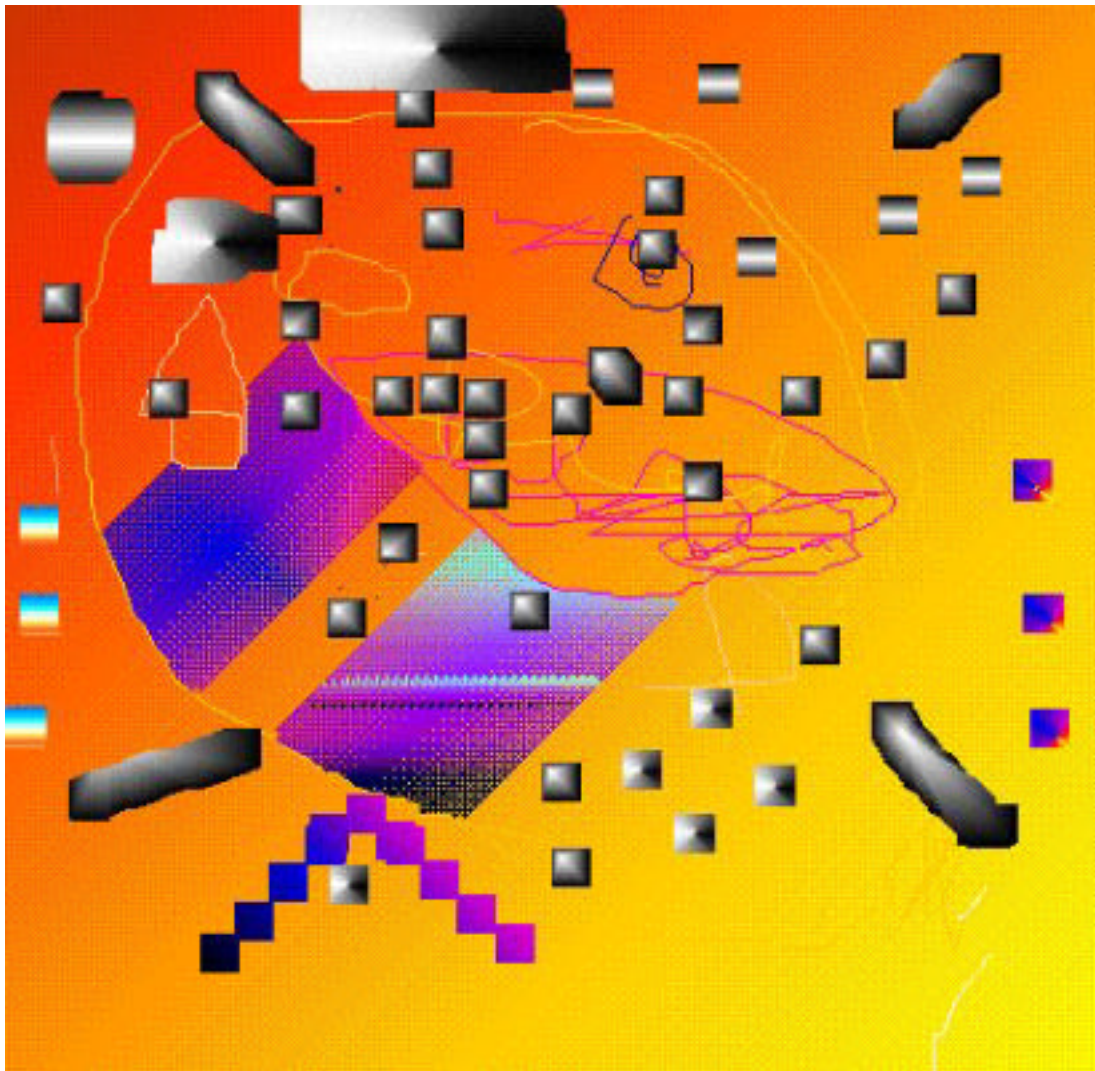


# *the possible world machine*

an introduction to the problems of philosophy



'Construction' © Ruth Klemper

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# the possible world machine

# 1

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## Introduction

THERE is a recognized tradition of philosophers using fiction as a medium for conveying their ideas and theories. Plato wrote dialogues in which he portrayed his teacher, Socrates, examining the philosophical beliefs of the citizens of Athens, seeking out their views on questions concerning whose answers he claimed – with some degree of irony – to ‘know nothing’. It was in the process of ‘dialectic’, Plato believed, in the conflict set up between opposing philosophical views on such questions as the nature of justice, or knowledge, or courage, or Being, that the art and science of philosophy lay. His dialogues represented, in a quasi-fictional form, inquiries into fundamental problems that still concern us today, as well as providing classic examples for other thinkers and students to follow. They were also meant to work effectively on a dramatic level, and it is indeed likely that many were performed before a public audience.

As well as providing the opportunity to examine philosophical issues in the form of dialogue, fiction also serves as a means for raising questions and testing theories, by placing characters in a practical predicament which requires not only them but also us, the readers, to confront philosophical problems. Perhaps the most famous example in recent times is Jean-Paul Sartre’s novel, *La Nausée*, in which the central character, Roquetin, comes face to face with the agonizing question of the freedom of the individual to act in defiance of all one’s previous goals and aspirations: what has come to be known as the ‘existential predicament’. The reader comes to share Roquetin’s sense of solitude, and also feel the disquiet and even terror at the prospect of

what the making of perhaps just one radically 'free' choice would mean in one's life. More than that, however, we are brought to question on a philosophical level just what it means for a human being to have the freedom to choose to do one thing rather than another.

In contrast with the case of Sartre, many, indeed the majority of writers who have produced fiction with a philosophical dimension would not regard themselves as philosophers. It is arguable that all serious fiction, in raising issues of fundamental human concern, has aspects that are relevant to philosophy; just as we in our everyday lives may on occasion be brought to face such questions ourselves. In the present century, however, there has been an explosion in a literary form that proves particularly effective in stimulating philosophical inquiry; and that is science fiction. Often, there is no pretence of literary sophistication. The aim is rather to stimulate in the most direct way the reader's wonder and amazement at possible worlds that might conceivably correspond to the future of our own world, or worlds that might, but for an accident of history, have been our world. The better examples of such writing prove particularly effective in encouraging the beginner to think about philosophy.

What, then, is a possible world? Even the most mundane piece of fiction describes a possible world: it is the way things might have been, or might yet be. There are in fact two notions of 'possibility' in play here. When we speculate about the unknown past, or look forward to an unknown future, we are interested in things that for all we know might have been the case, or with things that as far as we are able to predict now might yet come to be the case. Taking into account what I know now, or, at least, what I take myself to 'know' (that is one question that will concern us), it is *not* possible, in this sense, that I am now in Kuala Lumpur, or that Sheffield is the capital of Great Britain. Yet, in another sense, it *is* possible that I might have been writing these words seated in my hotel room in Kuala Lumpur – had I won the National Lottery and decided to go on that round-the-world trip I have always promised myself! Sheffield might have been the capital of Great Britain, had the history of the British Isles been radically different from the way it actually was. In some other possible world, I *am* in Kuala Lumpur, Sheffield *is* the capital of Great Britain.

It is not in these relatively mundane alternative worlds that philosophers are interested, however. They are concerned, rather, with possibilities that bring our very concepts, the limits of human thinking, into question. Again and again, throughout this course, we shall encounter worlds that in many cases seem quite like our own and yet for one reason or another appear to lie beyond the range of what we are able to conceive of as possible, or else rest on the very borderline of possibility. The reader will be invited to consider what one would think about a certain issue if such-and-such a state of affairs were to come about. – Suppose, for example, that the very next moment you were to wake up on a laboratory bench, with wires attached to your scalp, gazing up at a white-coated scientist who told you that the ‘life’ you thought had been yours up to that moment in time was all a dream: how would you establish the truth? Suppose someone found a way to accurately predict every human action: what would become of our so-called free will? Suppose human beings acquired the capacity to split like amoebas, with each of the two resulting persons possessing all the physical and mental attributes of the original, and that this process happened to your own body: which of the resulting pair of identical ‘yous’ would *you* be?

