

Words From Nowhere - Limits of Criticism

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Thomas Nagel's musings on alien minds are of the most fascinating philosophical adventures the last decades. They are also of the most peculiar. One oddity is that the patterns of thought constituting his attack on materialism correspond to the patterns of thought constituting familiar forms of defence of materialism. Of course, there is no outright contradiction here, as there are different kinds of materialism involved. Still, it is striking how similar Nagel's "mental objectivity" is to "physical objectivity." At the bottom of both we find the same insistence that *there is something there*, although it might prove difficult to say what that "something" is.

The aim of this essay is to accentuate this analogy by comparing the thoughts expressed by Berkeley's Hylas with those of Nagel in his philosophy of bats and aliens. The comparison has a critical purpose, inasmuch as parts of Philonous' criticism of Hylas can also be targeted at Nagel. I will argue that Nagel's central claim comes down to statements or "statements" that are marked by a peculiar form of emptiness. In the final section, though, I will further argue that this kind of Wittgensteinian criticism has its limitations. Indeed, those limitations are what make it possible both to criticise Nagel for falling into emptiness and still acknowledge his speculations as of the most captivating philosophical pieces produced.

1. "The really real"

If Wittgenstein had never appeared on the scene, we would still have had the first of Berkeley's *Three Dialogues*. Philonous' disclosure of the emptiness of Hylas' idea of matter

resembles Wittgenstein's method to such a degree that Cora Diamond chose that text to exemplify what she saw as emblematic of Wittgenstein's philosophy.¹

In the *Three Dialogues*, Hylas alleges that the existence of something like "matter" or "material substance," which upholds our sensations but exists independently of them, is necessary to avoid scepticism, solipsism, and other philosophical catastrophes. By various questions and arguments, Philonous gets Hylas to admit that this idea of matter, despite being so natural to us when we do philosophy, is an illusion, though a quite peculiar form of illusion. Now Philonous is not asserting that matter does *not* exist. He does not claim that Hylas says anything false or improbable by asserting the existence of matter, nor that there is an outright mistake or fallacy in his reasoning. Rather, Hylas' illusion is one of *sense*. This criticism can be reconstructed as proceeding through two stages. First, Philonous brings Hylas to see that he is in the dark as to the meaning of "matter." Second, Philonous shows Hylas that he does not *need* this idea – the world is there all the same.

Hylas begins with the apparently intuitive idea that the "material substances" simply are the things we see around us: tables, trees, and apples. When Philonous asks for clarification, though, he is forced to strip off one feature after the other of his idea of matter. Pain and pleasure, heat and cold, taste and smell, colour and sound are all admitted to exist only "in the mind" and not to be part of the substances themselves. Then, by familiar arguments, Philonous shows that if secondary qualities are unreal, then so for the same reasons are primary qualities: figure, extension, motion, and solidity are only appearances, too. Matter must then be something radically distinct from sensible qualities altogether. Though already strapped in obscurity, forced to assert that sounds are only seen and that true colours cannot be seen, Hylas does not give in. There *must* be a substratum somehow lying

¹ In the first half of the following account of Berkeley, I follow Diamond (1991: 39-72). The *Three Dialogues* will be referred to as "TD" (Berkeley (1948)).

underneath appearances and supporting them – otherwise it will all fall to the ground – and if the world does not accord with this picture, then so much the worse for the world, and for us. Yet he confesses that the words “cause,” “underneath,” and “support” are not literally meant here, but he is unable to explain what he means by them. So he is left with an unknowable something, a pure being yet somehow in a corporeal dressing, and with a rather mystic job description.

Philonous’ arguments are not arguments against a position but questions designed to help Hylas specify what he means, although, of course, Philonous suspects what will ensue, as he has been down the same road of sense-regression himself. His arguments do not amount to reasons to believe that matter does not exist but suggestions as to what Hylas can and cannot *mean*. We have not come so far as to weigh reasons for or against anything; that project is dissolved in a crisis of meaning:

Phil. It is to me a sufficient reason not to believe the existence of anything, if I see no reason for believing it. But, not to insist on reasons for believing, you will not so much as let me know *what it is* you would have me believe; since you say you have no manner of notion of it (TD, p. 218).

In effect, Philonous says, “I don’t know what you mean,” and therefore he cannot as yet assert or deny the existence of “it.” Consequently, “matter does not exist” is equally empty, because it presupposes that we have some idea of what things would be like if there were such a thing, whereas this is what Philonous denies, and that is why he also denies that he is a sceptic. So the investigation does not end with a piece of knowledge about the metaphysical structure of the world, neither what it is nor what it lacks. Yet neither is its destination the Socratic knowing-that-one-does-not-know-anything about the metaphysical structure of the world. It ends, rather, in the realisation that one does not know what one means when one wants to speak about such a structure. In so far as such a structure is the

object of philosophy, this criticism is directed against philosophy as such, finding emptiness in its heart.

