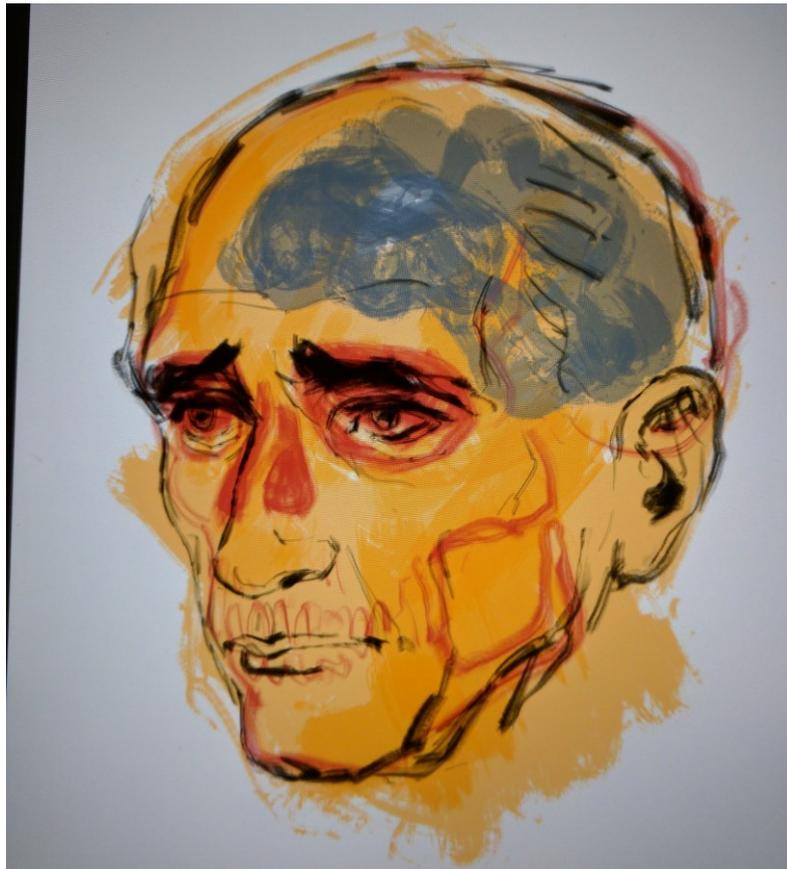


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The Kantian Catastrophe?
Anthony Morgan

Philosophy and Suffering
Nicky Brignell

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The Philosopher

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Editorial

In *To the Lighthouse*, Virginia Woolf pokes fun at philosophers. Her targets were the home-grown philosophers she met in Russell Square and on the banks of the Cam, not the phenomenologists on whom they poured scorn. She describes Mrs Ramsey thinking about her husband's work: *Whenever she 'thought of his work' she always saw clearly before her a large kitchen table. It was Andrew's doing. She asked him what his father's books were about. 'Subject and object and the nature of reality' Andrew had said. And when she said Heavens she had no notion what that meant. 'Think of a kitchen table then,' he told her, 'when you're not there' ... Naturally if one's days were passed in this seeing of angular essences, this reducing of lovely evenings, with all their flamingo clouds and blue and silver to a white deal four-legged table (and it was the mark of the finest minds so to do) naturally one could not be judged as an ordinary person.*

The philosophy of the last hundred years has seen the discipline pared down to a narrow range of topics - not as bad now as it used to be. There was more than a trace of UKIP about the British Positivists of the Thirties. They wanted to get control of their borders and laid down stringent criteria for belonging within them. They set up checkpoints to lookout for metaphysical migrants who might sneak across the border on the back of a French or Austrian lorry. They thought that they represented the way 'real people' think when they are not hoodwinked by foreign 'experts'.

But we should not think of our philosophical tradition as a closed domain, like a country. For a start it immediately generates a paradox: to talk about borders at all, as Wittgenstein says - admittedly in a different, but not entirely unrelated, context - *'we should have to find both sides of the limit thinkable'*.

Some leading English-speaking philosophers are making real connections with the tradition of thinking which we call (unhelpfully) 'Continental Philosophy'. The Society is doing something to contribute. The Alnmouth Workshop this year was devoted to Heideggerian themes. And we are planning a day school to explore French philosophy next year.

One development that ought to recommend itself to everyone is the extension of philosophical interest beyond 'the subject and the object' to include a wider range of personal experiences. We are energetic animals, always at the world, in a developing variety of ways; and the world is an intrusive world, always pressing on us, as opportunity, threat, comfort and challenge.

We could be more open about the style, as well as the subject-matter, of philosophical reflection. One philosopher's carefully honed terminology is another's irritating jargon. We should be generous in accommodating the dramas and extravagances, even the oxymorons of philosophers who try to express the *'receptive creativity'* of our interrelationship with the world. All philosophers are in rhetorical glasshouses and they should not throw stones.

The Kantian Catastrophe? - Anthony Morgan

Immanuel Kant, the most influential philosopher of the modern age, transformed our entire conception of philosophy. His radical reframing of philosophical questions placed the finitude of the human subject at the centre of philosophical enquiry and, at the same time, left reality in itself forever inaccessible. His impact was to restrict metaphysical pretensions and even to induce real despair. Famously the poet Heinrich von Kleist committed suicide in part due to the profound rupture induced by Kant's 'Copernican revolution', writing that "my one, my highest goal has sunk from sight, and I have no other"; and, more recently, the French philosopher Quentin Meillassoux has referred to it as "the Kantian catastrophe". Both of them are picking up in different ways on Kant's legacy of finitude, so in this paper I hope to say something about this ripple effect of our Kantian inheritance leading from Kleist's despair to Meillassoux's catastrophe.

This paper also offers me a very welcome opportunity to produce a tentative conclusion to a collection of interviews with philosophers that I have been working on for the past year, and that has recently been published by the Newcastle-based publisher Bigg Books as *The Kantian Catastrophe? Conversations on Finitude and the Limits of Philosophy*. Following Meillassoux's influential critique of Kant in his 2008 book *After Finitude*, I was intrigued by the fact that Kant seemed to have emerged as the principal villain for a new generation of continental thinkers keen to give the 'Real' its due after a 250 year eclipse under Kant and the endless permutations of his transcendental stranglehold. Kant's so-called 'Copernican Revolution' seemed to have replaced Descartes' separation of mind from body (the Cartesian catastrophe?) as the original sin of modernity. The principal aim of the book was to explore this doctrine of finitude that arose with Kant and has subsequently been transformed and mutated (but never overcome – until Meillassoux?) by thinkers like Husserl, Heidegger, Foucault, and Nancy.

In light of the responses that emerged from the contributors to *The Kantian Catastrophe?*, I will consider three prominent charges that have been levelled against Kant in some detail, as well as a few others - in no detail at all.

Charge 1: Kant's transcendental framework is inescapable. Try as you might, you can't break out. You're trapped.

For Slavoj Žižek, 'philosophy AS SUCH begins with Kant, with his transcendental turn.'¹ This sense that Kant not only inaugurated the modern era of philosophy but that his framework is inescapable was echoed by a number of contributors to the book. For example, Stella Sandford noted that "even where contemporary philosophers pit themselves against [Kant] it is often the Kantian paradigm with which they have to contend," while Ray Brassier suggested that the Copernican revolution was "certainly a radical transformation, perhaps the most momentous in philosophy since Aristotle. For philosophical modernity, there is a before and after Kant, just as there is a before and after Aristotle for ancient philosophy."