The context may seem at first frivolous, but the student soon learns that such seemingly improbable examples serve to raise, in a particularly vivid and effective way, philosophical problems concerning – as in the above examples – the possibility of knowledge, or the apparent conflict between human freedom and physical determinism, or the nature of personal identity. (All these examples will be covered in future course units.) The student will find that the same mental agility needed to conceive soberly of the consequences of such science fiction hypotheses, without balking at their seeming absurdity, is the quality of imagination and logical thought needed by the philosopher. Far from being merely an entertaining game or diversion, inquiries such as these prove to be of fundamental importance in sketching not so much the outer limits, as the very structure of the map of human knowledge.

## **The Possible World Machine**

For weeks, I had been pestering my friend the Professor to let me look round his secret laboratory. I'd never have known about it but for a casual remark dropped in the pub about an experiment he was working on 'at home'. Since then, I had hardly been able to contain my curiosity. Yet now, as I huddled on the doorstep in the rain, I was beginning to have second thoughts. Why all the secrecy? I began to glance anxiously towards my car. Before I could turn round, however, a single note chimed and a wizened face appeared at a tiny 3-D screen in the centre of the door, like a goblin popping out from a cuckoo-clock.

'You're early! Well, you'd better come in.'

Inside, the building was larger than an aircraft hangar, and full of strange machinery whose purpose I couldn't begin to figure out. How could all this fit into a small cottage? The old man saw the question forming on my lips.

'As you crossed the threshold, you were shrunk to a tenth of your normal size.'

'Where's the rest of me then?' I replied, gingerly feeling the top of my head. The old man guffawed.

As I looked round, one contraption with crystal rods and coils of shiny yellow wire jogged my memory of a story I had read long ago.

'A time machine!', I exclaimed.

'That's nothing,' replied the Professor. 'I was making those when I was still at school. No, this little beauty will take you to any possible world of your choice.'

I tried to take in what he had said, but it made no sense. 'What is a "possible world"?'

'You know perfectly well!', the Professor replied impatiently. 'Have you never had thoughts about the way things might have been, if the circumstances had been different, or what might have happened if you had chosen to do something other than what you actually did? Well, for every possibility you can think of, and many, many more beyond your feeble imagination, there is a world, a whole universe where that is the way things actually are. Take a simple case. Suppose you had not come here today...'

He stared at me intently, eyebrows raised, waiting for the penny to drop. I saw myself in my mind's eye watching football on TV, sipping a can of beer, surrounded by the half-chewed remains of a cheese and pickle sandwich.

'You mean there's an actual universe where I'm at home now in my flat?'

'Yes.'

'Eating a cheese and pickle sandwich?'

'Eating a caviar sandwich, if you like.'

The idea appealed to me. 'How could I afford that?'

'Your Grandmother left you some money in her will. Or maybe in that world caviar is as cheap as peanut butter, who cares?' The Professor was getting excited. 'But those are trivialities!' Just think of the possibilities. Suppose there had never been a Second World War. Suppose the wheel had never been invented. Suppose humans had evolved from birds. Suppose...'

The old man jabbered on, but I had ceased to listen. My head was spinning. Finally, I managed to gather my thoughts. 'Where are all these possible worlds, then?'

The Professor was silent for a moment, then smiled. 'A good question. I suppose you'd expect me to say far off in space, or in the distant past or future. Well, they're not. Every possible world is in its own "space" and "time", and not related either spatially or temporally to the space and time of our universe.'

'How could I visit another possible world if it's not in our space?'

'That's difficult to explain. All I can tell you is that once you're there you'll travel around like a ghost. You can experience the things that go on, even take the point of view of the person who would have been you in that possible world. But *you*, the actual you talking to me now, won't be able to do a thing.'

But now a different question occurred to me. 'What about the possible worlds in which I never existed at all?'

'Yes, there are many worlds in which you do not exist, far more indeed than the number of worlds in which you do exist. Just think what a fantastic coincidence it is that a particular sperm fertilised a particular egg and made the embryo that grew into you, or that your parents ever met, or that they ever existed!'

This troubled me greatly, though I wasn't exactly sure why. I decided to change tack. 'You said there are possible worlds I could never imagine. What is it that determines whether a world is possible? How different could the

universe be from the way it actually is? What I mean is, what are the limits of possibility?’

‘You should know better than to ask me that!’, the Professor snapped. ‘I’m a scientist, not a philosopher. I can only tell you about what I have been able to discover on the basis of observing real facts. Even if one were to live a million lifetimes, one could only hope to visit a tiny fraction of the possible worlds that exist.’

I was going to ask just how long one would have to live to have time to visit them all, but I stopped myself. The question about the limits of possibility wasn’t a scientific question. It was a question for philosophers. But what is philosophy?

By now, the Professor had switched on the machine. The crystal rods began to glow with an eerie blue light. ‘Do you want to try it out? Where would you like to go first?’

But my mind was racing ahead. I thought about all the questions I had always puzzled over, questions which no-one I’d ever met had been able to help me answer. One could fill one’s head with all kinds of strange and wonderful experiences and still be totally ignorant. Are all possible worlds in a ‘time’ and ‘space’? Why can’t there be worlds where there is no time, or where all that exists is conscious experience? Why is it that I find this person, myself, in this actual world, out of all the worlds I might have found myself in? What’s so special about it? How do I even know which possible world I’m in? For example, how do I know that this world isn’t one of the possible worlds where all that exists is my own dream? Come to think of it, even supposing that there was to be a person exactly like me in a world exactly like this, why did that person have to be me? Travelling around in the Professor’s machine could never tell me what I wanted to know. True, there are possibilities one can’t imagine. But it is also true that we imagine things that aren’t actually possible, things that seem to make sense but are logically absurd. One could travel for ever between possible worlds and never find out which one’s don’t exist!

‘I’m not interested in your machine,’ I told the old man. ‘I’m going to use my own mind instead.’



# the possible world machine

# 2

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## Introduction

WHY did you apply to do this course? That is a question which may have an immediate, clear answer, or it may be one which calls for some thought. Perhaps several considerations were brought to bear, and it may be difficult to say which of all the reasons was the deciding factor. It is just possible that the decision seemed a little reckless or even unwise at the time, given your other heavy commitments, but that you felt you just had to do it anyway for reasons that you could not clearly articulate, and still cannot explain even now. Or it may be the case, finally – though perhaps improbably – that sending in your enrolment form was a spur of the minute action that you cannot account for at all.

Whatever motivated you to apply, one would hope that you did so out of your own free will. That is not a foregone conclusion. You may have been coerced, or tricked, or even hypnotised into joining the course. Here, admittedly, one is relying on the everyday, non-philosophical understanding of what it is to do something out of ‘one’s own free will’. If you were threatened with the sack by a philosophy-mad employer or with divorce by a philosophy-mad spouse if you didn’t join, or coolly at gun point by an agent of the Pathways Association, then you still had the freedom to say no and face the consequences. Even if no such coercion was applied, no-one living in society, it might be argued, is totally free of constraints upon their freedom of action imposed, directly or indirectly by others. But there is a recognised difference between acting within ‘acceptable’ constraints – constraints which respect an agent’s right to make his or her own choices in matters that concern

them – and those which cross the line (admittedly blurred at times) into unacceptability. (In human history, not all societies, perhaps not even the majority have respected ‘freedom’ or ‘liberty’ in this sense: it is the notion of liberty passionately argued for in John Stuart Mill’s famous essay, *On Liberty*.)

