

1

It's easier to write toward definite people. Much of this will be familiar, I expect, but I offer it all with our current conversation in mind. Where, for instance, would either of you differ ? Where do we agree ?

2

I continue to like name *phenomenalism* for a way of understanding “the physical.” This “phenomenalism” is simultaneously a way of understanding consciousness.

What's bad about this name “phenomenalism” is that people mostly don't read Mill, Mach, and James. Or Schlick or Ayer. So they, following the lead of others, *project their own indirect realism* on phenomenalism. The rumor goes around that phenomenalism is “really” subjective idealism.¹ Yes, “sensation” is an important word in phenomenalism, but it cannot, in this new context, be understood as something *internal*. The “from-a-point-of-view-ness” or “for-me-ness” of a perception does not mean that “it's all just a simulation.”

3

Indeed, phenomenalism tries to make sense of the way we perceive together the same public enduring things, though only through situated or personal perceptions. These public things in contrast to the thousands of 20 dollar bills I wallowed in only to wake up drooling on my pillow. When I was younger, I dreamed of girl who went to my church, a red head. We were amorously entangled in the back of a moving ambulance. *In sleep a king, but waking no such matter.*

¹Yes, Berkeley's immaterialism was an influence, but theism is not exactly compatible with phenomenalism proper, as I endorse it in Mill and Mach (unless God is understood in terms of empirical manifestation ? As a logical construction ? A person with a strangely non-human body ?)

But how much confusion has been inspired by this difference between what we take for dream and what we take for reality ? To worry that it's all a dream is to forget that this would dissolve the distinction. We might say that real life "is" a dream, but it lasts much longer. A dream that lasts ten years, where I have time to spend all those twenty dollar bills on hookers and blow, becomes part of my life story. The *duration* of pleasant and unpleasant experience, and not just the intensity, seems central here.

What if I developed rich friendships also in a long dream ? To wake up would be like moving to a new planet, from which communication is impossible. I agree with Schopenhauer that philosophers tend to have a sense of the dream-like-ness of real life. And this is fun topic. But I trust that most of us "live" the seriousness of the distinction of "only a dream" and "real life." For most us, I think dreams are marginal. Occasionally vivid, but often (we can infer) not remembered at all.

But what if we "really" dream all through sleep ? And it's a defect of waking memory to not know this ? Locke is helpful here. "I" who speak now am the creature associated with *my* memories. Locke, way before Wittgenstein, contemplated two "souls" (with their own memories) sharing one body. And one soul controlling two bodies by turns. If I don't remember all those dreams, did I really dream them ? Is the "I" understood to refer to the brain and its attached rapidly moving eyes or the "conscious" person who is held responsible for their claims ?

4

Lately I realize how stained I've been by pragmatism. But in a good way, I hope. People who project the physical things "beyond" all of their manifestation remind me of a joke about dodecaphonic ("atonal") music. A joke that applies to any hyper-theorized academic music. The knowing critic assures us: "It's better than it sounds."

In other words, *why do we give a fuck ?* Why distinguish between fantasy and reality ? Some events are “good.” We like them, try to make them happen. Others are “bad.” We avoid them, seek to prevent them. It feels good to hug the person you love. Food poisoning and/or ass cancer feels bad. I like that Whitehead , as I understand him, prioritizes feeling. I like that Peirce sees that inquiry is (at least mostly) the settlement of belief. The belief is settled “enough” when one returns to acting and reacting confidently. Very close to Heidegger in *Being and Time*. When things are going smoothy, the environment is a blur. The tool (not just the hammer but also the steering wheel) *disappears in my hand*. Ortega even uses the word “being” for only the entities that have become theoretically present, for entities only after they are *yanked out* from this hazy background.

In other words, the distinction is motivated from the beginning in terms of “quality.” What the phenomenologists *could* have emphasized more is relatively internal quality. Nietzsche mentions good and bad digestion more than once. *How does your belly feel, chief ?* We might call this a “delayed” perception of the food consumed. Nietzsche writes that the spirit is a stomach. Ideology is also more or less friendly to the consuming spirit-stomach. This delay element, which gets coupled to anticipation, in terms of desire for good food and fear of what proved poison, fits in very well with Mill’s understanding of physical objects in terms of their interpersonal possibility.

To me this possibility is one approach to acknowledging the crucial temporal aspect of physical objects. We build a city on the river that we expect to remain there as source of drinking water and a way for boats to come and go, laden with resources to be consumed or traded. Dying of thirst sucks. And it sucks also for those we love to die of thirst. Is the real water “behind” the water I swallow when dangerously thirsty ? If this water-*like* stuff doesn’t quench my thirst as expected, *then* it becomes false water. Fool’s water. Unlike the true water that I took it to be.

