wonder if there is any reason for it. Assuming both that there is, and that it makes our lives valuable, we ask: what is the meaning of life? Now this assumed meaning of human life might be moral; for the reason we exist might be to achieve something morally good. But it need not be: the value of our existence might rather be found in our contribution to an unfathomable cosmic plan which bears no relation to human notions of morality, but is nevertheless valuable in some other way. The answer to the question might be thoroughly obscure, then, but the question is not.

Now equipped with scientific knowledge, we might try to answer it by saying that the reason we exist is that a chance chemical reaction occurred on Earth about 3.5 billion years ago, and this ultimately led to the chain of biological evolution which resulted in us. However this just pushes the question back a stage, because we must then ask why those fertile environmental conditions once existed. And to answer this we must ultimately ask why reality itself exists. The question has not changed in pursuing it backwards, because we are only asking why reality exists (in this context) because we want to know why human beings exist. For humans are a part of reality, and so if there is a reason the whole thing exists, it will tell us why we exist. Nothing else could.

The tantalizing possibility this raises is that if there is such a reason, then it might attribute a purpose to our lives. We might be here to *do* something, and so discovering the reason might persuade us to change our lives. This possibility is bound to fascinate us, even though it is just a possibility; for the reason for existence as a whole may have nothing to do with human beings. And even if we are implicated, simply existing might be enough: the meaning of our lives might consist in *being* valuable, rather than having the capacity for *doing* something valuable. And there may not be a reason anyway. But once we take up the question of why we exist, we can hardly ignore the possibility of a

purpose. To be told only that we exist for a reason without reference to purposes would not be enough, since it would leave us wondering whether it has practical implications for our lives. Hence the only options capable of resolving the issue on its own terms are that reality exists for a reason (which either does or does not attribute purpose to human life), or that reality does not exist for a reason.

I have been emphasizing the impersonal question of why human beings exist. This is simply because it is what the question of the meaning of life concerns; I do not regard this as a controversial philosophical claim, but rather a statement of the obvious, despite the fact that professional philosophy went to considerable lengths during the last century to make it seem otherwise. But the impersonal nature of the question does not rule out there being a very personal reason for any particular human being to ask it. For when we ask what the meaning of life is, a large part of the motivation is evidently to discover what the reason for each of our own, personal existences is, and thus whether that existence – yours or mine – serves some purpose.<sup>5</sup> I do not suppose for a second that this is all we are interested in; or more exactly, I do not suppose that this has been the sole interest for the vast majority of people who have asked the question with any seriousness. But nevertheless, I think we are all egotistical enough for the question to inevitably have a major personal emphasis. What we want to know is whether there is any sense to human beings existing, and by extension what – if any – sense there is to *me* existing as an example of a human being; the latter question may be a large part of the draw, but to answer it we must address the former one.

This is a profound question; a deeply philosophical one. Compare it to the question: ‘how can I get some more meaning in my life?’ To ask this is to ask what I can do to get more out of my life, in order to make it more fulfilling and rewarding. Or if our aspirations are higher, it might be to ask what kind of things I need to do in order to get others, and ultimately myself, to judge that I have lived a worthwhile life. This kind of question might be answered effectively through the decision to take up a new hobby, find a partner through an Internet dating agency, or become involved in charitable work or politics; these are the kind of things a sensible friend might suggest if you went to them with the worry that your life is meaningless. Now I ask you: what could be more obvious than that we have now moved onto a different issue? Unlike some philosophers I do not scorn the obvious. For although it can be boring, it can also be refreshing, especially when trying to find something out. If I am trying to remember where I left my keys and suddenly realize it is obvious, then that is great; problem solved (probably).<sup>6</sup> And when an intellectual issue has become swamped in obscurity, obviousness is particularly refreshing because it reveals that a sensible idea has not yet been completely drowned out by extraneous cultural factors. That is exactly the situation with the distinction between the question of the meaning of life, and the essentially social question of how to make our lives more meaningful. These are endlessly conflated within our culture, but thankfully the conflation remains obvious; to those prepared to look. The former is a deep, natural and ancient question, while the latter is a relatively recent cultural product.

This is not to say that the questions are unconnected; if they were then their motivated conflation would not have been possible. They are connected because the social issue of meaningfulness began to emerge in response to the waning of the firm intellectual

hold which religious answers to the question of the meaning of life once enjoyed; a process which began in earnest in the nineteenth century. A new generation of atheists became concerned by the simple inference that without God to give meaning to life, life must be meaningless. Within the essentially religious culture they occupied, this seemed like a terribly bad thing; as it would be for the sinner who lived a meaningless life in defiance of the essentially good meaning that God provides it with. Rebelling against this apparent condemnation of all we care about, then, they circumvented the inference and concluded instead that mankind needed to take control of its own destiny, and provide life with freely chosen human meaning; the intervention strategies some alighted upon were to cast a dark shadow over the twentieth century.<sup>7</sup> Through the philosophical influence of Marx and Nietzsche, especially, as well as many other factors, the idea that life has a social meaning established itself within our culture, and prepared the ground for conflation between the original question, and the new question of how to maximize social meaningfulness. The eventual product was that it became normal for people to evaluate their lives in terms of social meaningfulness, and to worry that they might not be getting enough of it. Memories of the older question were neutered by dismissing it as something of interest only to religious believers, or else to philosophers in their absurdly obscure ruminations. The choice seemed to be between either God or people providing life with meaning, and once the former was ruled out, the only interesting issue that seemed to remain was that of determining the best ways for people to make their own meaning.

This practical question does not strike me as terribly philosophical, which is not to deny, of course, that asking it can sometimes be very important to people. If you are dissatisfied, then addressing your problems in terms of the meaning in your life might be a useful tool to take you beyond your immediate concerns, and place your life in a broader, social context. But the issue of social meaningfulness has another connection to philosophy, other than its genesis from nineteenth-century overreactions to the prospect of nihilism. For the ancient question of what 'the good life' is for a human being is not far removed from this modern concern: both ask how we should act to fulfil our potential. This central question of moral philosophy, however, was traditionally asked in the metaphysical context of the nature of reality, and as such, within the context of the meaning of life. Claims about how we should live flowed from a characterization of reality and the human place within it. The modern question, by contrast, is shallow: it can be pursued without the need to dig down to the roots of what, if anything, it is about reality that means we should pursue certain kinds of social meaning. I agree that social meaning should be left at the surface, as it happens; but this view is a product of the metaphysic I shall later develop, and my present point is just that you do not need to think about the meaning of life to concern yourself with social meaningfulness. It is an issue that might preoccupy you even if a philosophical thought had never entered your mind; if it had never occurred to you that there might be a meaning of life which favours *different* activities to those our various societies consider meaningful.

The motivation for this conflation, which has convinced many contemporary philosophers that the issue of social meaning is the only interesting one in the area (if they even recognize the distinction), has a number of sources. The close association between the question of the meaning of life and religion – in a world in which science



has achieved intellectual hegemony – is an important one. Thus substituting the question of social meaning provided a route to leaving religion behind, while still paying lip-service to a question so natural that we cannot help thinking that there must be something to it.

But the psychologically deeper reason was that religions make us think about disconcerting issues such as the frailty of life and the inevitability of death. By secularizing the question of meaning, so it seemed, these uncomfortable issues could be put out of mind, and the question could be made more conformable to the carefree, life-affirming ethos that the advances in living standards we owe to science have produced. This factor also made the transition to a less *philosophical* question of meaning attractive, since philosophy can take us to the same uncomfortable places, albeit without any guarantee of religious consolation. And scepticism about philosophy, with its suspiciously verbose and impractical ways, also played a part; this understandable scepticism has been around since ancient times, such that we find Polybius, for instance, berating philosophers with ‘such facility at inventing specious arguments that they debate whether it is possible for people in Athens to smell eggs cooking in Ephesus, and wonder whether they might be home in bed, dreaming these discussions of theirs in the Academy, rather than talking like this in real life’.<sup>8</sup>

However the major intellectual influence that has brought the traditional question to be conflated with the issue of social meaning, and consequently marginalized in favour of the latter, has been the assumption that nihilism is *bad*. This is rooted in religious thinking. Religious leaders still espouse the idea that without the meaning God gives to life, there can be no standards of moral conduct; but few non-believers find this equation of atheism with moral chaos remotely plausible. Despite this, however, the assumption that nihilism is bad has exerted massive influence within secular culture. Unthinkingly adopted, it has licensed the dubious inference that since nihilism cannot be true (since that would be horrible) we should only consider a social notion of meaning that people can build up for themselves. Of course, placed in the light of day, it is obvious that even if nihilism would indeed be a disaster, that does not mean it is not true. But the inference has rarely been placed in the light of day; that is not where it has done its work.<sup>9</sup>

However we do not need to be brave to accept nihilism. And we certainly do not need to follow those morbid philosophers who occasionally crawl out of the woodwork, using nihilism to justify all manner of life-denying, hateful views; views which say more about their advocates than about life. For nihilism is not bad. It cannot be. If reality is meaningful, then the meaning of human life might be good, bad, or neither. Thus if reality exists for a reason, this might reveal that human life serves a good purpose. Or it might reveal that some or most of reality serves a good purpose which human life runs counter to. Or it might be that the reason has nothing to do with human notions of good and bad. But if there is *no* reason that reality and hence humans exist, then there is no good meaning against which the meaninglessness of human life might be counted as bad in comparison. So if nihilism is true, it cannot be good or bad. Rather, nihilism’s implication that life is meaningless is best viewed as simply a fact about life, not fundamentally different in kind from the fact that life evolved on Earth; except that the former is a philosophical fact.

Now it might be objected that we only need a possible contrast for 'bad', such that we could still significantly say that nihilism is bad so long as we can imagine human life having a good meaning; nihilism would then count as bad compared to the life we might have had. But then, we can equally imagine human life having a bad meaning, against the standard of which nihilism would be good. So I do not think this objection will get us far: it seems clear that if there is nothing good or bad about reality existing (in the relevant sense of a good or bad *reason* for it existing), then the fact that life is meaningless cannot itself be classed as good or bad. That we can imagine alternatives is irrelevant, because none of them has any claim to being the standard against which we evaluate the meaninglessness of reality.<sup>10</sup>

None of this implies that things cannot be good or bad *within* life; murder is bad, as I see it, because there is a well-informed social consensus to evaluate it as bad. The consensus is not wrong because there is no good reason for humans to exist, because now that we do, we have found plenty of good reasons to carry on. Even a moral objectivist should agree that the issues are different. They might hold that certain facts about the universe make things objectively good or bad, and perhaps even make human life – or reality as a whole – good or bad. But to hold that it could be objectively bad that reality exists for no reason is a very different kind of claim. It could not be rooted in the existence of physical pain, for instance, which is the prime candidate for something objectively bad. For nihilism does not and could not hurt anybody. The *realization* of nihilism might cause pain, but then, any fact about the world might be counted as bad on that criterion; a man might react to the realization that he is short by becoming a military despot, for instance. Nihilism is quite unlike a fact such as that nuclear weapons have been invented, where it is the possible consequences of this fact, rather than the mere grasping of it, that are bad. So I do not think the possible bad consequences of realizing a fact provides a good criterion for capturing what we mean in saying that the fact itself could be bad; for on that criterion, all facts could be good or bad, even those of mathematics. So given that I can also see no potential in moral accounts other than consequentialism for classifying nihilism as a fact that could be bad, I think we should conclude that although the existence of life might be, its existence for no reason could not.

If life has a meaning, then, this could be bad. But nihilism cannot be. To say that life is meaningless is to say that it is valueless or worthless; but only in the sense that value is not essential to what it is. It is not to say that we are worthless in the socially contextual sense that would amount to a condemnation. For although our nature is not intrinsically valuable, we value many things, including ourselves. We might not have done so, so this value is not essential to what we are, or to the other things we value. But our capacity to think about and value anything has made us contingently valuable. The philosophical realization that value does not flow inevitably from our nature – a nature which makes value possible – has practically no prospect of reversing this valuation; life is simply too compelling for a philosophical view about the nature of reality to have that kind of effect.

Whether nihilism is actually true or not is quite another matter, of course; for life might have a meaning. But like many others I can see no good reason to think it does. Unlike most, however, I am happy to call myself a 'nihilist' as a consequence. This use

of the word captures the main core of meaning it has picked up, and thus employed, it usefully labels an important philosophical position. Plus I like the sound of it; so I think it is worth salvaging from the confusion it has attracted.<sup>11</sup>

Now at this point, I can imagine some readers – especially philosophers of the kind I generally see eye-to-eye with – reacting as follows:

OK, I agree with you that nihilism is true (I already knew that); and also that it's a fact about us that has been neglected in philosophy, especially the analytic tradition. And perhaps you're right that it's been shied away from in the public arena because people picked up the wrong impression. But then, once you've pointed that out, there isn't really anything more to say, is there? Life is meaningless, and that's it. It doesn't lead anywhere interesting, as you've effectively conceded yourself: it doesn't show that life is terrible . . . or that anything goes . . . or anything like that. So it's a philosophical dead-end. It's boring.

But nihilism is not just any old fact: it entails that everybody's life is meaningless, and hence that *your* life is too. This must strike you as more significant for the way you think about the world than the vast majority of philosophical ideas you have come across, if not all of them; if it is not like that for you as it is for me, then perhaps I should start taking solipsism seriously. It is a thought which resonates throughout the understanding whenever you genuinely think about it, transfiguring everything while changing nothing.

But it still might not lead us anywhere in philosophy, no matter how much personal significance it may have for us. I shall be arguing that it does, however. In a sense, it leads everywhere in philosophy. The question of the meaning of life, to which nihilism provides the answer, is the keystone of philosophy; it locks the rest of its traditional preoccupations in place, and allows them to bear weight in an intellectual culture dominated by science. Without it, these other concerns fall apart and fragment, losing the form that makes them credible. This view about the nature of philosophy – and, more substantially, my attempts to answer a cluster of traditional metaphysical concerns in light of it – takes up much more space in this book than nihilism, though nihilism will never be very far from the surface. Nihilism is more important, but there is not much to say about it except in the context of these other issues that lend it substance. It is boring; essentially so, in a sense that should become clear in the discussion of boredom in Chapter 1. But it is anything but boring when philosophical understanding is your goal. Philosophy takes place in a meaningless life, and since I cannot believe this is peripheral to it, I have tried to ensure that mine explicitly does.

The importance of the question of the meaning of life to the rest of philosophy starts to emerge when we reflect on the following fact: that there is less understanding of the nature of philosophy than of any other major discipline. There are disciplines whose area of concern is not common knowledge, of course, but in these cases an Internet search can quickly fill the void. This tactic will not work for philosophy, however, for all you would find are more or less completely uninformative statements, most typically that philosophy asks the 'most fundamental questions'. By stark contrast, if you want to know what palaeontology is, you can quickly discover that it is the study of

life before the Holocene Epoch, which proceeds primarily through the study of fossils. This simple statement provides crucial insight into what the discipline is all about, which its typical analogues for philosophy conspicuously fail to do. For 'fundamental' does not mean anything until it is philosophically explained. Fundamentality in philosophy and physics are different, after all, and even the philosopher who claims that physics describes the fundamental nature of reality is implicitly distinguishing them; by making the philosophical claim that the two are co-extensive. Recognizing this, the neophyte wanting to know what is distinctive about philosophy may delve into philosophical accounts of fundamentality. But they will soon discover that many philosophers have no concern for it; and that some deny there is such a thing!

Many well-educated people know some philosophical ideas, just as they know some ideas from physics. But knowing some philosophical ideas does not tell you what they have in common to justify calling them all 'philosophical'. It is crucial to answer this obvious question, however, if the perspective from which philosophers make statements about the world is to be understood and respected outside of its own internal debates. And they increasingly are not these days; among the general public, but more stridently among scientists, for whom a vehement attack on philosophy has come to seem almost par for the course in their popular books, before they go on – more often than not – to step outside of their area of expertise to make their own philosophical statements. This regrettable circumstance is quite understandable, given that clear information about what philosophy amounts to is not available, and that much of what scientists are likely to find under the 'philosophy' label seems to be – and sometimes is – posing challenges to science.

This situation could be remedied by answering the obvious question. But few philosophers have tried, because most became convinced over the course of the twentieth century that the question is an empty one. They became convinced that philosophy is exceptional in lacking the ordinary unity other disciplines possess: some kind of unified subject-matter. A particularly extreme form of this conviction was voiced by W. V. O. Quine, who thought the term 'philosophy' was of interest only to university administrators and librarians.<sup>12</sup> Albeit less extreme, the best-known statements on the nature of philosophy have followed similar lines. These have included the views that philosophy is united only by its methodology; that philosophy is a genealogical linkage of the writings of historical figures; that philosophy is too controversial to define; or that philosophy deals with topics that cannot yet be dealt with by science. None stand up to much scrutiny, as I shall show in Chapter 3. But within the cultural climate in which they emerged, they were enough to persuade philosophers that the issue is not worth thinking about, in contrast to proper, first-order philosophical problems. Not knowing or caring what is philosophical about these problems, or actively thinking there is nothing to say on the matter, did not seem to matter to the problems themselves. But it mattered tremendously. It further marginalized philosophy's voice.

The disdain philosophers developed for the question of the nature of their discipline took place within a wider cultural trend in which philosophers – like everyone else apart from the faithful – were also disdaining the question of the meaning of life. But since the question is pivotal to the discipline, as I shall argue, they thereby began to lose touch with what they were doing and why they were doing it; the *doing* became

all that mattered. In a culture where science seemed to have claimed the sole right to describe the true nature of reality, those philosophers who did continue to think about the nature of their subject usually concluded that it must itself be a kind of science; or else a kind of literature. But since it did not seem to be either, they made up all kinds of excuses for why it did not need a nature of its own. Perhaps it possessed only a science-like methodology, but no real subject-matter. Or perhaps it was just a kind of writing which made reference to certain past figures and themes (the latter now known to be fictional).

But the theme that makes sense of the discipline is the one that philosophers were busy trying to ignore or degrade. For only the question of the meaning of life unifies the two main branches of the discipline: its 'practical' concern with ethical questions, and its 'theoretical' concern with knowledge and reality. It is the only thing which makes sense of why people called 'philosophers' would discuss *both* morals and metaphysics. This is the main consideration favouring my thesis, but there are many other mutually supporting ones – to be discussed in Chapter 3 – which all point to the same conclusion.

In light of this conclusion, I begin to address some of the traditional problems of philosophy in a manner that takes into account the issue of the meaning of life. For in this way, they can be reconnected with this central, natural concern in such a way as to remind us why we were ever interested in the first place. I think this approach of trying to bring philosophical problems back to their centre is a step in the right direction if philosophy is to regain its own distinctive cultural voice. But even if the problems are interesting enough on their own merit, or approaches to them have progressed so far beyond any impetus they received from concerns about the meaning of life, that resurrecting this connection will not help us solve them; even if that were all true, I still think the approach would be valuable. For it at least allows us to see why the great philosophers of the past connected these issues, and thereby enables us to see these problems in a new and hopefully interesting light. I think it does much more, but that alone would justify the effort.

This is the approach I have taken to the central metaphysical topics of consciousness (Chapters 4–5), time (Chapter 6) and universals (Chapter 7). My selection of these topics does not indicate that I think they are the most important ones in philosophy. And it certainly does not indicate any intention to put forward an exclusionary conception of philosophy. There have been far too many of those already; they typically accompany some innovative new approach to philosophy, as a manifesto to the effect that *this* (whatever it is) is the only proper way to do philosophy, and *these* (whatever they are) are the only legitimate topics. Rather, my conception of philosophy is completely inclusive: it covers everything that is standardly recognized as philosophy, from whatever tradition.

My selection of consciousness, time and universals has another motivation entirely. It is because together they provide a metaphysical picture of reality in the context of which the centrality of the question of the meaning of life to philosophy can readily be seen. What they reveal is that the reason these topics have been a battleground of persistent interest in philosophy – within the unlikely setting of the cultural dominance of science – is the issue of the meaning of life. In terms of their connection to this issue,

you can see why differing views on these topics have remained compelling, despite the nagging thought that science really ought to be in sole charge of telling us what consciousness and time are (the problem of universals is a special case because it has no scientific parallel). There are many other topics that can be informatively related back to this issue, and I would like to discuss as many of them as possible; but these are the three which I have found to most effectively bring into focus my central thesis about the persistence and autonomy of philosophy.

Consciousness provides my route in. The problem of consciousness arises because we cannot fit it into our scientific picture of the world. This shows that metaphysics will not stop at an affirmation of science, because the physicalist metaphysic provided by this unduly deferential conception of philosophy is untenable. We cannot sustain the pretence that consciousness does not exist, or that science in anything like the form we understand it could resolve the philosophical perplexities it generates. Philosophers try hard to pretend this, and can acquire a state of mind in which they no longer have to pretend. But it only takes a simple reminder to get the ball rolling again, such as Frank Jackson's thought-experiment about the woman in a black-and-white room whose scientific education leaves her unprepared for a world of colour; 'ludicrously simple' as John Searle put it, but still capable of sparking off endless complex debates. I speak as a once-committed physicalist; what I can now see was essential to my physicalist conviction remains in place in this book.<sup>13</sup>

What drives on debates about consciousness, I shall argue, is that once it is grasped that it will not fit into a scientific world-view, most philosophers become frightened. This is because they think philosophy is supposed to complement science. And what is worse, if you believe reality outruns the physical, then you seem to have strayed into the realms of religion: you have opened up the possibility that there is a meaning of life. Religious philosophers are happy with that, of course, and some brave souls feel no fear in describing reality in their own way, either scorning or ignoring science, or demanding with naïve optimism that it take account of their insights; this is the kind of self-confidence philosophy could do without. But most philosophers worry about the apparent clash with science, because they do not want to stray into territory occupied by religion and traditional metaphysics. So some keep trying to show that consciousness can be explained by science (or else does not exist); while others find that consciousness forces them to disagree. The clash is between the passionately felt need to avoid giving ground to those who believe in a meaning of life, and the almost irresistible urge to state the obvious truth. Once you understand that, and can see it reflected across philosophy's traditional debates, then you can understand why those debates have seemed interminable; and also why they need not, but probably always will.

The way out of this impasse is simply to realize that even if reality transcends the world of science, we have no reason to think this makes it any the less meaningless. So we had no reason to resist this philosophical move, except for an unjustified lack of confidence in philosophy based on lack of awareness of what it is. The fact that consciousness does not make sense in the world of science forces us to move beyond science, but the assumption that this has religious, anti-scientific implications calls us to stay where we are. However this assumption is wrong: there are philosophical implications but no anti-scientific ones. To be sure, it opens up the *possibility* of

a meaning of life – which those of faith will welcome – but it provides no reason to believe in one. In backing away from a meaning of life, then, philosophers have inadvertently been backing away not from religion but from philosophy. For it was philosophy, rather than any other field of endeavour, which saw through our apparent need for a meaning of life; it achieved this not because of any special philosophical methodology, but because it is an ancient tradition of human thought. People eventually worked out that what seemed to matter to us does not. We got there because of science, but this was philosophy's triumph; science has had its own even greater triumphs.

The argument I will present to make sense of consciousness – and subsequently also time and the problem of universals – is that we must recognize that reality transcends the human perspective; a philosophical concern which, properly understood, has no scientific implications. This is the 'Transcendent Hypothesis' presented in Chapter 5 – which is the key to this book. Now many philosophers have thought that claims to transcendence, of the kind that have predominated in the history of the discipline and continue to draw people to it, are confused and ultimately cannot be made sense of. The lesson I draw from these arguments, however, is simply that you must tread very carefully. A. W. Moore – who rejects transcendence (though not the concept of it<sup>14</sup>) – argues persuasively that if you claim that reality transcends the perspective from which we can make sense of it, then this claim itself starts to look like something we cannot make sense of.<sup>15</sup> However if we can make sense of transcendence *within* the human perspective, then it is perfectly coherent to extrapolate from this to the possibility of something outside. This something may or may not be capable of being made sense of, but if its existence would make sense of why there are things we cannot otherwise make sense of from within the human perspective, then we would have found a reason to believe in it from within that perspective. This is the line I shall pursue.

I now take myself to have introduced this book: the reader should have a good idea of what to expect, although the substance of the Transcendent Hypothesis and the solutions it provides will only emerge as the book progresses. My aim, as should be clear, is to show that philosophy can regain the self-confidence it lost in the face of science, by realizing that what it does is largely independent of science. And the best way for it to do this, I think, is to reclaim its centre by embracing the question of the meaning of life. This may allow it to become less culturally peripheral. Scientists should not, as is currently the case, be writing the only truly popular and hence culturally influential books about 'the nature of reality', for there is both room and need for another kind of book on that topic. And I strongly suspect that the philosophical kind could at least hold their own. For there are a lot of people nowadays who say they are not religious, but that they still think everyday life and science is not all there is; that they are spiritual people. This is an interest which philosophy could be rationally developing. It is a philosophically astute one.<sup>16</sup>

Before this introduction ends, however, I will discuss the recent literature on the meaning of life, since this might be of interest to philosophers and students who are working in the area. Other readers may prefer to skip ahead to Chapter 1 at this point.



## Appendix

This literature strikes me as heavily infected with the conflation I began by diagnosing. Even when the real problem is acknowledged, the discussion almost always seems to end with social meaning providing the solution; the solution to avoiding nihilism, that is. Or else the real problem is either dismissed as uninteresting or extraneous, or not acknowledged at all; sometimes not even recognized, from what I can tell. This is not always the case, but that is the dominant state of play.

It would be bad if nihilism were true, one author tells us, ‘in light of the fact that, well, life is meaningless’.<sup>17</sup> This is the most candid example I have come across of how thoroughly taken for granted the badness of nihilism is among many contemporary philosophers. And the attitude is typical; in spite of the fact that there have been philosophers such as Camus and E. D. Klemke, for instance, who thought, on the contrary, that nihilism is good.<sup>18</sup> That it might be morally neutral that life is meaningless, given that reality does not exist for a moral reason, has apparently been an option unworthy of attention. However the reason these alternatives are so often summarily dismissed, when even considered, is easy enough to see. It is that the traditional question itself has either been dismissed or conflated, and social meaning is the focus. With this focus, the badness of nihilism (construed as an absence of social meaning), starts to look like a reasonably understandable starting point. For everybody knows that it is bad to lack social meaning, do they not?

Antti Kauppinen tells us that ‘it is a commonsensical idea that it is better to lead a meaningful rather than a meaningless life’, which is a standard premise for philosophers working in this area; his perfunctory acknowledgement of the traditional question (‘this metaphysical or cosmological question of meaning need not deter us here’) is also typical.<sup>19</sup> But is it really commonsensical that it is better to lead a socially meaningful rather than socially meaningless life? If we say ‘significant’ rather than ‘meaningful’ – which on the face of it looks like a reasonable substitution – then it seems clear that although Adolf Hitler lived a life of exceptional social significance, it would have been better if he had not. Hitler, true to form, has proved a serious bone of contention in this debate. John Kekes and Paul Edwards, for instance, think that his life was meaningful, whereas Kauppinen and Thaddeus Metz think it was not; and it is easy to see which side other players in this field would fall on.<sup>20</sup> This disagreement seems pretty radical!

A simple way to explain it would be that one side thinks ‘meaningful’ has moral connotations and the other side does not. If you think it does not, and is just a matter of social impact, then it is obvious that Hitler had an exceptionally meaningful life; that seems plausible. But then again, to say that somebody’s life is meaningful seems like a compliment (because we often have in mind *good* meaning), so since we hate Hitler, we had better say that his life was meaningless; that seems plausible too. However although I think this explanation is essentially correct, there is another factor at play. For those who think that Hitler had a meaningful life typically do not emphasize the notion of social impact (though this example would not come up if it were not in the back of their minds). Rather, they emphasize subjective engagement with projects. Kekes’s entry point into the issue is the crisis J. S. Mill experienced as a young man, when all his projects suddenly seemed pointless; he had lost his subjective engagement with them.



And Edwards thinks subjective engagement is all that matters. Thus he says: ‘We are inclined to say, “If his life had meaning to him, then it had meaning – that’s all there is to it.” We are not inclined (or we are much less inclined) to say something of this kind when we speak of the worth of a person’s life.’<sup>21</sup>

On this type of account, then, having projects that engage you is all that is required for a meaningful life; so Hitler qualifies. This ties in nicely with concern about the ‘meaning-crises’ that plague people’s lives. However the other side of this debate, which thinks that social meaning has to be moral – or at least socially commendable in some way – also typically insist on a subjective component. Since this side believe that a meaningful life needs objective value, they motivate the addition of a subjective element on the grounds that even if your life did have an objective meaning, it would not be *your* meaning unless you identified with it.<sup>22</sup> Hence somebody living according to God’s plan would still not be living a meaningful life unless they made it their own; which of course they could not if they did not know what it was. This is often taken to be a damning objection to religious accounts of meaning. So in the debate that has crowded-out recent discussions of ‘the meaning of life’, there are, on the one hand, proponents of the purely subjective view, who require only that we engage with our projects; and on the other, proponents of the combined objective and subjective view, who think that a meaningful life consists in engaging with objectively worthwhile projects. The latter, whose position is epitomized by Susan Wolf’s slogan ‘Meaning arises when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness’, have become the dominant faction.<sup>23</sup>

The insistence on subjective engagement which pervades these debates makes it quite clear that the traditional question is no longer on the table; though the frequent references these authors make to God indicate that they often still think it is. For if God has a plan for us, I can see no reason why we would need to know it in order for it to make our lives meaningful; not unless our knowing about it is part of God’s plan. Unless that or something like it is the case, however, we could be living meaningful lives in a manner to which we were completely oblivious; we might be subjectively engaged with or disengaged from this meaning, but it would still be there. It would be what we are here for, and hence *our* meaning, whether we knew this or not; to think otherwise is evidently to confuse metaphysics with epistemology. Only if the meaning of life dictated that we *must* subjectively engage with certain goals would it make a difference; but then that would simply be part of the objective condition. And the only reason to think that would be if you had some religiously inspired conviction about what the meaning of life actually amounts to. Without this, the issue of subjective engagement is simply neither here nor there.

Given that this debate is concerned with social meaning, then, what must be driving the requirement of subjective engagement is the worry about what happens when people lose it and have a crisis. But even then the issues look distinct, as some philosophers have noticed, since there seems to be a clear distinction between your life seeming to be socially meaningless and its actually being so.<sup>24</sup> Otherwise it is hard to see how a therapist might persuade her depressive patient that his life is actually full of social meaning, and thereby persuade him to re-engage with it. Owing to a disruption in his engagement, of the kind personal tragedy can bring about, he might simply have

forgotten how valuable his various projects are to him, and need a reminder; he would not have lost the meaning in his life and then regained it, just temporally disengaged from it. Or he might not have forgotten at all, for the motivation for his engagement with social meaning might have been put into doubt by a worry about the question of *the meaning of life*. That is what happened to Tolstoy, whose reflections on the meaning of life *begin* from the acknowledgement that his own life had accrued exceptional levels of social meaning.<sup>25</sup>

When we disengage from social meaning, then, we might seem to have lost it when it actually remains. But accounts of social meaning in terms of subjective engagement alone cannot account for this divergence between appearance and reality. Neither can they account for it the other way around, and hence make sense of the judgement that a boy who eats, sleeps and breathes computer games is actually living a socially meaningless life; in spite of the fact that he is completely engaged by these games. People do make this kind of judgement, and they seem perfectly sensible to me. That said, it seems equally sensible to say that the games are what give this boy's life its meaning; that, as an objective matter of fact, playing the games are what he values about his life. Or that whether he values them or not, they provide his life with meaning because playing the games is what he spends most of his life doing. It depends on whether you are thinking of social meaning as something determined by social impact, by what people value, or by what they do. Depending on the context, we may think of it in any of these ways.

In any case, it is clear that those who think that subjective engagement is necessary and sufficient for social meaning are only providing an account of when life *seems* to have social meaning. And not a very good one at that, since it might *seem* to someone that their life is full of social meaning even though they were currently having trouble subjectively engaging with it. There are two senses of 'seeming' here: seeming as manifest but defeasible conscious presentation, and seeming as judgement. A disruption in social engagement can put social meaning into question, since it allows us to step back and look at it differently; projects 'seem' meaningless in the former sense. But it does not automatically 'seem' to negate it in the latter sense, for it is perfectly possible for a rational agent to judge that it remains in place even though it is not motivating them as it once did.

Those who combine subjective engagement with an objective criterion do allow for divergences between appearance and reality, because they include an objective criterion. But because they also insist on a subjective criterion, they thereby lapse into incoherence. What these theorists have failed to realize is that if you combine a subjective with an objective criterion, then the subjective condition inevitably takes the upper hand. For if a highly socially engaged and morally exceptional life can fail to be meaningful because of a lack of subjective engagement, then a socially meaningful life itself becomes a kind of subjective engagement with the world, albeit one with an objective condition of satisfaction. It becomes rather like a perceptual state – a way of accurately seeing the world. But in that case, this approach is landed with a similar problem to the first.

To see this, suppose we have somebody with all the right objective ingredients for a meaningful life, but who fails to be engaged by them. On this kind of account, such

a person simply *must* be right in judging their life to be meaningless; their lack of engagement provides an infallible, subjective guarantee of this judgement. They know that they are not engaged by their projects, whether or not they ought to be, and on this kind of account their life cannot have social meaning without such engagement. However judgements about meaninglessness seem no more infallible than those of meaningfulness. These accounts acknowledge that we can be wrong about the latter by including an objective criterion; thus I can be subjectively engaged by my projects, and judge that my life is meaningful, but if my projects are not worthwhile then my judgement is wrong. But in that case, it is hard to see why error would be impossible in the case of the former, given that we are presumably judging the absence or presence of the same thing. How could I be (potentially) infallible about whether my life is meaningless, but always fallible about whether it is meaningful? Now judgements about *seeming* meaningfulness (or meaninglessness) might be thought infallible, for the same reason as any judgement about how things subjectively seem; namely, that it cannot falsely seem that it seems a certain way, because within the subjective sphere, seeming to seem is the same as seeming. So I conclude that these accounts have tacked an account of meaningfulness (which they have misconstrued as a necessary condition for meaningfulness) onto an account of seeming meaningfulness (a bad one), and called this 'meaningfulness'. But of course, once you have an account of meaningfulness, then you are already there.<sup>26</sup>

It seems to me that these debates have not only completely missed the significance of subjective engagement to the question of the meaning of life – explaining this will be a principal theme of Chapter 1 – but have also been seriously misled by it in regard to social meaning. In fact, I think the former and latter are connected, because the reason these authors instinctively fixate on subjective engagement is that this is what best protects them (and all of us) from a powerful and natural motivation to address the question of the meaning of life. In particular, it protects them from the prospect of nihilism, which they assume is bad. So since they have conflated the issues, they assume that subjective engagement must be the key to keeping our lives socially meaningful.

If we now return to the Hitler question with the red herring of subjective engagement put out of play, we can see that what the issue really boils down to is whether you think social meaning is a matter of what a person values about their life, what a person actually does with their life, the social impact of their life, or the *good* social impact of their life.<sup>27</sup> But to take this question seriously, we must first assume that there is a consistent, context-free notion of 'a meaningful life' (in the social sense). Maybe there is not. Maybe some people would say that Hitler had a meaningful life in the context of a historical discussion, but not at a funeral when a loved one has just been commended for living a meaningful life. Maybe the 'good' connotation is lacking in China but critical in South Africa. I am inclined to agree when Tim Oakley says that 'People simply do not in any consistent way attribute meaningfulness to individual lives.' But the fact is that I simply do not know; and neither do the majority who assume the opposite. Berit Brogaard and Barry Smith think 'the word "meaningful" is obviously a vague term', but they are still interested in 'what ordinary folk actually mean by the expression in question'. So why not ask them?<sup>28</sup>

In saying this, I am not taking a stand on the merits of experimental philosophy. My point is rather twofold. First, whatever you might think about traditional philosophical concepts such as knowledge or truth, the concept of a socially meaningful life simply *looks* culturally specific; as culturally specific as any concept could look. Even without my addition of the word ‘socially’ this should be obvious, given that it concerns the projects people engage with; and people engage in different projects in different cultures. So it hardly makes sense to ignore the possibility that this concept can only be clarified with reference to communities; which these debates always do. And secondly, philosophers do not need to speculate about what people mean by a socially meaningful life, since there is a well-established branch of empirical psychology which investigates exactly that. It takes cultural specificity fully into account.<sup>29</sup> So if your interest is in the actual concept, its importance to people, and in helping people who feel their lives are meaningless, then this is clearly the place to look. Even if you think philosophical analysis can penetrate ordinary usage to discover a single, underlying formula for a meaningful life, it still seems clear that such analyses should begin from real data, rather than from an individual philosopher’s intuitions; intuitions that can radically conflict, as the Hitler question amply demonstrates. And yet you would do well to notice that this area of psychology even exists from looking at the philosophical debate.<sup>30</sup>

I do not know that there is no underlying consistency to attributions of social meaningfulness, then, but it seems unlikely; and even more unlikely that the philosophers in this debate could find one with their adopted method of running through a series of imaginative examples and counterexamples plucked from any area of life that happens to cross their minds. They have as much chance as if they were trying to find the acultural essence at the root of concepts such as *cool* or *nerdish*, I would have thought. But these efforts are not just pointless; they are often objectionable – and not just because they divert attention from the real issue. If you think social meaning is a matter of what you value, or simply what you do, then there is nothing objectionable in that. Similarly, there is nothing objectionable about the view that social meaning is determined by *any* kind of social impact; Hitler will score highly, telly-addicts will not, and the comparison need not be unfavourable. In all these cases, there is nothing else to say unless you are foolish enough to expect precision in these judgements.<sup>31</sup> However those who opt for *good* social impact, and then try to specify it exactly, have gone down the objectionable path of ranking people’s lives. Ordinary people who have never harmed a fly suddenly find their lives condemned as meaningless by philosophers – who always make room for philosophy to be a particularly meaningful pursuit, I have found.

David Wiggins once warned about the danger that philosophers would set themselves up as preachers if they presumed to discover a single formula for good social meaning; the ‘Holy Grail’, as he put it. Unfortunately, his warning was not heeded.<sup>32</sup> Thaddeus Metz, who is the most prolific contributor to these debates – and also their most enthusiastic proselytizer – actually uses the words ‘holy grail’ in reference to his own formula; with no irony I can detect, and no basis for it in his position either.<sup>33</sup> Metz avoids the incoherence of Wolf’s subjective–objective account by denying that subjective engagement is necessary for social meaning. But he still thinks it is incredibly

important, because he thinks social meaning is a matter of applying rationality to the 'fundamental conditions of human existence'; presumably the idea is that you cannot help doing this at least a little if the deeds you perform are good enough, irrespective of how bad your attitude is. So social meaning is still an attitude to the world, albeit objectively construed and without any subjective guarantees. However Metz follows Wolf's methodology and aims exactly, by stating paradigm-cases of meaningful lives (e.g. Mandela, Picasso, Einstein) and then working through an apparently endless stream of intuitions in an attempt to isolate the meaningful factors. By this means, he finds that some activities add meaning to life (art, science, philosophy), some detract from it (prostitution) and some are neutral (eating chocolate). And he thinks a meaningfulness calculus can be produced in this way, with scores for anything we might do.<sup>34</sup>

The moralizing intentions of this exercise are barely disguised. Metz tells us, for instance, that if 'someone had a talent for chess but did not like it, or were not pursuing it, an objectivist [like himself] might recommend that he change his mind'. Chess and anything else Metz thinks is good has to be tied in with his 'fundamentality' formula, no matter how tenuously (e.g. minimalist art), since that tells us the kind of things we *should* be doing. Rock stars, fashion models, jet-setting playboys and the like, have little chance of achieving a good meaning-score; because they are not the kind of people Metz admires. And the vast majority of people, who go to work and do their best to get by, can pretty much forget it. Being disabled depletes your score, and fundamental physicists have one up on their colleagues in the applied sciences (perhaps Metz should get into metaphysics). And so it goes on.<sup>35</sup>

All these intuitions, he thinks, are backed up by physical patterns in the world. Well in that case this could presumably all become an exact science; so when the natural scientists get around to measuring the patterns, it might be a nice idea to start putting meaning-counters on tombstones. Then, when visiting cemeteries, we could immediately see how well people had done; and given that your score can apparently change after death, it would be bound to liven the places up.<sup>36</sup> But to take this idea seriously for a moment, any physical pattern for social meaning must have been created through our behavioural interactions, along with the concept to think about it; as Metz accepts. In the case of social meaning, however, there is nothing asocial for that concept to latch on to. When concepts are built around natural phenomena such as our perceptual capacities, or biological pain and our natural aversion to it, then an appeal to natural essence may have some plausibility. But social meaning has nothing of the kind, and so given that social practices vary widely and continually change, I think we can safely assume that there is no unified natural pattern; a substantive, pancultural, conceptual unity supervening on the physical world is already unlikely enough. And in any case, in the event of a misguided attempt to isolate such a pattern, scientists would begin with its manifestations in the various behaviours of as broad a cross-section of people as possible; their focus would not be upon Metz's brain.

Let us now turn to the good guys: philosophers who recognize the clear distinction between the question of the meaning of life and issues about social meaning, and rather than dismissing the former, actually try to answer it.

Even in these cases, social meaning sometimes manages to creep in. An instructive case to consider is that of Robert Nozick. Nozick's answer to the traditional question begins with a distinction between value and meaning.<sup>37</sup> Value, he tells us, is achieved by integration within boundaries, as for instance when a painting integrates its diverse elements into a unified whole, or a scientific theory exhibits the unity of natural phenomena. Meaning, on the other hand, always reaches beyond limits: something meaningful within one context loses this meaning when we move to a wider context. And this is what makes the meaning of life problematic; our activities seem meaningful within life, but we can find no wider context in which life itself is meaningful.

This distinction is contrived, however, because meaning is always *to* somebody or something until we reach the base level of meaning-in-itself; but the kind of value Nozick discusses seems no different, in that integration and unity are valuable to us, but have no obvious value outside the context of life. The universe does not value our paintings or scientific theories. In any case, we soon see why the distinction has been contrived. Nozick goes on to observe that 'the regress of questions about meaning' could be halted by the 'meaningful-in-itself existence of the unlimited' – 'unlimited' because then there can be no extraneous reason for its existence – and this is why religions have been thought to provide the answer. But he also sees that 'we must not confuse what we desire with what is the case', and that nihilism provides an alternative answer. To accept the latter, however, would exhibit 'stern integrity in the face of temptation'. Not unless you assume that nihilism is bad, of course; but in any case, Nozick should have concluded his discussion here.<sup>38</sup>

Instead, he puts aside the thought that meaning might not be grounded in wider meaning (and does not consider that it might not need to be), and looks to the idea that the ground of meaning might be value, rather than more meaning. He argues that 'What bestows meaning by connection must itself be nontrivial', and so the 'chain that grounds meaning cannot terminate in something worthless'. So it is a *necessary* condition for whatever grounds meaning to be non-trivial. Then he concludes that, 'it need not end with something that somehow is intrinsically meaningful; it can rest upon something valuable. Thus the apparently inexorable regress is stopped'.<sup>39</sup> So now it is a *sufficient* condition; and value fits the bill. But of course, we might accept that the ground of meaning would have to be non-trivial, since the reason for the existence of the universe hardly sounds like a trivial matter. But that does not mean that anything non-trivial could do it, since it would have to explain why we are here – which Nozick's 'value' does not. Driven on by the assumption that nihilism is bad, however, Nozick manages to stumble onto his desired conclusion that the meaning of life is found within life; in the value of our projects, and hence social meaning.

David Cooper finds the question of the meaning of life just as obvious and natural as I do, I am pleased to say, and has a similar appraisal of attempts to push it aside in favour of the social meaning. His concern with nihilism, however, is the understandable one that although the lack of any meaning of life would not undermine the social meaning of our activities, it might still negatively affect it through 'the feeling that significance leaches out from those activities, which now become as pointless, empty or frivolous as what they contribute to'. I address this concern in Chapter 2. His solution is to appeal to an ineffable mystery which provides the measure of human

existence – something ‘beyond’ the human but still intimate with it; emphatically not ‘outside’ or ‘transcendent’ to the human perspective, because Cooper rejects such metaphysical claims. So human life can be meaningful in virtue of “‘responding” to what is mysterious’, and nihilism results when you fail to respond appropriately. I think nihilism is just a fact, and that Cooper thinks it needs to be avoided because he overestimates the importance of philosophy. But these are relatively subtle differences, to be evaluated when my position is on the table.<sup>40</sup>

John Cottingham is similarly clear about what the question is, and that social meaning will not answer it; as philosophers who come at it from a religious perspective typically are. Like Cooper he thinks we need a meaning of life, but Cottingham accepts the more straightforward answer that there *is* one, and that our lives become meaningful by responding to it through ‘intimations of a transcendent world of meaning that breaks through into the ordinary world of our five senses’.<sup>41</sup> The issue then comes down to whether you think there is transcendent meaning or not; I entirely agree that it does, and so do others. Joshua Seachris, for instance, carefully demonstrates the *ontological / normative* component of the question; as I would put it, that you cannot provide an appropriate answer without talking about the reason we exist (or the lack of one). And Joe Mintoff recognizes that religious accounts provide ‘the very best example of what a theory about the meaning of life should look like’; but since he does not believe in any of them, he unfortunately winds his way back to social meaning.<sup>42</sup>

My favourite philosopher writing about this question in recent times is Milton Munitz.<sup>43</sup> Not only did he recognize the transcendence of reality, which he calls ‘Boundless Existence’, but he was also a nihilist; once you get that far, the rest is just details. Thus he sees that the question must be answered in terms of transcendence, and that there are ‘many routes’ to affirming it (he opts for cosmology); but he does not think that it provides us with a meaning of life. And he also sees that there is no unitary social meaning that might be considered a substitute. My only serious qualm is that he thinks nihilism is *good*, in showing that we can ‘take life with less than total seriousness’; this idea is addressed in Chapter 2.<sup>44</sup>

Finally, I like Nicholas Waghorn’s recent book on the meaning of life; it displays a weird, almost Neoplatonic reticence about making any claims, which is quite appealing. Waghorn sees that social meaning is obviously not going to satisfy our curiosity about the meaning of life, though by qualifying the relevant meaning as ‘ultimate’ (others make similar qualifications) he makes an unnecessary concession to the other side; the question is about the *meaning of life*, after all. Quite unlike me, however, he thinks the question is deeply ambiguous and ultimately cannot be made sense of. But since he thinks *nothingness* cannot either, and that any positive answer could never provide a final resting place for our curiosity, he thinks nothingness is our best bet; this does not make him a nihilist, superficial appearances to the contrary. By taking the question away from grotesque moralizing, and into the realms of metaphysics and conceptual limits, this is a laudable attempt to buck the trend.<sup>45</sup>





# The Meaninglessness of Life

*I admit, or rather I would assert, that a result, if it fails to satisfy our whole nature, comes short of perfection. And I could not rest tranquilly in a truth if I were compelled to regard it as hateful. While unable, that is, to deny it, I should, rightly or wrongly, insist that the inquiry was not yet closed, and that the result was but partial. And if metaphysics is to stand, it must, I think, take account of all sides of our being.*

F. H. Bradley, 1893<sub>1</sub>

## 1. The truth of nihilism

There is no overall point to human life. We are each of us born into a certain specific situation, at a particular place, in a particular historical epoch, and with particular parents, and from this unchosen starting point we must continue to exist until our time runs out. Every day when we wake up from sleep we must do something simply because we exist, but there is nothing in particular that we must do. It rarely seems like this to us, because in the midst of life our ongoing projects provide a continual feed of tasks that apparently must be accomplished. The situation becomes more perspicuous, however, when we look to the beginning and the end of the human life cycle, since we do not regard the play-tasks small children devise for themselves as imposing any absolute imperatives, and although very old people continue to motivate and structure their lives with projects, we tend to regard these as things the person wants to do, rather than as things they have to do. In truth, the same situation holds throughout life: there is nothing we ever have to do.

Our most compelling imperatives come from biology, society and ourselves. Biological imperatives are the strongest, for our continued existence depends on our satisfying them; we have to eat, of course. However, since there is no overall point to life, failing to eat cannot count as a mistake comparable to the mistake of failing to play a move in chess that would checkmate your opponent. This point applies equally to imperatives that flow from society and ambition: nobody has to pay the mortgage or write the concluding chapter of their novel, in the sense that a failure to do these things cannot constitute a failure to live properly. Of course in an everyday sense, unforced actions that result in the loss of your home, your publishing contract, and most

especially your life, are mistakes of the gravest kind that exemplify failure in life. This sense, however, reflects only what we want for our lives, and not what our lives actually are. For when we restrict ourselves to the concern of describing the general nature of human life, we find something that exists with no built-in or externally determined purpose, and so must conclude that although we want to survive and prosper, this is not what we are here to do.

It is our concern for collective life that leads us to treat certain imperatives differently from others. Thus the little girl wants to finish her painting, and the octogenarian wants to see the Cook Islands, but we are unlikely to regard the accomplishment of these tasks as of any more than sentimental concern, thinking as we do that the real business of the girl's life is still ahead of her, and the old man's behind him. These activities are seen as just ways of passing the time, as periods of rest and recreation generally are. There are other activities, however, which we regard as constitutive of what we 'do with' or 'make of' our lives. These activities, generally centring around family and profession, and in some cases a project or mission, are regarded differently for the reason that they provide the means to the satisfaction of our most important imperatives. Thus by working, for example, we produce material goods and services, and are thereby able to consume material goods and services, as well as provide for those who do not work, such as the very young and the old. Nevertheless, despite the importance that these activities have in securing the lives we want for ourselves, they are not distinguished from the others by the contribution they make to the overall point of life, since there is none.

What has happened is that our desire to do things has disguised itself as *having* to do things, as if there were a meaning of life impelling us. Feeling that you have to do something is a particularly strong form of desire. It does not typically seem like this; the things we recognize that we *want* to do seem to exert a greater pull on us than those we dutifully go along with because they *have* to be done. But this is an illusion, as can be seen from how we react to the prospect of not doing something we feel we have to do (like paying the bills) as compared to not doing something we want to do (like buying a new car); we give up on the latter far more readily than the former. The reason is that we want to do both, only the former more strongly. Philosophy allows us to see through this disguise, and recognize that we do not need anything stronger than desire to motivate us; that we can live without the disguise. But some sad philosophers who saw through it were so attached to the illusion that they were unable to live without it. They thought that we needed something more than desire – which they once assumed we had – and unable to accept that desire is good enough, they consequently condemned the world. This is how nihilism has led to pessimism.

The social framework we live within, which has been building up over the course of history, makes it seem that our lives have an overall point, thereby disguising desires as absolute imperatives. The framework imposes a mutual understanding; an interpretation of the world and the various options we have for living in it which facilitates cooperation for the purposes of satisfying our imperatives, many of which are suggested – and all of which are shaped – by the framework itself. Within the framework there are roles already set out for us, pre-existing ways of life we can join based around traditions, family relationships, organizations and fields of endeavour. Many of these roles, especially those

built around the mid-life activities that we take most seriously, are associated with criteria of success. Thus every actor, banker or subsistence farmer knows what constitutes success in their field, and in addition, may adopt a more personal criterion of success determined by the extent of their ambition. Within the framework, then, we can tread a more or less beaten path through our lives, and are thereby provided with rules and objectives for living. In this way, life takes on the character of a game: a highly flexible and complex game, of course, but nevertheless an activity we can join in with others, and perhaps at the end, look back to evaluate how well we did.

Life is not a game, however, for games are our invention and human life is not. Since we invent games, we can dictate their rules and objectives, so that in a game of chess there are good moves, bad moves, and within the game, a definite point to playing, namely to win, just as within the wider context of life there is a point to playing chess. However, if the practice of moving chess pieces and investing them with a certain significance were to cease, so would chess; the only remainder would be the boards and pieces. But if the practice of playing the prescribed roles of the framework, and thereby interpreting life as a game were to cease, life would not cease. It would remain, its pointlessness rendered more perspicuous. The difference is that the existence of chess depends on our interpretation of certain moves and pieces, whereas the existence of life does not depend on how we interpret our daily activities. Once the interpretation is in place, activities have a purpose within life, just as chess moves have a purpose within the game, and the game has a purpose within life; but in all these cases the purpose is made up within a life that has no purpose of its own.

To say that the purposes we allow to govern our life decisions are 'made up' is not to say that they are the imaginative creations of particular individuals, of course; even imperatives of ambition, which come closest to this, are still largely determined by the options available to the individual, over which he or she can have little control. Rather, the purposes have been made up anonymously over the course of history, as people living together in communities, guided by evolving conceptions of what constitutes a good life and how best to achieve it, have established patterns of behaviour with criteria of success and failure. Biological imperatives provide no exception to this, for although the desire to eat is not something we invented, the imperative to satisfy this desire can only govern our behaviour if we choose to play along, just as the need to pay the mortgage can only govern our behaviour if we play along. This freedom to put even biological imperatives aside serves as a reminder that for the modern human being, all purposes are socially constructed impositions upon life, rather than something constitutive of life.<sup>2</sup>

The case is different with (non-human) animals: an animal cannot decide to go on hunger strike or take a vow of chastity, because the biological frameworks in which they live are largely or wholly constitutive of their lives. If an animal in its prime stops eating or mating for no good biological reason, then it has simply malfunctioned. Human beings, on the other hand, have broken free of the biological framework in which their ancestors lived. Within the biological framework of the animal, daily life is largely governed by learned routines and instincts; the scope for innovation or choice, where present, is limited. With the development of our social framework, however, the measure of freedom in the world was greatly increased, for the traditions and

established practises that came to govern daily life were not as binding and inflexible as the instinctual routines they evolved out of, and the development of different traditions and practices which were equally capable of satisfying our biological needs provided us with scope for choosing between alternative ways of life. An eventual product of this evolution of freedom was the realization that we do not have to choose any of the life options presented by the framework, and thus that although our social framework evolved out of a biological framework, and remains deeply conditioned by biological needs and instincts, it provides us with options only.<sup>3</sup>

Our social framework nevertheless plays a similar role to the biological frameworks of animals, in that it governs our behaviour to promote the satisfaction of our imperatives, including of course our biological imperatives. When immersed in the framework – as, for instance, when we are fully focused on our work – then we know exactly what we are supposed to be doing with ourselves, and the only decisions required concern how best to realize our presupposed goals. This can be compared both to the animal's immersion in its biological framework, and also to immersion in a game, since each restricts the parameters of possible behaviour while guiding it with an unquestioned goal. A crucial difference, however, is that unlike the animal's immersion, we have the ability to step back from our framework and see it for what it really is. In doing so, we see that the various goals we preoccupy ourselves with throughout life are all optional, and that they do not contribute to an overall goal, since human life exists without existing *for* anything. This capacity to break the spell of our immersion, rather as a player may at any moment suspend play, is a by-product of the freedom we evolved in the transition from the strictures of a biological to a more malleable social framework.

The notion of stepping back from our social framework is, in a variety of terminological guises, a familiar one from twentieth-century philosophy, and is usually introduced with some moralizing or otherwise redemptive intent. Thus in Heidegger, our absorption in the anonymous and impersonal world of 'the "they"' – by which he means our conception of what *anyone* (but no-one in particular) would think or do – produces a 'dimming down' of our possibilities which 'tranquillizes' us; the self that 'discloses to itself its own authentic Being' must first 'find itself' from within its 'dispersal' in 'the "they"'. A similar conception of the framework as imposing conformity and concealing individuality is to be found in Sartre, though with more emphasis on our complicity in this concealment; our self-deceptive aim is to unburden ourselves of freedom by playing out a fixed role, as illustrated in his example of a man 'playing *at being* a waiter in a café'. And in Foucault, to take a final example, the framework is conceived as a means of exerting political power; one which restricts our behaviour but which also 'induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse' in order to indoctrinate, normalize and control us. For Foucault, it is tantamount to a duty to step back from the framework.<sup>4</sup>

In all these well-known examples, then, stepping back from the framework is something positive and desirable; a source of liberation from an oppressive regime into which we can unthinkingly become co-opted. My notion of stepping back from the framework, however, lacks any positive connotations of liberation. To step back from the framework is to suspend in thought the ordinary, everyday understanding of life that makes sense of our actions in terms of goals presupposed as desirable. So, for example, I may be completely engaged by the goal of buying the best computer I can, given my

budget and requirements, and this goal will make sense of much of what I do for a while. To step back from the framework in this case is to stop allowing this goal to guide my thoughts and actions, and to put all such goals – as well as my understanding of my actions in terms of these goals – into question. The significance of doing this is that it allows us to view our lives more objectively, by including our goals as another aspect of life to be described.<sup>5</sup> Such an understanding of stepping back from the framework is completely indifferent to questions concerning autonomy and self-determination, for whether we have been subtly coerced into our goals, or they are constitutive of an original project that has been authentically chosen, we still need to step back from them (whether actively or passively) in order to describe them as a part of life.

The significance of stepping back from the framework is not practical, then, but rather theoretical: it is necessary to step back from the framework in order to realize that there is no overall point to life. This is because we cannot view our goals objectively while their desirability is being presupposed and they are guiding our actions. When we are fully immersed in our tasks – our minds creatively focused in problem-solving, our bodies coping with the task at hand in manual labour, or when we are preoccupied by the daily intrigues of interpersonal relations – then we are living within a framework of meaning, and thoughts about ultimate meaninglessness can occur only as idle memories from previous reflections. To look objectively at life, however, we must suspend our engagement with the framework in thought, which we are able to do as a by-product of the capacity we evolved to suspend engagement with one way of life in favour of another.

The quickest and easiest way to do this is to retreat to a physical perspective, and think of human life as consisting in bodies moving around and making noises. This perspective can arise of its own accord when observing crowded scenes, as for instance on a busy high-street, since the fact that we cannot know all the goals the various individuals understand their actions in terms of, and would not be able to collate this into an immediate collective understanding even if we could, causes our perception of such scenes to naturally condense into one of movement and noise. This perspective on life, which we can always deliberately take up, suggests that the only wider context into which our movements can be fitted is a meaningless physical one; our collective movements have created the context in which individual movements are understood as meaningful, but there is no wider context in which life itself can be understood as meaningful. Such a perspective does not allow us to view actions *as* actions, of course, and so in taking it we miss out on the rich framework understanding of life which has built up over thousands of years. Nevertheless, it remains a legitimate perspective on life, and one that allows us to grasp something that our ordinary perspective obscures; we do not have to live with it, only use it.<sup>6</sup>

## 2. Attunements to nihilism: Anxiety and boredom

According to Heidegger, as well as the existentialist thinkers he influenced, certain of our moods have a special significance, in that they reveal philosophically significant aspects of our situation. Heidegger sometimes calls these 'attunements' and the

name is apt, since they are supposed to show that at some level we are attuned to our fundamental situation, even if we rarely allow this to develop into a conscious theme. The attunements relevant to nihilism are anxiety and boredom.<sup>7</sup>

We are often dismissive of moods, so the idea that certain ones have philosophical significance seems strange when first encountered. Thus somebody in a good mood may take pleasure in their ordinary routines, and be more helpful than usual, but there is little temptation to read any particular significance into this. Rather, the mood seems like an inconsequential accompaniment to whatever the person is doing, and something we should actively avoid drawing conclusions about; for the reason that moods change, often for no particularly good reason. If we were to rashly infer that the person is satisfied with what they are doing, then our view might easily be overthrown the next minute when the good mood passes and a bad one takes its place.

When moods endure, however, our attitude to them changes, so that if somebody is happy for a significant amount of time we may suppose this to be because their life is going well. The same is true of dispositions to moods: if somebody is depressive we regard this as indicative of an underlying problem. With this in mind, it is not so strange that the attunements of anxiety and boredom should be regarded as philosophically significant, since they are conceived as a continual, ever-present backdrop to our lives, albeit as potentialities or dispositions that only occasionally develop into conscious moods. For Heidegger, the reason we are only aware of them episodically is that the 'tranquillized' existence of everyday life continually suppresses their development. Thus he says of boredom that it 'draws back and forth like a silent fog in the abysses of Dasein [our being]'. But what exactly do anxiety and boredom reveal about our situation that the framework ordinarily allows us to overlook?<sup>8</sup>

The short answer, but not the one given by Heidegger (who we shall return to in the next section), is that in different ways they both reveal the truth of nihilism. For unless we keep ourselves continually engaged by the framework, we are liable to fall into anxiety or boredom, both of which are appropriate responses to an existence which requires action because it is temporal, but does not require any *particular* action because it is meaningless. We are liable to anxiety, because our participation in the activities of the framework can only constrain or determine our actions if we choose to participate. When fully engaged by these activities, we become unaware of our ability to withdraw participation at any moment; but it is always possible for that engagement to subside, thereby laying bare the full range of our options, and exposing us to the anxiety associated with needing to choose and being responsible for whatever we do choose. In anxiety, then, the freedom the framework conceals becomes visible. In boredom, on the other hand, the pointlessness the framework conceals becomes visible. This is because in disengaging from the framework we cease to be engrossed by our usual goals, and thereby become sensitive to the fact that the activities we preoccupy ourselves with serve no overall purpose.

Anxiety and boredom are attunements, rather than simple moods, because they are not responses to particular and changeable circumstances, but rather the human condition as a whole. They reflect something about our condition that is concealed by our involvement in the framework, whereas ordinary moods arise as a result of our involvement in the framework, as for example when the achievement of a goal

makes us happy. Since attunements are responses to our general condition, it is always possible for anxiety or boredom to arise when our engagement with the framework subsides. When this occurs, anxiety may arise as an appropriate response to the self-imposed restrictions on our choices being removed, and boredom may arise as an appropriate response to the lack of any ultimate grounding for our choices.

That the framework obscures the full extent of our freedom should not be taken to imply that life governed by the framework is lacking in freedom, or indeed reflection. On the contrary, the framework facilitates the cooperative endeavours that provide us with options in life, and the vast majority of our reflection is goal-directed. Rather, the point is that freedom and reflection within the framework are always confined to a certain context – such as choosing where to travel on holiday, or reflecting on possible designs for a new building, for instance – and it is only when we disengage from our preoccupation with particular goals of this sort that we can reflect on our activities within the context of life as a whole. When we disengage in this way, either deliberately for the purposes of philosophy, or passively when we fall into anxiety or boredom, then previously unquestioned and all-consuming goals emerge in a new light: as optional and ultimately pointless.

