

Language, World, and the Logos

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1 – Introduction

The referential gulf between language and the world represents a seemingly insoluble problem of existence for modern thought. If our concepts and views of the world actually refer to the world, or can accurately divide reality into its endless parts, the gulf would not exist, or would simply be a function of our incomplete effort to grasp the nature of things. But all we have to go by when we undertake to know the world, moment by moment, with every thought that we take to be of something veridical, is our extended experience, and a potentially unending variety of interpretations of that experience. Either we, or our organs, fabricate what we claim to know, or reality somehow made our language right, or sufficient to the task that we set ourselves whenever we aim to think or express a thought about the world. But the question of whether or not the world actually exists as we try to think about it seems to be unanswerable. Complicating this ontological problem is the well-established fact that the image of the world that we have arrived at, through our most concerted and exacting forms of inquiry, presents a world that is impenetrable to thought. This image shows us a physical world that is mindless and meaningless; and it reveals that the agents who shape a linguistic-logical-mathematical understanding of the world are ultimately reducible to the basic constituents of this world, which positively preclude thinking subjects, knowledge, and language. The gulf it seems has not so much widened as disappeared, leaving an undifferentiated, or arbitrarily differentiated, *something* that is indistinguishable from nothing. This unhappy state of affairs, if we can refer to nothing as a state of anything, suggests a need to reject as radically insufficient our understanding of language and the world, or of the language-world relationship that we have created in our image. Against the methodological, or unacknowledged ontological, presumption that this relationship is a thing in principle sufficient unto itself, or provides *somewhat adequate* conditions for us to make sense of reality, this essay proposes a new version of the pre-modern, ancient idea that we and all reality are made in the image of a transcendent logos.

2 – Hegel's this-worldly conception of transcendence

If the most salient metaphysical fact of modernity is the collapse of the idea of transcendence, it would be difficult to find a sentence that expresses this fact more beguilingly than the conclusion of Hegel's landmark work *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. Borrowing the last stanza of Schiller's *Die Freundschaft*, Hegel invokes God in his conclusion while tacitly asserting the transition from a metaphysics of otherworldly transcendence to a this-worldly outlook: "Only"

The chalice of this realm of spirits
Foams forth to God His own Infinitude (808).

By adapting the stanza with his use of the word *only* (*nur*), Hegel in effect concludes that the spiritual forms of world history entirely subsume the idea of transcendence, and exhaust all significance. This implication draws on the immediately preceding part of the same sentence in which Hegel says that without the reflexive philosophical-scientific activity of “history comprehended,” which it is the task of the *Phenomenology* to introduce to the world, God or “absolute Spirit” would be “lifeless and alone” (808)

In *Hegel: A Reinterpretation*, Walter Kaufmann paraphrases Hegel’s intent with this blunt interpretation:

[T]here is no supreme being beyond; the spirit is not to be found in another world; this infinite spirit has to be found in the comprehension of this world, in the study of the spirits summoned in the *Phenomenology*. ‘History comprehended’ must replace theology (148).

Kaufmann’s interpretation implies that Hegel anticipates fully Nietzsche’s more emphatic proclamation of the death of God; and it is hard to avoid the question of influence, e.g. on Nietzsche’s genealogical view of the bad conscience as product of late Christianity, as we read the *Phenomenology*’s final section on the end-point of religion, the stage immediately preceding the ultimate moment of human self-awareness, where Hegel reports “the painful feeling of the Unhappy Consciousness that God Himself is dead” (476).

The intent of “history comprehended” is to replace *theologically guided* religion. We might regard this programmatic theme of the *Phenomenology* as an early attempt to fill the spiritual vacuum left by the death of transcendence in the wake of the Enlightenment. Hegel’s project in any case assumes an exclusively this-worldly account of spirit; it implies an account of the intentional-spiritual sphere that downstream finds a critically more incisive, and overtly skeptical, formulation in Nietzsche’s statement of the “problem of the value of existence” (306). Nietzsche’s problem raises a question that most of us would prefer to evade, viz. whether *everything* that exists is worthless in a world stripped of transcendent values. We can find no relief from the import of this bleak question if the new basis of redemption is essentially *backward* looking. Why should it matter that we comprehend “this realm of spirits” if what we recover is “lifeless and alone” except so far as we recover it? If we accept Hegel’s doctrine that the self is inherently communal, or other-grounded,ⁱ we can eliminate the superfluous “alone” and ask: Is our recovery of what is dead (bereft of significance; a mere abstraction; an illusion) worth the effort? The project arguably is scarcely cogent if there is nothing of significance, let alone world-historical significance, to recover.

Facing this existential complication of Hegel’s project, we might make a virtue of the collapse of transcendence, for instance by observing that it is our human creative-cognitive efforts that yield the significance of history. We could say that *our* combined agency exclusively creates the

stuff of history in the first place, which makes it perfectly natural to hold that similar kinds of human effort should suffice to justify the recovery of that which we initially produced, presumably as a basis for further creative output and spiritual health. Such an objection is right in an obvious sense. Individual actors and the cumulative contribution of human cultural, and, we should add, antecedent *biological*, evolution were contingently indispensable conditions for the creation of worlds of meaning over successive histories, over *world-history* if we accept that the spiritual forms of disparate civilisations surmount their local origins. And the recovery of these creations presumably nurtures human flourishing – if *that* concept is available. Nevertheless, the assertion that finite, cumulative human efforts over time keep filling “the cup of this realm of spirits” hardly forecloses on the basic problem of value that Nietzsche recognised arises with the collapse of metaphysics, or of any idea of (non-illusory, non-fictional) transcendence actually available in (quasi-theological) language that pictures secular human achievement as a “realm of spirits.” In the aftermath of this collapse, are we justified in speaking of an *evaluative* significance, beyond circular assertions to the effect that what we regard as a value is justified because we happen to value it?

This question might seem otiose or nonsensical if we reject the idea of transcendence, or seem misplaced if somehow we are able to keep alive an idea of this-worldly transcendence. In the sections below, I reject the view that we can eliminate the idea of transcendence, and support a view of this-worldly transcendence not entirely in keeping with Hegel’s conception, against the reductive force of scientific explanations, and philosophical theories that present meaning as something abstract, virtual, or illusory.

3 – The unmanageable expansiveness of meaning

Analytic philosophy’s progress over much of the last century, since its departure from the tradition of post-Kantian philosophy that includes Hegel, phenomenology, hermeneutics, etc., has been illuminating. The sustained focus of this tradition on problems of meaning – from seminal works by Frege, Moore, Russell, and Wittgenstein, through logical positivism and ordinary language philosophy; and post-analytic analytic inquiry, from Carnap and Quine, to Saul Kripke, Donald Davidson, et al – developed a labyrinthine scholarly industry of technical innovation in the areas of language and logic. Non-analytic, European philosophy – from Heidegger’s hermeneutic turn to deconstruction – while far more varied, also produced an industry of sorts, different from the analytic tradition in its tenor, methods, style, disciplinary and inter-disciplinary affiliations, and the direction and width of influence of its leading thinkers. But while tending to differ from each other in these respects, thinkers from both traditions, even Heidegger, left us with a gap in their pursuit of the question of meaning, by rejecting the metaphysically fraught view that meaning is concretely real, embodied by persons, and actually present in their thought, words, creative achievements, and deeds.

The implicit rejection of such ideas by analytic and postmodern thinkers is not new, and arguably should not be regarded as an issue of concern. The possibility of a metaphysics on which meaning and knowledge depends had been calmly extinguished by David Hume;ⁱⁱ and well past

the aftermath of logical positivism, whose proponents were Hume's most explicit 20th-century anti-metaphysical, empiricist heirs, a more recent naturalised recovery of metaphysics tends to be motivated by limited pragmatic considerations. But let us focus on the particular rejection of the metaphysical view of actual (i.e. non-abstract) meaning. For notwithstanding any analogy to the scientific idea of physical information, the view that meaning is something actual is not obvious to many thinkers today, let alone the more esoteric view that the source of meaning is *Geist* or the logos. Most of us see meaning as a non-empirical concept. If we regard the concept as non-empirical *and* as theoretically useful, we might not balk at accommodations of meaning that are metaphysical in some *pragmatic* sense, to avoid an outright elimination of meaning. One kind of accommodation involves a holistic, naturalized metaphysics that presents all reality as an image, or model, which allows its adherents to dodge the unpalatable alternatives of eliminating the very idea of meaning, or of invoking something like the logos.

We should reject the *image-of* approach to reality. In the discussion below, I attempt to advance a replacement view of meaning that is inseparable from the logos, which broadly is the idea of an independent source of meaning, or of reality as the source of meaning. We need to adopt this approach if we are to entertain the hypothesis that meaning is either objective or intersubjective *and* real,ⁱⁱⁱ which, I argue, we need to do if we are to account for the intersubjective fact of novel meaning. But for now, following a familiar precedent in modern philosophy, let us begin without an appeal to this exotic concept, by taking a perspective from within ourselves that looks outwards to our relationship with the world.