Now if you were not coerced or tricked into enrolling, and if you were in full possession of your mental faculties at the time that you made the decision, then common sense would say that it was indeed your own free choice to join the course. If you should come to regret that decision at some time in the future (as we sincerely hope you do not!), then it seems you would only have yourself to blame. What you did, you did without being pushed, with your eyes open and knowing what you were doing. You could have chosen not to have done what you in fact decided to do. You were free to join the course or not to join. And you chose to join. What could be clearer than that?

Let us look a bit more closely what acting freely in this sense involves. If you did act on impulse, then the thought might have come into your head when you saw the advertisement, ‘That looks interesting,’ or, ‘That would be fun.’ Even if there was no time in the intervening period between first seeing the advert and signing the enrolment form when you mentally rehearsed to yourself the reasons why it would be interesting or fun, however, there must have been some background that made your impulsive act intelligible. At the very least you had to have some mental picture of what philosophy is about. You would not have acted thus if you hadn’t felt the need for something new in your life, and so on. Someone else in your position but with different character and dispositions would not have made the decision that you did.

On the other hand, you may have gone through a process of deliberation that eventually led to a decision. You may have asked others what they thought of it, or borrowed a philosophy book from the library, and so on. You may indeed have made several decisions over a period of time, each one of which narrowed down options for consideration. (The first might have been simply, the decision to do something constructive with your free time, the second the decision to do a course, and so on.) At each stage, a range of choices appeared for consideration, and you had a clear reason for selecting one and rejecting the rest. The final decision was in every sense yours, reflecting your beliefs and values. Someone with different beliefs or values would not have had the

reason to do what you had reason to do, a reason which in the absence of countervailing reasons you chose to act upon.

But now suppose that someone were to make the following mischievous suggestion. Whether or not you deliberated before making your choice, you naturally assumed – as everyone does – that there were genuine alternative courses of action available to you. Prior to finally deciding, it seemed that you could have chosen to do one thing or another: all it took was your act of willing the action to make one of these possible outcomes actual. But what actually did happen? At the moment of putting your decision into effect, you were everything that your biological make-up and circumstances had made you, from your birth onwards. Given all that you were, all the decisions you had previously made in your life (accounted for, of course, in an exactly similar way), there was no possibility that you would hold back from the action you chose to do, or that you would choose to do something else instead. Even if you went through a careful process of deliberation, every thought that came into your head, every pro and con that you duly noted, arose in just the way it did because of what you were, because of what your circumstances or your previous choices had made you at just that moment in time. Taking all the circumstances into account – every aspect or nuance to your personality or your situation that was capable of having an effect on your decision – there was only one possible choice that you could have made, even though you were blissfully unaware of that fact.

In short, according to this suggestion, you had to enrol for this course. At the moment when you faced what seemed to be a choice, the outcome was already inevitable. It is only your ignorance of all the relevant circumstances – in the light of the human situation, a merciful ignorance indeed – that makes you think that some extra ingredient of ‘actually choosing’ or ‘freely willing’ had, at any stage of the process right up to the very end, anything to do with the final outcome. In other words, as we watch our lives unfold before us we are all slaves to a course of events over which we have no ultimate control, cogs in a machine, playthings of fate. What difference does it make whether or not you made your decision on impulse, whether your reasons for joining the course were good or bad, or indeed whether you were dragged to the post-box kicking and screaming? The hope that you joined up out of ‘your own free will’ is but a sad delusion.

There must be something, we feel, that is wrong with the reasoning behind that suggestion. Whatever philosophy or logic may say to the contrary, we just know that we have free will. My sense that I do not have to be tapping these keys at this very moment is surely as vivid and as indubitable as my sense of my own existence. Yet at the same time, something has to give. Either the arguments are wrong or we are wrong. – That is the philosophical problem of freedom of the will.

## **The Black Box**

The fighter's head spun. He never saw the swift upper-cut that sneaked under his guard catching him neatly on the left side of the jaw. He felt a vicious stab of pain at the back of his cranium, and a cold fog seemed to descend over the ring. For a few moments he gazed at the crowd, an expression of puzzlement in his eyes as if he were surprised to see anyone there, then at the bloodied face of his opponent. At last his head seemed to nod in recognition, his knees buckled and he sank gently to the canvas.

Later, in the bar, Danny was commiserating with his friend Joe.

'I just don't know how it could've happened,' Joe was wailing. 'A hundred quid it's cost me. My man was way ahead on points. He'd knocked that lump of lard down twice, no, three times. There was no way he could have lost.'

'Well, he did lose,' said Danny in a sombre tone that suggested a profound truth about the nature of human existence. The two men contemplated the truth in silence. Then Danny spoke again. 'He lost his concentration for a fraction of a second, that's all.'

Joe said nothing. That fraction of a second had swallowed up the week's housekeeping money.

That night, Joe had a dream. At first, he thought he'd woken. Next to him, his wife Betty looked serene. On her face there was no hint of the furious row they'd had that evening. Then his heart stopped as he became aware that someone else was in the room. From the shadows a tall figure in a shabby anorak approached, its face hidden by a voluminous hood.

'You don't know me, but I know you,' came a well-spoken man's voice, barely above the level of a whisper. Joe lunged at the figure, but his arms grasped at thin air. 'I'm sorry about your bet, but I knew you'd lose,' continued the voice unperturbed. 'You haven't been very lucky lately, have you?' Joe did not reply. It was a statement, not a question. 'That's why I've come to make you a proposal. I think you'll find it quite attractive.'

'Don't tell me, you want to buy my soul!' laughed Joe. 'Well you're in luck. It's going cheap.' He was no longer afraid, but settling down to enjoy his dream.

'No, not at all,' replied the voice. 'I have a gift for you. You can accept the gift or reject it, there's no catch. Then it's up to you how you use it.'

Joe noticed a small black box on the bedside table. He picked it up. The only features were a red button, and next to it in large white capitals the words, 'PRESS HERE'. For a few seconds Joe's finger hovered, then he carefully placed the box back on the table.

'Very wise,' said the hooded figure. 'You want to know what it does first. I'll tell you everything, we've got nothing to hide. In our organisation, we know the future like a book. On the basis of our exhaustive knowledge of the present state of the physical universe – I'll spare you the details! – we are able to predict every event that will ever happen, the birth of a solar system, the falling of a leaf, with perfect accuracy. Now, the answers to any questions that you will ever wish to ask about the future are stored in that box. Need I say more?'

'Yes you do!' said Joe defiantly. 'What you've just told me doesn't add up. It's one thing being able to predict the course of physical events, whether large or small. For the sake of argument, I'll grant you that, though the idea seems utterly far fetched. But if you then make your predictions available to human agents, you've introduced a new variable which wasn't part of the prediction, and that is what a person such as myself chooses to do with that so-called knowledge. If you had told me that I was going to go to the boxing match yesterday, you would have given me a reason that I previously didn't have for not going, namely, to prove you wrong!'

'How naive of you!', the hooded figure admonished Joe condescendingly. 'Do you suppose that we haven't already *included* what you're going to do with the information as part of the calculation? I assure you everything has been taken into account.'

'Then you already know whether I'm going to accept your gift or not?'

'Precisely. Now, will you take it?'

Joe's tongue moved to form the word 'No' but he found himself saying 'Yes.'

Joe awoke to find his wife already up and dressed. He was about to tell her of his strange dream when he noticed with a stab of fright the black box in her hands.

'I suppose this is what you spent the money on!' Betty looked at Joe accusingly.

'For God's sake, don't press that button,' cried Joe.

'Why not?' Seeing her husband panic, she tossed the box carelessly from one hand to the other. Then she pressed the button. From inside the box came a woman's voice. 'Thank you for calling. Please state your question after the tone...Beep.'

'Oh God, what am I going to do now?' blubbered Joe.