A good way to illustrate the significance of these attunements is by analogy with a game, since life within the framework takes on the character of a game. Thus the game of chess provides us with great freedom within the parameters of action it prescribes, and the whole exercise obviously calls for considerable reflection. The game also typically elicits certain moods: such as contentment when we are playing well, excitement when we think we are winning, and irritation if we make an unforced error. These moods are appropriate to our perceived position in the game, and reveal our complete immersion in its goals. However, it is always possible for us to step back from the game and take a more objective perspective on it, thereby viewing it as a rule-governed, goal-directed activity of moving pieces around a board.

Now suppose that while the spell of the game is broken, we contemplate moving the pieces around the board outside the framework of the game, rather as we might contemplate life outside the framework: what situation would we be envisaging, and what would be the appropriate response to it? Well, in one sense, we would be envisaging a situation in which we had gained considerable freedom, for the rules of chess would no longer apply; so we could move the pieces across the board wherever and however we wanted. On the other hand, since these moves would no longer be directed towards any goal, they would lose almost all of their significance, and hence differentiation from each other. Each move would be as uninteresting as the next, and each would be essentially isolated, lacking any place within a context of development. As such, the normal emotions that can be elicited by moving pieces in chess would be lacking. For without any rules or a goal, we would be unable to invest the moves with any hopes and fears for success or failure.

Contemplating this situation might be reasonably expected to elicit anxiety and boredom. Anxiety would be appropriate at first, since without the rules, it would now be possible to move anywhere, and yet there would be no criteria for deciding where to move. Of course, if we just think of this as an activity within the wider context of life, namely the activity of randomly moving chess pieces around a board, then it will not



seem especially anxiety-inducing. But if we maintain the analogy with life by supposing the activity to be of the utmost importance to the person, such that moving the pieces is all they will ever do, then the possibility of moving without restriction or criteria would indeed seem to present reasonable cause for anxiety. And another appropriate response, once the anxiety subsided, would be boredom. This is because without any rules or aims, the individual moves would lack any significance connecting them with past and possible future moves, and so we would have no basis for evaluating them as good or bad. Without our projection of a wider significance onto the moves, then, there would be little or nothing that was interesting about them, and it would all seem very boring.

### 3. Heidegger's rejection of nihilism

One of the central themes in Heidegger's early work, especially *Being and Time*, is that disengaging from the world leads us to misinterpret ourselves and the world around us. But I have been using Heidegger's notion of anxiety and boredom as attunements to show that the disengagement they precipitate allows us to see things more objectively and grasp truths that would otherwise remain hidden. This difference is unsurprising given that Heidegger was mainly concerned with anxiety and boredom for the roles they play within his redemptive agenda of teaching us how to provide our lives with authentic meaning; an agenda which will hold little appeal to those who regard nihilism as simply an ahistorical fact about the human condition which we cannot overcome and have no reason to want to.

For Heidegger, withdrawal from our everyday involved dealings with objects and others explains the genesis of Cartesian ontology and epistemology, and more generally, the conception of the world characteristic of scientific understanding. What happens, according to Heidegger, is that we privilege a certain detached and disengaged attitude to the world, called 'presence-at-hand', which can sometimes arise when our projects are interrupted or suspended. This leads us to conceive of the world as a conglomeration of meaningless stuff to which our epistemic relation is inherently problematic, as well as ourselves as essentially worldless subjects who are disinterestedly observing the world around us. This then creates a number of artificial problems characteristic of the philosophical tradition, such as scepticism, which Heidegger seeks to overcome by showing that the more 'primordial', that is original, way in which we understand our being – from which the scientific conception derives – is essentially tied up with the world around us, such that objects are understood in functional terms specifying their uses and significance within our way of life, and our own being is understood in terms of our relations to others and interpersonal projects.

This well-known critique of the prioritizing and subsequent grounding of the present-at-hand, is intended to dissolve some of the traditional problems of philosophy, but it is also part of a wider strategy: to draw philosophy's attention away from what Heidegger considers the artificial puzzles generated by the Cartesian misinterpretation of our being, and back to more fundamental issues, namely the nature and meaning of human life. Heidegger's insistence that 'the less we just stare at the [Thing], and the



more we seize hold of it and use it, the more primordial does our relationship to it become', and that this more primordial relation to things is one of 'circumspection' – according to which things are seen within the context of our projects – is meant to draw attention back to the nature of the projects which absorb us for the majority of our lives; except on those rare occasions when we step back from them to engage in more or less disinterested contemplation of the world.<sub>9</sub>

By showing that we generally encounter things as equipment within a human project to be used for the achievement of a goal, Heidegger reminds us that we ordinarily conceive of the world in terms of what we are doing and what we are trying to do. And one of his main reasons for wanting to do this is tied up with his redemptive agenda, since he thinks that we generally fail to determine our own projects, and unthinkingly let them be determined by the anonymous opinion of 'the "they"'. Heidegger's aim, then, is to persuade us to wrest control of our lives by choosing our own projects, instead of sleepwalking into a life dictated by circumstance and convenience. The strategic importance of the attunements is that they act as a kind of alarm-bell, waking us from our immersion within the projects we have haphazardly found ourselves engaged in, and reminding us of our ability to select our own, thereby using our allotted time in a manner of our own choosing.

Heidegger wants to claim not only great ontological significance for our everyday absorption in our projects, then, but also great existential significance for our ability to snap out of it by attending to our attunements. He skilfully combines these commitments by saying that 'anxiety brings [Dasein] back from its absorption in the "world"', creating a feeling of 'uncanniness' and 'not-being-at-home'; but immediately adding that although this withdrawal individualizes Dasein, it is 'individualized as Being-in-the-World', and that 'Being-in enters into the existential "mode" of the "not-at-home"'. In other words, anxiety only leads to a partial withdrawal from the framework. In recognizing the contingency of our projects, and the contingency of the interpretations we put on ourselves and the world, the familiarity which allows us to take these projects and interpretations for granted 'collapses', and we are 'individualized' by recognizing the possibility of choosing our own projects and interpretations. But the integrity of the Cartesian critique is maintained, because this transition from feeling that we know the world and our place in it, to feeling 'not-at-home', is not a complete withdrawal, but rather something that takes place within our being-in-the-world.<sub>10</sub>

Now Heidegger's view that although we can fall back from our engagements with the world in anxiety or boredom, they remain constitutive of our being, is clearly at odds with my view that falling back from our engagements – by viewing human life as the ultimately pointless activity of bodies moving around and making noises – allows us to grasp something fundamental about our situation. However, although we may grant Heidegger's point that we can never leave behind our involved understanding of the world – to the extent that this is presupposed in all of our practical interactions, such as reaching for the coffee cup while thinking about life objectively, for instance – it is also true that we have developed the ability to escape from this understanding in thought, and thereby look at our lives in detachment from the significance they normally have for us. According to Heidegger, to do so is to misinterpret life. But the problem with this view is that although we spend most of our waking lives in concerned engagement

with the world, withdrawing from these engagements has produced a scientific world-view capable of explaining many of the features of them, as well as many other features of reality that have nothing to do with human engagement; and it is hard to see why temporal priority should be thought to take precedence over explanatory power.<sup>11</sup>

Thus it may be the case that the understanding we have of ourselves and the world when we are engaged in the framework, is the original human way of understanding things, and it may also be the case that within this form of understanding, the characteristic epistemological problematic of modern philosophy simply cannot arise; but it does not follow that our scientific understanding must therefore be a misinterpretation of the kind of being we have. For we may have improved upon and supplemented our understanding by detaching from our projects, thereby revealing philosophical problems we were previously oblivious to. That this is indeed the case is suggested by the potential of science to make sense of the fact that we naturally understand ourselves in a world alongside others in terms of the evolutionary history of our cognition, for instance, and also by the fact that even if a philosophical problem such as scepticism about the external world is unthinkable within our everyday, engaged attitude, if it is true that our understanding of ourselves as being-in-the-world depends upon a biologically functioning brain, and such a brain could generate an experience of an external world which does not exist, then we have reason to believe that our natural confidence is excessive.

Since objective, scientific thinking provides a more comprehensive vocabulary for describing the world than the kind of understanding we have when engaged in the framework, we have every reason to take what it tells us seriously. And the particular significance it has in thinking about life philosophically is that it allows us to view our lives within a wider, physical context from which we are able to see that there is no overall point to our activities. Heidegger, however, does not allow himself this perspective: so he does not allow himself the perspective from which nihilism most readily comes into view.

Nevertheless, even though Heidegger will not allow himself this perspective, the resources for detached reflection provided by our natural, episodic withdrawals from the framework, such as in anxiety and boredom, are enough to allow us to see that our goals do not culminate in any externally imposed end-point; we pursue one goal for the sake of another, and that goal for the sake of another still, but these justifications are not brought to an end by an obligatory overall goal, akin to that of a game. But the significance of this for Heidegger is not that our purposes are created within a life which has no purpose of its own, since he thinks we are unable to form any legitimate understanding of ourselves apart from these purposes. Rather, the significance for him is that we are able to take control of our purposes; the meaning we find ourselves embroiled in must be selected from and actively gathered together if we are to impose our own choice of meaning on our lives. Thus although Heidegger sees that there is no externally imposed point to life, he thinks that it is possible to provide our existence with an overall purpose, by authentically choosing a way of being through an autonomous act of self-creation.

This is why the withdrawals brought about by anxiety and boredom are mainly of importance to Heidegger for the call to action they provide: they jolt us out of inauthentic

complacency to provoke an authentic choice. Moreover, the choice of a frivolous or immoral life would not be good enough, for we must choose in light of 'heritage', since man's deepest values are to be found within what Gadamer called 'the historical reality of his being'.<sup>12</sup> It was this redemptive agenda which led Heidegger to usually prioritize anxiety over boredom, since anxiety calls directly for action; Heidegger expresses this priority by saying that in boredom, beings 'are unveiled somehow as a whole', but that the 'fundamental mood of anxiety' is an 'originary attunement that in the most proper sense of unveiling makes manifest the nothing'. By this he means that in boredom, our immersion in projects subsides and we are left contemplating all possible projects with indifference, whereas in anxiety, when our immersion subsides we are struck by our freedom to choose; the 'nothing' we are confronted with is the open question of how to interpret the world and our place within it. Thus for Heidegger, anxiety provides a possible source of liberation – a route from determination by 'the "they"' to self-determination – since it can truly be said of the 'resolute' man that, 'Anxiety liberates him *from* possibilities which "count for nothing" and lets him become free *for* those which are authentic.'<sup>13</sup>

#### 4. The priority of boredom

Heidegger's view that we can provide our lives with a meaning is mistaken, and is motivated by the similarly mistaken view that nihilism is to be avoided at all costs. Nevertheless, it is because he held these views that he was led to (usually) prioritize anxiety over boredom; for somebody who accepts the truth of nihilism, on the other hand, it is boredom that emerges as the more philosophically significant attunement. This is because in boredom our withdrawal from the framework opens a line of questioning that can lead us to nihilism, whereas anxiety acts as a preparation for re-entry into the framework, calling us to choose new projects to throw ourselves into, and thereby calling for an end to this kind of reflection. If we accept nihilism and are free of redemptive intent, then, we will find more significance in our tendency to fall into the passive state of boredom, than into the action-inducing state of anxiety.

Boredom occurs when our engagement with the framework is suspended, and we notice the change to our experience brought about by our newfound inability to provide different times with different significances according to their relevance to a future goal; when this happens, one moment starts to seem much like the next, and we are bored. This phenomenon is experienced particularly acutely in childhood, when integration into the framework is not yet complete, so that the boy or girl who loses interest in one activity may have difficulty imaginatively projecting themselves into another, leaving them in a kind of limbo where time seems to go on forever.<sup>14</sup> By the time we reach adulthood, the framework reasserts itself much more readily for the average working person, both because we have gained more experience with it, and so are better able to project ourselves into new activities; and also because it makes considerably more demands upon our time, exacting consequences if we do not meet them. But it is in childhood boredom, when we literally cannot think what to do with ourselves and find all suggestions uniformly boring, that it really can seem to us that *we are here with nothing to do*. There is a sense in which this is true.

This kind of experience can sporadically return throughout life, albeit typically in a diluted form.<sup>15</sup> Thus there may be many things I urgently need to do, such as send an email, take the car to a garage, and so on, and yet I really cannot be bothered with any of it; it all seems too boring. I am not paralysed by boredom as a child might be, because I am skilled at filling my time trivially; but nevertheless I find myself at a loss to project the right significance into the tasks required of me by my framework imperatives. The metaphysical root of this phenomenon is that none of our activities have any overall point, since there is nothing that life itself requires of us; although there is much we demand of each other and of ourselves. Consequently there is nothing for us to do until we give ourselves something by choosing, accepting, or reaffirming goals. Of course, not all goals require us to actively project significance, for we accept many goals without trying, as is most obviously the case with biological imperatives, which require considerable force of will to reject. However, the fact that our goals are all optional creates the potential for our engagement with them to fall away to a greater or lesser degree, thereby dulling their hold over us and leaving us suspended within a time they no longer structure.

Although the root cause of boredom is always the same, it can manifest itself in different ways, as Heidegger brings out in his most extended discussion of the topic.<sup>16</sup> Typically, he notes, we experience time as 'dragging' when we are bored: it becomes painfully long, leaving us trying to 'kill' it or 'drive' it on, despite the fact that people generally want their time to last as long as possible, and frequently complain about time 'speeding up' as they get older.<sup>17</sup> Heidegger illustrates this 'dragging' kind of boredom with an example of being stuck at a quiet, provincial train station with nothing to do until your train arrives. The framework neglects such periods, because their only relevance to the satisfaction of our imperatives is that we must get through them in order to continue with the next stage of our project. In such cases, when the framework provides nothing to do, we may find ourselves actively looking for activities to structure our time, even if these activities are as self-evidently pointless as counting the railings on the opposite platform; since at least in this way we are able to provide ourselves with something to aim for, a goal capable of being satisfied during a time in which the arrival of the train remains stubbornly far off.

Time does not always drag when we are bored, however, as Heidegger makes clear with a second illustration. This time, the situation is that he has begrudgingly accepted an invitation to a party. It is a good party: the atmosphere is upbeat and Heidegger fits in effortlessly (you may be surprised to hear). As he puts it, 'time is neither too quick nor too slow'. When he gets home, however, he looks at the open books on his desk, regrets having missed an evening of work, and suddenly realizes that he has been bored all night; he remembers drumming his fingers under the table, for instance. The problem here is similar to the first case, for Heidegger is clearly somebody so motivated by his work that time at the party is as wasted to him as the time waiting for the train. The difference is that in this case his time is fully occupied; he has plenty to do, listening to and contributing to the conversation, but he is still bored because this time lacks importance to him. Thus he describes himself as caught up in the 'standing now', simply reacting to present events, and isolated from the past and future that really concern him. The common factor between the party and train station examples is

that both involve periods of time abandoned by the framework, in which we do not feel the need to do anything. This explanation is readily extended to the boredom experienced by people off work sick, who may well find themselves as entertained by daytime television as Heidegger was by his party.<sup>18</sup>

The final form of boredom, which Heidegger thinks brings us 'closer to the depths of the essence of boredom', concerns periods in which we withdraw – or partially withdraw – from the framework, rather than simply periods that are accorded no significance by our particular engagement with it. In such cases, he says that there is an 'indifference enveloping beings as a whole', and compares this to walking through a city on a Sunday when the shops are closed and the streets empty.<sup>19</sup> Unfortunately, Heidegger ties this final form of boredom in with his redemptive agenda, seeing it as a call for Dasein to 'wrest its own possibility from itself' in a 'moment of vision'; and so in this particular discussion, boredom is interpreted as providing the same call to action as anxiety. The essence of boredom Heidegger has in mind, then, is that it reveals to us the possibility of self-consciously choosing our own engagement with the framework, and thus becoming authentic. If our interest is only in nihilism, however, the need to break the spell of boredom emerges as less significant than the way the world appears when we are bored. For this is an appearance that reveals something fundamental to our situation, regardless of the fact that we must suppress such appearances to get anything done.<sup>20</sup>

Heidegger's concern with boredom shows the influence of Schopenhauer. Within Schopenhauer's dark metaphysic, according to which 'we have not to be pleased but rather sorry about the existence of the world', boredom features as a counterpart pain to the pain of striving, such that life 'swings like a pendulum' between unsatisfied desire and boredom when it is satisfied. Thus he writes that we live life as a 'game [ . . . ] of the constant transition from desire to satisfaction, and from that to a fresh desire'; a game we must continually play because when the transition is interrupted, we are faced with 'a fearful, life-destroying boredom, a lifeless longing without a definite object, a deadening languor'. In other words, when immersed in the framework, we treat life as a game with a continual stream of goals to be achieved, but if we stop striving for these goals, we become bored; this is an unpleasant state for the will, according to Schopenhauer, because it frustrates its nature, which is to will for something. Schopenhauer adds that although 'Every individual act has a purpose or end; willing as a whole has no end in view', which is just to say that there is no overall object to our willing, since life has no overall point.<sup>21</sup>

Although Schopenhauer connects boredom with withdrawing from the framework and nihilism, his main interest is once more bound up with a redemptive agenda. Thus as for Heidegger, boredom is ultimately a call to action: in Schopenhauer's case, to purge ourselves of will through a life of asceticism, and thereby free ourselves of the unpleasantness of boredom and striving.<sup>22</sup> If we forget Schopenhauerian metaphysics, however, and restrict our attention to the connection between boredom and nihilism, then there does not seem to be any great philosophical significance to the unpleasantness of boredom. Boredom is unpleasant because interest and enjoyment almost always require us to engage with the framework in some way; even if tranquil and pleasant states in which we are not trying to do anything are possible, and can become the norm for experienced meditators.

What is most significant about boredom from a philosophical perspective is that it naturally orientates us to the truth of nihilism; a line of philosophical questioning can creep up on us of its own accord. Thus rather than taking up an intellectual stance to determine the general nature of human life – a stance which requires us to actively step back from our various projects in order to view them more objectively – we can simply refrain from suppressing our attunements, allowing them to develop and raise by themselves the question of why we are prone to them. Why can the need to conquer anxiety and drive away boredom arise at any moment? Why are these natural states for us? Because there is no overall point to human life, and yet every day we must motivate ourselves to act.

Answering questions such as these can lead us to the realization that the sense we make of life has limits. Thus when we are engaged with life, we understand what we are doing and why we are doing it in terms of our presupposed goals. But when this engagement is suspended, it becomes possible for us to see that our ability to make sense of life in this way stops short at the framework. The suggestion of the limitedness of sense which such reflections are capable of producing is reinforced by the fact that there is another kind of question that comes just as naturally to us, and which leads in the same direction rather more directly; it is to this that we shall now turn.

## 5. Existence and nihilism

Feeling a sense of astonishment that the universe exists, and hence that there is such a thing as reality, is common currency among philosophers and non-philosophers alike; powerful expressions of this have included Wittgenstein's statement that 'It is not how things are in the world that is mystical, but that it exists', and Heidegger's that 'Man alone of all beings, when addressed by the voice of Being, experiences the marvel of all marvels: that what-is *is*'.<sup>23</sup> Astonishing as it certainly is, however, it is not obvious what we are being astonished by. The astonishment is evidently not focused on the fact that this particular world came about, rather than some other, which is something that might strike you in contemplating the contingencies leading to your own existence. Rather, as both the above quotations stress, the issue is that there is any world at all rather than nothingness. However, to say that this is what is astonishing suggests that it would be more reasonable to expect non-existence to existence, and it is not clear why this should be so.<sup>24</sup>

What strikes us when we contemplate the fact of existence is not just surprise that one of the existence-options triumphed over the non-existence-option; to the extent that the natural question 'why is there something rather than nothing?' suggests this, it is misleading. Rather, what principally strikes us is the limitedness of sense, for when we come to self-consciousness within the framework, we assume that everything can be made sense of; this is the assumption codified by Leibniz's principle of sufficient reason.<sup>25</sup> When we contemplate the fact of existence, however, we are presented with an apparent exception, and one that can hardly be dismissed as trivial. And this is what explains our surprise: we expect every particular thing and circumstance that exists to be capable of being made sense of, and yet existence as a whole is something

that apparently cannot be made sense of. What we really mean by the question 'why is there something rather than nothing?', then, is: 'why, given that no reason can be given for why there is something, was there not rather nothing?' What astonishes us is not so much that there is existence rather than non-existence, but that there is apparently existence for no reason; by making the contrast with non-existence, we remind ourselves that existence for no reason ought not to exist.<sup>26</sup>

In contemplating the fact of existence, it is not just that we have no idea what brought this fact about, as we may have no idea what brought about some puzzling phenomenon within life. Rather we are made aware, however dimly, that asking what brought this fact about cannot be the right question to ask in this context, since any appeal to a 'something' will not answer but rather defer the question. For since anything adduced to explain the fact of existence – be it God or an omniverse of which the universe is only a tiny part – will be something else that exists, and hence itself part of what needs to be explained, we are left with only two desperate alternatives: to say that reality came into existence from nothing and for no reason, or to say that reality has always existed for no reason. To accept either of these alternatives, however, is to give up on making sense of the fact of existence, and accept instead that we cannot explain why there is anything at all, since reality either happened for no reason, or there has always inexplicably been something.

The best we can do is to make sense of why we cannot make sense of it. This is the approach Kant takes in his Antinomies, by arguing that the root cause of our confusion is the transcendental realist assumption that the world we experience is 'a whole existing in itself'; rather than an appearance structured by us.<sup>27</sup> This still does not make sense of the fact of existence per se, because Kant also has to posit existence 'as it is in itself'; of which we can in principle make no sense; but it does nevertheless offer an account of the limitedness of sense. We must still accept a brute fact, and so cannot satisfy the principle of sufficient reason without qualification, but Kant shows how we might dispel our astonishment at the fact of existence by realizing that the kind of sense we naturally expect to make of it is not appropriate to the case; once we realize that we were expecting a kind of explanation we should not expect, it is no longer astonishing that our expectations are not met.<sup>28</sup>

That we cannot make sense of the existence of reality as a whole does not prevent us from making sense of things within reality; within a certain context of explanation, the reason for my existence remains that my parents met, for instance. But it does show that our reasons are ultimately groundless: they are reasons given within an existence that is itself lacking in reason. This groundlessness does not prevent us from making sense of things, so long as we remain within a limited context where rules, aims and forms of explanation can be taken for granted. Thus we can make sense of a move within the context of chess, of chess within the context of life and of life within the context of a physical universe. If we keep going, however, then sooner or later we will be confronted with a senseless brute fact: things make sense so long as we do not push too far.

The most important illustration of this point is provided by life within the framework. Thus if we take the various imperatives which motivate our activities for granted, these activities will generally make sense, but if we push further and start to ask ourselves



what the wider significance of being born, growing up, working, travelling, enjoying ourselves, aging, reflecting, suffering, and finally dying could possibly be, then we will find ourselves confronted with the truth of nihilism. The meaninglessness of life is a microcosm of the meaninglessness of reality; in the case of human life, the teleological explanations that make sense of our behaviour break down when we disengage from the framework to consider the overall purpose of this behaviour, and in the case of reality, the causal explanations that make sense of particular objects and events break down when we try to make sense of reality as a whole. Things make teleological sense only within life, and causal sense only within reality. Reality itself, however, makes neither teleological nor causal sense, for there is no purpose to it, and we cannot explain why it is here. As such, in contemplating the fact of existence, we come to see that the sense we make of our lives must be ultimately groundless, since our actions can hardly have a purpose in the grand scheme of things, if the grand scheme of things has no purpose and is consequently no 'scheme' at all.

## 6. Nietzsche's nihilism

The word 'nihilism' is closely associated with Nietzsche. There are many conflicting interpretations of Nietzsche's philosophy – which is not surprising given the importance he placed on lying and concealment, as Stanley Rosen emphasizes – but almost all would agree that Nietzsche wanted to overcome nihilism; I follow Bernard Reginster in thinking that this was his 'central project'. Reginster says that in its 'broadest description, nihilism is the belief that existence is *meaningless*'. According to this 'broadest description' I am a nihilist (though I find it more natural to construe nihilism as *what* is believed, rather than the belief itself). But that is where I get off the boat, because Nietzsche has a very rich conception of nihilism which amounts to much more than just that. Nihilism in my sense is not the kind of thing you *overcome* (even if you do construe it as a belief; unless, of course, you want to believe something false).<sup>29</sup>

Nietzsche, writing in the 1880s, thought that the advent of nihilism (in his rich sense) had become inevitable: the whole of European culture was moving towards it as if 'toward a catastrophe' and was 'afraid to reflect' on it. He, on the other hand, had 'done nothing so far but reflect', and having thought through 'every labyrinth of the future', was now able to reflect on nihilism as if retrospectively, as if it had already happened. He was 'the first perfect nihilist of Europe who, however, has even now lived [in reflection] through the whole of nihilism, to the end, leaving it behind, outside himself'. Still, this transcendence of nihilism apparently only came very late in his (sane) life, for in 1887 he wrote: 'That I have hitherto been a thorough-going nihilist, I have admitted to myself only recently.' With the visionary benefit of having seen beyond nihilism, however, Nietzsche saw himself as aiding a 'countermovement' which 'in some future' will replace it; a countermovement which would 'logically and psychologically' presuppose nihilism and could come 'only after and out of it'. This future countermovement would require 'new values'; and that is what Nietzsche aimed to supply. So Nietzsche saw nihilism as a crucial transitional stage in the development



of culture, and his concern was directed to the people of the future who would leave it behind, as he had already done. He was, as he said, a 'destiny'.<sup>30</sup>

Heady stuff: and that is why Nietzsche is so exciting to read. But what was this inevitable transitional stage of nihilism supposed to amount to? Something pretty terrible, by all accounts, even though it was supposed to have a happy ending. As Reginster argues, convincingly to my mind, despair is central to Nietzsche's conception of nihilism. The nihilist despairs because they see that their highest values cannot be realized by a meaningless world, and they have ceased to believe in another one – like the Christian heaven – which *would* realize their values. They have ceased to believe in the latter because religious belief has been discredited by the recognition that it is a product of our psychological needs; heaven would realize our values only because it has been invented for this purpose. This discrediting obviates the need to address every new proof of the existence of God that comes along, and is the principle idea behind Nietzsche's iconic formula: 'God is Dead'. So the nihilist condemns the actual world from the standpoint of nihilistic values; as Nietzsche puts it, the nihilist is 'a man who judges of the world as it is that it ought *not* to be, and of the world as it ought to be that it does not exist'. Nihilism can take the passive form of a weary resignation, or the active form of a desire to destroy; depending on how much spirit you can muster in response to the judgement that the world ought not to exist.<sup>31</sup>

Nietzsche thinks that nihilism is the logical consequence of the values that gained cultural dominance within our religiously dominated history, and hence became our own; values he regards as essentially life-denying, in that they condemn real life in favour of an imaginary, supposedly better world. In one striking passage, for instance, he says that Christianity 'made of sexuality something impure: it threw *filth* on the beginning, on the prerequisite of our life'. Key among these values, he says, are the notions of intrinsic purpose; a unity to reality within which human life finds its true context; and truth itself. The demands of the latter – truth – lead us to 'the last form of nihilism' in which we reject the supposedly better world beyond this one, as merely a product of our psychological needs; and hence not *true*. But this is still nihilism, because truth itself is just one more life-denying fabrication; a case of us reaching for 'nothingness' in order to condemn '*this* state of being'.<sup>32</sup>

Nietzsche welcomes rather than regrets the onset of nihilistic despair, however, because no matter how bad it will be, it is uniquely capable of revealing what our values amount to, by showing us where they lead. On the far side of nihilism, Nietzsche thinks (or rather knows) that there will emerge a new kind of people who – like Nietzsche himself – have 'the strength to reverse values and to deify becoming and the apparent world as the only world, and to call them good'. And as Reginster argues, the kind of post-nihilist revaluation Nietzsche envisages would show that 'life-negating values are not the *highest* values'.<sup>33</sup>

Nietzsche's nihilism, then, is a kind of despair generated by religiously inculcated values: we recognize that the world is meaningless, and so we morally condemn it because it does not provide our lives with the overall purpose our values demand. Camus, who we will discuss in the next chapter, gave this idea a lighter, twentieth-century spin with his notion of absurdity. In the backdrop of both is the fact that our intellectual history is dominated by the religious idea that God both gives our

lives meaning and dictates moral standards: in the eyes of God our lives have both a meaning and a moral worth. The meaninglessness of life and a lack of moral standards were thus yoked together, because God performed the twin functions of making life meaningful and maintaining the difference between right and wrong. Without God, then, life is meaningless and anything goes, and if you retain your religious values into atheism, as Nietzsche's nihilist does, then life is to be morally condemned.<sup>34</sup>

However, although these functions go together within a religious world-view, there is no good reason to leave them together within a secular world-view. If we accept nihilism (in my sense), we will deny that the overall point of life is to act morally, just as we will deny that there is any other overall point to life; such as pleasure, for example. Nevertheless, it does not follow from this that we thereby lose all reason and motivation for acting morally. Rather we lose one reason; a reason we never even thought we had for enjoying ourselves, despite the massive efforts people have invested in that agenda. Certainly without God's plan, acting morally is not the point of life, but there remain many other reasons for acting morally, not least that most of us want to, and that our societies impose penalties for immoral behaviour.<sup>35</sup>

To respond to Nietzsche's nihilism, then, I cannot see that anything more is required than to renounce the religious link between the meaning of life and morality; a link that millions of good people have already lived and died without making. I think that Nietzsche and many other philosophers have massively overestimated the motivational and moral significance of belief in overall purpose. Such belief is not essential to framework engagement, after all; if it were, then it is doubtful we would have ever heard of nihilism, since nobody would have been motivated enough to write about it. Perhaps such belief is very important to some religious people's framework engagement, especially in the moral sphere. But it cannot always be essential, because people do sometimes lose their faith and carry on.

The question of the meaning of life is indeed a very natural one, and naturally leads to ideas of overall purpose. But philosophy is not *that* important to people: not everybody asks the question; not everyone who does answers it with a belief in overall purpose; and even in the cases of those who do, it is very hard to believe that this is always, or even mostly, essential to their sense of right and wrong; and not at all obvious that it should be when it is. There seems no reason, then, not to treat the rejection of overall purpose as an isolated concern; one relevant to a specific philosophical question. And if we do, we need not follow Nietzsche in allowing it to bleed into rejections of a unified context of reality, and of truth itself; rejections which have led philosophy down some particularly implausible routes, as we shall see in the next chapter.

Of course Nietzsche thought that the link between religion and morality could and should be broken, and that after nihilism, people would be able to uphold values without supposing them backed up by God. Nevertheless, he also thought that the advent of nihilism was a major and malevolent turning point in history, and something we would have to struggle to overcome. With hindsight, we may perhaps regard such assessments as overestimating the extent to which religious belief sustained morality, which in turn must have resulted from being born into a society in which religion was culturally predominant; for later generations who would never be tempted to suppose that moral actions fulfil God's purposes for human life, the recognition that life is

meaningless would inevitably seem more anodyne. On the other hand, however, most people in the world remain religious, and even though religious belief and immorality have coexisted throughout history – often feeding off each other, of course – it may still be the case that the former restrains the latter, so that if religion ever does start to seriously wane, there really will be a moral catastrophe. Without the benefit of Nietzsche's clairvoyance – which from our present perspective is looking seriously dubious – it is impossible to know; and it may never happen anyway.

But even if we did have reason to fear the spread of belief in nihilism (in my sense), this should hardly be thought to have any bearing on our assessment of whether or not it is true; the effects of believing something true may, unfortunately, be regrettable. If we did have cause to regret the meaninglessness of life, this would not provide a good motivation for seeking to disprove or overcome it, any more than the fact that a serious illness is to be regretted would provide a good motivation for a doctor to reach a different diagnosis. Nevertheless, the notion that the provision of comfort is a condition of adequacy for philosophical description has surprisingly often held currency, with the quotation from Bradley with which we began this chapter providing an unusually self-conscious illustration; Fichte provides another good example:

And how can I believe in an explanation of my existence which conflicts so decisively with the innermost root of my existence, with the purpose for the sake of which alone I care to live and without which I deplore my existence, despite the correctness and strict precision of the proofs which this reflection seems to me to have?<sup>36</sup>

The simple answer is that if the proofs really are correct, then you have to believe what they establish, or else give up on the rational life of believing whatever you have best reason to think is true.<sup>37</sup> Before we start to think about devising coping strategies for living with the truth of nihilism, however, we first need to look a little more closely into the question of whether it really is such a burden.



# A Survey of Misguided Coping Strategies: Does Nihilism Ruin Your Life?

*This life is worth living, we can say, since it is what we make it, from the moral point of view . . .*

William James, 1896<sub>1</sub>

## 1. The consequences of nihilism

When we step back from the framework, we can see there is no overall point to life; but does this have any consequences? Should realizing the truth of nihilism be expected to change our behaviour in any way, or to change how we feel about ourselves? To answer this, let us return to the example of chess. Suppose that we have an obsessive chess-player who is always absorbed by the game, one way or another. Suppose he then steps back and sees it within the wider context of life as just an activity of moving pieces around a board. This thought might reasonably be expected to have consequences for his life both inside and outside the game. Outside the game, he may reappraise his commitment to chess: it may seem less important than it did before. Thus he may come to realize that his absorption in chess has led him to neglect his health or social life, for instance, and in putting more effort into these aspects of his life, he may start practising less, so that his game suffers. His attitude to the game may also be transformed, such that he loses the 'spirit of seriousness'; perhaps his new attitude will lead him to play deliberately weak moves on occasion, if this makes the game more interesting.<sub>2</sub> And he may also come to regard all the earnestness and drama that is invested in chess as absurd.

What happens when the chess-player breaks his absorption is that he no longer sees the game as his field of action, but rather as one component within the wider field of action that is his life; and this change of perspective may lead him to re-evaluate his commitment. However, since there is no field of action outside of the framework of *life* to rationalize a similar re-evaluation, the analogy cannot be sustained; we cannot re-channel our commitment from our framework goals to something else, as the chess-player can re-channel his commitment from chess. Likewise, there is nothing outside of life to motivate us to take life less seriously; prioritizing pleasure over

success is simply a case of prioritizing one kind of framework goal over another, and nihilism can have no bearing on such a decision, since its assessment of our activities as ultimately pointless is indiscriminating and uniform. And if some of these activities do occasionally strike us as absurd, this can only be in comparison to others, given that there is nothing outside of life capable of making all of our activities – including the serious ones like surgery – seem absurd.

Thus although when the chess-player steps back, his new perspective may transform his attitude to the game and motivate him to make practical changes in his life, what we discover about life when we step back from the framework does not seem capable of providing any similar motivation. Of course, any instance of stepping back can lead us to reappraise our commitments. But although reflection on nihilism may provide the spur to practical reflection, nihilism itself is lacking in practical consequences. After all, even if realizing that chess is just an activity of moving pieces around a board may have a bearing on life outside of chess, it is of no relevance within chess; and so it seems that realizing the truth of nihilism should likewise be of no relevance within life.

However, even though nihilism does not favour any particular activity over another, it may nevertheless have consequences for those who started out believing that there is a meaning of life. For such a person, who believes that their particular goals are constitutive of what a person is supposed to do with their life, there will be two main effects: first, they will realize they are free to choose their own goals, and secondly, a motivation for continuing to pursue their previous goals will have been removed. If they subsequently decide to rebalance their commitments, however, nihilism will play no further role, since nihilism shows no preferences among framework projects. Nihilism will have simply removed a false belief, thereby revealing the possibility of choice this belief had previously obscured, while also removing the illusory motivation it provided.

Nevertheless, this motivation, illusory or not, might still be thought to be crucially important. Now as we ran the chess example before, the reasons the player might become disenamoured with the game were all to do with the fact that he has (potentially) a life outside of chess; but we can vary the example by supposing that the player's life is confined to moving the pieces around the board. This immediately changes the significance of breaking his absorption in the game. In the previous case, looking at chess as an activity of moving pieces around a board placed it within a wider context in which its goals were no longer presupposed, thereby presenting it as one possible activity among others, and revealing the player's choice over whether or not to engage with it, and if so, how. In the new case, however, although his choice over whether or not to engage with the goals of chess is still revealed, the fact that there are no other goals changes the significance of this insight.

Initially he may feel anxiety, since he will realize he is free to make any move either inside or outside of the framework of chess. However, he should soon realize that although he can retract his commitment to working towards checkmate, if he does so, the consequences will be just as bad as before he stepped back from his engagement with this goal; namely that he will begin to lose. For others will continue to interpret his actions according to the rules of chess and will hold him to account accordingly, rather as others will hold us responsible if we fail to meet our framework obligations;

we will hold ourselves responsible too, as soon as we are immersed in the framework once again. And if the others had come to the same realization as him, they would – for the same reasons – continue to play chess. Even if they all had a discussion about what to do next, it is doubtful they would come up with anything better than chess.

However, if we are to make the example more true to life, if even less true to chess, we need to add the stipulation that when the chess player steps back from his absorption in the game, he realizes he can never win: the goal of checkmate is an illusion. His movements around the board will stop not when he wins or loses, but rather when he dies. And now it really does seem that he has been told something that would affect his motivation and attitude. Moreover, it seems to make no difference to remind him that checkmate was always an illusion, and that he had no problem committing to the game previously; for what mattered to his motivation was not the existence of the goal but his belief in it.

However, although learning that checkmate is an illusion would be bound to have an immediate impact on the player, it is unlikely this would be lasting, for he will soon realize that whatever value he finds in the game has nothing to do with its illusory goal, but rather with the achievement of other intermediate goals which he had supposed were helping him on his way to checkmate. The prospect of checkmate was what motivated him before, but now he can see that the goals he was pursuing were not intermediate after all – but rather the only real goals in the game – he should be able to realign his motivation towards them and them only. In short, he should now realize that he does not need to believe in an overall goal. This change of attitude may actually increase his commitment to the game, since a goal such as capturing his opponent's knight would previously have seemed expendable, to the extent that even if he failed to achieve it, he could simply redirect his attention to another intermediate goal that would make an equivalent contribution to achieving checkmate. But now this illusion is gone, he can value these goals for their own sake, or for their contribution to other achievable goals, and this should allow him to show them more commitment than when he thought of them all as simply markers on the way to the only goal that really mattered.

If it still nevertheless seems that the passing goals of chess would lose much of their interest without an overall goal, the situation is immediately transformed when we turn to the goals which motivate us in life. For trying to make money, change the world for the better, become famous, find love or just stay out of prison, all remain just as compelling as they ever were in light of nihilism, except to the extent that they were thought to contribute to an overall purpose to life; if indeed they ever did draw much of their appeal from such abstract thoughts. On realizing the truth of nihilism we will not suddenly find our situation transformed to that of the Danaids in Tartarus, endlessly pouring water into a leaky tub. Of course, engagement with our framework goals can always subside, and when this happens, life as a whole can seem boring. However, although boredom is an attunement to nihilism, we do not need to believe in a meaning of life to break its spell. Rather, all we need do is re-engage with the framework, which is something that comes naturally to us, since there are many things in life that we cannot help wanting; we see this from the remarkable speed with which disinterested reflection on life can be brought to a halt when faced with the consequences of failing to meet our framework obligations.

None of this is to deny that there may be people for whom belief in a meaning of life is the decisive factor in motivating them to act at all, and we should perhaps also grant the possibility of people who are only persuaded to act morally by this kind of conviction. But even if nihilism could have such consequences, it does not follow that what it says is reprehensible, for the consequences follow not from its positive content, but from its incompatibility with a false belief; even the most anodyne fact could have reprehensible consequences if it removed a bizarre-enough belief. Thus given that nihilism does not tell people to give up, or to behave immorally, it is not nihilism we should regret, but rather the fact that there are people who have no enthusiasm for life and who want to act immorally.

Overall, then, it is hard to see any good reason to regard belief in nihilism as a danger we should struggle to overcome. For there is no reason this belief should affect us practically at all, unless we were previously under the false impression that life has a meaning. And even if we were under this impression, nihilism can hardly be blamed for the consequences of discovering we were wrong; consequences which might well turn out to be positive in any case. As to the question of what we should do upon realizing the truth of nihilism, then, there may be more than a little relevance in Lin-Chi's advice to 'Just act ordinary, without trying to do anything particular. Move your bowels, piss, get dressed, eat your rice, and if you get tired, then lie down.'<sup>3</sup>

## 2. Absurdity

Nevertheless, it might still seem that nihilism changes our attitude to life, even if there is nothing we can do about it. The most familiar thought along these lines is that life is rendered absurd by the juxtaposition of the meaninglessness of life with the seriousness with which we take it; rather as some clowns embody the absurd by juxtaposing a ridiculous appearance with feigned dignity. Now we already touched on this issue above, when we said that such judgements require a comparison between activities within life. Thus chess or fashion modelling may be judged absurd in comparison to other activities, like life-saving surgery or landing an airliner in emergency conditions, because the former are trivial in comparison to the latter, and so the seriousness they are invested with can seem inappropriate. Some activities can seem absurd, then, if the seriousness we invest in them is inappropriate to what is actually going on, just as the clown's seriousness is inappropriate in light of his appearance. However, given that there is nothing outside of life for us to take more seriously, there would seem to be no question of our seriousness about life as a whole being inappropriate: human life is surely an entirely appropriate thing for human beings to be serious about, on occasion at least.

This reasoning has been explicitly rejected by Thomas Nagel, who argues that unlike ordinary judgements of absurdity, the philosophical judgement of absurdity does not depend on comparisons within life, but rather on 'another contrast which makes it a natural extension from more ordinary cases', and this is the contrast between 'the pretensions of life' and 'a larger context in which *no* standards can be discovered'.<sup>4</sup> The larger context Nagel has in mind is that of the physical universe, which does not



provide life with a meaning. The idea, then, is that if we look at life from the outside to try to justify our seriousness, the fact that life does not exist in any wider context of significance, but only in the wider physical context of the universe, means that we will inevitably fail. Life is absurd because we cannot help taking it seriously, and yet we cannot justify this seriousness.

Nagel compares his claim that life is absurd to epistemological scepticism, on the grounds that we take life seriously without being able to justify this attitude, just as we take ourselves to know various things that cannot be justified in light of sceptical hypotheses. However, although sceptical hypotheses place our natural confidence in doubt, such that my claim to perceptual knowledge is put into doubt by the possibility that I am dreaming, for example, Nagel never says what is supposed to similarly render dubious our natural confidence in the seriousness of life. In the case of scepticism, according to Nagel, the possibility that I am dreaming motivates me to try to justify my trust in perception, but any justification I might offer – in terms of the reliability of perception, for instance – will be circular, since such justifications are exactly what have been put into doubt by the sceptical hypothesis. Despite the fact that I cannot justify my claims to perceptual knowledge, however, I still cannot help making them, and so am brought to recognize my ‘unsupported natural confidence’.<sup>5</sup> But the problem with Nagel’s attempt to draw a parallel conclusion about our attitude to life is that there does not seem to be anything like the sceptical hypothesis to shake our confidence in taking life seriously. The sceptical hypothesis shows that I might be wrong to make knowledge claims, but it is not clear how I might similarly be wrong to take life seriously.

One way to explain this would be in terms of something else we should be taking seriously instead. This is how ordinary judgements of absurdity work: we need a conception of the kind of situation that really does deserve seriousness if we are to judge whether or not seriousness is appropriate. Nagel, however, says that his judgement does not require such a conception; as he puts it, stepping back from life ‘is not supposed to give us an understanding of what is *really* important’, but is rather supposed to show that the larger context of the physical universe provides nothing to justify our seriousness about life.<sup>6</sup> But although he is right that this larger context will not justify our seriousness, we have no need to look to such a context unless we are provided with some reason to think that our seriousness is inappropriate in the first place. If a person is asked why they are acting so seriously, then the answer that somebody’s life is at stake provides a perfectly good justification, and there seems no reason to look for further justification unless some reason can be given why we should not consider life and death worthy of seriousness.

It might be thought that the existence of our lives in a wider, physical context is enough to challenge our ordinary reasons for taking it seriously, and Nagel certainly seems to think this, since he says that if we view ourselves ‘as if from a great height’, our concerns begin to seem utterly trivial, as we form an objective conception of ourselves as a ‘small, contingent, and exceedingly temporary organic bubble in the universal soup’. However Nagel realizes that such considerations cannot provide the basis of a sound argument to show that we should not take life seriously. After all, the universe does not consider us unimportant on account of our smallness, for it does not consider us at all, and there is no reason for people to consider very

large and long-lived astronomical bodies more important than themselves. Rather, Nagel's reason for describing our lives in this way, he says, is that he thinks our 'sense of absurdity finds its natural expression in [such] bad arguments', for the reason that our 'small size and short lifespan' are metaphors for the 'backward step' we take from life in order to view it in detachment from its everyday significance.<sup>7</sup>

What Nagel means by this backwards step, of course, is that we can step back from the framework by placing life within a wider, physical context, in order to grasp the truth of nihilism. But if this is the key to the argument, and it is the lack of a meaning of life that is supposed to undermine our ordinary reasons for regarding our projects as important, then Nagel must be assuming that only a meaning of life can make something important. It is this assumption, then, which must be playing the role of undermining our ordinary reasons for seriousness about life, just as the possibility we are dreaming undermines ordinary perceptual justifications for the epistemological sceptic. But whereas reasons can be given for thinking that we might be dreaming, the assumption that only a meaning of life can bestow importance seems both unmotivated and entirely expendable. It seems like a leftover religious dogma.

Although Nagel claims that his judgement that life is absurd differs from, but is nevertheless a 'natural extension' of ordinary judgements of absurdity, then, we can now see that in this respect it is just like an ordinary judgement, since it uses a meaning of life as its criterion of what is really important and hence what is appropriate to be taken seriously: life is judged to be absurd because it lacks meaning, it being inappropriate, and consequently absurd, to take anything seriously that lacks meaning. Where this judgement does differ from an ordinary judgement of absurdity, however, is that ordinary conceptions of when seriousness is appropriate are based on real examples, whereas a meaning of life is an ideal that the world has never lived up to; it is the religious ideal of what we should take seriously.

That traces of this ideal lie behind Nagel's judgement is clear from the considerations about our physical insignificance from which he takes his cue, and which he considers a 'natural expression' of our sense of the absurd. For what they really express is religious humility. This can be seen from the fact that although it makes sense in comparing ourselves to something much larger than ourselves, that we should feel relatively small and powerless, it is something else again to feel insignificant, in the sense that implies triviality, since this presupposes a wider context of meaning that extends beyond our lives; an ant may be dismissed as trivial within our lives, but our lives could only be dismissed as trivial within some wider context of meaning. Likewise, the finitude and relative brevity of our lives could only show them to be trivial if there were a wider context of meaning that placed more value in things that last forever; this is the thinking behind *memento mori*. Given that religion has dominated our intellectual history, then, it is not surprising that thoughts of physical insignificance should slide so easily into thoughts of triviality. But if we no longer believe in such a context, these feelings of humility lose the redemptive power that lent them their purpose, for we can no longer look to redirect our seriousness to matters which are less trivial in the overall scheme of things. Once this is lost, then, all we are left with is a feeling of absurdity; nothing seems worth taking seriously.<sup>8</sup>

This feeling of absurdity may still be regarded as a significant consequence of nihilism, however; it was the feeling itself which was Camus's original emphasis, and it was Camus who inspired Nagel's position. Thus Camus describes the absurd as arising in a 'confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world', and says that this confrontation produces the 'feeling of the absurd', the 'absurd mind' and the 'absurd man'; the idea is not that life is absurd, but rather that we cannot help judging that life is absurd if we have a need for a meaning of life that the world cannot provide. Camus's absurdist is Nietzsche's nihilist without the despair; Nagel tried to over-extend this conception of a certain type of person with a bad argument. Maybe the real problem with nihilism, then, is it makes it psychologically impossible for some people to take life seriously; although perfectly capable of living in the absence of a meaning of life, just like Sisyphus, perhaps an insatiable need for meaning turns life for them into a heroic struggle against the odds.

Now if Camus were right about this, then prior to encountering and being persuaded by nihilism, it must have seemed to the absurdist that the world was satisfying their need for meaning. But clearly we do not all start out with an explicit belief about the meaning of life which nihilism subsequently disavows us of; many people do not believe this, and many more have simply never thought about it. Camus may have captured something about his own generation and cultural milieu, then, but there is nothing universal here. However there is a much weaker sense in which engagement in the framework does seem to provide us all with meaning, which is that life thereby takes on the character of a game: a currently unquestioned goal is presupposed. Our experience must take on this character, it seems, if we are to immerse ourselves in the task at hand, because we could never give it our full attention if we were continually questioning its point; this kind of questioning is sometimes appropriate to choosing our goals, but not to achieving them.

But if this is all that is required to satisfy our need for meaning, nihilism will not stand in the way; life will continue to take on the character of a game even after we are fully aware that it lacks meaning. Nihilism has the potential to transform our theoretical understanding of our goals, but provides no obstacle to our engagement with them. Thus once we see that there is no context beyond human life to either underwrite or overthrow our view that, for example, in normal circumstances saving somebody's life is important, then we will need to look for more mundane theoretical reasons to justify it. But however we justify this view in our more theoretical moments – and even if we do not justify it at all – there is no reason this should affect our ability to presuppose it when action is required.

It is not so much that we need a meaning of life, then, but rather that we need to presuppose that our goals are worthwhile while we are engaged with them. Since our most familiar model of a goal that can be presupposed in this way is the overall goal of a game, and has been so since early childhood, it is natural to expect life to work the same way; which is one reason nihilism is liable to strike us as surprising when we first discover it. However, nihilism is compatible with any number of alternative accounts of why it can make sense for us to presuppose our goals. Of course, we do not need to take up the theoretical question of what – if anything – makes our goals worthwhile in order to presuppose them; we do this effortlessly as soon as we stop thinking about it.

But if we do take up this question, then nihilism and the hypothesis of a meaning of life can offer competing answers, either of which would allow our practical engagements to continue as before. The only answer that really might disrupt this engagement is that none of our goals are worthwhile in any sense; if we believed this, then maybe it would be a heroic struggle to carry on. But the highly substantive and majorly contentious view that only goals backed up by a meaning of life can be socially worthwhile would take quite some establishing; and it is not upheld by the vast majority of philosophers who routinely presuppose that nihilism is bad.

### 3. Transcendence

Activities can have a purpose within life because of the context provided by the framework, but nihilism entails that life itself has no purpose, since there is no further context beyond life. A direct way of refuting nihilism, then, would be to show that there *is* a further context. Now we have already seen that placing life within the further context of the physical universe cannot do this, but on the contrary only serves to confirm nihilism, since the physical universe is not a context of meaning. Consequently, the kind of context needed to refute nihilism would be a further context of meaning, akin to the context the framework provides.

To see what the idea of a further context of meaning beyond life amounts to, consider how the framework shapes our understanding of an action, such as somebody systematically raising and lowering their arm; suppose we can see someone doing this, but do not know what it means. If we are subsequently told that the person is signalling to the taxiing aircraft, then this description conveys the meaning of the action by placing it within the context of the framework, and thus relating it to various goals, such as ensuring the safety of the flight, earning a wage and so on. Now according to nihilism, all such teleological explanations come to an end within the framework, but this would not be the case if there were a further context of meaning. Such a context would add an additional level of understanding, such that just as we can move from understanding only that the person is moving their arm to understanding that they are signalling to the pilots, so it would be possible to move from understanding the signalling as part of an attempt to live a constructive and enjoyable life, to understanding the overall point of such a life.

The framework provides a context of meaning in which the action counts as a case of signalling by relating it to various other objects and events; by thinking of the action as it enters into these various relationships, rather than in isolation, we place it in a context in which it is meaningful. The idea of a further context of meaning beyond the framework, then, is the idea that life itself might be placed in a context of meaning; and if there were such a context, this might provide our various activities within life with a further significance. However, the existence of life within just any further context of meaning would not be enough to overthrow nihilism; it would have to be of a particular kind.

To see this, suppose we were to discover that aliens have been watching our planet for centuries, televising our lives as a form of entertainment. This would certainly place

human life within a further context of meaning. However there is an obvious reason why it would not show that our lives had a meaning, which is that it would not explain why we live the lives we do, in the way the framework explains why the person is moving their arm; the issue is whether human life exists for a purpose, not whether it can be put to a purpose. But if we alter the example so the aliens do explain our existence, perhaps because they bred us specifically for their purposes, this is still not enough to challenge nihilism.<sup>10</sup> This is because knowing that our lives have a purpose for the aliens is not enough to undermine nihilism unless we also believe that the lives of the aliens serve an overall purpose: if we do not believe this, then nihilism is unaffected.

The reason the hypothesis of the aliens does not undermine nihilism, then, is that they are just as much a part of the physical universe as we are, and so we can always place their lives within this meaningless wider context and conclude that there is no overall purpose to our providing them with entertainment. This reasoning suggests the following: that nihilism requires that reality has no meaning within the final context of existence, where by the 'final' context, we mean the context which does not depend for its existence upon another, wider context.<sup>11</sup> Thus chess depends for its existence upon the context provided by life, which is wider in the sense that chess is one of many possible rule-governed activities within life. And life depends for its existence on the wider context of the physical universe, which is wider in the sense that life is one of many possible types of physical phenomena within the universe. If life is meaningless, then, the final context is a context, such as that provided by the physical universe, in which life has no meaning.

Now possessing meaning in the final context might be thought an overly strong requirement for there to be a meaning of life, given that games provide our paradigm of overall purpose, whether or not they have meaning in the final context. However, the overall purpose of a game is something we can disengage from, while an overall purpose of life could not be something we could disengage from (though it might seem that we could), since that would make it an optional pursuit within life rather than something constitutive of life. Games are our invention, so it is always possible for us to stop allowing their goals to determine our behaviour. But since life is not our invention, any overall purpose it might possess would have to be something that determines the significance of our behaviour whether we like it or not; if life had an overall purpose, it would be like a game we could not stop playing. And this would only be possible if life had an overall purpose in the final context of existence, because if the purpose depended for its existence on a wider context which was not the final context, it would always be possible for us to disengage and yet continue living, thus showing that the purpose was not constitutive of life in the way in which the purpose of a game is constitutive of the game.

Thus the aliens we imagined may have invented us, but the existence of human life does not depend on their interpretation. That is why any account of our origins within the wider context of physical reality can have no bearing on the meaninglessness of life; the same reasoning would show that our overall purpose cannot be to pass on our genes. Rather, for our lives to be meaningful, our physical existence itself would have to be meaningful, which would mean that it would require a certain interpretation in

order to exist as that physical existence, just as moves within a game require a certain interpretation in order to exist as those moves. This could only be the case if there were meaning in the final context.

If our lives did have a purpose in the final context, then, the physical universe could not be the final context, since it is not a context of meaning. Rather, there would have to be a wider context of meaning beyond the physical universe, on which the existence of the physical universe depended. There would have to be a context of meaning that *transcended* the spatiotemporal world. This transcendent context would provide reasons for the existence of the physical universe, just as the existence of chess in the wider context of life provides reasons for the existence of chess pieces and boards. And if there were reasons for the existence of the physical universe, there might also be reasons for the existence of human life; human life might still be irrelevant to the meaning of the universe, but a transcendent context is nevertheless what would be required to provide our lives with overall purpose.<sup>12</sup>

That a meaning of life would require reality to transcend the physical universe, once more highlights the connection between nihilism and the fact of existence (Chapter 1, Section 5). For if the universe really were transcended in this way, then sense might not be limited after all; perhaps then the principle of sufficient reason could be accepted without restriction, and explanation would culminate in perfect intelligibility. Crucially, we might no longer have to accept the 'absolute, and consequently perfect gratuitousness' that gave Sartre nausea, and which has provided the impetus to most of the bleak assessments of life in philosophy since Nietzsche.<sup>13</sup> For with a transcendent context of meaning in place, there might be a reason for reality which would allow the natural world to take on the character of a human artefact brought into existence for a purpose, rather than something that just happens to exist.

Thus for the apparent contingency of reality to conceal an underlying purpose, the world as we know it must be transcended; as Wittgenstein put it, 'all happening and being-so is accidental. What makes it non-accidental cannot lie *in* the world, for otherwise this would again be accidental. It must lie outside the world'.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, given that everything we know about on the basis of experience exists within the physical universe, the possibility of a wider context might seem to be nothing more than an abstract possibility arrived at by a process of reasoning about what would be required if life were to have meaning; which is of course how we have just arrived at it.

As it transpires, however, this is not the case, for the concept of transcendence has been central to the history of philosophy since at least Parmenides, and various arguments have been made for the existence of a transcendent context based on considerations apparently quite independent from the motive of providing life with overall purpose, as we shall see in subsequent chapters. Moreover, given that the concept has been even more central to religion, we are evidently dealing here with something deeply rooted in our intellectual history, rather than just a curiosity.

What most clearly demonstrates that transcendence is not just an abstract possibility is the fact that we have a phenomenological model of it within ordinary life: through dreams. Dreams provide a model of transcendence because when we wake from them, the space and time of the dream are transcended by the space and time of a wider

context; as J. J. Valberg has demonstrated, from the point of view of a dream, waking life is a transcendent context.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, the context the dream is placed within when we wake up is a transcendent context of meaning from the perspective of the dream, in which the significance of the dream is often immediately transformed. Thus, surprising as it might initially seem, we are in fact perfectly familiar with the phenomenology of emerging into a transcendent context in which the nature and significance of the experiences we have just been having are revealed to be quite different from what we might previously have expected.

So, for example, I might have a dream in which somebody is trying to break into my house, and I am trying to barricade the door to keep them out. When I awake, however, the significance of the situation is transformed: what I had thought was a threatening scenario in which I needed to repel an intruder is revealed to have been a dream brought on by my anxiety about an important letter I am due to receive. This kind of gestalt switch, in which we are suddenly able to see what was really going on, is the phenomenological basis for the transcendent challenge to nihilism, and has profoundly influenced all the major philosophical traditions; thus, for instance, we find Zhuangzi (Chuang Tzu) predicting that 'someday there will be a great awakening when we know that this is all a great dream.' Many of today's religious believers think something like this is going to happen.<sup>16</sup>

The possibility we are envisaging when we consider the transcendent challenge to nihilism, then, is of a kind we are already familiar with, and so something we can readily imagine; in outline at least. Thus we already know that on waking from a dream, we will find the space and time of the dream transcended, revealing the objects we had previously concerned ourselves with to be mere dream-objects, and the significance of the dream-situation to have been a borrowing from waking life. It takes no great leap of the imagination, then, to envisage the possibility that the physical universe might stand to a transcendent context in the same manner in which a dream stands to the context of waking life beyond the dream. Moreover, just as there is an experiential continuity between dreams and our waking lives – allowing us to wake from a dream, realize that we have been asleep, and consequently make new sense of the dream experiences – life itself might be akin to a dream in this respect also, in that we may one day 'wake up' from our lives in order to see them within a wider context, and thereby discover what has really been going on all along.

As to the question of what would be revealed in the transcendent context, the simple answer is that if life is like a dream, there is no reason we should expect to know, since a dreamer fully immersed in a dream typically does not know about the real world in which they are asleep in bed. Moreover, we have even less reason to expect to know about the transcendent context from the perspective of life than from a dream, for during the experiences we have when asleep, we typically forget our waking lives; but if life were a dream, we would have never even had a 'waking life' to start with; unless Plato was right that our transcendent lives precede our births. Leaving the latter story aside, however, the fact that a dream model of transcendence predicts our ignorance of the wider context serves only to make it more attractive, given that it is hard to come by any concrete suggestions as to what the overall purpose of human life might be. And the attractiveness of this model is increased still further by the fact that if we



were to 'wake' from life, this would presumably take place at the end of life, thereby transforming the significance of death – the greatest of human fears – from an end to a transition.

There exists a certain, persistent line of reasoning, however, which claims that even a transcendent context could not provide life with meaning. After all, the fact that a dream has a meaning within my waking life does not show that my dream has a meaning which accounts for its existence. And so if my life turns out to be one big dream, I might simply be 'waking up' to a new situation in which nihilism holds fast, thereby leading me to consider yet another transcendent hypothesis. It might seem, then, that Santayana was right when he said that 'existence is groundless, essentially groundless; for if I thought I saw a ground for it, I should have to look for a ground for that ground, *ad infinitum*. I must stop at the *quia*, the brute fact.'<sup>17</sup>

If this were right, the notion of an overall purpose to life could be ruled out on conceptual grounds, since for any purpose put forward, there would always be a legitimate further question about the purpose of serving that purpose, and so on, until we reached the brute fact of an existence for no purpose. This response betrays a lack of imagination, however, because the reason it is always possible for us to ask the further question may simply be that we are unaware of any context beyond the meaningless context of the physical universe; if the sense we can make of things were not limited by this context, the situation might be quite different. Thus if the physical universe were transcended by a final context of meaning, then an account of the purposes of things would not culminate in the brute fact of meaningless existence, but rather in the fact of purposeful existence. Consequently, it would make no more sense to ask a further question about the purpose of such a reality, than it would make sense – if the physical universe is the final context – to ask a further question about the purpose of the universe existing for no purpose; the answer in both cases would already have been grasped, making the further question redundant.

An overall purpose to reality is not conceptually ruled out, then, it is just that we are used to applying teleological concepts within a meaningless physical reality, in which our demands for a further purpose terminate only with the brute fact of existence for no purpose. If the whole universe were placed within a wider context, however, these explanations might go further, and there is no conceptual reason why they should not terminate in an overall purpose, rather as an explanation of a game, given entirely within the framework of the game, would terminate in the overall purpose of the game. We have no grounds to rule this out, because we have no grounds to suppose that only meaningless existence could provide the final context of existence, and any attempt to do so would simply show a failure to grasp the enormity of a transcendent hypothesis of meaning, which if true, could reasonably be expected to put everything in a new light.<sup>18</sup>

However, although we cannot rule out the possibility, we have no good reason to believe in it either.<sup>19</sup> For even if the physical universe does exist within a transcendent context, there is no reason this should be a context of meaning, or one in which human life has an overall purpose. All this is possible, but *possibility is cheap*. The real significance of a transcendent hypothesis of meaning is not the challenge it presents to nihilism, but rather that it provides us with an idea of what would be required for



nihilism to be false; an idea which is deeply rooted in our intellectual history, which is made tangible by our experience, and which people might understandably want to be true. The idea is naturally attractive, because our reasons for pursuing goals within life are ultimately rooted in our desires, and some human desires – especially those for eternal life and universal justice – cannot be satisfied within *our* lives; whatever may happen in the future. A transcendent hypothesis of meaning, however, offers up the prospect of a meaning of life which satisfies them already; it is an idea worthy of faith.