When I experience or am conscious of the presence of meaning (a meaningful object) within myself, my experience depends on an intentional or *thought-directed* relationship and intentional entities – e.g., beliefs, desires, perceptions, impulses, doubts – which represent an aspect of my consciousness that is *about* something, real or imagined, that can be thought or described. Insofar as this belief, etc. forms in my mind, it is meaningful, if only as a state of affairs for me. This meaning typically eludes me as it takes shape, not simply when I'm distracted, my memory falters, it fails to cohere, or I wish to avoid its implications, and so forth, but also because the complex semantic relations of our most common beliefs routinely exceed our grasp. Yet even in these instances, once generated, in any partial form, a belief becomes a cognitively tangible, however scarcely discernible, part of reality, regardless of whether its meaning is preserved, or created anew by myself or anyone else.

An unending number of beliefs, desires, and other intentional entities and relations within our minds form or partially form, linger, vanish, return, and sometimes, less frequently, with varying degrees of effortful or fluent agency by us, venture from our mind, via sound or light waves or other means of stimuli, to infest some other poor mind. These various possibilities suggest a basic question about the occurrence of beliefs and other intentional items. In what sense are they present? Their historical origin or mechanically (neuro-chemically) how they came about are distinct questions, which in some cases we might need to become clearer about in order to provide an answer to the question I just posed. I can hardly doubt that a belief, desire, etc. of which I am aware, however fragmentarily, is present; but were I to postulate that none of the intentional entities that inhabit our souls exist, I would need to deny that any of us exists,

which is an absorbing possibility, dependent on, among other factors, what I mean by an instance of *us*.

I contrast existence as a publicly available state of affairs and *presence* in the preceding sentence very loosely, simply to reflect a peculiar direction our question might take. There seems to be a difference between a belief *k* – say, the belief that this instant you are reading this sentence – that is present as a moment of awareness, and the belief as it might be communicated directly or from memory to another person, or, e.g., from a diary to whose contents a biographer or other reader might have recourse at a later time. The recovery or retrieval represents a secondary belief *l*, focused on among other things the content of belief *k*. This secondary belief, of e.g. the readers of the diary, is in some sense parasitical on your belief *k*, whose propositional content (explicit meaning) you recorded. Your reader's belief is alive to *her*; it is something that she experiences as a unique instance of a meaningful presence, until *that* belief perishes into memory, oblivion, or its propositional content is transcribed into the notes she might, e.g., keep to compose her biography of you. But we should distinguish between the public *fact* of belief *l*, as it occurs first in your diary, then in her notes, and finally in her biographical account if she undertakes the job to write about you and your belief, on the one hand, and, on the other, the successive and distinct beliefs *experienced* by you, by her, and by her readers.

In the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Wittgenstein states that “The world is the totality of facts, not of things” (1.1), and that a fact is a state of affairs, conceived as a *combination* of things (2.01). If we separate the facts of existence from their sense – because, e.g., we take the view that this sense lies “outside the world,” along with their value (6.41) – the statement that “The world is the totality of facts” would, if true, obliterate the distinctive actuality of beliefs. Fortunately, the world is not composed of facts existing apart from their (concrete) sense; nor is it composed (simply) of things. Beliefs construed factually outside a person are neither in the world, nor outside it, e.g. in a transcendent, Platonic country. Beliefs experienced within a person's mind are in the world; and they can travel over the world, between beings capable of thought. This claim implies that, in spite of their inherently subjective nature, beliefs are not purely subjective, nor as distinct as we might imagine from the rest of things that are, i.e. the independent parts of reality that exist with or without creatures who sustain beliefs. The peculiar presence of beliefs and kindred intentional entities within the consciousness of persons evidently can expand without end, prompted alike by lifeless physical marks or sounds, or by animated movements of flesh that seem to defy the boundary between the physical and the personal, e.g. lips and eyes that sometimes smile, scowl, or otherwise communicate.

The expansion is more or less unmanageable. Consider the opening line of Genesis (“In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth”), a notoriously unmanageable instance of expanding semantic presence. From its inception within its unknown author's mind, this verse has sponsored a multitude of divergent and incommensurate beliefs, in part because no interpreter has plausibly fixed its propositional meaning. Nor could anyone. Even its author could not have understood precisely and finally what the sentence says, unless his finite soul were miraculously flooded with the *infinitude* of meaning required to inform a complete

interpretation of the elusive concepts of time, of time before the time of the universe, and of God. Without receiving an *impossible* transfusion of meaning that lets us manage our interpretation to the point of expressing a finished thought, should we regard the sentence as saying anything? It might, after all, be nonsensical, and therefore incapable of underwriting a belief, whether construed abstractly or concretely.

To dismiss the opening verse of Genesis as nonsensical owing to its radical elusiveness would be to adopt a defeatist and precarious policy; for we have no clear idea just how elusive even many commonplace and possibly indispensable concepts are as they contribute to the countless propositions that rely on their meaning. The concepts that we rely on *fundamentally* to understand familiar features of physical and intentional reality – including the concepts of meaning and truth – are elusive to the point of inscrutability, in part owing to their role in the unendingly alterable semantic totality of our worldview in its relation to the world. We more or less fluently form myriad beliefs *with* (i.e., assuming) these concepts about commonplace claims, questions, requests, doubts, feelings, and so forth that are undergirded by their sense. If we were intent on analysing these subsidiary beliefs and their undergirding basic concepts in isolation from our (unaccountable) experience of their sense, we would be forced to regard them as nonsensical. Yet somehow they sprout into existence in their unfinished state, from worldviews that always are incomplete and alterable.

In keeping with the temporally dynamic, indeterminate nature of our language or worldview, we need to regard every non-analytic belief as provisional, and as elusive owing to the unending demands of interpretation, and of the world. Our beliefs exist, or should be regarded as existing, on a sea of doubt. We can distinguish between beliefs that reward revision from those whose meaning is sterile, or maladaptive, and hence prone to becoming obsolete. But beyond empirical methods that artificially bracket our intentional existence, it would be impossible to tell which cluster of concepts and beliefs might bear fruit in our attempts to glimpse reality, perhaps even from the vantage point of the most enlightening retrospective flights over world history.

Our notorious example raises an epistemically difficult case, the idea a divine being that is the source of all reality. To make its content *slightly* more manageable, and to cope with an aspect of it that figures prominently, indispensably, in our longer history, let the divine stand for the consummate point of all significantly influential and competing value hierarchies, i.e. for the good. Obviously, nothing like this ideal will ever finally repose in our finite fingers; nor does it seem likely, outside the jurisdiction of a totalising (e.g., positive theological or ideological) system of thought, that agreement about what, if anything, each of us might be prepared to accept as a subsuming standard of value will solidify among our diverse and divergent outlooks, especially for those of us who remain intellectually alive to the world over long stretches of our life. Yet, the idea of the divine as the consummation of our hierarchies is deeply rooted in the history of our institutions, canonical aesthetic achievements, moral revelations, ontology of a person, and many other representative features of our intentional existence. Almost certainly even in our biology.

But let us momentarily suspend the question of the sense of this deeply elusive and questionable idea, which might seem to be an improbable candidate for *concrete* meaning, and consider a holistic argument for the concreteness of meaning that situates its concreteness in the thoughts of the finite beings who think and see the world through language.

4 – A linguistic-intentional argument for the concreteness of meaning

Meaning, e.g. of words or sentences, requires an actual language.

An actual language depends on interpretation.

Interpretation requires (extended) thought.

Thought presupposes a variety of intentional, semantic, and alethic entities or processes – e.g., consciousness, beliefs, desires, value, meaning, truth, and agency.

These entities or processes are *essentially interrelated*.^{iv}

The intentional entities or processes of thought are concretely embodied in individual persons.

Meaning, in particular, is therefore concretely real.

5 – Language, meaning, and the world

In connecting meaning and language with intentional things, such as the persons who create and interpret meaning in a language, the argument above does not explicitly mention the relation of language to the world. But an *actual* language in the first two premises assumes a relation of language to language users, and thereby, inductively, to the encompassing world that prompts their verbal and non-verbal expressive exchanges with each other. This way of viewing a language contrasts an abstract language, construed as a conventionally arranged, more or less fixed system of syntax and meanings, with a concrete language, construed as a continuous expansion or interruption of that system, as it is used or modified by actual language users generating and sharing beliefs, desires, etc. that more or less fluently describe, engage, act on, etc. the world.