Yet the treatment of Hylas' fantasy does not end here. He is still obsessed about the idea that there *must* be something like matter, even if he does not know what it is or how to explain it. So Philonous must also show Hylas that no matter what matter is, there is no *need* for it. Like Wittgenstein, the philosophical work of Philonous has for its aim the mind's emancipation from imagined needs. To effect this conversion, Philonous reminds Hylas of our criteria for the concept of reality. For instance, if in a fit of fever I claim to see a horse flying by, then the others will deem me a victim of illusion. In this case, the criteria for distinguishing between reality and mere appearance are my state of health, coherence with natural laws, and other people's judgements. Philonous asks: how does "matter" come into these cases of distinguishing between reality and appearance?

Hylas does not know. Yet one thing is he certain of: our ordinary ways of distinguishing can only beg the question – the criteria we employ are irrelevant. Something can be an illusion even though all these criteria are fulfilled; indeed, that the criteria are fulfilled can itself be an illusion, as they are themselves based on appearances. We have no reason to think that everything is not an illusion as long as we are not able to show that there is something absolutely independent responsible for the real in what appear. The difference between the imagined horse and the real horse has nothing to do with our criteria but depends solely on the fact that the imagined horse is not caused or produced by the appropriate underlying matter. In other words, reality has, strictly speaking, nothing to do with how anything *looks*. Our ordinary ways of drawing distinctions are all too ordinary for the metaphysician, at best mere indicators of the really real lying underneath.

Yet this puts Hylas in a tight spot: matter must be radically distinct from our world if it is to be invulnerable to the all too common problems of distinguishing reality from

appearance, yet by making it radically distinct from our world, it cannot play a part in what we do. If it exists, whatever it is, we would still go on distinguishing reality from appearance in exactly the same ways that we are now. And if it does not exist, whatever it is, we would still be left with the same old criteria. So this X does not make any difference; it is entirely redundant: “In short, by whatever method you distinguish *things from chimeras* on your scheme, the same, it is evident, will hold also upon mine” (TD, p. 235).

However, the point is not that it does not matter “for practical purposes” whether matter exists but that we are not clear about what it is. If it cannot play any part in any distinction we use and care for, what is it? And how can it have anything to do with *our* concept of reality? As Philonous tells Hylas, “[you] pretend to believe you know not what and you know not why” (TD, p. 218). What then debars “matter” from actually being nothing, from being just a word? Nothing. Hylas admits, “I now clearly see it was a mere dream. There is nothing in it” (TD, p. 210).

According to Cora Diamond, Berkeley even gave a diagnosis of Hylas’ fantasy resembling Wittgenstein’s, namely, “a wrong idea of what it is for a term to be kept to a fixed meaning.”² Hylas proceeds in philosophy as though meaning were an atmosphere surrounding the word, so that “matter” means something definite even when dislocated from everything that makes it meaningful, as though he could make it meaningful by an act of pure will. “I clearly understand my own meaning,” he says, even though he cannot say anything about it, to which Philonous dryly replies, “I wish you could make me understand it too” (TD, p. 182). But *wanting* a word to mean something is no guarantee that it *will* mean anything. And in Hylas’ philosophizing, “matter” is floating free; it is nothing but a word; it seems to make sense but is not given any.

² Diamond (1991: 50-51).

Some features of Berkeley's text goes strangely unmentioned by Cora Diamond, though they seem to fit in well with her interpretation of Wittgenstein. One of them is important to avoid a misunderstanding of Philonous and Wittgenstein's method. Hylas' use of "matter" is not empty or misleading because it conflicts with common usage. Philonous is not arrogating himself to a linguistic God laying down requirements on what counts as meaningful but speaks as one speaker saying to another, "I don't know what you mean – please explain." To be sure, Philonous does refer to ordinary language, but then either to suggest possible interpretations of Hylas' words or to show that we do not in fact refer to matter to make the distinctions that Hylas wants to save. None of these strategies have the force to *prove* that Hylas' words are empty – nothing has that force. Hylas can use "matter" in any sense he likes, as long as he makes clear to us *which* sense: "I am not for imposing any sense on your words: you are at liberty to explain them as you please. Only, I beseech you, make me understand something by them" (TD, p. 199).

Of course, Philonous goes on to introduce God as the guarantee of ordinary things' continued existence when we turn away from them. To us that seems just as much a metaphysical fantasy as matter: an inconceivable something that somehow supports the existence of everything. Hylas wonders, "[If] you can conceive the mind of God, without having an idea of it, why may not I be allowed to conceive the existence of Matter, notwithstanding I have no idea of it?" (TD, p. 231). Philonous' answer is instructive, though, and reveals the difference between him and Hylas. He does not try to prove the existence of God but to show how the idea of God makes sense, and he does that by showing how God and his attributes are *natural extensions* of ordinary concepts.³ You do not have to use words as they are commonly used, but in order to show that you make sense where some other

³ It is fairly irrelevant here that we now find it hard to see how these ideas are supposed to be natural extensions of ordinary ones. It is no secret that what makes sense changes.

cannot see the sense, you have to show that your words, though perhaps unusual, are “natural extensions” of something the other already understands. Hylas’ dilemma, though, is that “matter” *must* be a natural extension of ordinary concepts if it is to make sense, yet at the same time *cannot* be such an extension if it is to be what Hylas needs, namely, something so radically detached from appearance that it is as invulnerable as God.