Last target: “beauty is in the eye of the beholder.” Bullshit. If

you are in love with a beautiful woman, but she doesn't love you and moves away, you don't get to pull that beauty out of your eyes. The bitch is gone. Sure, your friend thought her nose was too big. But for you she was perfection. The for-me-ness of her beauty makes it no less real. And a substance that is toxic to only me, among my tribe, is no less toxic. To me. As I writhe in agony, vomiting blood, for reasons I will not live to discover.

5

Granted that objects are interpersonal, what's left of them if all "conscious" beings are gone ? Or what was here before sentient life appeared ?

This is the psychedelic question. A difficult question. But speculative realists don't themselves answer the question they ask. "The mathematizable qualities" ? This just repeats the naivety of Locke. "Primary qualities" are whatever our current physics happens to bother with. In Locke's day, color was a secondary quality. But now we understand light and frequency and use it to say what the sun is made of.

As I see it, speculative realism is more of the usual mathematical mysticism. Which vaguely and evasively assumes that math makes sense apart from the lifeworld. Information mysticism. Beyond the taint of mark or noise. Beyond the taint of situated sensation.

My answer, though ? I don't think much can be said. To say that the mountain was here already before sentience, if the claim is empirical at all, is to make a complex conditional claim. If event X at a pre-sentience time occurred, then (according to our current projection of the causal nexus) an event Y should occur now, or maybe in 15 minutes. More informally, *if* we could take a time machine back to that time, "then" we'd see that mountain.

To me this would all connect to our temporally-forward orientation. What should I seek ? What should I fear and avoid ? What should I prepare for ? What should I expect ?

If I believe that this God character drowned just about everybody way back when, then maybe the old bastard'll do it again, this time with fire. Once bitten, twice shy.

Some say the world will end in fire,
Some say in ice.
From what I've tasted of desire
I hold with those who favor fire.
But if it had to perish twice,
I think I know enough of hate
To say that for destruction ice
Is also great
And would suffice.

That's from Frost, who gossip tells us was an asshole. Interesting name, given the theme of ice.

6

What *else* can we make of “things in themselves” ? My understanding is that Kant was worried about free will. So he gives a phenomenalism with one hand and creates a magical realm outside the domain of this phenomenalism with the other. But he also put space and time “inside” the subject. Called perceptions “representations.” But where then is the object ever *presented* in the first place ?

My confessedly biased theory : phenomenalism solves the “problem” of mind and matter about as much as it can be solved, but this solution is BORING. No bells and whistles. No Jesus or Information Mysticism. Nothing juicy and “properly” transcendent. This is also the problem with the better forms of pragmatism, which are closely related. I take early Wittgenstein to have been (essentially) a phenomenalist. And he famously felt that he said what was worth saying. And went to beat on children till they learned their numbers. Though he was pulled back in, as indeed his early stuff was still way too in love with mere formalism, indulged in the pretense of the purity of such

formalism. Forgivable fault, because the symbols are beautiful. If one learns the hieroglyphic lingo, which I have to some degree, it's delightfully compact and precise, *but only within its limited domain*. Wittgenstein ended up spending "too much time" on philosophy of math, perhaps because he understood his age's (and our age's) weakness for hieroglyphics associated, however legitimately or not, with wonder-working technology.

7

FWIW, I also admire technology. To me it's even the center of physics, something like the "truth" of physics. The difficult math *proves itself* in the lifeworld *as* this technology. Give us gas for our cars. Don't drop bombs on us. Give my dying son a new heart. Make me a virtual girlfriend who loves me unconditionally. This last one isn't my request, but I can imagine the *Brave New World* possibilities. The serfs of the coming age will be given their "soma" (some cocktail of cheaply produced but reliably satisfying psycho-active drugs) *and* a virtual fuckmate/soulmate customized to each user. Don't have to force anyone to work. Just only give the soma and virtual love-unit to those who put in their hours. As in *Brave New World*, maybe they'll be those who live outside the system, free but without the technology to threaten the lords or oligarchs of most of the population. I say "free", they'll still be human. Could be a bunch of savage fucks indeed. Less free by some standards.