How to go beyond Kant, to a *truly* post-Kantian philosophy (i.e. a post-Kantian philosophy that suggests overcoming or abandonment rather than inheritance and faithfulness) without regressing to pre-Kantian rationalist dogmatism or empiricist scepticism? One option would be to prioritise speculative metaphysics over epistemology. This would appear to be the route taken by contributors like Tom Sparrow and Graham Harman. Sparrow, for example, feels that the prominent recent movement called Speculative Realism has "turned away from the obsession with the limits of knowledge and related Kantian concerns, and unapologetically focused its efforts on producing thinking about objects and the reality of objects, in every

sense that ‘reality’ can be taken in this context,” while Harman, in discussing his influential object-oriented ontology (OOO), suggests that the finitude that Kant attributes to humans is in fact a feature of *all* objects and all relations between objects. As he puts it, “finitude is not rooted in *consciousness*, but in any *relation* whatsoever. In any relation between any two things, there is no direct contact between them, since everything is just as finite as humans are.”

Harman’s wish to move away from the focus on the correlation between mind and world that has seemed unavoidable since Kant (with modern inflections including phenomenology (Husserl’s noesis-noema correlation), philosophy of language (the language-referent correlation), as well as other variants on this theme such as Heidegger’s Dasein-Sein correlation) highlights a second sense of what it may mean to be ‘trapped’ within Kant’s framework. To come back to Meillassoux, in *After Finitude* we find interspersed amongst his more traditionally philosophical objections to Kant a far more emotive idiom at play, one built around the theme of *entrapment*. For Meillassoux, the post-Kantian outside (i.e. outside of our heads) induces “a strange feeling of imprisonment or enclosure”; it is “a cloistered outside, an outside in which one may legitimately feel incarcerated” such that “we do not transcend ourselves very much by plunging into such a world.” Similarly, in a number of the interviews I had with him, Harman often has the feel of a latter-day Timothy Leary when discussing the liberating force of his conversion from Heidegger and phenomenology to full-blown realism. The post-Kantian lament would appear to take the form: *I’m a philosopher, get me out of here!*

But of course the Kantian retort to the kinds of frameworks developed by Sparrow and Harman would be something like: “Ok, the ball’s in your court. You give us the epistemology necessary to assure us that the kinds of claims you want to make are well-founded.” In the final interview for the collection, Ray Brassier highlights this risk of engaging in a speculative metaphysics wholly divorced from any epistemological concerns:

[M]etaphysics without epistemology is blind. This is not to disavow metaphysics but just to insist that it can’t be seriously undertaken without paying attention to epistemology. Many realists insist that metaphysical issues are independent of and irreducible to epistemological issues and conclude that metaphysics cannot be epistemologically corralled. I agree. But that metaphysics is irreducible to epistemology does not entail that it can be undertaken with complete disregard for epistemology.

Of course, much of this talk of the inescapability of Kant would seem a bit baffling in analytic circles in which the Kantian transcendental bullet has never been very firmly bitten (although the idea so widely defended within analytical circles that the natural sciences are epistemically self-supporting and don’t require any *a priori* validation is, of course, open to dispute, not least from Kantians), but as the focus of my book was primarily around Kant’s transcendental philosophy and the doctrine of finitude that has emerged within so-called ‘continental’ philosophy (and indeed is seen by many as the very guarantor of its identity), this charge is a crucial one. Meillassoux strove to break free, and has inspired many in the process, but a decade on from *After Finitude* it seems that few have joined forces with him in breaking out of this ‘Matrix’ of philosophical modernity. Kant’s transcendental, as Catherine Malabou concludes in her contribution to the volume, “persists only because of the impossibility of doing without it.”

Verdict: Guilty as charged within continental circles; not guilty within analytic circles.

Charge 2: Kant was the great 1) deflator of objectivity and 2) curtailer of metaphysical ambitions.

Kant has emerged as the great setter of limits to philosophical enquiry. We are not Gods or creators of the reality we inhabit, but are rather finite and receptive beings who are only able to be receptive to reality *at all* because of the categories of mind that Kant identifies, including time and space. And because of these categories, we can only ever be presented with things as they appear to us rather than as they are in themselves. And because of this, our metaphysical ambitions, for example to be able to speak (as Gods) about God, must be significantly curtailed.

We are, in short, far more limited than we had thought.

But where there are limits there are those who wish to kick against them. Hence someone like Alain Badiou who claims to be “exasperated” by Kant’s legalism and his critical machinery which “loves nothing more than to rap the knuckles of the overambitious”, i.e. those who would cross the limits stipulated by Kant. One senses, however, that thinkers like Badiou *need* the likes of Kant to set limits in order to experience the pleasure of transgressing them, like Graham Greene whose conversion to Catholicism gave his propensity to sin a new lease of life.

But what has Kant *actually* denied us? Stephen Mulhall suggests that we can hear Kant’s prohibition of transcendent (not transcendental...) metaphysics in two ways: 1) as depriving us of something, i.e. transcendent knowledge of reality in itself, or 2) as saying that there is *no such thing* as a transcendent field of knowledge, and hence not depriving us of anything. Here Mulhall distinguishes between limits and limitations:

The idea of a limitation presupposes something beyond that at least it makes sense to talk about or imagine being an object of knowledge, whereas if you think about them as limits what you’re basically saying is that there isn’t a beyond.

And yet Mulhall acknowledges that “no matter how many times you convince yourself philosophically that these are limits and not limitations, you end up beating your head against them.”

The kind of realism – empirical realism – that Kant secured through his transcendental idealism may not seem enough to those of a metaphysical realist orientation (like Meillassoux) who strive for *the great outdoors*, or Kleist with his lament that his highest goal has sunk from sight, but in many ways the role of the contemporary philosopher is to persuade us to accept that which we don’t want, to let go of our “melancholia of the lost object” (Graham Harman’s phrase). Consider, for example, the question of free will over which philosophers increasingly request that we trade in our inflated desires for self-ownership or absolute freedom for a more reasonable disenchanted-but-grown-up position.

But what do this cluster of sundered philosophical ambitions – the infinite, the eternal, the immortal, the noumenal etc. – even mean? What work are they doing, philosophically speaking? What would it mean to *strive* for the infinite? Is this not the terrain of the mystic or the sage? What can it mean for the philosopher? A temporary release? A frisson of excitement, soon to fade? The *jouissance* of pure self-negation? Beyond an obvious *fascination* with the idea of infinite – infinite time, infinite space etc. (what A.W. Moore refers to in his interview as ‘the mathematical infinite’) – it seems that the infinite can also serve *motivational* goals, especially in the realm of ethics (e.g. Levinas) and politics (e.g. Badiou), as well as its traditionally religiously inflected soteriological goals. In this sense, the

infinite is not simply all that is (beyond the finitude of us humans) but rather all that is *possible*, the concept *par excellence* that will push our finitude to its limits. Hence we can envision a reimagining of these related concepts stripped free of their historical transcendent baggage and grounded in the immanent potentiality of the human subject. As an example, Bruno Bosteels, another contributor to the collection, describes immortality as “the nature of a subject capable of sustaining, without transcendence, the eternalizing powers of the infinite.”²

With the question of objectivity, we find following Kant a similar demand for lowering expectations as we have found with regard to metaphysical ambitions. After all, the critic of Kant will argue, if objectivity is only secured via subjectivity is this not a rather thin conception of objectivity? Stella Sandford comments on this line of critique:

This over-inflated sense of objectivity demands that there be absolutely no contribution from the knowing subject, or presumes that any contribution from the subject can only be a distorting one. Doesn't this position want to separate knowledge from the human completely? I think that Kant would think that this is ... a science for gods. One of the greatest challenges of the *Critique of Pure Reason* is that it asks us to rethink what we mean by 'objectivity'.