'You're going to take the box from your wife.'

Without thinking, Joe grabbed the box and put it on the bed. He waited to see what else it would do, but nothing happened. Keeping his eyes fixed on the mysterious device, Joe told Betty about the man in the anorak. Betty's mouth grew wider and wider.

'You expect me to believe that!'

'You heard what happened.'

For the first time, Betty's face showed signs of doubt. Joe saw his chance to take charge of the situation. Controlling his fear, he slowly reached forward and pressed the button. 'Go on, ask it something!'

'Thank you for calling. Please state your question after the tone...Beep.'

Betty hesitated. 'All right. What am I going to do now?'

'In fifteen seconds time you will make a phone call to your friend Judy.'

'Well I'm not, so there!' replied Betty, marching over to the dressing table. On the table she noticed a note that she'd scribbled two days before: 'Judy's birthday tomorrow.'

'Oh drat!' Without thinking, she marched over to the phone, picked it up and dialled. As her friend's voice came on she slammed the phone down. The penny had dropped.

Joe laughed with glee. 'My turn now!' He asked the box for the complete list of winners at Kempton Park horse races that afternoon. As the woman in the box recited the names, Joe's eyebrows rose several times. Then he phoned his bookmaker to place a £50 accumulator. 'We're going to be rich!'

Joe and Betty danced around the bedroom.

Betty sipped a Bacardi and Coke as the Caribbean sun beat down on pale yellow sands that stretched as far as the eye could see. The azure ocean merged at the horizon with a cloudless sky. 'Darling,' she said suddenly, it's been a wonderful holiday, but I'd really like to go home now. I miss my friends.'

Joe looked desperate. 'We can't.'

‘Why ever not? Is there something you haven’t told me?’ As she stared into Joe’s pleading eyes, Betty felt her insides turn to ice.

‘I asked the box this morning how long the holiday was going to go on and it said another two months,’ Joe said in a flat tone. ‘There’s no point in trying to leave, something’s bound to stop us.’

Betty’s eyes flashed with anger. ‘The box!’ You told me you’d left it behind!’

‘I was going to,’ said Joe breaking into sobs, ‘then I asked it whether I would leave it behind and it said no.’

Betty gripped his shoulders. ‘Listen to me. We’ve got to get rid of it!’ But Joe avoided her eyes.

‘There’s nothing we can do.’

The kitchen table was strewn with empty beer cans. Joe was alone. In front of him the black box seemed to grow larger and larger until it filled his field of vision. Gripped by an irresistible desire and an equally strong aversion, Joe willed his hand not to move. But he had to know. He pressed the red button.

‘Thank you for calling. Please state your question after the tone...Beep’.

‘Whaddam I g’n do now?’

Joe’s voice was barely comprehensible but the box replied immediately. ‘In one minute’s time you’re going to drink another can of beer.’

Joe surveyed the table. All the cans were empty. He felt a surge of joy. He counted them to make sure. He’d bought twelve and drunk twelve. There was no more drink in the house. ‘I’m free, free at last!’

At that moment, the door bell rang. It was his friend Danny. ‘I heard things weren’t going too well for you,’ said Danny. ‘I thought I’d drop by to watch the snooker.’ In his arms were two six-packs of beer.



# the possible world machine

# 3

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## Introduction

WHAT do you do your thinking with? Speaking for myself, sometimes I think with my typewriter, sometimes with my pen, and sometimes – though it may sound strange to say this – just with my brain. I may be sitting in a bus, looking out of the window, and – amazingly – words and images appear that are not inscribed *in* anything. Admittedly, one would never have imagined that grey stuff inside the skull was doing the thinking if science had not told us so. Science has achieved many remarkable things; what it says should be taken seriously. But can it seriously be believed that all that is going on in my mind at this moment is a process in my brain? The more I think about it the more absurd it seems. What can it possibly mean to say that this image, or this feeling, or this thought just *is* a pattern of chemical or electrical changes in a clump of brain cells? How can this sensation of blue as I look out of my study window at the sky just *be* a physical event, when the two seem so utterly different?

In the grip of this picture of the ineffable quality of consciousness, one is far more inclined to believe that something essentially non-physical – the mind or soul – *uses* the brain to think with just as I use my pen or my typewriter. The brain, on this view, is the physical collection point for experiences of the world outside or of bodily feelings, but not the thing that is doing the experiencing. It is the relay for converting intentions formed in the mind into physical action, but not the thing that is doing the intending. Yet it is not so easy to explain why an embodied brain should necessarily be thought of as incapable of thinking, or experiencing or intending all by itself.

Now if someone from the last century had been shown a television set and told that images that appeared on it were of events happening at distant parts of the globe, they would surely have found that hard to believe. What's the difference between astonishment at the idea that thoughts and feelings might just be brain processes and astonishment at the television set? One might say this: the fact that the television set is capable of showing images of things thousands of miles away would not be too difficult to prove; the problem would only be explaining *how* that was possible – a matter of basic electronics, the workings of the cathode ray tube, and so on. By contrast, it seems that nothing would ever count as showing that thoughts and feelings just are processes in the brain, however well we came to understand its workings. For there is always the alternative explanation that mental events are distinct from, but *correspond* to physical events.

Consider another analogy. I might think of my mind as a windowless room containing various pieces of mental 'furniture'. A scientist of the future, or so one imagines, might discover a way to find out exactly what is in there, say, by displaying images of the mental objects on a screen – a disturbing prospect! Even so, the objects of furniture themselves would remain hidden away, on the other side of the screen; the only person who could ever get a *direct* view would be myself. For while two or more persons can look at the same table or chair, only the person who is actually experiencing an experience, feeling a feeling, or thinking a thought can see the actual experience, or feeling, or thought, as opposed to its mere representation in speech or writing – or on a 'brain-monitoring screen'. Why is that? or why at least does it seem to be so? The picture one calls up is of an insurmountable barrier between the 'inside' of the mind and its 'outside'. – Yet just because a picture like this seems to force itself upon us doesn't necessarily make it correct. Before we draw any hasty conclusions, we must examine the hidden, unquestioned assumptions that lead us to see things in that way.

## Walkabout

SHE knew she was dead. The acrid, brown fumes billowed and swirled, but she was no longer choking. She held her breath until she realised she no longer needed to breathe. The heat and the pain were gone. Briefly, the wall of flame parted and she saw a crouching figure rock gently from side to side, then topple over. As it did so, a charred hand flopped towards her. For a few seconds she caught sight of a silver bracelet, then the figure was once more engulfed in flame. 'Good-bye dear body,' she thought, 'What am I going to do without you?'

What indeed? She wanted to move, to escape into the daylight. But there was nothing to move, no sense of weight or physical resistance, no place where effort could be applied. It seemed as if somewhere inside her there had to be mental levers that she could push or pull, but she could not find them. Or maybe she had found them, but they were no longer connected to anything. It was difficult to accept that she no longer had a body. That in a world of living human subjects negotiating their way around a physical environment of obstacles and tools and other human subjects, no physical being occupied the place called 'here'. What world could there be for her now?

Then again, how could she tell she had no body? An incongruous thought came: If one of Michaelangelo's great statues were magically endowed with the gift of sight, it would never know its own grandeur.

Then she moved. At first, it felt as if an unknown force had carried her along. Then she realized that she herself had willed it. She had caught herself, she had found her 'levers'. She could turn her point of view left or right, up or down, just as if she was swivelling her eyes, except that now she could swivel through three hundred and sixty degrees. Another lever initiated movement at the pace of a relaxed jog in whichever direction 'she' happened to be pointing. A third acted as an instant brake. After a few hasty experiments, she headed for the window and floated down into the street.