#### 4. Humanism

In response to the comment ‘Life’s a funny thing’, in Robert Wise’s film *I Want to Live!*, Susan Hayward’s character dismissively replies ‘Compared to what?’ This reply would have been just as telling had the comment been that life is absurd, or cruel, or exhilarating, its point being that all such evaluations depend for their sense on contrasts made within life, since there are no novel contrasts from which they might gain a new sense outside of life. The implication, of course, is that the comment is nonsense, and although this is not strictly true – since sense can be made of it – there is something in this line of thought to the extent that when we think through these kinds of comment on life, they no longer seem worth making. Thus many things happen within life, some of which are funny, absurd, cruel and so on, with the proportions differing in different lives. But when such evaluations are applied to life as a whole, the result is either to say something vacuous, such as that some funny things occur within life, or else to make an almost inevitably false, and in any event baseless generalization, such as that all lives involve more funny occurrences than boring or predictable ones. It might seem, then, that in claiming that life has no overall purpose, the nihilist is making a mistake of a similar kind.

This idea can be elaborated as part of a humanist challenge to nihilism, where we are using ‘humanist’ in one of its more familiar senses, to convey the belief that human beings need only rely upon each other to maintain institutions and standards once thought to rely upon non-human authority. Thus it might be argued that nihilism is simply a reaction to an essentially religious tradition of thought in which life was thought to derive its meaning from the transcendent context, and that once this model is rejected, meaning can be reconceived as something that human beings make for themselves. As the humanist sees it, then, nihilism and the belief that life has an overall purpose both share the same false premise, namely that life could only have meaning within a transcendent context, with the difference between the views turning solely on the question of whether there is such a context. But if we reject all such supernatural conceptions, however, and realize that meaning is an entirely human product, then rather than denying that life has a meaning, we will look instead to see if the notion can be applied within life, where there might be significant contrasts to be made between the meaning of different lives, or perhaps between lives that possess it and those that do not.

This humanist notion of the meaningfulness of life as something we construct within life is well-established within the collective consciousness, such that people

considered morally exemplary, the Gandhis and Mandelas of this world, are often held up as paradigms of what it is to lead a meaningful life, as sometimes are great scientists, artists and other high achievers; whereas somebody who spends most of his or her life alone in front of a television might be said to lead a meaningless life. This suggests that achievement – especially moral achievement – makes life meaningful, and that the meaning we bestow upon life comes in degrees, such that Gandhi lived a particularly meaningful life, the television-addict lives a more or less meaningless life, and somebody with an office job and an active social life might be said to live a fairly meaningful life; all of this fits in well with a certain contemporary ethos, which regards life as a resource we must expend with maximum efficiency by achieving great things and amassing a wide diversity of experiences. However, although this notion of meaning is readily conflated with moral worth and certain conceptions of the good life, it does in certain contexts seem to acquire its own distinctive content, as can be seen from the fact that morally reprehensible lives are not necessarily classed as meaningless (the ‘Hitler question’ we discussed in the introduction). This content seems to be best captured by the idea of contributing to a social narrative, since lives that are isolated or essentially self-directed are more likely to be described as meaningless, whereas those that make a difference to other lives are more likely to be considered meaningful.<sup>20</sup>

However, although social interactions provide individual lives with a meaning in the lives of others, this seems too fragmentary and inconclusive to provide any unifying narrative of the kind that would allow us to speak of a social meaning of life; somebody might think of their life as a pursuit of wealth in youth, love in middle age and adventure in old age, for instance, leaving it quite unclear what the social meaning of their life is supposed to be, even for those who happen to concur with the self-interpretations in question. This need for a unifying narrative within the humanist model was a major motivation for the notion of authenticity that arose in twentieth-century philosophy, the basic idea of which was that it is possible to take control of your existence by imposing an overall purpose upon it. Such a choice is typically said to be facilitated by reflection upon death, which allows us to conceive our existence as a whole; something with a start, middle and end that we can impose a narrative upon. This reflection is supposed to remind us of our ability to take control; because although we can allow chance and other people to effectively live our lives for us, we must each face our own death; and this reminds us that the preceding existence is equally our own possession and responsibility.

The fundamental problem with the humanist idea that we can provide our lives with a meaning is that to the extent that this is true, it is a meaning that exists within human life as a whole, rather than a meaning which human life possesses. Thus although individual lives might be said to be meaningful in virtue of our social interactions, the fact that social life itself lacks any meaning shows that the individual lives that make up that social life cannot have any meaning of their own. This should be clear from the fact that any meaning our lives acquire within society, or that we impose upon them ourselves, will always be something we can disengage from, and hence cannot be something that is constitutive of our existence; it is always possible for the socially engaged person to become a recluse, or for the authentic person to lose their resolve.

In response to this objection, the humanist might claim that the concept of the meaning of life can only be legitimately applied within the context of social life. However, this reasoning is immediately undercut by the fact that a human being can exist both inside and outside of social life, so that in referring to a human life, we need not make any reference to our social framework; as opposed to when we talk about an artefact such as a chair. Consequently, since any meaning our lives acquire from society is not constitutive of what it is to be a human being (if there is no wider context of meaning), and hence humans cannot succeed or fail in achieving the purpose of their existence in virtue of their interactions with society, the humanist cannot justify restricting the concept of the meaning of a human life to a social context. And they cannot deny the legitimacy of questioning the meaning of social life; or deny that since there is a clear sense in which social life serves no purpose, there is also a clear sense in which particular lives do not either. If there is no point building the house, then there is a sense in which there is no point in my helping to build it.

Moreover, the question of the meaning of social life is hardly an artificial question raised for no other reason than to provide an objection to the humanist proposal. Rather, it is the most natural question about the meaning of life that can occur to us. Thus when people first began to step back from their framework activities to raise the question of the meaning of life, what they were looking for – as is amply testified to by the phenomenon of religion – was a context into which human life as a whole might fit; they were interested in the meaning of their own, particular lives, of course, but only as an example of life in general. And it is patently obvious that they were not curious about social roles and evaluations. Now understanding a phenomenon within a wider context is usually the same as understanding its social role, but this cannot be the case when we are trying to understand the meaning of social life itself. Consequently, the notion of a context of meaning beyond life, far from being a spurious imposition on the question of the meaning of life, is an idea that cannot be avoided once the question has been raised.<sup>21</sup>

Rather than nihilism being enthralled to an otherworldly conception of meaning inherited from a religious tradition, then, nihilism is right to take the question at face value, but then deny there is any transcendent context of meaning; and it is humanism that really shows an allegiance to this tradition by assuming the need to provide life with a meaning, which is something it can manage only by changing the subject. And it clearly does change the subject, for even if my life has a strong social narrative that dovetails with various other lives from start to finish; or even if I rush forward to my death in imagination, thereby individualizing myself in order to impose my own choice of grand narrative; there remains a clear sense in which there would still be no overall point to my life. It may have a point within other lives, but only within other lives that have no point. Rather than such humanist proposals being ways of providing our lives with overall purpose, then, all they really amount to are suggestions for living; suggestions such as that we live socially engaged lives, or self-consciously narrate our lives, or perhaps actively avoid purposes and narratives, which was Camus's alternative suggestion. None of these have any claim over us in virtue of the kind of existence we have, however; we can take them or leave them.<sup>22</sup>

To get back to Susan Hayward's sassy riposte in *I Want to Live!*, then, although evaluations taking the form 'life is x' do tend to be either vacuous or false, there are nevertheless perfectly substantive, non-evaluative descriptions of this form, such as 'life is a biological phenomenon', or 'life evolved on Earth'; 'life has no overall purpose' is one of these. If you make the mistake of thinking that nihilism is evaluative and that this is a negative evaluation made on the grounds that only God's meaning could make our lives worthwhile, then the humanist's proposal to dismiss this evaluation does start to seem appealing. However nihilism simply states a fact about life, and all humanism does is obscure this by substituting a notion of social meaning that was never in dispute in the first place. Life has no overall purpose compared to what? Compared to games, to how things seem in the framework, and to how things might be if there is a wider context of meaning. We cannot give our lives this kind of purpose, but we do not need to anyway, because we have more localized and transitory purposes to occupy ourselves with.<sup>23</sup>

## 5. Relativism

A more radical challenge to nihilism that can be developed from humanism is provided by relativism. Thus in opposition to absolute claims to truth, justification or goodness, for example, relativists have argued that we may only legitimately speak of truth at a certain historical epoch, justification within a field of inquiry or goodness within a culture. The following is a memorable statement of one kind of relativism:

Tomorrow, after my death, some men may decide to establish Fascism, and the others may be so cowardly or slack as to let them do so. If so Fascism will then be the truth of man, and so much the worse for us.<sup>24</sup>

This comes from Sartre's lecture 'Existentialism is a Humanism', and indeed, relativism of this kind is an extension of humanistic thinking, since it is motivated by the idea that absolute conceptions of truth or morality tacitly presuppose a non-human standpoint from which our practices are evaluated; a standpoint which is a residue of religious thinking we could manage without. Thus Sartre's idea in this example is that in a future state in which the persecution of minorities is condoned, for instance, there would no longer be any perspective from which this counted as morally unacceptable; it is morally unacceptable to us, of course, but we would no longer be around, and so if we refuse to be seduced by the idea of a transcendent third party looking down and favouring our extinct opinion over that of the fascists, then we are invited to accept Sartre's conclusion that in this situation, fascism would be 'the truth of man'.

Relativism can be used to argue that nihilism is not an absolute truth, but could at best be a truth relative to some particular audience. Thus it is easy to imagine a certain kind of contemporary relativist claiming, for example, that nihilism is simply a reflection of developed capitalist society, in which technology has isolated us from our environment, and thereby removed the possibility of the kind of meaningful existence we used to enjoy; perhaps nihilism is the result of the fact that our relation to the

environment is now being mediated by a technology-based infrastructure that renders all of our activities optional, so that we no longer fit into any particular way of life, and are prone to disengage and regard life as pointless.<sup>25</sup> Or perhaps it might simply be claimed that nihilism is a transitory product of the collapse of religious faith in a certain sector of Western society. Either way, and whatever sociopolitical story is told, the moral the relativist wants to draw is that nihilism is not a truth applicable to every human being who has ever lived or ever will, but is rather true only for a certain group of people at a certain point in history.

If there is any relevance in these kinds of consideration, however, it is simply that we are now better placed than ever before to grasp an absolute truth, even if people will eventually be blinded to it by the advent of relativism and humanist conceptions of social meaning, just as people have always been blinded to it by faith in transcendent hypotheses. To see why relativism can have no bearing on nihilism, consider again Sartre's hypothetical fascist state that condones the persecution of minorities. Now the fascists may not want to talk about 'persecution', preferring, as they no doubt would, to put a positive spin on proceedings. But whether described in a positive light by them, or a negative light by us, exactly the same activities will be going on: certain people will be being rounded up, imprisoned, put under surveillance and so on. Thus when described from our differing moral perspectives, two different evaluations are made of the same physical events. Similarly, the fascists may describe a work of modernist art as degenerate and we may describe it as a masterpiece, in which case two different aesthetic evaluations are made of the same physical thing or event. Again, same thing or event, different evaluation. With this kind of evaluative disagreement, then, relativism is on its strongest ground, since the evaluation must belong to somebody, and yet if we step outside of the evaluations of particular societies, we find no further basis for an evaluation provided by the physical universe, making it hard to see on what basis the fascists' activities could be said to be wrong except, as the relativist suggests, our own or that of God. In the case of a disagreement that is not evaluative, however, the situation is quite different.<sup>26</sup>

Suppose the fascists believe that the world is flat; would this then be the 'truth of man'? In this case, of course, it seems obvious that it would not be, because our disagreement with the fascists is not over how to evaluate something, the underlying nature of which we can agree upon, but is rather about the underlying nature of the thing itself. What makes moral and aesthetic disagreements amenable to relativism is that they are normative disagreements about how people ought to respond to things and events; the fascists want to encourage the persecution of minorities and discourage the viewing of modernist art, whereas our society values the opposite kinds of behaviour. Non-evaluative disagreements, on the other hand, are not disagreements about how we should behaviourally interact with people and things, but are rather disagreements about what kinds of things and events exist. Given that such disagreements are not resolved by a decision about how we should live, then, but rather by the world itself, the fascist's belief could only be true if the Earth really were flat. And since whether or not it is flat is a matter quite independent of human society, the fact that everybody in this future society believes the Earth is flat cannot be enough to establish that it is.

If this distinction between evaluative and non-evaluative descriptions is accepted, then the challenge presented by relativism has been met, since nihilism provides a non-evaluative description, and hence one whose truth or falsity is not determined by the views of a particular society, but rather by a fact of the matter; namely whether or not the final context of existence is meaningful. However, there is a certain, extreme kind of relativism, influential from the 1960s onwards, which denies that there are any facts at all. According to this kind of view, the only reason we are inclined to think that the Earth is roughly spherical, irrespective of what the fascists think, is that we are illicitly applying our own standards of justification. However, since the fascists might have quite different standards of justification, so the argument goes, we have no right to assume that the kind of evidence which persuades us – such as Eratosthenes's calculations, Magellan's expedition, or satellite images – would also persuade the fascists. As such, given that our claim that the Earth is spherical presupposes standards of justification the fascists might reject, and that their standards would be the only ones in this hypothetical future, then perhaps the flatness of the Earth would become part of the new 'truth of man' after all.

Far-fetched as this kind of view may seem, the serious point behind it is that 'the only criterion we have for applying the word "true" is justification, and justification is always relative to an audience', as Rorty once put it.<sup>27</sup> Thus in judging that it is true that the Earth is spherical, we must be presupposing some standards of justification, and yet given the premise that these are standards the fascists reject, the relativist concludes that the Earth can only be said to be spherical relative to our standards, while it is flat relative to theirs. Without any neutral and definitive standards of justification to adjudicate between the fascists and us, then – of the sort that might be supplied by God – we are invited to conclude that we can never be justified in claiming that something is objectively true, since even truths about the physical world are relative to society. An alternative to this conclusion, defended by Rorty, is to claim that the Earth is spherical and hence the fascists are wrong, but to base this not on an objective truth about the Earth, but rather our 'ethnocentric' loyalty to the standards of justification prevalent in the contemporary West; given that the fascists would have their own ethnocentric loyalties, however, this is clearly just a variation on a theme.<sup>28</sup>

The basic flaw to this kind of relativism is that there are no genuine alternatives to our standards of justification in non-evaluative matters: human beings justify their beliefs about physical states of affairs through a combination of observation, induction and deduction.<sup>29</sup> Thus, for example, if we show the fascists some photographs taken from a satellite orbiting the Earth, they will be able to see that the Earth is spherical. This is quite unlike the moral case, where any evidence we might use to try to persuade them their practices are wrong – such as evidence of the suffering of the minorities they persecute, for instance – is likely to be something they already know about but interpret differently. For in showing them the satellite photographs, we would be showing them something incompatible with their beliefs according to our shared standards, since like us, they must form their views about shape on the basis of observation. Now the natural response for the relativist to make is that the photographs would also be open to differing interpretations, just like the evidence of suffering. The case is different, however, since to render the photographic evidence compatible with a flat Earth

would require more than just a different interpretation. Rather, the fascists would need to invoke some extraneous state of affairs, such as mysterious forces that alter photographs, systematic hallucinations or something similarly unlikely. But since any belief in such a state of affairs would also have to be based on observation, induction and deduction, these standards could simply be employed again to settle the matter, thereby demonstrating the overwhelming likelihood that the Earth is spherical.

Since the fascists would justify their beliefs in the same ways that we do, then, the relativist's premise that they might have alternative standards that would warrant their belief that the Earth is flat can be rejected; they may believe it is flat, but only because they lack our evidence. Thus given that certain kinds of evidence would justify a belief to any human audience, we can accept the relativist's point that our only criterion of truth is justification, but nevertheless claim that the best explanation of the fact that certain beliefs could be justified whatever views prevailed in society is that they are objectively true. This is not only the best explanation of why we could justify our beliefs to the fascists, but also of why they might be expected to come to our beliefs of their own accord. After all, if the fascists were to try to sail to the edge of the Earth, they would find themselves unable to reach it, and this is just one of many possible experiences capable of undermining their beliefs. And the best, and perhaps only, explanation of why there should be so much potential for doubt about the flatness of the Earth to arise of its own accord is that there is an objective fact about its shape which has nothing to do with society; the Earth itself opposes their view.

The kind of extreme relativism we have been considering overextends humanistic thinking by rejecting all objective truths; our religious heritage may be responsible for many aspects of our moral thinking, but it is not responsible for our belief in an independent world. However, more interesting than the view itself are the circumstances in which it came to prominence, namely in the immediate aftermath of the philosophy of the first half of the twentieth century which – under the influence of Nietzsche – had explored the possibility of an alternative to nihilism through notions such as authenticity. The driving force behind this kind of existentialist philosophy was the humanist idea that we do not need God to provide our lives with meaning, since we can provide the meaning ourselves. It was in this atmosphere, then, when philosophers were trying to get to grips with the thought that without a transcendent context of meaning provided by God there could be no objective truth determining the meaning of human life and our moral standards, that some took what must have seemed like the natural next step; one Nietzsche had already suggested. This was to deny that there is any objective truth whatsoever, such that nothing holds true independently of human opinion, and everything is endlessly open to interpretation and reinterpretation. This extreme relativism, which is sometimes called postmodernism, is the most recent stage in the intellectual flight from nihilism.

For those who saw the prospect of nihilism replacing religious meaningfulness as a threat – and were not satisfied that existentialism had neutralized this threat, in light of the negative assessments of life made by most of its proponents – the idea of dispensing with objective truth altogether must have held an immediate appeal. Since the meaninglessness of life could not then be an objective truth, only an optional interpretation.<sup>30</sup> This move was dressed up historically, as if it were the final liberation



from religious modes of thought; so that we find Derrida, for instance, talking about passing 'beyond man and humanism, the name of man being the name of that being who, throughout the history of metaphysics or of ontotheology . . . has dreamed of full presence, the reassuring foundation, the origin and the end of play'. What was right about the humanism that led to these postmodernist conclusions, was that human beings must take responsibility for the moral meaning of their own individual lives, and the moral codes of their societies; William James was right that life is what we make it from the moral point of view, and condemnations of life, of the kind associated with Schopenhauer, are either vacuous or false. What was wrong with the direction this humanist line of thought took, however, is that not everything about life is a construction; to the extent that Sartre was right that 'we *make ourselves* what we are', we can do so only with the existence that we find ourselves given over to, and about which there are numerous objective truths.<sup>31</sup>



## On What Philosophy Is

*After experience had taught me that all the usual surroundings of social life are vain and futile [ . . . ] I finally resolved to inquire whether there might be some real good having power to communicate itself, which would effect the mind singly, to the exclusion of all else . . .*

Benedict de Spinoza, 1662<sub>1</sub>

### 1. The persistence of philosophical questions

In the Epic of Gilgamesh, we find among people to whom civilization was still a novelty, an instinctive concern with the themes to which nihilism would eventually provide an answer; the plot of the standard version has the following outline.<sup>2</sup> King Gilgamesh has achieved great things and built up a secure and civilized way of life for his subjects, but in his unchallenged pre-eminence he has turned to tyranny and decadence. His people ask the gods for protection, and they oblige by creating Enkidu, a wild man who lives among the animals. Enkidu soon becomes civilized and befriends Gilgamesh, inspiring him to set off on dangerous and heroic quests in search of eternal fame. When Enkidu dies, however, Gilgamesh acquires such an unbearable fear of death that he sets out on a new quest to find the secret of immortal life. After racing against time along the path of the Sun God, he ferries across the Waters of Death to meet Uta-napishti, an immortal king. Uta-napishti explains that the circumstances which brought about his own immortality were unique, and tells Gilgamesh to accept the inevitability of death, appreciate his privileges as a king, and go back to performing his proper duties. Discouraged, Gilgamesh prepares for the homeward journey, but just before he leaves, Uta-napishti tells Gilgamesh about a magical plant that grants immortality. Gilgamesh finds it, a snake subsequently steals it, and then finally realizing the futility of fleeing death he returns home by ferry, where he proudly shows the ferryman the city he founded.

The people this story arose from, the first city dwellers possessed of the earliest written languages, had relatively recently – like Enkidu – come from the wild, and thus attained an unprecedented distance from biological imperatives: they had achieved enough security and stability in a complex collective life that they could invest considerably more time in reflecting and setting their own imperatives. What their minds immediately turned to was the question of what they should be doing with

their lives, and they asked this question in the company of Enkidu, newly civilized and thus able to choose, and Gilgamesh, who had lately been making the wrong choices. This question is made more urgent by the appearance of futility to human endeavour in light of our mortality; Gilgamesh gives voice to this when he says, 'As for man, [his days] are numbered, whatever he may do, it is but wind'.<sup>3</sup> This thought, later to be developed in *Ecclesiastes*, instinctively connects finitude with futility, just as we still do when considering activities such as building an ice-sculpture or house of cards; all the effort that goes into the building seems wasted on something so transient.

Gilgamesh's initial response to finitude is to try to achieve something that will be remembered after his death. The death of Enkidu, however, brings it home to him that the remembrance of others will not prevent his death, which is what concerns him most, and at this point reflections on the meaning of life, the futility of transient activities and fear of death come together as Gilgamesh decides that what he should really be doing is trying to find a way to avoid death; the Abrahamic religions were later to conceive of life as provided with meaning by just such a quest, since by living according to God's will, the believer hopes to gain eternal life. Gilgamesh's quest fails, however, and so he learns to reconcile himself to the transitory pleasures and duties of life, a lesson made poignant in a variant of the epic in which Gilgamesh is advised to 'Make merry each day, dance and play day and night! [ . . . ] Gaze on the child who holds your hand, let your wife enjoy your repeated embrace!'.<sup>4</sup>

Gilgamesh becomes wise, then, when he stops trying to escape from time and comes to appreciate everything finite life has to offer, as well as what it demands of him. At first he regards our ordinary projects as irrelevant when doom is on the horizon, reasoning that the only worthwhile project is the quest for eternal life; but he comes to regard this quest as illusory, thereafter returning to normal life with his attitude transformed. The Epic seems to be telling us, moreover, that we must each discover this for ourselves, since even after Gilgamesh has been told that his quest cannot succeed he still has to try once more – with the magical plant – before he can accept it.<sup>5</sup>

There are many aspects of the Epic that can only be understood by reference to ancient Mesopotamian culture, as is only to be expected from such a remote text. However this does not detract from the fact that some of the questions raised by these people, within their magical, pre-scientific world-view, are universal enough for us to recognize straight away. This is because the questions never left us, namely questions about the meaning of life, and what we should be doing with our finite measure of existence. That such questions arise for beings like us seems inevitable, for once we had developed the leisure and sophistication to reflect, we were destined to find ourselves in the thick of life, with no idea why we were there or what we were there for. Any historicist thesis claiming that these questions are simply the product of our particular, contingent past, would have to contend with the endless renewability of the conditions that generate the questions, given that new people are born every day who may one day break free of the presupposed meaning provided by their upbringing, and find themselves existing, caught up in a time that carries them to death, and capable of steering their lives in any number of different directions. Maybe we do not have to think in such a way that these questions arise, but so far as we know we always have, and unless major changes take place to our way of life, the questions will remain.

Now if we ask within a contemporary context to which areas of concern these questions belong, then the answer is obvious; they are the concerns of religion and philosophy. There are other disciplines that may provide some insight into the form these questions take and our readiness to ask them, such as sociology and cognitive science perhaps, but the questions themselves are religious and philosophical questions, or better, philosophical questions to which religions have always provided answers. Philosophy is the area of culture to which we would expect to be able to look for rational and impartial approaches to these questions, both to analysing their import and demarcating possible answers; while religion, on the other hand, offers set answers – rationally debated and interpreted – promoted on the basis of faith and the authority of sacred texts and traditions. Let us say, then, that questions concerning human finitude and the meaning of life are paradigmatically philosophical questions, to which religions have provided the best-known and most widely believed answers. These questions have persisted since the dawn of civilization, and are renewed within each new generation by those that feel the need to answer them.

## 2. What is philosophy?

If we think that the Epic of Gilgamesh is concerned with philosophical questions, we must also think that philosophical questions were being asked long before the official beginning of philosophy. There is nothing surprising in this, for people asked historical and geological questions before anything like a discipline was established in these areas, and our judgement that these are philosophical questions is patently consequent upon the fact that the thinkers who gave us our notion of ‘philosophy’ did concern themselves with them. However the question of the meaning of life has been eclipsed within the history of philosophy by more manifest concerns with metaphysics, epistemology and morality: with the nature of reality, our ability to know it and the basis of moral conduct. In recent years it has all but disappeared.

This raises the question of what the unifying subject-matter of philosophy is, such that philosophers should concern themselves with metaphysics, epistemology, ethics and the themes in the Epic we recognize as philosophical. And yet although the question naturally arises, there is no simple, rule-of-thumb answer to it, despite the fact that such answers are readily available for other disciplines; when definitional precision is required, academic quibbles can arise concerning the nature of any discipline, but with philosophy there is not even any obvious starting point. It has become so far from obvious what philosophy is the study of, in fact, that philosophers have even designated a sub-division of their discipline, ‘metaphilosophy’, to reflecting on the nature of philosophy. Some have even said that philosophy is distinctive in that the question of the nature of philosophy is itself a philosophical question.<sup>6</sup>

If metaphilosophy were a part of philosophy, then on the face of it at least, the range of subject-matters it could deal with would be very limited indeed. Philosophy could not be the study of *the fundamental nature of reality*, for instance, for then metaphilosophy would study *the study of the fundamental nature of reality*, rather than *the fundamental nature of reality*, and hence would not be philosophical. To avoid this

kind of obstacle, metaphilosophy would have to study this subject-matter in a different way to first-order philosophy, which is the approach we shall ultimately take. But leaving this option aside for the moment, the only alternative would be for philosophy to have an extremely general subject-matter, as for example if it were said to be the study of concepts; since metaphilosophy could then count as philosophical in virtue of studying the concept of philosophy. However, this would be too broad, because many concepts, such as 'offside' in football, are evidently not of philosophical interest. Parallel problems arise for any subject-matter broad enough to straightforwardly maintain the claim that metaphilosophy is part of philosophy.

An alternative approach would be to abandon the view that philosophy has any distinctive subject-matter, and instead conceive the discipline as united by methodology. This would render an investigation philosophical if it employed the appropriate methodology, and hence would allow for there to be a philosophy of almost anything, from philosophy itself to sport or wine; tacitly, at least, this idea has been gaining popularity in recent years.<sup>7</sup> The problem with it, however, is that many different methodologies have been advocated in the history of philosophy, such as radical doubt, phenomenological description, conceptual analysis and most recently, experimentation, and so to alight on any of these to the exclusion of the others is bound to amount to partisanship, rather than a serious attempt to determine what is distinctive about philosophy. Moreover, even if it is true that we are able to recognize a discussion as philosophical in virtue of its methodology, this is only because we recognize the methodology from discussions in which the subject-matter *is* philosophical; a parallel response could be made to the claim that we recognize discussions as philosophical only on account of their writing style or the authors they refer to.<sup>8</sup>

A methodological answer will not tell us what unites the topics and concerns from which the methodologies sprang, then. But it is subject-matter above all else that provides a discipline with its voice; evolutionary biologists and psychologists can talk about sport or wine too, but the interest of what they have to say as experts, rather than simply laypeople, derives from their knowledge of evolutionary biology or psychology. If philosophy also has something distinctive to say, then, it seems clear that this must be because of its subject-matter, with the wide range of methodologies it has employed best interpreted – as they most naturally are – as evidence of disagreement over how to approach that subject-matter.

Since using philosophy to determine the nature of philosophy invites a partisanship which presupposes exactly what it sets out to determine, I think we must recognize that metaphilosophy is not necessarily a kind of philosophy. If we want to determine the nature of philosophy even-handedly, we should not simply get on with philosophical business as usual, but rather engage in general reflection of the sort that occurs in many areas of life, not just philosophy; we need to reflect upon the current practice and history of philosophy, in order to try to discover a unifying subject-matter; which is the same sort of thing we would do to determine the nature of any discipline. Once we know this subject-matter, however, we can then engage in second-order reflection upon it in order to ask why it leads us to certain kinds of philosophical conclusions. And since this is a way of investigating the subject-matter itself, it is a kind of metaphilosophy that does deserve to be called philosophy; when we are in a position to do this, we will

no longer just be investigating the study of the subject-matter, but also what it is about that subject-matter which makes the study proceed in the way it does.<sup>9</sup>

When we engage in the kind of general and not specifically philosophical reflection required, however, a familiar kind of scepticism immediately takes hold. A good place to start is with the name of the discipline, coming from the Greek for 'love of wisdom', since until relatively recently this term was applied indiscriminately to all areas of learning, as seems appropriate to its literal meaning. As such, 'philosophy' was not originally conceived as a name for a discipline with a distinctive subject-matter, which is clear from the fact that the Greek philosophers had many interests apart from those we would now consider philosophical; Aristotle is widely recognized as the founder of biology, for instance. The narrowing of the meaning of 'philosophy' occurred through the increasing specialization of knowledge, as independent disciplines, and particularly sciences, developed to take over discussion of topics that were once the domain of more general scholars. The topics that remained, and hence were not either taken up by a new discipline or abandoned, are those we now regard as philosophical, with the historical figures we regard as philosophers being those who made important contributions to these topics; their contributions to mathematics and science, for instance, are now chiefly of concern in the history of mathematics and science.<sup>10</sup>

The fact that the topics philosophy deals with have been largely untouched by the advance of science, raises the suspicion that they may have nothing in common except our inability, at present at least, to treat them scientifically; this would certainly explain why the subject-matter of philosophy is not readily apparent. This kind of view is reminiscent of Comte's claim that 'each branch of our knowledge, passes successively through three different theoretical stages: the theological or fictitious, the metaphysical or abstract, and the scientific or positive', with 'philosophy' as we now understand it, corresponding to Comte's second, 'metaphysical or abstract' stage, prior to science.<sup>11</sup> Philosophy might thus be understood as an *a priori*, speculative stage of inquiry, which offers an improvement on mythological or religious explanations, but which is destined for eventual replacement by a properly regimented programme of empirical research. Such a view is supported by recent history, given that both psychology and cognitive science, founded in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries respectively, originated from *a priori* philosophical theorizing before becoming established, and then leaving behind the founding assumptions of their philosophical originators.

This view of philosophy as *a priori* speculation about topics we are unable to treat scientifically at present – a breeding ground for proto-sciences with no real area of expertise to call its own – is a common one. But there are two problems with it. The first is that the traditional core of metaphysical and epistemological problems characteristic of the discipline, do not form the kind of disparate list this view would lead you to expect. Rather, questions about appearance and reality, representation and knowledge and so on, do seem to form a cohesive subject-matter. This impression of unity is reinforced by the fact that philosophers from the Greeks onwards have grouped their treatments of these topics together within unified texts; the core topics of the contemporary discipline were not generally extracted and pieced together from works giving equal prominence to scientific and mathematical matters. And the second problem with the view is that when we consider these traditional problems, it is hard to see how they

could be dealt with in any way apart from through a priori reflection. In recent years, some philosophers have found a role for experimentation in philosophy. But although this certainly adds 'another tool to the philosopher's toolbox', which is valuable, most notably, for the check it provides on baseless claims to the intuitive high ground which can sometimes play an important role in motivating philosophical positions, there nevertheless seems to be no prospect of empirically determining whether consciousness is physical or we can know the world as it is in itself, for instance. This seems a matter of principle, rather than the result of a temporary shortfall in science.<sup>12</sup>

Taken together, these considerations suggest that there is something distinctive about the subject-matter of philosophy that has prevented philosophical questions from being investigated scientifically. If this is right, however, then another strand of Comte's positivism suggests itself, namely scepticism about the legitimacy of philosophical problems.<sup>13</sup> Much of the impetus for this kind of scepticism results from the combination of the paradigmatic problems of philosophy often involving factual matters, such as the nature of perception or time; and its a priori methodology, which typically involves a lone philosopher simply reflecting on the matter – albeit in the company of previous reflections, and with the intention of subjecting his or her reflections to the criticisms of others.<sup>14</sup> Attempts to work out how the world works through reflection alone, however, have seemed suspicious ever since the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century, in which quantitative, mathematical approaches gradually came to replace the use of a priori reasoning framed within imprecise natural language; the contrast between the a priori reflections of philosophers, and the empirical methodology of science, is highlighted by certain conspicuous attempts, now immediately recognizable as misguided, that philosophers made to practise natural science a priori, as for example in Descartes's *The World*, and in later works of *Naturphilosophie*, such as Schelling's *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature*.<sup>15</sup>

Given that the ascendancy of empirical methodology led to an exponential growth in human knowledge, any suggestion that it is distinctive of philosophical problems that they cannot be dealt with scientifically as a matter of principle, naturally generates suspicion about the cogency of these problems; perhaps the paring down of 'philosophical' concerns that delivered the contemporary discipline really amounted to a steady hiving off, the remainder from which is a residue of archaic pseudo-problems. This suspicion is heightened by the notorious lack of progress in philosophy: for an academic discipline that arguably predates all others, and has been contributed to by some of the most celebrated thinkers of all time, philosophy has apparently enjoyed an astonishing lack of success in solving its problems. All the main ones remain thoroughly controversial, and most of the principal positions taken on them in mediaeval and ancient times survive within contemporary debates in clearly recognizable form. Thus unlike science – which builds on what came before and then forgets it, such that it would be unthinkable for a leading physicist to bring ancient Greek or early modern physics into a contemporary discussion – the history of philosophy seems inseparable from its current practice, and leading philosophers do often defend positions that are explicitly Platonic, Aristotelian or Kantian. Moreover, it is not just that none of the central problems of philosophy has been solved to anything like universal satisfaction, for there are not even any historically important positions that have been definitively

disproved; the belief that the mind is a separate substance which controls the body is one of the most unpopular theories in contemporary philosophy, for instance, and yet it still has its distinguished defenders, and any sensible bookmaker would keep the odds on a twenty-first century renaissance of Cartesian dualism relatively low.<sup>16</sup>

Of course, each new generation of philosophers claims to have solved some problems, or at least to have made progress on them, but there are always counterclaims and competing approaches, and the next generation always seems to be dissatisfied. This lack of steady progress does not necessarily indicate that the problems are illusory or insoluble, for it may simply be that the kind of methodology required for work on the problems to proceed as an *a priori* science has yet to be developed, or has perhaps only been developed relatively recently; this latter kind of claim has been made regularly within philosophy ever since Kant.<sup>17</sup> However, another reason to think that the problem is indeed with the problems, and one which is particularly hard to ignore, is that the most powerful voices to raise suspicions about philosophical problems have been philosophers themselves. Arguably the two most influential philosophers of the twentieth century, namely Wittgenstein and Heidegger, fall squarely into this camp.

Wittgenstein was famously disdainful of philosophy, regarding it as a form of intellectual disease that he needed to free himself from in order to pursue a better, more ordinary life; philosophical problems, in his developed view, were an illusion of language, to be cured through a special kind of therapy requiring us to return to everyday forms of discourse in which the problems do not arise. As such, traditional philosophical problems were not to be solved, but rather avoided, or if necessary, diagnosed and treated. Heidegger, on the other hand, came to regard these problems as an unavoidable stage in the historical development of a metaphysical interpretation of the world that began with Plato and culminated in the technological understanding of the world provided by science; as he once put it, 'the development of philosophy into the independent sciences . . . is the legitimate completion of philosophy'.<sup>18</sup> In his developed view, it was a mistake to try to solve or overcome these problems – as he himself had earlier tried to do by using reflection upon everyday practices to provide an alternative to the metaphysical interpretation of the world – since the problems were characteristic of their historical epoch, and needed only to be passively reflected upon in order to maintain the kind of openness, or *Gelassenheit*, that would allow a new, non-manipulative understanding to naturally develop. Thus although Heidegger was not in the least disdainful of philosophy, but rather considered it of the utmost importance, he still saw no prospect of its problems being solved, and regarded continuing attempts to solve them as misguided.

The end of philosophy themes that emerge in these iconic figures of the twentieth century are not isolated, but rather symptomatic of philosophy's long developing suicidal tendencies, which have been out in the open since Comte, and became a focus of twentieth-century movements such as logical positivism, ordinary language philosophy, pragmatism and deconstruction. A milder scepticism about philosophical problems has even been absorbed by the mainstream, to the extent that traditional problems are rarely taken at face value any more, with the standard approach being to try to unravel them, thereby showing that it is only on the basis of faulty assumptions or reasoning that we come to think there are problems in the first place.



Thus philosophers of perception try to show that our naïve view of perception is the correct one; philosophers of language try to show that there is nothing substantive to say about truth; and philosophers of mind try to show that the mind-body problem is an illusion.<sup>19</sup> This development does not bode well for the future of the discipline, however, since it is increasingly coming to seem that philosophers are the only ones taking the steps in need of unravelling, given that many people today, whose world-view is shaped by science, often seem unwilling to understand philosophical problems, and are ready to express their lack of understanding not in deference to the expertise of philosophers, as might have previously been the case, but rather aggressively, with the implication that there is nothing to understand.<sup>20</sup> Philosophy's internalization of scepticism about its problems makes this stance particularly difficult to defend against; why learn to empathize with a problem if doing so consists in being lured into a trap from which you must subsequently learn to escape?

In light of the fact that problems requiring us to take a stance on the nature of the world through a priori reflection are naturally viewed with suspicion within our intellectual culture, that philosophy has apparently failed to make progress on its problems, and that one of the most persistent trends in philosophy's history is the suspicion that its problems are illusory, there is plenty of reason for scepticism about philosophy. Nevertheless, institutionally at least, the discipline is healthier today than ever before, in that there are more professional philosophers, students, journals, academic and popular books, and philosophy has successfully transferred online to continue its exponential growth. In short, according to most objective measures, the discipline is thriving, with the metaphysical optimists apparently able to thrive alongside the pessimists; constructive metaphysics, spurned throughout much of the last century, is enjoying a renaissance, thereby reinvigorating pessimism to the effect that metaphysical disputes are 'merely verbal', with a new form of pessimism on the rise in which scientific findings, such as those of cognitive science, are adduced to challenge traditional philosophical methods and assumptions.<sup>21</sup> And all the while, there are some philosophers who continue to regard their subject as a fledging science; some who regard it as a form of literature that should celebrate the open-ended nature of its discussion; some who think that it deals with insoluble mysteries; and there are even those who would seek to explain the activities of philosophers in terms of psychoanalysis or sociology.<sup>22</sup>

Amid all of these competing agendas, approaches and self-images, it is no easy matter to discern a unifying subject-matter of philosophical inquiry. But if we do want to persevere with the question 'what is philosophy?', there are certain key points, broached in the preceding discussion, that it will help to keep in mind:

1. Questions concerning the meaning of human existence are paradigmatically philosophical.
2. The history of philosophy has been centrally concerned with questions of metaphysics and epistemology.
3. Philosophy was not conceived as a discipline, but rather deals with problems left behind by the development of independent sciences.
4. The problems that remain seem to form a unified subject-matter.



5. These problems seem to only be amenable to a priori reflection.
6. Philosophy has apparently made little progress with these problems; in combination with (5), this generates metaphilosophical scepticism.

But why should we persevere with the question? One reason is that we need to know what philosophy is to assess scepticism about its problems. But another equally important reason is that we already implicitly know enough about philosophy – from even the most cursory acquaintance with the concerns and aspirations of the great philosophers of the past – to know that if our culture is to contain any areas of self-conscious practice, philosophy must be surely one of them. For it would be absurd if philosophers, of all people, were simply engaging with inherited puzzles without knowing why they were doing so; and more absurd still if the reasons were always as inconsequential as that the puzzles are interesting (as train-spotting is to some people) or that addressing certain traditional questions is a prerequisite for career advancement.<sup>23</sup> Ideally, at least, a philosopher should be somebody with a clear grasp of their aims in thinking and writing, and a substantive justification to offer for them.

### 3. Enframement and ontology

The answer provided to the question ‘what is philosophy?’ in this section and the next will address the points listed above. Its leading idea is that philosophy begins in, and remains rooted in, the kind of questions already to be found exercising the authors of the Epic, namely questions about the meaning of life. It was in trying to answer these questions that the concept of transcendence was introduced into our thinking about the world, and the employment of this concept produced what was eventually to become the core epistemological and metaphysical subject-matter of a distinctive discipline. The concept of transcendence allows us to think of the familiar world we perceive as a potentially misleading appearance of a more fundamental reality. This concept is familiar from its employment within some of the most influential of all philosophical theories, such as in Plato’s distinction between the perceived world of becoming and the ideal world of being, Kant’s distinction between the empirically real world and things-in-themselves, Laozi’s idea that the unitary and undifferentiated reality of *Dao* transcends perception, and the Buddhist notion that true reality transcends the perceived world. It is an essential ingredient in formulating many of the traditional problems of philosophy, and remains in the background of recent debates even where the aim is to extricate it from our thinking.

Now the concept of transcendence is evidently not implicated in all and only philosophical debates, and neither do all such debates bear upon the kinds of mortal concern we find evidenced in the Epic. However, if we understand the concept of philosophy as a prototype concept, that is, as a structured representation which encodes a statistical analysis of the features that items in the extension of the concept tend to possess, then we need only claim that prototypical philosophical concerns relate either to concerns about the meaning of life, broadly construed, or to concerns raised by employing the concept of transcendence; with other concerns counting

as philosophical in virtue of their association, whether for conceptual or historical reasons, with these prototypes.<sup>24</sup> Philosophy cannot be said to have one thing in common, then, as was to be expected given its long and complex history. But it does centre on two prototypical concerns; and once the connection between them is understood, we have more than enough unity to speak of a distinctive subject-matter of philosophy.

Connections between the meaning of life and hypotheses of a transcendent reality are not only found in philosophy, of course, since they have also been a mainstay of religious belief. A good part of the reason for this is rooted in our standard patterns of explanation, since in seeking to explain puzzling phenomena within life, we typically invoke a context of meaning into which the phenomena can be placed. In trying to understand human life as a whole, then, it is only to be expected that we should have sought to employ the same form of explanation that usually serves us so well, and that this should have led us to look beyond the human context. As such, religions have typically hypothesized contexts of meaning supplied by supernatural gods, which can then be appealed to in answering practical concerns about how we ought to act and organize our societies. Thus our patterns of explanation provide a natural route to hypotheses of wider meaning; the discipline of philosophy was only able to emerge, however, when a whole host of other routes were discovered.

Let us call a question about the context of meaning into which something fits a question of 'enframing'. Thus if we want to understand the meaning of a particular practice, we do so by framing it within the wider context of social life; and if we want to understand the meaning of human life, we look to frame it within a wider context than that provided by our social framework. When people first tried to systematically understand the world, then, we can assume that questions of enframing were at the forefront of their minds. This is because we know the questions dominated our earliest literature, that religion has dominated human civilization since its beginnings, and that our standard patterns of explanation naturally lead us to the assumption that there might be a reason why we exist. Moreover since answering large-scale enframing questions might reasonably be expected to tell us how to act and organize our societies, it seems likely that the questions have been with us for almost as long as the practical concerns themselves.

Now enframing is obviously not all we would want to know about in a world full of puzzling natural phenomena; and we know it was not from the fact that early literature also shows a preoccupation with meteorology, astronomy, anatomy, physics and many other areas of concern which contribute to a general understanding of how nature works. This agenda of trying to explain the natural world, which was eventually to become the preserve of science, seems to have been the primary concern of those thinkers traditionally regarded as the first Western philosophers, namely the Milesian cosmologists. The way they went about pursuing it was to have a definitive influence on both the history of science and philosophy, for their innovation was to look for a basic constituent, or series of constituents, from which everything in the universe is composed or can be explained. This is an idea that lives on in the scientific assumption that everything is composed of, or can be explained in terms of, elementary physical particles and forces. But it also lives on in philosophical debates about fundamental

categories; debates about whether universals exist in addition to particulars, for example, or whether mind can be reduced to matter.

Let us call a question about the basic constituents of reality a question of 'ontology'. Now if we think of philosophy in the original, expansive way – and thus as encompassing everything we would now count as science or philosophy – then we can say that philosophy was originally driven by questions of both ontology and enframing; we wanted to know what exists and why it exists. These two concerns would have been closely connected from the outset, not only because supernatural enframing can be invoked to explain natural phenomena, but also because ontological issues are directly relevant to large-scale questions of enframing. Thus in order to determine whether there is a meaning of life, a natural place to start is with the ontological question of whether there are any gods to provide a wider framework within which human life exists. However, although questions of enframing naturally lead into ontology, it was not until the concept of transcendence entered the mix that these issues began to be united in the new and distinctive way that was to give rise to the discipline of philosophy as we now understand it.

It is immediately after the initial phase of Milesian cosmology that we find the concept of transcendence introduced by Parmenides; this was a crucial stage in the development of the discipline, since Parmenides had a definitive influence on Plato, and Plato had a definitive influence on the subsequent history of Western philosophy. Parmenides introduced transcendence by arguing that the concept of non-existence is irrevocably confused, and that if we purge our understanding of it, we arrive at a new understanding of reality quite unlike anything we had previously supposed; thus we discover, for instance, that reality has no past or future and is unchanging. What was important about Parmenides's thinking was not so much the argument he employed, as the general form of the conclusion he reached. For the clear implication of claiming that change is illusory is that the changing world we observe in daily life is merely apparent: reality has been reconceived as something which transcends or exists beyond illusory appearance, and which can only be apprehended by reason.

Parmenides's claim that reality is not what perception and common sense lead us to suppose, opened up the space of transcendence. One of the most important consequences of this new way of thinking – which had a profound effect on the development of religion – was to make it possible to conceive of the hypothesis of a meaning of life in terms of transcendent enframing; the hypothesis of a wider context of meaning, after all, is much weaker than the hypothesis that space and time are transcended, and is more readily conceived as the existence of powerful beings within *our* space and time. This development consequently proved well-suited to the natural presumption against nihilism which the framework and our patterns of explanation provide, since it made the fact that there is little suggestion of a wider context of meaning to be found in the observable world seem irrelevant to questions of enframing, given that the wider context could now be thought of as transcending the entire physical universe and hence anything we might discover within it. In addition, the introduction of transcendence made it possible for the idea that human life fits into a wider context to be modelled on a phenomenon that was already a familiar, but suitably mysterious, part of our lives, namely dreaming; it is no coincidence that

Parmenides sets out his doctrine in a dream-like context in which he is required to pass through 'the gates of the paths of Night and Day' to learn the truth from a goddess, whose presence is itself indicative of a wider context of enframement.<sup>25</sup>

Another consequence of Parmenides's introduction of transcendence was that it reconfigured the relationship between questions of enframement and ontology. Thus although questions of enframement had always naturally led into questions of ontology, the recognition of the possibility of transcendent enframement raised new and distinctive types of ontological questions, concerning whether the physical universe provides the final context of existence, and whether the basic constituents of the physical universe are the basic constituents of reality itself. These are the kind of philosophical questions we now think of as ontological, as opposed to scientific questions about what the basic constituents of the physical universe are; in Milesian cosmology the distinction had yet to be made, hence its ambiguous status between science and philosophy. And in turn, these new ontological questions raised new types of epistemological questions about whether we can know reality itself, or only an illusion that reality transcends.

When Plato took up the idea of transcendence from Parmenides, one of his most important innovations was to supply a model of the relationship between the familiar world of everyday life and the unfamiliar world of transcendent reality. Thus, echoing Parmenides, he distinguished the illusory world of perception from the transcendent reality we can only know intellectually; but his crucial addition was to relate these worlds by claiming that the perceived is a mere copy of the transcendent. This introduced the concept of representation into philosophy, which has remained one of its central preoccupations. In addition, he made the connection between questions of enframement and ontology considerably more explicit by finding ways to directly employ Parmenides's thesis of transcendence to answer questions of enframement.

Thus Plato makes it the basis of his explanation of 'why the creator made this world of generation', with the explanation centring on the creator's desire to copy his own transcendent goodness.<sup>26</sup> And more famously, he makes it central to his political and moral theories, in which it is the philosophers' knowledge of transcendent reality which qualifies them to tell us how we ought to live. Ancient non-Western philosophies made much the same move, by claiming that we need to think beyond the perceptual world to find guidance in understanding the purpose of our lives. Thus for Laozi, conformity to the *Dao* – which is hidden from perception – provides moral guidance by inculcating otherwise overlooked virtues such as inactivity; while Buddhist thought teaches us to detach ourselves from the illusory world of perception to achieve tranquillity and salvation.

Although ontology and enframement are tightly interwoven within Plato's philosophy, the Western philosophical tradition was ultimately to develop a purely ontological interest in such matters. Thus the problem of universals is still worked on today just as it was in medieval and ancient times; and yet although descendents of Plato's views remain at the centre of debates – as do some of his arguments – Platonic realism is now almost always dissociated from the metaphysics of transcendence, and connections to enframement are rarely if ever made. The vast majority of participants to contemporary debates about the relative merits of realism and nominalism would

not suppose for a moment that these debates have any bearing upon questions about how we ought to live.<sup>27</sup> Rather, such debates have long since taken on the veneer of disinterested scientific inquiry, with the motivation for continuing them – to the extent that this ever arises as an issue – simply being to resolve an acknowledged philosophical problem, while possibly making progress on others as a result.

Other problems opened by Plato's account of transcendence have developed along similar lines. Thus the traditional opposition between materialists who 'define reality as the same thing as body', and idealists who hold that 'true reality consists in certain intelligible and bodiless forms', has resurfaced in innumerable ways since Plato's time, most notably in modern mind-body dualism, which remains at the root of debates about the nature of consciousness and the efficacy of psychological properties.<sup>28</sup> In all these cases and more, then, there are good reasons to think that our paradigmatic philosophical concerns originate in Plato's employment of the concept of transcendence, and thus to agree to some extent with A. N. Whitehead's famous comment about Western philosophy consisting of footnotes to Plato. However the debates we have inherited have certainly changed in one crucial respect; they typically no longer make any connection to the enframing concerns that Plato wore on his sleeve.

Although concerns about transcendence and the meaning of life have been marginalized over the course of the history of philosophy, especially in twentieth-century analytic philosophy's drive to naturalism and the emulation of scientific or mathematical inquiry, they provide the unifying core to the subject-matter of philosophy. According to the present account, then, attempts to answer enframing questions led to the discovery of theoretical motivations to introduce the concept of transcendence into our thinking, and this innovation formed our philosophical conception of ontology, generating epistemological and metaphysical problems that combined with the original questions to become definitive of a new branch of inquiry.

Thus for Plato, with whom the core moral, epistemological and metaphysical concerns of philosophy come together for the first time, the concept of transcendence provides the key to determining how we ought to live, which is an idea that has dominated the history of Western moral thinking through the agency of religion. But Plato also found other reasons for conceiving reality as something that transcends the perceived world. And there have subsequently been many more suggestions, such as to account for freedom in a world governed by deterministic laws, or to avoid attributing the apparent contradictions in our dynamic conception of time to reality itself, to mention some prominent examples. Once introduced, however, the concept of transcendence brings in its wake a host of problems concerning knowledge, representation, truth and the ontological status of appearance and reality. Thus when a natural set of concerns about the meaning of life combined with an intellectual innovation that led us to see the need for – but problematic consequences of – a new way of thinking about reality, it was then that philosophy acquired its subject-matter.

In answer to doubts about the unity of philosophy based upon its apparently haphazard origins, then, we may respond that although philosophy was not conceived as a discipline, human inquiry nevertheless acquired a distinctive set of concerns at an early stage in its development, when the concept of transcendence was introduced into our attempts to gain a systematic understanding of the world and our place within

it. These concerns, along with others that grew out of them, are those we now classify as philosophical. On this account, we find philosophy somewhere between religion and science, although not as Comte's transitional stage. Rather, philosophy resembles religion in its aims and science in its approach. It resembles religion, in that it begins in the same kind of questions, and is rooted in the same desire for a synoptic vision of the world and our place within it. But it resembles science in seeking a rational, disinterested view of reality, no matter how discomfiting this may be.

Western philosophy came to be explicitly demarcated from other branches of learning in the modern period, and thereby acquired its modern sense; a sense which allowed Western scholars to recognize it within non-Western cultures as soon as they encountered it.<sup>29</sup> It became demarcated because concerns relating to transcendence were relatively unaffected by the advent of the independent empirical sciences, and as a consequence of this, they remained a part of the traditional body of learning that had no name apart from 'philosophy'. Thus although empirical science rapidly achieved more success in satisfying our interest in the workings of nature than a priori speculation had ever managed, ontological issues relating to transcendence were left behind; and in combination with correlative epistemological issues, as well as the enframement issues empirical science also left largely untouched, these came to comprise the core subject-matter of the discipline of philosophy.

Looked at in this way, the origins of philosophy no longer provide any reason to doubt the unity of its subject-matter, and the name 'philosophy' seems apt, given the centrality of this subject-matter to many of the best-known Greek philosophers – with whom the name will always be indelibly linked. Moreover the organic process by which this subject-matter came to be the concern of an independent discipline goes some way to explaining why the nature of philosophy should have become a controversial topic, given that the discipline was not inaugurated by anything like a conscious decision, but rather emerged from a long tradition of addressing a group of problems whose connection had long since been obscured, both by the wide variety of directions the tradition had led – often explicitly away from the unifying factor of transcendence – as well as by the distinct concerns it had developed alongside. With this account, then, we can begin to see how the development of empirical science from a priori speculation might have left behind a unified discipline whose unity was not apparent. What is perhaps more significant, however, is the light it sheds on the two most persistent sources of scepticism about the discipline; namely its apparent lack of progress and its a priori method.

#### 4. Against philosophy-scepticism

As regards lack of progress, once it is recognized that questions of enframement are integral to the subject-matter of philosophy – which along with religion is one of only two areas of culture which asks such questions – then philosophy-scepticism is immediately answered by the fact that the discipline of philosophy discovered the truth of *nihilism*. Thus philosophy answered the most important enframement question of all, the question which provided its *raison d'être*. This discovery has produced – or at

least has the potential to produce – a significant change in our self-understanding, since it overthrows the presumption of a meaning of life that has dominated most of human history, a presumption continually reinforced by both our way of life within the framework, and our usual patterns of explanation. With the discovery of nihilism, then, human beings – who have always been in the unique position of knowing they will die – have learnt in addition that their existence serves no overall purpose. Knowledge of this kind lacks any particular practical consequences, but it does have the potential to achieve a deep personal resonance with every individual who reflects on it, thereby making other more impressive human discoveries seem like mere curiosities in comparison.

Complaints about lack of progress in philosophy gain whatever force they have by restricting our attention to the traditional metaphysical and epistemological problems, thereby neglecting the enframing concerns that in large part drew us into this area in the first place. The tradition of investigating these metaphysical and epistemological problems, however, ultimately led to the discovery of nihilism. Nihilism did not appear from nowhere, but rather emerged, in the West at least, from a long tradition of developing ideas about transcendence which progressed from the Greeks, through medieval philosophy and theology, to Cartesian rationalism, British empiricism and German idealism, before Nietzsche brought this tradition to its culmination with his explicit and definitive statements about the threat of nihilism in the late nineteenth century. Philosophy cannot be given sole credit for the discovery, of course, for many ideas belonging to different traditions – particularly scientific ideas – helped to prepare the intellectual ground; as of course did social changes to our way of life. But nevertheless, nihilism is a paradigmatically philosophical thesis, and its truth, in the West, was first understood and thematized by a philosopher who was thoroughly and primarily engaged with the philosophical tradition.<sup>30</sup>

In the time since this discovery, philosophy has pursued various agendas. One of the most prominent – which largely stems from Heidegger – has centred on nihilism, and has consisted in both reactions against nihilism and attempts to determine its consequences. Much of the rest of philosophy, however, has been largely unaffected, and has continued to focus on traditional metaphysical and epistemological problems; finding innovative new ways to approach and reformulate them, while building links to new knowledge. However, although philosophy has continued to forge ahead, we should not lose sight of the fact that an important stage in its history is already complete; since the fundamental question that led into its concern with transcendence has been answered, even if there is much more to be said about this answer.

The other main source of scepticism about philosophy, namely its *a priori* method, is also undermined by this account. An important aspect of the justification for the *a priori* method of philosophy is simply that transcendence cannot in principle be investigated empirically. This is because any empirical investigation of a phenomenon will be neutral on the question of whether that phenomenon exists in a transcendent context. Thus when science uses experiential testing to develop accurate descriptions of the physical universe, it does so indifferently to the metaphysical status of what it is investigating. Scientific discourses concerning particles, fields of force, and the like, can be read in line with any number of philosophical interpretations, depending on how



we answer metaphysical and epistemological questions concerning whether science describes a world beyond perception, and how we should characterize the relationship between perceptions and the world perceived. These questions can only be answered by a priori reasoning employing concepts derived from a tradition of thought that places the world into the context of transcendence, thereby conceptualizing the world in light of possibilities such as that the particulars we perceive are transcended by universals, or that perceptions are transcended by a mind-independent reality.

What we are effectively doing when we engage in a priori reasoning about this subject-matter, is trying to determine how to make maximal sense of the world using philosophical concepts, that is, concepts that have traditionally been employed to address enframement and ontological concerns relating to – or at one time thought to relate to – transcendence. Deciding how best to employ these concepts is not the kind of matter that could be determined by science. Thus Berkeley's immaterialist interpretation of science in terms of inert ideas and God's omniscience was not rejected because of its incompatibility with any particular scientific discovery, but rather because of doubts about its internal consistency, allied to qualms about its theoretical extravagance. In principle, no doubt, we could find a way to understand current scientific theories in Berkeleian terms; but most philosophers agree that this is not the best way to employ concepts such as 'physical', 'idea' and 'causation'.

Other philosophical concerns display similar imperviousness to empirical results. So, for instance, a detailed description of the interaction that takes place between brain and external world in typical cases of sensory experience is neutral on the question of whether that interaction is best conceptualized as knowledge; and the development of a 'hedonistic calculus' allowing us to quantify levels of pleasure would not thereby determine what is the most theoretically satisfactory way to conceptually relate pleasure to moral worth. Empirical results can and frequently do influence philosophical debates, of course, especially when new phenomena are discovered that must be accounted for; but they can only be a factor, interpretable in different ways, within an a priori deliberation about how best to employ our concepts.

The short answer to philosophy-scepticism, then, is that philosophy has a distinctive subject-matter which centres on enframement and transcendence; that its progress in discovering nihilism is unassailable; and that its a priori methodology is entirely appropriate given its subject-matter and aims. However, the fact remains, it might be objected, that the discipline of philosophy has primarily concerned itself with problems on which it has made little or no progress. Moreover, if it is insisted that these problems can only be investigated a priori, then given this lack of progress, there still seems to be good reason to suspect that the problems are illusory.

The objection can be taken a step further, for the metaphilosophy we have started to develop seems to generate its own source of philosophy-scepticism. This is because nihilism's rejection of any transcendent context to provide life with a meaning might be thought to suggest that the whole idea of transcendence is a nonsense we have learnt to see through, such that if the traditional problems of philosophy are rooted in this idea, they are likely to be nonsense too. Thus perhaps the real implication of our account is that the metaphysical and epistemological problems of philosophy are pseudo-problems that served their purpose – by instigating a line of reflection leading to the



discovery of nihilism – but which are now set to fade from the intellectual landscape; this would make them akin to other once pressing but now obsolete problems, such as astronomical problems about equant points. Viewed in this light, then, our account starts to look like yet another ‘end of philosophy’ narrative. This time, the narrative would be that in searching for the meaning of life, philosophy discovered the concept of transcendence, thereby embroiling itself in various metaphysical and epistemological problems. But the eventual discovery that there is no transcendent context has revealed these problems to be illusory. We would be congratulating philosophy, but retiring it nonetheless.

The flaw to this reasoning, however, is that nihilism does not find fault with the concept of transcendence. Nihilism simply holds that there is no transcendent context of *meaning*. Nihilism is thus perfectly compatible with the possibility that human life exists in a transcendent context. This means that we can be nihilists without ruling out the possibility that philosophy did in fact discover a legitimate subject-matter in transcendence. And as we shall see when we turn to the topic of consciousness, it did.

However, the problem of progress remains. About this, two things should immediately be noted, both of which suggest that there only seems to be a problem because an inappropriate comparison to science or mathematics has been made. First, the idea that philosophy might accumulate definitive results, thereby allowing an interested party to consult a textbook to discover not the views of some philosopher or another, but rather the *facts* that, for instance, free will is compatible with determinism, or mental properties are functional properties, seems on the face of it absurd; and not even obviously desirable. Secondly, if philosophy is instead compared to an intellectual endeavour such as art, for instance, then the fact that generation after generation of philosophers take up the same old problems in new ways, without reaching lasting consensus on either solutions or approaches, does not necessarily indicate that no progress is made. After all, artists have represented the same kinds of subjects, such as people and landscapes, throughout history; with each generation developing new styles of representation, and with competing schools typically showing little sympathy with approaches other than their own (just like philosophy). But none of this suggests that there are not better and worse representations of landscapes; or that progress has not been made in the history of art.

The reason that it seems absurd to suppose that philosophy might accumulate a track-record of definitive solutions, is that these are problems each new generation must think through for themselves. To some extent, philosophical opinion is a matter of individual intellectual conscience, such that excessive conformity in these matters would evidence intellectual stagnation within a culture. In short, you simply cannot be told the answers in philosophy, any more than you can in matters of religious faith or aesthetics. Rather, addressing these kinds of questions requires a degree of personal reflection; in philosophy we must personally deliberate over how best to employ traditional philosophical concepts to understand the world – guided by the options developed in the history of the discipline – in order to be said to have philosophical views. Philosophy does not make progress by eliminating these options until only one remains, but rather by exploring their implications, removing their weaknesses, investigating their compatibility with newly discovered empirical facts, developing

new methods of argumentative support and even occasionally working out new options. Thus if Cartesian dualism does make a definitive comeback in the twenty-first century, this can be expected to be a new form of the theory that overcomes previous conceptual problems, and takes into account developments in the new science of consciousness; this would, if nothing else, constitute progress in our understanding of a dualist representation of the world.

That philosophical theories need to be continually thought-through and refreshed, and can apparently never be accepted as a body of knowledge, indicates something distinctive about the aims of philosophy, rather than providing reason to suspect its propriety. Except in the case of some moral and political philosophy, as well as the more applied branches of philosophy of science, the aim of philosophical inquiry is rarely practical; in that nobody is in practical need of a theory of truth or an answer to the sceptic, for instance. Rather, the aim of engaging with the traditional problems of philosophy is to achieve an overall understanding of reality and our place within it – of a kind not available within the necessarily more fragmented perspectives offered by natural and social sciences. To this extent, the aims of philosophy resemble those of religion, and it remains rooted in the same kinds of human need. Science is quite different in that it has the ability to leave old problems behind, aided by technological developments that lead to the discovery of new phenomena to be explained. But if philosophy were to leave any of its traditional problems behind, we would simply have lost some tried and tested vehicles for leading us into the most general thoughts about reality. Luckily, with philosophical opinions and methodologies as diverse as they have ever been, there is little chance of these intellectual resources drying up anytime soon.