An abstract language is a model that presents the syntactic and semantic rules which in theory determine participation in a language, whereas an actual (concrete) language is intentionally embedded in the speech and actions of persons who with their thoughts marry the more or less settled meanings prescribed by the model's rules to novel contexts supplied by an endlessly changing world, infusing their words and deeds with meanings which need not leave the rules intact (especially in the case of semantic rules). Donald Davidson, the philosopher most famously associated with this view of language in the Anglo-sphere, uses the metaphor of triangulation to explain this basic relation of language and world. He uses the metaphor to

represent two or more language users (mutually or separately) interpreting each other's verbal and wider responses to similar promptings of the world, and revising their own interpretations or making allowances for the other's responses where they notice divergences between these responses, their interpretations of the responses, and the world. Triangulation thus depends on the thought of subjects; yet through triangulation the subject-object distinction disappears, into the (semantic-biological) process of seeing the world through language. Its disappearance does not eliminate the subjects who live in language and in the world; they remain subjects, though from an extended point of view they do not exist independently of the (ever-changing) objective conditions in which they and other subjects subsist. Instead the subjective and objective aspects of language users and world are thoroughly dispersed over their relationship. In somewhat different words, the actively realised ontology – concrete actuality – of meaning is inseparable from meaningful words forming concepts and propositions over an actual language, through meaning creating, conveying, comprehending, acting, etc. persons, and a world that generates and encompasses these meaning-making individuals, grounding persons and their thought in an endlessly renewable source of meaning.

Since the world produces both the promptings that intentional beings (actively or passively) interpret and the beings themselves, the world is ontologically primary in this three-way relationship, in the sense that it is the most indispensable part of the relationship through which the subject-object distinction dissolves. For we might postulate a world without creatures who are prompted to respond to it, but it would be unintelligible to postulate creatures without a world. The wide range of kinds of intentional beings that the world evolves, and the indeterminately large number of intentional beings that it might evolve under an endless variety of distinct conditions, suggests another sense in which the world is primary: It is capable of meaning production that supersedes the meaning that particular conscious creatures experience when they are conscious, and animates their underlying beliefs and purposes; for it evolves, generates, and potentially combines the conditions of significance of an unending variety of conscious creatures, and continuously sustains every thought that any creature might experience.

Against a pre-empiricist, pre-modern view of things, one might insist that the world, though more extensively significant than any finite being, is nevertheless utterly meaningless, that is, except for the parts of it represented by such beings. This (modern) estimation of reality presents a lacuna at the heart of thought and meaning, which, it seems to me, supports the plausibility of (some version of) the logos, an independent and transcendent source of meaning that fluently structures the world and is present in existence per se.

6 – Hierarchies and the question of value

Hierarchies occur naturally in the world and imply the existence of values. From the methodological standpoint of empiricism, the world contains no values. From this standpoint, hierarchies and the values they imply are therefore a natural illusion.

One can avoid this conclusion, if one wishes, by relinquishing the concept of value (i.e. as a concept that is incommensurate with an empirical understanding of the world) and substituting for it value-like facts, such as desire, instinct, genetic dispositions, or cultural programming. Some versions of empiricism, at some level of analysis of reality, can countenance *these* kinds of facts, and they in turn permit one to keep alive a kind of fact-based proxy for value. But an empirical stance comes with a price in the very questions one is permitted to ask about these proxy phenomena, about one's own desires and proclivities or those of others, or about systemic or embedded so-called 'values,' e.g. of an institution, a society, moral practices, ways of being in the world, or forms of life. Unintelligible from this empirical stance are questions about whether or not an instinct, a desire, a hierarchy, a set of moral rules, etc. is *worth* having, justifiable, or in need of reevaluation, or even whether such meta-empirical questions are in principle meaningful. These questions might be construed as questions that are empirically respectable, so that they are taken to be about, e.g., the relative desirability of this set of desires or that, or the conduciveness of this morality, cultural practice, etc. to satisfy antecedent desires or preferences, perhaps deeply rooted in biology. But such a manoeuvre merely switches topics, and thus evades the problem of value.

While the fate of a metaphysical concept is a non-problem from the standpoint of empiricism, evading the problem of value leaves us susceptible to a tacit positivism that erodes the significance of the intentional sphere, and thereby undermines the possibility of any standpoint, including its own. We face wider practical problems if we evade the problem of value. We become less critically fit to withstand the decidedly uncharitable suspicion and animus directed, from a variety of sweeping, hierarchy collapsing perspectives, against the higher values of *any* hierarchy. Further, eliminating the concept of value leaves exposed reason, and whatever concept of truth we manage to cling to. Logic, and the many disciplinary methods that once implicitly served truth, at most become pragmatic devices, facilitating a multitude of desires expressive of an indeterminable number of contrary claims, all 'true' relative to the incommensurable cultures, worldviews or languages of their adherents. Biologically based, socially elaborated desires will naturally continue to sustain myriad hierarchies. But if the world actually is valueless, the problem of value becomes a pseudo problem, and claims made about the practices or distinctions of any hierarchy must merely be expressions of fact (assuming, illicitly, that the concept of a fact is still available) about rudimentary biology and social power, without prescriptive significance.

Of course nothing will *seem* more real than values. However theoretically complacent we might be about their existence, our outward behaviour (talk, responses, actions, etc.) and deepest thought will maintain the semantic pretense of their reality as we act in the world and think about the outcomes of our performance, e.g. when we ponder whether we will *flourish*, *stagnate*, *grow decadent*, etc. as individuals, communities, cultures, or civilisations – if these still exist. In one of his posthumously published notes, Nietzsche characterised such pretense as "incomplete nihilism," as an attempt "to escape nihilism without reevaluating our values" (1968, 19), which he supposed would make the problem of nihilism "more acute" (19). But if the doctrine of nihilism is true, these concerns are baseless. *That* the problem is more or less acute,

or whether our acceptance of it is complete or incomplete, could not possibly matter. Nor could it matter whether or not we reevaluate our 'values 'and establish a new hierarchy of values, since these values and the 'values 'we replace them with would be equally baseless.

Nietzsche speculated that “[i]t will take a few centuries before” the problem of nihilism – or “the problem of the value of existence” – “can even be heard fully and in its depth” (1974, 308).^v This could be an elusive future. Few of us choose to think about any metaphysical problem, “in its depths” or otherwise. And in so far as *this* problem tempts our curiosity, we tend to think falsely, deceived by a faith in our agency that so misconstrues that mysterious capacity that we think that it lends support to the modern prejudice that ultimately we construct the hierarchies that bring meaning into the world, and that we thus alone determine the value of everything, including ourselves. Even those among us who are convinced that freedom is an illusion in many cases preserve their faith in our apparent intentional dominion over the world. Yet, it seems, eventually our confidence in this remarkable prejudice shrivels before the astonishing spectacle of science (or perhaps *scientism*^{vi}), which progressively eliminates all our fantasies and continues to reveal to us the extent of our insignificance. As we watch the rapid progress of science deprive us of any basis of belief in our most sacred idols (including truth, which possibly still lingers in our imagination as something almost divine^{vii}), we can take solace in the fact that scientific method compensates us with the invaluable ideal of *precise quantification* – which vouchsafes a wondrously undogmatic ritual with which to structure new forms of worship. Inconsolable members of our species who doubt that a mere *methodological* ideal can secure an adequate substitute form of worship, especially one that delivered them into their current situation, might brighten slightly when they reflect that humanity was the efficient cause and operating agent of this supra-human instrument of science that deprives them of their lingering faith in false idols – at least until they realize that the reflection which preserves the image of agency is also false.

7 – The analytic episteme

This account may only serve as a caricature of the flight of intentionality from the modern world. Yet, the most empirically compelling approaches to reality have for some time encouraged us to eradicate, or quarantine, intentional concepts – even while modeling the world on theories that are ultimately parasitic on, and unthinkable without, the intentional (the mental), and testing these theories with procedures decided by thinking beings. In some luminous future, empirical models and tests might come exclusively from algorithms ‘devised’ by artificial neural networks that indiscernibly mimic thought. In such a future possibly some remarkable machine will design a test to show the more obtuse among us, once and finally, that thought is an illusion. But the illogic of this operation would prevent its inception; for if thought is an illusion, so too is agency, and this remarkable machine would need to calculate more effective means of stimulating a correct ‘attitude ’(adjustment of neural-chemical processes) in the deluded creatures who still believe that they think and make decisions regarding this flaw of their ‘thought ’(neural programming).