Although there was no need to, she felt comfortable hovering at her old height of five feet five inches. She joined the crowds that pressed forward against the hastily erected barriers. Suddenly everything went black. She had been dodging in and out, trying to get a good view of the spectacle, when one of the bystanders had walked straight 'into' her. She was inside his body! She

was not afraid, just curious. She thought she could just perceive vague deep-red shapes in the almost pitch dark. Was that dark line part of a rib-cage? Was that palpitating mass a beating heart? Then just as suddenly she re-emerged through a heavy brown sweater, back into the daylight.

It occurred to her that it was rather strange that the objects of her vision continued to obey the laws of optics, considering that she didn't possess anything to physically 'see' with. She wasn't able to see through opaque objects, or round corners, for example. Yet undoubtedly she was 'seeing' without eyes, in fact, things looked exactly the same as they did when she was 'alive'! Though she had never believed in God, it was difficult to avoid concluding that some supernatural agency was responsible for what she was now experiencing. – Then what about before, when she still had a body?

Her thoughts were taking her in a direction she did not want to go. She concentrated on the spectacle, watching with grim admiration as the firemen carried out their well-rehearsed moves. It was clear from their faces that they did not expect anyone to remain alive in the inferno.

She wondered when her body would be found, and whether anyone would be able to identify her. It was clear that no-one was going to attempt to venture into the apartment building until the fire was out. After a while she lost interest. Where to now? She could go anywhere she liked. But as she turned the possibilities over in her mind, they all seemed pointless. She remembered there was a new film that she had very much wanted to see. Prices in the new cinema complexes were exorbitant, but now she didn't have to pay! She headed for the city centre. Gradually, however, suppressed thoughts began to surface. 'What am I? How long am I going to continue in this state of limbo?' The more she thought about the second question, the more she was filled with dread. 'This is where it all ends. There is no escape.' She stopped near a bench where a bag lady was sitting. Hovering next to her for company, she tried to concentrate on the first question.

What am I? At school she had learned about the philosopher Descartes, who said that we are essentially non-physical souls, existing in time but not in space, yet connected in some mysterious way to physical bodies. He had reached that conclusion by a very subtle proof. He argued that since it was possible to doubt the existence of a world outside one's own consciousness, it was at least logically possible that a conscious subject could exist in the absence of any physical objects. It followed, he said, that whatever it is that essentially makes me me, a subject with these thoughts and feelings, cannot

be anything physical. However closely the things that go on in my mind may be connected with the physical things that go on in my body – for example, my brain – my mind and my physical body are still two and not one.

‘Well, it seems old Descartes was right!’, she thought. ‘Here I am, no body, just a mind, a subject capable of thought and will, experiencing the world from my detached viewpoint.’ On second thoughts, however, things didn’t seem so clear cut. ‘How do I know that I have not turned into a tiny germ, too small to see myself in any mirror, small enough to pass through larger objects? Perhaps that is what I have been all along!’ She remembered a friend who’d got involved with Scientologists telling her some such fantastic story about intelligent alien beings who had learned to hitch a ride in human bodies. Was that so absurd? It did seem odd, to say the least, that despite the enormously detailed knowledge of the human body provided by physiology, the tiny organisms had up to now completely evaded discovery. Yet the alternative hypothesis that the mind was non-physical meant rejecting the hard-won discoveries of physical science, and its claim to account for all the events that take place in the universe.

Then another possibility occurred to her. ‘Perhaps I’m dreaming all this!’ Descartes had used the sceptical thought that he was being fed with dreams by an evil demon to demonstrate how it was possible for a soul to exist in a world where there were no physical objects. But in fact it seemed to her that the correct conclusion to draw in her case was the reverse. If she was dreaming, according to her only understanding of the word, then somewhere there was a physical body, asleep, and the thoughts and experiences she was now having were its thoughts and experiences. Of course, Descartes had meant something different by ‘dreaming’: an experience happening without anything physical for it to happen in, awake or asleep, indeed without any kind of physical cause. But nothing she had so far experienced forced her to accept Descartes’ theory.

Neither of the alternatives to Descartes could be dismissed, but did either one or the other have to be right? Perhaps the first was correct, but it was still open to scientific disproof. If exhaustive physical investigations failed to discover any of the Scientologists’ ‘riders’, then at some stage it would surely be rational to conclude that it was, at least, highly unlikely that there were any such things. The second implied that none of the things she was experiencing was really happening. It was something she very much wanted to believe. But supposing things continued on like this for weeks, months, years? Eventually,

she would have to take her experiences at face value: the possibility of waking up would recede further and further into the background. What a terrible thought!

There was one more possibility. Perhaps her body was awake somewhere, but deprived of all its senses apart from a remarkable ability to see things from a point of view outside its own location. She pictured the remnants of a brain ticking over inside her charred remains. Surely it was incredible that there could still be anything in there capable of thought, let alone possessing such a seemingly magical faculty of sight. But suppose that had never been her real physical body, but merely the point of view from which her 'real' body, perhaps hundreds of miles away, perhaps in another galaxy, perceived the world? The idea involved no logical absurdity as far as she could see. But clearly the theory could never be tested. One would have to search the whole universe before one could be sure that no such body existed!

The old woman turned to her and smiled. The expression was warm and welcoming. She felt drawn closer and closer. Then she was looking out through the old woman's eyes. She could feel the cool breeze on her face, smell the musty odour of her ragged clothes, feel the reassuring pressure of the wooden bench.

The old woman chuckled. 'That was a nice trip. I wonder if there's anything to eat in the litter bin?'

# the possible world machine

# 4

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## Introduction

WHO is Prime Minister of Great Britain? I am sure no-one reading these lines at 11 o'clock on the 18th September 2007 would be in any doubt that the answer is Gordon Brown. But suppose I were to ask another question: is Gordon Brown alive? If someone were to ask me now, I could not honestly tell them that he is definitely alive: if he had died within the last ten minutes, I would never know about it. Can I then assert that Gordon Brown is Prime Minister, if I don't know whether he is alive or dead? – 'Don't be ridiculous,' the reader will retort, 'When we say that Gordon Brown is Prime Minister we do not mean to imply that we know he hasn't died in the last ten minutes; only that *if* he hasn't died, or *if* there hasn't been a military coup, or *if* any one of a number of other circumstances hasn't occurred, *then* Gordon Brown is Prime Minister.' Now the problem with this reply is that one can say the same with regard to just about anything we claim to know. What we call our 'knowledge' rests on a vast network of assumptions; assumptions whose truth or falsity would be impossible to check or prove in their entirety. In that case, it seems, we simply have no right to claim knowledge whenever there is the possibility that we have made some false assumption. Nor would there be any point in attempting to list the assumptions in a particular case, for the list would be endless.

In response to this, we might feel safer making the more modest claim that all we really know is what each of us has learned directly through our senses. Everything else that we believe comes under the heading of the 'best explanation' of our sense experiences. For example, I believe that there is a

country called the United States, although I have never been there. Were I to board an aeroplane at Heathrow to visit my relatives in Chicago, I could not, on the basis of my subsequent experiences, rule out absolutely the thought that I had been deceived by an incredibly elaborate hoax; that the aeroplane, after circling round for a few hours over the Atlantic, had not really landed in a remote part of Scotland. Provided the scene through the aeroplane window *looked* like pictures I've seen of the US – smog, skyscrapers, freeways and the like – I wouldn't know the difference. My belief that there is such a country as the US is a very well confirmed *theory*; but one which certain experiences – such as discovering the hoax – would persuade me to overturn in favour of a better theory.

But why should information gained directly from sense perception should be especially privileged? On precisely the same lines, one would say that the best explanation of the experiences I am now having as I write these words is that I sitting in front of a computer terminal at the University Information Technology Centre, although it is conceivable that I might be asleep in my bed dreaming of the work I planned to do the next day. My belief that my senses are not deceiving me, indeed that they are at this moment operating at all, is just another theory, another thing I believe on the basis of a network of assumptions that I cannot prove.