## 5. Meno's paradox

In the argument that has come to be known as 'Meno's Paradox' (or 'The Paradox of Inquiry'), Plato has his character Meno ask Socrates – who has just been expressing his characteristic combination of self-confessed ignorance and readiness for inquiry – how it is possible to look for something if you do not know what it is; as Meno puts it, 'even if you come right up against it, how will you know that what you have found is the thing you didn't know?' Socrates's response is to invoke Plato's theory of recollection, according to which to learn is to remember truths that the immortal soul once knew but has forgotten. Inquiry is thereby modelled on the process of trying to prompt a memory, with its conclusion occurring when the memories come flooding back; inquiry reaches a natural conclusion, then, when the inquirer is able to recognize that their questions have been satisfactorily answered, because this recognition is the moment of recollection. Socrates draws back from claiming that we are literally remembering forgotten knowledge by saying that 'I shouldn't like to take my oath on the whole story', but he does nevertheless think that we are better off believing this story – which provides an impetus to inquiry – than believing that 'there is no point in looking because what we don't know we can never discover'.<sup>31</sup>

What Plato offers here is a useful model of constructive inquiry, and a good way to make sense of it is to think of the moment of recollection as our realization that a

possible answer to an inquiry fits into the parameters of the question we have asked. Thus if I arrive in a town for the first time and ask a passer-by for directions to the town hall, then when I receive an answer I will obviously not literally remember the route. But I will recognize whether or not the answer is appropriate to the question; my grasp of its significance allows me to recognize whether the answer is of the appropriate type. Thus if I am told to play chess, or to make my way to the airport, then I will not feel that my question has been satisfactorily answered; but if I am told to continue two blocks and take a left, then I probably will. When I make an inquiry, then, I may not know exactly what I am looking for, but I do know the sort of thing I am looking for, otherwise inquiry really would be impossible. And the sort of thing I am looking for is something that will satisfy my curiosity by fitting into the implicit parameters for satisfaction of the question I have asked. So we might say that when I recognize the answer as appropriate and am thus satisfied that the inquiry is concluded, this is not because I remember the answer; but rather because I remember the question.<sup>32</sup>

The difficulty of remembering the question is a major obstacle to constructive inquiry in philosophy. This is because the questions we have inherited have been reformulated countless times, and come to us in a more or less technical format. This makes it highly unlikely that we would have asked some of these questions for ourselves prior to encountering the philosophical tradition; although we may have asked questions that subsequently strike us as related. The process of learning to be engaged by these questions – of coming to feel their ‘pull’ – is the process of joining the tradition; but this can be done without awareness of the natural curiosity that led to the questions being raised in the first place, or of how the questions connect up with our own natural curiosity. Without this curiosity to set parameters for its own satisfaction, however, the question is in danger of becoming an isolated intellectual puzzle, cut off from its own significance, which even if solved in its present form will soon reappear in another. Thus someone may become engaged by a question, and find an answer that fits the parameters they have either accepted or perhaps partially set themselves; but so long as its motivation remains obscure there are bound to be others with different parameters in mind who will be dissatisfied, and who will consequently set about reformulating the question in order to tackle it afresh.

Now as any discipline develops, the questions it addresses inevitably become further removed from natural sources of curiosity; it is hard to imagine anyone being naturally curious about black body radiation, for example, and nobody was in a position to become curious about distant nebulae until they were discovered. Thus it might seem inevitable that any discipline will eventually leave behind the initial sources of curiosity that gave it its start, in order to generate new and more sophisticated forms of inquiry. Moreover, by replacing intuitive, more or less inarticulate questions, with technical and precise ones, it seems that we increase our chances of being able to provide answers. Thus even if philosophy has in many cases moved beyond matters of natural human interest, this might be thought to be nothing more than a sign of the discipline’s maturity.

Where the difficulty arises, however, is that in coming to concern itself with more sophisticated questions, philosophy has rarely satisfied the more natural forms of curiosity, but has rather lost sight of them to a greater or lesser extent. This kind

of distancing which attends increasing sophistication does not present problems for science, because answering scientific questions adds to our stock of knowledge to incrementally build up an account of the workings of nature. Natural curiosity is legitimately left behind when explanations become available for the more obviously puzzling phenomena, and attention can then turn to other less apparent issues. However when philosophy asks sophisticated questions that we must actively learn to engage with, this is usually not because the more obvious questions have already been answered. Rather, sophisticated questions in philosophy often represent attempts, usually inherited, to formulate the obvious questions with precision, or else concern extraneous matters that have arisen in the course of such attempts.

Thus given that philosophical problems are rooted in matters of natural human interest, but have grown distant from this source, attempts to solve them can prove inconclusive and dissatisfying, because they have been cut off from their potential for natural resolution. Formulating a question with precision may make it more amenable to a solution, but while its intuitive basis remains a background theme vaguely motivating the inquiry, the solution is liable to simply shift attention to variant forms of the question. However, if traditional philosophical problems could be more explicitly connected – or in some cases reconnected – with the kinds of curiosity from which they arose, then there might be some prospect of this curiosity being satisfied; we might come to feel that we had found out what we wanted to know. Given that most philosophical problems – and certainly all the core, traditional ones – cannot be settled with an empirical result as in science, or with a conclusive proof as in mathematics, then this may be the best we can hope for.

Another, equally important reason why it is worth trying to connect philosophical problems with matters of natural human interest is that this provides a motivation for engaging with them. There is rarely any practical interest in non-moral philosophy, so apart from the possibility that philosophical theories might have positive knock-on effects for other fields of inquiry, as well as the general cultural benefits of sustained intellectual activity, all there is to motivate it is the interest of its problems. Once these problems have become disconnected from anything we might naturally want to know about, however, the interest starts to look artificial and not worth pursuing. After all, we can take a strong interest in the problems of fictional characters, but this interest is fabricated. And although philosophical problems are real rather than fictional, it is easy to fabricate real problems. Counting the blades of grass in a meadow would certainly create some real problems, but there is no reason for anybody to make the attempt.

If we work on the assumption that philosophical problems are rooted in matters about which we might be naturally curious, then, the connections we uncover or make more explicit may provide both the motivation for investigating the problem, and the potential for it to be satisfactorily resolved. This approach may not always be appropriate or even necessary, but trying to connect debates with matters of natural human interest may on occasion provide a fruitful counterbalance to philosophy's long-established tendency towards insularity. Furthermore, such an approach provides a simple check on artificial and self-inflicted intellectual torture; the 'why' game can go on as long as you like, as most children quickly learn, so it pays to stop when you find out what you

wanted to know. Of course, you may not be clear what you wanted to know, but the present suggestion is that such matters need to be reflected on as a matter of priority if inquiry is to find a natural resting place; we must reflect impersonally on what might have led people into the familiar problem areas of philosophy, and reflect personally on why we ourselves are interested.<sup>33</sup> Philosophy's precarious cultural position between science and religion has put great psychological pressure on its practitioners to wrap matters of obvious human interest in wilfully obscure prose or the trappings of technicality – depending on tradition – but it may be more productive, if also more disconcerting, to get things out in the open.



## The Problem of Consciousness

*I should say that what the physiologist sees when he looks at a brain is part of his own brain, not part of the brain he is examining.*

Bertrand Russell, 1927<sub>1</sub>

### 1. Consciousness and objective thought

Imagine you are in a cinema, watching a movie with one hundred or so other people. Our everyday way of thinking about the nature of the world, which we shall call 'objective thought', provides a straightforward way of understanding the situation you are in. Thus according to objective thought, the room you are in consists of a space bounded by walls, floor and ceiling, all of which are composed of certain materials. Inside the space there is air, itself a kind of material, which surrounds rows of chairs facing an illuminated screen, and about one hundred people seated on the chairs. All these objects have a certain size and shape and are composed of certain materials: carbon-based organic materials in the case of the people, various synthetic materials for the chairs and screen, and largely silicon-based materials for the building. The basic picture objective thought presents of the cinema, then, is of objects in space made up of various different types of material. This picture readily extends to take in the whole universe: the cinema is located on planet Earth, which is itself simply a very large object within a vast space containing astronomical objects composed of various materials.

Objective thought provides the foundation for all our understanding of the world.<sup>2</sup> We may deepen the understanding it provides, and on occasion adjust it slightly, but it remains presupposed for the majority of our lives, and our more rarefied, scientific understandings are inevitably referred back to it. However objective thought can be thrown into disarray by reflection upon a simple fact which, although open to numerous interpretations, we know in some sense to be true. This is the fact that the world is experienced from a variety of different perspectives. Thus when sitting in the cinema, you know that the other people are experiencing the same environment as you but from different perspectives. So, for instance, the others are seeing the screen from different angles; some have better eyesight or hearing; some may be aware of the frame of their glasses or the fringe of their hair; some may be diverted by aches or pains; some may be struggling to understand the language; some may be misinterpreting the plot;

some may be transfixed by parallels between the situations faced by the characters and their own life; some may be mentally rehearsing sentences for the review they have to write; some may be drunk; and some may be sleepy. In short, we know that each person in the cinema is a unique centre of consciousness.

This simple reflection supplements the objective scene with a cacophony of experiences which objective thought cannot conceive as objects of a certain shape and size that help to fill the space of the cinema. For there are no ethereal images hovering behind the eyes of the people watching the screen; there is only flesh and blood. Once we know this, we also know that we cannot appeal to shape, size or material to comprehend the nature of experiences, and so objective thought leaves us at a loss as to what to say they are. We recognize them from our own case, of course, and can work out roughly what kinds of experiences people must be having in certain circumstances. However when asked to say what experiences, thoughts, feelings and other conscious states *are*, objective thought will not help us. We are left unable to fit them into our understanding of an ordinary situation such as sitting in a cinema; we know the experiences are 'all around us' in some vague sense, but the more we think about it, the more they seem like an incomprehensibly alien addendum to the world we understand.

The philosophical problem with consciousness, then, is that it is something we know exists, even though it apparently has no place within the world.<sup>3</sup> This is because objective thought is *centreless*.<sup>4</sup> Thus if we think about what the cinema scene objectively amounts to, there is nothing there to indicate that the organic objects should be centres of conscious experience; there is nothing in the scene to indicate that there should be any experiential centres at all. And yet we know that each person in the cinema is an experiential centre. If you are one of them, the world exists from your perspective: the screen, soundtrack and much more, are experientially present to you from the perspective of a particular location in space and time, and you can truly say things such as, 'that's the screen as seen from my perspective'.

That objective thought is centreless is easily overlooked because we are so accustomed to superimposing experiential centres onto the objective world. Moreover once superimposed, objective thought, and by extension science, can explain why each centre has the experiences it does, with the consequent explanatory interweaving creating the impression that consciousness belongs to the world of objective thought after all. So, for instance, once we have superimposed experiential centres, we can say why the screen looks different to somebody on the front row than it does to somebody near the back, in terms of different angles to the screen resulting in different images projected onto retinas; the explanation is not unlike that of why two cameras set up in different places record different images. Science can even explain more puzzling matters, such as why somebody with complete achromatopsia sees the screen only in black-and-white, by telling us about how their cone cells are reacting to the light, or about an abnormality in the visual processing in their brain. However, for any of this information to have explanatory purchase on consciousness, we first need to know that people are centres of consciousness.

Since we already know this, we are able to recognize physical information about people as relevant to consciousness when appropriate correlations exist; but if we did



not, the correlations would not seem relevant. After all, we do not think the physical differences between a black-and-white and a colour analogue camera explain the differences between the experiences of the two cameras, because we do not think cameras have experiences. If we did, then the fact that the film in the colour camera has light sensitive silver halides in red-, blue- and green-sensitive layers, whereas the film in the black-and-white one has only a single layer of silver halides, would, *ceteris paribus*, be just as obviously relevant to explaining why some cameras lack colour experience, as brain damage is to explaining why some people lack colour experience. Of course, brain activity does explain consciousness while silver halides do not, but this fact is not accounted for by anything objective thought or science tells us about the former but not the latter; our objective conception of human brain activity no more implicates consciousness than our conception of a silver halide does.

In summary, then, objective thought is centreless in that it is blind to the idea that in virtue of being a certain object, the world exists from the perspective of that object and thus the object is a centre of consciousness. In fact, objective thought is blind to the whole idea of 'being an object', and simply tells us what objects are; it tells us what humans and rocks are, but has nothing to say about *being a human* or *being a rock*. As such, it seems that consciousness could never in principle be implicated in anything objective thought, and by extension science, has to say about human beings: no matter what strange and complex cells are discovered in our brains, no matter what special feedback circuitry is found, this information will simply contribute to a better description of a certain kind of object, and the fact that if *you* are that object then the world will appear from your perspective will be missed out.

If the preceding line of reasoning is right, then objective thought, and the science we have built upon it, seems to be incomplete, and this incompleteness could hardly be a trivial matter given the fundamental importance of consciousness to human beings; as Einstein once put it, without consciousness 'the world would be nothing but a pile of dirt'.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the fact that objective thought misses out consciousness seems to indicate something much more serious than a temporary shortfall in our understanding, of the kind we might expect to see redressed in the course of ordinary scientific research. This is because objective thought seems to omit consciousness as a matter of principle, which suggests a fundamental conceptual limitation to our scientific ways of thinking about the world.

As such, the existence of consciousness holds out the prospect that reality transcends the world of objective thought: that our ordinary way of understanding the world might not capture everything there is to the world, given that it apparently does not capture consciousness. More specifically, since consciousness seems to transcend the world of objective thought, this raises the prospect that reality transcends the physical universe, and consequently that – as religions have so often told us – objective thought does not describe the final context of existence. And since nihilism is most conspicuous when we apply objective thought to human life, and thereby view ourselves as simply bodies moving around and making noises to each other, the challenge of consciousness to objective thought provides reason to believe that nihilism might not be true. In short, consciousness holds out the hope that the world of objective thought, in which the truth of nihilism seems unavoidable, is transcended by a wider context of existence in

which nihilism might not to be true. And although there is no good reason to hope that nihilism is false, this is something people have always hoped.

The suggestion here is not that philosophical interest in consciousness primarily stems from a latent desire for nihilism to be false; although this does seem to be true of certain writers who use its supposed inexplicability as a premise to reach religious conclusions.<sup>6</sup> Rather, the suggestion is that the issue of natural human interest from which the problem ultimately derives its appeal is the question of the meaning of life; the connection has been covered over, as is so often the case, but its presence sustains interest in the problem. This comes out most conspicuously in the ubiquitous description of consciousness as a *mystery*. Mysteries raise the prospect of our not having grasped the true significance of human life, a prospect appealing to some philosophers but annoying to others. Scientists sometimes get annoyed too, typically regarding the suggestion of such an obvious mystery as an affront to their expertise. When they do, they tend to react in one of two equally ineffectual ways. Either, they wilfully miss the point of the simple thought process required to establish the philosophical problem; a tactic also popular among the scientifically-minded public. Or, they acknowledge the problem, and then claim to have solved it by citing their own empirical research on the brain; or evidence about evolutionary history; or some other objective scientific data that is tangential to the problem.

## 2. Indirectness and self-awareness

When we imagine the experiences in the cinema scene, we most naturally (if we are sighted) think of visual images; vision is our dominant sense. So, for example, we think of an expansive blurry image for a person at the front with poor eyesight, or a sharp image framed by curtains and the backs of people's heads for someone at the back with 20/20 vision. We know this is what they would see, but the images do not belong in our objective conception of the scene. Now according to the way of thinking about experience being taken for granted here, there is a sense in which the cinema-goers do not see the screen itself, but rather a visual image of it. But there is also another sense in which they *do* see the screen, since having a visual image of the screen caused by its light affecting their eyes is what seeing the screen consists in. These two senses are traditionally characterized by saying that we directly see the visual image, and thereby indirectly see the screen. This indirect realism is readily extended as an account of experience generally; thus, for example, we may distinguish the sound coming out of the speakers from the people's auditory representations, and say that the latter is all they are directly aware of. The basic idea, then, is that images, ideas, representations, phenomenal states, perceptions, experiences – call them what you will – are what we directly experience, and through our awareness of them we indirectly experience their causes.

Many of the great philosophers of the past not only believed this account of experience, but considered it obvious. Thus Hume said that, 'no man, who reflects, ever doubted, that the existences, which we consider, when we say, *this house* and *that tree*, are nothing but perceptions in the mind, and fleeting copies or representations

of other existences, which remain uniform and independent'; and Schopenhauer even went so far as to say that, 'no truth is more certain, more independent of all others, and less in need of proof than this, namely that everything that exists for knowledge, and hence the whole of this world, is only object in relation to the subject, perception of the perceiver, in a word, representation.'<sup>7</sup> However, few philosophers find indirect realism obvious anymore, for it was the subject of sustained criticism throughout the twentieth century. Consequently it makes sense to ask whether an alternative model of perception is now available, one which would allow us to dispense with visual images and other such experiential representations, and thereby avoid the problem of their lack of fit with objective thought. I do not think there is.

Rejections of the indirect realist model were traditionally motivated by the epistemological concern that any mediated account of our perceptual relationship to the world places us behind an unacceptably problematic 'veil of perception'; a concern that made 'direct' a merit- and 'indirect' a demerit-term in philosophy. This concern makes philosophers keen to reject any suggestion that we see images or ideas. As an observation about ordinary language, it is certainly on solid ground: seeing is something done by human beings using their eyes, and the kinds of things we can see with our eyes are physical objects not mental ideas. To see mental ideas, it seems we would have to use some kind of mystical inner eye instead of the ordinary ones in our eye-sockets, and this sounds bogus; something only philosophers captivated by a theory would ever endorse.

However the direct realism this observation motivates is barely distinguishable from indirect realism, except for its explicitness about rejecting the language of 'seeing ideas'. Thus it is typical to hear it claimed that, 'All that the direct realist must deny is that we *see* (or hear, etc.) experiences or ideas, or sense data, or whatever, not that we have them.' Having the ideas, or being in a visual phenomenological state, are to be identified with directly perceiving; thus 'Being in the phenomenological state *just is* directly perceiving [e.g.] the boy, so long as the phenomenological state is appropriately caused by the boy: for nothing gets in the way, nothing at all'. But this is little more than indirect realism rebranded, because the basic metaphysical picture is still that the perceived object causes an idea, and perceiving the object is having that idea. All that has changed is that we have now insisted on the terminology of 'having' the idea (or 'being in' the phenomenological state) and rejected the terminology of 'seeing' it; although since it was always integral to the indirect realist picture that any sense in which we 'see' an idea is distinct from the sense in which we 'see' physical objects, this amounts to nothing more than the removal of a potential source of confusion. The only real novelty to direct realism of this kind is its rejection of the view that ideas are mental objects. But this was never essential to indirect realism anyway; if direct realism can be this bland, it is plausible to argue that Locke, the archetypal indirect realist, is best interpreted as a direct realist.<sup>8</sup>

But even if we accept that perceptual experiences are not a kind of mental object we see with 'the mind's eye', the fact remains that experiences do still seem to be something we are aware of; it is one thing to make the essentially linguistic point that we do not 'see' our experiences, but quite another to hold that we are completely oblivious to them. To say the latter would thoroughly conflict with ordinary language, for although we do not say that we see experiences, we certainly do say that we feel and are aware

of them; we feel pains, which are experiences, and we are aware of all sorts of vivid experiences, such as the world appearing to spin around when we make ourselves dizzy. Thus most philosophers tend to follow Aristotle, implicitly if not explicitly, in holding that 'It seems that knowing, believing, perceiving and thinking are always of something else, but of themselves on the side', the intuitive idea being that awareness of what we are looking at, for example, is always accompanied 'on the side' by awareness of the experiential state we are in while looking.<sup>9</sup>

But now we have conceded two different senses of awareness, which is just a terminological variation on the indirect realist notion of a direct and indirect sense of seeing. Of course, acknowledging two types of awareness does not require us to describe one as more direct than the other. But given that the model remains one of perceiving objects in virtue of having experiences, talk of directness and indirectness seems as well-motivated as ever. To see this, consider a case where we see an image of Marilyn Monroe on a cinema screen: it certainly seems right to say that we see her indirectly in virtue of seeing the screen; but this case involves an intermediary object, the screen. But now consider the case where we see her in real life: arguably we are still justified in describing this as indirect awareness – even once we have renounced intermediary mental objects – since we see her in virtue of our awareness of the experience she has caused in us, just as in the former case we see her in virtue of our awareness of the screen. Thus the awareness of the experiential state – the introspective awareness we have of the state simply in virtue of being in it – does seem to be acting as an intermediary: just like perceptual awareness of the screen, introspective awareness of the experience seems to be a medium through which we can become perceptually aware of Marilyn Monroe. All that has changed is that we are now refusing to describe introspective awareness as internal seeing.

Thus it seems that the old line of reasoning – the original one behind the indirect realist model – remains unaffected by the rejection of mental objects, and continues to suggest that no model of perception has a right to call itself 'direct' if it depends on self-aware states; that is, states we are aware of – if only 'on the side' – simply in virtue of occupying them. This could be endlessly disputed, however, since 'direct' is a philosophical term of art; there is little more we can do to support it than inconclusively state the intuition that the self-awareness I have of a state of myself seems more direct than any awareness that state could provide of a part of its causal ancestry. However even if this intuition is rejected, and it is held that states of experience do put us in 'direct' touch with the world, the fact remains that any model of perception reliant upon such states will not avoid the problem of consciousness; the ontological problem for objective thought will remain to jeopardise our understanding of reality even if we can secure that understanding from unknown possibilities behind the veil of perception. For self-aware states simply do not belong within objective thought. We can stipulate that certain states of humans are self-aware, such that being in the state is sufficient for being aware of the state; just as we could stipulate this for the internal states of cameras. But nothing in objective thought remotely implies it, because its account of what those states are has nothing to do with 'being in' them.

It seems, then, that indirect realism and self-aware states cannot be easily dispensed with. In fact it is hard to see how self-aware states could ever be avoided at all given

certain basic facts about perception, namely that it is a causally mediated process in which objects affect our sensory receptors and thereby cause a perceptual experience. Suppose we say, plausibly enough, that the perceptual experience is a state of the person perceiving the object. In that case, the person must be aware of whether they are in this kind of state if it is to make them aware of the object; I cannot be oblivious to my experiential state, as I might be oblivious to my financial state, if that state is to alert me to the presence of the object that caused it. But then, if being in states of experience makes us aware of those states – even if we do not think of ourselves as aware of the states but rather of distal objects – then states of experience are self-aware states. That is to say, they are states of a person such that when occupied, the person is aware of the state, and thereby can become aware of the world.

We might try to avoid this conclusion by positing a second-order state that must be related to the experiential state in a certain way if we are to be aware of it.<sup>10</sup> But this would not alter the basic metaphysical predicament, since we are now simply thinking of a more complex objective state comprising both the first- and second-order states as self-aware. Could we avoid self-aware states by denying that the perceived object simply causes the experience, and claiming instead that the object is part of the experience?<sup>11</sup> This would not help either, because objective thought would still need to include a self-aware state to account for the fact the object is experienced from the perspective of the perceiver; some portion of objective reality incorporating both the perceiver and the perceived object would now have to count as a self-aware state.

Philosophers often appear to disown such states by insisting on the ‘transparency’, ‘diaphanousness’, or outwardly-directed nature of perception; although on closer inspection it becomes apparent that the point concerns only how we interpret our experiences. Thus, for example, Gilbert Harman says that when you see a tree, ‘you do not experience any features as intrinsic features of your experience’.<sup>12</sup> As an observation about phenomenology this is disputable. Certainly we have a strong inclination to agree in perceptually ideal conditions, such as when looking at a tree from an appropriate distance in broad sunlight; at these times, it does indeed seem that – as J. J. Valberg memorably puts it – ‘All we find is the world’.<sup>13</sup> But when we look at the tree in the dark, however, we are not so inclined to interpret the inconstant patterns we typically experience as features of the tree. And in any case, regardless of the legitimacy of the phenomenological claim, it bears only on how we *interpret* experience, not *what* we experience. Thus the claim is that when we experience a tree, we think of the features as belonging to the tree. But this is compatible with the features actually belonging to experience; the indirect realist should agree that it is usual to interpret features of our experiences as features of distal objects, but this obviously does not affect their contention that experiencing a tree requires self-awareness of an experience of a tree.

### 3. Consciousness as the brain: Revisionism

How then can we actually avoid this model, rather than simply tweak it a little and rebrand it? By understanding the awareness involved in perceptual states in a non-experiential manner, and thereby construing the whole process as nothing more than

a complex causal interaction between different parts of the objective world. Thus the truly radical direct realist must say that seeing the screen involves light coming from the screen into a person's eyes, consequent visual processing in their brains . . . and nothing more. This model of perception certainly deserves to be called 'direct', since perceiving an object is now understood as simply a matter of being in a brain state with the right causal history, and there is no longer any requirement that a person's awareness of an object be mediated by introspective self-awareness of their experience. For on this model, there is no experience.

Of course, to say 'there is no experience' is provocative, but the direct realist need not put it this way; they could instead just say that the brain state is the experience. In fact, they need not deny any of the details of the original model: they can agree that objects cause states of perceptual awareness in people, and that these states must be self-aware in order to make people aware of what they represent. However, if they are to present a new model – one which is truly direct and does not trouble objective thought – then they must reinterpret the component features of the original. Thus they must say, for example, that a brain state counts as a perceptual awareness because it causally co-varies with the environment to provide the organism with information used in regulating and guiding motor activities, and that the state counts as self-aware, and thus experiential, because it incorporates different neuronal groups interacting with each other in such a way that the state can aptly be described as monitoring itself. The direct realist can say these kinds of things, then, but they must make it clear – if they are to be candid about their position – that the brain state they are talking about is not what we ordinarily think of as an experience. For when we ordinarily think of an experience we imagine having it; if we think about the visual experience of the person at the back of the cinema, we imagine how the world looks from their perspective, and our intention is to refer to 'that' experience, the one we are imagining. But the direct realist cannot purport to be describing 'that', because then they would have reverted back to the indirect realist model in which our awareness of the world is mediated by introspective awareness.

There are two ways for the direct realist to advertise their position, then; vacillation between them frequently obscures discussion of this view. Either they can adopt the provocative eliminativist line of saying that there are no experiences, only brain states of a certain kind. Or they can say that experiences are not what we ordinarily think they are, and need to be reconceived as brain states of a certain kind. Either way, experiences as we ordinarily think of them are eliminated, and we are left only with organisms in causal relations to their environments. And of course, once we make this move for perceptual experiences, there is every reason to make it for all conscious experiences, with the resultant general eliminativism standing out among all the philosophical positions that have been taken on the nature of experience for the consistency of its adherence to objective thought, and its ability to solve the problem of consciousness without remainder.

The problem with it, however, is that it is very hard to believe; which explains why it has had relatively few advocates. Daniel Dennett has been the most prominent.<sup>14</sup> And the reason it is hard to believe is that the original, indirect realist model primes us to think that our awareness of our own consciousness is more intimate than our

awareness of anything else. As such, denying that consciousness exists seems like a form of madness: like denying the one thing we know best in an inverted parody of Descartes's second meditation. Galen Strawson has summed up this sentiment – felt by many philosophers – by describing consciousness eliminativism as 'surely the strangest thing that has ever happened in the whole history of human thought, not just in the whole history of philosophy'; it is, he says, 'the silliest view ever put forward'.<sup>15</sup>

Dennett, however, thinks that consciousness eliminativism – which in line with the softer advertising position might be called 'consciousness revisionism' – is supported by science. Thus he describes a case in which we enter a room and 'see' almost instantly that the walls are covered with hundreds of little pictures of Marilyn Monroe. Science, however, tells us that only one or two could have affected our eyes in the time it takes to form this judgement, and that it is highly unlikely that our brains would engage in the energy-inefficient process of 'filling in' to generate a visual image of hundreds of identical pictures. Rather the best conclusion to draw is that when we claim to have seen all the pictures, we have made a false judgement about consciousness, namely that we have undergone a certain kind of visual experience. However we have made a correct judgement about the world, namely that the walls are covered in Marilyn wallpaper; such judgements are all evolution cares about and consciousness is a product of evolution. Dennett has appealed to many striking cases like this to suggest that our reports of conscious experiences are not to be trusted, with the consequence, he thinks, that objective thought and science have nothing more to account for than the reports themselves.<sup>16</sup>

Now Dennett may be right that our judgements about conscious experiences are unreliable, and he may also be right that some of the attempts philosophers have made to characterize them, such as in terms of 'qualia', have been contradictory.<sup>17</sup> However, it is one thing to claim that the reports are unreliable, and another to claim that we are not reporting anything. After all, empirical psychology has amassed evidence to show that many of our ordinary judgements about psychological processes are strikingly inaccurate; memory, for example, routinely involves imaginative reconstruction, with the order of events changed and fictitious detail added.<sup>18</sup> But the latter evidence obviously does not suggest that we are not really reporting past experiences. Dennett, however, is claiming much more than that our reports of experiences are unreliable. To see this, think again of how the world looks from the perspective of somebody at the back of the cinema: if you focus your attention on 'that' experience, the one you are imaging, then Dennett's claim is that you are thereby trying to refer to something which does not exist.

The force of this claim is highlighted by contrasting the way we think about people and machines. Thus suppose there were also a robot at the back of the cinema; one capable of interacting with its environment with a high degree of sophistication, and perhaps even able to make incorrigible reports on its own internal states.<sup>19</sup> We naturally think that the human cinema-goer is in an experiential state with the world appearing to them a certain way, whereas the robot is not; and this distinction seems of obvious significance. And yet the consciousness revisionist of this ilk denies that there is any significant distinction. Consequently we have no reason to think differently about people and machines, on this view, and the question of whether a robot might ever



share our 'inner illumination' is bogus. If we favour the softer advertising position of continuing to talk about 'conscious experiences', then the question of whether we want to label the internal states of the robot this way or not is simply a judgement call, depending on how similar its objective states and abilities are to our own.

The most distinctive feature of this position, then, and the one that makes it the most viable as a solution to the problem of consciousness, is that it does not identify conscious experience as ordinarily understood with objective parts of the world, but rather denies that it exists. However Dennett, for one, is not always as clear about this as he could be. Thus consider the following key passage in *Consciousness Explained*, used at the start of the book to establish that his intuitive grasp of the problem of consciousness is as good as anybody's, and then again at the end to show that his theory has succeeded in explaining consciousness.<sup>20</sup> Dennett is rocking in his chair, looking at the trees outside while listening to music – and has a distinctive experience:

Then I noticed that this visual metronome in the tree branches was locked in rhythm with the Vivaldi concerto grosso I was listening to as 'background music' for my reading . . . My conscious thinking, and especially the enjoyment I felt in the combination of sunny light, sunny Vivaldi violins, rippling branches – plus the pleasure I took in just thinking about it all – how could *all that* be just something physical happening in my brain? How could any combination of electromagnetic happenings in my brain somehow add up to the delightful way those hundreds of twigs genuflected in time with the music? How could some information-processing event in my brain *be* the delicate warmth of the sunlight I felt falling on me?<sup>21</sup>

Dennett then proceeds to explain that 'No such "plenum" ever came into his mind', and that although it seemed that he was having a conscious experience with all these details, 'this was an illusion'; all that really happened was that he formed the correct judgement that certain features existed in the world – just as in the wallpaper case you form the correct judgement that there are hundreds of Marilyn pictures without actually experiencing them.<sup>22</sup>

So far so good; but then Dennett proceeds, echoing a famous remark by Wittgenstein, to answer his original rhetorical questions with another, namely: 'Well, what do you think it would seem like if it *were* just a combination of electrochemical happenings in your brain?'<sup>23</sup> The problem with this is that the 'it' – just like the '*all that*' in his earlier rhetorical question – strongly suggests that reference is being made to conscious experience; it is hard to see what else 'it' could refer to in this context except for the phenomenology Dennett is officially denying the existence of. And this gets to the heart of the difficulty with the revisionist position, which is that no matter how well-supported its rejection of consciousness as ordinarily conceived might be, such rejections will inevitably be made in the apparent presence of consciousness. Our most sincere denials that 'that' exists will not make 'that' go away. This point is not the disingenuous one that we need only pinch ourselves to recognize the manifest falsity of the revisionist position; Dennett is obviously aware that we feel pain, just as Berkeley was aware that rocks are solid.<sup>24</sup> Rather, the point is that even when enlightened by the revisionist position, our inclination to make false judgements about consciousness is



bound to continue no matter how often we correct it; which suggests that consciousness has not been adequately described.

To see this, imagine a parallel situation we might describe by invoking systematic false judgements. Thus suppose everybody has the systematic inclination to judge that there is a tree in a certain place; when they look in that direction they apparently see it, when they walk in that direction they apparently bump into it, and so on. However powerful theoretical considerations suggest there can be no such tree. In order to reconcile the manifest evidence with the theoretical considerations, the revisionist proposes that people are subject to systematic false judgements; nobody sees or feels a tree, they just falsely judge that they do. If this is accepted, people will continue to apparently see and bump into a tree, but they will now explicitly say that they only *apparently* do so. However an adequate description of the situation has yet to be provided given that we have not explained why everyone seems to see and feel a tree when there is nothing there. The natural way to rectify this would be to invoke an alternative explanation; thus perhaps everybody has been hypnotized, or there is a strange force-field that causes them to hallucinate in certain circumstances. And now we would indeed have an adequate description, since we would have explained people's systematic inclination to falsely judge that there is a tree, in terms of extraneous conditions which cause them to have experiences as-of a tree.

This final move, however, is not open to the revisionist about consciousness. They cannot explain why we seem to be aware of conscious experiences in the same way we might explain why we seem to be aware of the tree – namely by invoking illusory experiences – since this would immediately undermine their denial of experience. In the tree case, we explain how things seem in terms of experience: experience is the fallible basis for our judgements about how the world is. But the revisionist about consciousness must reject this account of seeming, and replace it with bare judgement: how things seem is not how experience presents the world as being, but is rather simply whatever we judge.<sup>25</sup> But then if this is accepted, our persistent inclination to judge that we are having experiences can be nothing more than a dumb reflex, rather than a rational if ultimately misguided response to the evidence. This is because – as Dennett continually emphasizes – the objective world lacks any evidence for the existence of experience: it is this fact, after all, which generates the problem of consciousness in the first place. Thus, for example, when I make myself dizzy, I am strongly inclined to judge that I am having a visual experience in which the world seems to spin around. But this inclination necessarily lacks any rational explanation on the revisionist model, because that model denies that there are any dizzy experiences – or anything similar that might be mistaken for one – to provide the evidential basis of my false judgement. As such, my inclination to judge that I am having experiences seems baseless and inexplicable, rather than based on any kind of 'illusion', as Dennett puts it.<sup>26</sup>

Consider a standard case of systematic illusion: a visual illusion such as the Müller-Lyer, in which we continue to see two lines as looking of unequal length even when we know they are equal. Here we explain our inclination to make a false judgement (which we can easily override) by the fact that the lines *look* unequal; the drawing is designed to resemble situations where we really would be viewing unequal lines. In this case, the visual experience provides the evidential basis which inclines us to make

a false judgement. But in the case of my judgement that I am having a dizzy experience, the revisionist can provide no evidential basis. For if there is no experience – and as a sold-up revisionist I also judge there is no experience – it makes no rational sense for me to retain the enduring inclination to judge that there is. Note that this is not the inclination to judge that there is a disturbance in my vestibular system, or that I ought not to try doing anything requiring manual dexterity for a while – or even the inclination to falsely judge that I am still spinning around even after I have stepped off the roundabout; any of these might make sense on the revisionist picture. Rather the enduring inclination is to judge that I am having a certain kind of experience. But if I am not, and there is nothing in the objective world that I could mistake for an experience, then this inclination can have no rational basis, and must rather be an automatic and senseless reaction. This, however, is not how it strikes us at all: it is not as though I inexplicably find myself wanting to spout the words ‘I’m having an experience’ without knowing why; as if believing we have experiences were like suffering from Tourette’s syndrome.

If our inclination to judge that we undergo experiences has no evidential basis, and can persist even once we accept the revisionist view, then this seems just as bizarre and rationally inexplicable as would be a persistent inclination to judge that Casablanca is the capital of Morocco even once you know fully well that Rabat is. The problem, to sum up, is that if the revisionist is right that experience does not exist, then they need to provide some rational basis for our persistent inclination to judge that it does; an inclination which even Dennett shows himself subject to when he considers the possibility that the experiential ‘it’ is a state of his brain. Without this basis, the consciousness revisionist position parallels the tree case before we add an explanation of why people are inclined to judge that there is a tree. Thus just as it would be arbitrary and implausible to suppose that people’s rational lives might systematically be interrupted by the evidentially baseless urge to utter sentences such as ‘I see a tree’, it would be equally arbitrary and implausible to suppose that our enduring inclination to utter sentences such as ‘I am having a dizzy experience’ is of this baseless kind. Revisionism fails, then, because it does not explain how we might reasonably believe that consciousness exists even if it does not.

But did not science support the view? The evidence shows, for instance, that when a person has an experience of the Marilyn wallpaper, their experience does not bear the causal imprint of all the pictures. But this only shows that experience is a fallible guide to the world; which is ancient wisdom. It does not show that experience does not exist; given that experience apparently has no place within the objective world anyway, it is no less plausible that an experiential array of Marylins should exist with or without causal links to each picture. And even if causal links were required for the reality of an experience – which would be an odd requirement given the existence of dreams and hallucinations – there might still exist one or two self-aware images from which we instinctively jump to conclusions. To show that experience does not exist you would need an alternative evidential basis for our inclination to judge that it does. But the kind of evidence Dennett invokes is only capable of explaining our inclination to make judgements about the world, not our experiences; evolutionary considerations might explain why we judge that hundreds of pictures exist even though only a couple have

causally affected us, but not why we judge that an experience of hundreds of pictures exists even though there is no such thing.

If philosophy 'leaves everything as it is', as Wittgenstein said, then revisionism was always a non-starter: since it requires us to massively rethink our lives.<sup>27</sup> Consider somebody contemplating death and instinctively recoiling from the awful prospect of eternal experiential nothingness. The revisionist is asking this person to bring themselves around to the view that they are already in a state of experiential nothingness, and that death means something quite different, such as loss of motor function and ability to emit sentences – none of which sounds nearly so bad unless you make the mistake of imagining it experientially. In order to defend objective thought, as they see it at least, the revisionist goes too far.

#### 4. Consciousness as the brain: From identification to revisionism

But maybe there is no need to deny the existence of experience; maybe we can simply identify it with a part of the objective world. Thus we might imagine the experience of the cinema-goer and say that 'that' – the screen as viewed from the person's perspective – is the same thing as the person's brain at that particular moment; this would fit conscious experience squarely into the objective scene without any need to deny that it exists.

This has been the mainstream approach to the problem in analytic philosophy, with only a few like Dennett taking the more radical line. But the radicals are right to the extent that revisionism provides the only realistic prospect of finding something to call 'consciousness' in the world of objective thought. Overt revisionism is highly implausible and metaphilosophically overstretches itself, but it could still be true: it might be the case that we have a built-in and evidentially baseless inclination to judge that we are undergoing experiences. But although it seems as if there is a more straightforward and plausible alternative in the mainstream approach, on closer inspection this turns out to be chimerical.

The reason we cannot simply identify experiences with brain states is nicely summed up by Bishop Butler's memorable sentence: 'Everything is what it is, and not another thing.'<sup>28</sup> For a brain state is one thing and an experience is another; they cannot be the same any more than an apple can be a banana. To avoid this obvious objection, the influential tactic originated by U. T. Place and J. J. C. Smart in the 1950s was to argue that we have two sets of descriptions for the same thing, making the mind-brain case akin to Frege's example of talking about Venus as both the Morning Star and Evening Star.<sup>29</sup> However in the Frege case there is no problem in ascribing the properties of both the Morning and Evening Star to Venus: the same planet appears in the morning and evening. All such cases are equally unproblematic: water has the same properties as H<sub>2</sub>O and Marilyn Monroe has the same properties as Norma Jeane Baker. In the mind-brain case, however, brain states and experiences apparently have entirely different properties, so their being the same seems out of the question. A brain state is a temporal snapshot of an organ: a snapshot of nerve cells located in the head of a

living human being, that is, those nerve cells at a certain time. A conscious experience, on the other hand, is conceived as a self-aware visual image: it is the 'that' you imagine when you put yourself in the place of someone in the cinema. In short, a brain state is a brain state, and not another thing such as a visual image.

Place's tactic for avoiding this objection was to argue that our conceptions of conscious experiences are less committal about their properties than we might suppose, and are in fact based only on their functional role; he was developing B. A. Farrell's earlier suggestion that experience is 'featureless'.<sup>30</sup> Thus we do not think of the cinema experience as a visual image, for instance, but rather just as something which occurs when I sit in a cinema with my eyes directed at the screen; it is something which occupies a certain role in my life. If this were right then the identification could go ahead without a hitch, because these kinds of anodyne properties could readily be attributed to brain states. The problem, however, and the underlying reason why functional analyses have been a focus of controversy since their inception, is that our conception of conscious experience is not remotely this anodyne.

Thus Place, speaking of the kind of visual image we might experience after staring at a bright green light and then closing our eyes, says that 'when we describe the after-image as green, we are not saying that there is something, the after-image, which is green'.<sup>31</sup> However, it is hard to imagine anyone claiming this without a vested interest in reconciling consciousness with objective thought, because suitably qualified, this is precisely what we are saying: when making this kind of report we are fully committed to the existence of something of which we are aware. Once we reflect on the matter, we will find ourselves unable to think of it as something in the objective world, of course, because we know that there is no green patch hovering behind our eyes. But we do nevertheless continue to think of the after-image as part of a visual array; whatever that might be. Moreover we think of the after-image as green; again on reflection we may realize that it cannot be 'green' in the same sense we use to describe a patch of light, but we continue to think of it as 'green' in the sense that an experience caused by a patch of light can be green; whatever that might be.

Nevertheless the positive part of Place's account is still right, namely that we conceive the after-image as 'the sort of experience which we normally have when [...] looking at a green patch of light'.<sup>32</sup> However this under-describes the situation, and thereby conveniently leaves out most of the properties which cause the problems for objective thought. Most but not all, because he says 'the sort of experience', and thereby overlooks the fact that this in itself commits him to properties alien to objective thought; since to describe something as an 'experience' implies that it has the property of being an awareness of the world from a perspective, something you might internally demonstrate as 'that'. Smart avoided this mistake by saying instead that 'there is something going on' of the kind which goes on when we look at green light.<sup>33</sup> But this just under-describes the situation further, since the 'something' is evidently experiential; if it were not we would not know about it, as we do not know about various other goings-on within our bodies.

Thus we conceive experiences as possessed of properties brain states lack; and if we are conceiving them as they are, then, they cannot be the same. It does not help, as many philosophers have thought it might, to hold that experiential properties are

irreducible, and thus akin to large-scale social properties such as economic inflation. Nobody in their right mind would think we could reduce inflation to movements of physical particles, so goes the thought, but since this does not incline us to think inflation cannot be part of the objective world, maybe there is no reason to think brain states lack experiential properties after all; maybe they are just irreducible properties of brains. But reducibility was never the issue. We do not think inflation is reducible, but we still think it is part of the objective world: it is a large-scale way of talking about ordinary objects and their interactions, namely people exchanging goods and services. The case of consciousness is different, however, because the reason we do not think it is reducible is that it does not seem to be part of the objective world. As such we think people could be physically different but have the same experiences *not* because we think of experiences as functional states which are multiply realizable by different physical states, as in Hilary Putnam's functionalist theory of mind, but rather because we do not think the existence of any physical state is enough to 'realize' an experiential state. For no matter what scale we conceive the world at, whether microscopic or macroscopic, we still conceive it as objective, and hence not as something that experientially appears to the bearer of the state, thereby allowing them to internally demonstrate it as 'that'.<sup>34</sup>

A more recent attempt to show that experiences can be identified with brain states has been to abandon functional analyses, and hold that we conceive conscious states directly in virtue of the physical properties they have as brain states.<sup>35</sup> Thus if we conceive the after-image as green, for instance, the property of greenness we ascribe is just a physical property of the brain state, such as a certain neuronal configuration. Of course, we do not ordinarily conceive the greenness as a neuronal configuration, but according to this proposal the reason is because we have both a perceptual and introspective concept of that property. Thus just because we have different concepts, so the thought goes, we should not conclude that we are conceiving different things, or even the same thing in virtue of its possession of different properties; since we can explain the difference between the concepts cognitively, in terms of the different classificatory roles they play.

There is a clear problem with this proposal, however. Part of our conception of the after-image is, say, that it is green and oblong with fuzzy edges. If we are actually conceptualizing a brain state, then, we must have formed a radically false conception of it, given that it is not green and oblong with fuzzy edges.<sup>36</sup> But if the proposal holds that our conceptions of experiences are radically false, then it seems the idea cannot be that experiences are brain states, but rather that the whole idea of an experience is just a misconception; given that the objective world is all that exists and nothing within it fits our idea of an experience. Since nothing fits our idea of an experience, then, if we want to keep the label 'experience', we will have to reapply it to something objective, such as a brain state. And this is just revisionism once more.

The advocate of this position, commonly known as the 'Phenomenal Concept Strategy', will respond that we are failing to make allowance for the difference between perceptually- and introspectively-based concepts. Thus Brian Loar says that we must distinguish the grasp of essence of a brain property provided by a physical concept, which 'structurally analyses the property' and 'reveal[s] how it is internally constituted', from the grasp of essence provided by an introspective or 'phenomenal' concept of

that same property; which simply refers to it directly, rather than via its accidental properties. But this response forgets what it means to have a *concept* of something. My concept of a tree is what I believe the tree to be: it is how I think of it. It is true that I can have a false conception of a tree and yet still manage to refer to it; just as I can refer to a man at a party as the one drinking a martini even if he is drinking water.<sup>37</sup> However even a false conception presents my conception of what the thing is; the Phenomenal Concept Strategy cannot exempt introspective concepts of this basic requirement simply by insisting on the cognitive distinctiveness of introspection. Loar tries to do exactly this, however, by claiming that experiential concepts are recognitional, demonstrative concepts. But even our most ephemeral concepts of this kind – such as of smells and feelings we have come across before without knowing exactly what they are – embody some conception of what we are talking about. My concept of ‘that’ smell is still the concept of a *smell*: an experiential state which I might describe as pleasant or musty, for instance, and thereby distinguish it from other smells, non-olfactory sensations, parts of the objective world and so on.

Our concepts of experiences, then, provide our conception of what experiences are, and since brain states lack most of the properties we ascribe to experiences, we must conclude that if they are concepts of brain states, we are radically misconceiving brain states. Thus the Phenomenal Concept Strategy ultimately issues in a misrepresentation view: a view according to which concepts of experiences are misrepresentations of brain states. These misrepresentations might still refer to brain states, however, since the misrepresentation need not be complete; on the most plausible development of this suggestion, our concepts of experiences might refer to brain states in virtue of their functional properties, since we conceive experiences and brain states as having similar functional properties.<sup>38</sup> Similarly, somebody might radically misconceive the sun by thinking of it as a systematic hallucination; but if the supposed hallucination played a similar functional role to the sun, their concept might succeed in referring to the sun, even though no hallucination of the kind exists. The advocate of this view, then, might claim to have found a way of avoiding revisionism and showing that experiences are brain states, by holding that concepts of experiences refer to brain states while radically misrepresenting them.

The problem, however, is that if our concepts of experiences are misrepresentations of brain states, then all that exists is the centreless objective world. We should not, then, be imagining somebody focusing on their experience of the world from a certain perspective, and thinking of ‘that’ as an experience, even though what they are really focusing on is a brain state. We should not be imagining this because if the proposal were correct, there would be no experiential ‘that’ to either accurately represent or misrepresent. Rather, the situation would be one in which a person would utter certain sentences, and be disposed to utter others, about the nature of their experience. Those sentences would refer to their brain state in virtue of the brain state possessing the functional role ascribed by the sentences, but the sentences would otherwise provide a completely false description of the brain state. The person would say that something was experientially present to them, then, but in reality there would be nothing of the sort; just an organism misdescribing its internal states, and on the basis of those misdescriptions falsely believing itself to be fundamentally unlike inanimate objects

in virtue of having a conscious perspective on the world. The organism would think there was an experiential 'that' but there would not be; it would just be misrepresenting its brain state. Ultimately, then, the misrepresentation view is not distinct from revisionism; it just finds a functional commonality between experiences and brain states to justify its revisionist labelling of certain brain states as 'experiences'.<sup>39</sup>

In fact, the potential for mind-brain identification theories to slide into revisionism was latent even in the original version of the theory put forward by Place. For if we hold, as Place did, that the only accurate component of our conception of a conscious state is of its functional role, then the rest must be a misrepresentation and we are again effectively proposing a revisionist conception of experience. Place did not say he was seeking to revise our conception of consciousness, but rather that when we conceive the green after-image, '*we are not saying* [my emphasis] that there is something, the after-image, which is green': this might be read as a suggestion ('we should not say this') or an observation ('we do not ordinarily mean to say this'). If he meant the former, the implications are plainly revisionist. The latter is implausible, but even if Place were right, he would still have to concede that there is a concept of consciousness which does conflict with objective thought; otherwise the origins of our vast literature on the mind-body problem would be a bigger mystery than the problem itself. But then this problematic conception would still need revision. So either way, the result is a centreless objective world and a revisionist conception of experience.

Attempts to identify consciousness with the brain inevitably gravitate towards revisionism, then, but not necessarily to revisionism about *consciousness*; for it might be possible for experience as ordinarily conceived to be identified with the brain in the circumstance in which a future scientific revolution transforms our conception of matter – or perhaps goes beyond the concept of matter. This is because such a revolution might completely overthrow objective thought, or else supplement it in such a way that we become able to understand how objective states of the world could have experiential self-awareness. This suggestion, common to Thomas Nagel and Galen Strawson, avoids the need to revise our conception of consciousness by postulating future revisions to our conception of a brain state. But just like standard revisionism, it is implausible and metaphilosophically overstretches itself.<sup>40</sup>

As a prediction about what will take place in the future, it is implausible both because the world has no track record of metaphysical problems instigating scientific revolutions; and because it is practically impossible to imagine philosophers persuading physicists to take the problem seriously enough for them to build up the kind of major research programme required (to go nowhere); the voices of philosophers such as Dennett would have to have disappeared, for a start. But perhaps the proposal is not to be read so much as a prediction, as a statement of what would have to happen for the problem of consciousness to be solved. If this is the case, however, then it metaphilosophically overstretches itself. For philosophers are in no position to pontificate on the inadequacy of our conception of matter; this is a concern which long ago passed into the hands of empirical science. And besides the inadvisability of philosophers stepping into core scientific territory as anything more than interested bystanders – unless of course they become scientists themselves – the fact remains that in a contest between our ordinary conception of consciousness and objective thought,



objective thought wins hands down. Objective thought provides the foundation for all our understanding of the world, and cannot be put in doubt by a philosophical problem. If revisionism is necessary, then, it is Dennett who takes it in the more sensible direction, that is, towards experience rather than matter.

We have found that all attempts to identify consciousness with the brain ultimately result in revisionism. It must do, because our conception of an experience is nothing like our conception of a brain state, and everything is what it is and not another thing. One concept or the other will have to be revised if what they conceive is identical. Thus if experiences are brain states, our conception of either experiences or brain states must be more or less completely wrong. Is it possible to reach a more satisfying conclusion? Only if we keep in mind the subject-matter of philosophy.



## Consciousness: The Transcendent Hypothesis

*It is better that philosophy fail to totalize meaning – even though, as ontology, it has attempted just this – for it thereby remains open to the irreducible otherness of transcendence.*

Emmanuel Levinas, 1981<sub>1</sub>

### 1. Consciousness and transcendence

We have seen that attempts to find conscious experience in the objective world by identifying it with brain activity inevitably gravitate towards revisionism: revisionism of either our concept of consciousness or our concept of the brain. However suppose, *per impossibile*, that experiences were brain states: that they were somehow what they are *and* another thing. In that case the self-awareness of our experiences would be the self-awareness of our brains, and there would be a sense in which we are only ever aware of our brains; experience would be the self-awareness of our current brain state, with some states representing their external causes to make us indirectly aware of the world. Even perceptual awareness of our own brains, on this model, would be the brain's self-awareness; which is why Bradley thought it a consequence of naturalism that, 'for me my own brain in the end must be a state of my own brain.'<sup>2</sup> Thus if experience is the brain, the brain must be reconceived as akin to a self-aware cinema screen: aware only of its own pictures and in virtue of this self-awareness indirectly aware of what the pictures depict. It becomes a unique object, narcissistically peering at itself while interpreting what it sees as the world.

This strange metaphysical vision would be an unavoidable consequence of locating experience in the objective world. It is strange because it makes the brain as metaphysically unique as experience; brains become uniquely self-aware and uniquely capable of appearing as whatever causally affected them in the right way, by contrast with the rest of the world, which is unable to appear either to itself or as another thing. However we know from objective thought that the brain is not radically unlike everything else in the world; it is the most complex organ in the human body and the one science currently knows least about, but it is nevertheless still just a physical object,

metaphysically on a par with any other. Any satisfactory solution to the problem of consciousness, then, must respect this fact, for there is no sense trying to do justice to objective thought by accommodating experience within it, if what it tells us about the world, and specifically our brains, is thereby ignored in the process.

If we want to leave objective thought's conception of the world alone then, maybe our best option would be to just accept that experience does not belong there; this is the thinking behind dualism. For if consciousness occupies a parallel reality, then its puzzling properties can simply be treated as basic features of this reality; the self-awareness of consciousness, for instance, can be given an exotic label such as 'non-thetic consciousness', and then nothing more needs to be said to explain it.<sup>3</sup> Granted, the resulting picture is not altogether different from the one we had before, for the mind is still portrayed as a unique object narcissistically peering at itself. However once banished to a non-physical reality, this strangeness might no longer seem to matter, so long as objective thought is left intact. But it is not left intact; for if consciousness is excluded from the objective world, its manifest integration with that world needs to be accounted for. Thus the dualist must attribute to the brain a unique capacity to interact with the non-physical world, which is another kind of metaphysical specialness; once more metaphysics finds itself forced to tamper with objective thought's conception of the world.

How then can we hope to avoid this impasse? How can we avoid revisionism, while leaving the objective world alone? To start to see a way out, let us return to the metaphilosophy of Chapter 3. Thus let us suppose that the issue of natural interest which attracts people to the problem of consciousness is that of transcendence; that people are fascinated by consciousness, at first at least, because the apparent mystery of it raises the prospect that reality transcends the objective world. And correlatively, let us suppose that no proposed solution to the problem can establish any kind of lasting consensus unless it relates to this motivating interest in transcendence; that the implicit parameters for an answer to the problem are such that any acceptable answer must have implications for whether or not reality transcends the world of objective thought.

In that case, we are looking for a solution which – at a minimum – tells us whether or not reality transcends the objective world. Let us begin by supposing it does not. If that is so, then the objective world is the final context of existence. And if it is, and hence there is nothing else (concrete) to reality, it follows that if experience exists, a place must be found for it within the objective world. This is the assumption most contemporary philosophers make. However it leads to revisionism.

So let us instead try supposing that reality *does* transcend the objective world. This suggestion has long been unpopular since it smacks of supernaturalism, religious hypotheses and immodest metaphilosophy. Worse still, the most popular way of pursuing it has been through dualism. However, the kind of transcendence that dualism appeals to is weaker than the full-blown version which has fascinated religions and philosophies since ancient times. For while dualism holds that reality transcends the objective world because minds, or mental properties, are non-spatial, this mental reality is not a wider context of existence; the existence of non-physical minds does not imply that the objective world depends for its existence on this reality. Rather dualism

only commits us to a counterpart of the objective world within the same context of existence. If the objective world were transcended by a wider context of existence, then according to the only concrete model of transcendence we have which could apply to this case, the wider context would have to stand to the objective world as the objective world stands to a dream. But in that case the dualist's reality of thoughts and feelings would also be transcended, showing that they belong to the same context as the objective world. Suppose this is a dream. In that case not only are the dream-trees I see transcended by the wider context in which I am asleep; my dream-thoughts must be as well. For any reality there is to the thoughts and feelings we have in a dream must be found in the real world, not the world of the dream.

The sense in which dualism holds that reality transcends the objective world, then, is just that there is more to concrete reality than the objective world. But there is also a stronger sense based on the phenomenological model of waking from a dream. The weaker sense is no help with the problem of consciousness; dualism is, and always has been, stricken by the problem of explaining how an ontologically distinct mind and body could interact. But what if we employ the genuine article?

## 2. The problem in a dream

Suppose I am currently dreaming. If this is a dream, then I am not really sitting at my desk typing these words. Rather, I am lying asleep in my bed (or at least I am asleep somewhere and my bed seems the most likely option). Thus the hands I see before me are not my real hands. Rather they are dream-hands. They are not real hands because they exist within the consciousness of my dream, just like the dream-desk and dream-trees I see; like them, the hands I currently see belong to a different context of existence from that of waking reality.

Now suppose that within my dream I think about the problem of consciousness. I focus my attention on my current experience and then begin to be puzzled by the question of how it fits into the objective scene I am apparently part of. Objective thought provides me with a conception of the room I am in, a room containing various objects composed of various materials; what then puzzles me is that experience seems to have no place within that room. Nonetheless I am convinced that experience must somehow be there, so I fixate on the old philosophical hypothesis that my conscious states are states of my brain. But now I become even more puzzled, because this does not seem possible unless I adopt an implausible revisionist conception of experience.

This thought-process is of course the one we went through in the last chapter; but the supposition that this is a dream alters its significance. Consider the stage when I suppose my experiences must be states of my brain. What is problematic about this is that my conception of a brain is of an organic object; something which unlike experience is at home within objective thought. As such when I think about both the grey matter inside my skull and my present experience of a tree, there seems absolutely no question of numerical identity. If this is a dream rather than reality, however, then there is an ambiguity in the reasoning here – an ambiguity J. J. Valberg has revealed – which makes it likely that I am thinking about the wrong brain.<sup>4</sup> For there is no

prospect of my conscious experience being identified with *the brain within the dream*. Rather if I am to consider identifying my experience with any brain, then it must be the real one outside the dream: the one located close to the pillow on my bed, and which is responsible for the dream world I am currently immersed in.

If this is a dream, then, the usual thought-process I go through in thinking about the problem of consciousness is liable to be confused, unless I deliberately adjust it to take account of differential contexts of existence. For I would be confused if I began wondering how my experience fits into the scene, if the scene is part of a dream world. If I want to think about the problem of consciousness from within my dream, then, I need to think about it differently. I should not be wondering about how my experience fits into the world of the dream, but rather how it fits into the objective world outside the dream. Moreover I should not be considering identifications between my dream experiences and my dream-brain, but rather identifications between my dream experiences and the states of the brain doing the dreaming, that is, the one within my real, sleeping head.

This difference might initially seem of no great consequence, given that whether I am currently having waking or dream experiences they are experiences all the same; and it is experience *simpliciter*, not a particular kind of experience, which has no place within objective thought. And indeed, there is no more prospect of identifying brain states with dream experiences than waking ones. However the importance of the dreaming hypothesis to the problem of consciousness is this: if this is a dream, then it would be a mistake to try to identify my experience with a part of the world that exists within the context of existence presented by my consciousness. Thus it would be a mistake to try to identify my experience with my dream-brain, and if I convinced myself that this identity must hold, I would be liable to become very puzzled indeed. Rather, if my experience is to be identified with anything, it must be identified with something within a wider context of existence. Might we not reach an equivalent conclusion when we consider the problem in ordinary waking life?

The equivalent conclusion would be that conscious experience must be identified with something within a wider context of existence than the world it presents: it must be identified with something transcendent to the objective world. If this is right, it would explain why consciousness apparently has no place within the objective world. The reason would be that it does not exist there, any more than dream experience exists in the world of the dream. It would also explain why experiences cannot be identified with brain states. The reason would be that experiences exist in a context transcendent to the objective world in which brain states belong, making such an identity out of the question; just as an identity between a dream experience and a state of a dream-brain would be out of the question.

This is the transcendent hypothesis – that the objective, physical world is transcended – and it provides the basis for a metaphysical description of the world which leaves objective thought and thus the brain alone; while relating to transcendence and incorporating the existence of experience. Objective thought and the brain are left alone because once experience is conceived as transcendent, there is no need to try to incorporate it into the world of objective thought, thereby transforming the brain into a uniquely self-aware object. The brain can again be an ordinary object with the

same status as any other in the objective world, just as a dream-brain enjoys the same status as everything else in the world of a dream. And if experience has transcendent existence, and thus its existence is compatible with objective thought, then the pressure to deny it is removed. Revisionism is avoided. Overall, then, this looks like a solution of the right shape. But what does it amount to? And is it true?

Before we start to answer these questions, however, we shall first provide a more precise account of the concept of transcendence we are employing, since this might be helpful in following the argument to come.

Transcendence is a relation of either ontological dependency between worlds presented by consciousness and the independently existing world; or apparent ontological dependency between different worlds presented by consciousness (a 'context of existence' is either a world presented by consciousness or the independently existing world). So a world is transcended when there is another world upon which the entire space and time (or apparent space and time) of the former is apparently or actually ontologically dependent; the latter is the transcendent world relative to the former. The ontological dependency will be merely apparent when the transcendent world is a world which exists within consciousness (which consciousness presents). This is because the apparent ontological dependency will itself be something which consciousness presents, and there can only be actual ontological dependency upon independent existence; a world presented by consciousness cannot independently exist, since consciousness cannot belong to a world that it presents (we have already seen this in the case of both dreams (above) and the objective world (Chapter 4)) and yet must belong to the world which independently exists. The ontological dependency will be actual when the transcendent world is not a world which exists within consciousness (which consciousness presents), because it is the world in which consciousness independently exists. The ontological dependency will be actual in this case because the conscious presentation of the transcended world exists independently in the transcendent world.

### 3. The transcendent hypothesis I: Two traditional themes

There is an important disanalogy between trying to locate dreaming and waking experiences in the objective world, because in dreams it only makes sense to identify experience with something outside the dream. Thus an identification of dream experiences with something in the objective world is at least possible, although it is ruled out by the contingent fact that experience has no place in the objective world. However if we work on the assumption that dreams provide insight into how consciousness works in general – namely by creating differential contexts of existence with the experience existing in the wider context – then we should conclude that there was never any prospect of identifying waking experiences with objective brain states, given that these states exist *within* our consciousness of the objective world, not outside it.