Important for the last part of this essay, and essential to the form of dialogue, is Berkeley’s emphasis on Hylas own admissions and acknowledgments. It is Hylas’ concessions more than Philonous’ arguments that move the dialogue forward. Not until Philonous is sure that Hylas is following him, does he continue. Accordingly, Philonous’ questions are not only directed against Hylas’ beliefs but also against his forces of resistance, the “peculiar repugnancy” he feels in the face of Philonous’ arguments (TD, p. 251). Constantly we find Hylas agreeing intellectually but still voicing reservations: “Nothing now remains to be overcome but a sort of unaccountable backwardness that I find in myself towards your notions” (TD, p. 256). Only when Hylas sees that there is no reason to feel that Philonous leaves us “nothing but the empty forms of things,” has he freed himself of his fantasy (TD, p. 244). So in philosophy a change of mind is not always sufficient.

2. “It certainly means something to ...”

From Hylas’ reflections on alien forms of matter we move onto Nagel’s related reflections on alien forms of mind.⁴ These famous but puzzling ideas on “what it is like” are crucial to Nagel’s rejection of physicalism and solipsism and to his picture of the place of subjectivity in an objective world, in particular the place of *human* subjectivity. Moreover, his idea of “mental objectivity,” the objective reality of subjectivity, combined with the claim that completely alien forms of life can have such subjectivity, shows us, he says, that there are

⁴ Nagel (1974;1986).

“things about the world that we couldn’t conceive,” a view he opposes to a “Wittgensteinian” position.⁵

“I assume we all believe that bats have experience,” writes Nagel.⁶ This is peculiar. Do we believe that bats have experience? Nagel does not doubt it; he says that we have “rich external evidence of conscious inner life” in bats.⁷ That idea of evidence, though, is spurious, because nothing would count as such evidence unless we were *already prepared* to treat the creature as conscious.⁸ If your response to a Japanese *tamagocchi* or a Schwarzeneggerian humanoid is already that of a response to a conscious being, then you will find plenty of “evidence” of conscious life: the way it cries, the way it talks, and the way it laughs. But if you are not prepared to treat it as conscious, then nothing it does will count as evidence of consciousness: whatever it does will at best be evidence of its being a good imitation of conscious life. Thus, the “evidence” does not function as evidence; it is not our way of getting from “mere behaviour” to “conscious life.” Now it does happen, as we shall see, that some event or experience can *make* me prepared to treat a being as conscious but that is not what Nagel has in mind. What does he have in mind?

Nothing. On its own, “Bats have experience” is as empty as “A rose has no teeth,” though that seems obviously true as well (PI, p. 222).⁹ As used by Nagel, it has only a façade of sense. In some specific story or situation, though, its meaning might be clear. A seasoned bat scientist may say, “They have experience, too, you know,” to his new assistant when he sees him handling the bats roughly and uncaringly. The same words might be said to a child torturing a bat. Or if I pricked a bat with a needle and it shrieked and shivered strangely, I

⁵ Nagel (1986: 106).

⁶ Nagel (1974: 438).

⁷ Nagel (1986: 23).

⁸ As I read it, that is one implication of Part I of *The Claim of Reason* (Cavell (1979)).

⁹ “PI” refers to Wittgenstein (2003).

suppose I would think, “He is in pain.” And if someone said in the spirit of Buber, staring into the eyes of a bat, “There is consciousness there,” I think I can understand what kind of experience could lead me to say the same thing.¹⁰

What we would say in this or that situation, though, feels irrelevant to Nagel, because bats can shake and shiver, and we can talk to them or pity them, and *still* they could lack the crucial “experience” that he is after. The “what it is like” is beyond all these things that we do and they do. Relying on examples as those above seems to Nagel to make the truth and meaning of “Bats have experience” dependent on *our* ways of seeing, speaking, acting, and reacting, and his point is that it is absolutely not thus dependent. So the expressions in the contexts above are at best indicators of the extraordinary truth that Nagel chases, the realism of subjectivity. He wants “Bats have experience” to have a deep and important meaning, but he does not want it to mean anything in particular, that is, he is not saying those words *in response to anything*, whether an experience or a situation. Nor is he trying to inform someone of something they did not know or did not know that they knew. He just wants it to be a naked fact, independent of all particular contexts and experiences. This “what it is like” is to be like Hylas’ matter, in relation to which the things we say and do, our criteria, are extraneous because they are based on *our* experience, *our* world.

Accordingly, the emptiness of Nagel’s central statement is not mendable, for it *cannot* be part of any story if it is to carry the philosophical burden he wants it to. That is why Nagel would feel that the examples above are nonphilosophical and that they do not touch the really deep issues, whereas I feel that spelling examples out in detail makes us see how natural the expression “have experience” and its cognates are in these contexts and how hollow Nagel’s “have experience” is when isolated from any such story. As though one could make the sounds “Bats have experience” or “Bats do not have experience” in splendid isolation from

¹⁰ This kind of experience will be important in the next section.

anything else about bats and experience, indeed, from our world *überhaupt*, and still have them mean something specific.