If any creature is *deluded* or *believes falsely*, it thinks. Can we then think away thought as an illusion? When we look to settle this question, Daniel Dennett's tripartite epistemic scheme lets us eat but not quite have our cake. The level of the scheme that he calls *the intentional stance* permits us to attribute 'thoughts' ('beliefs,' 'desires,' etc.) to the behaviour of a wide array of entities that might catch our interest, e.g. to humans, bats, even lifeless objects such as computers, or batteries. Dennett allows this dispensation as a practical measure, for the sake of calculative simplicity on those occasions when we wish to describe the antics of these various entities, or to predict their behaviour. Shift from the intentional stance to *the physical stance* and we then need to purge these entities from our 'thought' (neural behaviour); for they fall outside the realm of permissible entities, and vanish from reality once we view things from the standpoint of this more basic model. It seems then that by 'thinking' within Dennett's scheme we *can* conceptualise thought, or something like thought, even while we anticipate eliminating it as an illusion as soon as we refine or alter our model of reality.^{viii} We should nevertheless be perplexed by the dispensation afforded to the intentional stance within an overarching reductively materialist scheme, and especially by the reflexive absurdity of an intentional act (the physical stance) that purports to purge categorically the conditions of its possibility. Our perplexity on this second count, I hasten to say, provides no impetus to think that physics should be replete with conjectures about intentionality (as opposed to *presupposing* intentionality, as every purposeful activity does); but it suggests the implausibility of the materialist methodological dogma that reality (or our knowledge of reality) is reducible to quantifiable things or processes.

Many anti-reductivists who dissent from this dogma, or its more pristine formulations, find refuge in some form of *epistemic* dualism. But I expect that few philosophers who renounce reductive forms of materialism would accept dualisms that (i) divide reality between this world and a separate, transcendent realm, or, less extravagantly, (ii) imply a substantive distinction of subject and object, mind and matter, perceiver and world, and so on. While we should perhaps repudiate both dualisms, the second is more intuitively promising if we want to account for the apparent incommensurability of subject and object in our thought or talk, or for the tension they represent in our intentional relationship with the world; for the omnipresence of this tension seems to imply the existence of both thought and the world. In light of this intractable problem, a few notable philosophers in the analytic tradition have proposed versatile epistemic, *methodological* strategies^{ix} that salvage some sense of the experiential obviousness of our intentional existence while affirming physical monism, which entails the fact that mind is dependent on matter. The reluctance of these philosophers to offer an *ontological* account of this basic problem of our intentional-physical existence is not surprising. From a retrospective view going back to the Renaissance, it is clear that the success of the sciences has more or less eclipsed traditional metaphysical inquiries into the nature of being. Their epistemic-methodological inquiries in any case are more logically creative than explanatory, and what philosophy of mind in general has created is a labyrinth of intellectual diversions.

8 – Some speculative postulates of the logos

Let us bring ourselves back from modern philosophy's descent into the analytic episteme, and assume for a moment, with few qualifications and little manoeuvring, that our intentional being is real. This assumption, it seems to me, implies an ontology of transcendence X that grounds our native intuition that we exist beyond the flux of perceptions that appear to comprise our experience of ourselves and the rest of the world. It would be impossible to fabricate the salient aspects of X entirely outside a tradition; so I shall assume a number of salient concepts that we cannot easily do without, as I did earlier in this essay, and offer a series of postulates that suggest why thought and the material conditions of thought ultimately require the reality of the logos.

(8a) The world of facts depends on its physical conditions, or *physis*. But the fact that the world (rather than nothing) exists supersedes the *quantifiable* character of these conditions; and the concept of a fact also supersedes these conditions. Without these unaccountable, formal framing features of reality, the physical conditions of the world would not exist. But a world without physical being is possible, and hence the fact of such an implausible event is possible. That there is a world of some sort is therefore logically prior to any particular sort of world, and *that* there is a world is a mystery. (Within the linguistic-methodological episteme of the modern zeitgeist,^x we might say that our *account* of physical goings on assumes the mystery of the world's existence, and the complex array of linguistic-logical framing devices that the concept of a fact subsumes.) *Physis* or matter minimally presupposes these interrelated aspects of the logos (which at this stage of these remarks might be characterised as a mere abstraction).

(8ai) The fact that physical events and processes can be perceived and thought about – are susceptible of sensation, desire, explanation, analysis, interpretation, a panoply of immediate and reflective intentional attitudes and decisions about their nature – represents another aspect of the logos. We can imagine a material world that exists without the proclivities and attitudes of minds, but a world in which *physis* evolves these intentional entities and relations, or is susceptible to their activities in the unlikely event that they evolve, would be unintelligible without the logos.

(8aii) This claim is reinforced by the fact that the material world conforms to the principles of reason (e.g., principles of logic and mathematics) that suffuse and constrain intentionality.

(8aiii) Without the logos, neither *physis* nor the life forms it evolves would exist.

(8b) The intentional aspects of the logos are uniquely instantiated, as mental activities or actions, within particular material bodies. These activities or actions are inseparable from the physical beings who embody them. This fact directs their ontology either through a narrowing of the doors of perception and thought to their absolute reduction in matter, or raises the possibility that the reality underlying these activities or actions represents a synthesis of matter and thought. (-a) Only minds can perform acts such as explanatory reduction; the reduction of mind to matter would represent an astonishing feat, a vanishing act performed by an agent whose success would preclude its appearance. A world containing agents who reduce the entire world to matter alone and yet continue to think, by any light of thought is an absurdity. The

reduction of the material conditions of mental activities to the category of mind, by the light of all appearances is excessively implausible. We are left then with an essential synthesis of mind and matter, wherein, in certain instances (e.g. in the active parts of the nervous system of a sentient being who is neither dead nor dreamlessly asleep), mental and physical activities cannot be disentangled.

(8bi) The unique instantiation of thought in the flesh of a person implies the concreteness of thought. By contrast, purely linguistic or mathematical representations of thought (explanations, propositions, hypotheses, formulas, instructions, and so forth) are abstractions of thought; these remain “lifeless and alone” until activated within the intentional-physical activity of an actual language. But how can this uniquely embodied meaning, or locus of intentional-physical activity, become the kind of thing that the person in whom it becomes incarnate can communicate to other persons? Meaning obviously is never present in sound or light waves, or other stimuli that impinge on the organs of the language users who comprehend, in degrees, the meaning that is conveyed. The organs and neural activity of the persons exchanging meaning never enter into a state of harmonious alignment; and their languages never fully converge. We might observe that language is inherently interpersonal; our biology predisposes us to learn a language, and we initiate and develop our linguistic skill in communion with others. But this disposition and skill leaves us without an adequate explanation for the creation and shared understanding of novel or alien meaning, meaning that we communicate beyond situations where language users coordinate pre-established signals and common observations with each other – unless something about the biological-social *skill* that we rely on can illuminate the mysterious fact that we are able to create and share novel or alien meaning.

(8bii) Faced with meaning beyond the horizons of our worldview (outside the current incarnation of our language), this linguistic skill involves degrees of creative, rational agency, or free will: to formulate a promising interpretation of alien meaning from the pre-existing material of our worldview; to recognise that this interpretation falls short or misses the mark, which inevitably it will; and then, when we persist, to revise it – which involves a provisional or permanent revision, and potential revaluation, of our worldview.^{xi}

(8biii) Like meaning, agency, I proposed (4), is one of the essentially interrelated concepts presupposed by thought. Invoking free will to *explain* the mysterious features of meaning is therefore futile. Though we are immersed in our freedom, fragmentary and limited as it is, it is as mysterious to us as meaning, and every other intentional concept. The interrelationship of these concepts expands the mystery, as does their incarnation in flesh, the problem we are trying to cope with now.

(8biii-a) The fact that the self is opaque to itself is a commonplace of modern and postmodern critiques of the idea of a self, which despite their radical divergence of method and outlook tend to converge around a reduction, dissolution, demystification, or banalisation of the self. (A retrospective hypothesis: Wherever modern and postmodern ideas uniquely agree, they tend to show humanity its reflection in an abyss.) The authors of these critiques sleepwalk through an unacknowledged episteme of explanation and diagnosis in which human thought

somehow contains reality, while declaring (intent to show the imperturbability of their somnolence) the impotence of human thought. Let us embrace the spirit of this declaration and wonder how closely we should expect our most basic explanations of the world to illuminate the underlying conditions of the self, or of the extraordinary agency that enables us to make sense of ourselves and the world.

(8biii-ai) The most basic quantitative explanations of the world presuppose the logos in its finite existence, in the physical-intentional activities of embodied thought; these quantitative explanations reveal parts of the world by bracketing what they presuppose, which is beyond explanation. One might object that this bracketing is only temporary, and that the methods of empirical and analytic investigation will progressively shed light on the opaque creatures who offer these explanations, so that increasingly *we* (whatever this pronoun might designate) will be able to explain the interrelated concepts of their agency and thought in more basic (i.e., quantifiable) terms, or, possibly, explain that these concepts represent a mirage that our explanations should aim to dispel. This latter possibility involves the heady thought of agents who think in a world without thought (8b). That possibility aside, the very idea of an explanation involves a problem with which we are still trying to cope, viz. the agency that delivers us from our embodied finitude into the wider world of actual language (8bi-8biii).