If dream experience shows that consciousness creates differential contexts of existence, we have reason to believe that the objective world is not the final context. This is because the fact that we are conscious of the objective world indicates that another context transcends it: the one where consciousness exists. Just as consciousness of a dream world requires a world transcendent to the dream, so does consciousness of the objective world require a world transcendent to the objective world. On the transcendent hypothesis, then, the final context of existence transcends the objective world; and since the final context is the independently existing world, this must be the world to which all experience belongs, whether dreaming or waking. Thus according to the hypothesis, dream experiences exist in a context which transcends the world of the dream, but this is one step removed from the objective world. This extra step provides the clue to the nature of consciousness on which the hypothesis is based, and roots its sense in the objective world.

The transcendent context of existence being hypothesized is one of which our knowledge is seriously curtailed. This is because we have no reason to regard it as a context we could ever be conscious of, given that there is no evidence for further 'waking' to a transcendent world; we awaken from dreams but there is no reason to believe we will ever awaken from life.<sup>5</sup> Thus if there is a context of existence which transcends the objective world, it is not one, so far as we know, which exists within consciousness. And if it did exist within consciousness, it would not be the final context, since consciousness, according to the hypothesis, is always transcendent. This removes any realistic prospect of identifying experiences with particular parts of the transcendent world, since the transcendent reality of the final context – in which independent being is to be found – is not something we could consciously experience in such a way as to allow us to distinguish one part of it from another. For although we must suppose there is a world outside of a dream where dream experiences exist, we need not suppose it is a world of which we are even potentially conscious; there could be a dreamer incapable of waking, for instance. And likewise if we suppose there is a world transcendent to the objective world, this need not be a world of which we can be conscious either; once we get to the final context, it could not be.

However, although there is a sense in which we are not conscious of transcendent reality, there must also be a sense in which we are; given that we are aware of consciousness and consciousness is transcendent. Awareness of conscious experiences is not perceptual awareness of the kind we have of the objective world, nor the quasi-perceptual awareness we have of objects in a dream. Rather we are aware of experiences in virtue of having them – conscious experiences are conceived as self-aware. If conscious experiences are part of transcendent reality, then, it seems we must have self-awareness of transcendent reality. This is something we readily accept in dreams. For since dream experiences must exist in a world that transcends the dream, the self-awareness we have of these experiences must be of a world transcending the dream. What the hypothesis suggests, then, is that the same holds of all experience, and hence that the self-awareness we have of our waking experiences is of a reality which transcends the objective world.

Thus the transcendent hypothesis seems to be saying that conscious experience is a transcendent reality we have self-awareness of, and it is in virtue of this

self-awareness that we are perceptually aware of the objective world. Understood in this way, it immediately jars with two major themes in the history of philosophy; the first that transcendent reality is humanly unknowable, and the second that experience is perfectly knowable. Once these themes are combined, the hypothesis begins to look like a thoroughly problematic hybrid, since it claims that experiences – which are supposed to be perfectly known – exist in a transcendent reality – which is supposed to be perfectly unknown. However, correctly understood, the implication of the hypothesis is rather that transcendent reality is very well known as the objective world, but very imperfectly known as experience. To see this, let us address the traditional themes in turn.

The idea that transcendent reality is humanly unknowable derives, in modern times at least, from Kant's transcendental idealism. However to say that Kantian idealism is committed to unknowable things-in-themselves is misleading. It is correct given the strict Kantian definition of knowledge; but this conveys the false impression of a separate world hermetically sealed off from us. If we speak instead of 'awareness', however, it is clear that if the transcendent reality of things-in-themselves is independent reality, then all awareness is of things-in-themselves: there is nothing else to be aware of. And if we forget about Kantian knowledge, it seems clear there is nothing else to know either. Kant's transcendent reality of things-in-themselves is not a distinct reality, but independent reality considered 'as it is in itself'; rather than in relation to our senses or conceptual apparatus. The Kantian idealist tradition provides no theoretical obstacle to claiming that we are aware of transcendent reality, then. Rather, it purports only to show that we cannot be aware of transcendent reality as it is in itself.<sup>6</sup>

So if reality is transcendent, we are certainly aware of it. But the question is whether this awareness allows us to understand its independent nature as it is in itself. The transcendent hypothesis suggests that perceptual awareness of the objective world does not provide this understanding, because we have no reason to expect theories built up within consciousness to apply outside of it; any more than we should trust theories devised within a dream to capture the independent nature of the world outside the dream. But even if our conception of the objective world does not capture the nature of independent reality, our conception of consciousness still might. For if conscious experience transcends the objective world, and we have self-knowledge of experience, this must be self-knowledge of transcendent reality. Perhaps, then, it is this self-knowledge which allows us to grasp reality's independent nature as it is in itself. This brings us to the second traditional theme: the idea that experience is perfectly known.

On the face of it, this suggestion seems unlikely, given how little we can say about what experience is. If I want to tell you what the experience of green is, for instance, I have but three very inadequate options: I can compare it to another colour experience; tell you how to get it so you can find out for yourself; or say some very general, philosophical things, such as that it is a subjective state that alerts people to the presence of green light. None of this remotely compares to the detailed knowledge that can be imparted about things in the objective world. If all I could tell you about trees, for instance, was that they are like bushes, can be seen in forests ('go and have a look!'), and that they are physical objects which cause experiences of trees, then you



would likely conclude that I knew very little about trees. Moreover if consciousness transcends the objective world, as the objective world transcends dreams, we have a much stronger reason to be sceptical about it being peculiarly well known.

Despite this, the view that the mind is better known than the physical world has been highly influential; it was weakened by Kant, and came in for sustained criticism from Wittgenstein, but it still regularly resurfaces to dominate philosophical discussion.<sup>7</sup> It is encouraged by the idea of directness, since if experience is unique in being known directly, this tends to suggest that it is uniquely well known. Somebody who met Marilyn Monroe, for instance, is typically thought to have attained a superior kind of knowledge to those who only know of her indirectly; in this way Monroe's casual acquaintances get one up on her biographers. This intuition seems to lurk in the background of the philosophical view that experience provides our only acquaintance with the intrinsic nature of reality; with knowledge of the objective world contrasted as a kind of extrinsic knowledge of how different elements of reality relate to each other.<sup>8</sup> Experience is attributed this capacity to provide knowledge of the intrinsic because our direct knowledge of it is conceived as a kind of self-knowledge; the intrinsic nature of reality knows itself, as it were. Then on the basis of this self-knowledge, it is supposed that we form an extrinsic conception of the rest of the world. Thus we know a tree indirectly from the effects it has on our consciousness, and so learn what it is extrinsically – in terms of its relations to consciousness and objects which affect consciousness. But consciousness is known not from its effect on consciousness, but rather according to its own intrinsic nature; through direct self-knowledge.

This line of reasoning suggests that our knowledge of consciousness reveals the nature of reality as it is in itself. And since the nature revealed is experiential, accepting it would transform the transcendent hypothesis into a form of idealism. The reasoning is based on a mistake, however. The mistake is to misconstrue our understanding of experience as autonomous, when it is really just a *shadow of objective thought*. If we did have an autonomous set of concepts for understanding experience, there might be good reason to suppose that experiential concepts uniquely enable us to grasp the independent nature of reality. But we do not possess such concepts; when we interpret what we experience *as* experience, we do so equipped only with the concepts of objective thought. As such, in trying to form a positive conception of the nature of different types of experience, we necessarily misconceive experience. Once this point and its implications are grasped, traditional mind-body perplexities fade.

#### 4. The transcendent hypothesis II: Introspection and perception

The notion that we have an autonomous understanding of experience goes hand in hand with the notion that we are aware of experience and the objective world via distinct faculties. Thus the distinction between introspection – through which we know conscious experience directly – and perception – through which we know the objective world indirectly – is traditionally thought of as between distinct cognitive faculties 'used to detect different regions of reality', as Colin McGinn puts it.<sup>9</sup> This view



fits neatly with ontological dualism, in which the regions are held to be ontologically distinct; but it is also the standard view among physicalists, who think of the regions as simply different parts of the physical world – most typically the brain, in the case of introspective awareness, or whatever part of the physical world is being perceived, in the case of perceptual awareness. Once this interpretation is accepted, it subsequently makes sense that we should have an autonomous set of concepts for understanding conscious experience; these would be the concepts based on our awareness of experiences, as opposed to those based on the distinct kind of our awareness we have of other parts of reality.<sup>10</sup>

However there is an alternative to thinking of the distinction as between types of awareness sensitive to different parts of reality. For we can also think of it as between different components of an interpretation of a unitary reality – we interpret reality as experience we are introspectively aware of, and which makes us perceptually aware of the objective world. This interpretation requires us to misrepresent experience, because our experiential concepts are shadow concepts borrowed from the objective world. Thus once we adopt the ‘different components’ view, and realize that it incorporates misrepresentation, the reasoning which leads us to conclude that experience is the better known part of reality – and which subsequently points to the idealist conclusion that reality is intrinsically experiential – is immediately undermined. For then the pertinent question is no longer ‘which part of reality is better known?’ but rather ‘under which interpretation is reality known better?’ And the answer to this is clear: not as experience, but as perceptual awareness of an objective world.

For most of our waking lives we interpret what we are directly aware of as the objective world. Thus I ordinarily think of what is currently appearing to me as I look out of the window as a tree; not an experience caused within me by a tree, but a tree.<sup>11</sup> This everyday interpretation retreats of its own accord, however, when experience presents things with no obvious place in the objective world. Thus I am lying in bed looking up at the electric light, and find that by closing my eyes a little I can make the light extend from the bulb in a thick white line across the ceiling. Now I can no longer interpret what I am aware of as part of the objective world. The same thing occurs, if considerably more dramatically, when people hallucinate, and thereby experience all kinds of fantastical things.<sup>12</sup> In such cases, when I can no longer interpret what I experience as the objective world, I interpret it as experience: I think of the white line, or the hallucination, as something experiential. Experiential interpretations routinely co-exist with objective ones. Thus when I look at the ceiling, I am aware of both the ceiling and experience, namely the white line. Or I walk down the street attending to people, cars, an itch and my thoughts, taking myself to be simultaneously aware of both the objective world and experiences.

The fact that we sometimes have to interpret what we are aware of as experience provides a foothold for familiar philosophical reasoning. Thus, the reasoning goes, although it might naïvely seem that looking at the tree in broad daylight and looking at a hallucination have little in common, the fact remains that both are cases of experience, and so both must involve a self-aware experiential state. In this way, philosophical reasoning calls us to *always* interpret what we are aware of as an experiential array making us indirectly aware of the objective world. Helped along by science, I now

begin to think of the real tree as something like a cloud of molecules, not the familiar tree present within my consciousness – the one bathed in ‘phenomenal’ colour (note that I must now recognize a new kind of colour). And as such, I have learnt to distinguish perception from experience (or ‘sensation’), and may now understand myself as perceiving the tree by attending to the cause of my experience; something which experience provides a belief in and conception of.<sup>13</sup>

But all I have really done is to say to myself, in the face of a unitary reality: ‘I’m not thinking of this as the tree anymore, rather I’m thinking of it as my experience of the tree.’ The mistake occurs when we take this interpretation at face value, and so think that experience is one kind of thing for which we have one set of concepts, and the objective world is another for which we have a distinct set. This is a mistake because we are misinterpreting experience by conceiving it within the confines of objective thought. Since this is a misinterpretation, we cannot rely on it to tell us the nature of experience. Rather, we can rely on it only for what it tells us about the objective world; we are adopting an interpretation of transcendent being which requires us to misinterpret experience in order to articulate an objective world.

To see that we are misinterpreting experience, consider looking at the tree again. I suppose I can direct my attention to experience; an array of colour suitably arranged into the shape of a tree. But recall that experience has no place in the objective world – if experience has no place in the objective world, the colour cannot be arranged into the shape of a tree. For our only notion of spatial arrangement and shape belongs to the objective world. We have no other notion, and besides, this is evidently the notion we have in mind; the shape we discern in the experience is the shape the tree has, just as a photograph of a tree has the shape the tree has. This apparent match between the shape of the experience and the tree explains why Locke held that ideas of primary qualities resemble the qualities themselves. But as Berkeley pointed out, resemblance between ideas and physical objects ultimately makes no sense; and we might express this point by saying that if experience does not belong to the objective world, then an experience cannot resemble something objective in virtue of shape. We might try to get around this by talking of an abstract isomorphism rather than a resemblance, such that something about the nature of experience systematically correlates with the shape of the tree. But to say this is to admit that the notion of shape is inapplicable to experience, despite the fact that when I attend to my experience, all I find is something shaped like a tree; the experience of the leaves is *above* the experience of the trunk and so on. Since there are no tree-shaped experiences in the objective world, then, I must be misconceiving experience; in which case, I am in no position to assert an isomorphism between experience and the tree.

The situation is similar with the secondary qualities. Here we are tempted to distinguish the greenness of the experience of the leaves – the ‘quale’ or ‘phenomenal’ greenness – from the greenness of the leaves – the property clouds of colourless molecules have of reflecting light at a certain frequency, let us say. The clouds of molecules then seem to possess nothing like the ‘phenomenal’ greenness; which is why Locke denied there was any resemblance in such cases. But just as we do not have two autonomous conceptions of shape, neither do we have two autonomous conceptions of colour – our only such conception comes from the objective world. Now this case

might seem different to the last, because unlike with shape, we are inclined to accord priority to our supposed 'phenomenal' conception of colour. Thus although we might readily accept that trees have shape but experiences do not, it is tempting to think that trees are clouds of colourless molecules and that real colour resides only in the mind. However if experiences do not have a size and shape, they can hardly have a colour which fills that size and shape. So once more our apparent grasp of what an experience is supposed to be slips away. For the greenness I had in mind filled the contours of my experiences; but since experiences can have no contours to be filled, this cannot be a property that experience possesses.

What is happening here is that when we switch interpretation from objective world to experience, we misconceive experience; we interpret experiences as if they were things in the objective world, when in actual fact – as we realize on further reflection – they have no place there. This misconception is inevitable because there is only one substantive interpretation of reality: the communal one we become adept at when we learn language, namely objective thought. Its historically embedded and hence practically irrevocable understanding places us in an objective world without experience. And yet we know that experience exists, exactly because we find ourselves 'placed' – we are always at the centre of a world we conceive as centreless.

When we form positive conceptions of experiences, then, we inevitably conceive them as putative occupants of the objective world. Thus we conceive visual experiences as special kinds of pictures, illuminations on an ever-present visual field; or bodily sensations as ethereal objects located in our bodies; or thinking as our own voice as if heard through headphones.<sup>14</sup> However, we also interpret experiences as known only by the person whose experience it is. Consequently we conceive them as both objective and subjective; consider pains, for instance, which we conceive as located in our bodies, and hence as belonging to objective space, but also as subjective appearances. This combination is not manifestly incoherent, and so is easy to live with, because we can simply think of experiences as located in objective space but perceived by only one person. However philosophical reasoning quickly reveals that if experiences are directly known – as they must be to make us indirectly aware of the objective world – then they must be self-knowing; and the only explanation of this which does not violate our conception of experience is that they are subjective by nature.<sup>15</sup> Since this subjectivity is incompatible with experiences existing in the space of the objective world – where anyone could in principle know them – the ordinary conception is ultimately incoherent. But its objective and subjective components both serve an invaluable role in our interpretation of reality. For the objective component allows us to think of experiences as having features causally determined by the objective world; while the subjective component allows us to explain why experiences cannot be found in the objective world.

That we need positive conceptions of experiences to build up our picture of the objective world is easily seen. For if I think of what I am aware of as just the tree, then if someone else describes it differently – as having darker coloured leaves, for instance – one of us must be wrong. The reason this kind of crass dilemma does not routinely occur is that the naïve interpretation of what we are directly aware of retreats of its own accord when challenged – as in the example of the white line extending from the light

bulb – and we naturally appeal to experience. So instead of thinking of what I am aware of as the tree, I think of it as an experience of the tree from a certain perspective; and this gives me new options to explain our disagreement. It might still be that one of us is wrong, but there might also be an experiential difference due to the different positions we are looking from; or even abnormalities in the other person's visual cortices. For now many factors pertaining to the perceived object and the perceiver it causally impacts upon can be appealed to, rather as in explaining why a camera captures a certain image we can appeal to a wide variety of factors in the environment or in the camera.

Of course, if experiences are not part of the objective world, then objective conditions cannot causally impact upon them in the way objective conditions do causally impact upon a camera image. It is rather the case that we interpret reality this way – as containing experiences with features causally determined by the environment and perceiver – in order to facilitate our interpretation of reality as an indirect awareness of an objective world. Thus we say that the leaves and brain activity caused the experience of green, for instance, because we conceive the experience as something objective, a kind of image. But we also conceive it as a subjective appearance to explain why only one person is aware of it and it is not to be found in the objective world. This conception of experience is ultimately incoherent, and as such must misrepresent experience. However by using it, and not dwelling on the incoherence, we become informed about the objective condition of the environment and perceiver.

Revisionism arises when we look for something to call 'experience' which really is caused by the objective conditions (dualism also arises in this way). Thus the leaves and brain activity cause the subject to report a green experience, and when we are inclined to report experiences and react in appropriate ways to them, we occupy a certain kind of functional state; the revisionist then looks to call these kinds of states 'experiences'. It would be better to call them 'experiential states', however, since they are only the objective counterparts of our concepts of different types of experiences. Experience itself is the transcendent reality we misinterpret as both part of the objective world and a subjective entity, in order to interpret it as indirect awareness of an objective world. Whereas the experiential state is the objective state we occupy when we make this misinterpretation and act accordingly, that is, when we act as if the objective world had caused a self-aware green image within us, for instance.

It is because we form positive, shadow conceptions of experiences – by conceiving them as in causal dialogue with the objective world – that experience exhibits apparent causal dependency upon the brain. Thus a person's waking experiences can be altered by altering their brain states; and if a dreamer's brain states are altered so that they wake, the dream experiences end. There is also a large body of scientific data showing that altering the brain states of dreamers can systematically alter their dreams.<sup>16</sup> On the face of it, these apparent dependencies support both the dualist view that experience is causally dependent upon the brain, and the physicalist view that it is ontologically dependent upon the brain. But the transcendent hypothesis takes a different tact. It holds that the experience does not causally interact with the objective world, and neither is it a part of that world; since experience and the objective world are both parts of an interpretation of transcendent reality. It is the nature of the interpretation which explains the appearance of causal or ontological dependency; but it is not an accurate

interpretation because it requires us to conceive experience as objective. However it is by so conceiving experience that we arrive at our picture of an objective world in which objects like trees cause certain brain states, the function of which justifies us in classifying them as experiential states.<sup>17</sup>

Thus, I interpret reality as an experience of a tree from a certain perspective, and can then explain the experience's features as caused by features of the tree, or the perspective from which the tree was viewed. Now objective thought has discovered that the brain can be causally correlated with more of the features we find in experience than anything else in the objective world. Thus we conceive trees but not elephants as part of the causal explanation of tree experiences, but brains are conceived as part of the causal explanation of *any* experience, even those – such as hallucinations and dream experiences – where there is no external object. But this is no more puzzling, from the perspective of objective thought, than the fact that the internal workings of a camera are part of the causal explanation of any image it captures, and would also explain any autonomously produced image it was able to produce.

Experience is not dependent on the brain, however, because it is only by misconceiving experience that we are able to invoke this kind of causal explanation. Doing so allows us to interpret reality as experience of an objective world; and if we are to understand ourselves as having a perspective on that world, then the perspective must lead back to somewhere. That somewhere is the brain. However on the transcendent hypothesis, this apparent dependency is the result of a misconception of experience. Brain states do not have an independent existence which the existence of experience depends upon, causally or otherwise. Rather brain states are part of our interpretation of independent, transcendent reality. The reason experiences seem to be dependent upon them is that when we interpret reality as experiences caused by conditions in the objective world, at least part of that condition will always be a brain state. In hallucination and dreams it is the whole condition.

According to the hypothesis's conception of perception and introspection, then, instead of there being different types of awareness of different parts of reality, it is rather the case that we interpret reality as an introspectively known experiential field through which we are perceptually aware of an objective world; perception and introspection are two components of this interpretation. The interpretation requires us to form positive conceptions of experiences by applying concepts only applicable to the objective world. Thus we think of experiences as objective but somehow also self-knowing, with this self-knowledge facilitating perceptual awareness of the objective conditions that caused them. Since we consequently take ourselves to be only indirectly aware of objective features such as green, we reason that experience itself cannot be green. We thereby invent a different kind of colour, 'phenomenal-green', and seem to have an autonomous concept applicable to a different part of reality. But the new concept is just a shadow of the first; because although we would not conceptualize the experiential property as a spectral surface reflectance, for instance, we do nevertheless conceptualize it as extended in space. The new concept is actually just our original concept of an objective feature – from before we scientifically refined it – but now displaced onto experience.<sup>18</sup> In attributing the feature to experience, we thereby think of it as something subjective and distinct from the objective world. But since we are

applying a shadow concept of an objective feature, we also think of it as objective – which allows us to think of it as in causal contact with the objective world and thus informative. Consequently we have misconceived experience. But we have done so to make maximal sense of reality.

This account reveals the confusion behind debates over the ‘transparency’ of experience. One side says that all experience makes us aware of is the perceived object, and that we cannot redirect our attention to the experience itself. The other side says we can redirect our attention at will between the perceived object and experience.<sup>19</sup> However whether we take ourselves to be aware of experience or the perceived object is simply a matter of which component of our interpretation of reality we attend to. We can switch between thinking of ourselves as directly aware of the experience or indirectly aware of the object – and this explains the intuition behind the second view. But there is only one thing there – which explains the intuition behind the first.

### 5. The transcendent hypothesis III: Appearance and reality

The view that we have autonomous concepts of subjective entities or properties is encouraged by an asymmetry between concepts like phenomenal-green, for which we call the corresponding objective property ‘green’; and concepts like pain, for which there is no corresponding property to call ‘pain’. Since in the latter case there is no objective property, it seems the concept must be autonomous. And if some experiential concepts are autonomous, this raises the possibility that they all are; perhaps our concept of phenomenal-green, for instance, is also an independent concept of an experience, rather than a shadow concept formed on the basis of our encounters with certain light-reflecting surfaces. This is a misunderstanding of the asymmetry, however.

It is a misunderstanding because the reason there is no objective feature we call ‘pain’ is not because the concept of pain is an autonomous concept of a subjective feeling, but rather because of the causal chain by which we take pain to be caused; the asymmetry is all at the level of objective thought. In the case of colour, we think of an objective feature as the cause of our colour experience, and thereby misconceive the experience as something the feature caused; we think of it as a self-aware visual image and form a shadow concept for the supposed colour of the experience. In the case of pain, we also think of an objective feature as the cause of the experience, and thereby misconceive the experience as something the feature caused; we think of it as a self-aware disturbance within the body and form a shadow concept for the supposed pain-quality of the experience. The difference is that in the colour case, but not the pain case, the objective feature is conceived as capable of causing the experience intersubjectively. Thus the colour experience is conceived as the causal upshot of light reflecting into the eyes; and the surface property responsible could have this effect on any suitably positioned person. In the case of pain, however, the objective feature – be it bodily damage or perhaps just a brain state – is conceived as only causing the experience in *one particular subject*, such that the feature only has this effect in the person whose bodily damage or brain state it is. Objective thought has a simple explanation of this asymmetry, namely that people are wired up to detect the objective causes of their

own pain experiences but not those of others, whereas every normal visual perceiver is wired up to detect the objective causes of colour experiences.

It is because objective thought conceives the causation in which objective features give rise to pain experiences as specific to individual people, that it has no use for an objective feature called 'pain'. For objective features need to be there for everyone, so we can talk about them and agree on how to describe them. If we imagine a science-fiction scenario in which our brains were wired up differently, so that internal bodily features were capable of an intersubjective effect, then no doubt we would call those bodily features 'pain' and the asymmetry would disappear. We might then call a property such as C-fibre stimulation in the brain 'pain' and conceive it as the cause of 'phenomenal-pain'. As things stand, however, we have the shadow concept without the original. But this provides no reason to think of it as an autonomous concept, because the process by which the concept is formed is just the same. Thus we form the concept of pain by ascribing a feature to something in the objective world – the part of the body where the pain is felt. Then in order to interpret reality as experience which makes us indirectly aware of that feature, we reconceive the feature – or another which objective thought decides is more causally relevant – as the cause of the experience of pain, thereby forming the shadow concept of 'phenomenal-pain'. The only difference is that we do not then call the objective feature 'pain', because it is not conceived as causing the experience intersubjectively.

This shows why the traditional idea that there is no appearance/reality distinction for experiences is so apt to mislead. The idea is that we can make the distinction for something objective like gold – such that 'fool's gold' might appear to be gold though it is not really – whereas we cannot make it for an experience like pain. What is right about this is that we conceive pain, but not gold, as an experiential property; we conceive it as a kind of subjective appearance. However we also conceive it as existing in space, and hence as an occupant of the objective world; we conceive it as a subjective appearance located in part of the body.<sup>20</sup> As such, our conception of pain is ultimately incoherent; which is why it is a mistake to conclude from it that the essence of experiential properties is their subjective appearance – and that since there is nothing to be known about them except how they appear, they are better known than objective properties. For although there is indeed no room for an appearance/reality distinction for pain within the unstable subjective component of our ordinary conception, there is at the level of metaphysics. For pain appears to be a subjective appearance located within our bodies, but we know it is not, since the objective world can contain no such thing. It is a misrepresentation of transcendent reality.

Since our positive conceptions of experiences are misconceptions, it is also easy to be misled by the thought that in having experiences we learn something new, namely *what it is like* to have them. There is something important to this thought, since there is no experience in the objective world, and so in having an experience we will indeed learn something objective thought cannot tell us about. However, although the having of an experience demonstrates the incompleteness of objective thought, it is a mistake to infer that objective thought needs to improve to make up for the shortfall; or that knowledge of 'what it is like' is knowledge of a different part of reality than the objective world.<sup>21</sup> These are mistakes because in having an experience, and making



sense of it in the only way we can – namely with objective thought – we are forming a misconception. As such, objective thought's conception of reality can hardly be held to account for failing to incorporate this misconception. For what we are learning is how to misconceive reality as experience in order to make sense of it as indirect awareness of the objective world; we are not learning about a part of the objective world we do not currently understand, or about a non-objective reality which supplements the objective one within the same context.<sup>22</sup>

Thus suppose I could somehow acquire the experiences of a bat.<sup>23</sup> To make sense of this, I will interpret reality as direct awareness of bat experiences, and indirect awareness of the objective world from a perspective I have never occupied before. In this way I will learn what it is like to be a bat by forming concepts of bat experiences. I will subsequently be able to recognize, compare and contrast them, and if I retained my human experiential concepts I might find this informative; I might learn that echolocation is more like human vision than touch, for instance. However whether I think of my experiences as visual images, or disturbances within my body, or something else entirely, I will still think of them as occupants of the objective world and hence misconceive them. As such, I will not have learnt anything objective thought ought to have been able to tell me.

Objective thought might even be able to predict these misconceptions without the need for me to have bat experiences; since to have the experiences I would have to be in certain physical states, and if these were known it might be possible to work out how they would affect the speech centres of my brain. The intuition remains, however, that in having the experiences I learn something ineffable, which my misconceptions are just vain attempts to capture in words. There is also something to this, since a component of experiential concepts is demonstrative. Thus only when I have had bat experiences will I be able to recognize them as 'that' kind of experience. This explains the ineffability intuition, since we can recognize things demonstratively without being able to convey them in words; I recognize what my garden looks like from here, for instance, but if I described it over the phone to an artist it seems unlikely they could produce even a moderately accurate picture. However, although bats having an experiential 'that' to conceptualize is something of which objective thought is oblivious, nevertheless having bat experiences – and thereby acquiring misconceptions with a demonstrative component – is not going to tell us anything about what they are.

Similarly, it is said that someone acquainted with objective thought's final story about the nature of red, would upon seeing red for the first time learn what it is like to see red – which is not something they could have known before.<sup>24</sup> Now again, it seems that if this person knew enough about the objective world, they might know exactly what they would say upon first seeing red; that they would say, for instance, 'wow I've learnt something new, since this is quite unlike my old black-and-white experiences'. However the intuition remains that on having the experience they learn something ineffable. Again this seems right, and best accounted for in terms of their acquisition of demonstrative concepts. Thus when they first see red, they acquire a new demonstrative concept of it as 'that' property, the one they are indirectly aware of when they have a certain type of experience; as well as a shadow concept of 'that' as an experience of red. However although this will allow them to recognize red when they



see it, and the experience of red when they have it, it will not teach them anything new about reality under either interpretation. For learning to recognize red as 'that' kind of colour provides no information about what the objective property is. And since the shadow concept will be a misrepresentation, they will not learn anything about experience either; they already knew that it existed, after all.

## 6. The transcendent hypothesis IV: Idealism and realism

In order to make sense of transcendent being, we interpret it as experience which makes us indirectly aware of an objective world. However, if experiences existed as we conceive them, they would have to exist in the objective world, since we conceive them spatially; as at the very least spatially coextensive with our bodies rather flying through the air, for instance. But objective thought knows of no such things, and neither could it, since they are also conceived as self-knowing and hence subjective by nature. As such we must be misconceiving experience. Thus our conception of transcendent reality as experience is revealed as an invisible crutch; it allows us to articulate an objective world, but when we follow through on it, experience is no longer there. Nevertheless there evidently is something we are interpreting, and we have no alternative to thinking of it as experience of an objective world. But all we can correctly say about experience itself is that it is transcendent.

From this, we see that experience is not better known than the objective world, as the idealist tradition has maintained, but on the contrary is known only as something transcendent which we misconceive in order to make sense of it as awareness of an objective world. As such, our awareness of experience will not allow us to know transcendent reality as it is in itself. Objective thought cannot reveal the independent nature of reality because it misses out consciousness and describes a world that is transcended. And our awareness of experience cannot either, since our only legitimate conception of experience is that it is transcendent.

It might still seem that there are positive characteristics of experience we know, such as that it appears and is self-aware, for instance; and that these characteristics might carry over to transcendent reality. But this is an illusion, since experience cannot appear without appearing in some place or another; and the notion of appearance is in any case just an analogical borrowing from objective thought. Thus the sun appears from behind a cloud, and we think of experience as appearing when we wake from a dreamless sleep; it 'stands before us' somehow. But this analogy contains no great insight into the nature of experience. It is just that we know experience exists – and we know that something exists in the objective world when it appears before us. Likewise, the notion that experience is 'self-aware' is just an attempt to conceive what experience would have to be like if it were objective. So we have an objective conception of awareness, and we reason that if an experience were a thing in the world, it would not only have to be aware of things in the world, but also aware of its own awareness. However experience does not belong to the objective world; the notion of experiential self-awareness is simply part of our misconception of experience, and so the transcendent hypothesis is free of this narcissistic vision.

Thus our awareness of experience does not reveal the independent nature of reality as it is in itself. This we can never rationally expect to know, since as conscious beings we can only know reality as it appears within consciousness; and consciousness is always transcendent. We can know transcendent reality as it appears within consciousness by interpreting it as experience of an objective world. But the final context of independent reality cannot be one in which we are conscious, since in that context there is nothing transcendent to facilitate consciousness. Compare trying to find out about this context to trying to find out about the objective world from within a dream – this would be impossible unless we could at some point wake up. The independent nature of a transcendent reality we cannot wake to, then, is not something we can rationally expect to discover.<sup>25</sup>

Is the transcendent hypothesis a form of realism or idealism? Realism holds that the objective world would exist as we conceive it even if there were no consciousness. Idealism typically holds that the independent nature of reality is captured by our conception of consciousness, and that the objective world is a construction from consciousness. The transcendent hypothesis has something in common with both; but since it holds that consciousness is transcendent, cannot ultimately be classified as either.

On the face of it, it has most in common with idealism, since it holds that our conception of the objective world is not a conception of independent being. Also like idealism, it is committed to the independent existence of experience, since it holds that we interpret reality as experience of an objective world in order to make sense of it; and that although the objective world is transcended, experience has transcendent being. However unlike idealism, the hypothesis denies that we have any legitimate conception of experience except that it is transcendent. The idealist, by contrast, thinks we have a positive conception of the intrinsically experiential nature of reality. Another difference is that the transcendent hypothesis does not claim that experience is all that exists, for it is compatible with the existence of transcendent being we do not interpret as experience of an objective world, since we do not interpret it at all.<sup>26</sup> As such, although there is a sense in which the hypothesis prioritizes experience over the objective world, it is not a form of idealism since it does not hold that all reality is experiential; it says rather that all reality is transcendent.

Nevertheless, it might still seem to inherit the worst aspect of idealism by reducing the objective world to the status of a dream, given that the objective world becomes a posit to make sense of waking experience; as the dream world is a posit to make sense of dream experience. But this is a misunderstanding. A dream world is transcended when we wake, and within the wider understanding then at our disposal, we no longer have a use for the dream world; but we still need to talk about dream experiences, misconceived as part of the objective world. As such, we regard the dream world as unreal because the dream experiences remain integral to our understanding of reality but the dream world does not. The objective world, however, will never be transcended within our experience and our commitment to it is practically irreplaceable. Consequently we have no reason to describe it as unreal; we are not going to wake from it, and it does not disappear when we turn our backs. It does not have independent existence, to be sure, but transcendent reality does, and the best sense we can make of that reality is as experience of an objective world – a world which can be treated as independently existing

for all purposes except metaphysics. Dreams and hallucinations cannot be so treated, which is why we call them 'unreal'. The reason our conception of the objective world provides our ordinary and scientific criterion of reality, though not our metaphysical one, is that it is by far the richest and most powerful interpretation of independent reality we have; our conception of experience, by contrast, tells us nothing except that it is transcendent. As such, although the hypothesis prioritizes experience over the objective world, in the sense that it is only committed to the independent existence of the former, it prioritizes our conception of the objective world over our conception of experience as an interpretation of reality. In this sense, then, the hypothesis has a closer affinity with realism than idealism.

But is this just transcendental idealism? After all, Kant also denied his theory was a 'genuine' idealism, and was at pains to affirm what he called 'empirical' realism.<sup>27</sup> Well, there is certainly one obvious point of contact: both hold that independent reality is transcendent and unknowable as it is in itself. However, for Kant this claim is just the beginning of an elaborate attempt to delve into the structuring capacities of the human mind, in order to show how the manifold of passively received intuition is synthesized through various layers of a priori mental operations into a world we can experience and know. The transcendent hypothesis endorses none of this. This is not because it is a stripped-down Kantianism, but rather for a principled reason which explains why – unlike Kant's theory – it cannot be classified as idealism in any sense.

The reason is that in the sense we make of transcendent reality, Kant prioritizes the mind, whereas the transcendent hypothesis prioritizes the objective world. Kant does not think transcendent reality is intrinsically mental, to be sure, since he thinks its independent nature is unknowable; but he does nevertheless think that the objective world is a mental representation or appearance of transcendent reality. Thus he says:

there are bodies outside us, that is, things which, though completely unknown to us as they may be in themselves, we know through the representations which their influence on our sensibility provides for us, and to which we give the name of a body – which word therefore merely signifies the appearance of this object that is unknown to us but is nevertheless real.<sup>28</sup>

According to the transcendent hypothesis, however, the objective world is not a mental representation of transcendent reality, but rather part of an interpretation of transcendent reality; something we commit ourselves to the existence of in order to make sense of it. And interpretation and representation need not be construed as mental.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, although we use both mental and physical concepts to make sense of transcendent being, our positive conception of mind is parasitic upon objective thought – which is what justifies the claim that the transcendent hypothesis prioritizes the objective. This parasitism renders our positive conception of mind a misrepresentation, for it misrepresents it as objective, leaving our only metaphysically legitimate conception of mind as something transcendent, which is practically devoid of content. But for Kant, by contrast, the best sense we can make of transcendent reality is in terms of mental representations and our mental operations upon them. This prompts his various a priori investigations into the supposed depths of mind and justifies the label 'idealism'

for the result. It is because of the epistemological priority Kant accorded to mind that he thought he could discover things *a priori* about the objective world, such as the nature of objective space and time – and thereby strayed disastrously into scientific territory. But philosophy can only make discoveries about the status of the objective world within the context of transcendence; that is, philosophical discoveries.

## 7. Is it true?

That was the long story and this is the short. We ordinarily think of ourselves as sometimes aware of the objective world and sometimes aware of experience; but philosophical reflection teaches us that a more coherent and sustainable interpretation of reality is that we are always (when conscious) directly aware of experience, with that experience sometimes making us indirectly aware of the objective world. This interpretation requires us to misconceive experience as part of the objective world, because we have no alternative if we are to form positive conceptions of individual experiences; and we need to do this to facilitate causal explanations involving the impact of the world upon experience and vice versa. By means of these explanations we are provided with a conception of the objective world in which experience has no place; this is the source of the mind/body problem. This problem is solved, however, when we realize that the conception of experience we used to derive our conception of an experienceless objective world is, from the perspective of metaphysics, just a necessary evil; and that all we can accurately say of experience is that it is transcendent.

If this account is correct it would explain the persistence of the problem of consciousness. Since ancient times, people have been fascinated by the possibility of transcendence because it holds out the prospect of life being placed within a radically new context. In such a context, nihilism, injustice and death might all be negated. In terms of human interest, then, the reason for the fascination is obvious. However, according to the transcendent hypothesis there is another reason beyond wishful thinking. This is that transcendence is a fact which reason can discover. One way we can discover it is through reflection upon conscious experience. It is hardly surprising, then, that history has found a never-ending supply of philosophers ready to argue, in a variety of ways, that the reason consciousness seems to be something beyond the objective world is that it actually is. For not only were they right, they were asserting something people have always regarded as of the greatest significance; something people have pinned their hopes on and which seems capable of turning our conception of life upside down.

However it is exactly because of this connection of transcendence with religious and mystical hypotheses of meaningful enframement, that history has also found a never-ending supply of philosophers ready to argue the reverse. For if we hold that religious hypotheses are false and that objective thought provides our best conception of reality, then it is natural to want to deny transcendence; the idea of transcendence seems like nothing but baggage from false religious hypotheses rooted in wishful thinking. Moreover philosophical claims to a reality beyond the objective world seem to denigrate scientific understanding – as traditional metaphysics was wont to do – to

the detriment of the apparently more modest and believable contemporary image of philosophy as a discipline that works in tandem with science. For these reasons, then, philosophers have been persuaded that a place must be found for experience in the objective world. Efforts to find this place, however, have all ended in revisionism.

The debate has persisted because philosophers of the first kind realize that experience exists and cannot be replaced by a revisionist substitute, whereas philosophers of the second kind think that a pro-scientific conception of philosophy requires experience to be something objective. In effect, the philosophical convictions of the first require them to reject all the efforts of the second, while the metaphysical convictions of the second require them to keep trying. The transcendent hypothesis promises to resolve this impasse. Philosophically it sides with the first, but metaphysically it should be acceptable to the second; since its claim that consciousness is transcendent is completely lacking in consequences for nihilism, while a matter of indifference for science. It is lacking in consequences for nihilism because its existence has no consequence for questions of enframing. At some point in the past reality created a picture of itself and that picture is consciousness. We cannot climb out of it, but we have no reason to want to; since we have no reason to think the reality outside is any less meaningless than the reality within.<sup>30</sup> And the claim that reality is transcendent is a matter of indifference for science, because its only implication for objective thought is that it does not describe independent reality as it is in itself; which is a matter of only philosophical interest.

According to the transcendent hypothesis, then, there is a basis in reality for religious and mystical beliefs, and so the persistence and prevalence of such beliefs cannot all be put down to wishful thinking and scientific ignorance. That reflection on consciousness leads to transcendence, on which religious hypotheses pin their hopes, explains its philosophical interest. Thus idealist philosophers have tried to use consciousness as a rational route to religious hypotheses, while realist philosophers have tried to close off any prospect of a reality beyond the objective world in order to philosophically consolidate the scientific world-view. In pursuit of the latter agenda, philosophers have persistently tried to conceive consciousness as part of the objective world, but their attempts always fail because consciousness is transcendent. Once this is realized, there is no longer any pressure to believe that the brain is an inexplicably special part of the world, or that experiences are bizarre subjective objects in inexplicable communion with our bodies. The unique ability of the transcendent hypothesis to avoid these typical but evidently unsatisfactory results, while digging deep into the roots of philosophical interest to explain the persistence of the mind/body problem, provides good reason to think it is true.



## Time

*Once firewood turns to ash, the ash cannot revert to being firewood. But you should not take the view that it is ashes afterward and firewood before. You should realise that although firewood is at the dharma-stage of firewood, and that this is possessed of before and after, the firewood is at the same time independent, completely cut off from before, completely cut off from after.*

Dōgen Zenji, 1231–53<sub>1</sub>

### 1. Time in and out of the framework

The framework provides time with a significance determined by our projects. For our projects have goals and a goal is a projected future; once I have a type of future in mind, the significance of my present is to work towards it. So, for instance, in a busy day of work I aim to finish the document, have a quick lunch, be at the meeting at two o'clock, then work on the other document before leaving in time to collect the children. While I am working, my projected future makes sense of my present and recent activity. But also presupposed is the more distant future I aim to bring about by achieving all my tasks for the day; my understanding of this future presupposes a more distant past explaining why I want to spend my days like this; and my understanding of this past presupposes a still more distant projected future, such as my receiving promotion. And so on back and forth between various past decisions and projected futures, however incompletely I may recall or envisage them. In short, my understanding of any particular time within the framework presupposes a whole network of times, the significance of which is determined by my projects. In accordance with my progress on these projects, I understand my time as well-spent or wasted.

In providing times with significances in terms of projects, the framework conditions our experience of time, and hence how we think of it. Suppose, for instance, that I begin to worry that I am not going to finish in time; I feel flustered and it seems that time is passing too quickly. So I decide to skip lunch, and with a new, more distant future now in mind, the phenomenon fades – now I will have time. Or suppose I am stuck at a busy T-junction; there is an apparently endless stream of traffic and a line of cars has backed up behind me. I feel impatient and it seems I have been waiting for ages; although when I finally get out I realize it was only a couple of minutes. Or

imagine a woman who has been the victim of crime, and has spent two traumatic years trying to bring the perpetrator to justice. She finally succeeds and is now waiting for the jury to reach their verdict; the framework goal of attaining justice has dominated her life and now there is nothing to do but wait. The jury takes about an hour; but this hour will seem 'like an eternity'.

In all these cases, we see how the framework determines our experience of time as flowing towards the future. We find it flowing too quickly if our efforts are insufficient to bring about a projected future; a different and unwanted future approaches before we have time to bring about the desired one. And we find it flowing too slowly when we have only one future in mind and there is nothing we can do to bring it about. Measuring our progress can affect this sense of flow; when I can check off how much of the document I have written against a clock, then if I am not making enough progress it will typically seem that time is moving too quickly. But when there is no progress to measure, it will typically seem that time is moving too slowly. For in the latter kind of case, the significance of my present does not change, as it does between when I am half-way through the document and almost at the end; this lack of change removes my sense of the present evolving into the future. When everything is going as per plan, however, and I am steadily bringing about my projected future – or when my goal is not pressing – then I may hardly notice the time pass. It flows at an appropriate speed that requires no attention. And when I do once more pay attention I may find that it has 'flowed'.

In addition to our understanding of time as something which flows quickly or slowly, we also have a more objective conception of time which developed in order to better coordinate our framework activities. Thus according to Norbert Elias, the concept of time first arose when human groups established a relationship 'between two or more continua of changes, one of which is used as a frame of reference or standard of measurement for the other (or others)'. This might be as simple as using hunger as a cue that it is time to eat, and tiredness as a cue that it is time to sleep.<sup>2</sup> Social coordination, however, required the selection of a publically observable frame of reference; a group might decide to work together for as long as a certain cloud is visible, for instance. This would be a poor choice for a frame of reference, however, because the amount of work completed would vary depending on weather conditions, and so more reliable continua of change were alighted upon, most definitively the movements across the sky of the sun and moon.

As more precise continua were discovered, and subsequently created with the advent of horological inventions such as the pendulum, our concept of time was able to become more detached from the framework. For conceived in terms of the steady ticking of a clock, time could be experienced not as flowing towards a goal, but rather as something which moves ever onwards with complete indifference to our concerns. Ideas about the rate at which time flows could then be thought to pertain only to how time appears to people fixated upon their projects, rather than what it actually is, with time itself now conceived as an independently existing feature of the world; as 'intrinsically a free-floating sequence of nows' which is 'simply there', as Heidegger puts it.<sup>3</sup> For Heidegger, this transition encourages a kind of mistake, and we shall return to this idea in the next section. But our present concern is with how



the development of the concept away from the framework led us to regard time as a philosophical problem.<sup>4</sup>

Now when our engagement with the framework is suspended, we no longer experience time as flowing towards a goal. In this condition, we are able to view our goals more objectively as options chosen within a meaningless life. And reflection on time adds to this sense of nihilism, for while we no longer experience time moving towards a goal, we can nevertheless recognize that it is steadily pressing onwards; not towards our goals, but indefinitely into the future. And since objective time does not culminate at any particular future, but just keeps on going, we cannot regard it as culminating in an overall purpose. So unlike in the framework – where we can experience time flowing towards any number of different futures – we find it moving only towards a single future that serves no purpose.

This kind of detached reflection is liable to make time seem threatening. For when we think of time moving inexorably into a meaningless future, we see that it will move past even our most distant goals, on towards death, then onwards still. As such, time appears as a threat – before which we are powerless – to almost everything we care about. People we care about will die, our looks, abilities, pleasures and enthusiasm will fade, our children will grow up and leave us (or else we will wish they would), and no matter what goals we achieve, time will continue straight past them and on towards death, probably preceded by illness; and that is pretty much a best-case scenario. Defence mechanisms have been developed, such as aiming for a glorious or philosophical death – since death cannot rob you of what you care for if death itself is what you care for. Alternatively we may focus on our posthumous legacy. But although we may indeed care about these things, there is inevitably much more that time will rob us of in the interim. Of course we may care for less in life as we get older, and developmental psychologists tell us it is healthy to displace our cares onto others as we do.<sup>5</sup> But this is just a product of the threat lessening as it progressively materializes; and even if we displace our cares onto others, time remains a threat to them.

When we step back from the framework to reflect on time, then, we see that it is not moving towards an overall goal, but that it is moving towards death. Moreover during such reflection, we may also be struck by the apparent arbitrariness of the present, which can accentuate the threat.<sup>6</sup> For when immersed in the framework, our understanding of our projects stretches forwards and backwards, providing us with a firm sense of being in a present rooted in the middle. However when our projects lose their hold, it can start to seem arbitrary that it is *this* present rather than another; I wonder why it is ‘now’ when I am reading these words, rather than some earlier or later ‘now’. There is an apparently obvious answer, namely that certain events have taken place that had not occurred when ‘now’ was my twenty-first birthday, for instance. But the fact that they have taken place is only a fact *now*, so the question resurfaces: why is it *this* ‘now’, when those events have taken place, rather than a previous one when they had not? For when I conceive my life as an objective sequence of events, every event in the sequence has the privilege of ‘now’, making it hard to see how one could be distinguished from another in this respect. This thought can exacerbate the threat of time, making it seem that I might suddenly find myself at a stage of life I do not want

to be at; right at the end perhaps, and with equally little idea why it is this 'now' rather than another.

Thus disinterested reflection on time is liable to be a disturbing prospect for people actively engaged with the framework, since it brings on thoughts of nihilism, decay and death. This is a problem for living; so remedies were devised by philosophical schools such as Epicureanism and Stoicism, as well as by religions. However the ultimate solution was offered by metaphysicians who entertained the possibility that time is not real. The motivation to *want* to think this is clear; but these philosophers found reasons to believe it is actually true, thereby converting a problem for living into a specifically philosophical problem. This happened early on across the great traditions; thus Laozi claimed that the reality of Dao was unchanging, Buddhism traced the origin of suffering to the temporal impermanence of the phenomenal world (the reality of which its various schools debated), and Parmenides, although his view is open to numerous interpretations, clearly thought that reality is not characterized by time understood as a continuum of change.<sup>7</sup> Within the Western tradition, the theme that soon emerged was that there is reason to believe that the world that exists in time – where nihilism and death seem inevitable – is transcended, and consequently that time characterizes only illusory appearance, not true reality.

An original manifestation of this reasoning is the problem of change in Greek thought, wherein it was discovered that time threatens not just people but also knowledge. For if I take myself to know something on the basis of perception, I may find my descriptions almost immediately falsified as time moves on; I describe a leaf's position only for the wind to blow it out of place, for instance. Thus trying to know something in time seems inherently problematic and liable to embroil us in contradictions, such as believing the leaf both is and is not in a certain place; in contrast with knowledge of the truths of geometry and mathematics, to which time seems irrelevant. Heraclitus was prepared to embrace a contradictory temporal flux as reality; but most philosophers followed Parmenides in thinking that since reality could not be contradictory, time could not be real.<sup>8</sup> Hence to know reality we would have to look *beyond* time. The idea that time is contradictory and consequently unreal – or at least that ordinary conceptions of time are contradictory – has been definitive of the philosophy of time ever since.

## 2. Time and objective thought

Time is integral to objective thought, since for objects to move and interact presupposes that they do so in time. Since objective thought provides our best conception of what exists, it is the natural place to look in seeking to answer the question of what time is, as opposed to how it appears to those preoccupied with framework projects. And more pressingly, it is the natural place to look to answer the question of *whether* time exists, which is the question the philosophical traditions prime us for. Objective thought can ordinarily answer existential questions without implication for itself; it can tell us that physical objects are real but hallucinations are not, for instance. However if we were to discover that objective time is unreal, this would imply that the objective world is not real either. This is the conclusion idealist philosophers since Parmenides have reached;

and it provides a satisfying answer to the question of whether the objective world in which nihilism seems unavoidable is transcended.

Now when we try to isolate time as an element within objective thought, it has traditionally been thought of as a property of presentness which passes successively and unidirectionally from one physical arrangement of the universe to another. Thus we may suppose the universe to have the property of being present when it is in a certain physical configuration, and then to pass this property on to another, causally consequent physical configuration. With this conception before us, it is not hard to see why idealists such as Bradley might think that time is, 'so far from enduring the test of criticism, that at a touch it falls apart and declares itself illusory',

Of the many problems that have been noticed with this notion of time, let us single out three striking and influential ones. The first stems from Aristotle, and suggests that if we regard time as a series of presents, then our conception of reality becomes impossibly *thin*.<sup>10</sup> For since presentness is one of our main determinants of reality, there seems a clear sense in which past and future do not exist. Thus we think, for instance, that of the Seven Wonders of the World, only the pyramids still exist (as anything more than rubble); the other six Wonders did exist – and hence are real in the sense of not being fictional – but this attribution of reality requires a time when they were present. However the view that the present is all that exists seems untenable if the present is a durationless boundary point between past and future, as apparently it must be. For if the present had duration, however small, it would encompass a past and future; from the perspective of the beginning of the period, its end would be the future, hence not the present; and from the perspective of the end, its beginning would be the past. Since the present could not encompass a past and future, then, it must be durationless. But it is hard to see how all reality could exist in the durationless coterminous of the nothingness of past and future; or how the continuous flow of time could be composed of a series of such durationless presents.

The second kind of problem stems from thinking of the present as something absolute. For although our conceptions of past and future are relative – in that something can only be past or future relative to some present – our conception of the present is not. This can be seen from the fact that a past or future presupposes a present, but – if we put the first kind of problem to one side – a present does not presuppose a past or future; there is nothing incoherent in the idea of a cosmologically unitary event, for instance. The reason for the difference is that we have something concrete in mind when we think of the present – a Heraclitean flux you could point to – whereas in the case of past and future we are simply relating events which do not have this property to others that do. Thus we cannot understand the present exclusively relationally – as what happened immediately after the past, for instance – since the notion of past makes essential reference to that of the present. But we can understand the past and future this way. The difference is that only the present stands on its own.

The absoluteness of our notion of present seems to prevent objective thought telling us anything informative about it, since objective thought works relationally; it describes objects by relating them to other objects in terms of their shared properties. It also seems to render our notion of time incoherent, since we do not conceive just one event as absolutely present, but rather *every* event – one state of the universe is present,

then the next and so on. Thus McTaggart's famous argument for the unreality of time, which points out that since the present changes, events must possess the contradictory properties of being past, present and future.<sup>11</sup> To respond that events do not have these properties at the *same time* is just to appeal to the very notion of time in question – we try to remove the contradiction by appealing to different pasts, presents and futures for which the same issue arises. Thus we might say that an event is only present in the present, future in the past and past in the future – which is not contradictory. But then since the present is always moving, that same event must also be present in the future and past, for instance, which reintroduces the contradiction. The contradiction does not exist from the standpoint of any particular 'now', of course; but the whole point of the dynamic conception of time is that this standpoint continually changes, such that if an event is 'now' it must also be 'not-now'. As Huw Price neatly puts it, the problem is an irreconcilable tension between inclusivity and exclusivity; between making all events bearers of presentness to account for change, and singling out one event as present to avoid contradiction.<sup>12</sup>

The third kind of problem concerns the idea of the present moving.<sup>13</sup> For anything moving must move at a particular rate, and yet we specify the rate at which things move by reference to time – we say the car is moving at sixty miles per hour, for instance. It seems we cannot similarly specify the rate at which time is moving, then, since we cannot presuppose time as a fixed continuum of change when our aim is to measure time itself. All we can say, vacuously, is that time is moving at a rate of one hour per hour, for instance, which is like saying that the minute hand moves around the clock in the time it takes it to move around the clock. Only when we treat the hand movement as a fixed continuum can we specify the rate at which something is moving by reference to it, such as that the car is moving sixty miles in the time it takes the hand to go around. So it seems that to measure the rate at which time moves, we would need another continuum, a 'hyper-time' as Smart called it; then we could say, for instance, that the present moves at a rate of one hour per unit of hyper-time.<sup>14</sup> But this postulation is obviously ad hoc, and raises the same issue for the rate at which hyper-time moves. Thus it seems the question of how fast time moves cannot coherently be answered – and hence time cannot be moving. The root of the problem, once more, is conceiving time absolutely. We conceive the movement of time absolutely, just as we conceive of the present absolutely, and this is ultimately incoherent.<sup>15</sup>

Of course many responses have been made to these problems. However perhaps it is a mistake to attempt to salvage the notion of a moving present, on the grounds that we should not be thinking about time objectively in the first place. This is the line Heidegger takes. In his view, trying to conceive time as objective is just another facet of our tendency to misinterpret everything that exists as 'extant', that is, as an independently existing object; the whole of objective thought constitutes a mistake in this sense, to the extent that we think of it as ontological, rather than just a mode of thinking grounded in the kind of existence we have. Thus he says that, 'Aristotle's aporia with reference to the being of time – which is still the principal difficulty today – derives from the concept of being as equal to being extant.' If Heidegger is right that the kind of aporia we have been considering results from a misconception, then there is no need to try to resolve it.<sup>16</sup>

In Heidegger's view, the 'original time' this misconception derives from is human temporality, a feature of the kind of existence ('Dasein') which human beings have. As such, there is 'no nature-time, since all time belongs essentially to the Dasein'; Dasein is 'the *temporal entity as such*'. Temporality is a process – our existence temporalizes itself 'ahead' towards its expectations, 'behind' to its retention of what it has already been, and 'alongside' to the other beings it encounters. As such, it is always 'outside itself'; 'carried away' to future possibilities, past constraints on these possibilities, and the world that provides our present options. These three elements of 'carrying away' – the 'ecstases' of temporality – are unified, such that 'Temporality *temporalizes itself* in the ever current unity of future, past, and present'; thus reference to past resolutions and future aims structure our present, for instance. Moreover, in contrast to the objective conception of time as a potentially infinite sequence of durationless and intrinsically insignificant presents, Heidegger holds that time is essentially finite – because the temporalizing process of projecting ourselves onto our possibilities is limited by death. It is '*spanned* within itself' in a unified structure of future, present and past, and always significant as either appropriate or inappropriate to our aims.<sup>17</sup>

What Heidegger is trying to do here is find an alternative to an objective conception of time in our framework understanding; time is no longer an objective backdrop invested with significance by our concerns, but rather a matter of how we engage with those concerns – as we project possibilities through goal-directed actions, and in light of the situation we find ourselves in. This account has an essential role in Heidegger's overall project of drawing our conception of ontology away from objective thought and towards a conception of human existence as meaningful. Thus he claims that 'the meaning of Dasein is temporality' – our lives are made meaningful by the possibilities we project. Temporality can be authentic when we project ourselves onto possibilities we have individualized by recognizing our ultimate possibility, namely death; or inauthentic when we project ourselves unthinkingly onto possibilities determined by the public expectations of an anonymous 'they', which 'never dies because it cannot die'.<sup>18</sup> The objective conception of time is rooted in this inauthentic temporalizing, as we turn away from our responsibility for projecting our own finite possibilities, focus instead on a present isolated from past and future, and subsequently misconceive time as a series of extant 'nows'.

Heidegger's conception of time is ultimately a product of his humanistic response to nihilism, then. The truth of nihilism is most visible within objective thought; so Heidegger looked for an alternative source of ontology in our engagement with the framework. This allowed him to give substance to the humanistic view that we make our own lives meaningful, by arguing that projecting our activities towards our projects is itself something ontological; namely human temporality. Given that temporality is part of what we are, then, and also the humanistic premise that the 'meaning of Dasein's Being is not something free-floating which is other than and "outside of" itself, but is the self-understanding Dasein itself', he was able to portray our lives as meaningful by nature.<sup>19</sup> Moreover the possibility of different ways of temporalizing – whether authentic or inauthentic – left room for his redemptive agenda; the connection between projecting towards our possibilities, and death as our ultimate possibility, stripped

death of its connotations of nihilism, while reconfiguring the religious associations between death and the meaning of an afterlife in humanism's favour.

For nihilists who think that the meaning of life would indeed have to be 'outside of' human existence, this project will not be attractive. But whatever our judgement on the humanism it is designed to support, Heidegger's ontology of everydayness is untenable; and its account of time is the clearest demonstration of this. To see this, we need only revisit the objection we made in Chapter 1; namely that even if Heidegger is right that objective thought grew out of our everyday understanding of the world, it does not follow that the understanding it provides is less fundamental. This is because objective thought's abstraction from human concerns provides a more comprehensive and explanatorily powerful way of understanding the world, and there is no reason temporal priority should take precedence over explanatory power.

However given Heidegger's conception of time, this objection is in danger of begging the question; since his prioritizing of everydayness as how we are 'proximally and for the most part', must *itself* be understood in terms of his account of time – everydayness is temporality, he says.<sup>20</sup> Thus Heidegger's claim for the priority of everydayness cannot be that we understand the world this way for most of our objective time, or that it is 'primordial' in the sense that it came first. Rather it is the claim that objective time 'arises from' our ability to authentically temporalize our projects; which is a claim for explanatory priority.<sup>21</sup> But in that case, Heidegger's case is matched and bettered by objective thought. For although he has an account of how the notion of objective time arises from temporalizing our projects, objective thought can equally well explain why human beings preoccupied by their projects might anthropocentrically conceive the passing of objective time in terms of those projects.<sup>22</sup> And there is much else besides that objective thought can explain, but which is rendered problematic by Heidegger's alternative – since the existence of objective time makes sense of there having been vast swathes of time which passed before human beings existed, and which will no doubt pass afterwards.

Now Heidegger does not deny that objective thought can legitimately describe existence independent of human beings; he claims only that our conception of it is the result of 'thematizing' components of our being as objective.<sup>23</sup> Thus he says that:

When Dasein does not exist, 'independence' 'is' not either, nor 'is' the 'in-itself'. In such a case this sort of thing can be neither understood nor not understood. In such a case even entities within-the-world can neither be discovered nor lie hidden. *In such a case* it cannot be said that entities are, nor can it be said that they are not. But *now*, as long as there is an understanding of Being and therefore an understanding of presence-at-hand, it can indeed be said that *in this case* entities will still continue to be.<sup>24</sup>

The use of quotation marks is designed to remind us that our notion of independent existence is part of a human understanding of the world. Thus although it is part of our understanding that there was a time before human beings, and which will continue even if we become extinct, these claims only make sense because there is human existence. So Heidegger claims to be able to make sense of independent existence as

part of our understanding of the world, while denying, plausibly enough, that there is any other perspective to accommodate.

However this influential response to charges of idealism and anthropomorphism is completely undermined by Heidegger's account of time. For if temporalizing is a human process, then it is part of our understanding of the world – as Heidegger would have it develop at least – that without human beings there is no time. Entities exist in time, however. Thus it cannot be a legitimate consequence of a certain understanding of entities to say that they 'will still continue to be' after the demise of humans, once we understand that 'continuing to be' is a result of human temporalizing. For if we temporalize forwards or backwards to a time when there are no humans, we impose time on a situation in which we recognize that there would be no time, since we – the temporalizers – would not exist. Since our understanding of entities is dependent upon their existing within time, then, we cannot, on reflection, coherently think of them as existing independently; for it is incoherent to conceive them existing in a time before humans evolved, while recognizing that there was no time before humans evolved.

It is not just that Heidegger's account of time as a human process has the implausible consequence that there was no time before human beings, then, for it has the even more implausible consequence that there were no entities either. The problem ultimately derives from the fact that our everyday engagement with our projects simply does not lend itself to ontological interpretation. For within an objective world, it makes sense that we might be preoccupied by our projects, and the functions of objects that aid in those projects. Without an objective world, however, the whole notion of functionality become mysterious, since it can no longer be thought of as objects having a size and shape suited to performing our tasks. And the notion of projecting goals onto the future becomes even more mysterious, since once ontologized as time itself, this projection becomes a unique, *sui generis* process which brings with it the existence of all entities in time, including, incoherently, entities that predate and postdate human temporalizing. Heidegger's account generates its own aporia, then, and once we have recognized that it arises through a misguided project of trying to undermine nihilism, we have more than enough reason to persist with an objective conception of time.

### 3. The block theory

If we want to know what time is, then it seems we must look to objective thought; and yet the traditional conception of time as an objective moving present is manifestly problematic – which suggests that time cannot be real and hence that the objective world cannot be real either. We might respond by trying to defend the traditional conception, as many philosophers continue to do; but the definitive twentieth-century response is to abandon it and replace it with a new objective conception of time. The scientific impetus for this response came from Einstein's theory of relativity, which provided new reasons to think that the notion of a moving present was untenable, while presenting a new conception of time's integrality to the nature of the objective world. The conclusion many philosophers drew was that there was no reason to labour with the traditional problems; the idealists were right that they were insoluble and



indicated something important. However they did not indicate the unreality of time; just that the traditional conception was incoherent. For time as correctly conceived, on this account, makes no objective distinction between past, present and future – there is no moving present within which reality exclusively resides, since everything that exists does so eternally and in fixed temporal relations.