But, as Sandford continues, through bringing subjectivity into objectivity Kant forces us to rethink what we mean by subjectivity:

'Subjectivity' no longer means the variable or even fickle contribution of the particular individual that messes up the possibility of objective knowledge. It refers to the universal, hence shared, structures of subjectivity.

We saw above that for Žižek philosophy *as such* begins with Kant, and this is so insofar as Kant finally brought subjectivity to the centre of philosophical enquiry. Many would see this move as rooted in Descartes' Cogito, but in fact it was with Kant and his muddying of the pellucid Cartesian representational waters that subjectivity truly emerged as *the* central philosophical question. In Kant, we find the birth of the split subject as we are *both* phenomenon and noumenon with the former incapable of knowing the latter – no wonder Adrian Johnston considers Kant to be a forerunner of psychoanalysis, noting that “Kant's theoretical and practical philosophies contain acknowledgements of versions of an intra-subjective, unconscious Real” and that (in line with Freud's depiction of conscious organizations as defensive shields against both intra-psychical as well as extra-psychical stimuli) “Kant even occasionally indicates that were certain things-in-themselves impossibly to be made accessible as phenomena, they would be horrifying, overwhelming, terrifying, traumatizing, and the like.”

As a final point, it is worth noting that anyone who considers the Copernican revolution catastrophic because it curtailed metaphysical ambitions would seem to be forgetting that the Kantian development made possible the extremely ambitious metaphysical projects of Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, and a number of extraordinary thinkers in the 19th century.

Verdict: Guilty on both counts, but arguably both crimes needed to be committed anyway.

Charge 3: Kant fails to found his transcendental, and thus fails to provide his proclaimed ultimate foundation for philosophy.

However you wish to look at it, when it comes to questions of genesis Kant's transcendental categories suddenly appear *radically mysterious*. It is this lack of a genetic explanation of Kant's categories that drives Meillassoux's critique in *After Finitude*. So-called 'ancestral statements' (e.g. the date of the origin of the Universe or the date of the origin of life on

earth) would appear to call the Kantian's bluff, asking how seriously they are really prepared to take his whole transcendental framework. For, as Meillassoux writes, how are we "to grasp the *meaning* of scientific statements bearing explicitly upon a manifestation of the world that is posited as anterior to the emergence of thought and even of life – *posited, that is, as anterior to every form of human relation to the world?*" If we are to take ancestral statements at their word, we are forced to accept that the emergence of the mind-world correlation is simply another stage in a temporal relation that cannot thus be an *originary* relation, as the Kantian framework demands (time being one of the transcendental categories).

Adrian Johnston has written that "the transcendental subject appears to be left frictionlessly spinning in a deontologized void, mysteriously floating in an unexplained vacuum"³, and in his interview he expands upon these philosophical silences relating to questions of genesis, with their contemporary references to negativity, nothingness, void etc. There can be no doubt that Kant's transcendental framework and its various successors have served to allow continental philosophy to remain closer to the humanities, with the kind of metaphysical scepticism and critical tools they afford seemingly placing them in a better position to offer useful frameworks within which socio-political and emancipatory questions can be answered rather than simply defending the scientific norms of the day from sceptical onslaughts (as the naturalistic framework generally favoured by analytic philosophers serves to do). However, a recurrent theme that emerged was that under pressure from genetic explanations at an empirical level, the transcendental framework appears caught in a bind, with Michel Foucault's account of the 'analytic of finitude' being one of the most celebrated exposés of the paradoxes of Kant's Copernican revolution. As Béatrice Han-Pile sums it up in her interview:

For Foucault 19th and 20th century thought is characterised by this circle whereby Man is both the epistemic condition of possibility of knowledge on the one hand, and a causally determined object within the epistemic field thus opened on the other. Without Man nothing can be known, but as soon as there is knowledge Man appears to itself as empirically pre-existing his very opening of the epistemic field... Foucault thinks that this is a very pernicious structure.

However, in a nifty feat of dialectics, Catherine Malabou (a naturalistically-oriented transcendental philosopher like Johnston) manages to rescue the transcendental from the grip of the very naturalistic framework that was threatening to render it obsolete. And she does this by arguing that the transcendental is an epi-genetic rather than genetic structure, such that critiques by the likes of Meillassoux are pointless. As she puts it:

If we are always trying...to dig deeper underground to find the treasure, we will totally overlook Kant's point that the transcendental is a *surface* structure, not in the sense of shallowness or superficiality, but in the sense in which we speak of the epicentre of an earthquake as the point of contact between the underground and the ground... The transcendental is subject to epigenesis, not to foundation.

Verdict: Guilty, but aren't questions of genesis a bit boorish anyway?

Charge 4: Kant's transcendental framework is that of an obsessive-neurotic who wishes at all costs to maintain an appropriate degree of distance from the monstrosity/void/blind spots/gaps/ fissures/death/devastation/utter dismemberment/ chaos/discord/obscene mass of raw palpating slime/putrefied flesh/horror (plenty more where this came from – see Schelling, Hegel, Žižek, and many of the speculative realists...) of the Real/Noumenon.

Verdict: Guilty, apparently.

Charge 5: Kant keeps God intact, safely protected by faith from any would-be usurpers, philosophical, scientific or otherwise.

Verdict: Guilty.

Charge 6: Kant's critical philosophy stands in the same relation to his racism as Heidegger's early work does to his Nazism.

Verdict: Jury's out.

Charge 7: Kant was a catastrophe.

Verdict: Not guilty.

Notes

1. Slavoj Žižek, *On Belief* (2001). New York: Routledge.
2. Bruno Bosteels, *Philosophies of Defeat: The Jargon of Finitude* (forthcoming). London: Verso.
3. Adrian Johnston, *Žižek's Ontology: A Transcendental Materialist Theory of Subjectivity* (2008). Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press.

Anthony Morgan's edited collection *The Kantian Catastrophe? Conversations on Finitude and the Limits of Philosophy* published by Bigg Books in October, is available on Amazon and at selected bookshops in the North-East, Edinburgh, and London.

A Philosophers' Quiz - The second of three parts. Set by J. L. H. Thomas

Famous last words *(Alternative last words are recorded of several philosophers.)*

Which philosopher's reputed famous last words were:

1. 'Tell them that I have had a wonderful life.'
2. 'Time is up, my soul, I must leave.' / 'It is time to leave, my soul.' / 'Ah, my soul, thou hast long been held captive. The hour has now come for thee to quit thy prison, to leave the trammels of this body. Then to this separation with joy and courage.'
3. 'On this truly blissful day of my life, which is likewise my last, I write you all these words.' / 'Now, farewell, remember all my teachings.'
4. 'Seek to raise the divine in you to the god in the All.' / 'I am striving to bring the divine which is in me into harmony with the god who is in the universe.'
5. 'This world affords no solid satisfaction but the consciousness of well doing, and the hopes of another life.' / 'Oh! the depth of the riches of the goodness and knowledge of God. Cease now.'
6. 'It is so hard to overcome the senses.'
7. 'This time it [a travelling rug] will serve me for the journey from which there is no return.'
8. 'Work, for the Lord is hard.'
9. 'How will we afford the funeral expenses?'
10. 'My son, I can certainly be wrong, and it can happen to you, too; *errare humanum est.*'
11. 'The first step towards philosophy is incredulity.' / 'But what the devil do you think that will do to me?'
12. 'I have lived as a philosopher, and shall endeavour to die as a philosopher.'
13. 'What for should I burn a' me wee bookies?' / 'I am dying as fast as my enemies, if I have any, could wish, and as cheerfully as my best friends could desire.'
14. 'I don't know, I don't know.'
15. 'Pound, pound the pouch.'
16. 'Were He to let me stay with you a little longer till I had resolved a problem concerning the origin of the soul, I would gladly accept the boon, for I do not know whether anyone else will work it out when I am gone.'
17. 'Thee did I preach and teach. I have never said aught against Thee. Nor do I persist stubbornly in my views.'
18. 'Do you hear the music? Now I go hence.'
19. 'You are more afraid to pronounce my sentence than I am to receive it. I die a martyr and willingly. My soul shall mount up with the smoke to Paradise.'
20. 'Ah, my friend, I am about to leave this world, where the heart must either be broken or be brass.'