So much for bats. The emptiness in question is more palpable when we consider truly alien forms of life, say, from outer space. Nagel imagines that there may be creatures with completely different bodies and completely different perceptual systems where all of their senses are as unknown to us as the bat sonar. The “what it is like” of these creatures, he claims, may be as rich and as specific as ours but still unintelligible to us and indescribable “even in the most general experiential terms.”¹¹ One does not have to be a verificationist in order to be suspicious of this. If we actually met such creatures, how could we know that they were conscious? Nagel might reply: we could not know, because we have nothing to go on, but it is *possible*, it makes *sense* to say, “They are conscious.” So he thinks he can say those words *in total isolation* from all the criteria that normally surrounds the concept of consciousness: crying, thinking, loving, aching, and so on. I presume he would also claim that it makes sense, apart from any special situation, to say about something looking unmistakably like a stone, “It is conscious.” While I feel that it does not.

Nagel says that the aliens may have an “experiential life fully comparable in richness of detail to our own.”¹² One would think, though, that this is itself a specific and complex description that implicates a host of things about these creatures, so that their subjectivity is not indescribable after all. Thus it is as though Nagel really wants to say even *less* than this. A bare “something” is what he wants: “[We] know there’s something there, something perspectival, even if we don’t know what it is or even how to think about it.”¹³ And that is peculiar, as he admits himself: “Facts about what it is like to be an X are very peculiar, so

¹¹ Nagel (1974: 439-440).

¹² Nagel (1974: 440).

¹³ Nagel (1986: 21).

peculiar that some may be inclined to doubt their reality, or the significance of claims about them.”¹⁴ Yet few would deny their significance if they were not *made* peculiar, but instead fell naturally into some situation. However, Nagel does not make his statements in any such situation, and he cannot do so, for what these words would mean in some particular context is not what he wants them to mean. He wants a pure fact, unstained by the particulars of our lives; he wants the subjective equivalent of Hylas’ matter – a realism of interiority corresponding to realism about exteriority. This “realism,” though, ends in an evocation of some unknowable, indescribable, and unimaginable “something” that can just *be*, so that Nagel does to subjectivity what Hylas did to objectivity: mystifying it. By a dialectic somersault their realism becomes an ally of what it wants to combat, materialism and scepticism respectively. For if this something is nothing more than a something-I-cannot-know-what, what stops it from being a nothing?

Nagel tries to reassure us, or himself, that “it certainly means something to speculate that there are such creatures, and that they have minds.”¹⁵ But in order for it to mean something, it is not enough just to *say* it. Saying “X” and “X is meaningful” does not make X meaningful. Meaning must be made; words cannot do it on their own. Certainly, we can picture extremely strange creatures, like the one in John Carpenter’s *The Thing*, and think of them as “minded,” but that will not be what Nagel is looking for, because we would then picture them as feeling pain, having desires, and so on, and Nagel’s idea is of a subjectivity wholly distinct from *any specific* bodily and mental state. According to Kathleen Wider, this leads Nagel to operate with a too “thin” notion of consciousness, one to which he attaches too much significance and about which he says too little.¹⁶ This is not accidental, though, it is a

¹⁴ Nagel (1974: 437).

¹⁵ Nagel (1986: 24).

¹⁶ Wider (1990: 481).

result of his project. “What it is like” *must* be cut loose from everything else in order for it to fulfil its philosophical function. Accordingly, Nagel *cannot* say anything more than that it is a “what it is like,” because if “we” cannot say anything about it, nor can the philosopher. But do we know what “what it is like” means apart from what any specific state is like? I do not. That is why I think that Nagel’s notion of consciousness is not only thin; it is nothing.

Nagel seems to see the problem, because he tries to hide it with rhetorical tricks: “The fact that we cannot ... accommodate in our language a detailed description of Martian or bat phenomenology should not lead us to dismiss as meaningless the claim that bats and Martians have experiences.”¹⁷ Certainly, our inability to describe something *in detail* does not imply that it is meaningless to assert its existence, but who has ever maintained that? Later, Nagel says, “we can believe in the existence of facts ... whose exact nature we cannot possible conceive.”¹⁸ Once again, *of course* we can believe in the existence of facts whose *exact* nature we cannot understand – who is denying that? But what Nagel really means is that we can believe in the existence of facts whose nature we cannot conceive *at all*, and that is far from obvious. It seems to say, “I believe in a fact but I do not know what fact,” and what does that mean? Wittgenstein’s point is both simpler and harder: if we are said to be, by necessity, incapable of describing something, then we may wonder *what* it is we are incapable of describing. If a friend tells me, “I feel something strange, but I can’t explain what,” then perhaps I would understand, but here I have many things to go on: I know the man, the surroundings, and I know it is a strange *feeling* he is talking about. But if someone says about an alien creature not even looking like a creature that it “has something,” then we are left without a clue. Or, rather, as soon as we find a possible way of taking it, say, thinking of the alien in Ridley Scott’s *Alien* that it has some strange hunger or desire, then that is not what

¹⁷ Nagel (1974: 440).