The main way in which relativity bolsters the case against the moving present is through its commitment to the relativity of simultaneity. For the moving present conception, on the face of it, presupposes absolute simultaneity across the universe at any particular present; there is only one present, in which all reality has a particular physical configuration simultaneously. The present state of affairs on Earth could not be simultaneous with a past state of affairs on Mars, for instance, given that on this conception the past state of affairs has ceased to exist.<sup>25</sup> However relativity theory holds that simultaneity, and time generally – when considered in isolation – is always observer-relative. To take a typical illustration, consider a spacecraft orbiting the Earth with a source at its midpoint emitting pulses of light to equidistant targets at the front and back.<sup>26</sup> For an observer on the spacecraft, the light arrives simultaneously at the front and back targets. But to an observer on Earth, the light arrives at the back before the front; because the front target is moving away from the light as the spacecraft travels away from the observer, while the rear target is moving towards it. Moreover to an observer on a spacecraft travelling faster than the first one and overtaking it, the light arrives at the front before the back; because the back target is moving away from the light as the spacecraft falls behind the observer. This seems to render untenable the notion of a single present at which the light either simultaneously reaches both targets or else does not.

According to the ‘block theory’ of the universe inspired by relativity theory, these differing observations are to be resolved by reconceiving time as a dimension of the unified four-dimensional reality of space-time. Thus the idea is that each observer is reporting only an instantaneous state of four-dimensional reality; a projection or three-dimensional ‘time-slice’ of it, rather as we might think of a photograph as showing only a two-dimensional projection of a three-dimensional object. With an understanding of this four-dimensional reality, then – of the kind physics provides by calculating the distance in space-time between the two events of the light hitting the front and back targets – the apparently conflicting observations are related to each other and resolved as simply different perspectives on the same reality. This reality cannot be thought of as one in which objects exist in time, but rather one in which time is part of what an object is: objects extend through time as well as space.

If we accept that objective reality is a continuum of space-time and reject the notion of an objective present, then it has seemed to most philosophers that we can no longer think of the present as the sole repository of reality. Rather there are just different time-slices of reality which we can temporally order in terms of their being earlier or later than each other, but all of which have an equal claim to exist; all the temporal parts of the universe exist together as a ‘block’. Classification of objects and events as past, present or future is thus revealed to be anthropocentric and without objective significance, since it depends on our own, physically arbitrary frame of reference; rather as spatial classifications of objects as ‘here’ or ‘there’ do. Moreover objects can



no longer be thought of as coming into existence, then ceasing to exist, only as having starting and ending points in space-time. And neither can objects be thought to change as time passes; if the notion of change is to be salvaged, it must be reconceived as one time-slice of a four-dimensional object being eternally different from another.

This radical reconception of time sweeps away all the problems we encountered for the moving present view. Reality is no longer confined to a durationless present, since all of space-time exists and there is no objectively privileged present. Neither is there a contradiction between past, present and future, because events do not temporally change; we may speak of an event as past, present and future, but in doing so we simply relate it to other events which are before, after or simultaneous with it; and these relations do not change. Thus the standard, if controversial, philosophical proposal to make sense of the notions of past, present and future within a four-dimensional reality, is that when we think or say that some event is in the past, present or future, what makes our thought or utterance true – if it is true – is that within a certain frame of reference, the event in question is before, simultaneous with, or after the thought or utterance itself.<sup>27</sup> And finally, we are no longer faced with the problem of our inability to specify the rate at which time flows, because on this conception it does not flow; it simply exists as one of the axes of a fixed continuum.

In general, the four-dimensional conception of time seems to succeed in demystifying time by replacing an absolute conception with a relative one. Rather than time being something unique which we must treat as a basic although manifestly problematic feature of reality, once reconceived in relation to space, the problems are removed and we can say something informative about it in both science and philosophy. Moreover by removing the problems, philosophy blocks the idealist move to a denial of the reality of the objective world, while nevertheless managing to retain much of its motivational appeal; given that like idealism, four-dimensionalism also denies the reality of a moving present. This shared appeal is not so obvious in case of idealism's ability to distance us from nihilism, since conceived as a four-dimensional continuum, the objective world seems just as meaningless as ever; perhaps more so since it shows that we are not moving towards any goals at all. Yet by demonstrating science's ability to overthrow our conception of something as basic to our understanding as time, four-dimensionalism holds out the prospect that there are more mysteries waiting to be uncovered which might radically transform a nihilistic outlook. And in the case of the threat of time, the appeal of the block universe is just as strong as with idealism. Since if time is not flowing, it is not flowing towards death; and our position within that flow cannot be arbitrary.<sup>28</sup> Thus a concern which has always haunted reflection on time, and the philosophical quest it motivated for something permanent beyond the inconstant temporal flux, both receive their answer: the concern has its basis in an illusion, and there is no temporal flux since time itself is permanent.<sup>29</sup>

Now it has been argued that the science does not settle the case against a moving present, and that we should not consider the science settled anyway – maybe quantum physics will require radical changes to our conception of space-time which will reinstate the notion of a moving present, for instance.<sup>30</sup> This seems right, to the extent that any scientific development is open to a variety of philosophical interpretations, and may itself be overthrown in the course of scientific progress; science may influence

a traditional philosophical problem, but never definitely settle it. But even though it is possible to defend the moving present against the block universe, what is the motivation to do so, given the advantages of the latter and the problems of the former?

The motivation is that many philosophers, as well as scientists, find the block universe deeply dissatisfactory, and this is for the simple reason that it seems to us – whenever we reflect upon it – that the present has some objective privilege and that time is always moving on.<sup>31</sup> If this is wrong, and each stage of our lives exists eternally, it seems our framework conception of life must be an illusion; we are not progressing through life towards our goals, since all stages of life exist on a par. And yet here I am, at a certain stage of my life, working towards certain goals; that is how experience presents my situation. Moreover it is not even clear that this kind of experience *could* be an illusion; since if time is not passing, our experience should, on the face of it, come to a standstill. We might think of this as like freeze-framing a film, if it were not for the fact that experiencing even a stationary image presupposes a time in which our attention can shift and our thoughts change. So if time is not moving, experience does not even seem possible.

However defenders of the block universe have responded by providing accounts of why experience inclines us to judge that there is an objective present and that the present is moving, even though these judgements are false. For example, it has been argued that the apparent objectivity of the present is rooted in a pragmatic need for intersubjective agreement.<sup>32</sup> Thus although there are time-lags involved in observation and oral communication because of the time taken for signals to pass to our sense organs and for subsequent neural processing, these can safely be ignored for most practical purposes; doing so produces intersubjective agreement about what is happening ‘now’ and generates the false impression of an objective present. In a similar vein, evidence from psychology and neuroscience has been invoked to argue that the apparent objectivity of the present results from our brains integrating temporally disparate inputs into a unified experience.<sup>33</sup> Thus we hear two sounds as simultaneous if the time between them is short enough, for instance; and it has been found that the ‘simultaneity window’ for such judgements varies between different sensory modalities, different people, different age groups, and can even be manipulated in various ways; this again suggests that our sense of an objective present is a creation of consciousness. And finally, the notion of the ‘specious’ present – commonly understood as the brief interval of time during which different contents of consciousness are experienced together as co-present within a single experience – has been invoked to explain why the present seems to move. Thus the idea is that conscious experience of a specious present contains a temporal depth in which change is perceptible, and that the combination of such presents accounts for our sense of the present as moving without any need to invoke an actual moving present.<sup>34</sup>

What these suggestions have in common is the idea that our conception of time as a moving present is a reflection of the nature of consciousness; we are mistakenly projecting elements of our experience onto the world itself. Thus to partake in the idealist’s view that the moving present is illusory, without following them in rendering the objective world illusory, the block universe conception still needs to explain the basis of this illusion; and it does so, just like idealism, by looking to consciousness.

However for this tactic to be successful, consciousness would have to be part of the objective world. And we have already seen that it is not. For any attempt to place consciousness within the objective world ultimately results in revisionism, in which we deny that what we ordinarily think of as experience exists, in order to re-label as 'experiences' certain objective states, such as brain states.

The revisionists' ability to explain the illusion of a moving present, then, is only as good as their ability to explain what they take to be the illusion of experience; which we have already seen is no good at all. For the revisionist must say that when we are in certain objective states, we are inclined to judge (falsely) that we are undergoing subjective experiences; and it is the nature we ascribe to these experiences which explains the illusion of an objective moving present – the illusion of experience generates the illusion of moving time. However, since revisionism cannot rationally explain our inclination to judge that there are experiences – since there is nothing in the objective world we might reasonably mistake for such things – neither can it explain our inclination to judge that experience occupies a privileged and dynamic present. Consider, for example, my judgement that I am aware of a certain movement within the unified experience of a specious present; or that I hear two sounds as simultaneous though I know they are not. If there were such experiences – or something I might misrepresent as such – then my judgements would have a rational basis. But since there cannot be within objective thought, my inclination to make such judgements is rendered rationally inexplicable. And in that case belief in an objective moving present is also rationally inexplicable; which means that the block theorist's appeal to consciousness has failed to explain why time seems as it does to us.

Unless a moving present is held to be a feature of independent reality, then – with all the problems this entails – the datum of an apparent moving present must be traced to consciousness; which is a proposal that cannot be pursued within objective thought. But how does such a proposal fare in light of the transcendent hypothesis?

#### 4. Time and transcendence

The hypothesis begins from the need to accommodate the fact that the world is experienced from perspectives, despite objective thought being centreless. Now these perspectives on the world are not only spatial, but also temporal; we experience the world from a certain place and time. There is a sense in which these places and times vary, in that the world is experienced from various objective locations and dates; but another in which they do not, since it is always experienced from 'here' and 'now'. The invariable sense fixes the reference for the variable, since for each different experience, 'here' and 'now' will refer to different spatial and temporal locations in the objective world, thereby seemingly rooting experience in that world. So although experience does not belong to the objective world, we always interpret it as something spatially and temporally located; this provides us with a perspective on a world we conceive as lacking perspective.<sup>35</sup>

There is an important difference between the invariable spatial and temporal orientations of experience. The difference is that the spatial, unlike the temporal, is

entirely conditional, in that it tells you only where you would be in space if you were having a veridical experience. So for instance, I interpret my current visual experience as a self-aware image of the kind that were it veridical, it would have to be located in a certain position in objective space in order to have been appropriately caused. Thus just as we can work out where a photograph must have been taken from, given what is visible in the photograph, so our interpretation of experiences as spatial implies a certain location. Given what I can see of the trees and my desk, for instance, my experience would have to occupy a certain location in order to have been appropriately caused. But now suppose that while still seated at my desk, I hallucinate being at the top of the tree; I find myself apparently looking down over the roofs of houses, say. Again my experience provides a sense of 'here': it tells me where I would have to be if my experience existed in real, objective space, and was appropriately caused by objects within that space. But this time the experience is illusory. And if we suppose further that I am aware of this fact, then the experience does not spatially orientate me at all – it does not tell me where 'here' is, only where it would have to be if I trusted the experience (which I do not).

The case with dreams is similar; a dream experience tells me where I would be if the space of the dream were real. It orientates me within the dream, but the orientation is conditional such that my sense of the dream experience as 'here' tells me only where I would be if the dream world were real. If I recognize that the dream is transcended, however, then I also recognize that its sense of 'here' is illusory, and so provides no idea of where my experience is being had from. Moreover if I consider waking experience on the transcendent hypothesis, I similarly cannot think of the spatial orientation of the experience as applicable to transcendent reality; not just because the space in which its orientation applies is transcended, as in the dream case, but also because I have no reason to think that spatial notions have any application to transcendent reality. The reason the spatial orientation of 'here' dissolves on any transcendent hypothesis – whether from the perspective of a dream or the objective world – is that it is part of an interpretation of experience as a constituent of the objective world; it tells us where experience would be located if it were part of the objective world. If the experiential presentation is not of the objective world, then – as in a dream, or else if we think of experience as not part of the objective world, as on the transcendent hypothesis – then the interpretation is no longer applicable. It can now only tell us where the experience *seems* to be, though we know it is not there.

The case of the temporal orientation of 'now' is different, because although this too is part of an interpretation of experience as objective, it also has an absolute, non-conditional sense. Thus consider a case where I hallucinate a scene from the eighteenth century; just as the hallucination tells me where 'here' would have to be in order for me to see that scene, it also tells me when 'now' would be. That is, it tells me that my experience would have to be simultaneous with, or close to simultaneous with, the various elements of the scene being in the positions they are experienced as being in; just as a photograph must have been taken at a time more or less coincident with the scene it depicts. This is because we are interpreting the experience as something caused by the scene. However since this is a hallucination, the experience cannot be taking place then; the scene is long past. Now in the spatial case, the fact that the

experience is not veridical completely removes my orientation. Does this also happen in the temporal case? No, because although the experience can no longer tell me when it would be taking place in objective time, the fact remains that the experience is 'now'. That I am not experiencing something in the objective world, then, dissolves the conditional sense of 'now', just as it dissolves the conditional sense of 'here'. But the experience remains 'now' in another sense.<sup>36</sup>

As an illustration, consider once more the dreaming case. Dream experience provides a conditional sense of 'now', since it tells us what would have to be taking place at roughly the same time as the experience if it presented the objective world. However if we realize that it is a dream, and hence that our experience must be something outside the dream, this does not remove the temporal orientation of the experience; as it does remove its spatial orientation. For we still think the experience is 'now' – outside of the dream the dreamer is having this experience 'now', even though the experience provides no way of knowing how this 'now' relates to the temporal sequence of the objective world. This is not just the point that we think that outside the dream, the experience must be taking place at some 'now', just as we might also think it must be taking place at some 'here'; this draws on our knowledge of the world outside the dream and applies only the conditional senses. Rather, the point is that the experience is taking place in the same 'now' inside and outside the dream – which has no parallel with the spatial case.

Similarly, if we consider waking experience on the transcendent hypothesis, the thought that the experience transcends the objective world does nothing to shake our conviction that it must nevertheless be 'now'. Of course in considering the hypothesis that reality transcends the objective world, we have no reason to think that our conceptual apparatus – which is bound to the objective world – has application beyond that world. However just as we have no choice but to think of the transcendent being we are interpreting as 'experience', we equally have no choice but to think of it as 'now'. We cannot think of it as atemporal, or even as possibly atemporal, when we are fixing our attention on its concrete presence. This is because just like the notions of 'experience', 'appearance' and 'self-awareness', the notion of temporal presence is an attempt to characterize transcendent existence as it is in itself.

There is, then, a transcendent sense of 'now'. This sense must ultimately derive from objective thought – as indeed do all our concepts of what exists – but like 'experience', it is an attempt to characterize something that we realize, on reflection, can have no place within the objective world. This sense of 'now' is inextricable from our notion of experience, since we cannot think of experience except as 'now'; we can of course think of past experiences, but in order to think of them as *experiences*, we must think of them as having been 'now'. This thought might seem illusory, since in order to think of any past event, such as an ancient volcanic eruption, for instance, we must think of it as having been 'now'; this, it might seem, is just what our notion of 'past' amounts to. But this is only true on the objective moving present conception of time. If we think in terms of the block universe conception instead, there is no reason to think of the eruption as 'now' in any sense; we can just think of it as an earlier slice of space-time, and need not also think of it as once 'now' by superimposing a past utterance or thought with which it was simultaneous.<sup>37</sup> But with experience the situation is different, since

no matter how we conceive the pastness of a past experience, we must still think of it as having been 'now'; this is just part of our conception of experience.

It might still seem that there is something illusory here. For perhaps what seems to be a significant claim about experience is really just a tautology, as D. H. Mellor thinks; rather as it has similarly been claimed – by Adolf Grünbaum – that the idea that only the present is real is rooted in a tautology.<sup>38</sup> Thus perhaps the reason we are inclined to think that only the present exists, is that the notion of existence we have in mind is *present existence*, and hence we are tautologously claiming that only what presently exists, presently exists. And similarly, perhaps the reason experience and temporal presence seem inseparable is that the notion of experience we have in mind is *present experience*; we are being misled by the tautologous judgement that the experiences now being had are present, into thinking that because such a judgement would be true whenever we made it, the notions of experience and temporal presence are inseparable. But according to this argument, experience has no special connection with presentness; if we think about a past experience, we need not think of it as 'now' in anything more than the trivial sense – which applies to all events – that it would have been 'now' in relation to a judgement made simultaneously with it.

But how exactly do we mistake the tautology that present experience is present for the significant claim that experience can only exist by being present? The idea seems to be that we fail to notice that we are only thinking about experiences simultaneous with our judgement, rather than experience in general. Thus the objection works by splitting consciousness into two components – the part making the judgement, and the experience being judged – and supposing that the judging part is liable to be misled by a tautology because it overlooks the fact that it has restricted its attention to present experience. The problem, however, is that the judging and the experience seem equally to be 'now': they seem like part of a unified conscious experience. To apply the same account to explain why the judgement seems to be 'now', then, we would have to say that we fail to notice we are only thinking about judgements simultaneous with our judgement. But now we have split consciousness again, by introducing a judgement about the judgement; and this new judgement will also seem to be 'now'. And no matter how many artificial divisions we introduce into consciousness, the fact will remain that when we think about conscious experience, we think about it as 'now' in the transcendent sense; our supposed susceptibility to a tautological judgement cannot explain this away, since the possibility of such a judgement itself presupposes the conscious 'now'.<sup>39</sup>

Once it is recognized that we have a transcendent sense of 'now' in addition to our conditional senses of both time and space, considerable light is shed on traditional metaphysical debates about the nature of time. Take, to begin with, the view that mind is temporal but not spatial. There is something to this, since experience is indeed more closely related to time than space; but the difference has been misunderstood because the transcendent sense has been overlooked. The reasoning behind the traditional view is simple and compelling. It is that nothing in the space of the objective world fits our notion of experience: there are no mental images located behind our eyes, only neurons. However, experiences do seem to take place simultaneously with, before, or after, events in the objective world – my current visual experience is simultaneous with

the leaves on the trees being in certain positions, for instance. And this seems to be true even if I am hallucinating or dreaming; even in such a case, my experiences would be taking place simultaneously with certain events in the world. So it seems that the mind exists in time but not space.

This reasoning is mistaken, however, because our conditional senses constitute a unified misinterpretation of experience as objective – they tell you where and when experience would have to be if it were part of the objective world. So if experience cannot be found in objective space, we have just as much reason to think that it cannot be found in objective time either. On the face of it, the case seems different because experiences always seem to be simultaneous with objective events. But then again, they equally always seem to have a spatial location – they seem to be located where I am, and must be conceived spatially if their apparent orientation is to be made sense of as the effect of certain objective influences. Moreover, if experiences were non-spatial but nevertheless simultaneous with objective events, then this simultaneity would be inexplicable except by recourse to a problematic metaphysical theory. For non-spatial experiences could not be physically caused; we would have to appeal to a special notion of interaction, or perhaps a mysterious parallelism between mind and world. But the fact that experiences seem to enter into temporal relations with objects and events in the objective world gives us no more reason to entertain these hypotheses, than the parallel fact that experiences seem to be spatial gives us reason to think that there must be some rarefied metaphysical sense in which they really are.

If there is good reason to think that experiences are not spatial, then, and that we misinterpret them as spatial to provide ourselves with a perspective on a perspectiveless world, then we have just as good reason to think that they are not really temporally in the objective world either; that they are not really simultaneous with, before or after objective events. And yet it is harder to believe our conditional sense of time is illusory. Suppose I am dreaming, and both of the conditional senses are deceiving me: if the space and time of the dream were real, I would be on the turret of a castle in medieval times, but I am actually asleep in bed. Now we readily accept that the space of the dream is illusory; but it still seems that the experience must be taking place in the time of the objective world – in sync with the movements of the clock on the wall above my bed, for instance. But this thought is confused. For while it is true that to make sense of the experience, we must interpret it as taking place simultaneously with objective events, it is equally true that we must interpret it as taking place in the space of the objective world – as inside my dreaming head; for otherwise we could make no sense of our ability to interfere with those experiences by causally affecting a certain region of objective space. So once again, if we think experiences are not in objective space, we have the same reason to think they are not in objective time either; outside of the context in which their conditional senses apply they are equally untrustworthy.

If we have the same reason to mistrust our conditional senses of space and time, then, why are we so inclined to think that experience does indeed exist in objective time? The reason is that we have a transcendent sense of 'now'. Recognizing this undeniable temporality of experience, we are inclined to apply our only substantive understanding of time, and so falsely conclude that experience exists in objective time. Thus we make sense of the transcendent 'now' as a feature of the objective world, such



that experience is 'now' at a certain point in the objective time-order. But experience does not belong to the objective world and so nothing in the objective world is 'now' in this sense; being 'now' is not a privilege experience has at a certain time in the objective order, because experience does not belong to that order. And this explains why it is so hard to accept that the mind is not in objective time, even when we have recognized that it is not in space; we cannot help thinking of it temporally, and we mistake this for the temporality of the objective world. The tradition has been wrong to conclude that the mind shares the temporality but not the spatiality of the objective world, then. But nevertheless, there remains a sense in which experience is temporal but not spatial; because spatiality, unlike temporality, is *exclusively* a part of our misinterpretation of experience as objective.

It is the superimposition of the transcendent 'now' upon the objective world which is responsible not just for this mistake, but for all the traditional perplexities we have encountered when trying to understand time. Thus if we think of a particular stage of the objective world as 'now' in this sense, then we think of it as 'now' absolutely. But when we reason about this property of being absolutely present as a putative feature of the objective world, it will seem to be durationless; contradictions will arise from conceiving it as a unique property which passes from one stage to the next; and the very notion of it passing will appear problematic. These problems result from trying to impose perspective upon a world we conceive as lacking perspective.

Thus to make sense of experience as indirect awareness of an objective world, we think of it as belonging to the objective temporal order – we misrepresent experiences as things which exist simultaneously with, before and after objective events. Now given that we always think of experience as 'now' in the transcendent sense, we think of each of these putatively objective experiences as 'now'. However, our conception of the transcendent 'now' is unitary – only one experience can be 'now' in this sense, and so if we are to conceive the transcendent 'now' as part of the objective temporal order, we must think of it being passed sequentially along the objective series of experiences, such that past experiences were 'now' but are 'now' no more. We thereby arrive at an objective moving present conception of time, albeit one centred on experience. However, we may also arrive at this conception by superimposing the transcendent 'now' directly onto the objective world; since we ordinarily think of what we are directly aware of as the world. Thus we may reason that objective states of the world are 'now' in the transcendent sense, and conceive time as a matter of this 'now' being passed along sequentially, with experiences simply numbering among all the other objective things which momentarily bear the 'now'.

The problem with this conception of time is that it attempts to find the temporal perspective of experience in a world that has none. This is highlighted by the fact that objective thought, in its drive to consistently describe an objective world, has discovered that such a world should be conceived as a block universe; and hence as entirely lacking in temporal perspective. Now defenders of the objective moving present may object that it may still be possible to conceive an objective present within four-dimensional space-time, and that even if it is not, scientific developments may yet vindicate the moving present. However, if we are right that this conception results from illegitimately superimposing the transcendent 'now' onto the objective world, there is



no reason to cling to such possibilities; the fact that the block universe dispenses with temporal perspective emerges as a point in its favour, from a philosophical point of view, since it shows objective thought being carried through to its logical conclusion.

So how do we retain the fact that we have a conscious perspective on the temporal order of the objective world, without illegitimately trying to objectivize that perspective? We must realize that the temporal order – which we currently have good reason to think of as a block universe – is an interpretation of the transcendent ‘now’ of experience. But we must also realize that *we cannot play the same hand twice* – we cannot commit to the existence of the transcendent ‘now’ within that temporal order, since the ‘now’ was used up when we interpreted it as that order. Thus we will never find the transcendent ‘now’ in the objective world, any more than we will find experience. However, we will find objective misrepresentations of experience, and one of them will always seem to be privileged by the transcendent ‘now’. For at any point in objective time, we will be interpreting transcendent experience as an objective experience caused by an objective world; and the putatively objective experience – since it is a misinterpretation of transcendent experience – will seem to be privileged within the objective time-order as the one which bears the transcendent ‘now’. Since this interpretation brings in its wake the objective world, it commits us to past states of the objective world when we were also conscious, and hence to past objective experiences which were once privileged as bearers of the transcendent ‘now’. But these past experiences did not really bear this privilege – any more than the present one does – because none of them exist. They are all misrepresentations. Only the transcendent reality of experience bears the transcendent ‘now’.

So we are always interpreting transcendent reality objectively, and hence always leaving it behind in favour of both the objective world and the putatively objective experiences (which are misrepresentations) needed to understand that world and have a life within it. Since we are always interpreting transcendent reality, we are always trapped within the transcendent ‘now’. Which is just how things seem to us; so long as we are conscious it is always ‘now’. The moving present conception explains this phenomenon by supposing that the ‘now’ follows us along throughout our lives. But the transcendent hypothesis, by contrast, explains it as a consequence of the fact that at any stage in our conscious lives, we find an objective world by making sense of the transcendent ‘now’ of experience. By resisting the temptation to introduce the transcendent ‘now’ into the objective time-order, the hypothesis avoids the problems of the moving present conception, and allows us to agree with the block theorist that there is no privileged present within the objective world. And it is similarly by resisting the temptation to introduce transcendent experience into the objective world, that the hypothesis addresses the mind–body problem. In both cases, yielding to this temptation – by mistaking our objective misrepresentation for the real thing, so to speak – lands us with insoluble problems. We are left trying to find experiences, or a privileged present, within a world that contains nothing of the kind.

Once we recognize that our belief in experiences at the various temporal stages of the world is rooted in misrepresentation, we will not think that the transcendent ‘now’ and other remembered ‘now’s form an objective sequence. To try to make sense of such a sequence, with all the traditional problems attendant upon such a venture, is to try

to make sense of a misrepresentation which is ultimately incoherent; since it combines thinking of experience as objective, with thinking of it as self-aware and 'now'. The problems result from this incoherence. Thus we will find that the 'now's necessarily lack duration (since they cannot be identified with any durable event in the objective world), that their attribution at different points in objective time creates contradictions (since the transcendent 'now' is unique), and that objective thought lacks the resources to make sense of one 'now' passing to the next (since it is not a property of an object or event). However, keeping the transcendent 'now' out of the objective time-order does not mean giving up on temporal perspective, because it is always the transcendent 'now' which is being interpreted as experience of an objective world.

Thus the transcendent hypothesis makes sense of there being a past, present and future relative to events which we privilege owing to their apparent simultaneity with putatively objective experiences which we misconceive as bearers of the transcendent 'now'. This allows us to understand our experiential perspective on the temporal order of the objective world, without generating the traditional problems which arise when we try to introduce perspective into that order; it avoids an implausible denial of perspective while also avoiding the misguided project of objectifying it. It avoids realism about an objective present; and it avoids idealism too, since we always interpret transcendent experience as experience of an objective world with its own objective temporal order. If human beings cease to exist then transcendent reality will no longer be interpreted this way, of course. But that does not mean that the interpretation would be any the less valid; if the time of the objective world were a product of human temporality, by contrast, then it would no longer be valid without the human way of life it gains its significance from.

For all its advantages, this account is easily misunderstood. For it is liable to stubbornly seem that which experience is 'now' is constantly changing, and hence that we must be attributing change to transcendent being itself, such that the objective world is an interpretation of each experience in turn. Thus we may reason that the objective world was once an interpretation of a past experience, then another, and now it is an interpretation of present experience. But if we are thinking of transcendent experience changing, we have mistakenly projected it into the objective world. For transcendent experience does not gain or lose its 'now': it *is* 'now'. When we misrepresent experience as part of the objective world, we do so as a series of experiences in sync with its temporal stages. However, these 'objective experiences' do not gain and then lose the transcendent 'now'; they do not even exist, but are rather our way of making sense of transcendent experience as experience of an objective world. Thus although we always interpret transcendent experience as a particular objective experience with a temporal privilege in the objective order – the one that is 'now' in the transcendent sense – this putatively objective experience cannot lose its privilege only for another to gain it; because there is no such experience and nothing in the objective world has a temporal privilege. Transcendent experience exists, but what we interpret it as does not.

It might now seem that we have simply transferred the problems of the moving present from the objective world to our misrepresentation of experience; that our misinterpretation must be constantly changing, and hence changing at a particular

rate, for instance. However, to say that our misinterpretation is changing, is just to say that we have different misinterpretations at different times. Thus human beings have different beliefs at different times about which of their experiences are 'now', and which are no longer 'now', and they also occupy different 'experiential states'; the objective counterparts of experiences. But what is being misinterpreted – the transcendent 'now' – cannot be coherently thought of as changing. There are no past, present or future states of transcendence, only a unitary transcendent reality which is misinterpreted as different objective experiences at different times. And at each time, this misinterpretation leads us to privilege one of those experiences as the one which is present.

Suppose this is a dream. I can recognize that experience is 'now', and must exist outside the dream. But if I think about a past experience, I have entered the world of the dream; which is just to interpret the present experience as part of a dream world which once included the past experience. If I resist this thought, however, and suppose that the past of the dream was, at the time, an interpretation of a past transcendent experience, then I have tried to think into the past of the world outside the dream. We could, in principle, do this in the case of dreams – if it were possible to be this lucid while asleep – because we understand the past of the objective world. But we could not in the case of the objective world, because this would require us to illegitimately apply a concept of 'past' derived from the objective world, to a transcendent reality of which we have no reason to think it has application. We have no more reason to think 'present' has application either, of course, but we cannot help thinking of transcendent experience as present; and it is a presence which does not imply a past or future except when we misrepresent it as part of the dream or objective world. Thus at every point in our conscious lives, we are interpreting the same unique transcendent 'now' as the objective world, and at each point we misrepresent it as an objective experience which is privileged as 'now'. But we cannot make sense of this privilege in terms of the objective world, since it does not belong there; and we cannot make sense of it in terms of transcendence, since we cannot make positive sense of transcendence. And that is why we find ourselves trapped in the transcendent 'now', and unable to make sense of why it seems to privilege one stage of the objective world rather than another. But when we also understand that it is a mistake to try to make sense of it, the problem is solved.<sup>40</sup>

There is no objective moving present and transcendent experience does not move; yet the present does *seem* to move. This is explained to some extent by our misinterpretation of the transcendent 'now', since whenever we reflect on experience, our objective misrepresentation brings in its wake past states of the objective world which we misrepresent as its causal antecedents. However this cannot be the whole story, since the appearance of a moving present is a real phenomenon we experience in the present; I look to the sky and see the clouds move, for instance. But now that consciousness has been reintroduced into the picture, we are free to draw on the psychological accounts appealed to by block theorists. Thus we may say, for instance, that when we misinterpret transcendent experience as an objective experience, we misinterpret it as an objective experience of a specious present.<sup>41</sup> So assuming that some such account can be made to work, we can explain this sense of a moving present

without the need for an actual moving present; while appealing to the transcendent 'now' in order to avoid aligning the account with revisionism.

But in describing transcendent reality as 'now' are we not attempting to characterize reality in itself? We are, just as we are in describing it as 'experience'; which is unavoidable given the way of representing the world we have developed. 'Experience' is our rather vague conception of what reality must be like for us to have *any* perspective on it, and 'now' (in the transcendent sense) is our rather vague conception of what reality must be like for us to have a *temporal* perspective on it. We cannot think of experience without thinking of it as 'now' and we cannot think of 'now' without thinking of experience; these are two inseparable aspects of how we try to make sense of transcendence, ultimately derived from the objective world. We attribute these features to transcendence when we realize they cannot belong to that world. Thus we misconceive experience as objective, and we misconceive 'now' as a privilege attaching to an objective experience. But then when we realize that the objective world contains no experience, we form the transcendent hypothesis and attribute these characteristics to transcendent reality. These attempts to positively characterize reality as it is in itself recognizably fail, since we have no reason to think concepts formed from the objective world have application to transcendent reality. On reflection, then, we should say only that to describe transcendent reality as 'experience' and 'now' is to point out that we cannot grasp its nature; which we cannot help thinking of as experiential and temporally present. Thus we recognize that consciousness creates differential contexts of existence, and so hypothesize that it exists in a context that transcends the objective world – to explain why we cannot grasp its existence objectively and yet cannot deny that it exists. And likewise, we hypothesize that the temporal perspective of 'now' transcends the objective world, to explain why we cannot grasp its existence objectively and yet cannot deny that it exists.

## 5. Respite without consolation

Does the transcendent hypothesis show that time is unreal? It does not, because time is part of the objective world. It does, however, show that the moving present conception is the result of illegitimately superimposing the transcendent 'now' upon the objective order. And so given that on the block conception, movement and change are to be accounted for without imparting any change to time itself – and given also that we cannot coherently think of transcendent being as changing – we can agree that the appearance of a moving present is an illusion created by conscious experience. However, this insight provides none of the consolation against the threat of time that initiated this line of metaphysical reflection. For whenever we reflect on time, we find ourselves apparently placed at a certain point within the objective order, with loss and death but no meaningful culmination ahead of us. The realization that the objective world is not itself flowing towards these outcomes – and that we only seem to occupy a temporal position within the objective world because of our misrepresentation of experience – does not help. For the misrepresentation is practically inevitable, even if in metaphysics we can see through it; metaphysical reflection detects it, but we still think of ourselves as having a life in the objective world.

Nevertheless time does provide a route to transcendence, which is what drew philosophy's attention in the first place. But the existence of transcendent reality has no effect on the truth of nihilism, and neither does it provide us with an alternative life which might somehow be atemporal; or at least free from the threat of time. Moreover, the transcendent hypothesis not only fails to neutralize worries about what time has in store for us, but actually corroborates a thought accentuating this threat; namely that of the arbitrariness of 'now'. For the hypothesis shows that we really cannot explain why transcendent reality seems to privilege one stage of the objective world as 'now' over another. This is a reflection of the inexplicability of there being transcendent reality at all; the same inexplicability we find in the fact that the universe exists.

However, considering time on the transcendent hypothesis does at least allow us to make sense of a certain recurrent theme in the Zen (Chan) tradition; one which might be thought to offer a little respite, if not consolation, in the face of time. Thus Dōgen, in the quotation which opened this chapter, says that an objective subject of change, such as firewood burning, is 'possessed of before and after', but is 'at the same time independent, completely cut off from before, completely cut off from after'. This is the insight we expressed in saying that objective time is an interpretation of transcendent being; things in the objective world are 'possessed of before and after', but the transcendent 'now' is 'completely cut off from before, completely cut off from after'. Dōgen also recognizes the inseparability of transcendent being (we know about) and 'now', which he characterizes by referring to 'being-time'; he says that 'each being-time is without exception entire time', which is to say that each interpretation of the transcendent 'now' brings with it the entire time of the objective world, and indeed 'the entire world'.<sup>42</sup> The same idea is found in Hui-neng, who brings out its significance for the tradition in this passage:

There is no sign of origination in an instant, and there is no sign of passing away in an instant: with no more birth and death to be extinguished, quiescent extinction thus manifests. As it is manifesting, furthermore, there is no quantification or objectification of manifestation, so it is called eternal and blissful. This bliss has no subject that experiences it, yet there is none who does not experience it.<sup>43</sup>

Thus when we reflect on transcendence – Hui-neng's 'instant' – we find a reality free of the forward-directedness of life within the framework. This may not strike us as 'blissful' if we do not regard the framework as oppressive – as something to free ourselves from by attaining a certain state of mind; albeit without then doing anything different, as the Chan/Zen masters typically insist we should not. But seeing it does allow us to transform boredom into metaphysical understanding.



## Universals

*If the true world collapses, so must the world of appearances. Only then is Platonism overcome, which is to say, inverted in such a way that philosophical thinking twists free of it.*

Martin Heidegger, 1936–7<sub>1</sub>

### 1. Universals and the meaning of life

Philosophical interest in universals is a natural offshoot of our framework concerns. For framework activities are guided by goals, and to work towards a goal is to have an ideal, however mundane. Thus the cabinet-maker and athlete have some conception of 'the perfect X' in their respective fields; as does the gambler, who hopes for perfection as he looks down at the hand he has just been dealt. An ideal gives us something to aim for; a dream we can strive to realize or at least approximate. Of course, life calls on us to moderate our aspirations, and if we are to find contentment, our goals may have to become not so much ideal, as ideal-for-me-in-the-circumstances. As such, the child who dreamed of conquering Hollywood and grows into an unknown but working actress may still be content, if she develops her thinking skilfully enough; and even if lingering disappointment remains, this may be compartmentalized into rare maudlin moments. Others who develop less wisdom may seek contentment through the unfalsifiable hope of posthumous success. But although dreams shrink, many of us manage to hold onto them in some shape or form. Such dreams have thoroughly shaped the various fields of endeavour which determine our framework activities.

Ideals provide guidance in life, so were of natural interest in the philosophical quest to use reason to determine what we ought to do; thus Socrates sought to clarify the laudable ideals of justice, piety, virtue, courage, beauty and love. Philosophy then took on its characteristic shape when Plato introduced metaphysics into the equation to ask what these ideals actually *are*. On the face of it, an ideal such as perfect justice is just a dream; but Plato found reasons to believe that ideals are more real than life within the framework – he portrayed the dream as the reality and the reality as the dream. This move was facilitated by the concept of transcendence which he took from Parmenides, and the result was a conception of reality as a transcendent realm populated by ideal objects such as pure goodness, perfect justice and love itself, with everyday examples

of these demoted to approximations – representations or shadows of reality. Through this displacement of our concept of reality, then, the familiar world in which life has no meaning and we will die, was portrayed as unreal; and the ideals we strive for real. The real world was now as aspiration – or more generally thought – presented it. And in this way, reflection on universals provided the definitive Western philosophical route to transcendence and the denial of nihilism.

Consider the parable of the fall in Plato's *Phaedrus*; a narrative of a kind familiar to the Greeks from Hesiod, but here given a metaphysical twist. Plato portrays life in the framework as a temporary stage in the life of the immortal soul, which we occupy because of an imperfection in our souls that is lacking in the gods. This imperfection causes us to lose sight of the true reality of ideal forms which exist 'beyond the heavens', and take on material form as a mortal. After we subsequently die, our lives are judged, and we are either punished under the earth or rewarded in the heavens. Then, we are reincarnated, with our new status determined by the merit of our previous life. This cycle of reincarnation continues for a set period until the soul is released from material existence; but it may thereafter fall again.<sup>2</sup> The cycle can only be permanently broken by living a philosophical life in pursuit of knowledge, according to which we renounce material pleasures and focus our minds on the true reality of forms such as goodness and justice – knowledge of which teaches us how to live well. If we succeed, our souls are purged of imperfection and regain their focus on true reality, allowing us to put our flawed lives as human beings behind us.

Plato's account provides life with a meaning which resonates deeply with our lives within the framework, apparently vindicating them. For life is spent striving to realize ideals – most conspicuously in the case of the high achievers we tend to admire most – and Plato's account tells us that realizing certain ideals such as goodness and justice is just what we *should* be doing. For it is by coming to know ideals – by focusing our attention on them to the exclusion of all else, and thereby living lives that reflect them – that we can perfect our souls and ascend to a better life. That is the overall purpose of our efforts. Of course, human life is only a shadow of the life of the immortal soul, and this account does not tell us the meaning of *that*; but this is simply another benefit of the package. For we have no idea what purpose existence as a whole might serve, and so rather than embarking on the evidentially baseless task of trying to suggest one, the account seeks to counter nihilistic intimations by explaining our ignorance as a consequence of temporary material existence – leaving open the possibility that the soul will understand the reason for its existence when it regains full contact with the forms. Ultimately, then, the meaning of our real lives as immortal souls is something we have forgotten; but the quest to remember gives meaning to our embodied lives.

This account has plenty of appeal for someone concerned by nihilism, death and injustice. For it overcomes nihilism and death by conceiving our real lives as transcendent, while leaving room for a redemptive agenda according to which our mundane lives are to reflect only certain forms; those deemed conducive to a moral and aesthetic life. People who fail to live up to these standards are punished – their transgressions are not a regrettable life-style choice, but an objective mistake that will not go unnoticed. With so much power to ease these most natural of human concerns, it is no wonder that this account was to so fundamentally affect subsequent thinking.



This was mainly through its influence – once purged of its elitist focus on knowledge – on the world's most successful religions. But it also helped set in motion the discipline of philosophy, which dealt with the problems generated by introducing the concept of transcendence into our understanding of the world: with the metaphysical and epistemological status of appearance and reality, and thus issues such as the nature of ideals, substances, experiences, time, representation, knowledge and so forth. Since Nietzsche, it has been customary to portray this vision as born of hatred of life and will to power; and there is some plausibility to this, given Plato's renouncement of material pleasures, and his ranking of the philosophical life above all others. But it is just as plausible to portray it as life-affirming, since to someone who perceives nihilism as a threat to life's value, it offers a vindication of our daily strivings. And since there are many possible lifestyles, someone who valued life could be expected to recommend their own – if convinced it is best.<sup>3</sup>

The human appeal of Plato's metaphysical vision is clear, then, but does it have any sound theoretical basis? Does the ideal of justice, as opposed to particular just acts, require the existence of transcendent universals? Few would answer this latter question in the affirmative anymore. But plenty of philosophers still believe that there are real universals, and so the problem lives on; albeit now divorced from the connections with the meaning of life which gave it its start. However some think it should not live on. Scepticism about the universal/particular distinction finds forceful expression in Nietzsche, who sees it as an illusion of language. In his view, the subject-predicate form of language and logic serves the purposes of our way of life only by *falsifying* reality; and so Plato was naïve to think it reflected a fundamental metaphysical distinction.<sup>4</sup> F. P. Ramsey took a similar line, as more recently have Fraser MacBride and Galen Strawson.<sup>5</sup>

Thus we might reason that general terms like 'justice' must refer to something to be meaningful, but being general, cannot refer to particulars – and so must refer to universals. Such reasoning, which would presuppose what Ryle disparaged as a 'Fido'-Fido account of meaning, is suggested by Plato in the *Republic*; though he elsewhere expresses doubts.<sup>6</sup> However Ryle was right: linguistic meaning is generally more complex than a direct correspondence between words and entities, so we cannot simply read off the existence of universals from the form of language. Wittgenstein's well-known 'games' example shows the inadvisability of assuming underlying commonality from sameness of label; and the lesson does not stop at social phenomena such as games or justice.<sup>7</sup> For we know, for instance, that two objects experienced as the same colour in normal conditions may not share any intrinsic physical property accounting for this; this is not a decisive objection to objectivist accounts of colour, but it does show that judgements of sameness embedded in language may be rendered doubtful by science.<sup>8</sup> Dennett, echoing Nietzsche, thinks that our evolutionary history is to blame: 'If some creature's life depended on lumping together the moon, blue cheese, and bicycles, he says, 'you can be pretty sure that Mother Nature would find a way for it to "see" these as "intuitively just the same kind of thing"'.

A moderate conclusion that can be drawn from these considerations is D. M. Armstrong's; namely that if we are to endorse an ontology of universals, it must be empirically guided – both scientific evidence and philosophical considerations must

be brought to bear in determining whether predicates apply to universals – and if they do – which universals they apply to.<sup>10</sup> This conclusion falls a long way short of Nietzschean scepticism; but it is not clear that anything else is required. Moreover it is not clear that Nietzschean scepticism is even *coherent*, since to be so its claim must be capable of being formulated without the universal/particular distinction it repudiates – it cannot be the claim that reality lacks the property of being divided into universals and particulars, for instance. Of course, once we reject the ‘Fido’-Fido account, we will not think that all predication ascribes a property.<sup>11</sup> But in that case, it is unclear what the sceptic is saying, or how the scientific, and specifically evolutionary considerations sometimes adduced in its support are to be interpreted as claims about reality, if they do not ascribe properties to particulars.

The nominalist – who also claims that reality is not divided into universals and particulars – faces no such difficulties, because they accept some basis in reality for our classification of things as of the same type; they simply deny that this is the existence of real universals. The Nietzschean needs an equivalent account. Thus consider Quine’s rejection of the analytic/synthetic distinction, with which MacBride compares his own Ramsey-inspired scepticism.<sup>12</sup> Quine argues that no statements are true simply in virtue of meaning, which effectively makes all statements synthetic – with the appearance of an analytic/synthetic distinction to be explained in terms of distinctions between synthetic statements, just as the nominalist explains the appearance of a universal/particular distinction in terms of particulars alone. In both cases an alternative to the distinction placed in question renders the position coherent.

But Nietzschean scepticism offers no such account. Strawson, for instance, thinks it is enough to claim that the distinction is ‘unexceptional in everyday life’, but ‘superficial from the point of view of science and metaphysics’; there is a ‘conceptual distinction’ that works well in everyday life, but no ‘real distinction’, since ‘concrete objects are nothing but concrete instantiations of properties’.<sup>13</sup> Driving this view is a desire to avoid both the Lockean conception of substance as independent of properties, and the Humean ‘bundle’ conception of objects as properties without bearers. Since particulars and properties seem equally problematic when isolated, Strawson concludes that the Lockean and Humean views are dead-ends which language alone – and not the world – drives us to.

However the claim that reality contains no ‘real distinction’ between properties and particulars is clearly not an everyday claim. So if language and thought are not to be trusted beyond the everyday, then the sceptic has no right to this claim unless they can provide an alternative account of how it is to be understood without the distinction it puts in doubt. Strawson says that Nietzsche, ‘never thinks that there’s any insuperable difficulty in using language that builds in such errors to express truths about those very errors’ – and this does seem right about Nietzsche.<sup>14</sup> But if language and thought are sometimes to be trusted, we need to know when. Perhaps not when we find ourselves led to intractable problems. But metaphysical problems typically become deadlocked, so to take this line would threaten a general scepticism about metaphysics – which might be conducive to Nietzsche in some of his moods, but is certainly not what Strawson intends. And more importantly, if we give up on metaphysical problems because we believe they are illusions of language, we are still left with the phenomena

that gave rise to them. This is particularly clear in the case at hand, where a refusal to pursue the metaphysics of the universal/particular distinction would render its everyday usefulness entirely mysterious.

Strawson seems to be on firmer ground when he recommends we simply *look* at an ordinary object, and *see* that its properties – its way of being – is exactly the same as its being; we can gaze beyond the deceptive shroud of human language and thought, he thinks.<sup>15</sup> However what we see is entirely compatible with all the traditional positions on the problem of universals. It is not as if the Platonist thinks we have distinct impressions of both the universal and the particular; or that nominalists rest their case on our inability to see anything except the particular. Both positions are metaphysical interpretations of what we all see alike. And so is the sceptic's view; the difference is that it is an interpretation which repudiates a distinction required by the only natural way we have of making sense of it as a metaphysical claim.

Abandoning the universal/particular distinction does not offer an easy way out, then. For the distinction is so basic to our thinking that to deny it is simply to raise the new metaphysical question of what – if not ascribing properties to particulars – we are doing when we talk about the world. Maybe this can be achieved; Whitehead made the attempt, for instance.<sup>16</sup> However if the result is a revisionary metaphysic – which will doubtless generate problems of its own – this undermines the initial appeal of the move, which was to sweep away the ancient problem of universals. This is not to deny that particular problems may be raised about *where* we draw universal/particular distinctions; detailed problems of the kind Ramsey and MacBride raise, and Armstrong tries to address. And we may profitably express scepticism about the misleading form of language in particular cases where we have learnt to make better sense of the world; as when science refines our notion of colour, or philosophy our notion of existence. But complete scepticism about the distinction seems to ask too much of philosophy – namely that it step outside our understanding of the world and put something else in its place.

Once excessive scepticism about language, as well as excessive trust in it, are put to one side, we can look to the real theoretical basis for the problem of universals, which can be developed in two closely connected ways, both stemming from Plato.<sup>17</sup> The first is most easily grasped by just looking – look at two points in a uniformly blue sky. Exactly the same blue can be seen at both. Since we cannot be aware of the same particular as wholly located at two different places at the same time, it seems we must in some sense be aware of a universal. For a universal – on one natural conception at least – is something which can be wholly present not only in two places at once, but in any number; since it makes no difference to its identity how many appearances it puts in. As Keith Campbell puts it, 'increasing or decreasing it by millions, in no way either augments or diminishes the universal itself'.<sup>18</sup> Strange as it seems when spelt out this way, this is a natural way of thinking – lots of different things can be the same blue, and it makes no difference to the nature of blue how much or little of the world happens to be that colour. However, any commitment to the existence of universals creates an immediate and obvious clash with objective thought, which tells us that the world is a collection of physical things, such as books and quarks, which are most naturally conceived as particulars with individual, unrepeatable being. The

problem of universals, then, is to determine whether or not objective thought must be supplemented with general, universal things such as blueness. This is the traditional 'one over many' route into the problem.<sup>19</sup>

The second comes from reflection on the generality of thought, as expressed in language. For ideas or concepts are general, in that they can apply to any number of different things. It seems, then, that if thought is to have application to the world – if the world is to be intelligible – then it must itself contain generality; there must be something general answering to the generality of our thought. And yet our conception of the objective world is of a world of particulars. Thus reflection on thought, just like reflection on the world, brings us to the question of whether objective thought must be supplemented with universals. In the first case, we see the generality in the world – a world we have already made sense of – while in the second, we reason that since we can make sense of the world, the world must contain generality.

However whether or not the world contains generality, it falls short of our ideals. Thus people and states are at best relatively, rather than ideally, just; while a circle drawn in the sand is only an approximation to the geometrical ideal of circularity. This may suggest, as it did to Plato, that the generalities thought corresponds to are non-physical ideals, rather than occupants of the objective world; and that the generality we experience in the world is of a secondary kind, somehow inherited from these ideals – perhaps the blueness we see is only a shadow of the universal reality we grasp with our minds. Or perhaps, as Aristotle thought, the blueness is in some sense a worldly 'this-such' (*tode ti*), if not actually a particular, which possesses the potential to become universal in the mind that comprehends it.

## 2. Universals, ontology and mind

Nominalism, in the hands of most contemporary philosophers, is an attempt to secure ontological status for objective thought against the threat of generality. Nominalism's approach is to deny the existence of generality; or as we might say in revisionist spirit, show that generality can be accounted for in terms of particularity. However a recurrent complaint has been that it either fails to account for the appearance of generality, or else accounts for it by smuggling in *real* generality. Thus, for instance, an unrestricted set nominalism, which claimed that to have a property is to be a member of a set, would fail to account for the appearance because it would not explain our sense that some sets are natural; that nature comes divided into general patterns, and hence that all possible groupings of particulars are not ontologically on a par. But a version of nominalism that does account for the appearance of generality, such as resemblance nominalism, seems able to distinguish the natural sets only by appealing to real generalities; namely resemblance generalities. Given this general dilemma, in addition to the practically innumerable problems that have arisen for specific proposals, some philosophers have concluded that the nominalist project of eradicating generality from the world is untenable.

This prompts another strategy, which is to argue that generality can, after all, exist within the objective world. Thus Armstrong's 'immanent realism', according to which

universality is inextricably built into the objective world, such that particularity and universality are inseparable – distinguishable but not related – like the size and shape of an object.<sup>20</sup> Or alternatively, we might drive a wedge between generality and properties, and content ourselves with building *properties* into the objective world. Thus we might recognize the existence of ‘tropes’ – understood as instances of properties in objects – as the ontologically basic kind of particular.<sup>21</sup> Both kinds of account try to take the wind out of the nominalist’s sails by laying claim to the intuitive view that everything is a particular, without thereby abandoning properties – which they achieve by enlarging our notion of a particular; either to include Armstrong’s ‘thick’ particulars which ‘enfold universals within themselves’; or to include tropes, which are particularized properties – abstract particulars that combine into concrete particulars.<sup>22</sup>

Like nominalism, this strategy also promises to remove the apparent obstacle of universals from an ontological understanding of objective thought, since the fundamental immanent universals, or the tropes, could be *physical*. However it is not clear it fares any better. For despite the many advances Armstrong brings to realism, he leaves the main obstacle exactly where he found it – since immanent realism accepts that different particulars may have exactly the same property, and hence that one property may completely exist in many places at the same time. If this seems counterintuitive, then that is ‘simply the fault of the Nominalist’s intuitions’, he tells us.<sup>23</sup> And yet it was the nominalist’s intuitions, inherited from objective thought, which generated the problem in the first place. Trope theorists, by contrast, *do* make headway with this intuitive obstacle – by particularizing properties. But in doing so, they revert to the predicament of the nominalist, since if properties are no longer general, they are no longer of any obvious use in explaining generality. Thus the trope theorist still needs an account of generality, and a standard response – that of D. C. Williams – is to appeal to resemblances between tropes. But then just as with resemblance nominalism, this seems to smuggle in real resemblance generalities, rather than explaining away the appearance of generality with particulars alone.

Now what both these strategies have in common is their ontological seriousness, in that they are looking to an account of particulars, universals, or both, to provide the final word about what reality consists in. Armstrong brings this out well in characterizing his combined physicalism and immanent realism as comprising commitments at different levels. Thus only immanent realism is general enough to count as ‘first philosophy’, and hence ontology proper; while physicalism is a more specific kind of ‘world-hypothesis’ – an instance of ‘speculative cosmology’.<sup>24</sup> The reasoning here seems clear enough, for to claim with the physicalist that everything is fundamentally physical still leaves open the question of what is meant by ‘everything’. But this is an ontological question *par excellence*; one that can apparently only be answered by invoking the universal/particular distinction to endorse some version of realism or nominalism. So it seems that ontology, just as Aristotle thought, always leads back to the status of particulars and universals – since these are the most abstract categories of being. Understood in this way, a dualist and physicalist might endorse the *same* ontology; their disagreement would only be about whether any particulars (if they are both nominalists), or particulars and universals (if they are both realists), are intrinsically mental. This is a more general disagreement than whether or not

there are any electrons, for instance; but not general enough to count as an ontological disagreement.

To provide a solution to the problem of universals, then, is to provide a fundamental ontology, and thus an exhaustive, if maximally general, account of what exists. In our terms, the aim is to say what exists in the final context. All the standard theories in the debate, apart from Plato's, assume that the objective world exists in the final context; even if it is supplemented by mental reality, or is to be analysed as itself a kind of mental reality. Only Plato's theory is different, since it holds that the objective world is transcended. Nevertheless in providing an account of universals, Plato's intention is still to tell us what exists in the final context; namely universals that are transcendent from the perspective of the objective world.

A theory which lacks this aim is Kant's transcendental idealism. For although it resembles Plato's idealism in incorporating a transcendent hypothesis, it also claims that transcendent reality is unknowable as it is in itself. It is this latter claim which rules out the kind of ontological ambition common to the other theories. For if the final context is transcendent and unknowable as it is in itself, we are in no position to account for it in terms of universals and particulars. Thus Kant has no use for a theory of universals; which is what we find when we look to his system. Instead of any commitment to a nominalist or realist position, we are instead provided with a distinction between two types of representation: concepts and intuitions. Thus the faculty of sensibility gives us 'singular representations', while the faculty of understanding produces concepts which, when applied to objects, do so 'by means of a feature which many things may have in common'. For Kant, then, generality and particularity are not explained ontologically, but in terms of transcendental psychology.<sup>25</sup>

If we now turn to the transcendent hypothesis, we find the same situation as with Kant; to the extent that since we are also claiming that reality is transcendent, and that its independent nature is unknowable, we have no use for a theory of universals. The appearance of the universal/appearance distinction still needs to be explained, however, and we cannot follow Kant's account, since it draws on his rich conception of mind, according to which the objective world is a mental representation made possible by deeper levels of mental processing. Our conception of mind, by contrast, is maximally thin; it is of a misrepresentation based on our understanding of the objective world. So eschewing both ontological seriousness and Kantian idealism, what does the transcendent hypothesis say?

The first thing to note is that Plato's inference from universals to transcendence parallels the inferences we have already made from mind and temporal presence to transcendence. Of course, it might be that reflection on universals does not support the transcendent hypothesis, though reflection on mind and time do. However there are two good reasons to suppose a connection. The first is that the debate about universals has contours already familiar to us. Thus nominalists deny universals, against realists who think that objective thought can somehow accommodate them; just as revisionists deny consciousness and pure block theorists deny the temporal present, against those who think objective thought must somehow accommodate them. In all these cases, the anti-realist side provides an objective alternative to account for the appearance of a reality they feel forced to deny, but one which invariably fails to satisfy the realist

side. The metaphilosophy of the transcendent hypothesis suggests that such debates are produced by a stand-off between two alternative methods for blocking an inference to transcendence.

The second reason is that the history of the concept of mind shows clear continuity between ancient concerns about universals and modern concerns about mind. This continuity comes into relief when we reflect on the fact that the modern, and specifically Cartesian, conception of mind was revolutionary. It offered a conception of mind centred on consciousness to replace the Aristotelian conception of the Scholastics – which was instead centred on thought.<sup>26</sup> This conceptual revolution explains why the contemporary problem of fitting consciousness into the objective world is not to be found in Greek philosophy, where the notion of sensations as possessed of a specifically phenomenal existence is lacking in any clear form.<sup>27</sup> For within Plato's metaphysics, it is the objective world, rather than the mind, which is conceived as phenomenal – the objective world is the phenomenal appearance of the transcendent reality of the forms. In Aristotle, substantial being is re-assigned to the objective world, but there is still no consistent notion of the mind as phenomenal. Rather mind is immaterial thought taking on the matter-less form of the world.<sup>28</sup> It is only in the modern period that mind becomes the phenomenal appearance of objective reality.<sup>29</sup> During this transition, what Plato called '*idéā*', and thought of as transcendent, developed into the paradigmatically mental 'idea' – a term that became practically interchangeable with 'concept' once this neologism entered philosophy in the seventeenth century.<sup>30</sup>

This shift in the appearance/reality distinction reflected a new confidence in human ability to discover the nature of the objective world through science. For the objective world was now conceived as an independent reality that could be known through its appearances to mind, rather than as an illusory appearance (Plato), or as something underpinned by unintelligible matter (Aristotle). To secure the intelligibility of the objective world, empiricists such as Locke sought to show that features which apparently belonged to the objective world – but which seemed problematic for objective thought – were indeed only apparent, and hence, according to the new way of looking at things, features of mind. One of the most important applications of this strategy was the withdrawal of the secondary qualities to mind.<sup>31</sup> And the other was the withdrawal of generality. Thus according to Locke's nominalist strategy, adapted by Berkeley and Hume, the appearance of generality was explained as the generality of appearance, by positing general ideas as among the furniture of the subjective mind; even if such ideas were not general by nature, as Berkeley insisted, they were still general in denotation.<sup>32</sup> This gave us the essentially modern notion that the ideal of perfect justice, for instance, is not a Platonic form ('*idéā*'), but rather just an idea in people's minds.

Kant thought this kind of account mistakenly 'sensualized' concepts. The error, which Sellars generalized with his notion of the 'Myth of the Given', was failing to recognize that to make sense of a sensory idea – to grasp it *as* a sensory idea, and moreover as a general one of which our concern is only for its colour rather than its shape, for instance – is already to presuppose conceptualization; for Kant this explained why not all concepts could be derived from experience. Kant's alternative was to treat conceptualization as an explanatory posit rather than a subjective idea.<sup>33</sup> Thus he still explains the appearance of generality with the mind – in line with the standard modern



strategy – but instead of treating conceptualization as phenomenal – as having ideas before the mind – he treats it as a presupposition of our ability to find generality in either the world or mind, and hence to make sense of either. Thus although Kantian concepts are mental representations, they are representations discovered through analysis on the basis of their results. Even specifically empirical concepts are not imagistic, for Kant, but rather rule-based. They are determined by rules which the mind follows when constructing exemplar images in imagination, or when recognizing in intuition the instances to which the concept applies.<sup>34</sup>

Given that the revolution in our conception of mind drew generality into the realm of the mental, then, we have good reason to suspect that the considerations that led us to the hypothesis that mind is transcendent will be intimately connected to the problem of universals. To see how this plays out in practice, we need to return to the details of the transcendent hypothesis.

### 3. Universals and the transcendent hypothesis

Recall that when we retreat from the naïve attitude, and thereby cease to think of what we are aware of as simply the world, we then think of it as the mind making us indirectly aware of the world. Yet there is nothing in the objective world corresponding to our notion of mind, so we hypothesize that mind is transcendent. Now on the face of it, this has nothing to do with generality and universals. Physical objects and experiences belong to different types, of course, since they are conceived as possessing different kinds of properties. And it is due to these differing properties that we do not think experiences belong to the objective world; experiences are supposed to have non-objective phenomenal properties, like experiential greenness. But since our grasp of the problem of consciousness presupposes properties on both sides of the divide, it seems to be tangential to the problem of universals.

This is not the case however, since a commitment to universals is built into our conception of consciousness. This situation came about when the concept of mind was revolutionized in the early modern period. For when the modern concept of mind centring on consciousness started to replace the ancient and medieval concept which had centred on thought, Plato's fundamental concern to show how reality is knowable was now addressed differently. Thus rather than supposing that the generality of thought was naturally in accord with a transcendent reality of universals, modern philosophers typically dispensed with transcendent reality and supposed that the objective world caused self-aware conscious representations of itself. Universals were no less central to this new answer than they had been to Plato's, however; it is just that the commitment was no longer made explicit. And it is partly due to this inheritance that consciousness cannot be fitted into the objective world – the modern discrepancy between the objective world and consciousness is simply a conceptual realignment of the Platonic discrepancy between the objective world and transcendent universals. The problem transformed as our thinking about transcendence developed.

Once the scientific revolution accustomed us to thinking of the objective world in terms of elementary particles and forces that we cannot ordinarily think of ourselves



as being directly aware of – as we *can* ordinarily think of ourselves as directly aware of objects like trees – there emerged a glaring conceptual clash between mind and world; and that is why we find the problem of consciousness so intuitive. The clash could hardly be more glaring, in fact, because the experiential concepts the modern conception of consciousness accustoms us to, are shadow concepts of features naïvely taken as objective – and hence the whole point of them was not to pick out objective features, but rather the experiential features caused by objective features. Since they are understood by their contrast with objective features – such that we take ourselves to be conceptualizing experiential red, rather than the redness in the objective world, for instance – these new concepts were bound to seem to pick out properties absent from the objective world.