You can find the answers to these questions and to the questions in Part 1 on p. 28

Philosophy and Suffering in the *Dialectics of Enlightenment* - Nicholas Brignell

"The need to lend a voice to suffering is a condition of all truth"
(Adorno, 1973, pp. 17 - 18).

If giving a voice to suffering is a requirement of philosophy if it wants to have pretensions to truth, then why has so much of philosophy tended to remain silent on the topic of suffering? In their book *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944) Adorno and Horkheimer take aim at what Robert Solomon has described as the "ideological cauldron" of Enlightenment thought, of which the chief unifying facets were: humanism, rationality and universality (Solomon, 1988, pp. 8 - 9). None of these three principles come away from their critique unscathed.

Their critique chiefly points a finger at Enlightenment thought for increasingly moving towards a model of philosophical investigation which denies a place for the subject of suffering as a legitimate consideration of philosophy - eventually framing questions about death, devastation and cruelty as outside its remit. Further, they claim that Enlightenment thought uncritically endorsed the view that the increase in technological prowess afforded by scientific discovery (and the accompanying disenchantment of nature) progressively inverts the relationship of power that nature traditionally held over humanity.

Adorno and Horkheimer hold to the idea that "The core of truth is historical" (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1997, p. ix). When they - German, Jewish and writing in the mid-20th century - speak of suffering, catastrophe or devastation, they are almost always thinking of the Holocaust. This does not mean that their concerns are limited to the Holocaust, as if, somehow, suffering had not really existed before or after. For them what is crucial to understand about the Holocaust, as well as contemporary 'inventions', such as the atomic bomb and "the introduction of torture as a permanent institution" (Adorno, 2003, p. 428), is that they crash up against - in the most violent, material way - the wisdom inherent to Enlightenment 'metaphysics': that truth is neutral, objective, disinterested, democratic and emancipatory.

"The program of the Enlightenment was the disenchantment of the world; the dissolution of myths and the substitution of knowledge for fancy ... In the most general sense of progressive thought, the Enlightenment has always aimed at liberating men from fear and establishing their sovereignty. Yet the fully enlightened earth radiates disaster triumphant" (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1997, p. 3).

How is it that the progressive disenchantment of the world promised by the Enlightenment has - at best - failed to provide a bulwark against the most lamentable barbarisms of the 20th century and - at worst - might in fact be found complicit with them? This is the motivating question of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Adorno & Horkheimer, p. xii).

So, in what sense do 'metaphysics' and history crash up against each other, thinking specifically of the relationship between Enlightenment thought and the sites of suffering in the 20th century? I would like to begin by asking this quite broad question: 'What is the relationship between philosophy and suffering?' This question can be further split into two separate questions: Firstly: how does one analyse suffering philosophically? Secondly: what is the nature of the reciprocity between philosophy and suffering? The first question asks how

philosophy has approached the topic of suffering, as a category of philosophical investigation. The second question asks something more like: does suffering stimulate philosophy and/or does philosophy stimulate suffering?

The modern philosophical impulse here is to bracket these two questions as, respectively, theoretical and practical. There is a difficulty immediately: the traditional implication of separating these questions into categories already asserts the primacy of the first question; it implies that one can understand suffering theoretically, as though divorced from the experience of suffering itself. If this is the case, then the reciprocity under scrutiny in the second question can - at best - only be one-sided: that is, philosophy can have an active relationship with suffering but not the other way around. Philosophy may treat suffering as an object of study or otherwise affect it, through causation or some therapeutic function; i.e. perhaps philosophy can generate or ease suffering when put into practice politically (including ideologically) or in questions of practical ethics.

Why must this relationship be one-sided? Precisely because if instances of suffering are able to affect philosophy, then philosophy would lose its objectivity - its very ability to analyse categories like suffering objectively, i.e. truthfully. To assert a properly reciprocal relationship between philosophy and suffering would be to deny or at least undermine the possibility of analysing suffering from a neutral philosophical vantage point. This issue manifests the distinction between two approaches to philosophy: the first, one that would like to keep the theoretical and practical spheres as separate realms of inquiry; and the second, one which seeks to collapse the distinction because it is itself impossible or perhaps otherwise disingenuous.

Adorno strongly accuses the first approach with being *silent* on the topic of suffering - and not just silent, but even, though unaware of its power, *silencing*. It aims at objectivity through categorisation, through clear and distinct lines which separate concepts and which separate theory from practice. This approach instrumentalises thought: it sees philosophy or 'thought' as a tool with which to pursue these endeavours in order to achieve truthful answers using a single, correct and universally agreed method. But in the light of the Holocaust is it right for philosophy to be nothing but the disinterested search for truth, as though the existence of the Holocaust should not be a motivating concern in that search? Does it even make sense? Should not the Holocaust, as event and possibility, provoke us into re-examining the aims and procedures of philosophy? Has the Holocaust somehow interrupted our disinterested search for truth - in some way shone a light back onto its own limitations in terms of explaining and preventing such a calamitous state of affairs? Does history impinge upon metaphysics? That is, does the Holocaust change the nature and content of the questions the philosopher has to ask? Adorno says that for philosophy to have any worth, it must, at times like this, re-examine its own workings.

There is an ethical conundrum posed in Balzac's novel *Pere Goriot*: if you could have whatever you desire at the cost of killing an old Mandarin in Peking and no one would ever know - would you do it? If we follow Kant, we accept that no matter how distant his life is from mine, or how much I stand to gain and he to lose, the old Mandarin should not be used as a means to an end. But if, instead of suggesting a personal advantage, you were offered a payout in terms of some good for others, Kant's imperative becomes less compelling.

This is not just some abstract 'thought experiment' with which bored intellectuals bamboozle each other. In reality we play the daily exploitation of the global impoverished off against the creature comforts of the global privileged. A few years ago, the journalist George Monbiot

wrote an article for *The Guardian* in which he pursued the question of whether it is possible to buy a smart phone that is ethically sourced, i.e. a smart phone which did not rely on the suffering of others for the production of its components or assembly. He wants to focus on one specific issue and asks:

"are the components soaked in the blood of people from the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo?... While these elements are by no means the only reason for conflict there, they help to fund it, supporting a fragmented war that – through direct killings, displacement, disease and malnutrition – has now killed several million people. Rival armies have forced local people to dig in extremely dangerous conditions, have extorted minerals and money from self-employed miners, have tortured, mutilated and murdered those who don't comply, and have spread terror and violence – including gang rape and child abduction – through the rest of the population. I do not want to participate." (Monbiot, 2013)

That last line is important - "I do not want to participate". This is the kind of ethical problem we find ourselves faced with in the globalised economy, daily and not just as a thought experiment. I do not want to participate in this global order of suffering. The issue is no longer a matter of Balzac's choice but of constant participation through everyday activity.