¹⁸ Nagel (1974: 440).

Nagel needs, as we have here used the words “hunger” and “desire,” which is too specific to give us an example of a pure subjectivity.

In a sense, it is part of Nagel’s intention that these expressions are to be empty:

[To] deny the reality or logical significance of what we can never describe or understand is the crudest form of cognitive dissonance ... My realism about the subjective domain in all its forms implies a belief in the existence of facts beyond the reach of human concepts... We can be compelled to recognize the existence of such facts without being able to state or comprehend them.¹⁹

However, it is one thing to believe that there are things that we will never comprehend in the sense of understanding *why* they are as they are (that may be a religious belief), it is quite another to say that there are *unintelligible* facts and then go on *stating one*. For if the fact is unintelligible, how can we know that it is a fact, and what fact it is? Or perhaps Nagel does not really mean “unintelligible”? In fact, when he says that “It has experience” said about bats or aliens is unintelligible (but true), he only seems to mean that we cannot *picture* what it says (see it for our mind’s eye) or that we do not know *how* it is true (its causal mechanisms).²⁰ This first sense is operative when he later says, “A being of total imaginative flexibility could project himself directly into every possible subjective point of view.”²¹ So the existence of alien minds is not strictly but only psychologically inconceivable: if we had other senses or a better imagination, then it would be conceivable. The real problem with his “speculations,” though, is that they are inconceivable in a stronger sense. Nagel thinks that it is only unimaginable what it is like to *be* conscious this way, while I cannot imagine what he means at all by “conscious,” as he does not mean any of the things we normally connect with

¹⁹ Nagel (1974: 440-441).

²⁰ Nagel (1974: 446).

²¹ Nagel (1986: 17).

consciousness. The problem is not that we cannot see *it* in front of our mind's eye but that we do not know what would count as *it*. So even a perfect imagination would not know what to imagine.

Like Hylas, Nagel believes that those who doubt the significance of his central claims do so because the claims deviate from the ordinary uses of the words involved. Yet that was not Philonous' ground for suspicion against Hylas' utterances, nor was it Wittgenstein's way of criticising philosophical moves. What Philonous says to Hylas, and Wittgenstein to his interlocutor, is this: use the words in any way you like as long as you do *use* them, that is, make them *do* something, so that I can understand what you are saying. Hence, the problem with Nagel is not that his "attempted generalisation of the concept of mind takes us away from *the* conditions that make the concept meaningful."²² It is, rather, that he takes us away from *any* conditions. In his reply to Wittgensteinian criticism, Nagel says, "We have not simply left [our ordinary pre-philosophical concept of experience] behind and taken off with the *word*."²³ Yet he *has* taken off with the word, though not *because* he has left ordinary uses behind (it is rather the other way around) but because his words have left any ground against which the friction necessary for meaning could have been produced.

Nagel says about the alien mind that we are "unable to grasp it except in the abstract, as we are presumably unable to grasp now concepts of objective physical reality which will be developed five centuries hence."²⁴ In other words, that a statement is unintelligible to us now does not imply that it is empty, as we may come to understand it "five centuries hence." This is peculiar, for how do we know the relation between the statement said now and the statement said in five centuries? If we were explained *which* concepts we are unable to grasp,

²² Nagel (1986: 22, emphasis added).

²³ Nagel (1986: 24).

²⁴ Nagel (1986: 21).

then we would perhaps be able to grasp them. But if we are not told which concepts we are unable to grasp, then we are not merely *unable* to grasp them, because we simply do not know what we are talking about. It is like being told that you are unable to play Z, where “Z” has not been given any meaning. And asserting that “I am unable to play Z” is empty is *not* to assert that I am able to play all possible games or instruments or whatever it is we are supposed to be unable to play. If a string of words M (“mental events are physical events”) is unintelligible, then, of course, that string may become meaningful and perhaps true, although that future meaning and truth might have nothing to do with what we call “mental events” and “physical events” today.²⁵ Yet Nagel seems to want to say that the future meaning of M is the meaning M would have had for us today if we could only understand its meaning – and *that* is nonsense. We have no way of assessing whether M-in-the-future has the same or a different meaning from M, as we do not know what M (or M-in-the-future) means, as Nagel himself says, though he does not seem to mean it, as he does seem to know what it means after all.

Thomas Nagel’s idea of “the view from nowhere,” describing the world in terms of properties available to all beings, is an idea implicit in parts of natural science. Considered as a regulative idea of science, it is in no way a metaphysical fantasy. Considered as a regulative idea of philosophy, though, it is converted into a machine for producing emptiness. For it is one thing to describe the world by concepts that not only humans can understand; it is quite another thing for a human being, even a philosopher, to want to describe the world without the use of human concepts altogether, as though one wanted to use language to speak outside language, to use words to get between the words and the world (cf. PI, §245). So in the hands of the philosopher, the idea or ideal of overcoming the human becomes an overcoming of

²⁵ “Mental events are physical events” is Nagel’s example of a sentence that we are unable to understand now but that may become true and meaningful in the future Nagel (1974: 447).

meaning. You are a human being; you must speak a human language – why does that feel as a prison?