However we were led to the transcendent hypothesis not just by the fact that the mind is supposed to possess experiential properties, and that these properties are not – as a matter of fact – to be found in the objective world; this would leave the possibility, which some revisionists cling to, that they are somehow hidden in the objective world. Rather the basis of the hypothesis is stronger than this, because we also found that our conception of experience is ultimately incoherent. This is because we conceive experience as part of objective space and time, but also as self-knowing. It is within this latter narcissistic notion that the ancient problem of universals lives on in the modern problem of mind. For it tries to capture the crucial difference between mind and world; namely that the latter simply exists, whereas the former *grasps* that it exists.

In conceiving reality as self-aware experiential appearance, we have already presupposed conceptualization. This is not to invoke the spurious reasoning that experience presupposes conceptualization because we are conceiving it, which would recall Berkeley's notorious argument that we can have no idea of a non-mental reality; this is spurious because the fact that we must conceive something to talk about it – whether that something is experience or the universe before life evolved – cannot show that it could only exist conceived.<sup>35</sup> Rather, the point is that what we are conceiving, in conceiving of experience, is something that is by its very nature conceived as something: this is what its self-awareness amounts to, without which it could not be experiential.

There is a certain line of thought, stemming from Leibniz, which attempts to deny this by claiming that unconscious experience is possible; thus perhaps when we speak of being woken from a dreamless sleep by pain we commit to this. However, since whatever woke us from unconsciousness cannot have been a conscious appearance, and hence cannot have hurt, it is needlessly paradoxical, given the ready availability of alternative interpretations, to describe it as a 'pain'.<sup>36</sup> A more moderate line of thought in the same vein comes from discussions of non-conceptual content which stem, in recent times, from Gareth Evans.<sup>37</sup> So, for instance, it seems that we can experience a particular shade of red without having a concept for it, such that experiences 'far outstrip our color concepts', as Michael Tye puts it.<sup>38</sup> But this is only to claim that there are experience-types we lack a unique concept for, and does not conflict with our claim that the self-consciousness of any experience requires it to be conceptualized in some way or another. The claim would only be challenged if non-conceptual content could account for consciousness all on its own, as might seem to be the case in non-linguistic animals and pre-linguistic children. But given that animals and babies make some

kind of sense of their experiences – which might be accounted for by invoking non-linguistic representations of experiences – this simply calls on us to apply a broader notion of conceptual self-awareness in their cases.<sup>39</sup> And even if a higher, specifically linguistic standard of ‘concepts’ is insisted upon, the fact remains that our paradigm of experience – from which other applications must derive – is of an appearance that we conceive of in some way.<sup>40</sup>

Now consider an experience of red. Since experience is self-aware, it is something which is aware of itself as something – or as we might more naturally say – it is something which I, the subject of the experience, am aware of as something. Typically I am aware of it as red, but my conception may be more or less detailed. But unless I conceptualize the experience in some way, it cannot be self-aware and hence cannot be an experience; a rock makes nothing of its own existence and so lacks experience. To conceptualize something is a matter of representing it. So we are supposing that for an experience of red to exist there must be a representational relationship between the concept of red and the experience; otherwise the concept would not represent the experience, so there would be no self-awareness and hence no experience.

Now standard cases of representation allow the possibility of misrepresentation, such that a picture, statement or experience may represent an apple as red even though it is not red. To misrepresent presupposes two conceptions – a conception of what the thing is represented as and another of how it actually is. Thus we may represent an apple as red because of the experiences it causes, but on realizing the causation is aberrant, we subsequently represent the apple as green; that the first conception was a misrepresentation presupposes the possibility of applying the second. But in the case of the self-awareness of experience, however, there is no such possibility, because there is only one concept in play – the application of which constitutes the experience’s appearing a certain way and hence being a certain way. For to conceive your own experience as red is for it to seem or appear to be red, and yet there is no appearance/reality distinction in our ordinary conception of experience. We conceive experiences as appearances. According to this conception of experience, then, if we conceive an experience as red, it is a red experience.

Since our conception of an experience does not distinguish how we represent it from what it is, the representational relation must hold between what the concept of red is a concept of – namely redness in general – and the experience. This is not so in cases where misrepresentation is possible. So, for instance, we may conceive an apple as red, but even if the apple is indeed red this does not presuppose a representational relationship between the redness conceived and the apple. This can be seen from the fact that the redness conceived would typically be experiential, such that we have in mind a generalization of experiential redness; while the property of the apple would be something objective, such as a spectral surface reflectance – two concepts are in play. In such a case, then, the representational relationship does not hold between the property conceived and objective property, but rather between the concept itself and objective property.<sup>41</sup> The former might be thought of as the vehicle of representation, rather than its content, such that encounters with the objective property systematically trigger applications of the concept. This kind of representational relationship might be a highly abstract kind of isomorphism, the holding of which would not imply any

correlation between the content of the concept and the property represented. This point is underlined by considering the possibility of an alien subject in which an entirely different kind of experience is caused by the same objective property; the alien's concept might represent the objective property just as well as ours, despite having an entirely different content.<sup>42</sup>

The case of the self-conceptualization of experience is different, however, for here the representational relationship *must* be between the property conceived by the concept of red and the experience. However all that could possibly relate the redness conceived to the experience is that the experience is an instance of redness; it is a concrete instantiation of what has been conceived. For if it were not an instance of the redness conceived, it would have to be possible that we conceive the experience as red – and hence it seems or appears red to us – and yet it is not actually a red experience; which would violate our conception of experience. So the experience must be an instance of the general redness we conceive.

However we cannot understand the experience being an instance of general redness in this kind of case without commitment to the existence of general redness itself – the universal – because any attempt to do so will undermine the representational relationship required for the experience to exist. Take the nominalist proposal that to be red is to belong to a certain set. In that case, the representational relationship would hold between the general redness we conceive and the experience, in virtue of the experience being a member of the set of red experiences. However being a member of the set of experientially red things presupposes the representation required for experiential status, and so cannot be what accounts for that representation. For being represented as experientially red is what is supposed to *make* something a self-aware experience; so it cannot be the case that the representation is facilitated by the fact that what is being represented is already a member of the set of self-aware experiences. Or take the nominalist proposal that to be an instance of experiential red is to resemble red experiences. Again, the resemblance could not be what accounts for the representation, since without the representation there would be no experiential redness, and hence no resemblance in virtue of experiential redness.

The self-awareness of experience only makes sense if being an instance of experiential red presupposes the existence of the universal of experiential red. For if the representation accounts for the self-awareness, and hence the existence of the experience, then the representational relationship cannot hold between the redness conceived and the experience in virtue of that experience being a member of a set, or in virtue of its bearing a resemblance to something else, for instance; because to be a member of a set, or bear a resemblance to something else, requires the experience to already exist. And if it already exists, then the relationship cannot be what makes it exist. Neither can the representational relationship be an abstract isomorphism between the concept and experience, because that would violate our conception of experience by allowing for the possibility of misrepresentation.

Rather, the representational relationship could only hold between the redness conceived and the experience, in virtue of the experience being an instance of the universal of redness. Thus by conceiving or representing the universal of redness, the redness is actualized in a concrete instance, thereby securing the representational

relationship required for self-awareness; in this way, the representational relationship brings the experience into existence, or rather is constitutive of what it is. That is why the experience being an instance of the universal of redness – as opposed to the nominalist accounts of what it is to be an instance of redness – does not presuppose that the experience already exists. For representing the universal of redness is what *makes* the experience exist.

This might seem like an esoteric thought, but the phenomenon of actualizing a concrete instantiation of a universal by conceiving it, is in fact something we are quite familiar with from imagination. Thus we can, on occasion, focus our attention on the idea of experiential redness in general, for instance, and then suddenly find ourselves having a red experience – the universal of redness has been actualized by our representing it, and thereby a self-aware experience is brought into existence. This is not how we generally come by our experiences, however, most of which are conceived as the causal product of the objective world. Thus when we look at a red apple, our objective misrepresentation of experience allows us to think of the apple as causing a self-aware experience; the apple causes us to represent the universal of redness, and thereby causes a red experience to exist.

Thus our ordinary conception of consciousness presupposes universals. Once this is grasped, considerable light is shone on our curious conception of experiences as entities exhausted by their appearance. For the reason there is no reality below the appearance of consciousness, is that experiences are conceived as nothing more nor less than instances of universals. Just as there is nothing to the universal of red except its redness, so there is nothing to a red experience except what it is conceived as. It can have no hidden structure to uncover, since appearance is simply what meets our conception. What you are aware of in experiencing a uniformly blue sky is just an instance of your conception of that particular shade. It is your conception of that shade made concrete.<sup>43</sup>

Now we have already seen that our positive conception of consciousness is a misrepresentation, and the recognition that consciousness presupposes universals simply builds upon that analysis – consciousness is misrepresented because our conception of it derives from objective thought; and the universals it implies are misrepresentations for the same reason. For redness only makes sense as an occupant of space and time; colour fills spaces at times. Yet reflection on the universality of redness suggests that it is only instances of red which need occupy space and time, and that since redness itself cannot be identified with any of its instances – or indeed with all of its instances, since that would just be a collection of red things – it must be something which does not occupy space and time. But now we have arrived at an incoherent conception of redness; we have no choice except to conceive it objectively, but we must also recognize that it cannot belong to the objective world. And this is because we are misrepresenting. Just as we do not and could not find experience in the objective world, it is also the case that we do not find universals in the objective world, only particular things. And we *could* not find universals there, since they are conceived as distinct from their spatiotemporal instantiations. But our conception of consciousness commits us to them nonetheless.

The reason for the misrepresentation is the same in both cases, namely that our perspective on the objective world – the fact that it appears to us – presupposes

transcendent being, and yet when we recognize this and try to make sense of that transcendent being, we can do so only with objective thought. Thus when we try to make sense of the appearance of the objective world as experience, we conceive experiences objectively; but are then obliged to attribute them a feature objective things cannot possess, namely self-awareness. And likewise when we recognize that appearance requires us to grasp generalities, we conceive universals objectively – as properties like redness which we know from the objective world prior to metaphysical reflection – but since we are now thinking of these properties as things in their own right, we thereby attribute them a feature which objective things cannot possess, namely generality.

Thus our commitment to universals provides another route to transcendence; because we have a perspective on the objective world which presupposes universals, but universals cannot belong to the objective world, we hypothesize that they are misrepresentations of transcendent being. And if they are misrepresentations, we should not try to draw up an ontology of particulars and universals. For even if the objective world consisted entirely of particular being, our perspective on it would still require universals and thus involve misrepresentation. As such, Plato was fundamentally right, to the extent that he recognized the need for transcendence to explain the fact that the world appears to us. However he was also importantly wrong in two respects.

The first is that he failed to realize that our conception of universals is formed by misrepresentation. Instead he trusted these conceptions more than those of objective thought, since he failed to realize that all our conceptions are rooted in the objective world. He thereby thought he could form positive conceptions of universals residing in transcendent reality, when in actual fact all attempts to positively characterize transcendent reality as it is in itself, result in vacuities which simply reveal our ignorance.

His second mistake was to think that universals were needed to explain most (if not all) of our concepts. It is easy to see why he was drawn to this view, since admitting forms of goodness, justice and the like, allowed him to link up transcendence with a rejection of nihilism. However, there is a crucial difference between experiential and other kinds of properties, namely that only the former are required by our conception of appearance. Thus we can experience a just act without conceiving it as just, but we cannot have a red experience without conceiving it as red; or at least as a quality distinguishable from other qualities. Consider triangularity – no actual triangles live up to this geometrical ideal, of course. But we are being misled if we think of this as akin to an ordinary comparison between two kinds of thing. For triangularity is not a thing, nor even an ideal thing; rather it is the implication of a definition. And no matter how hard it might be to provide a philosophical account of definition, or to find anything approaching a definition in the case of complex and fluent social phenomena such as justice, it is hard to believe – once the practical inescapability of objective thought is granted – that such an account would require anything to exist except people interacting with each other, saying and writing things, and having experiences and thoughts. It is hard to believe because people talking and thinking about triangles already seems sufficient to imply an ideal of triangularity. Once all this is in place, 'actual triangularity' is rendered otiose.

If we reject any view according to which we can define things into existence, then, we can view ideals as simply models implied by our definitions and theories. Such models are invaluable in our efforts to represent the objective world. Thus we devise astronomical models to predict the motions of the planets. But when we discover a discrepancy, it would be odd to suppose that there must be an ideal planetary motion exactly corresponding to the model that has thereby been discredited; belief in an ideal of triangularity is in no better shape. Of course, an account is still needed of why a multiplicity of actual triangles conform in some way to the ideal, and if this makes any reference to experience, however indirectly, then universals will still be implied. But the case of the experiential properties is crucially different, because here we are concerned with the requirements for something to exist. Thus for an experience to exist it must be self-aware; this requires conceptualization, and the only way for an experience to conform to our concept is for a universal to be instantiated. In the case of triangles, by contrast, we are talking about something which already exists, and so all manner of objective accounts of what conformity to our concept consists in become available.

Plato saw that the appearance of the world required that we grasp generalities, and that this required the existence of universals. He also saw that universals would have to transcend the objective world. But he did not see that substantive knowledge of transcendent reality as it is in itself is impossible; and thus he ended up populating it with fictional pure objects of thought – as perfect and isolated from change as Greek sculpture. The modern conception of consciousness preserved the best of Plato's insights, while providing us with a more useful notion of appearance. Appearance was no longer just a reflection of reality with tenuous ontological status, but rather a structured subjective reality, with the need for universals built into the nature of consciousness itself. This was useful, because it allowed us to think of appearances – now construed as mental states – as entities in causal contact with the objective world; eventually leading to the present situation where scientists can, in many cases, tell us which brain states cause which mental states. This modern conception of consciousness, just like the Platonic conception of forms it superseded, is rooted in recognition of the fact that we have a perspective on the objective world; and is an attempt to form a positive conception of that perspective. But such conceptions are ultimately incoherent, since they derive from the world of objective thought, where the perspective cannot belong. It is our need to form such conceptions, in order to refine objective thought, which explains the appearance of a universal/particular distinction.

It might now seem that the transcendent hypothesis takes a similar view of the universal/particular distinction to that of the Nietzschean sceptic, since both hold that it is part of a misrepresentation, and hence does not apply to independent reality. The difference, however, is that the Nietzschean sceptic thinks that the distinction obscures the nature of that independent reality, and hence is an obstacle to metaphysics.<sup>44</sup> The transcendent hypothesis, by contrast, holds that the distinction is integral to our best articulations of independent reality – those achieved through objective thought. It is also an aid to metaphysics, not a hindrance, both because reflection upon it provides a route to transcendence; and because it allows us to recognize the elements of misrepresentation which, when not grasped, can mistakenly seem to throw up philosophical obstacles to our understanding of the objective world.

#### 4. Representation and the objective world

Our ordinary conception of experience and the universals it presupposes involves misrepresentation. We conceive experiences and universals in such a way that they could only exist in the objective world, and yet they do not, and could not, exist in the objective world. The misrepresentation can be recognized empirically, from the fact that the objective world does not contain such things, and through reason, from the fact that our conceptions are ultimately incoherent. What we are misrepresenting is transcendent reality, which we can only accurately represent by saying that it is transcendent.

But what is this notion of representation which is so integral to the transcendent hypothesis? The answer is that the hypothesis is free to endorse any of the various objective accounts of representation that have been proposed, which generally appeal to causal responsiveness, functional role, evolutionary history or some combination thereof; but it must add that whatever objective representation is, it is ontologically dependent upon transcendent being, just like the rest of the objective world.

Now this might seem problematic, given that according to the hypothesis the objective world is itself a commitment of the kind of representation of transcendent reality we employ. Thus it might seem that the hypothesis cannot locate representation in the objective world, since it presupposes a more fundamental kind of representation which accounts for our finding an objective world in the first place. And to think this would be to raise the question of *what* is representing transcendent being; since the representer could not be part of the objective world created by the representation – and hence not something like a human being – we might then be tempted to posit an elusive ‘transcendental ego’.

However this whole line of thought, which in outline is a common one in the history of philosophy, is illusory. It neglects the fact that our notion of representation is itself derived from our representation of the world. Thus we pick up the idea of representation (a representation of representation) from the objective world, in which we recognize, in language and pictures and so on, cases of both accurate representation and misrepresentation. It is by employing this notion in metaphysics that we come to the conclusion that we are misrepresenting transcendent reality by thinking of it as experiences in causal dialogue with objective conditions; we must be applying our ordinary, objective notion of representation, since it is the only one we have, and it is according to this notion that we are misrepresenting. Misrepresentation does not stand outside of the objective world to generate it, then, but is rather something we are committed to by a misrepresentation of reality which provides a standard of accurate representation which it cannot itself meet. Human beings and representation are commitments of this misrepresentation, within which we are able to ascertain that we are misrepresenting; that is, ascertain that human beings are misrepresenting independent reality in terms of an objective world.

When we compare this view of representation with that of physicalism and dualism, for instance, we see that the main difference is not metaphysical but epistemological – it is over whether we can turn representation on itself in order to represent its own independent nature. Thus the dualist will typically take representation to be a



fundamental feature of mind, such that given the nature of experience, experiences represent – or purport to represent – objective conditions. The physicalist, on the other hand, will typically take representation to be an objective feature which experiencing subjects share with other, non-experiential physical systems. Both assume that given that certain things exist, be they mental or physical, there will be representation. The transcendent hypothesis makes much the same assumption, despite its otherwise quite different commitments; since it holds that given the independent nature of reality, that independent nature will be misrepresented according to the criteria of representation set up within the misrepresentation. It sides with the physicalist in holding that these criteria are objective. However where it differs is in denying that we can represent the independent nature of representation itself; on the grounds that representation belongs to the objective world, which is part of our misrepresentation of independent being (again: according to the criteria set up by the misrepresentation). Thus like everything else in the objective world, representation is not the kind of thing that has an independent nature, though it is ontologically dependent on transcendent being that does.

The fact that we cannot say what representation independently is, however, presents no obstacle to our claiming to represent things, since our criteria of representation are objective. And the fact that representation must be accounted for in objective terms does not mean that we can only represent objective things, of course; we can represent anything – including fictional objects of thought – as any credible account of representation must allow. So there is no conflict between an objective account of representation and the hypothesis's claims about our representation of transcendent reality. However, if we attribute any features to this reality from the objective world, then we are bound to misrepresent it. The hypothesis avoids doing so by representing independent being as something which transcends our misrepresentation of it in objective terms. It acquires leverage on this representational intention by appealing to the case of dreams, where we can represent something either as part of the dream, or as something transcendent to the dream (without which there would be no dream). Of course, a dream and the objective world transcending it are equally part of our misrepresentation of what independently exists. But by hypothesizing an analogous dependency of the objective world upon independent reality, and thus representing the latter as transcendent, we do the best we can to acknowledge both that we cannot deny there is an independent reality, but that we recognize that we cannot characterize it in the objective terms which provide the bedrock of our thinking.

Now once we see that the criteria of representation are provided by our misrepresentation of independent being in objective terms, we should also see why it is misleading to think of representation – or intentionality – as the fundamental bond between mind and world. There is something to this thought; just not what has been traditionally supposed. It is correct in the sense that experience is an independent reality, and so it is our misrepresentation of experience that places us in an objective world; though our representation of that reality as experience is itself part of the misrepresentation. However it is not the case that the bond amounts to experiences and thoughts picturing – or otherwise reflecting – conditions in the objective world, perhaps through some abstract isomorphism. For if representation is objective, the



medium of representation can only be objective things such as language in use, and experiential states, understood as the brain states concomitant with experiences. The intentional bond should not be thought of as a relation between mental states and physical states conceived as independently existing items, then. Rather, the bond is that mind and world are both part of a representation of transcendent being, according to which they causally interact with each other.

This point is easily confused, for since we conceive experiences objectively, it seems *they* must represent the world just as the putatively objective thing conceived would; that just as a picture represents the world, an experience conceived as an inner picture must do likewise. However, to conceive it as a picture is to misrepresent it as something objective, so it is not really representing the world; it does not bear the causal or functional properties and relations required for representation – which a real picture can possess – because it does not belong to the objective world. That experience sometimes appears to represent is simply a by-product of our misrepresentation of experience as something objective which enters into causal relationships with conditions in the objective world. Thus in the case of visual perception, the appearance is explained by our reliance on our notion of pictorial representation; and in the case of thought, the appearance is reliant upon our notion of linguistic representation.

The appearance is not always there, however, for despite the best efforts of some philosophers, it is not clear why we should think of a bodily sensation such as pain as representing a bodily condition; although we must certainly think of it as caused by an objective condition – which will generally involve the bodily condition where the pain is felt.<sup>45</sup> For a bodily sensation seems to be spatially located but does not seem to represent anything. The brain state it correlates with may represent something, but to insist that the experience itself does is simply a theoretical requirement of a mistaken view of how representation connects mind and world. This view is a remnant of dualism. For if mind and world were essentially different, their connection could not be explained objectively, but would require a unique connection – the mind's ability to intentionally direct itself then seems to fit the bill, as Descartes thought.<sup>46</sup> But once dualism is rejected, representation must be objectified, and we are back with causal and functional relations, except now feeling obliged – by the remaining influence of the rejected theory – to construe these as representational in every case involving mind; thereby stretching our notion of representation to cover cases where there may be no good reason to think it takes place.

Now experiences and the universals they commit us to, are misrepresentations of transcendent being; but it does not follow that the objective world is a misrepresentation too. For we do not represent transcendent reality as an objective world, and hence do not misrepresent it as such either. Rather, we represent transcendent reality as *caused* by an objective world; *this* is the misrepresentation. Consider a dream. We represent dream experiences as *caused* by dream objects and events, and not as the dream objects and events themselves. But if the objective world is not a representation of transcendent being, or an ontologically independent reality in its own right, this raises the question of what it is.

The best answer to this is that it is exactly what objective thought says it is: a world of physical things, such as electrons, tables and planets, in physical relations

with each other. For objective thought is metaphysically shallow; although our conception of the physical world presupposes particulars, properties and relations, such that two particular objects may share the same physical property, for instance, it goes no further than this. It does not dwell on the possible implication that properties must be multiply-instanced entities; it cannot countenance such entities, as the nominalist realizes, but since it is not in the business of metaphysics, it has no need to do so. And such implications need not be dwelt upon, according to the transcendent hypothesis, since the objective world is not a world of independent being. The indifference typically shown by scientists towards philosophical efforts to ontologically ground their descriptions of the world, turns out to be based on good sense. Some scientists may well think of themselves as describing the independent nature of reality, but this is a metaphysical interpretation of what they are doing, which is extraneous to their expertise.

Of course, this answer dodges the question to some extent, since the transcendent hypothesis must assign metaphysical status to the objective world, even though science and common sense need not. The status it assigns is that the objective world is a representational *posit*; something we commit ourselves to the existence of in order to make sense of transcendent being. The fact that the transcendent reality of experience is not actually caused by an objective world does not undermine this commitment; as might be the case if our only reason for believing an object existed was that it caused another object, but we then discovered that the causation was not actual. This is because the commitment is not based on the accuracy of our representation of experience, but rather the fact that our representation allows us to make maximum sense of reality in terms of that representation; it allows us to predict and control experience, for instance, where prediction and control are also understood in objective terms.

Although the hypothesis can make sense of our commitment to the existence of the objective world – since the commitment belongs within our representation – it cannot metaphysically interpret it as a commitment to independent being satisfying our objective descriptions. But it can interpret it as a commitment to our interpretation of independent being requiring us to posit something satisfying those descriptions. This is ontological commitment of a kind, and we can acknowledge it by recognizing a notion of physical existence underpinned by the nature of our misrepresentation of independent being; this requires a contextual understanding of existence, such that we may speak of things existing in contexts of existence other than the final context.<sup>47</sup> And since the transcendent hypothesis provides no obstacle to physical things existing in this sense, along with the functions their arrangements imply, there can be *accurate* representation in the objective world. The fact that when these representations concern metaphysics, they imply that representation itself is a posit without independent being, is a matter of indifference. For representation, like photosynthesis and combustion, requires only physical existence.

The hypothesis rejects ontological physicalism, of course, and even physicalism in Armstrong's non-metaphysical sense, since transcendent existence is not physical. But it can nevertheless endorse a physicalism restricted to our context of existence. And it provides the best possible reason for doing so, since it is the existence of mind which provides the main reason for thinking that physical reality must be supplemented

with something non-physical, or analysed as itself something non-physical. The hypothesis, however, reveals this reasoning to be based on a failure to recognize the transcendence of mind.

## 5. Plato's nascent nihilism

Nietzsche thought Plato's account of universals stripped meaning from the ordinary world in order to relocate it in a transcendent world, thereby paving the way to nihilism – once people rejected the transcendent world as a fiction. Nihilism, in his view, was often a symptom of weariness, decadence, and ultimately, *weakness*; it showed that people had been too weak and lazy to invest life with their own meaning, and thereby create a better world. They had preferred to believe in a fictional world that was *already* better than the real one, rather than go to the effort of *making* the real world better; and when they eventually saw through their belief in this fictional world, they had preferred to acquiesce in values that condemned the real world, rather than develop new values that did not. This situation would be rectified by the emergence of a stronger, more energetic class of people, who would not denigrate our changing world in favour of an illusory, unchanging one.<sup>48</sup>

Heidegger, however, thought that Nietzsche's solution was the 'ultimate entanglement in nihilism'.<sup>49</sup> This is because he thought it presupposed that meaning is something that has to be imposed by the subject through an act of will, and hence that the world itself is meaningless until enlivened by our subjective being. Heidegger's own solution – at this point in his career – was to try to think back to a time before Plato made his supposedly fatal move of distinguishing appearance from reality; Nietzsche's mistake was to acquiesce in this move by seeking to glorify appearance. For in these halcyon days of Heidegger's imagination, the meaning of the ordinary world went unchallenged.<sup>50</sup> However what Plato actually did was to take the first crucial steps – in the Western tradition at least – on the path to realizing the truth of nihilism. For he realized that the meaning of life would have to be transcendent, and he also found reasons to think that reality *is* transcendent; it is just that on putting these points together he jumped to the wrong conclusion. He failed to realize that reason cannot escape objective thought, except to render itself metaphysically coherent by hypothesizing from its own resources that reality transcends it. And objective thought points inexorably to nihilism.



## Nihilism, Transcendence and Philosophy

*[W]hen I say, magnanimously, 'all metaphysical positions are equally good', I am not taking any position; I am simply expressing a principle of tolerance which, however laudable, is merely formal, and can never produce or even encourage any metaphysical idea. But if I try to combine this principle with my particular position, I become incoherent, because what I then end up saying is, 'my position is as good as any other, even though it is incompatible with any other.'*

Leszek Kołakowski, 1988<sub>1</sub>

### 1. Living with nihilism

Superstition reveals a primitive sense of a metaphysical appearance/reality distinction. Thus the superstitious person senses that things might have a different significance to that provided by the framework, and so clings irrationally to idle possibilities, providing them with inappropriate significance. They think that if they touch wood, or wear this shirt rather than that one, then things will turn out as they want them to. They could only be right if life is quite unlike what it appears on the surface. But although there being any real connection between these rituals and the person's framework goals bears no rational scrutiny, it is nevertheless possible; possibility is superstition's life-blood. The philosophical traditions began a systematic, rational approach to the possibility that things are not as they seem, which led directly to idea of transcendence. They opened up the prospect of *discovering* something game-changing, rather than just guessing at it; something which would turn everything upside down and put human life in a whole new perspective. Religion and science have often been inspired by the same prospect.

Nietzsche's nihilist loses this inspiration and becomes reconciled to the ordinary world being all there is; while retaining values that condemn it. His superior man of the future, however, demonstrates his overcoming of nihilism by taking delight in the thought of eternal recurrence. This curious doctrine, according to Heidegger's interpretation, goes back to the beginning of philosophy to complete metaphysical thinking, since it combines Parmenides' and Heraclitus's notions of existence – the opposition between which provided the appearance/reality distinction that defined such thinking. It combines Heraclitus's ever-changing flux, with Parmenides's unchanging

being, by holding that all change recurs in an eternal cycle. Eternal recurrence thereby provides, as Nietzsche puts it, 'the closest *approximation of a world of becoming to a world of being*'. And so in this way, Nietzsche sought to provide our fleeting lives with the eternity of heaven; their fleeting reality keeps happening forever.<sup>2</sup>

Now Nietzsche is right that there is a connection between concerns about the meaning of life, the possibility such meaning is concealed, and transcendence. He is also right that this connection has a lot to do with the history of philosophy and religion. But philosophical belief in transcendence is not simply a product of psychological needs; it is the product of a tradition of argument about how best to describe the kind of reality we occupy. This is not to deny that some philosophers have been driven by psychological need; reading Fichte leaves no room for doubt on the matter.<sup>3</sup> But some may have been driven by nothing more than the bare suspicion that life has some other meaning beneath its surface, and perhaps also the hope that it does. There is a clear difference: somebody may suspect that another person loves them, and rather hope they are right; but it does not follow that they have a psychological need for love. However whether psychological need, bare suspicion or a suspicion motivated by the kind of engagement we have with the framework is at the root of interest in transcendence, the cause of an inquiry cannot discredit what is discovered. Recognizing that people want something to be true should make us wary, of course. But not wary about the transcendent hypothesis, since what people have wanted is a transcendent context of meaning; and the hypothesis denies that there is one.

The association between transcendence and belief in religious meaning has led to many false directions being taken in philosophy, and many fruitful directions being unduly neglected. On the one hand, it has led post-Nietzschean philosophers – who typically take the loss of religious meaning to be definitive of our age – to a dismissal of transcendence and ontology itself, as well as to attempts to overcome or otherwise respond to nihilism. It has led to nonsense such as eternal recurrence and blanket rejections of objective truth.<sup>4</sup> While on the other hand, it has led analytic philosophers – who typically want to uphold the scientific world-view and see their efforts as contributions to a wider scientific agenda – to also dismiss transcendence, while regarding nihilism as a narrow, isolated topic; something with little or nothing to do with the central questions of philosophy. Cutting off this major source of interest in their problems has been a contributing factor in producing debates which interest only the debaters and those who would become the debaters; a kind of non-spectator sport.

But there is no need to associate transcendence with religious meaning; to think they must go together is to confuse ontology with enframing. The two have often been self-consciously aligned, of course; and not only in religion. Thus the physicalism of d'Holbach and Marx was meant to reinforce atheism; while Plato and Kant's transcendent hypotheses were motivated by belief in overall meaning. Kant wanted to 'make room for faith', of course.<sup>5</sup> But there is no reason to link the two, since there is no reason a transcendent context should be a context of meaning; that would be an extra claim. It is true that a transcendent hypothesis, unlike metaphysical physicalism, provides an ontology which leaves open the possibility of that extra claim; as Kant saw. But seeing that there is no good reason to believe in this possibility provides no more

reason to endorse ontological physicalism than the transcendent hypothesis, since ruling the possibility out is otiose if you think it is idle. It is possible that Heidegger's death was faked and that he lives on as the world's oldest man; but nobody with any sense would feel the need to rule *that* out. Possibility, as I said before, is cheap.

Once transcendence is disentangled from religious meaning, its philosophical potential is released. For this removes one of the most influential reasons for suspicion about the metaphysical appearance/reality distinction, and the central place of that distinction within the history of philosophy, thereby removing this rationale for trying to overturn that history. This leaves the considerable resources of the concept of transcendence free to be applied to its traditional problems, as I have been trying to do. It also allows us to make sense of the unity of philosophical problems – and hence of philosophy as an academic discipline – while providing the prerequisite resources to reconnect them with natural sources of interest; which is another thing I have been trying to do. And when we follow through on this agenda to the transcendent hypothesis, we find a description of reality which reveals that one important source of psychological need for meaning is a straightforward mistake. For people have felt this need because they have recognized that unless there is a transcendent context of meaning, nihilism must be true. But you do not *need* transcendent meaning if nihilism is morally neutral and simply a fact.

The straightforward mistake at the root of all elaborate attempts to escape from nihilism is an equation of 'meaningless' with 'socially worthless'. It is perfectly reasonable that people should want to avoid condemning life as worthless in this sense, of course; worthless things are bad, and unless we can reform them, we generally want to either ignore or get rid of them. Arguably mosquitoes are worthless.<sup>6</sup> If human life were worthless, then extreme, unrestricted misanthropy and so-called antinatalism – the view that being born is bad and that the extinction of the human race would be good – would not be absurd.<sup>7</sup> And if we did take this kind of view seriously, the solution to our predicament would be obvious, just as Epicurus saw: it would be to solve Camus's 'one truly serious philosophical problem' with suicide.<sup>8</sup> Thankfully (if rather conveniently) the advocates of these views usually manage to persuade themselves that this is not the solution.

However, the judgement that life is socially worthless is an evaluation whereas the judgement that life is meaningless is not. The only way to bridge the gap is with the religious view that we should only value things valued within a wider context of meaning, which – to all intents and purposes – amounts to the view that we should only value what God values. So nihilism is only relevant to evaluating life for those who project all value into another world; a task which innumerable religious sinners have failed to consistently see through. But if we do not hold such a view, we will not care that our goals are not valued by something else, so long as we value them.

It is somewhat ironic that Nietzsche saw this point clearly, given that he inspired the twentieth-century flight from nihilism. Thus he said that 'value judgements concerning life, for or against, can in the last resort never be true'; that 'such judgements are stupidities'; and that for 'a philosopher to see a problem in the *value* of life thus even constitutes an objection to him, a question-mark as to his wisdom'.<sup>9</sup> He was right. His mistake was to believe that a wave of nihilistic psychology was about to engulf the

world, and that without the religious meaning that once provided the bedrock of our understanding, all truth and value would collapse; and also to remain under the sway of the religious sentiment that ‘everything seems far too valuable to be so fleeting’ and thus seek ‘consolation’.<sup>10</sup> But nihilism does not require us to revalue the world, because all we need for truth and value are the framework and the objective world. And metaphysics should never be an exercise in wish-fulfilment. If only Nietzsche had possessed a little less faith in his own historical destiny, and a little more faith in ordinary people, he might have been content to simply point out that it is only a conflation of social value with the question of the meaning of life which makes the meaninglessness of life seem bad.<sup>11</sup>

Nihilism has no moral consequences, then, and in itself it has no practical consequences either; in that it does not recommend one form of life over another. Realizing that there is no overall goal to life does not imply that we should take our framework goals less seriously, as for instance both Sartre and Camus thought. Neither, as Schlick thought, does it suggest that we should take play more seriously; Plato also thought that ‘man’s life is a business which does not deserve to be taken too seriously’, and that we should ‘pass our lives in the playing of games’ in order to ‘gain heaven’s grace’.<sup>12</sup> But of course, Plato drew this implication for our framework goals not from nihilism, but rather from an overall purpose that the framework conceals; philosophers have sought respite from both directions.

But nihilism issues no such imperatives. It can liberate you from belief in overall goals – such as religious or hedonistic ones – although it leaves you perfectly free to pursue them if that is what you think best; or what you desire; or what society expects of you; or simply for no reason. Nihilism tells us that life has no overall goal, but we can still act as if it did; though any such commitment is our own, not an imposition from reality. In short, a metaphysical account of reality will not tell us how to live. Moral and political philosophy may have a useful social role to play in developing and clarifying arguments for and against various possible goals and courses of action; it may influence politicians and other decision-makers. And metaphysical reflection may throw up some interesting redemptive agendas – such as existentialism – which some people may profitably choose to pursue. But the truth of nihilism provides no platform for bossiness.

Nihilism’s consequences outside of philosophy are all negative; in that it only has practical potential because of its ability to relieve us of false beliefs. And assuming that Nietzsche’s cataclysm never happens, perhaps the most important such consequence is that it liberates us from the belief that we might one day discover something *game-changing*. This belief has been a driving force in philosophy, and has sometimes had practical consequences, most notably through Hegel and Marx’s conceptions of ‘what is really going on’. Religions have also claimed to know something of this kind, of course, and have thereby exercised an enormous influence on people’s lives. And even science, our paradigm of rationality, often seems to be motivated by the same desire to find the hidden, transformative secret of reality. In the case of science, however, this motivation is liable to be confused, since science operates with a different appearance/reality distinction from that of philosophy and religion. Thus science can tell us that the planetary motions are different to what we might naively suppose, for instance, but



it could never transform our framework understanding by placing life within a wider context. For science tells us the nature of the objective world, which exists within this context, irrespective of whether there is a transcendent one.

To take just one prominent example of the currently widespread conflation of philosophy with science, consider Stephen Hawking – a scientist who makes no secret of his desire to find the hidden secret of reality. Thus he says that ‘the search for the ultimate theory of the universe seems difficult to justify on practical grounds’, given that ‘the partial theories that we already have are sufficient to make accurate predictions in all but the most extreme circumstances’.<sup>13</sup> But he adds that ‘similar arguments could have been used against both relativity and quantum mechanics, and these theories have given us both nuclear power and the microelectronics revolution’; having just conceded that ‘our scientific discoveries may well destroy us’. So the practical consequences of searching for the ultimate theory may be complete annihilation or the development of useful technology. But although the ultimate theory ‘may not aid the survival of our species’ and ‘may not even affect our life-style’, he still thinks we are justified in searching for it because:

Since the dawn of civilisation, people have not been content to see events as unconnected and inexplicable. They have craved an understanding of the underlying order of the world. Today we still yearn to know why we are here and where we came from.<sup>14</sup>

And in the famous ending to his book, Hawking equates the ‘ultimate triumph of human reason’ he envisages – a unified physical theory – with coming to ‘know the mind of God’.<sup>15</sup>

The questions that motivate Hawking concerning ‘why we are here and where we came from’ are ambiguous between scientific and philosophical questions. Interpreted scientifically – within physics at least – they concern our physical understanding of the Big Bang. Interpreted philosophically, they concern the meaning of life and the fact of existence. Hawking supposes that answering the former questions will settle the latter ones and so the motivation he is expressing is *philosophical*; his book begins and ends with philosophy, with the science in the middle. Failing to see the distinction, however, he berates philosophy for not keeping up with developments in physics, and so abdicating, as he sees it, its traditional responsibilities; ‘philosophy is dead’ he later announced, thereby joining an unfortunate philosophical tradition.<sup>16</sup> But when the two sets of concerns are held apart, we see that finding a physical theory that applies at the moment of the Big Bang has no potential to turn everything upside down for us; because it has no implications for enframement, or the conflict between the fact of existence and the principle of sufficient reason. It will not answer questions that have persisted since the dawn of civilization; rather it will tell us some more about the objective world within technical and thoroughly contemporary parameters with which we are already familiar, with the likely effect – as we become better at predicting and explaining at the subatomic level – of suggesting new technologies which might be useful, but might destroy us. What would happen if Hawking and others like him could keep the philosophy out of their thinking?

Science will discover anything it can, and that is the main social problem with it; if a physicist made a breakthrough which they could envisage leading to the development of a doomsday device, it is unfortunately hard to imagine them choosing not to publish.<sup>17</sup> And even if they did refrain, someone with less moral fibre would probably arrive on the scene before long. The problem has already been made concrete with the advent of nuclear weapons – the ultimate reminder of our evolutionary past as aggressive apes – which brought us to the brink of destruction as recently as 1962. This technology is getting older, hence more accessible, and nobody knows what surprises science has in store for us next. Only politics can solve the problem, but political and moral philosophy may have a role to play in working out a balance between our desires for security, technological advancement and legitimate scientific curiosity.

However there may also be a role for metaphysical philosophy: namely, convincing people that science cannot answer the big philosophical questions, so as to keep these questions out of the minds of both scientists, and the policymakers and businesspeople who fund them. If this were achieved, maybe there would be less scientific interest in topics with clear philosophical overtones, such as the beginning of the universe, consciousness, immortality and life on other planets. And then maybe scientists would be less keen to recreate the conditions at the Big Bang; reverse-engineer consciousness; make eternal life a reality; and discover life on other planets – none of which would have any bearing on the kind of natural philosophical curiosity addressed by nihilism and the transcendent hypothesis, and all of which could – and in some cases clearly would – have a profound social impact.<sup>18</sup> Of course, we might decide we want these impacts, and it may be that keeping the philosophy out of science would have little effect on the directions it takes in any case; since these are largely determined by factors such as the need for innovation to drive economic development, the personal ambition of scientists, and scientific curiosity about how things work and what the universe contains. But a little clarity on these matters would certainly not hurt. We would not want anybody to be influenced by a confused quest for a wider context of meaning.

Instead of analytic philosophy undertaking thankless tasks such as trying to ground science by reconciling common-sense commitments with physicalism, then – rather as it used to try to reconcile them with the strictures of positivism,<sup>19</sup> – it might provide a genuine service by persuading people to keep metaphysical issues away from science; so that science is not distracted and can mind its own business. And post-Nietzschean philosophy could contribute by ceasing to propagate the false notion that nihilism undermines scientific progress; when all it really undermines is the idea of progress towards an overall goal. Science can still progress in its search for objective truths, and perhaps even *the* objective truth – if we think of a fundamental physical theory this way (it would simply be a tool enabling us to find yet more objective truths). And it is certainly not helpful to suggest *abandoning* truth to focus instead on usefulness, as Rorty did; since this just encourages a continued conflation of philosophical with scientific concerns.<sup>20</sup>

Nihilism creates no obstacle to progress in science or any other walk of life. It shows that we are not supposed to be creating a socialist or capitalist utopia, and removes a major reason for thinking that we inevitably will; but it does stop us from trying. We could seek to perfect humanity, or recoil from such ambitions.<sup>21</sup> But either way,

our search for progress in politics and morality can continue unabated; the fact that we have gone badly wrong in the past may remind us there is no overall goal we are inevitably moving towards, but this provides no reason to stop formulating ideals and trying to achieve them. And we can seek progress in art too. Our art does not have to be fragmented and ephemeral because we have rejected an obligatory goal for humanity, and artistic sophistication does not require artworks to continually register the philosophical point that there is no meaning of life. We can take a genre-defying and eclectic 'postmodern' approach, or work diligently to progress a particular genre. Nihilism rules out the motivation that belief in wider goals provided great art of the past. But if we want to take up once more the genres of Greco-Roman or Gothic architecture, for instance, then we are perfectly free to do so without the remotest fear of a philosophical bad conscience. The idea that everything is a text we can interpret as we will, may have produced some interesting ideas and art, but there are innumerable facts we may run up against in our interpretations, even if some of these – such as authorial intention – can be hard to determine.<sup>22</sup> And even where there are no facts, radical interpretations are not foisted upon us by the nature of reality; any more than traditional ones are.

In addition to progress, nihilism has been thought to threaten commitment; a view which has been influential since at least Kierkegaard.<sup>23</sup> But again there is nothing to it. For just because our goals are not imposed from on high, and we realize this, it does not follow that we cannot commit to them; because the framework is the principal source of our commitment, and gets on perfectly well without metaphysical reinforcement. We see this clearly in sport, where commitment is often total, with or without the waning motivation of religious glorification through athletic achievement.

Such commitment has no need of irony, and neither, *contra* Rorty, do we have to be ironic about how we describe the world.<sup>24</sup> Irony is useful when dealing with unavoidable burdens, such as ineffectual bureaucracy; but in most walks of life it is a pathetic attitude, revealing only lack of confidence and a misplaced sense of superiority. People listen to music ironically when they do not want to admit to genuinely liking it; from fear of suggesting they do not know better – that they lack an appreciation of the kind of music they are proud to like. But while it might be rational to remain aloof from certain kinds of bureaucracy – to register disapproval and keep the mind-set it encourages at bay – this can only be the right attitude when there is something else warranting greater commitment. Rorty thinks we must be ironic, since we cannot non-circularly justify our basic descriptions to those who reject them; to people who think the Earth is flat, or that might is right, for instance. But where there are objective facts, he is wrong, and even where there are not, we do not need to justify something to fully commit to it; the athlete does not need to be ironic because they cannot justify their commitment. Of course, sports can peacefully co-exist, whereas some moral commitments cannot. But irony is still the wrong attitude so long as we do not think the alternatives warrant greater commitment than our own. What really would warrant greater commitment, of course, would be descriptions justified by a wider context of meaning. So it is hard to avoid the suspicion that Rorty's irony is just another unwitting inheritance of the view that life is devalued without religious meaning.

## 2. The role of philosophy

The central claim of the transcendent hypothesis is that experience does not belong to the objective world. If it did, then it would have to be something objective; but it is not. So where does experience belong? Both experience and the objective world 'belong' – in the loosest possible sense – to transcendent reality. Since reality is transcendent, ontology is transcendent. So we cannot specify the independent being of an experience or object in any more precise way than to say it is transcendent. Given that this is to say very little, there is a sense in which we cannot say what things really are. But in the ordinary, non-ontological sense, we can indeed say what things really are, by using objective thought to relate things to each other, thereby defining them exactly; in principle at least.<sup>25</sup>

To say that experience does not belong to the objective world is to reject ontological naturalism. It is because so many philosophers have considered such naturalism obligatory that they have tried in vain to show that experience is part of the objective world; they have thought it just *has* to be. The view that the physical world could not interact with anything non-physical goes some way to explaining this attitude, as does scepticism about ghosts and magic. But not as far as respect for science, and fear of setting up philosophy as its absurd a priori competitor – one which aims to tell us about the nature of the world armed only with reflection; when the scientists have equipment such as the Large Hadron Collider! However the transcendent hypothesis does not offer a rival nature of reality to challenge or supplement science; it does not tell us that it is really constituted of mind-stuff, for instance. Rather it says that we cannot substantively describe the independent nature of reality, and that this whole notion of independence is a philosophical one, distinct from science's ideal of objectivity. It reaches this conclusion through a priori reasoning, but unlike that of naturalism, this reasoning does not impinge on science. For naturalists try to unite philosophy with science a priori, in order to back science up; both because they think it needs backing up, and to counter anti-naturalist philosophies. But the transcendent hypothesis leaves science alone, because it does not construe the task of describing the independent nature of reality as a joint venture between science and philosophy, but rather as a philosophical venture suggested by the concept of transcendence.

Science can tell us vastly more than philosophy; it can in principle describe and explain anything in the objective world – or as scientists say – the universe. But there is one thing it misses out, exactly because it does not belong there: experience. Looked at from a scientific perspective, this is minor in the grand scheme of things, since experience is absent from most of the universe. But philosophers consider it profound, at least if they are in touch with the roots of their subject and not in the grip of revisionism. Scientists may respond that 'profound' is here being used to mean nothing more than 'of philosophical interest' – and philosophers can only agree; 'fundamental' is often used in the same sense. But philosophy is no minority interest, since an abiding concern with transcendence – usually via the medium of spirituality and religion – has always been widespread. Reflection on experience is the rational route into that concern which emerges most clearly today. There are others, as we have seen, and others still we have not discussed.<sup>26</sup> But they all take us back to experience, since what is missing from the objective world, is the fact that we have

a perspective on it. And we think of that perspective – due to progress in the history of philosophy – as conscious experience.

It is a mistake to think that this indicates a shortfall in science, because if experience does not belong to the objective world, then it was never science's task to describe it in the first place. It is only when philosophy makes claims about how the objective world *must be* that scientific territory is infringed upon. Thus when dualism requires physically inexplicable events in our brains, for instance, this may understandably inspire scientists to investigate. But if they did then find something suitably anomalous, the only scientific implication would be that a new explanation must be sought. For the scientist to claim that the events could not be explained in principle would be for them to step outside their field of expertise to affirm a philosophical theory. And they would have been tempted to do so because the philosophical theory had stepped outside *its* own field of expertise, by making demands of the objective world, rather than simply interpreting it. For philosophy should have no scientific implications; when a philosophical theory does more than fit and draw support from objective facts, this is generally a sign that it has illegitimately tried to find perspective in the objective world. Science influences philosophy, but the influence is asymmetrical; because although philosophy can never be indifferent to science – since the objective world is part of what it interprets – scientific theories can and should be indifferent to how they are metaphysically interpreted.

The transcendent hypothesis requires nothing of the objective world. It does not dispute that the brain is an ordinary object, nor the block universe conception of time. Rather, it takes these deliverances of objective thought as confirmation that perspective is absent from the objective world. When it claims this, it is a mistake for scientists, *qua* scientists, to think they have been challenged; and to respond by claiming that science can indeed account for experience. For when they do, they are making philosophical claims – given that experience, unlike reports of experience and correlative brain states, are not part of the objective world. When scientists do take an interest in experience rather than its objective correlates, then, they have either been misled into taking an interest in philosophy, or have had latent philosophical interests and commitments aroused.

The transcendent hypothesis avoids both a denial of perspective and any attempt to objectify it; not just because such attempts are philosophically untenable, but also because they are motivated by the desire to make objective thought ontological, which, when we are clear about the distinct concerns of philosophy and science, can be seen to be unmotivated. Instead, it holds that our perspective on the objective world presupposes transcendent being, but that when we try to make sense of this being we can do so only with objective thought. We thereby misrepresent experience, but doing so maximizes our articulation of the objective world. Philosophy goes wrong when, driven by the desire for ontological naturalism, it seeks an accurate representation of experience as objective. Thus it realizes that the shadow concepts we apply to experiences mislead, but then seeks something *else* objective for experience to be – when in actual fact any representation of experience as objective is inevitably a misrepresentation.

All representation belongs to the objective world, but it is not all *of* the objective world; representation of fiction is an obvious case in point. But although we can

represent transcendent being, this representation has minimal content except when we misrepresent it. Misrepresentation of transcendent being as experiences caused by conditions in the objective world has plenty of content, and is highly informative. For it allows us to articulate the objective world, and hence accurately represent it in all the astonishing detail we have achieved through science. But our minimally contentful representation of reality as transcendent also has its role to play, since it tells us that the objective world is not independent being – unlike the transcendent being we misrepresent as particular experiences. Rather the objective world exists within a context created by consciousness. Once we stop trying to project experience into the objective world as anything more than indispensable misrepresentation, we reach a relative quietism on ontological issues; one which does nothing more than recognize transcendence and our misrepresentation of it. Misrepresentation is recognized through philosophical reasoning suggesting that consciousness cannot be objective; or that time is unreal; or that reality must have a universal nature reflecting the universality of thought. And science can help by discrediting attempts to find objective perspective; such as conceptions of time as a moving present.

Philosophical problems arise from attempts to make sense of the world with the concept of transcendence, and such attempts are its proper aim. For although there is little content to our concept of transcendence, it is required to provide an ontological description of reality – which in turn is required to make a certain kind of minimal sense of it; the kind that answers a certain kind of curiosity. Thus it allows us to say what experience independently is, and tells us that we cannot explain the fact of existence in terms of the objective world – because the objective world is not independent reality. Asked of objective reality, the question of why it exists refers us to transcendence; and asked of that, we have no reason to think that the question even makes sense, since our notions of explanation are bound to the objective world.<sup>27</sup> Such answers tell us little compared with the substantive explanations of objective thought, which tell us about what exists within reality, rather than about reality itself (in the metaphysical sense). For transcendence lies at the edge of the objective world, rather as nihilism lies at the edge of the framework; because of its interest in overviews, philosophy, by its very nature, operates at the fringes.

Any statement about all of reality or life is bound to lack detail, then, because the detail comes when we talk about the things within reality, or the activities within life. Extension and intension are in inverse proportion, in the sense that concepts with very wide application will not tell us much about what they apply to. But just because philosophical answers typically lack substantive content, this does not prevent them from being *right*. And they will be – so far as we can tell – if they are coherent with what we know, survive reasonable argumentative scrutiny and answer the question. To answer the question requires that the answer fall within the parameters of the question, and thereby satisfies the curiosity that gave rise to it; and there is no principled reason why this cannot always be achieved in philosophy.

This goes against a certain tradition according to which there are unanswerable questions; and even that philosophy specializes in addressing such questions.<sup>28</sup> Thus Darwin, struggling with the question of whether the universe was designed by God, felt that:

The whole subject is too profound for the human intellect. A dog might as well speculate on the mind of Newton.<sup>29</sup>

He later concluded that the 'mystery of the beginning of all things is insoluble to us'.<sup>30</sup> But this would be the right conclusion only if there were a wider context of meaning in which such answers existed but were closed off to us. As it is, we are free to develop our descriptions of the world, adjusting our concepts if necessary, until we find an answer that satisfies; when we do, we have every reason to think that it is right. If there were more intelligent beings somewhere in the universe, and they were able to communicate their alternative answers to us, we might change our minds. But if we were for some reason unable to understand their answers – which would be odd if they could speak us – it would not make sense for us to conclude, in philosophy at least, that there are questions we cannot answer.<sup>31</sup> They might persuade us that we cannot understand their science, if they could show that their incomprehensible statements facilitated vastly superior technology; but even this would just be a defeatist philosophical view, and our scientists would keep trying. But in philosophy, however, we would not have heard a reason why we should reject our own philosophical answers; so we would be right to stick with them, secure in the knowledge that our new friends might one day discover even more intelligent beings, with their own incomprehensible answers – and that the cycle could only be halted by a wider context of meaning.<sup>32</sup>

Philosophical problems are always answerable, then, assuming that the kind of natural block provided by Colin McGinn's Darwinian 'cognitive closure' thesis is the only candidate for preventing this in principle. But given the transcendent hypothesis, these answers are liable to keep ending up in the same minimally contentful place – namely with the recognition of transcendence. It is this recurrent destination, given its connection with nihilism, which drives philosophy on; usually in the wrong directions. The connection is that if reality is transcendent, then nihilism might not be true. There might be a wider context of meaning that puts life in a whole new perspective. This prospect provided the original impetus to philosophical inquiry, but it also generates powerful pressures to close down the conceptual space of transcendence – or else develop it in opposition to objective thought. Thus if we fail to realize that transcendence does not imply a wider context of meaning, and hence can peacefully co-exist with nihilism; and we also fail to distinguish objective thought from philosophical ontology – then transcendence will seem to challenge the scientific world-view. But there is no challenge, because transcendence does not imply a religious perspective, and ontology is a philosophical concern.

Philosophers rise to this illusory challenge nonetheless. Some welcome it, whether because they have religious convictions; because they relish the mystery of keeping all options live; or because they see it as their task to point out the shortfalls in objective thought to its overenthusiastic defenders. They consequently seek alternative articulations of transcendent being to that of objective thought through revisionary metaphysical systems. Not having embraced the transcendent hypothesis, however, they are unlikely to conceive their project this way; but rather as the project of describing the reality beneath illusory appearance; or of drawing up an ontology that



is true to the original phenomenology; or of working out what objective thought needs to explain in order to become adequate.

A different kind of philosopher rises to the illusory challenge in order to defend the scientific world-view, and thus block the various philosophical lines of thought which lead to transcendence. These efforts generally employ one of two strategies: either denying perspective while offering some supposed objective substitute for it, or else insisting that objective thought can in fact accommodate perspective. Overt revisionists, ontological block universe theorists and nominalists pursue the former strategy; while identity theorists, defenders of a moving present and immanent realists pursue the latter.

Philosophy proceeds as a perennial debate between these two factions, with one side reminding us of the fact of transcendence only to take it in the wrong direction, and the other side trying to deny it. Thus the first provide alternative articulations of transcendent being to that provided by objective thought – typically achieved by treating our shadow concepts of experiences as accurate representations – with this then producing a clash with commitments which the other side consider obligatory, such as physicalism, positivism or common sense. The debate is fuelled by a certain (well-concealed) mutual sympathy, since transcendence provides philosophy's subject-matter even when it is being denied; and objective thought is unavoidable even when it is being challenged. The debate is further fuelled, and sometimes loses track of itself, through the invention of imaginative thought-experiments which enclose thought in an alternative possible world; or by arguments for linguistic decision in cases where objective thought and the framework leave matters undecided. When this gets out of hand, we may find ourselves worrying about idle possibilities – which is practically impossible in everyday life (for good reason) – or else addressing questions akin to 'how long is a piece of string?'<sup>33</sup> But however far-flung philosophical debates have become, whether profitably or not, the backdrop is almost always the same however far it recedes – namely a stand-off between the wrong answers about transcendence versus attempts to deny it.

From a metaphilosophical perspective this is all good, because the space of transcendence is kept open by the two sides debating each other. This is important for three closely connected reasons. First, it preserves an understanding of rational routes to transcendence, together with highly developed modes of inquiring about it. This allows people growing up with a natural philosophical curiosity to join a tradition of inquiry; or simply gain satisfaction by reading about it – either way irrationality is kept at bay. According to the hypothesis, such curiosity is practically inevitable, given that transcendence is a fact; and that without it we cannot make a certain kind of minimal sense of reality. And in any case, it is a kind of curiosity which is clearly widespread – so we need a rational area of culture catering to it. Secondly, philosophy is part of our heritage, and if we lost it our culture would be diminished; just as if we lost art, poetry or music. It gives people pleasure, understanding, and for its active participants, something worthwhile to do. And thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, it allows us to understand the meaninglessness of life. For if the concept of transcendence became as obsolete as a scientific concept such as phlogiston, the judgement of meaninglessness would only retain the humanistic meaning of social



worthlessness. This is not to suggest the potential for a Nietzschean cataclysm, for if such a judgement survived in a world in which the space of transcendence was lost, it would be applied only to individual lives we disapproved of. The problem, rather, is that we would have lost a means of distancing ourselves from the framework. We would have become more closely bonded with it, and part of the significance of our existence would have been lost; withdrawals from the framework would retain only practical significance.

As things stand, the debate goes on and shows no sign of abating, as various approaches to affirming or denying transcendence are developed from generation to generation; taking in new discoveries and reflecting new interests. This constitutes progress in philosophy; a progress which reflects life in that it has no prospect of completion. Frustration about this has led to announcements of the 'end of philosophy'. The antidote is to realize that philosophy, like life, needs no end; its lack of an end is lacking in consequences. There are purposes within philosophy, just as there are purposes within life – but its main purpose within life is personal, transient understanding. At its best it 'makes nothing happen', as Auden said of poetry.

There would only be a problem if one side were to win. But the transcendent hypothesis gives us good reason to think this will never happen, as does the history of philosophy. The side drawing up alternative articulations will not win, because there are so many different ways to do this; as can be seen from the variety of metaphysical systems history has produced and continually reinvented. Philosophy of this kind is as inexhaustible as our capacity for misrepresentation. None of them will receive definitive confirmation from objective thought or the framework – which they will always challenge or seek to supplement in some way – and they will only be on firm ground in reminding us of the bare fact of transcendence. But the side denying transcendence will not win either, because transcendence is a fact. Facts can be covered over and forgotten, but so much in life points to this one – and so many iconic figures have written about it – that even if a misplaced philosophical attitude to science were to cover it over for a while (which is itself unlikely), it would almost inevitably resurface before long; somebody would find an interesting new way of drawing it to our attention and overcoming previous objections.

Of course, although this perennial debate is good from a metaphilosophical perspective, it is not ideal philosophically. Ideally, everyone would accept the transcendent hypothesis. For then we would have the right attitude to transcendence – we would no longer try to deny it, since we would not think it challenged science, and we would no longer search for something unexpected to change our perspective on life, since we would accept nihilism. Nihilism and transcendence would be in harmony. There would still be plenty for philosophy to do, of course, because there are many routes to transcendence to explore; some of which have doubtless yet to be discovered. And there is endless potential for investigating the nature and scope of our misrepresentation of transcendent being, as well as the interrelations within it – which change as concepts develop and new discoveries are made. The task could not end, because every new generation needs to make philosophical ideas their own. Before long, the hypothesis might become barely recognizable, with new forms of opposition springing up to replace the old stand-off between denying and affirming

transcendence. That would be the ideal, then; but the status quo is good too, and I am not holding my breath.

### 3. Spirituality and the framework online

As prosperity has increased exponentially in recent times, thanks largely to technology, the framework has moved on. What seems to have been its most significant development, from our current perspective, is that it has gone online. Computers now increasingly dominate the lives of those who have them, providing a continual feed of new tasks that apparently *must* be accomplished. There are more goals than ever before, because we can interact with far more people without the need to actually meet them; we no longer even need to interrupt their lives by phoning them up. We can enter into these tasks almost instantly, finding or creating new ones as soon as our engagement subsides, whether we have just completed a goal or not; we need only move our fingers to switch between email, social media and all manner of websites and applications designed to draw us in immediately. Time flows at just the right rate and leaves no room for boredom or anxiety; since we have learnt to care about these goals, and alternating between them is effortless. We can even carry them around with us now, and engage with them whenever offline life lets up for a second. In short, the framework is getting better at suppressing our attunement to nihilism, and it will get better still; the process will not stop but accelerate.

This is not a conspiracy; the framework is not an alien force trying to suppress the truth of nihilism, and neither is its progress an expression of an inner desire to suppress the truth from ourselves. Rather, we have so wholeheartedly embraced the new technology for economic benefits, and for the ability to more easily obtain many of the things we want, particularly knowledge, goods and services, and attention. And we have also done so because boredom is typically unpleasant – interest and enjoyment almost always require us to engage with the framework in some way. As increased prosperity has increased our leisure time and distanced us from survival issues, then, the framework has developed to fill the gaps and thereby drive away boredom. And as the framework becomes more engaging, falling back from it becomes less likely and stepping back from it harder.

Philosophers since Heidegger have seen modern technology as a threat to the meaning of our lives. It is not hard to see why, since while immersed in the framework we cannot impose our own self-determined meaning on life, in the way early Heidegger recommended; and engagement in a virtual reality is clearly antithetical to finding meaning in the natural world, as Heidegger later thought we should.<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, there is no shortage of those who embrace new technologies as an opportunity for creating better meaning. The Heideggerian ‘thrownness’ of our existence is something that an online existence promises to leave behind, for instance, and the possibility of re-engineering our own bodies opens up yet more opportunities for crafting our existence. Slavoj Žižek takes a third line between pessimism and optimism; against those who worry we will become cogs in the machine, and those who think technology will lead us to paradise, he argues that where the changes to

our lives are as far-reaching as those presently envisaged – and there may of course be much more we have not envisaged – then we cannot apply our current standards to make judgements about them.<sup>35</sup>

This debate concerns only social meaning, however; the truth of nihilism will not change whatever we do to ourselves with technology. The problem is that it may become more difficult to see. And this may also be true of transcendence, since the technology that now preoccupies us encourages a misunderstanding of consciousness: it inclines us to think of it as akin to a computer. This is philosophically untenable, of course; it is not so far removed from thinking of it as akin to a television, given that both analogies can only occur to us when we fail to ask the question of *who* it is that has the awareness (whether of the computing or the TV screen). But when we are surrounded by these mind-like things all the time – mind-like because we designed them that way – then the comparison is hard to resist. It is because nihilism and transcendence may become harder to see, then – as social meaning becomes more all-consuming and we increasingly immerse ourselves in interactive virtual worlds – that philosophy's task of tending the space of transcendence may become more important.