(8biv) An actual language would “stand still” if it relied solely on our “reasoning power” and “organs of perception.”^{xii} In his a *poetic* critique of empiricism “There is No Natural Religion [a & b],” William Blake offers a similar, albeit more elaborate, conclusion:

If it were not for the Poetic or Prophetic character,
the Philosophic & Experimental would soon be at the ratio of all things,
& stand still, unable to do other than repeat the same dull round over again
Application. He who see the Infinite in all things sees God. He who sees
the Ratio only sees himself only
Therefore
God becomes as we are,
that we may be as he
is

(8bv) The finite agency by which we understand new meanings suggests the infinite character of the logos, and its independence. The meaning of innumerable intentional (non-empirical) modes of expression or particular artifacts lies beyond any interpretation or thought of “an individual, a people or a culture.”^{xiii} (-a) Meaning is expansively indeterminate, and thus not bound to the organs of a single possessor, nor the harmoniously arranged organs of a linguistic herd; nor is indeterminate meaning confined to the beliefs of a shared worldview, which springs from equivalent forms of life. Non-analytic meaning can never be exhausted by an actual language, unless we imagine a language out of time, bound to the biology of its possessors, or to

fixed worldviews and unalterable forms of life.^{xiv} We would only be imagining the death or (temporary) confinement of a language, not its (infinite) character.

(8bvi) Meaning is specific and holistic; a proposition *s* possesses a specific sense, fixed by a truth value (true or false), relative to one or more languages. An actual language is never complete. Hence propositional meaning is both (provisionally) fixed and indeterminate.

(8bvi-a) A proposition represents only a single truth value; the concrete expression of a proposition, e.g., a sentence, is never bound to its context or its reception; it can simultaneously express contrary truth values, relative to *different* languages. (-b) Propositions abstracted from concrete expressions are permanent; (-bi) but the semantic boundaries of the actual language wherein a proposition is expressed are never closed. (-c) Propositions are only meaningful relative to a language. (-d) The expansive character of languages implies a *direction* of indeterminate expressions of propositions towards truth; otherwise languages would be emptied of meaning. (-e) It would be misleading to say that all actual languages converge in a single language, given the character of an actual language, or to think of languages as numerically distinct. (Heraclitus affirmed the view that the logos is one, which is similarly misleading. The logos is neither single nor multiple; it is non-numerical, and hence non-quantifiable.)

(8bvii) Actual meaning is indeterminate; whether ephemeral or durable, it is impermanent in its finitude, as the passing worldviews and forms of life that secure its wider context are impermanent. (-a) In its relation to the infinitude of the logos, it is impermanent. (-b) Meaning contrasts with analytic meaning, which has the character of permanence inasmuch its expressions are *stipulated* to remain constant over all possible contexts. (-c) An *infinitude* of contexts, if the expansion it implies is directional, would be infinitely dynamic, and infinitely multitudinous. (-ci-a) Only a quantitative infinitude that “repeat[s] the same dull round” suggests the possibility of permanence, or of simplicity. (-d) Analytic truths or relations suggest the poverty of the (abstract) idea of permanent meaning, and (-e) the insufficiency of human (semantic) invention, which suggests why we have invoked the idea of logos.

(8bviii) If we assume the directional infinitude of the logos, then doctrines of undifferentiated being and ontological permanence are false. (-a) The logos is *endlessly* new, and hence, despite its (unquantifiable) unity, is not permanently or simply configured. (-ai) We cannot even say that its unity is permanent, except by identifying it with boundaries that its character precludes.

(8bix) The directional, qualitative infinitude of the logos has the character of intentionality, which strikes our modern understanding as an illicit thought. The essentially interrelated intentional concepts presupposed by thought are in a sense both finite and infinite. Take meaning as a proxy for the other concepts; while finite, it has the temporal character of the infinite, as it can never be contained by a single language or form of life. (-a) All languages and forms of life could perish, but meaning would still not have been exhausted; nor would the perished languages or forms of life.

(8c) A hierarchy is a structure of values. (-ci) The directional infinitude of the logos structures the hierarchy of being.

(8d) If the directional infinitude of the logos is a hierarchy of truth and approximations of truth, then truth is equivalent to the good, and approximate expressions of truth should direct our (creative, rational) attention towards the good.

9 – Cause, agency, and the logos

Is freedom possible if the infinitude of the logos is *directional*, and if it *structures the hierarchy of being*? None of the speculative remarks about the logos in the last section implies, and together they are not consistent with, the idea of an overarching causal power that determines the course of the universe, nor with its theistic counterpart, viz. predestination. In this final section, I first argue why these doctrines are unjustified, which opens a door to the possibility of freedom. From the standpoint of our language-world relationship, I then argue that freedom and causation are both unavoidable, and suggest further reasons to invoke the idea of the logos.

Universal causation, the theory that every event has a cause, does not imply determinism, nor the absence of freedom; nor does it confine freedom within the sleight-of-hand manoeuvres of compatibilism, the kind of half-hearted defence of agency that determinists who ultimately dispense with freedom advance. For the doctrine of determinism conflates causation with necessity, and, as David Hume recognised, has no basis in empirical reality. As Hume says, nothing in our experience reveals a causal power, or necessary connection, between events that we take to be causally related.^{xv} Hume intended his analysis of causation to undermine the first-cause argument of the theists, by showing that causal necessity is not vouchsafed by experience; and in passing he denies the option that God must then empower every causal event in nature, as based on a claim that similarly “lies entirely outside the sphere of experience” (1975, 72). Further, he more or less anticipates the slightly more modest approach of this essay, when he disparages the assertion of “a certain unknown, inexplicable *something*, as the cause of our perceptions; a notion so imperfect, [he says], that no sceptic will think it worth while to contend against it” (155).

It would be idle to say that “*something*” *x* is the *cause* of event *y*, if *x* is inexplicable. However, Hume’s definition of a cause – viz., “*An object precedent and contiguous with another, and so united with it in the imagination, that the idea of the one determines the mind to form the idea of the other, and the impression of one to form a more lively idea of the other*” (1978, 172) – suggests that the *basis* of causation is inexplicable. To attribute truth to a claim of the sort ‘*Event x caused event y*’ (or more involved inductive claims), we need to assume that reality grounds causation (and invariant laws based in inductive reasoning), independently of our projections or expectations. This assumption does not entail the determinist doctrine that all events of the world were predetermined by an original cause, such as a singular event of nature, or the will of God. Nor does it entail the interventionist doctrine that Nature or God determines all causal

outcomes by continuously managing the world's unfolding complexity. It would be illicit to invoke the logos as a stand-in for particular causes, e.g. the x that causes a particular perception or thought. But if mechanistic explanations that develop a description of x , or some physical counterpart of x , are to succeed, causation must be based in a dimension of reality, which we need not regard as the cause of x .

We are vaguely aware, with the immediacy of direct experience, of innumerable confluences of the causal and the volitional – of events bound to invariant physical laws and interventions by agents, ourselves, whose thoughts and actions conform to these laws while producing effects of their own, presumably first on their own bodies and then (thereby) on their surrounding environment. Some such possibility would seem to be the case if our thoughts are *embodied*. But both thought and causation elude us, even if we can discern the physical correlate of a thought; so, for instance, if the physical activity underlying a particular thought x were invoked to explain how x caused a complex physical event y to occur, such an explanation of this confluence of the volition and causation would leave untouched, i.e. unexplained, the reality of *causation*, or of thought.

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Thought or an actual language encompasses our entire relationship with being, and is a product of being – which suggests why the idea of the logos once had such wide currency in our antecedent civilisation. The idea of the logos represents a way of thinking about being as the ground of all meaning, and about the totality of what is actual as meaningful, as opposed to an undifferentiated flux, or that which signifies nothing whatever. In a slogan, if we wished to resurrect the spirit of this displaced tradition, we could assert that to exist is to be meaningful, or say that the idea of meaningless being is unintelligible. This slogan might be taken to mean that meaning is embedded in, or is a predicate of, things in themselves; but drawing on an analogy with language, let us assume instead that things or processes are meaningful only within the infinitely complex, *holistic* structure of being. Against this inflated view of meaning *and* being, we face the modern objection that members of our species alone produce meaning (which we can extend into a slightly more catholic objection, viz. that only intentional life forms, beings capable of thinking about things, make meaning). One might be reluctant to accept the thesis that being itself is independently meaningful, or the complementary thesis that the logos is the ground of all finite meaning, and yet recognise that none of us produces meaning in isolation, e.g. in a language incommensurate with the language of others. One might reject these theses and acknowledge the fact that the language through which we see and think about the world is rooted in our biological inheritance, and relies on our formative and ongoing communication with others. That our evolved biological constitution makes us fit for language and engenders the creative agency that our language presupposes *suggests* a wider relation of meaning to the structure of reality, but evolutionary mechanisms that provide the causal explanation for the appearance of language are presumably blind, and bereft of intentionality, which leaves many of us reluctant to accept the idea of the logos.