3. The Limits of Criticism

Wittgenstein did have an unprecedented sense for both emptiness and its attractions.

Nevertheless, I do not think that Wittgenstein held every single word uttered in philosophy hitherto, from Athens to Cambridge, for empty. Yet neither is this kind of emptiness an occasional mistake, easily avoided by the bright and alert, like a fallacy. When we trace the logical history of problems and positions back to their sources, we reach the utterances that Wittgenstein was interested in and that he found to be oddly empty, despite or perhaps because of how they are said in a strained voice that suggests an almost inarticulate depth: “This table is *really* real,” “There *must* be something underneath,” or “There is *something* inside.” As I see it, many philosophical problems are constituted by such fantasies, and the most characteristic movements in philosophy derive from them.

A certain idea of rethinking everything from the start is typical of philosophy, and that is why both scepticism and emptiness is also typical of philosophy. The wish to be born again, to remove oneself from everything stained by empirical life, develops into a desire for an *absolute* point of view, a view from nowhere, leading to the kind of empty striving that Wittgenstein felt so acutely. When we philosophise, we tend to take up a position that drives us into emptiness. In that non-place, words are detached from the voice, upon which words are emptied and the voice silenced.

Some philosophers will find this form of criticism depressing. It is as though the disclosing of emptiness itself leaves nothing but emptiness in its wake, as though Wittgensteinian criticism robs us of everything that is deep and important (PI, §118). And even if we reply that it was only castles of air that the criticism destroyed, that does not stamp out the impression that the ground has been cut from under our feet or that we are back at

ground zero, which pretty much comes down to the same thing. So the question remains: is this all? Is this the end? What remains of philosophy *after* the Wittgensteinian destruction of “Luftgebäude”? What may arise out of the ruins left behind? Nothing?

Seen from the perspective of philosophical education, the Wittgensteinian criticism is, even though it might not have been for Wittgenstein himself, a preparation, though perhaps an endless one. It is an ending that clears the ground for a new beginning. What appears when one clears the ground is not the voice from nowhere, the voice of God, which can only hear babble in the voice of man but which in the mouth of man can itself only result in babble. Rather, when the ground has been cleared of the desire to speak from nowhere, a philosophy closer to the ground can appear, a philosophy that knows that the ground, the earth, is necessary to the friction necessary to sense. What that amounts to is a voice that do not seek to escape from the world, but that emerges from its midst.

I shall now suggest that something is left untouched, though prepared for, by the Wittgensteinian criticism, namely, the genuine philosophical expression. Yet these expressions do not amount to the foundations of new philosophical buildings. In so far as they are used as building blocks for theories or systems, they will only too easily be mythologised to the point where a new criticism, a new demythologising, must come forward. Perhaps we must accept that they are best preserved as ruins, as fragments of our experience.

The limits of Wittgensteinian philosophical criticism are comparable to the limits of aesthetic criticism. What Kant famously said about aesthetics goes for this region of philosophy, too, though not for all things said in philosophy.

If any one reads me his poem, or brings me to a play, which, all said and done, fails to commend itself to my taste, then let him adduce Batteux or Lessing, or still older and more famous critics of taste, with all the host of rules laid down by them, as a proof of the beauty of his poem; let certain passages particularly displeasing to me accord completely with the rules of beauty (as set out by these critics and universally

recognized): I stop my ears: I do not want to hear any reasons or any arguing about the matter. I would prefer to suppose that those rules of the critics were at fault, or at least have no application, than to allow my judgement to be determined by a priori proof.²⁶

What this passage gets clearly in view is the experience-dependency of aesthetic judgements. It comes, though, at the cost of making them irrational. *Of course* reasons and arguments may influence me. To stop one's ears is sometimes to be not only dogmatic but egomaniac, and to the extent that Kant excludes the possibility of talking about taste, then to that extent he is wrong. Nevertheless, what Kant says is true in the end. The aesthetic judgement is based on experience, and in order to be valid, the criticism must change that experience. The same goes for the kind of philosophical criticism in question here. If anyone adduced Wittgenstein, or "still older and more famous" critical philosophers, with "all the host of rules" about what is intelligible and not, I come to a certain point where "I stop my ears." Their arguments do not touch me any longer. I would "prefer to suppose that those rules of the critics were at fault" rather than giving up my ... what? What is left untouched by the criticism? What remains after the Wittgensteinian destruction? What is the philosophical analogue to aesthetic experience? Is there something we might call philosophical experience?