One should note that the beliefs, 'Gordon Brown is Prime Minister' and 'I visited my relatives in Chicago last summer' have a somewhat different status. One would *accept* for the purposes in hand that Gordon Brown is still alive at this moment, though one may have no positive belief about it. A lot of what we believe falls into this category. In contrast with my belief that I visited America, there is nothing in my past or present experience that Gordon Brown's being alive or dead at this very minute *explains*. (It would appear that what makes the difference between the two cases is time. The examples of Gordon Brown and the US could be switched round, if we consider the possibility that the entire American continent might have been obliterated by a Martian invasion one minute ago.)

Either way, whether we are considering beliefs that figure positively in the explanation of our experience, or beliefs whose truth we just accept, lacking any positive reason to reject them, should the lack of absolute proof be a cause



for worry? Should we perhaps be more circumspect when we express our beliefs? If in reply to a question about my relatives I said, 'I have an Uncle Jack in the US – provided there really is such a place,' it would be considered rather odd. What point would I be making? Even if every unqualified assertion says more than we strictly 'know', still even if one were able to put in all the necessary qualifications it would add no relevant *information*. If, in response to these imagined doubts, people got into the habit of qualifying everything they said, all attempts at communication would be swamped by a mass of redundant verbiage.

Or suppose the philosopher concluded from this that, 'Nobody really knows anything, we only have beliefs.' The problem is that to give up use of the term 'knowledge' deprives our language of a word that marks an important distinction: one person, we like to think, can believe a thing, and may happen to be right; while they yet may fail know it, because the way in which they acquired the belief, or the reasons they would give for holding the belief are defective in some way. Yet in spite of such practical considerations I think we should be worried. The utility of a distinction, as we saw in the case of supposedly 'free' or 'unfree' actions, is no proof that it marks a real difference in the things themselves. Who is to say that the grounds for our beliefs are not all ultimately defective? What right, indeed, do we have to think that what we consider a 'good' explanation is more likely to be true than a 'bad' one? If we cannot *prove* that there exists a real difference between knowledge and belief, or justify our notion of best explanation, then we are all mere guessers, trying to convince each other – and ourselves – otherwise. There is no solid ground beneath our feet; the ground is not even soft. Nothing can ultimately be counted on, nothing is secure or definite. Each of us lives in a world of our own sheer invention. – Is there any way to resist the destructive arguments of the philosophical sceptic?

## A Case of Doubt

It was 7.30 on a Friday morning, and Alice cast a baleful eye down a corridor strewn with Coke tins, cigarette ends and empty crisp packets. It had been the same all last term. Crisps and ash crushed underfoot made dark score lines in the parquet flooring which took ages to remove. It was bad enough that the Physiology Department paid their student guinea pigs the same for lying down and doing nothing as she was getting for doing real work. What made her angry was that no allowance was made for the mess caused by the young people as they queued in hordes during the lunch hour for their 'screening interviews'. She was expected to clear all this up and still get to the Physics labs by 8.00. She once asked what the interviews were for – and for two pins would have volunteered herself – but all she learned was that it was all hush hush, and only the lucky few that got selected ever found out the Big Secret. Well they could keep it. She wasn't going into anything blindfolded.

Things could be worse, though, she thought philosophically. At least here the academics talked to her. Professor Bert something-or-other (she wasn't much good with names) often began work early in his cosy room overlooking the university park, and could be counted on to brighten her day with a kind word or a joke. Alice noticed the light under his door and felt glad.

'Good morning, Alice. Looking forward to the weekend?' Peter Burtowski leaned back in his swivel chair and smiled. Every Friday he asked the same question, but always managed to make it sound as if he was really interested to know.

'Oh yes. My daughter and her husband are coming on Saturday, with little Hilda.'

'She's just started school, hasn't she?'

Alice nodded her reply, pleased that the Professor had remembered.

'Our youngest granddaughter can't wait to get to school in the morning. I bet your little one's the same, isn't she, Alice?'

'Yes, she's enjoying her school very much. She's always full of tales when she comes home.'

Alice was going to continue, but stopped herself. Their short conversation was over. The Professor smiled again briefly and turned back to his word processor.

It was a glorious late-October morning as Alice walked home through the park. The sun cast patterns of gold-leaf on the grass and the trees, a rich colour that reminded Alice of her childhood. A warm, scented breeze caressed her face and neck, melting ice packs of memory and flooding her mind with images that made her swoon. In her imagination it seemed as if the birds were singing in tune. Stopping to listen, she fancied that she could hear the song, 'Oranges and Lemons'. Two squirrels darted about playfully, throwing acorns at one another. Alice watched, captivated.

On the VDU screen, little green letters danced, then formed into neat rows. Peter gazed at the press release he'd been composing with a sense of deep satisfaction. The results of his experiments had been collated and checked, and were already on their way to the British Journal of Neurophysiology. For many years he had been considered pre-eminent in his field. Now, he had created a new and vital field of research all of his own, whose ramifications were endless and far outstripped the narrow academic world to which his recognition had hitherto been confined. Tomorrow, when the news broke, his name would be known world-wide. For a few moments, he daydreamed about the series he planned to do for the BBC.

'Here mum, look at this. Quickly!'

Alice was just putting the brussel sprouts on the stove when Susan called from the living room. Summoned by her daughter's urgent tone, she rushed in, still holding the saucepan. Susan gestured to the TV. On the screen were the familiar grey buildings of the university where Alice worked. Then the scene changed to what looked like a dentist's surgery, where a young man reclined in the chair, eyes closed, a forest of wires attached to his head.

'...According to the Head of Department, Professor Burtowski, the subjects reported vivid dreams which corresponded almost exactly to the detailed information fed through the electrodes directly into their brains,' the science reporter was saying.

On Alice's face was the look of someone who had just put two and two together to make four.

'What is an electrode? What does she mean?', asked Susan, addressing her question to the TV set.

'It means no more cinema or TV or videos!', her husband Mike babbled excitedly. 'You can just go down to the corner shop and rent your own dream!'

Alice imagined herself in a villa in the South of France awaiting her morning massage, the cook busy in the kitchen, the maid scrubbing the ceramic tile floors. Then she glanced at Hilda playing with her dolls, oblivious to everything that was going on.

'I'm quite happy living a real life, thank you very much!'

The following Monday, when Alice returned from work, her next door neighbour was waiting at her front gate, looking very agitated. 'What would you say if I told you that you'd won a million pounds?', she blurted out.

'I'd say, don't be daft!'

'It's true! A man and woman from Littlewoods came round. They wouldn't say exactly how much you'd won but it's a very large First Dividend, a seven-figure sum. If you don't believe me, call this number.'

Alice remembered that in the excitement over the News item, no-one had bothered to check the pools coupon.

Two hours later, Alice was standing at the entrance to her living room. Her legs felt weak as she leaned against the door frame, not daring to take a single step forward into the room. On the sofa opposite, a smartly dressed young woman was explaining, '...We can arrange an appointment with our financial advisor to discuss how to invest the money, or you can see your own bank manager if you like...' Next to her, a man who looked like an insurance salesman with a dark grey suit and black briefcase smiled broadly, saying nothing but nodding at intervals. Alice thought how she'd scrimped and saved over the years just to have a little money put by for when she retired. Now more than she'd ever dreamed of was being handed to her on a plate. Looking at her visitor's animated, empty faces, she felt a momentary surge of anger. Then she thought of her villa.

It was only after the couple had gone that Alice began to have doubts. Not that she was especially prone to doubt: it was just that things like that never happened to her. Two modest wins at bingo were the sum total of her success in competitions. She remembered someone telling her that one was far more likely to get murdered than have a major pools win. But surely all this

couldn't be a hoax? Why should anyone go to so much trouble? No, that seemed even more unlikely. Then, as she gazed at the empty sofa a vision came to her of a middle-aged woman dressed in a light blue smock, reclining in a dentist's chair, eyes closed, wires attached to her scalp. Suddenly, she felt sick with panic.