Enlightenment approaches to ethics, which tend to concentrate on the individual making the 'right' or most reasonable choice, are faced with new difficulties and might even break down when faced with the situation today - as Adorno famously writes "Wrong life cannot be lived rightly" (2005, p. 39). Andrew Bowie, in *Adorno and the Ends of Philosophy*, explains this pronouncement. He says:

"[it] can be understood ... in relation to the difficulties of self-determination in complex, commodity-dominated societies, where a trip to the supermarket can oppress a third-world farmer ... In Adornian terms the indeterminacy here, with regard to the ethical content of the situation, shows how the 'primacy of the objective' can make established ways of looking at moral issues in modernity problematic" (Bowie, 2013, p. 68).

This is not simply a matter of knowledge; it undermines the optimism inherent to Enlightenment thought. Even when we know all about practices and supply chains and feel an imperative to use our own self-determination and sense of right - to boycott and inform others so that they can boycott with us, for example - the rationalistic impulse to found ethical action on individual decisions is frustrated again by the fact that this is only really possible for and entertained largely by those with the privilege to do so. The notion of ethical consumer choice is predicated upon the Enlightenment notion of individual self-determination. But in the current economic system, this means that an individual's capacity to act ethically increases according to that individual's economic power. Knowledge, which is power (Adorno says they are synonymous), understood in the Enlightenment sense, is only as democratic as the economic system with which it is bound up (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1997, p. 4).

But the extreme end of Enlightenment thought, as Adorno saw it, in which only what can be categorised according to scientific principles could be counted as knowledge, would not even allow the problem of suffering to have any bearing on how we should understand the goals and the aims of philosophy. Adorno and Horkheimer say that "To the Enlightenment, that which does not reduce to numbers, and ultimately the one, becomes illusion; modern positivism writes it off as literature" (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1997, p. 7) and further claim that "Enlightenment is as totalitarian as any system" (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1997, p. 24).

The Enlightenment excludes suffering from the realms of meaning - what is incommensurable is excised.

The other aspect which is important to understand about the claim that Enlightenment is totalitarian is that what I have just said easily spills over into social and historical relations - the world itself becomes subjected to the law of computation as the only verifiable means of treating the complex of human relations (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1997, p. 30). Adorno sees in Wittgenstein's maxim that: "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent" the placing of a taboo over philosophy and signals the point, as he says: "in which the extreme of positivism spills over into the gesture of reverent authoritarian authenticity, and which for that reason exerts a kind of intellectual mass suggestion, [and] is utterly antiphilosophical" (Adorno, 1993, p. 101).

The instrumentalisation of thought implies that thought is a means to achieve ends - that is, thought has a function - it is meant to be employed in order to achieve some outcome. Humanity's increasing power through knowledge and technology is used to gain mastery over nature - and mastery, for Adorno and Horkheimer, means domination and subjugation. The real concern comes when we realise that humanity's capacity to dominate and subjugate nature improves at the same rate as humanity's capacity to dominate other human beings.

Enlightenment thought expunges the irrational, the non-computational and ruthlessly pursues knowledge and scientific discovery, which translate into, and are aided by, an endless technological change. But the Enlightenment's social and political hopes are misplaced and the technological capacity to provide more does not directly promote the betterment of humanity. The weak point of Enlightenment thought was always its greatest power: the assumption that its method truly examined all preconceptions blinded it to its own.

Adorno may be - and has been - charged with inaccuracies in regard to the positions of other thinkers. During the so-called 'Positivism Dispute' in the 1960's, Adorno and Horkheimer attributed the position of positivism to Karl Popper and charged his philosophy with all of the misgivings the two thinkers had about positivism, which they saw as the culmination of the most repressive elements of Enlightenment thought. Of course, anyone who knows anything about Popper will know that he considered himself to have spent his entire philosophical career *opposing* positivism and so did not accept this label at the time.

In relation to this dispute, it is important that Adorno saw philosophy not as a collection of rigid, self-contained theories but rather as a set of "tendencies". It is only because of the predominance of theories that attempt to bring philosophy into line with the scientific method that we tend to think otherwise (Adorno, 2003, p. 434). This itself can be seen as a philosophical tendency and one of which Popper is as guilty as the positivists. This can be seen especially in his demand in *Conjectures and Refutations* that all knowledge be sorted into one of three categories: scientific, non-scientific and pseudo-scientific, of which scientific knowledge is the closest to truth.

Adorno saw in the kind of absolute distinction between theoretical and practical concerns something violent and repressive: to say that the question of whether it is bad to enjoy the infliction of cruelty belongs to "matters of feeling" and not matters of "knowledge", not only conjures away the extra-logical moment (2003, p. 440) but may itself be censorious.

One must admit that Adorno can come across as vague or imprecise - though one will find that his writing is often clear, precise and incisive. The interplay between these elements is one of the most difficult aspects when reading Adorno; but both are necessary for philosophy to be possible for him. The Enlightenment demands for clarity and distinction should not be abandoned at all costs but neither should they be pursued as absolute requirements of knowledge at the expense of the moments and relations which cannot be captured according to the stringent demands of rationality.

The *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is a wide-ranging attack on tendencies of thought, present throughout the history of Western philosophy but finding their strongest expression in Enlightenment thought, of which the most extreme versions are positivist influenced. Nevertheless, Adorno and Horkheimer are not calling for an abandonment of reason or rationality, as they themselves claim that they are convinced "that social freedom is inseparable from enlightened thought" (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1997, p. xiii).

So what, then, does the failure of Enlightenment thought consist in? It consists in the fact that it is unable to cope with what seems to lie outside of its remit - suffering, death, devastation; it does not examine the results of its stringency. Ultimately its demands remove too much of importance from our field of inquiry - suffering, pain, cruelty - while at the same time failing to recognise its inextricable relationship with them. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer trace the development of this approach as part of the longer 'history of reason': Enlightenment thought involves the explicit characterisation of reason as an instrument with which to discover truths that are characterised by universality and reduction to neutral facts; the principles of the scientific approach to the production of knowledge becomes the established, and increasingly the *sole*, method for investigating all phenomena.

Broadly construed, Enlightenment thought increasingly views 'Reason', the scientific method and logic, as the only real authoritative tools with which to sort objective 'facts' from subjective 'fictions'. Eventually these 'fictions' are cast aside as literally 'nonsense' or 'meaningless', according to the later development of Enlightenment thought in the positivist influenced philosophies of the 20th century.

When metaphysics crashes up against history, such as in the advent of the Holocaust, what occurs is a kind of shock to philosophy. One of the most important aspects of philosophy as a discipline is that it is a discipline which constantly questions its own importance. After the Holocaust, Adorno thinks this question must be asked once again - what questions should philosophy be addressing itself to? The question, as he frames it, is: *How can one do metaphysics after Auschwitz?*

It is worth qualifying what is meant by 'metaphysics', as the way I have used it rubs up quite badly against a modern understanding of Enlightenment thought. The history of Enlightenment thought can be seen as an increasingly severe questioning of the very possibility of metaphysics. If metaphysics was to be worth consideration then, according to Kant, it had to be defined in such a way that it could be distinguished from other sciences, otherwise it would revert to mere speculation. If it were to fail to distinguish itself as a science then metaphysics would be a modern version of the kinds of pronouncements that the Pre-Socratic philosophers used to make about the nature of the world - that all things are made of fire or of water or of air. Positivism, which Adorno viewed as the culmination of the worst and most uncritical aspects of Enlightenment thought, excoriated metaphysics even more strongly than Kant did – rejecting it as simply incoherent.