It will always be important for the simple reason that we do not want to lose contact with any body of knowledge; and we certainly do not want to acquire false beliefs. But that is not the only reason. For philosophy provides a kind of understanding that is important to people, and may become more important as technology moves on. Consider how young children want to believe in all kinds of magic, and will do so given only the slightest encouragement. Most parents pander to this to some extent because they see a harmless benefit. As the child gets older, however, belief in magic becomes untenable. They still want to believe it, but the belief will not stand up to reason; so it fades away and something is lost. Religious believers are not in an altogether different situation, except that the desires that make them want to believe – as well as the reasons that sustain or count against their beliefs – are adult ones.

Now many atheists think that religious belief is a straight-forward mistake; but it is simply incredible to suppose that the majority of people who have ever lived, including the majority of the wisest ones, have been wholly wrong.<sup>36</sup> And they were not, because reality is transcendent – they were wrong only to believe in a wider context of meaning. As such, although we may have developed the desire to believe in a hidden dimension to reality for the wrong reasons on the whole, this is nevertheless a desire which reason allows us to satisfy. For there really is more to reality than meets the eye; this does not make it special or magical in any way, but knowing about it changes your perspective on everything, if only for a short while. It is a recognition that wakes you up, or better, enlightens you. Just as you could not continue to experience a dream in the same way once you recognized you were dreaming – and would probably be woken up by the enormity of the realization – so the metaphysical understanding that you are making sense of a transcendent reality makes it almost impossible to experience reality in the same way; not until you once more re-engage with the framework.

There are both producers and consumers of philosophy. The producers are also the most ardent consumers, and their preoccupation makes them better able to take the consumption to a higher level at which they do not simply follow a variety of philosophical views with interest, but rather identify with one of them and use it to

think about reality; although you do not have to be a producer to do this. I became a producer, but most of the time I am simply reading, writing, talking about, or listening to philosophy, all in order to do my job; I am in the framework. On occasion, however, the ideas come alive, and I find myself realizing once more that my life belongs to a transcendent reality which serves no overall purpose, and which I cannot and should not hope to make any more than minimal sense of. Many kinds of philosophical reflection can get you to this place, and when you arrive, everything takes on a new significance; this is the most sense I can make of the idea of spirituality. The funny thing about philosophy is that there is not much to discover, not that matters, but it is everything.

# Notes

## Introduction

- 1 Bergner (1998: 73, 79–80).
- 2 For example, Ayer (1947).
- 3 I have in mind Wittgenstein and Rorty in particular. The latter, by arranging it so that after his death a sociologist (Gross 2008) would dissect his philosophical life and thought into a series of career moves (concerning prospects for promotion, spotting a niche to make it into the world of public intellectuals, etc.) made his ultimate anti-philosophical statement. In this way, he bettered Wittgenstein. Attempts to make philosophy more like science have been a more reticent – and thereby more influential – part of the same trend.
- 4 An excellent survey is provided by David Cooper (2003), who would not make this objection.
- 5 I shall later say ‘overall purpose’; simply as a safeguard against possible misunderstandings.
- 6 You then have to check if the keys are really where you think, but it is the best possible start.
- 7 I have in mind the influence this idea seems to have had on eugenicists in late nineteenth-century France; see Hecht (2003). The idea was morally salvaged by Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl, whose highly influential *Man’s Search for Meaning* (Frankl 1946) became the founding document of empirical psychology’s interest in attributions of social meaningfulness.
- 8 Polybius (second century BC: 441).
- 9 With the conflation in place, you might unthinkingly assume that if nihilism is true, then there can be no social meaning. But nihilism is obviously unable to prevent us from engaging in the activities we value. I shall discuss the related but more sophisticated worry that accepting nihilism might spoil our attitude to life in Chapter 2.
- 10 It might be argued that since our standards of good and bad come from within life, then this provides the contrast. But there are both good and bad things within life. And anyway, when we are not using these standards to think about how life would be if it did have a meaning, it is not clear that comparisons make sense. It would be odd to say that nihilism is good compared to murder, or bad compared to charity, for instance.
- 11 I think that fear of decay, loss and death, which I take to be fairly common (especially among philosophers), has an intimate connection with the hope that reality has a good meaning that extends beyond physical life. I also think that anger at injustice plays a role for some people. But fear (or anger) obviously provides no evidence for believing in such a meaning, and the related worry that it might matter what we think (‘if you don’t believe it, you won’t get it’) displays concern with a more particular – and thus even less likely – kind of possibility; albeit one deeply rooted in our history. It is a fear that does not impress me: ‘whaddya gonna do?’, as Tony Soprano would say. But still, I can see the selfish appeal of a well-timed deathbed conversion, when madness would not matter to you.

- 12 Quine (1975).
- 13 Jackson (1982); Searle (1992: 118). The best I could do for physicalism was presented in my 'Conceptualizing Physical Consciousness' (Tartaglia 2013), which was the belated final product of my PhD (2001). I am afraid to say that by the time I had perfected it (a valuable process) I had long since ceased to believe in it: I will never do anything like that again.
- 14 Moore (2012: 589–90); see also p. 579. I think Moore is right to make this concession, but for much stronger reasons than he gives. For it seems to me that you cannot have metaphysics without the concept of transcendence; whether transcendence itself is being affirmed or denied (perhaps only implicitly).
- 15 This argument comes out most clearly in Moore's criticism of Kant; see Moore (2012: 141).
- 16 For why it is important for philosophy to regain cultural influence, see Chapter 8.
- 17 Murphy (2010: 137); for a similar example, see Morris (1992: 50). To find out just how terribly bad nihilism can be thought to be, see Casey (2004) or Metz (2013: 152).
- 18 Camus (1942: 53); Klemke (2008: 193).
- 19 Kauppinen (2012: 345–6, 352).
- 20 Kekes (2000: 30); Edwards (1967: 127); Kauppinen (2012: 361); Metz (2013: 5) (though he never returns to say it, by the end of his book we can safely assume that Metz thinks Hitler's life was worse than meaningless; it had *negative* meaning).
- 21 Kekes (1986) and (2000); Edwards (1967: 127) (see also p. 125, where 'meaning' and 'zest' are equated). See Taylor (1970) for a similar view.
- 22 For example, Levy (2005); Pritchard (2010); Metz (2013). For the origins of this idea, see Ayer (1947) and Nagel (1971) (the latter is discussed in Chapter 2).
- 23 Wolf (1997); see also Wolf (2010).
- 24 Oakley (2010).
- 25 Tolstoy (1880).
- 26 To spell this out, if judgements about the presence of meaning are fallible, then judgements about its absence must be too; if we are judging the same thing. To say that we can both fallibly judge that our life lacks meaning (when it subjectively engages us) or infallibly judge the same thing (when it does not), shows that the judgement must have a different basis in each case. The basis of the latter judgement can only be seeming meaninglessness (construed as subjective engagement). But then, only a purely subjective criterion of actual meaningfulness could motivate making seeming meaningfulness a necessary condition on actual meaningfulness. Mixed theorists think they are rejecting any such criterion, but they are actually just incoherently combining it with an objective one; the incoherence only reveals itself in the limiting case where only the subjective criterion counts, because otherwise it is trumped by the objective condition. The analogy with perception breaks down because perception representationally graduates with the world it represents, but engagement with meaning graduates both with the world and our attitude to the world; between X being '(maximally) worth doing' and '(maximally) not worth doing'. Thus if your conscious state is not of the appropriate subjective kind for accurate perception, there is either no perception, the perception is misleading, or we might perhaps retreat to the notion of unconscious perception. If it does not consciously seem that I am perceiving a tree, then, this rules out my perceiving a tree unless we can say that what I take to be a lamppost is really a tree I am (mis)perceiving, or that I am unconsciously perceiving a tree. But social meaning cannot be a similar kind of state, because conscious disengagement rules out meaning: it cannot be that your state is misleadingly or unconsciously directed upon a meaningful life. That this is ruled out makes it clear that

- in the infallible cases (those to which the objective condition is irrelevant), it is only the conscious component that is being analysed, that is, seeming meaningfulness. And that the mixed account is incoherently and inconsistently treating seeming meaningfulness as the sole criterion of actual meaningfulness in these cases.
- 27 I can think of other plausible options; but these are enough for present purposes.
  - 28 Oakley (2010); Brogaard and Smith (2005: 455, 444).
  - 29 For example, Steger, Kawabata, Shimai and Otake (2008); Mason (2013).
  - 30 Kauppinen (2013) is a very rare exception.
  - 31 This is not to deny that there might be philosophically interesting things to say about social meaning in these senses; I am just saying that they require no further explication. For instance, maybe what is morally bad about some forms of deception is best understood as deceiving people about the social meaning of their lives, as I have recently (2015) heard J. J. Valberg argue. But I have discovered nothing similarly interesting in the literature reviewed here.
  - 32 Wiggins (1976: 377–8). Perhaps Wiggins's warning was too abstruse. But Steven Cahn's succinct response to Wolf's influential preaching really should have put an end to this kind of thing (Cahn 2006). Cahn relies heavily on rhetorical questions to express his exasperation and incredulity; nothing else should have been required.
  - 33 Metz (2013: 249).
  - 34 Metz (2013: 146–7, 234). Nozick once toyed with this idea in passing (Nozick 1974: 50) but had enough sense not to pursue it.
  - 35 Metz (2013: 165, 231, 149, 217).
  - 36 Metz (2013: 91–3, 171–2, 247–8).
  - 37 Nozick (1981: 571–619); Nozick (1989: 162–9).
  - 38 Nozick (1981: 606, 609, 610).
  - 39 Nozick (1981: 610).
  - 40 Cooper (2003: 126–30, 133, 140); see also Cooper (2002) and (2005).
  - 41 Cottingham (2003: 100).
  - 42 Seachris (2013); Mintoff (2008: 68).
  - 43 I discovered his work in summer 2014 and was amazed at how Munitzian a book I had written.
  - 44 Munitz (1986: 19, 282). Munitz sometimes expresses his message about social meaning in an unnecessarily ambiguous manner (Munitz 1993: 113); but nevertheless his position is clear enough.
  - 45 Waghorn (2014).

## Chapter 1

- 1 Bradley (1893: 148).
- 2 Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Kelly think that meanings which we make up can have no authority over us (2011: 142). When they are largely the imagination creations of individuals, they have a point, since the framework may make them practically unsustainable; although Don Quixote did rather well against the odds. But when society consents to them, they can become integral to our engagement with the framework, which is the most authority they can have.
- 3 Breathing is an interestingly ambiguous case: for it is typically automatic, but can be controlled. This, I think, accounts for the interest taken in it within Eastern philosophies and religions.

- 4 Heidegger (1927a: 239, 167); Sartre (1943: 59); Foucault (1977: 119).
- 5 To view something 'objectively' is to view it in terms of our conception of what it actually is; a conception which aspires to rational communal assent. Thus a goal might seem valuable to me, but when I look at it objectively I may conclude that it ought not to; because it is not actually valuable. Our attempts to view the world objectively ultimately lead back to the spatial conception of existence I call 'objective thought'; see Chapter 4.
- 6 This way of looking at the world is rather reminiscent of the 'truth-taking stare' of schizophrenics described by Louis Sass (Sass 1992: chapter 2). Sass's extraordinary book draws fascinating parallels between, on the one hand, the beliefs of people with schizoid personalities and full-blown schizophrenics, and on the other hand, philosophy and modern art. He often toys with the idea that philosophy is infected with madness, and thereby devalued (especially when discussing Fichte and Derrida), but in the end is frustratingly evasive about this. His real agenda comes from the opposite direction, namely to show that schizophrenia has been misunderstood as a kind of primitive irrationality.
- 7 Heidegger (1929: 87 ff.); Heidegger (1938: 59 ff).
- 8 Heidegger (1938: 77).
- 9 Heidegger (1927a: 98).
- 10 Heidegger (1927a: 233).
- 11 This claim will be qualified when we discuss Heidegger's conception of time in Chapter 6, Section 2, which will supplement and complete the argument of this present section.
- 12 Heidegger (1927a: 435) (for a parallel view see Bradley 1914: chapter 26); Gadamer (1960: 277).
- 13 Heidegger (1929: 87–8; 1927a: 395).
- 14 After my son (5) has finished his cornflakes, and I have put a slice of bread into the electric toaster for him, he often asks: 'what can I do while I'm waiting for my toast?'
- 15 Perhaps adult boredom can be just as intense, and even take pathological forms; but I am inclined to agree with Peter Toohey that such views may simply result from mixing it up with depression (Toohey 2011: 188). I disagree with Toohey, however, when he draws a radical distinction between 'simple' and 'existential' boredom (*ibid.*: 6; chapters 3 and 4). Even if he is right that the latter notion has been applied to a number of distinct conditions – such as depression – there is still a unifying core to it. And this core, namely disengagement from the framework and the exposure to nihilism it provides, is on a continuum with simple boredom. Boredom can be useful in detaching us from mindless or overly familiar framework goals, and it can also lead into philosophical reflection. But these are just different uses it can be put to, and their metaphysical root is the same. So I disagree with the central thesis of Toohey's book that boredom should not be rendered 'alarmingly significant by endowing it with philosophical accoutrements' (*ibid.*: 190).
- 16 Heidegger (1938: 74–174).
- 17 For an interesting survey of scientific accounts of the mechanisms underlying time perception, see Hammond (2013).
- 18 Heidegger (1938: 118, 126).
- 19 Heidegger (1938: 138); cf. Schopenhauer (1844a: 313).
- 20 Heidegger (1938: 165); cf. Heidegger (1927a: 394).
- 21 Schopenhauer (1844b: 576; 1844a: 312, 164–5).
- 22 Schopenhauer (1844a: 380).
- 23 Wittgenstein (1921: 6.44); Heidegger (1949: 386).



- 24 Adolf Grünbaum thinks that the question owes its appeal to the religiously motivated assumption – which he rejects – that nothingness is the natural state of affairs (see Holt 2012: 69ff.). But as Derek Parfit points out, nothingness would demand an explanation just as much as any particular something (Parfit 2011: 647–8).
- 25 Leibniz (1714: 258ff.).
- 26 Non-existence for no reason might be similarly puzzling.
- 27 Kant (1787: B534).
- 28 Anyone who suspects there are more substantive options on the table for making sense of the fact of existence would do well to read Jim Holt's *Why Does the World Exist?* Holt does a brilliant job of surveying the leading authorities on this question, from science and philosophy, and of refusing – armed with some philosophical acuity and a lot of common sense – to accept the very poor answers he is offered; the most sensible of the scientists and philosophers acknowledge the answers are poor. The best the scientists can hope to offer, as Holt realizes, is an account showing that 'the laws describing the regularities inside the world are incompatible with the nonexistence of that world' (Holt 2012: 162–3), which does not address the question of why there is a world in which these laws hold. While the best the philosophers can do – if they aspire to address the question head-on, as those Holt focuses on mainly do – is to appeal to pure possibility, and suppose that a certain kind of possibility actualized itself. Thus in Derek Parfit's terms, there are possible 'selectors' – such as being maximally good, or part of the fullest way reality can be, or existing in accordance with the simplest laws – which could be sufficient for actuality. Parfit concedes that we must accept the 'highest selector' as a brute fact (Parfit 2011: 645), but the real problem which prevents this approach from answering the question, is that it requires us to accept an inexplicable transition from possibility to actuality; saying that whichever selector governs the transition would be a 'fundamental truth' or 'the single highest law' (ibid.: 636, 645) simply underlines this inexplicability. For the question was never *which* possibility is capable of actualizing itself, but rather *how* the mere possibility of something existing could make it exist. Basic physical laws can explain why something happens given pre-existing conditions because the conditions have causal power, but pure possibility lacks this. The only flaw to Holt's book is that he has little time for the positions of Kant and Wittgenstein, which he classifies as 'rejectionist' (Holt 2012: 29). While I agree with Holt's criticisms of Kant (ibid.: 48, 82), I think Kant nevertheless provided the basic insight required for a fully satisfying answer to Holt's question, which Wittgenstein's reflections on staying within our language-games to some extent supplement; and I do not think this answer requires us to hold that 'the very question is meaningless' (ibid.: 29). The answer I favour will become apparent in the second half of this book, and I will briefly return to this question in the final chapter, by which point my answer will require minimal explanation.
- 29 Rosen (2009); an exception to this consensus is Megill (1985: 34) (who is misled, I think, by Nietzsche's comments on 'active' nihilism); Reginster (2006: 7 [also 51], 21). That Nietzsche's most extensive discussions of nihilism are found in his posthumously published notes is a mixed blessing: it generates doubts about whether these were his considered views, of course, but he writes much more candidly than he often saw fit to in his published books.
- 30 Nietzsche (1883–8: 3–4, 18). Reginster, whose interpretation I otherwise follow in this section, reads the former passage slightly differently; (Reginster 2006: 52). For the 'destiny' claim, see Nietzsche (1888b).
- 31 Reginster (2006: 28ff); Nietzsche (1882: 279); Nietzsche (1883–8: 318, 17–18).
- 32 Nietzsche (1888a: 121); Nietzsche (1883–8: 12–14, 253).
- 33 Nietzsche (1883–8: 319); Reginster (2006: 50, chapter 4).

- 34 Before Nietzsche, Dostoyevsky (1880: 753) voiced this highly influential ‘anything goes’ thought through one of his characters: “Only how,” I asked, “is man to fare after that? Without God and without a life to come? After all, that would mean that now all things are lawful, that one may do anything one likes.”
- 35 Cf. Parfit (2011: 587ff).
- 36 Fichte (1800: 20).
- 37 This point was well-expressed by McTaggart (1909). Rationality brings us to nihilism, but once nihilism is grasped we recognize that we do not have to be rational. However, nihilism leaves open the possibility that there are things in life we have to do if we want to be rational – as many moral philosophers have supposed – just as there may be things we have to do if we want to be happy, or to achieve political office, for instance. Irrationality is typically a matter of indifference to evidence (‘the pyramids were built by aliens’), indifference to argument (‘it doesn’t matter what you say, I’ll still believe it’), or both.

## Chapter 2

- 1 James (1896: 61).
- 2 Sartre (1943: 626).
- 3 Lin-Chi (ninth century: 31). Similar advice arises in Ikkyū: ‘In this world we eat, we shit, we sleep and we wake up – and after all that all we have to do is die’ (fifteenth century: 204).
- 4 Nagel (1971: 55).
- 5 Nagel (1971: 56).
- 6 Nagel (1971: 55).
- 7 Nagel (1986: 216, 210; 1971: 57).
- 8 Nagel’s paper has caused considerable confusion. It has led some to think that if our lives are absurd, then they are meaningless (Pritchard 2010), and others to use ‘absurd’ and ‘meaningless’ interchangeably (Morris 1992: 49ff.; Kauppinen 2012: 355). For a refreshing exception, see Metz (2013: 6).
- 9 Camus (1942: 32, 34, 98).
- 10 Cf. Nagel (1971: 53).
- 11 Cf. Valberg (2007: 91ff.).
- 12 For present purposes, the concept of transcendence we are employing can be left at an intuitive level reliant upon examples; but we shall be in a position to clarify it in Chapter 5.
- 13 Sartre (1938: 188); see Toohey (2011: 125) on the title of Sartre’s novel.
- 14 Wittgenstein (1921: 6.41).
- 15 Valberg (2007: chapter 1).
- 16 Chuang Tzu (fourth century BC: 43).
- 17 Santayana (1940: 505). See also Nozick (1981: 599).
- 18 Thaddeus Metz spends considerable time arguing against philosophers who fail to imagine the enormity of a transcendent hypothesis of meaning (2013: chapters 6–8). His main objection to ‘supernaturalism’ is that it is ‘incoherent’, because ‘we do not know whether anything spiritual exists but we do know that meaningfulness exists’ (ibid.: 158). However the social meaning he has in mind is attributed within life, whereas transcendent meaning would accrue to life in virtue of its existence within a wider context of meaning. Since these might not coincide, it is perfectly coherent for the supernaturalist to suppose that our lives have social meaning even though we

- do not know whether they also have wider meaning. The problem Metz identifies could only arise for a supernaturalist who believes that social meaning is conferred by a wider context. But even then, the position is not incoherent if construed as the hypothesis that what we regard as meaningful is made so by the wider context. Metz's problem only arises for a supernaturalist who regards our judgements of meaning as both infallible and conferred by a wider context. But any supernaturalist who grasps the enormity of the transcendent hypothesis will reject this combination of views.
- 19 This is no good reason to believe in transcendent meaning because our richest conception of reality – from which all our reasoning derives – is objective thought (Chapter 5, esp. Section 6); and objective thought supports nihilism (Chapter 1). Moreover the reasons I shall later provide for denying that objective thought provides our metaphysical criterion of reality have no bearing on nihilism, except to hold open the idle possibility that it is false (Chapter 8, Section 1). (I see no tension between this and my talk of nihilism as a 'fact' and of its 'truth', since there are many things we hold to be facts which nevertheless might not be. Moreover, if my transcendent hypothesis of Chapter 5 is false, then we are back with objective thought, so that would not undermine talk of nihilism as a 'fact'.) Nevertheless, there are many philosophers who think there are good reasons to believe in God. I have nothing much to add to this ancient debate, except to note that the metaphysical theory developed in the second half of this book provides good reason to be suspicious about any kind of cosmological argument (which strike me as considerably more plausible than any other kind of argument in this area). Nevertheless, those who think there is good reason to believe in a wider context of meaning – or have faith in one – may still discover much they find conducive in what follows (albeit obviously not the nihilism). For I argue that there is an important sense in which religious belief evidences more philosophical acumen than atheism (*ceteris paribus*).
  - 20 Metz, as we saw in the introduction, thinks this notion of meaning has an exact content which provides a positive appraisal (so not *just* social impact), but which is distinct from notions such as morally good or happy (2013: 3–6). However his methodology (testing his intuitions against everything he can possibly find in recent philosophy to construe as a theory of what makes life socially meaningful) soon wanders from this motivating presupposition, since he has no qualms about including authors discussing a 'good and worthwhile life' or the 'value of a life', for instance (*ibid.*: 150, 187).
  - 21 Metz (2013: 242–4) argues that it is 'incoherent' to argue for nihilism on the basis that there is no wider context of meaning, because the nihilist is both rejecting a 'supernaturalist' conception of meaning and using it to judge that life is meaningless. This line of reasoning is confused, however, because the nihilist does not reject the *concept* of wider meaning: it is evidently widespread, largely because people have recognized that only wider meaning could make life meaningful. Rather, the nihilist denies that reality satisfies this concept. There is nothing incoherent, after all, in an atheist supposing that only a god could save us: the atheist does not believe that there are any gods and so does not think we can be saved. Note that there is no conflict between this response to Metz, and my earlier response to Nagel and Camus, because although only a wider context of meaning could make life meaningful, there is no good reason to think that only a wider context of meaning could make life important enough to be worth taking seriously (and hence not absurd); the latter requires a value judgement which only makes sense from a religious perspective, whereas the former does not.
  - 22 Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Kelly have their own suggestion for how we ought to live, although they do not think that is what it is. This is to cultivate *physis* and *poiesis* (2011:

chapter 7). The former, which in my terms is the kind of complete immersion in the framework which makes thoughts of nihilism all but inconceivable, they graphically describe as 'whooshing up' (ibid.: 200). We experience this phenomenon in sport, music, political rallies, sexual encounters and wars. The latter, which they adopt from Heidegger to provide a more gentle counterpoint to the whooshing that mainly inspires them, is exemplified by the craftsman who skilfully responds to each job on an individual basis, with respect for and knowledge of his local environment. And of course, we are perfectly free to follow their advice: we can actively seek out situations which carry us away, take up carpentry, hold tea ceremonies, and so on. While these activities engage us, nihilism will never cross our minds, as it doubtless does not cross the minds of peasants struggling to survive and soldiers fighting wars; at least not during the day. But nihilism is still true even when we are so engrossed we cannot notice it, and we are equally free to do the things Dreyfus and Kelly disapprove of instead, such as set the GPS and just drive, or fiddle with our phones. It seems to me, in fact, that they have the significance of new technology exactly upside down, since it is nihilism it tends to cover over, not meaning (see Chapter 8, Section 3). At the end of their book they deny they are making a moralistic claim: there is no reason we should follow their advice, but there are 'callings' which 'demand to be heard and obeyed' (ibid.: 221). The framework does indeed make demands on us, as would a meaning of life. But all they have is one more suggestion for living, the moralistic intent of which pervades their nevertheless fascinating and insightful book.

- 23 The phenomenon of changing the subject to social meaning in philosophical discussions of the meaning of life is perfectly exemplified by Paul Thagard's *The Brain and the Meaning of Life* (2010); he does it on page one and never looks back. Thus Thagard thinks it is an objection to Camus to point out that he was a man with plenty of 'valued goals' in his life (ibid.: 142–3); in other words plenty of social meaning, which is not what Camus was talking about. Thagard argues that we can discover the meaning of life by looking at the effect our activities have on our brains. I have no objection to his moral outlook, with which I am basically in agreement, but apart from the fact that he is not really talking about the meaning of life, but rather which activities we find rewarding; and apart from the deep implausibility of drawing conclusions about what we ought to be doing from what is going on in our brains (why should we engage in activities which yield 'brain-based emotional consciousness of satisfaction and happiness?' [ibid.: 166]); apart from all that, this is a very dangerous line of (thankfully spurious) reasoning. Suppose diligent and honest neuroscientists discover that what really satisfies us more than anything is war. Who knows what our evolved primate brains – when conceived with Thagard as a kind of Freudian other – might have to tell us?
- 24 Sartre (1946: 358).
- 25 Dreyfus (1991: 336 ff.).
- 26 Many philosophers reject this contrast between the objective facts and our moral evaluations of them because they think there are objective moral facts. Nagel, for instance, thinks moral truths are basic, and as such do not need to be grounded by any other kind of truth (2012: 101–5); he is 'convinced that pain is really bad, and not just something we hate' (ibid.: 110). I find such views implausible and am suspicious of their motivation. Two reasons I find them implausible are the following. First, in a world in which people hated pain just as much as us but thought it was morally good, we would have to say that they were wrong; regardless of what role it played in their lives. Secondly, because if there are objective moral truths, then all of our moral judgements could be wrong; the nature of reality might determine that murder is not wrong, perhaps in a way we could never ascertain. I find both these consequences

unacceptable. Two reasons I am suspicious of their motivation are the following. First, because insisting on objective moral truths looks like an otiose attempt to reinforce our moral evaluations, allowing us to say that the Nazis were wrong not just in our opinion, but because of the nature of reality; otiose because once the argument between us broke down, this supposed moral truth would not help us. And secondly, because the kind of pluralism such views implicitly endorse, according to which there can be innumerable different kinds of objective truth, seems rooted in a desire to keep all options live, including currently unimaginable mysteries; a willingness to embrace such views, I suspect, stems from opposition to nihilism (see Chapter 8). So I am with the relativists on the evaluative truths of morality and aesthetics. But this is a big debate, and the main thread of the argument that follows does not depend on my opinion in this regard.

- 27 Rorty (1998: 4).
- 28 Rorty (1991: 21–34).
- 29 Boghossian (2006).
- 30 Strictly speaking, it cannot be an objective truth; only a fact which the objective truth points to.
- 31 Derrida (1978: 292); Sartre (1943: 59).

### Chapter 3

- 1 Spinoza (1662: 3).
- 2 Thirteenth–tenth centuries BC / George (ed.) (1999: 1–100).
- 3 George (ed.) (1999: 19).
- 4 George (ed.) (1999: 124).
- 5 Gilgamesh learns what Dreyfus and Kelly call the ‘ability to live at the surface’ (2011: 163).
- 6 For example, Russell (1959: 7).
- 7 For example, McGinn (2008); Smith (ed.) (2007).
- 8 Rorty (1979: 391); Rorty (1982: 92).
- 9 There may be more indirect ways in which metaphilosophy can count as a kind of philosophy. What Williamson means by ‘philosophy of philosophy’, for instance, is an investigation of a certain kind of philosophical methodology using a certain kind of philosophical methodology (Williamson 2007: 5–6), although it is a philosophical methodology only because he applies it to philosophical subjects. It is a mistake, however, to use ‘philosophy of philosophy’ as if it were straightforwardly synonymous with ‘metaphilosophy’, as is sometimes now the practice (e.g. Stoljar 2010). Have we been engaged in ‘meta-metaphilosophy’? If you like; but this is not philosophy, simply general reflection at a level of abstraction necessitated by the extent to which philosophy’s subject-matter has been covered over by its history.
- 10 They are also a great source of pride to some philosophers; which is indicative of the lack of self-confidence that pervades contemporary philosophy.
- 11 Comte (1842: 19).
- 12 Knobe and Nichols (eds) (2008: 10, 81–104).
- 13 Comte (1842: 24ff).
- 14 As John Cottingham has noted, although philosophers have come to think of themselves as ‘researchers’, the average philosopher’s research methods amount to ‘reading some books and thinking about some ideas’ (Cottingham 2009: 234). This only seems bad if you make the false comparison with science that ‘researchers’ encourages.

- 15 Descartes (1633: 79–108); Schelling (1803).
- 16 Some years after I wrote this sentence, a new volume appeared defending various versions of dualism, including Cartesian; see Koons and Bealer (eds) (2010).
- 17 For example, Russell (1945: chapter XXXI); Dummett (1978: 454ff.); Williamson (2007: 278–92).
- 18 Heidegger (1964: 58).
- 19 Martin (2002); Horwich (1998); Papineau (2002).
- 20 For example, Rose (2006: 215–16).
- 21 Hirsh (2009); Lakoff and Johnson (1999).
- 22 Rorty (1982: chapter 6) and Derrida (1987); McGinn (1993); Hanly and Lazerowitz (eds) (1970) and Kusch (ed.) (2000).
- 23 This not to say that valuable work in philosophy is impossible without philosophical self-consciousness; that is obviously false. It is only to say that philosophy, as a paradigm of self-conscious human reflection, would be absurd if at least some of its practitioners did not attain, or at least aspire to, such self-consciousness.
- 24 For an introduction to prototype concepts, see Laurence and Margolis (1999: 27ff.).
- 25 Parmenides (fifth century BC: 79).
- 26 *Timaeus* 29d–e.
- 27 For example, Armstrong (1978).
- 28 *Sophist* 246a–b. For similar perspectives on this issue, see Robinson (1991) and Rorty (1979: chapter 1).
- 29 See Clarke (1997).
- 30 The idea of nihilism existed long before Nietzsche, of course; it is there in Macbeth's 'sound and fury' speech, just to mention the best-known example. In fact, it has probably been around as long as – or almost as long as – the question of the meaning of life; for once raised, the idea of a negative answer was bound to suggest itself. Nevertheless Nietzsche was the first Western thinker to extensively theorize nihilism. Arguably, nihilism was discovered much earlier in the East by Chan (Zen) Buddhism, with its central idea, as Hui-neng put it, that 'Enlightenment is only to be sought in the mind; Why bother seeking mysteries outside?' (seventh century: 29) Thus once it was understood that life has no meaning to become 'enlightened' about, the Chan practitioner could simply continue with ordinary life, their attitude transformed. If this interpretation of Chan is right, and Chan is right about Buddhism, then nihilism has been influential in non-Western philosophy for almost as long as Western philosophy has existed; Nietzsche did say that Buddhism was nihilistic, but then he said that about Christianity too, and meant only that it had within it the seeds of nihilism (in his rich sense).
- 31 *Meno* 80e, 86b–c.
- 32 For an interesting attempt to relate philosophy to the satisfaction of curiosity, see Goodman (1956).
- 33 Experimental philosophy might well have a useful contribution to make to the former kind of reflection.

## Chapter 4

- 1 Russell (1927: 383).
- 2 This includes our framework understanding, since we cannot make sense of our goals without presupposing that we are interacting with objects to achieve them. I reject

Heideggerian ontology for reasons already given (Chapter 1, Section 3) and which will later be extended (Chapter 6, Section 2). But the problem we will now address arises for Heidegger too, since he grants that we understand the world objectively at times, and that this is perfectly legitimate; his dispute with 'Cartesian' ontology is over whether objective thought should provide the basis for ontology. But regardless of this dispute, objective thought still purports to be an all-inclusive way of understanding the world, and hence should on the face of it include consciousness.

- 3 Strictly speaking, I should perhaps say that consciousness is something we know exists *concretely*, since we are not here concerned with the view of some philosophers that numbers and sets, for instance, should be thought of as abstract objects; this qualification should be borne in mind whenever relevant in the subsequent text.
- 4 Nagel (1986).
- 5 Quoted in Feigl (1967: 138).
- 6 For example, P. Russell (2002).
- 7 Hume (1748: 152); Schopenhauer (1844a: 3).
- 8 Rogers (1975: 216); Montague (2009: 505); Rogers (2004).
- 9 *Metaphysics* 12.9, 1074b35–6 / trans. Caston (2002: 786).
- 10 Rosenthal (1997).
- 11 Martin (2002).
- 12 Harman (1990: 39).
- 13 Valberg (1992: 22).
- 14 For example, Dennett (1991); see also Rorty (1979) and Sellars (1956).
- 15 Strawson (2008: 6).
- 16 Dennett (1991: 354ff. and 98).
- 17 Dennett (1988).
- 18 Groeger (1997).
- 19 Dennett (2000).
- 20 Dennett (1991: 25–7 and 406–11).
- 21 Dennett (1991: 26–7 and 407).
- 22 Dennett (1991: 408).
- 23 Dennett (1991: 410). Wittgenstein asked, 'what would it have looked like if it had looked as if the Earth turned on its axis?' (quoted in Anscombe 1959: 151); Derek Jarman milked this line for all it was worth in his 1993 film *Wittgenstein*.
- 24 Searle (1997: chapter 5). Dr Johnson famously kicked a rock to disprove Berkeley's immaterialist metaphysics.
- 25 Dennett (1991: 364).
- 26 Dennett (1991: 408).
- 27 Wittgenstein (1953: §124).
- 28 Butler (1729: 20).
- 29 Only Smart drew the analogy with Frege.
- 30 Farrell (1950: 179).
- 31 Place (1956: 49).
- 32 Place (1956: 49).
- 33 Smart (1959: 149).
- 34 See Putnam (1967). We have the intuition that inflation can supervene on physically very different states of the objective world not because we think inflation is non-physical, but because we think that talking about inflation is a highly abstract way of talking about the world, thus rendering the property of inflation irreducible. Talk of consciousness, however, seems to be neither an abstract nor concrete way of talking about the objective



- world. Philosophers who think non-reductivism is relevant to consciousness, then, are confusing two different reasons multiple realizability intuitions can occur.
- 35 Loar (1997). Loar actually says that we directly refer to 'physical-functional' properties, because he does not want to commit to the properties being physical rather than functional. I think this is confused because he clearly thinks the concept of experiential greenness refers to something concrete, and yet a functional property is not something concrete, but rather something that can be realized by something concrete. However my omission makes no difference to the argument, because Loar does not mean a function we could know through ordinary reflection on the everyday role of experience, but rather a theoretical property of the brain.
- 36 It might be responded that 'green', 'oblong' and so on also refer to neuronal configurations. However although this might have some plausibility with colours – where we suppose only a causal link between the surfaces we see and the experiences we have – in the case of shapes we also suppose *resemblance*; that the oblong shape of the experience has something in common with oblong objects. If we are actually conceiving a neuronal configuration this will not be the case; so we must be misrepresenting the neuronal configuration. In any case, the pointlessness of such responses will become apparent by the end of this discussion; for they will not allow us to avoid revisionism.
- 37 Loar (1997: 608–9); Donnellan (1966).
- 38 The reason for this will be explained in Chapter 5, Section 4.
- 39 This is the fatal flaw to the position I presented in Tartaglia (2013).
- 40 Nagel (1998; 2012); Strawson (2008).

## Chapter 5

- 1 Levinas (1981: 73–4).
- 2 Bradley (1893: 264). This is a fundamental flaw to naturalism, according to Bradley (*ibid.*: 263–4). His reasoning depends on the idealist premise that 'my organism, like all else, is but what is experienced'. Thus if the natural world is experientially known only as a state of a brain, then everything in nature is a state of a brain. But brains are part of nature, so a brain itself is a state of a brain. But then if a brain is a state of a brain, it must be a state of a state of a brain, and a state of a state of a state of a brain and so on. Thus everything in nature becomes 'states of one another in indefinite regress' and we can never know what they are states of: 'this illusive quest goes on for ever'. Naturalism consequently leads us to a view of nature as 'the phenomenal relation of the Unknown to the Unknown', and for Bradley this means it is an illusion. If we drop the idealist premise, however, the most this argument can show is that brains cannot tell us about the world since they cannot tell us about themselves; if we know the world only as it affects our brains, then such knowledge requires us to know the effect on our brains, for which we would need to know the effect on our brains of the effect on our brains and so on.
- 3 Sartre (1943: introduction).
- 4 Valberg (2007: chapter 3).
- 5 The hope that there might be a further waking, and hence that death might not be final, explains interest in near-death experiences. There is no evidence for the veracity of such experiences however; the people reporting them are simply reporting dreams, and the content of a dream, no matter how vivid or disconcerting, could not, except in the most fantastical circumstances, be a good reason to believe a hypothesis about

the nature of transcendent reality. (The fantastical circumstances? If the dreamer awoke with a sufficient level of amazing and inexplicable knowledge we should probably believe them, but this has nothing to do with dreaming: we should probably believe anyone who demonstrated magical omniscience, whether they gained it from a dream or not.)

- 6 Bradley makes much the same point when he says that appearance 'can have no place to live except reality' (1893: 132), although since he takes the Kantian 'Thing-in-itself' to be unknowable, he distinguishes it from his own 'Absolute'. It seems to me, however, that they are both talking about the same thing, namely transcendent reality, and that since any reality there is to appearances must belong to transcendent reality, knowledge of appearances must be knowledge of the Thing-in-Itself.
- 7 The discussion of the mind/body problem in Kripke (1972) provides a particularly influential example of this.
- 8 Russell (1927: 402).
- 9 McGinn (1991: 61).
- 10 The view that experience is the best-known part of reality immediately jars with physicalism, even though physicalist discussions of 'qualia' tend to presuppose it. For if experience is the brain, then we ought to know the brain better than the rest of the world, which we manifestly do not. The would-be physicalist may avoid this embarrassment by adopting a revisionist conception of the physical, such that our awareness of experience provides superior knowledge of the intrinsically experiential nature of our own brain states. Thus we see how the view that introspection and perception detect 'different regions of reality' naturally tends towards idealism.
- 11 A desire to maintain this philosophically naïve attitude in the face of philosophical reasoning (no doubt because the naïve attitude has nothing to do with transcendence) motivates philosophers to insist on direct as opposed to indirect realism, even when their conception of perception is essentially the same.
- 12 See Sacks (2012) for some vivid examples.
- 13 See Reid (1785: 318).
- 14 For some attempts to describe cognitive phenomenology in detail (from those contributors who do not adopt the revisionist strategy of denying that it exists), see Bayne and Montague (eds) (2011).
- 15 This reasoning could be resisted by holding that experiences are only contingently self-knowing, not self-knowing by nature (and hence subjective). But this clearly violates our conception of experience, since it implies that a pain could exist without being felt, for instance. This is the route taken by panpsychism, which combines the worst of both revisionist worlds: it revises our conceptions of both experience (experiences need not be experienced) *and* the objective world (the objective world is 'experiential', in the panpsychist's novel sense of the word).
- 16 For example, Hobson (2002).
- 17 Waking experience is apparently causally dependent upon an objective brain, but this is not so clear in the case of dreaming experience; for there is a sense in which it appears to be causally dependent upon objects within the dream, including the dream-brain. There is also a sense in which it appears to be causally dependent on the objective brain, of course, but to say this is to presuppose that it belongs to the same context of existence as the objective brain, since the concept of causation is rooted in the objective context; apparent causal dependency within a dream results from the dream appearing to be an objective context. Since the transcendent hypothesis rejects the assumption that experience (whether waking or dreaming) belongs to the

- context of the objective world (an assumption common to the physicalist and dualist, and made natural by our objective misinterpretation of experience), it must insist on the terminology of apparent *ontological* rather than causal dependency (hence our exclusive employment of the former in formulating the concept of transcendence). The evidence for causal or ontological dependency is the same, namely that experience systematically co-varies with the state of the brain and would cease to exist if the brain did. But describing this evidence as apparent ontological dependency – by which it is meant that the nature of the experience appears to be dependent upon the nature of the brain – does not presuppose a unitary context of existence, and is thus more theoretically neutral. It is compatible with the dualist view that this appearance is explained by actual causal dependency upon the brain; the physicalist view that it is explained by actual ontological dependency upon the brain; and the transcendent hypothesis view that it is explained by our interpretation of transcendent reality.
- 18 The disanalogy between primary and secondary qualities is simply that our original, pre-scientific concept of shape seems applicable to both experiences and the objective world, while our original concept of colour does not. However this is a false impression. The fact that individual molecules have no colour provides no reason to think that macroscopic surfaces do not.
  - 19 For the former, see Tye (2009); for the latter, see Montague (2009).
  - 20 We do not conceive it as the subjective appearance of something painful being located in the body, as some philosophical analyses try to insist (Tye 2000), since it is the subjective appearance itself we conceive as located in the body. Moreover there is no way to prise off the appearance from the spatiality, since a pain that is nowhere is no pain.
  - 21 Nagel (1974); Jackson (1982).
  - 22 The root of these mistakes is metaphilosophical: it is failing to correctly demarcate philosophy from science. See Chapter 8, Section 2.
  - 23 Farrell (1950).
  - 24 Jackson (1982).
  - 25 Thus, given the nature of consciousness, the final context could not be one with which we had experiential continuity; which was a possibility mooted in Chapter 2, Section 3. It could still be meaningful, however, and we could still wake from life into a transcendent context that is not the final one, but nevertheless one in which we are somehow able to grasp the meaning and independent nature of the final one; but only in the cheap sense of ‘could’.
  - 26 Bradley was making a similar point when he wrote that: ‘in the Absolute we must keep every item of our experience. We cannot have less, but, on the other hand, we may have much more; and this more may so supplement the elements of our actual experience that in the whole they may become transformed’ (Bradley 1893: 172). I agree until he starts talking about the elements being transformed in the whole; we cannot accurately characterize the independent being of transcendent reality as it is in itself except to say that it exists and transcends our perspective.
  - 27 Kant (1783: 111–12).
  - 28 Kant (1783: 40); see also Kant (1787: A491–3).
  - 29 See Chapter 7, Section 4. Note that to interpret or represent transcendent reality does not presuppose that we actively impose a structure upon it through a priori mental operations, or that the structure we interpret it as having is possessed of necessity.
  - 30 That we cannot escape the picture obviously does not mean that there is nothing outside the picture. If there were not – the picture tells us – there would have been no picture; since that is where it came from.

## Chapter 6

- 1 Dōgen (1231–53: 42).
- 2 Elias (1984: 46, 49).
- 3 Heidegger (1927b: 268); see also Elias (1984: 105–30).
- 4 Elias perceives a similar mistake, arguing that to think ‘time’ names an independent existence is to enter upon ‘a wild goose chase, a hunt for something that does not exist’ (1984: 123). Rather there are only a variety of timing practices, used by different societies for different purposes, which involve comparing distinct continua of change with each other. Thus he argues that ‘one could not speak of “time” in a universe which consisted of one single sequence of changes’ since in such a ‘single-strand universe’, timing operations would be impossible (ibid.: 71). However, even if he were right that the concept of time could not develop in such a situation, it does not follow that there would be no time. For Elias presupposes that the world changes, and yet change seems to presuppose time; the concept of change, we might reasonably think, is just variation over time (Mellor 1998: 70). For his argument to be effective, then, Elias would need to provide an alternative, non-temporal account of change; but he does not attempt this.
- 5 Erikson (1968).
- 6 Cf. Nagel (1986: 59).
- 7 Laozi (sixth century BC: 152); for interpretations of Parmenides, see Sorabji (1983: 99–108).
- 8 See Hoy (2013).
- 9 Bradley (1893: 207).
- 10 *Physics* 4.10 and 6.3.
- 11 McTaggart (1908).
- 12 Price (2011).
- 13 Smart (1949).
- 14 Smart (1963: 136).
- 15 Ned Markosian (1993) offers a number of possible responses to this argument, with his guiding idea being that notions of time are basic to objective thought, and hence do not need to be explained by anything more basic. This displays a misunderstanding of the absoluteness in question, as will become clear in the course of this chapter.
- 16 Heidegger (1927b: 272). That the aporia results from a misconception is a view Heidegger shares not only with idealism, but also, as we shall see, with the block conception and the transcendent hypothesis.
- 17 Heidegger (1927b: 261–73) (quotes: 262, 271, 267, 266, 269).
- 18 Heidegger (1927a: 380, 477).
- 19 Heidegger (1927a: 372).
- 20 Heidegger (1927a: 423).
- 21 Heidegger (1927a: 377).
- 22 Heidegger (1927a: 472–80).
- 23 Heidegger (1927a: 414).
- 24 Heidegger (1927a: 255).
- 25 We speak of looking into the past as we look at distant stars, but within the moving present conception, this can be understood as seeing, in the present moment, light that left the star long ago; even though in that same present moment there may no longer be a star at the location from which the light originated.
- 26 Stannard (2008: 16–19).
- 27 For objections to this proposal, see Ludlow (1999: 89ff.).

- 28 Cf. Sorabji (1983: 179).
- 29 Cf. Elias (1984: 128).
- 30 For the former, see Godfrey-Smith (1979); for the latter, see Zimmerman (2011).
- 31 For this view from a scientist, see Stannard (2008: 30–32).
- 32 Butterfield (1984); see also Mellor (1998: 66–9).
- 33 Callender (2004).
- 34 Dainton (2011).
- 35 This formulation captures the contradictory nature of our objective misrepresentation of experience. If we conceive an experience as akin to a photograph, say, there is a sense in which this provides perspective in the objective world, since it seems to be spatially and temporally located; and also a sense in which it does not, since a photograph is just another part of the centreless objective world. The latter is overcome by our identification with the ‘photograph’: by our conceiving it as self-aware. Thus experience can orientate us because we misrepresent it as both objective and self-aware.
- 36 Valberg makes this distinction when he says ‘the spatial in contrast to the temporal present does not have a constant meaning for us’ (Valberg 2013: 373). I would say both have a conditional meaning, while only the temporal present has an extra, unconditional meaning.
- 37 We can say that it *could have been* simultaneous with a past utterance; but this qualification is not required in the case of experience.
- 38 Mellor (1998: 42–5); Grünbaum (1968: 331–2).
- 39 Valberg makes a similar objection to this kind of account when he says that if ‘temporal presence is part of the explication of demonstrative reference, demonstrative reference cannot, in turn, be part of the explication of temporal presence’ (Valberg 2013: 374).
- 40 Valberg argues that reflection on the temporal present confronts us with an ‘impossible generalisation’, namely that it is uniquely ‘now’ and yet ‘always like that’ (Valberg 2013: 372). But there is nothing impossible here, because what is uniquely ‘now’ is transcendent experience, but what is ‘always like that’ is the fact that we are always, at every point in objective time, misrepresenting transcendent experience as an objective experience which is privileged as ‘now’. Thus every point in our conscious lives seems unique but is not; it seems to be because it is a point of entry upon transcendence, but it is not because they all are. This is no more puzzling than the fact that every point of a dream is something outside the dream, though the sense we are able to make of what is outside the dream is the same at every point; if we try to make different sense of it, we make the mistake of trying to think outside the dream. At the end of his paper, Valberg says that when we realize that the problem is specific to consciousness and not ‘intrinsic to reality’, we are left ‘both puzzled and philosophically relieved’ (ibid.: 386). But we only remain puzzled if we continue trying to make sense of the privilege we misrepresent objective states as having, not realizing that to do this is to try to make positive sense of transcendence. The puzzlement, and belief in an impossibility, result from trying to explain something that cannot be explained, and when this is recognized both should disappear. I think, although cannot argue here, that the same kind of response can be made to all the apparent impossibilities Valberg thinks are actual (Valberg 2007: chapter 24).
- 41 Cf. Dainton (2011).
- 42 Dōgen (1231–53: 50).
- 43 Hui-neng (seventh century: 54).

## Chapter 7

- 1 Heidegger (1936–7, vol. I: 201).
- 2 See Bluck (1958).
- 3 Plato did not think that the philosophical life was open to all, however.
- 4 For example, Nietzsche (1883–8: §§409, 521, 522, 568, 584); see also Hales (1996).
- 5 Ramsey (1925); MacBride (2005); Strawson (2006: 193–9; 2009: 304–17; 2015).
- 6 Ryle (1957); *Republic* (596a); *Parmenides* (130c–d).
- 7 Wittgenstein (1953: §66).
- 8 For responses to this objection to objectivist accounts of colour, see Tye (2000: chapter 7).
- 9 Dennett (1991: 381).
- 10 Armstrong (1978b: 7–9); Armstrong (1980: 162–3).
- 11 Armstrong makes this point against a similar argument by Michael Loux (Armstrong 1978a: 103ff.); however none of Armstrong's suggestions for making sense of predicates that do not ascribe characteristics show any potential for making sense of Nietzschean scepticism.
- 12 Quine (1951); MacBride (2005).
- 13 Strawson (2006: 198, 195).
- 14 Strawson (2015: 15); Nietzsche (1883–8: §522).
- 15 Strawson (2006: 199). Applied to reality as a whole, this recalls Bradley's mystical view that since the relational, subject-predicate structure of thought falsifies, we can only approach the final truth about reality through a 'consummation' whereby our thought is 'absorbed into a fuller experience' and thereby commits 'happy suicide' (Bradley 1893: 170–3). Such holism does seem the natural outcome of scepticism about ordinary distinctions between particulars and properties, and Strawson's 'identity metaphysics' (Strawson 2015) endorses this tradition. But even Bradley's view that as reason ascends to truth it fades away, cannot avoid the basic difficulty that this ascent is guided by the discursive thought we are told to distrust.
- 16 Whitehead (1929).
- 17 Kołakowski (1988: 39–59) tells a good story about the knots the Neoplatonists tied themselves in through excessive scepticism about language.
- 18 Campbell (1981: 125).
- 19 MacBride thinks that the characterization of a universal as a one-over-many is a 'crude slogan' which fails to illuminate the universal/particular distinction; because we could equally think of a particular as the 'one' which unites 'many' universals (2005: 566). If we did not approach the distinction from objective thought he would be right. But as it is, this characterization adequately distinguishes universals from the objective world that provides the bedrock of our understanding; we already accept particulars, but this line of reasoning seems to show that we must also accept universals as the one-over-many.
- 20 Armstrong (1978a: 110).
- 21 Williams (1966); Campbell (1981).
- 22 Armstrong (1978a: 116).
- 23 Armstrong (1978a: 109).
- 24 Armstrong (1978a: chapter 12) (quotes from 127); Armstrong (1980).
- 25 Kant (1787: B136n, A320/B377). Peirce says that 'Kant was a nominalist' (Peirce 1903: 5). However this is because he construes the issue as 'whether *laws* and general *types*

- are figments of the mind or are real' (ibid.: 4); since Kant falls on the 'figments of the mind' side of this disjunction, he counts as a nominalist for Peirce. But since Kant is not committed to the sole existence of particulars, he is not a nominalist in the ontological sense we are employing. For Kant's most explicit rejection of 'Ontology', see (1787: A247/B303); although he does provide an ontology of a sort simply through his commitment to things-in-themselves.
- 26 Matson (1966); Rorty (1979: chapter 1); Robinson (1991); MacDonald (2003: chapter 7).
  - 27 It is hinted at in certain special contexts, such as in reference to dreams (cf. Matson 1966).
  - 28 *De Anima* III.4, 429b29–430a7.
  - 29 Kant is atypical; he merged Platonism and Cartesianism by, effectively, identifying the objective world and mind. Thus he was Cartesian in conceiving mind as appearance; but Platonic in conceiving the objective world as appearance, and contrasting it with transcendent reality.
  - 30 Philosophical use of the terminology of 'concepts' originated with Leibniz, from whom Kant adopted it via Wolff and Baumgarten; all these philosophers used it to refer to representations. See Caygill (1995: 118–22).
  - 31 For an analysis of how certain shadow concepts came to be prioritized in this manner, see Chapter 5, Section 4.
  - 32 Berkeley (1710: *Principles*, Introduction §12).
  - 33 Kant (1787: A271/B327); Sellars (1956). To some extent, Kant's move was prefigured by Locke, who allows that some ideas are formed on the basis of 'internal Sense' of 'the Operations of our own Minds within' (Locke 1700: II.1.§4). This anticipation of Kant's appeal to the mind's operations, rather than its phenomenal manifestations, does not affect Kant's criticism, however, since Locke never seeks to equate conceptualization to these operations. Concepts, or 'general ideas', are the collections of ideas which we 'put together', sometimes inconsistently (ibid.: IV.7.§9).
  - 34 Kant (1787: A141/B180); for discussion see Guyer (2006: 97).
  - 35 For the standard analysis of the flaw in Berkeley's argument, see Williams (1973) and Mackie (1976: 52–4).
  - 36 Leibniz (1704: §§53–8); Leibniz (1714: *Monadology* §23). I take this example from Tim Crane (1998), who does not press it, but rather concedes immediately that alternative descriptions are available, such as that a physiological condition woke us up to pain. However I have heard others insist on describing this case as involving unconscious sensations (e.g. Coleman 2014: 41). Why? To support revisionist, mind-based conceptions of the objective world.
  - 37 Evans (1982).
  - 38 Tye (2000: 61).
  - 39 See Bermúdez (2003).
  - 40 The terminology of 'concepts' was introduced into philosophy to mean 'representations', as previously noted. We might then say that animals have non-linguistic conceptual self-awareness of experience; or failing that, that they have non-linguistic self-representations which we count as experiential because of their similarity to our conceptually self-aware experiences.
  - 41 Note that I am not denying that there might be cases which do not involve the self-awareness of experience, but where the representational relation is between the property conceived and the objective property; if the apple is conceived as having a certain spectral surface reflectance, then this present case would be like that. However, in such cases misrepresentation would be possible (the reflectance conceived might not match the actual one), and the representation would obviously



- not account for the existence of the objective property. So the arguments to be presented below would not apply; nominalist explanations of such cases would be possible even if the representation was accurate.
- 42 I am of course putting to one side externalist conceptions of content; most philosophers recognize the notion of content I am employing here, even those who endorse some form of externalism.
- 43 It is sometimes claimed that experience must have a hidden structure to explain certain phenomena, such as similarities between colours (Armstrong 1978b: 124–7) or the logical form of thought (McGinn 1991: chapter 4). However if the mind is a misrepresentation, then attributing additional structure to it will not pave the way to naturalizing it, as these authors suppose. Moreover building up the misrepresentation in the proposed manner conflicts with our conception of experience, because if the hidden structure of a red experience was essential to it, we might seem to have a red experience when we actually do not. A better tactic is to explain the phenomena in question in terms of brain states or sentences, for instance.
- 44 I have principally in mind the philosophers inspired by Nietzsche discussed above; Nietzsche's own views on metaphysics are ambivalent.
- 45 See Tye (2000) for such efforts.
- 46 See Cottingham (2000).
- 47 Cf. Pears (1967).
- 48 Nietzsche (1883–8: 24ff., 316–22).
- 49 Heidegger (1939–46, vol. IV: 203).
- 50 This recalls certain attempts in recent philosophy to recover the 'enchantment' of the world, albeit for ostensibly different purposes; see McDowell (1994).

## Chapter 8

- 1 Kołakowski (1988/2001: 111).
- 2 Heidegger (1936–7, vol. II: 198–233); Nietzsche (1883–8: 330). As Reginster (2006: 227) points out, for Nietzsche the 'Christian demand for an eternal life is objectionable not because it aspires to an infinite life, but because it aspires to a life free from change and becoming.'
- 3 Fichte (1800: 80–2).
- 4 I call eternal recurrence 'nonsense' because despite the scholarly consensus to the contrary (a notable exception is Kaufmann 1950: 326ff.), I think Nietzsche believed that reality *literally does* eternally recur; rather as he believed that Christianity literally had inculcated life-denying values. Consider how the man actually reacted to this 'revelation' (see Safranski 2002: 220ff.); such bombast would be inappropriate to the kind of subtle doctrines his sympathetic interpreters find in the thought of eternal recurrence. Of course, Nietzsche did place great significance in the life-affirming psychological significance of being able to welcome eternal recurrence. But the ability to feel no regret at (e.g.) having just clumsily knocked over my pint, and rather delight in the thought of this event eternally recurring, just strikes me as idiocy.
- 5 Kant (1787: Bxxx).
- 6 Fang (2010).
- 7 Schopenhauer (1844); Benatar (2006).
- 8 Epicurus (Fourth–third century BC: 29); Camus (1942: 1).
- 9 Nietzsche (1888a: 40).

- 10 Nietzsche (1883–8: §1065).
- 11 Ray Brassier not only grasps all this, but shares my perspective on nihilism. Thus he ‘does not treat nihilism as a disease, requiring diagnosis and the recommendation of an antidote’, but rather thinks that it ‘deserves to be celebrated as an achievement of intellectual maturity’; it is ‘not an existential quandary but a speculative opportunity’ (Brassier 2007: x–xi). However, he also seems to sympathize with extreme misanthropy – presumably on independent grounds not stated in his book – since he uses a quote from antinatalist Thomas Ligotti as his epigraph, and wrote an approving preface to Ligotti’s book (Brassier 2010). With this I have no sympathy at all, since the arguments for these morbid views seem to have become worse – if that is possible – since Schopenhauer. They fill me with despair, but not in the way the authors intend. To explain why would take me too far afield; but I have already explained why such views are unconnected to nihilism. (For inappropriately temperate, but nevertheless sensible criticism of David Benatar’s antinatalism, see Harman 2009.)
- 12 Schlick (1927); *Laws* 803b–e.
- 13 Hawking (1988: 13). Since there are innumerable things we cannot predict, from diseases to earthquakes, this should be read ‘accurate predictions *in principle*’.
- 14 Hawking (1988: 13–14).
- 15 Hawking (1988: 191).
- 16 Hawking (1988: 191); Hawking and Mlodinow (2010: 13).
- 17 Philosophy will discover anything it can too, but it does not issue in technology. If some currently unimaginable circumstance arose which made us seriously believe that a philosophical idea was about to instigate a catastrophe, then politicians might have to intervene, I suppose. But with science the circumstances are all too easy to imagine.
- 18 Kurzweil (2012) and Bor (2012) (consciousness); de Grey and Rae (2007) (immortality); Coustenis and Encrenaz (2013) (aliens).
- 19 Stoljar (2010: 25).
- 20 Rorty typically motivates his abandonment of objective truth with the failure of representationalism, rather than as a consequence of nihilism. But he nevertheless made no secret of his allegiance to the Nietzschean tradition that sees objective truth as untenable outside of a religious perspective; see Rorty (1989: 5).
- 21 Passmore (1970).
- 22 There may be no answer as to which of two possible interpretations the author had in mind when the author did not realize that these two interpretations were available. But it is very rare for an author not to have anything in mind.
- 23 Kierkegaard (1846: 255 ff.).
- 24 Rorty (1989: chapter 4); see also Dreyfus and Kelly (2011: 194).
- 25 Philosophers have often argued that science tells us only about relations, not the intrinsic natures being related (for some classic examples, see Holt 2012: 192–6). They then typically go on to say that these intrinsic natures are mental, which leaves philosophy in the important position of needing to complete the job of describing the objective world; or at least telling science what it still has to do (if these intrinsic natures are not held to be immune from scientific investigation). Other philosophers have recoiled from this line of thought, however, by holding that reality is exclusively relational (Rorty 1994; Ladyman and Ross 2007). Then philosophy no longer looks as if it is challenging science. It seems to me, however, that when the notion of ‘intrinsic’ is taken outside of its ordinary use – as when we say that somebody’s looks are intrinsic to them but their job is not, for instance – then the resulting philosophical intuitions are simply a tip-off to transcendence. To say that science describes a

- purely relational world is innocent – and an improvement on saying that it misses out the intrinsic properties of the objective world – so long as this relational world is not thought to be independent reality (Ladyman and Ross), and so long as it is not thought to replace the need for an independent reality (Rorty). But we could just as well say that the relations tell us the intrinsic nature of things in the objective world.
- 26 In previous drafts of this book I tried to cover more.
- 27 Thus Kant was right that the question of why the universe exists applies to a transcendent reality of which we can make no substantive sense; but his analysis of the confusions we entangle ourselves in if we nevertheless try are marred by his a priori theorizing about the nature, rather than status, of the objective world. Wittgenstein does a better job of explaining these confusions simply by reminding us that our language-games are ill-equipped for reasoning about *all* of reality – rather than events within reality – and so the kind of substantive answer we naturally expect is not to be had. Combining these two insights provides us with the best answer available to the question of why there is something rather than nothing.
- 28 McGinn (1993).
- 29 Darwin (1860: 12).
- 30 Darwin (1887: 54).
- 31 See McGinn (1991: 4–5).
- 32 The aliens might tell us that our conceptual apparatus is unable to form unified perceptual and introspective concepts, and that this is why we cannot understand the physical nature of consciousness; this is the prospect Colin McGinn has in mind (1991: 1–22). But we could respond that they have misunderstood the distinction between perception and introspection. Even they could not short-circuit our philosophical debates.
- 33 On one reading ‘piece’ is a mereological term akin with ‘part’, and as such a piece of string cannot have a length except if there is string of greater extension than the particular piece from which the latter is either actually or possibly partitioned. But in the loose and popular sense, ‘piece’ is evidently context-dependent: we would not call a string encircling the Earth a ‘piece’, but a sufficiently large giant might. Taking this second sense, consider object O instantiating the property of being string S in a context of size Cn, where the spatio-temporal dimensions of any context Ci are determined relative to an observer or object. Assuming for the sake of simplicity that string is always a physical object, there is a length  $L1 > 0$  and a length  $L2 < Cn$  where  $L1 \neq L2$  such that if O instantiates length Lk where Lk is greater than or equal to L1 and less than or equal to L2, then O instantiates the property of being a piece P. But how is this specification to proceed, in its endeavour to locate us within the open space of the question, when questioning itself remains unquestioned? For only when the question is seized in its undecidedness can we hope to wrest from it the possibilities of the ‘piece’, and thereby grasp what is always already asked of us anew; only then will we no longer hear it as a passing amusement, an unanswerable in our world of answers – but rather as a paean to certainty. My point? That philosophy can start to look very silly indeed when it wanders too far from its subject-matter, where its techniques and styles have a history and purpose.
- 34 Heidegger (1954).
- 35 Žižek (2006: 195ff.). For the kind of technological developments envisaged, see Fukuyama (2003).
- 36 That by far the most influential recent book on religion (Dawkins 2006) is by a scientist has not helped; the book is overflowing with philosophy, of course.



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