The Professor was naturally delighted to hear from his secretary about Alice's pools win, but wondered why Alice had not come to see him herself. It wasn't like her. Then a strange idea occurred to him: suppose Alice had for some unaccountable reason become convinced from the news reports that she was being experimented on against her will. How could he ever persuade her that that was not the case?

'No, she's too simple to have doubts like that,' he thought.

In a laboratory on a planet many hundreds of light years from Earth is a glass jar with a living brain in it. Attached to the brain are thousands of tiny tubes and wires. The alien scientists who work there refer to the brain in words which approximately translate as, 'Human Specimen Number 47933'. The brain refers to itself as Peter Burtowski.

# the possible world machine

# 5

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## Introduction

HOW do I know that other persons have minds? Superficially, the question I have asked is similar to the question, How do I know that other persons have brains? It is *logically* possible that some, or perhaps all the so-called human beings I have ever met do not have brains. All the human beings whose heads have ever been opened may have been found to have brains, but that could, at best, only make it very likely that the rest, including myself, have brains also. One can imagine a brain surgeon cutting open a patient's skull and being shocked to discover tiny wires and printed circuits where a brain ought to have been. One would be led to conclude that the subject was not a human being but what science fiction writers call an 'android': an intelligent robot.

Even that conclusion might prove unwarranted. It is conceivable that one might find, on further investigation, that all the robot's actions were controlled by a pre-recorded computer disc. Knowing all the things that would ever happen to the robot down to the minutest detail (as in the story 'The Black Box'), super-intelligent aliens have pre-programmed all the robot's speech and movements, so that it was no more than a dressed up tape recorder, simulating intelligence. – In this case, as in the previous case, such far-fetched worries relate to the general or 'inductive' scepticism. One could find cause to doubt, say, whether other persons had brains if in response to sceptical arguments we considered last time, one came to question whether prediction based on inductive inference from examined cases to unexamined cases can be a source of knowledge. For the judgement that the worries are 'far-fetched', i.e. highly improbable, presupposes the validity of the general

assumption that the future will resemble the past, or that nature is in fact uniform. If we cannot be certain that such inductive inference is valid, then we cannot claim knowledge, not even knowledge of probabilities.

By contrast, the question how I know whether other persons have minds or consciousness, despite its apparent similarity to the question how I know that they have brains, raises a quite different form of scepticism. Consider first the case of the android. How could one ever determine whether androids or artificial human beings are *really* conscious? The ability to deal intelligently with practical problems or with questions we asked it in just the same way that a human being might do would not be enough to satisfy us, even if we could prove that it was genuinely responding to its environment and not merely running off a pre-recorded disc. We would still want to know whether there was anything it was *like* to be that individual; whether there were real thoughts and feelings corresponding to the physical processes occurring in its computer brain, or only sheer 'darkness' on the inside.

But then can one not ask exactly the same question about any apparently 'normal' human being? Couldn't a creature with a fully functioning brain, who spoke and acted as we did, nevertheless lack real thoughts and feelings? Even if one were confident, in general, in forms of reasoning based on induction, that will not help in the present example. The inference that all human beings have brains is based on the many humans whose heads have been opened in the past. We infer that those human beings who have not had their heads opened are *alike* in the relevant respects to those who have. By contrast, the basis for my inference that other human beings have minds and are not mere 'zombies' (cf. 3/pp. 42ff.) is just one single instance: my own case. I know that there is not darkness in me, because I am immediately aware of the presence of my own thoughts and feelings. But those are the only thoughts and feelings I know about in that way. I learn about the thoughts and feelings of others only indirectly, through their speech and actions.

The problem is that we do not normally trust inference from a single, unique case, because for all we know we may have come across the exception, rather than the rule. We prefer to look for other examples before committing ourselves. Moreover, when we have a series of examples to go on, we can corroborate the inductive inference by checking predicted results against

those that actually turn up. But in the case of my so-called knowledge of other minds, there is no question of my looking for other examples. The only case I shall ever be acquainted with is my own. I therefore have no way of determining whether my possession of consciousness is the exception rather than the rule, no way of checking whether or not my inference that other persons have consciousness is sound or unsound. – For all I can ever know, it seems, I may be utterly alone in the universe.



## **A Lesson in Biology**

On a clearing by a lake, flanked by tall oaks and sycamores, a group of young robots were playing hockey. Their wheels left crazy patterns in the newly mown grass as they zig-zagged back and forth in pursuit of a silver disc that sped inches above the ground, then hovered motionless for a few moments before sailing through the air out of reach. The silence was broken only by the crackle and hum of electric motors strained to maximum load, and the crunch of metal on metal as round, squat bodies recklessly cannoned into one another. Coloured flags fluttered on radio antennae that whipped through the air like rapiers as the robots accelerated and swerved in the *melée*. The Yellows were playing the Greens, while Reds and Blues cheered from the sidelines, or chased one another up and down the edge of the lake, or stood motionless with solar panels extended to catch the last few drops of precious energy before sundown.

Concorde Jet was beginning to tire. She'd chased backwards and forwards without let up, but it seemed the action was always somewhere else. She was beginning to resent being allocated the position of left back. The wings and the forwards were getting all the fun. No-one seemed to want to pass the disc to her. She called for it repeatedly, but time after time her radio broadcasts fell on deaf antennae. She could score goals with the best of them. Why wouldn't anyone give her a chance?

All of a sudden her circuits buzzed with joy as she found herself in control of the silver disc for the first time in the match. In a desperate lunge, she'd succeeded in intercepting a badly played forward pass. She felt a surge of power from her drive motor as she began to race towards the Yellow goal. Defenders stood facing her menacingly as she called out for support from her team-mates. She was just about to take a shot at goal when she noticed that no-one else was moving. Realising that something was wrong, she juddered to a halt, allowing the disc to speed across the grass.

All eyes were turned towards the trees, from where a biped tottered towards them, upper limbs outstretched, its soft pale body quivering and lurching as it shifted its weight from one lower limb to the other in a typical jerky motion. As it came closer, Concorde noticed the streaks of dirt on its emaciated body and tattered plastic tunic. A runaway! The biped had

probably spend a week or more scraping for roots and berries and was clearly starving.

‘W-h-o i-s y-o-u-r o-w-n-e-r?,’ the Captain of the Yellow team boomed out, her metal casing rattling as she switched her loudspeaker on to full volume. The biped did not answer but continued to lurch forwards. Then its rubbery mouth-parts began to open and close, and a creaky, spluttering sound emerged, like an electric motor about to break down. ‘C-a-u-t-i-o-n! D-o n-o-t a-p-p-r-o-a-c-h a-n-y c-l-o-s-e-r!’ Called the Yellow Captain, beginning to panic as she tried to remember the standard safety drill. There had been some ugly incidents recently, where robots had been ambushed and destroyed by gangs of roaming bipeds. But the solitary biped ignored the order and continued its relentless approach.

Without warning, a spindly limb waved, and a rock crashed into the Yellow Captain’s camera pod. Instantly blinded, she twisted her turret back and forth in agony while her friends looked on in horror. The biped was just about to launch a second rock when the silver disc flashed by, severing the raised limb at the root. The biped began to emit screeching sounds as red liquid pumped down its side. The disc flashed past a second time and the screeching stopped.

Concorde returned home to a severe scolding from her guardian. ‘You had no right to play in the park without permission,’ Boeing Jet was telling her. ‘And in any case, at the first sign of trouble you should have called for help. You know that unauthorised culling is strictly illegal. I’ve a good mind to remove your batteries and keep you plugged into your extension lead!’