However, we might say that Adorno's argument - what he means when he talks about metaphysics in relation to Enlightenment thought - is that all thought is metaphysical in some sense, in that it gives some positive account of truth - of what truth is or of the criterion of truth - that is itself separable from and prior to experience. The metaphysical elements of Enlightenment thought include the view that truth is trans-historical and that it is found objectively, by cutting away subjective fictions, feelings and experiences. Certainly many would reject the characterisation of these commonalities as constituting a metaphysics, as these are typically characterised as epistemological elements - relating to how we come to *know* things. But for Adorno, rejecting these commonalities as constituting something like a metaphysics is one of Enlightenment thought's most dangerous and, ironically, most unthinking aspects. Enlightenment thought's unwillingness to examine its own presuppositions walks a dangerous line which is at constant risk of stepping over from metaphysics into ideology.

None of this is to say that Adorno saw reason or rationality as things to be cast aside, things that, somehow, the history of philosophy and history itself would simply have been better without. It is worth noting that Adorno is equally wary of relativism and the urge to embrace the irrational and he is often at great pains to emphasise that reason is the only thing which may stand against the repetition of Auschwitz.

The intention of this paper is only to outline how Adorno and Horkheimer argue that the tradition of philosophy which can be called 'Enlightenment thought' has, for the most part been silent on the topic of suffering because it is a topic which of necessity lies outside its bounds, while simultaneously taking for granted that the pursuit of Enlightenment thought will eventually lead to a wholesale alleviation of suffering. For Adorno, it is this failure to examine itself *against the very thoughts which are most difficult for it to think* that has allowed Enlightenment thought to transform into its other - a metaphysics, hidden even to itself, which increasingly aims at the domination of other human beings and the flattening out of all experience - all otherness - to an idea of universally agreeable truth.

To pursue philosophy as a neutral, objective, universal and transhistorical exercise in a world in which Auschwitz is possible - and this means not only that Auschwitz *was* possible but that it was always possible and is possible still - is not only self-defeating but immoral. Adorno rebukes this tendency in a characteristically stark tone: "If thought is not measured by the extremity which eludes the concept, it is from the outset in the nature of the musical accompaniment with which the SS liked to drown out the screams of the victims" (Adorno, 1973, p. 365).

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Perspectives on Evolution - Bryan Blears

Every species evolves, but not every species evolves in the same way. Understanding this is the first step to understanding why, unlike forces like gravity and magnetism, we have so far been unable to come up with any grand theory of understanding evolution and subsequently, ourselves. Since the publication of Charles Darwin's work *On the Origin of Species* just over 150 years ago, humanity has progressed in a multitude of ways which render Darwin's theory of natural selection far too simplistic an understanding of how our own species has and continues to evolve over time.

In the past few decades, the global expansion and technological progress of our species has led to the creation of a new term, the *Anthropocene*, to denote an era in which human activity has become the primary driver of ecological and geological change on Earth. While Darwin's work was a product of his time, we can no longer pretend that evolution takes place solely by means of a passive process of 'natural' selection. Darwin, a brilliant scientist and philosopher, recognised at the time of writing his *Origin of Species* that natural selection, rather than providing a single answer to evolution, was part of a wider process. He writes, "I am convinced that Natural Selection has been the *main but not exclusive* means of modification." [My italics.]

To take a few examples: dogs, cats and many species of plants (including especially those which we tend to consume) have been selectively bred by people for hundreds of years. We have created pit bulls, poodles, carrots, onions, potatoes and many other hybrid organisms to match the characteristics we desire, even when those modifications make the organisms less able to survive and reproduce. Mules, for example, are unable to reproduce at all, yet we regularly breed them for their combination of strength and stamina over donkeys or horses. *Anthropogenic selection*, the selection of traits by human beings, is therefore a part of the bigger puzzle which Darwin hinted at within his *Origin of Species*. Not all of the selection performed by human beings is done intentionally; in fact, the opposite is true – far more of our shaping of nature is accidental and not fully understood. Research has shown, for example, that birds which live in cities on average wake up earlier and have more disrupted sleep-cycles than those which live in rural environments. That is perhaps ignoring the much more obvious impacts which human activity has upon ecosystems, migration patterns and the extermination of entire species – but it is a reminder that our actions have largely unseen and unchartered consequences for the majority of other animals on Earth on a day-to-day basis as they try to evolve within the world that we have constructed.

So, too, do human actions across the globe have a far greater impact upon our own evolution as a species than natural forces such as climate change. In the modern world, a person's evolutionary 'fitness' is far more likely to be determined by the country they are born in, their material wealth and status in society, than by their genes. People born in war-zones are far less likely to reach adulthood and to reproduce than the children of Oxford graduates. This leads us to another elephant in the room when it comes to interpreting Darwin's work, which is *autonomous selection* – or the role that organisms themselves play as they select partners, mate, and create social hierarchies which determine the safety and security of an individual within their tribe, herd or country.

The impacts of *autonomous selection* on human development are documented but perhaps under-appreciated; anthropological studies of early human tribes show the creation of a rigid

rule of laws and hierarchies in order to maintain the security of the tribe and enable it to succeed. These social structures, as also seen in the relationships depicted between chimpanzees in Frans De Waal's *Chimpanzee Politics*, enabled early humans to select characteristics which were advantageous in their leader, such as strength and wisdom, and to create a social hierarchy which rewarded cooperation and punished destructive or selfish traits through exile or even death. Anthropologist Christopher Boehm describes humans of the late Pleistocene period 'ganging up on their alphas' to ensure equal distribution of resources, and in *A Cooperative Species: Human Reciprocity and Its Evolution*, Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis depict in great detail how ancient tribes eliminated "free-riders" within their societies and developed altruistic bonds.



Frans De Waal

In recent times, the study of this other half of evolution – the social side, known as *cultural evolution*, has started to gain ground as a field of study. If biological evolution depicts the transmission of genetic traits over time, then cultural evolution equally depicts how certain behaviours, such as hunting techniques, dances, songs and religions, are adapted and passed from generation to generation. Understanding cultural evolution is key to understanding human evolution, as

most of our history since the emergence of *Homo sapiens* has been defined by our cultural habits rather than by major biological change. People have changed little in the past 100,000 years; what has changed beyond recognition is our knowledge and behaviour. Early humans passed down their knowledge of tool-building and which animals and plants to avoid via speech, and most of ancient history was told through stories and songs. But since *homo sapiens* discovered the art of writing and later printing, we have been able to better secure our knowledge from the erosion of memory and make it accessible to many more people at a time than could be achieved through the democratic forums of ancient times. Cultural evolution is becoming exponentially more complex – in the modern age, we can read the texts of Aristotle alongside those of Stephen Hawking, pitting ideas from centuries apart against each other and transmitting information effortlessly through time as well as space.

Contrary to, perhaps, the separation that has traditionally existed within the academic world, cultural and biological evolution cannot sit firmly apart – they both influence each other's outcomes in dramatic ways. Cultural ideas have led to eugenics programmes, the destruction of ecosystems and the subsequent designation of species as 'endangered'; all of which are human 'interruptions' in what Darwin deemed natural selection processes. But the relationship between the two goes far further. A new field of scientific study known as *epigenetics* has found, remarkably, that certain triggers within an individual's life cause genes to be switched 'on' and 'off', and that these traits can be passed down to future generations. A study in 2012 found that children born to older fathers are more resilient to aging, and researchers have shown that there is a link between obesity and epigenetic changes in their parents. Evolution, therefore, is not – as Darwin believed – predominantly about who reproduces and who does not, but is much more dependent upon what individuals do during their lives as well.