Our reluctance, though, leaves us with a deep mystery. For the mechanical (biological) origins or conditions of a language provide no basis for explaining the infinite capacity of a language. Picturing the meaning of a language as finite, for instance by defining it at a particular moment of the totality of its expressions, dispels the mystery. But only a dead language, or an abstract model of a language, has a definable and thus finite meaning. The horizons of an actual language are endlessly open, though the fragile mortals who see and act in the world through this language will perish. A language would cease to exist if the intentional beings who think within it were swept away, or otherwise lost their capacity for thought. But if a language encloses these beings within a finite semantic structure, it will cease to be a language, at least the kind of language that sustains the intentional existence of members of our species, and its brief history of meaning and forms of meaning.

Are we tacitly invoking the language of a race of infinitely capacious beings, and flattering our finite imagination and limited agency? Only if we think that we subsume our language, or that a language is circumscribed by the limitations of its speakers. Language confers on our finite thought a glimmer of infinitude, when our thought transcends what we currently know, or when our thought and actions fluently display a significance that exceeds the quantifiable functions of our organs. If the grazing cattle that Nietzsche envisions at the beginning of his essay on history could speak, their thought would also contain a hint of the infinite, though their reluctance to speak would leave us wondering in vain about this hypothesis. If we imagine instead the language of a race of *Übermenschen*, or much better for our present purpose, of gods, their intentional existence would surely represent a glimmer of infinitude. But only a glimmer; for no matter how replete with significance the life-world of higher intentional beings might be, it could only represent a spark of the infinite, unless we conceive their language as a finished totality of thought, a conception that collapses the idea of an *infinite* logos.

We might imagine that these superior beings would be flattered by the supposition that their language exhausts reality, as it would elevate their thought to the pinnacle of existence. Their thought would be co-extensive with (finite) reality, and they would be justified in seeing themselves as perfectly self-sufficient beings, the sole ground of their own significance, and of all being. But if these gods are incomparably more insightful than the creatures who believe that they can coherently construe reality as finite, they would surely perceive in this idea the twilight of their existence (or the unintelligibility of the idea); for their thought would henceforth represent an existence whose meaning, categorically apprehended by them in its entirety, would be as circumscribed as the mechanical operations of a bacterium, which fortunately for the bacterium is spared the capacity to reflect on “the same dull round” of its existence. Their predicament would not be reducible to a psychological malady, e.g. an abiding boredom or ennui that they could treat by a temporary emptying and invigorating restoration of their perfectly formed intentional being, or by drifting permanently into nirvana, or into nothingness. It would stem from an *ontological defect*, paradoxically from the consummate perfection of their significance and being; for only abstract and empty meaning can be *perfectly* realised, as in the case of tautological expressions – or the unchanging meaning of a Platonic heaven, whose perfect forms entail a conception of a dead good.

If there is an approximate hierarchy of intentional being, a capacity for cognitive self-transcendence might count as one of the surer marks of those beings who occupy its upper branches. I doubt that any being capable of thought, however repetitively dull we imagine its mental life to be, simply perpetuates the same perceptions over and over. If the cattle in the field, e.g., think, “as they leap about, eat, rest, digest . . . from morn till night and from day to day, fettered to the moment,” or while they “stand and gaze”(1997, 60) at the face of a curious human, they likely never experience the *same* perception, even if it is unlikely that they would ever be troubled by this imputation, or suffer vain feelings of resentment over their position in a hierarchy of intentional being. Our extraordinary capacity for overcoming even our most sacred beliefs, not to speak of our ineradicable vanity concerning where we place in any prestigious order of rank, should make us warm to the standard of self-transcendence. But this singular capacity has become quite ferociously iconoclastic in the late-modern world, and our vanity over matters of rank is of course consistent with a will to destroy every prospect of realizing any instance of this idea. Even aside from these psychological-political attitudes which have been gathering in intensity of late, it has become, as we considered earlier, almost impossible for us to escape the suspicion that, as an ongoing conduit of our biology and social history, we are the ground of all meaning. Otherwise, it seems, an infinitude of *possible* meaning hangs lifelessly above us.

Provided we resist the temptation to introduce subtle shifts in the meaning of *being* and *nothing*, it might seem obvious that a possible meaning that has not come into being, e.g. an *idea* that has yet to be conceived by anyone, is non-existent, especially if we are careful not to allow a manner of speaking to determine the ontological status of the idea *prior* to its being thought. On this view, we cannot *refer* to an idea that has not yet been thought; and since we have abandoned the Platonic theory of a permanent original repository of meaning, the question of the being of an idea to which we are not in a position to refer does not arise.

The case of elusive meaning is slightly more troubling. Meaning at the edge of our language is a mere possibility, and hence apparently nothing until it enters our consciousness in a well-formed sentence that soberly observes the semantic conventions of our language. Complicating this picture of meaning and our language are instances of meaning actualised in another language, and non-existent in our own. But the complication is slight if we assume that languages that diverge semantically in some measure from our own may later, after an expansion of our language to accommodate this alien meaning, diverge less far with respect to it. The partial convergence of languages required to make sense of this assumption is an involved question, but if we allow that languages can converge, we can avoid, or allay, the strange and unsettling problem of meaning coming into existence from nothing. To the extent that meaning arises spontaneously within the same language, the problem returns, but only as a testament to the fact of our individual or interpersonal agency, or to the conditions of semantic expansion implicit in the multitude of contrary ideas and tensions within every actual language.

We might conclude that we are not in a position to invoke the idea of meaning and truth outside our language, and hence feel entitled to banish the idea of the logos. But ruling out the idea of a source of meaning beyond the horizons of our language seems to leave us with the idea

of a finite or fixed language, and the idea of a world that vacillates between something whose meaning is co-extensive with our language and an inert merely possible something – or infinity of possible arrangements of elementary particles and forces, each arrangement an interpretation sponsored by some (possible) world-arranging language. Either way, we are left with an indefinitely numerous variety of incommensurate constructions of the world, each creating its own world from an infinite range of possible worlds. We can indulge this absurd conclusion because we have switched topics; we are tacitly treating discrete parts of the world as the world, or re-defining a world as something other than everything.

This switch of topics suggests an incoherent ontological vision in which language determines reality, which stems from a radically incomplete view of a language, and a world. Stipulating the existence of elementary particles or waves, and accompanying physical laws, dramatically improves this vision, by suggesting *the starting point* of an (evolutionary) account of how a language, or system of thought, that configures the world in this way or that might come about (i.e., evolve), and by restricting the range of possible worlds that creatures determined by this language or that might inadvertently create. But this vision fundamentally still lacks coherence if it allows us to affirm the idea of different actual worlds, *or* the idea of different languages, each with their own isolated or incommensurate truth regime. Coherence is restored if we bracket language, or thought, and imagine a world of elementary particles, governed by unifying forces – what we would call *laws* if we had not bracketed language, and thought. We are left with *the world*, as opposed to a multitude of worlds; and the problem of an insufficiently constrained language that supports distinct truth regimes that proliferate worlds has been set aside. But in restoring coherence we have embraced a methodological fantasy, since *in its entirety* the world contains language, and the physical-intentional conditions of language. *That* the world contains language or thought, or species that think, is a contingent fact, and a world without thought is conceivable; but a world that precludes the *possibility* of thought is inconceivable, unless we invoke a meta-conceiver to conceptualise it, which would involve thinking about something other than *the world*, or withdrawing the conception of a world in which thought is impossible.

Whatever the case might be for non-actual worlds, a coherent ontology of this world cannot be based on languages that, in theory, proliferate worlds at the behest of competing regimes of truth and interpretation. Language requires the world to underwrite its approximations of truth, and thus implies a language-world relationship. To avoid ontological incoherence, we need to limit the language through which language users understand the world to that relationship alone. The language-world relationship to which it is limited will impose a variety of constraints on the ever-changing meaning of a language; otherwise their language would be incapable of approximating truth, and would thereby be emptied of meaning. These constraints cannot be limited to the explicable, quantifiable parts of the relationship, to the laws of nature; for these are consistent with a multitude of worlds. Nor does the agency of language users who depend on the language-world relationship to make sense of the ever-expanding intentional dimension of reality suffice to constrain ontology. The creative, rational agency of language users underlies this expansion, which is liable to become more multitudinous and divergent in proportion to the creative resourcefulness of these agents, assuming that they are as free as they appear to be.

The centre of their intentional existence would cease to hold if its significance and value were not tied to truth, or to the good and the true to speak in pre-modern, pre-postmodern terms.