Huxley's decision to make "mother" a terrifying word was brilliant. It's marginal at the moment, but some thinkers preach the synthetic womb as part of women's liberation. Which isn't as crazy as it sounds, though it does offend something primal in me. But I have the luxury of not having a womb. This gets us in to deep water. For some, family is the point of life down here. For others, the goal is eternal adolescence. As in *Brave New World*. A game of Find The Zipper forever. Or at least one doesn't age in an obvious way. The body just suddenly fails at some point. Unless we can figure that out too. I have this sci-fi

movie pitch about those who have become immortal ending up at war with envious mortals. After the way, only a few immortals remain, hiding among the mortals. But they are smart, see, because they are old and live a life of duplicity. Vampire themes. Maybe some mortals want to steal the secret from their blood.

8

I trust technology to keep working. Should I be a determinist? I sort of see people as “forced” to be who they are. But earnest determinism doesn’t appeal to me. As it looks to me like a mystification of expectation. Also QM is probabilistic, as I understand it. Though some people still look for a deterministic theory.

I suspect that a machine that could predict events perfectly would involve some kind of paradox. Lots of good movie plots here, along the lines of Oedipus Rex. People fulfilling prophecies precisely by trying to evade their fulfillment.

If we don’t feel that we can predict the future in general, it’s open. For us. As much as we can care about it. Though we could care about and pursue what we take to be the possibility of such a machine. Time travel movie trope. Go back in time, buy the right stocks.

9

I talked about the “personal hero myth.” This guy is a messenger from suppressed good-old-ways spirituality. This other guys a messenger from the future, where they have a classless society. Though that old dream is not so popular these days. A future without oppression. A future without struggle or humiliation. Without envy or competition. All are manufactures equally, the same tan androgynous body. No genitals. The factories produce the equal people of the future, with the factory managers a little more equal than others.

The divine past, the revised-divine future. Or maybe the Everyman of Plain Common Sense. Or maybe the hero of Radical Moderation. Or, let's not forget, the earnest anti-natalist, who preaches a gentle self-inflicted genocide. Also knew a guy who was *very* concerned about all of this circumcision going on. Preachers of the crisis and the cure. Even Nietzsche descended at times into frothing at the mouth. Hegel is better on this stuff, but *we are no longer in a position to believe him*. I mean his optimism about human history was arguably more plausible then. Whereas we see the dystopian possibility of our technology. And, frankly, the low manner of those in power.

This is where my Darwin-influenced pessimism sneaks in. We were “designed” (by trial and error) to be nepotistic, to grab what can be grabbed now, fuck the long term consequences. Game theory shit. Deep in the blood. Yes, we “enact” freedom by holding one another responsible, and I hold myself responsible. To some degree. But do I believe in some pure, theoretical freedom ? Not really.

Is life in general good ? Don't know. Not sure I care. Is *my* life worth living ? For now, sure. Though aging suggests a horizon of negation. We prepare to prepare to die, when we occasionally remember that a heart attack or car accident could wipe us away in moments.

In this improvisation, I hope I've hinted at how existentialism and phenomenism and skepticism and even relativism are entangled. Is this anti-philosophy or philosophy ? Doesn't really matter which flag gets waved. I think Protagoras was a phenomenalist who didn't think “objective truth” was a meaningful phrase. A “sophist” we have been taught to call him.

Why is relativism misunderstood ? Even when it doesn't misunderstand itself ? Because the “personal hero myth” of the “earnest” Truth-bringing intellectual can hardly “see” outside this hero myth. “Obviously” “intellectuals” are Truth-bringers. Burroughs would call them Senders.

An “existentialist” is (self-consciously) *not* inscribing a letter

for Anyone. There's something corrosive and harsh in my world view that somehow works for me. But I don't exactly try to convert my mom. Or the Jesus lady at the bus stop, who wrote bible quotes all over the bench. Or the many conspicuously fragile people who meekly sneak by. Who need what comfort that they can find in this or that Truth.

I did, of course, ask myself about my own personal hero myth. The detached psychologist, the joker, the artist. What kind of person could accept the theory of the hero myth, consistently self-applied ? Only the "ironic" or "relativistic" "psychologist" who even enjoys this self-unveiling.

I find this in Nietzsche at his strongest. I think digesting Nietzsche tends to take a long time. One has to read the better part against the worse, which means figuring out the hard way, through life, which is which. Is the result wisdom ? I'd connect it to "the wisdom of the serpent" or "integrating the shadow," but then I'd emphasize that it's only knowledge of one path among others. A sense of darkness and horizon. As if one has at least followed the path that seemed most plausible in one's own little fugitive life. To be able to affirm the trauma of one's youth, one's disadvantages, as conditions for one's flowering. The conversion of disaster into a fleeting triumph, against a background perhaps of the universe grinding down. Maybe to spin back up again. Who the fuck knows ? Or can spare the time to care much ?