It is also becoming more apparent that evolution is less a product of random mutations over time and more about intelligent 'design' – not from any intelligent force of nature, but from organisms themselves as they strive to adapt. For example, evolutionary scientist Stephen Jay

Gould describes in *The Flamingo's Smile* how the feeding habits of flamingos led, over time, to their upside-down beak shapes. He writes, "Substantial change in morphology usually arises as a consequence of behavioural triggers." In other words, giraffes are more likely to have evolved longer necks 'on purpose' as they tried to reach higher leaves, as opposed to them being passively 'selected' over time to favour longer-necked giraffes (a theory proposed by Jean-Baptiste Lamarck, but somewhat dismissed by Darwin during his work on species). There are numerous examples of how cultural change in early humans led to subsequent biological changes to our bodies: the ability to cook food led humans to have smaller stomachs and larger brains, and over time our invention of clothes led to us having less body hair than our primate cousins.

Throughout human history, we have consistently and stubbornly fought against natural selection by inventing tools and weapons, harnessing the power of fire and building homes in order to combat the effects of the climate, and we have advanced agricultural techniques and animal husbandry to make ourselves more resilient against starvation. It is almost impossible to say that our traits have been 'naturally' selected by our environment, as human beings have persistently attempted to create their own, safer environments, surrounded by walls and fences and other defences, and have lived together in ever-larger groups with more complex social hierarchies. Of course, we are not the only organisms to construct our own living environments. Earthworms, a favourite organism of Darwin's studies, chemically alter the soil around them to make it more hospitable for a variety of species including themselves, and beavers and other organisms have a conservatory impact upon the environments they themselves live in. The process of building micro-environments which are warmer, safe and more conducive to survival is known as *niche-construction*, and it is fundamental to understanding how human beings have become more influenced by our social 'niches' in the way that we evolve, and less influenced by natural forces like the weather and other predators.

Even though cultural evolution has been a massive driving factor in our *biological* evolution, in human terms it has become far more important as our history has progressed. In the developed world nearly all of us, with the exception of those born infertile or with serious illnesses, can now hope to grow old enough to have children who will, in turn, survive into adulthood. We have, in effect, beaten Darwin's metaphorical "struggle for existence" against hunger, predation and disease; day by day, the human population continues to increase. What has become far more important to us are the strands of culture and information which influence peoples' lives: ranging from our religious beliefs and practices to our political views, our family names and our nationalities. These ideas, or "memes" as Richard Dawkins calls them, have a considerable impact on traditional reproductive evolution, too. Consider, for example, the effect which cultural trends have on what is seen as sexually desirable from generation to generation, or the desire to have children for example during the Baby Boom era.

Human evolution has fundamentally changed during a series of revolutions from the development of agriculture to the industrial revolution and now, in the technological era, we are evolving in new ways with new and uncharted impacts upon our biological evolution. Human beings are already becoming more short-sighted in developed countries – not, as popular opinion might have it, due to our fondness for reading or computers – but simply because humans spend more time indoors, and less time scanning the landscape for potential threats. Culturally, we now have long-distance internet relationships and apps changing the way we select mates, social media creating new forms of social hierarchies, and new ways of

expressing ourselves through Snaps, Tweets, Emojis and more. Anybody doubting the importance of cultural evolution should look to the current occupant of the White House in the United States. Millions of lives, both in the United States and across the world, may have their evolutionary outcomes determined by the cultural ideas which enabled the current office-holder to occupy his place.

For more information, the author recommends the article *Does evolutionary theory need a rethink?* in *Nature*, the international weekly journal of science:

<https://www.nature.com/news/does-evolutionary-theory-need-a-rethink-1.16080>

Man and Being: a platform for 'spiritual but not religious' people - Glauco Frizzera

We have just entered an era in which the moral disorder that is always present in the human world has become so pervasive and unsettling that we need to regroup. On the one hand, we need to remember that there is an entirely different world out there, where decency, honesty, truth, and love of neighbors still count and keep our society going. On the other hand, we need to hang on to something higher in human life: philosophy, music, arts, sciences and 'areté' over the good life. People of a speculative sort of mind might need to re-examine their beliefs and their healing potential.

Others may look further, for some coherent framework that help them confront these troubling times. Among them are the so-called 'spiritual, but not religious' people. These are squeezed, so to speak, between the believer and the atheist. For the former, calling oneself spiritual is taken as an excuse not to get down to the serious business of believing and acting according to those beliefs. The latter is always looking with suspicion at any explanation beyond scientific materialism, seeing it as a retreat of reason and as a slippery road to perdition (religion). What has a 'spiritual, but not religious' person to do? Where to turn to?

I would like here to propose to such a person - a fellow traveller, a rational foundation, a platform, as it were, on which to anchor a position different from those of both the religious believer and the atheist.

Personal experiences of a 'beyond'

To do that I will start with bringing to the forefront those special personal experiences in which one is transiently transported 'out of this world', losing sight of oneself, location and time - experiences that strongly suggest the existence of a greater reality outside ourselves; let's call it a 'beyond' for now.

I am thinking for instance of the experience of forgetting oneself while admiring some piece of beautiful art or listening to some sublime music. I once visited a neighbor on the spur of the moment and obviously surprised her: she looked at me in an odd detached way and justified herself by saying: "Sorry, I was in heaven", which turned out to be one of Schubert's piano sonatas. So one might feel standing at the top of a mountain, looking down at a valley with an endless lake, arms stretched out in wonder, as in a photograph of a friend that I hold dear. I can think of other, more ordinary situations: a mother or father in contemplation of their first child; or the unexpected disappearance of the self in sharing a warm, totally fulfilling closeness with the beloved. Many of us, I believe, at one time or another, have found ourselves in similar exalted situations, although we may not actually have interpreted them as evidence of another world.

Perhaps the most unique of these experiences, for those who are prepared to accept them, are those of 'conversion'. In William James' *The varieties of religious experience*, the recipients describe them in various singular and moving ways: the "rushing together of the two worlds, the inner and the outer"; being "transformed by the presence of a *spiritual spirit*"; "an illumination which revealed to me a deeper significance that I had been wont to attach to life"¹. Two of these testimonies, which I find the most vivid and compelling, are worth quoting in more detail.

One is from David Brainerd, an early eighteenth century American missionary, and describes a time of deep spiritual crisis: "I was walking again in the same solitary place. Here, in a mournful melancholy state... I thought the Spirit of God had quite left me; ... then, as I was walking in a thick grove, *unspeakable glory seemed to open to the apprehension of my soul*. I do not mean any external brightness, not any imagination of a body of light, but it was a new inward apprehension or view that I had of God, such I never had before ... My soul rejoiced with joy unspeakable, to see such a God.... I continued in this state of inward joy, peace and astonishment till near dark..."². Another testimony is from a Swiss youth hiking in the mountains with friends, "when *all at once I experienced a feeling of being raised above myself*, I felt the presence of God.... The throb of emotion was so violent that I could barely tell the boys to pass on and not wait for me. I then sat down on a stone, unable to stand any longer, and my eyes overflowed with tears."³ (*emphasis mine*).

These personal experiences are real, W. James tells us, because they produce good biological effects: a state of assurance; "the ecstasy of happiness"; a feeling of peace and harmony; "the sense of perceiving truths not known before"; a "sense of clean and beautiful newness within and without"⁴. And it is these affective/biological states that validate those experiences; they need not to be proven by rational, logical means. From this he concludes that "God is real since he produces real effects"⁵ - an idea I would like to borrow at this point: *a 'beyond' exists, because it produces real effects*. Believing in it seems to be a first necessary step for the 'spiritual, but not religious' person.