In an otherwise fine paper, Edward Witherspoon runs up against the same limitations of Wittgensteinian philosophical criticism. After expounding Cavell's criticism of scepticism and diagnosing the emptiness in scepticism as a result of wanting to speak about the world as an object to which we have a relation, he acknowledges that some of these utterances, may continue to attract us even after criticism has done its work. He says the following, which I quote at length because of its manifold of wrong responses to his own insights:

Yet the words 'How am I related to the world?'" continue to fascinate our philosophical imagination. The line of thought I have sketched would conclude that

²⁶ Kant (1952: §33); Kant (1902: 5:284).

there is only an illusion of sense in them... (for the notion of a relation between me and the world treats the world as an object, as one relatum among others, and there is no sense to be made of the world as an object.)... At the same time, it seems unacceptable to conclude that there is nothing that I am asking when I utter those words. Here the philosopher's task is to examine the occasions that elicit such an expression, to find what calls forth these words, and to try to find a more fitting expression for whatever that turns out to be. I speculate that the origin of these words is a sense of being not at home, of being disoriented. If this is the predicament that elicits these words, the speaker will not be helped by alluding to supposedly fundamental but unassertible propositions that constitute a framework of meaningfulness ... I don't know that philosophers have discovered how to express this disorientation ... (without invoking the world conceived as an object) ...; but perhaps what is called for in such a case is not philosophy, but prayer or poetry.²⁷

Witherspoon condemns certain interpretations of Cavell (and of Wittgenstein) for relying on the idea of a framework of unassailable framework propositions, an idea not found in Cavell (nor in Wittgenstein), and he thinks that there is a hint of Carnapian positivism left in such interpretations. Yet the above quote makes one wonder if there is not a hint of positivism left in Witherspoon as well. Once again we come up against the old idea that if something shows up in philosophy that seems strange or inscrutable but that we cannot quite bring ourselves to dismiss outright as nonsense, then it must be condemned to poetry or religion. Yet why cannot the expression of an experience of not being at home in the world be part of philosophy? Why cannot a philosophical exchange be a way of articulating and reflecting upon such experiences? They have been part of philosophy in the past, though perhaps we find it hard to see that today. In my view, philosophy has a distinct way of taking up such experiences, different from poetry, religion, or psychology. And even if it is admitted that such experiences really are strange, does that mean that they are unimportant? Moreover, does it mean that they really have to mean something else than what they say? Indeed, the only task

²⁷ Witherspoon (2002: 206-207).

that Witherspoon leaves to the philosopher with regard to such expressions is that she should try and find more fitting ways of expressing them. But in that case we may find out that the question “How I am related to the world?” simply *is* the most fitting way of expressing it. And if it *is* exactly the right expression and if the experience *is* essential to me, then I would rather sacrifice the Wittgensteinian criticism than the experience, and even more so if the expression resonates in others. Perhaps I would feel that whether we call it “nonsense” or not is less important than the experience itself. Perhaps I am more prepared to doubt a particular view of meaning or nonsense than the experience.²⁸

What have now come to the fore is that certain expressions, though empty fantasies taken in one way, namely, as objective or absolute statements, can be important and important to philosophy taken in another way, namely, as expressions of experience, that is, as analogies to aesthetic judgements (whether a certain statement is meant as the one or the other is often only heard from *how* it is said). Put differently, some philosophical statements are not understandable at all as objective theses, yet philosophical fantasies may have aesthetic counterparts immune to Wittgensteinian criticism. In fact, there are examples of philosophical experiences that can be expressed by exactly the same words as those involved in the fantasies of Hylas and Nagel.

There can be no doubt that Hylas’ claim about matter was at first a thesis or a theory. He did not intend it as an expression of experience. However, the fierce resistance he puts up against Philonous’ criticism shows that something more or else is at stake for him. Hylas being a literary figure, we are free to imagine what that stake is. To me, he appears to be afraid of something he suspects is the case, namely, that the world is, as it were, *flat*. Such a picture of the world is what he detects in Philonous’ words, and Philonous’ job is to show that no such picture *is* suggested by the denial of matter, that there is no reason to let matter,

²⁸ This is a central point in Williams (1996).

whether the acceptance or the denial of it, hypnotise us into a certain experience of the world, be it the world's depth or its flatness.

Imagine, though, that Hylas had responded to Philonous' criticism like this: "Well, your analysis has convinced me that philosophical realism comes down to nothing; yet I am still inclined to say, though I do not know what relation it bears to the philosophical positions of realism and scepticism, that it is as though something unspeakable and unreachable lies underneath every object we meet in this world." If so, Philonous would in the end either have to hold his hands up or to take the conversation into a quite different region. That region is now usually expelled from philosophy, but it is sometimes entered into by literature, which has, therefore, inherited a part of what used to belong to philosophy.

In Proust's *Combray*, for example, there is a striking expression of an experience that one may sense at certain locations in the history of philosophy, as in Berkeley's *Dialogues*:

[Suddenly] a roof, a gleam of sunlight reflected from a stone, the smell of a road would make me stop still, to enjoy the special pleasure that each of them gave me, and also because they appeared to be concealing, beneath what my eyes could see, something which they invited me to approach and seize from them, but which, despite all my efforts, I never managed to discover. As I felt that the mysterious object was to be found in them, I would stand there in front of them, motionless, gazing, breathing, endeavouring to penetrate with my mind beyond the thing seen or smelt.²⁹

In ascertaining and noting the shape of [the spires of the twin steeples of Martinville], the changes of aspect, the sunny warmth of their surfaces, I felt that I was not penetrating to the full depth of my impression, that something more lay behind that mobility, that luminosity, something which they seemed at once to contain and to conceal.³⁰

²⁹ Proust (1934: 138)

³⁰ Proust (1934: 140).