10 – A nihilistic image of the world and the logos

The centre of those areas of our civilisation that have held together – legal principles, basic views of morality, canons of art, and so on – have done so temporarily, amidst innovations and subtle and radical divergences of perspective which kept the centre alive. Conspicuously in the history of the West, these tensions led to successive disruptions and reconfigurations of the centre. If we can still imagine a civilisation, or a global arrangement loosely based on its history, the idea of its centre, or a very inspiring centre, holding seems quite remote. If the logos is meant to entail a *holistic* vision, the sheer multiplicity of contrary worldviews our species produces suggests that it is diffuse to the point of meaninglessness – especially if the logos is meant to sustain an infinitude of possible worldviews. The growing disarray, or impending demise, of our (formerly logo-centric) civilisation might reinforce our existential sense of this practical objection to the very idea of the logos. Yet if we conceive the logos as an *infinitude*, we should not be surprised by the successive deaths of cultures or civilisations, by the prospect of a continuous apocalypse of our finite social and cultural arrangements and worldviews. Instead we should be surprised that we ever imagined that the good might descend into our thought and ways of being in a complete and entirely digestible form, or that an infinitude of meaning could be encapsulated or finished by our worldview or thought. More surprising, to my mind, is the unsustainable and essentially nihilistic thought that an ever-higher centre is in principle unavailable in light of the endless relativity of human cultures or worldviews. But this view collapses on reflection. If all values and points of view are true only relative to this self-enclosed worldview (language) or that, then truth dissolves, or, as we have seen, worldviews (languages) proliferate worlds. I shall not comment further on either possibility, except to say that the dissolution of the truth of all values and points of view, in addition to showing a self-undermining nihilism, undoes the objection to the logos that stems from a multiplicity of points of view. The diffusion of meaning that this objection infers from a multitude of worldviews inadvertently counts in favour of an overriding, obviously elusive, centre; otherwise, the truth-value and hence meaning of each worldview amidst this passing multitude of worldviews would not merely dissolve but never exist. All worldviews would be annulled before conception.

Anxiety about nihilism is a recurrent feature of the early-modern and modern world, and of much antecedent history; a well-articulated view of this anxiety as a response to a scientific worldview achieved very wide currency within years of the publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859), through Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* (1861), and later through Nietzsche's *The Gay Science* (1882), and other works in which he reflects on the collapse of metaphysics. Nietzsche had begun much earlier to examine the aesthetic-mythic remedy of the pre-philosophical Greeks to the problem of the metaphysical problem of the value of existence, beginning with *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872). Broadly under Nietzsche's influence, but as a continuation of the impetus to recover Greek culture that underpinned the Renaissance, almost every notable figure of European art and fiction in the last decade of the 19th-century and opening

decades of the 20th-century can readily be seen as offering a mimetic response to the nihilistic drift of modernity, or as discovering radically new aesthetic means of infusing a culture in decay with new implied values, or a sense of a critique or reevaluation of decadent values. Indeed the singular aesthetic-cognitive achievement and experimentalism of modernism cannot plausibly be dissociated from an awareness of the spiritual death of European bourgeois culture, or the collapse of its basis of values. But this achievement is a century in the past now, and in retrospect resembles the afterglow of a sun that had already set. Today, an implicit nihilism is so wedded to the dominant intersections of our worldviews that it is hard to imagine what shape an aesthetic response could take without collapsing into theistic nostalgia, or into cultural kitsch; it perhaps seems quaint even to raise the issue of the presumed meaninglessness of everything. We have domesticated the nihilistic implications of our semi-acknowledged ontology, by adopting a resiliently pragmatic view of the world that leaves us more or less unconcerned that our metaphysically agnostic experience of reality is ungrounded, and unintelligible. From the standpoint of this suspension of a metaphysical attitude, it is hard not to see Hume's *Treatise* and *Enquiry* as the first clear, thoroughly worked-out document unveiling the implicit nihilism of modern thought – in its positivist, pragmatic, and radically deconstructive phases.

Hume's remark that "[r]eason is, and ought only to be, the slave of the passions" (1978, 415) in the context in which he justifies this assertion in the *Treatise*, entails evaluative nihilism – unless the passions are a sufficient or self-justifying ground of value. The passions are merely a natural fact, and, as Hume observes later in the *Treatise*, a moral value or *ought* introduces a "new relation or affirmation" that it is "altogether inconceivable" could be derived from factual claims (469-70). Only by eliding desire and value can we invoke the idea of moral values or virtues, but in doing so we will have introduced the "new relation" that Hume validly infers we are not entitled to do. Unless passions or desires are somehow a ground unto themselves, values are nowhere in sight, and we face value nihilism, or the problem of the value of existence.

Hume's bundle theory of the self reinforces the case for value nihilism, and widens to a more basic nihilism in which all ontological commitments fade from view. To arrest such an eventuality, Descartes had claimed that he could infer *his* existence, as *a thinking being* no less, from his direct experience or introspection of his thoughts. But as Hume says of himself when he reflects inwardly, he never observes a self, a subject "–what I call *myself*" – but only "different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement" (252). Perceptions *per se*, without the overlay of enhancing projections of "new relations" or interpretations, as Hume argues, show no evidence of a self; and, we should add, *the idea of isolated, relation-free perceptions in any case is an impossibility*. The *relations between* these appearing and disappearing perceptions might substitute for a *self*, but of course these relations are as much a theoretical projection as the idea of a self, and are not observed. So, perceptions, relations between perceptions, and what we call *the self* are unavailable from the standpoint of observation; for there is no standpoint. What we are left with is an ontological story told from the perspective of observation statements that leave it without a perspective, because these statements and any other class of statements are unavailable.

Try as we might it seems that we have no choice but to *presuppose* the relations of our thought, from perceptions and beliefs, to meaning, agency, the self, and so on, along with whatever other ontological commitments the history of our language-world relationship implicitly reveals to us. Perhaps no historically conscious individual amidst the successive thinkers or herds of thinkers representing our species can directly justify these presuppositions; it may be that in our finitude our ability to justify a single relation or extension of thought is insufficient. It would obviously be reflexively absurd to deny that we think, and only slightly less obviously absurd to repudiate the constellation of concepts required by thought, even if they are inexplicable. So, perhaps we should cultivate, as metaphysical dogmatists of a special kind, a faith in the basic concepts and relations required to maintain a minimally rational ontology; or as agnostic pragmatists we might choose to carry on thinking, calculating, and acting in the world, as though the more unavoidable concepts of our intentional existence were true of reality, while maintaining strict silence over whether or not this assumption or anything else were the case, instead turning our attention exclusively to the instrumental value of our practices and behaviour. But these are hardly the only methodological-existential approaches to the metaphysical problem of our intentional condition; and they both trade in a fallacy, which, it is worth noting, attracts scores of followers of theological dogma, and advocates of a less overtly metaphysical outlook, namely that our most basic and inexplicable view of the world is simple and ineffable.

This fallacy works on the basis of at least two assumptions: first, that an inexplicable concept or proposition is thereby ineffable; and second, that a basic concept must be simple. An alluring synergy exists between these assumptions. It is natural to assume that basic concepts are ultimately inexplicable. But the secondary associations – simplicity and ineffability – may not extend over all domains of reality. If we allow that an inexplicable concept *X*, say God or matter, is not nonsense or a pseudo-concept, we might think that it is inexplicable because it is simple. If *X* were not simple, perhaps our thinking goes, we would be afforded some discernible point of semantic or calculative leverage for at least the start of an explanation, which might arouse our suspicion that *X* is not really inexplicable. If a concept is basic, we might be tempted to think that it is ineffable, beyond its name; for if we were able to talk about or calculate its discernible parts or inner relations, or hypothesise and theorise about these, we might suspect that *X* is explicable, and hence not basic.

The logos is obviously basic if it grounds our intentional existence and the world, and possibly inexplicable on that count; the *infinitude* of the logos, as we have conceived it (as the source of the qualitative complexity revealed to us in the language-being relationship), implies an independent reason why it is inexplicable. If we conceive the logos as the ground of an array of irreducible and essentially interrelated intentional-semantic-alethic concepts and relations, it is not obvious that it is simple, or *simply* unified, and at least as likely that it is qualitatively complex, and fraught with the tensions of being, which our experience reveals to us, endlessly extended – in which case its complexity would suffice to render it inexplicable, but not ineffable.