What is this 'beyond' made of?

It is difficult to envision it, because it cannot easily be recalled and relived. All the experiences of it are extraordinary and brief: in most cases, they are quickly overwhelmed by the outside world and pale with time as we move on with the usual business of life.

The answer that I suggest to the above question cannot be found in psychology, but requires from the reader to follow me in a sharp shift to philosophy: it involves the philosophical notion of 'substance'. This well-recognized ontological category corresponds to the human mind's innate perception of a thing or object, as opposed, say, to a quality, a place, or a fact. A substance has two realities: it is a 'thing as it appears' in its external manifestations, which we see and can evaluate, and, at the same time, it is a mysterious immaterial 'thing in itself' that transcends these manifestations in a secret life that is beyond our ability to perceive.

If the sources of the experiences I reported - such as natural surroundings, a heart aching music, a beloved one - were viewed as 'substances', they would possess, beyond their physical appearances, an internal life - which usually goes unrecognized. But if that life suddenly reveals itself, if there is a sudden connection between it and our own being, wouldn't this encounter overwhelm our self and raise it 'out of this world'? W. James makes a similar point when he states that the religious experience is possible because the "higher part" of man's consciousness "is coterminous and continuous with a MORE of the same quality, which is operative in the universe outside of him"⁶. This MORE, like the inner life of 'substances', is 'being' (*essence*) and to be taken over by it is what is common to all of the human experiences I mentioned above. *Being is the constituent of the beyond* - which a 'spiritual, but not religious' person may now refer to as '*the Universe of Being*'.

Is 'the Universe of Being' a personal God?

Yes, would be the answer of the believer. Jacques Maritain, the French Thomistic philosopher, writes that plenitude or perfection of being is obtained in God: *God is Being*

itself and the primal cause of all being⁷. From his non-religious viewpoint, W. James believes that the “MORE of the same quality” represents “an altogether other dimension of existence”, for which “God is the natural appellation”⁸. By accepting these conclusions, one affirms an omnipotent *personal* God who created the world. Such view of God is ‘natural’ to the human mind according to the modern cognitive science of religion⁹ and modern cosmology too seems to lend a hand to it: the physical constants that developed in the first fractions of a second after the Big Bang, are, for some physicists, “unexplained remarkable coincidences”, “just what one would expect if life and consciousness were among the goals of a rational and purposeful God”¹⁰.

*However, the notion of a personal God entails an impossible dilemma for the believer: how is this caring, omnipotent Creator compatible with the existence of evil, which taints His whole creation? In David Hume’s stark telling, “Is he willing to prevent evil, but not able? then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? whence then is evil?”*¹¹

In dealing with moral evil, the classic response to Hume’s challenge by Christian theologians and many old and modern philosophers is that God is good and omnipotent but, to respect man’s free will, He does not intervene and allows evil. In Augustine’s classical formulation, “the Omnipotent God ... would not allow any evil in his works, unless in his omnipotence and goodness, as the Supreme Good, he is able to bring forth good out of evil”¹². *So the dilemma of evil for a believer in a personal God can only be solved by faith.* The great Catholic theologian, Hans Küng, quotes Kant’s work "On the failure of all philosophical attempts in theodicy"¹³ and agrees: "Suffering belongs to man" and "reason can never show why this is so"¹⁴.

If not, is there an alternative worth believing?

I would suggest that there is one. To approach it, one must first forgo the paradigm of origins, focused on God, creation and evil.

In such alternative, these issues take a back seat, although they do have answers. First, a personal creator and provider God is not needed if one chooses to believe that the omnipresent Universe of Being always has the power to redress any disorder; it would be the ‘default’ state of the world and so, as it were, would always have the upper hand, sooner or later. Similar ideas are espoused by both some modern scientists¹⁵ and progress theologians¹⁶. Second, evil needs not be - as it is for the believer - a harrowing existential mystery or the enemy that lurks at every corner to ensnare us. Evil has natural explanations: not only the Universe of Being needs to contend with man’s free agency, but, in every event, the natural laws it has imparted to the cosmos are opposed by a myriad of ‘contingent’ factors that result from the multiplicity of systems operating concurrently in nature. In this perspective, *deviation from a movement towards the good is to be expected*: moral evil and natural ‘woes’ (disasters and human diseases) are inherent, inextricable part of creation as such.

The ‘spiritual but not religious’ person has lesser stake in issues of origins, because *he/she is fully involved with the present* as it unfolds under our nose.

He/she nurtures an ontological view of the world: he/she understands that everything around us is both a physical reality and an immaterial reality behind it, and looks beyond the physical

appearances, seeking out this ‘content in being’ everywhere. He/she deeply believes in this Universe of Being as real, although hidden from our eyes.

In this view, *our physical world becomes an interlocutor with a message of its own*, to which one needs pay attention. It hides in its inner life the templates of how things should be in order to reach their highest potential, their plenitude of being. Science, which speaks its language, is our main guide to understand and respond. The world we live in begs for repair and its message is for all: no one can retreat from it into the ‘good life’, a bucolic ‘*otium*’ or an ivory tower.*

Finally, *this ontological view cultivates a sense of awe in front of the mystery and power of nature, art and music*. It inspires one to get in tune with their mystery and open up to their revelations. If we are able to surrender to them, letting go of our daily concerns and overbearing thoughts, something momentous and far-reaching may follow. As indicated at the beginning, in trying to reach out to another life beyond the appearances, *that life may in fact suddenly touch us*. From such experience one can only expect the good psychological and biological effects that W. James reports in ‘conversion’, as well as personal growth and enrichment of our lives.

* I understand this today more than ever, reading the news about the shooting in Las Vegas, when I feel I only want to crawl somewhere, curl up, cry and let go. We cannot give up hope that it can be repaired.

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1. William James, *The varieties of religious experience*, Vintage Books, 1990, pp. 66-70
2. *ib.* p. 198
3. *ib.* p. 68
4. *ib.* pp. 227-233
5. *ib.* p. 461
6. *ib.* p. 454
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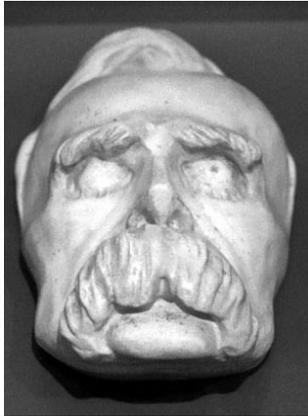
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Answers to the Last Words Quiz

Part 1

The Philosopher, Spring 2017,
(p. 24)



Nietzsche

1. Socrates
2. Hobbes
3. Kant
4. Renouvier
5. Francis Bacon
6. Confucius
7. John of St Thomas
8. Nietzsche
9. Theophrastus
10. Croce
11. J. S. Mill
12. Bentham
13. Anaxagoras
14. Demoxax
15. Rousseau
16. Voltaire
17. Benjamin Franklin
18. Frederick the Great
19. Thomas More
20. Renan

Part 2

This edition, (p. 11)

1. Wittgenstein
2. Descartes
3. Epicurus
4. Plotinus
5. Locke
6. Brentano
7. Claude Bernard
8. Soloviev
9. Sartre
10. Hamann
11. Diderot
12. Husserl
13. Hume
14. Abelard
15. Anaxarchus
16. Anselm
17. Aquinas
18. Boehme
19. Bruno
20. Chamfort



Voltaire

The final part of this quiz will appear in the next edition.