Marcel is here struck by how each thing has an imponderable core that the mind can at best only glimpse. Adorno, whose lectures on *Kritik der Reinen Vernunft* are one of the few places where the category of philosophical experience is thematised, found a similar experience in or underneath the philosophy of Kant.

Adorno says about the teaching of philosophy, “The formulae to which philosophies are commonly reduced tend to reify the actual writing, to sum them up in a rigid fashion and thus to make a genuine interaction with them harder” (p. 2).³¹ As a counter-movement, he proposes the following:

What I should like is to make this book speak to us. I should like to show you what interest the matters that are discussed in it can still hold for us today. And I should like to rehearse the experiences that underlie this work as objective realities, as experiences forming an essential part of the history of philosophy ... I shall do this ... as a kind of transcript of the intellectual experiences that lie behind them (p. 4).

One such experience is that of *duplication*, by which Adorno is referring to *Das Ding-an-sich*. It is what Nietzsche pointed to when he termed Kant a *Hinterweltler*, “someone who supposes that behind the world of our experience there lies a second world even though we know nothing whatever of this second, other world” (p. 109). Adorno specifies it as an experience of a *block*, the sense that the more we know of this world, “the more obscure and the more threatening the Absolute, of which we know that this world of experience is only a detail, becomes” (p. 111). The analogy to the experience expressed by Proust becomes clear when Adorno adds that the block is the sense of “an entirely undefined, obscure and, if you like, demonic world as a world ‘behind’ our own world, even though we have no way of knowing how it relates to the world of experience that we inhabit” (p. 111). Later, Adorno equates this “metaphysical mourning” with “the underlying feeling that while we are putting out or nets

³¹ The references in this paragraph are all to Adorno (2001).

and catching more and more things in them, there is a sense in which nature itself seems to keep receding from us” (p. 176).

Although Nagel wants his thesis about the possible and impossible mindedness of alien creatures to be strictly separated from everything we say and do, let alone what we feel and suffer, he does occasionally refer to certain experiences where such a thought may force itself on us: “[Anyone] who has spent some time in an enclosed space with an excited bat knows what it is to encounter a fundamentally *alien* form of life.”³² Likewise, I think I can understand what someone meant who said, while staring into the eyes of a bat, “There is mind there” or “Now I know what otherness means.” Martin Buber famously claimed to have had such an insight from the experience of stroking the neck of a horse.³³

However, there is a great difference between using the words “There is mind there” as a philosophical thesis and using them as the expression of an experience. The two might even be in conflict. I may, philosophically or scientifically, be of the opinion that bats are not minded, yet still be unable to kill or mistreat it, because I cannot escape the sense that it would suffer. Conversely, I may hold the thesis that bats are minded, perhaps for philosophical reasons, but still be unable to have any *sense* of them as such, so that I simply do not *care* how they are treated – when I look into their eyes, I see nothing.

The Norwegian philosopher Arne Næss relates a related story.

My term “identification” comes, I think, from a particular experience, when I was looking through a microscope down on a little chemical transformation in a drop of acid, probably; then, a flea from a lemon [*sic!*] that was also on my table but was not joining in my experiments jumped from the lemon onto the microscope and got too near to the drop and was caught. As you know, the force on the surface of the drop is too strong, and I had this terrible experience: It was like being trapped in an enormous

³² Nagel (1974: 438).

³³ Buber (2002: 26-27).

chewing gum or something. And I knew it was impossible to save him, but instead of giving up the experiment and killing the flea fast, I was absorbed in looking at it, the movement of the legs, and its fight was so like a human being hit by something, fighting for life. I saw it completely as a human death-fight; there was no difference. I know that their nervous system is irrelevant in this case, but the identification was very strong, and it made me not want to give up a formulation like, "All life is one."³⁴

For Næss, this experience is connected to a (Spinozistic) notion of an expanded self, which may culminate in experiences expressed by phrases like, "All life is one," "I am a part of the world," or even "All is one." Is it at all possible to understand such expressions as *theses*? Is it at all possible to disagree with them? If one disagrees here, I presume, it can only be because one is unable to recognise the experience beneath. Indeed, I am unable to see such expressions as at all meaningful without having had myself the experiences they belong to, or at least imagining myself how it would be to have them. Only then can one use the words "All is one" or "I am a part of this world" in the heightened sense that is necessary for them to be expressions of deep insights rather than trivialities on the brink of emptiness.

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³⁴ As told by Arne Næss in a book of interviews with David Rothenberg (Rothenberg (1993: 178-179)). The Norwegian version has "lemen" ("lemming"), not "sitron" ("lemon"), so the finer details of this experience are somewhat unclear (Rothenberg (1992: 270-271)).

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