Permanent silence is death, for the core of any value or outlook, and antithetical to the good of the intellect, which flourishes in historical circumstances that sustain a vibrant freedom of

thought and expression that encourages multiple collisions and reconfigurations of perspective. Were the logos ineffable, the concepts of truth and meaning, and all intentional concepts, would not only be inexplicable but senseless, in which case we would not be in a position to suppose, or even to entertain the possibility, that these concepts were true of meta-empirical reality; and we would not be able to make sense of the idea of our thought or language. Nor could we begin to make sense of a world that somehow produces thought, and which can in principle be understood. If we can affirm the relation of thought to the world, then the logos, as we have conceived it, is not ineffable. But unlike a reductive, quantitative model of reality that is to be confirmed or adjusted or rejected with theory-cancelling precision, our propositions about the logos represent, where they are approximately true, an approximation that points to an infinite and imprecise *expansion* of our basic understanding of intentional reality, or of the ground of our existence, as opposed to a *reduction* to ever more simple and certain concepts.

Our species is burdened by a ceaseless curiosity about the meaning of its experience – which naturally extends to the meaning of the world. It is quite natural that we should wish to leverage our curiosity about our experience to *the world*; our experience is sustained by the world, and is about the world, whatever the world might be, and never about the invisible, mysterious subject that always perceives something, but never itself. Further, the world is inexhaustible; so, the more we know, and enhance our facility to know, the more the world arouses our curiosity. These factors may partly explain the extraordinary energy with which we have invented and expanded our modes of inquiry and expression, linguistic and non-linguistic, well past the demands of utility, survival, and a will to dominate ourselves, and all things and creatures that we can exert mastery over. Yet, we generally spend no less energy suppressing our curiosity, and that of others, typically by attaching ourselves with myopic devotion to values and perspectives that would never cease to invite an expansion of their meaning were we to view them in a more open, slightly more curious spirit. Anxiety over some especially burdensome aspect of our curiosity might explain this somewhat schizophrenic attitude. Perhaps many of us simply wish to secure solid ground, certainty even, from or in spite of our aspiration to know the world, and to be able function amidst the inevitable proliferation of divergent worldviews, and relativistic threats to the stability of every outlook. Only science appears on our horizon with the means and a vision to address these conflicting motivations, and to satisfy the demands they make on our spiritual desire for cognitive growth and for existential stability, even though many of us sense that science is incompatible with the most vital areas of human understanding and represents one of the sources of instability in our conception of ourselves, and in our culture and society.

The pact that we who regard ourselves as more or less modern have made with science has procured for us unprecedented knowledge and power, and made even the least prepossessing members of our species seem as wondrous as demigods, in their external aspects. In the technologies we wield, and in our capacity to manipulate ourselves and to transform the face of the globe, we may fairly view ourselves as a race of lesser deities. But pacts that bring such sweeping benefits rarely come without a steep price, which is never made known in detail to all parties at the outset of the arrangement. We have already alluded to the price in our discussion. If we are true to our pact, we must eliminate from the centre of our worldview all non-scientific

beliefs, or regard these beliefs merely as useful fictions, which is a remarkably tricky, perhaps impossible, operation. All told, this bargain is fiendishly tricky; for it amounts to an agreement that we have struck with no one other than ourselves, and those among us who show any sign of apprehension about the terms of the arrangement appear to have concocted an unannounced codicil that, so far as I can tell, is unsustainable, and impossibly cynical. Its main clause involves the following prescription: that the more perspicacious among us should studiously avoid gazing into, or pretend not to notice, the abyss that now represents the centre of our being, viz. the core of our worldview – which consists of nothing, assuming that as we have actually managed to observe the spirit and the letter of this strange bargain. An option more faithful to our total experience of the world, and less radically imperiling of an intelligible, not to mention salutary, worldview, would be to repudiate the contract, and to regard the quantifiable features of the world that physics and other scientific disciplines reveal to us as only a pristine, narrow *image* of an infinitely more complex and inexplicable reality. Those of us who are apprehensive about treating this extraordinary image with insufficient respect can rest easy. For we can only make sense of the scientific image of the world if we repudiate its ultimate authority, and we can only make sense of the language-reality relationship by which we make sense of this image, and of our manifest image of reality, if we resurrect our metaphysical faith in the idea of the logos.

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Anscombe.

ⁱ E.g., “Self-consciousness achieves its satisfaction only in another self-consciousness” (*The Phenomenology of Mind*, page 110), i.e. “only in being acknowledged”/recognised (*Ibid.*, page 111).

ⁱⁱ *Enquiries*, L. A. Selby-Bigge, ed. (Oxford, Third Edition, 1975), page 165.

ⁱⁱⁱ If meaning is merely objective, in the sense that the rules of a game are objective, then it would not be able to anchor the word-world relationship that we attribute to meaningful words. Besides, objectivity represents a temporary ontological frame if we ultimately can find no basis for distinguishing between subject and object. The term ‘intersubjective’ is useful if we wish to avoid deeper problems, but assumes some facts about meaning and communication that are quite problematic, as I shall suggest below.

^{iv} I develop this thesis in several papers published by *Modern Horizons Journal*, e.g., in the June 2015, 2016, and 2017 editions.

^v In this passage, Nietzsche refers to the problem by way of Schopenhauer’s “terrifying” question: “*Has existence any meaning at all?*” Earlier in section 357, Nietzsche says that Schopenhauer’s “pessimism” as based in “the problem of the *value of existence*.” He immediately describes this problem as arising from a singular, related event: “the decline in the Christian god, the triumph of scientific atheism” (p.306). Nietzsche is clearly alluding to the problem of nihilism here, as he is when he uses the phrase “the problem of the value of existence” or asks whether existence has “any meaning at all.”

^{vi} In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche’s use of the phrase “scientific atheism” anticipates the current term “scientism” (section 357, page 306.)

^{vii} At the end of this section 244 (p 283) of *The Gay Science*, while discussing our “metaphysical faith upon which our faith in science rests,” Nietzsche suggests that this faith implicitly affirms “that truth is divine” and thereupon asks “what if this should become more and more incredible, if nothing should prove to be divine any more unless it were error, blindness, the lie – if God himself should prove to be our most enduring lie?”

^{viii} Dennett explains “the intentional stance” in many places, quite extensively in “Real Patterns,” *The Journal of Philosophy*, Volume 88, Issue 1 (Jan., 1991).

^{ix} I have in mind Donald Davidson’s Anomalous Monism, and Hilary Putnam’s functionalism, which he later abandoned. See, e.g., *The Many Faces of Realism* (1987); in that work, after rejecting functionalism (page 14), Putnam declares that “[t]he ‘intentional level’ is simply not reducible to the ‘computational level’ any more than it is to the ‘physical level’ (page 15). See also Chapter 5 of *Representation and Reality* (1988).

^x I use the idea of a methodological zeitgeist here in line with Hermann Broch’s critique of positivism, in his essay “The Spirit in an Unspiritual Age” (1934), one of the six essays of *Geist and Zeitgeist*. Broch remarks at one point on the spread of a nihilistic positivism into all areas of culture, including literature: “the circle of relative nihilism, which is the mark of positivism, and leads it toward mysticism, must appear in every other value-field, and thus in literature as well” (59). This insight, appearing in 1934, suggests how naïve, and precarious, it is to assume that

value can be systematically bracketed by the preeminent disciplines of inquiry into the real, without a clear understanding of how it is that the concept of value can remain a live concept, something that belongs to our view of reality.

^{xi} Hans-Georg Gadamer discusses these requirements for understanding novel or alien meaning in his landmark work *Truth and Method* (1960). His explanation of linguistic understanding, or more basically the structure of experience, emphasizes its historical dimension, for which he coined the term historically effected consciousness (*wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein*). In his essay on history in *Untimely Meditations*, Nietzsche discusses the existential risk involved in historical consciousness as such, insofar as it encourages “individuals, peoples, and cultures” to maintain endlessly open horizons, which, he implies, becomes a radically corrosive attitude before the endless influx of scientific views into our existing human view of the world. Gadamer, in my view, tries to sweep Nietzsche’s concern under the carpet, by characterizing his concern as merely directed at “historical study” (305), which, ironically, involves a spectacular act of forgetting of Nietzsche’s text.

^{xii} I borrow these phrases, and the skeletal argument for the non-natural source of our creative agency, from William Blake’s cryptic, poetic critique of empiricism and proto-analytic philosophy in “There is No Natural Religion [a & b].” See *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, David V. Erdman (Anchor, 1988), page 2.

^{xiii} Nietzsche uses this phrase to refer to the main stress points of new knowledge in the face of a dynamic, pressurising history.

^{xiv} We might construe Wittgenstein’s famous lion remark – “If a lion could talk, we could not understand him.” (PI, page 223e) – as a comment on the necessary connection of a language to a biologically-environmentally rooted form of life.

^{xv} E.g., at the beginning of Section VII, Part II of the first part of the *Enquiries*, L. A. Selby-Bigge, ed. (Oxford, Third Edition, 1975), pages 73-4; or Book I, Section XV of the *Treatise*, L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford, Second Edition, 1978), pages 173-6.