Boeing’s rusty body shook with anger, sending up a shimmer of fine particles. But Concorde was in defiant mood. ‘I don’t see why we need bipeds anyway. They’re just a nuisance. All they do is spoil things and hurt us whenever they get the chance. And they’re useless as servants; there’s nothing a biped can do that a robot can’t do better. Why don’t we just get rid of them all?’

‘You wouldn’t destroy all the apple trees, just because sometimes apples fell on us and broke our antennae, would you? Besides, the bipeds are of special scientific interest. They are the only organisms that are able to move themselves about. There’s evidence that long ago there were many types of similar organisms. Some had four legs, some swam and some actually flew! But they all became extinct, though no-one knows why.’

Concorde imagined all those biological forms, wriggling and slimy, proliferating over their planet like weeds. She shuddered with disgust. 'All I can say is I'm glad they're not around now!'

Boeing was disappointed to witness this sad display of her ward's lack of sensitivity. It was an attitude that seemed to be becoming increasingly prevalent, especially amongst the young. If a thing seemed ugly or was of no practical use, destroy it. There seemed to be no appreciation that beauty and value could be more than a matter of superficial appearance. The ugliest weed still looked beautiful to the botanist examining its structure under a microscope. The bipeds, despite their grotesque appearance, were fascinating subjects of study, in addition to being the last link to an unknown past. Indeed, Boeing longed to have one of her own. Perhaps then Concorde would learn to be more appreciative. But bipeds were expensive to buy and even more costly to keep. she could never afford one on a Traffic Warden's salary. Even if she were lucky enough to win the Lottery, it took months or even years of bureaucratic red tape to get a license.

Later, her neighbour DeHavilland Turbo-Prop called by for a game of scrabble. DeHavilland was a good ten years her junior and still shiny, a successful sales executive for a double-glazing company. She and her two wards had recently acquired a biped and were still breaking it in.

'Believe me, Boeing, they're more trouble than they're worth,' her friend was saying. 'We've tried everything from beatings to electric shocks, but instead of behaving better, it only gets worse. Yesterday, it broke into our living room and nearly destroyed my microfilm library. In the end, we had to take it out into the garden and throw it in the pond. We held its head under the water for a good minute before it calmed down.'

Boeing sympathised with her friend. 'I know you've got to be firm; it'll pay dividends in the long run. There was a discussion on breakfast TV about it just this morning. You've got to persevere, that's what all the experts say.'

'I do hope so.'

'Tell you what, why don't you join me at my philosophy evening class tonight? It will give you something different to think about. Your Douglas and Vanguard can come over and keep Concorde company.'

'I'm not sure my computer is up to that kind of abstract reasoning, Boeing. You know me, I'm too practical for that sort of thing.'

‘Nonsense! There’s nothing to it,’ her friend admonished her. ‘Come along, it’ll be fun!’

By the time Boeing and DeHavilland arrived, the room was almost full. Through a forest of camera pods, Boeing watched a crumpled looking lecturer motor nervously up and down in front of the display screen.

‘Tonight, we’re going to discuss the philosophical problem of other minds,’ the ageing robot was saying. ‘I wonder whether any of you has ever asked yourself how you can be sure what someone else is thinking or feeling, when you can never rule out the possibility that they are deliberately setting out to deceive you about their state of mind? How can you even know that anyone other than yourself has *consciousness* – whether they have any real thoughts and feelings at all – or merely behave in a way that leads you to think that they do? Or here’s another angle you might think about. Have you ever wondered whether flowers or trees or even bipeds might not be conscious? For example, how do you know that when a biped is injured, it doesn’t feel pain, just as we do?’

‘What an absurd idea!’ thought Boeing.

# the possible world machine

# 6

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## Introduction

WHAT makes me *me*? One might think that's an odd question to ask. As I munch my breakfast toast, there is no doubt in my mind who is sitting in my seat. My wife and children see that old familiar face, smiling or distracted, occasionally frowning; hear a voice that they hear practically every day of their lives. To my family and others who know me, or at least know me well, as indeed to myself, I am absolutely unique and irreplaceable.

Now it is fortunate for us human beings that things have turned out this way. For there is no logical necessity to it. From the point of view of biological science, a human body is an amazingly intricate structure of living cells, themselves complex structures of organic molecules, so intricate and so complex, we like to think, as to be incapable of ever being duplicated. As with other living organisms, the only way to build a human body is to grow one. Up until now, the only way we know how to grow human bodies is the way nature intended them to be grown: in a womb. And even if people could be grown in test tubes – using, say, some process of cloning – the only way to program the brain with memories, a character, a sense of self, is to give it a real life: first learning from one's parents and from one's own clumsy attempts at dealing one's surroundings, then forming personal relationships, playing, working, exploring.

All this is true; yet things might one day be different. In principle, no physical structure is so complex that it is incapable of being copied. William Caxton would no doubt have been astonished at our ubiquitous photocopying machine, which accomplishes in a few minutes and with great accuracy what

once would have taken days or even weeks of painstaking work. Perhaps one day we shall be able to copy a person with the same ease that we now copy articles or books.

There is no need to place a bet on it. It is enough, in thinking about this question philosophically, that we can conduct thought experiments. Suppose one could duplicate people: what then? On what principles could one distinguish the 'copy' from the 'original'? What would be the difference, if any, between the identity of a self and mere similarity, perhaps exact similarity? I only need to think about my own case to realize that these are not idle questions. I began by asserting that I knew who I was. I did not arrive at that conclusion by some process of deduction, nor did I need to look at myself in a mirror or listen to myself speak. My sense of my unique and indisputable identity seems far too strong to give way to any imaginable contingency. I just know that I am *myself*; others can speculate however they like. Yet I need only reflect, in the light of these thought experiments, on what would be the most reasonable thing to say about the identities of persons *other* than myself to begin to entertain the most radical doubts.

Questions about the identity of objects in general depend on many factors. Suppose the component parts that made up my computer were replaced, one by one; first the keys, then the electronic circuits, then the cathode-ray tube, then the housing: at what point (if any) would it cease to be the same computer? The fact is there is no determinate answer to that question, and only a mildly interesting logical point to make about our concept of identity-over-time. Nothing to get at all worried about. It is when, in a cool and disinterested way, we begin to dismantle the conditions for the identities of persons that the trouble starts.

What we discover, when we begin to investigate our thought experiments, is a painful clash between the first- and third-person views. On reflection, a person's self-identity would appear to depend – at least when one looks at it from the 'outside', from the point of view of another person – on bodily continuity combined with an ingredient of continuity of characteristically human 'functions': the speech and behaviour associated with particular memories and character. There are of course difficult cases, and different philosophical views about how the ingredients combine together. Just because of the special significance of our concept of a person, such questions are more

interesting than the case of computers. Yet when one looks at personal identity from the *inside*, all one's careful reasoning threatens to fall apart. If I woke up one morning at the other end of the world, my lack of bodily continuity would in no way reduce my sense of identity with what I took to be my former self. No-one could tell me that I couldn't be me, because 'I' was somewhere else. If someone put me into a duplicating machine, others could argue for ever and a day about who was the 'real' GK: surely I would simply *know*. – Or would I?

## The Insurance Policy

The doorbell rang just as Mike Harding was tucking into his bacon and eggs. His fork hovered inches from his mouth as he pondered the law of cause and effect. Why was it that something always happened to prevent him from eating his breakfast while it was still warm? He waited. From upstairs, a voice came. 'Will you get it darling? I'm dressing the children.' The fork hovered for a few more seconds, then clattered on to the plate. Mike opened the kitchen door and looked down the corridor, Through the porch window, he could see a middle aged woman with an over-sized handbag. Not the Jehovah's Witnesses *again!*

'Before you say anything, there's something I think you ought to know,' said Mike as he launched into a confession of atheism he had repeated so many times it was word perfect.

Before he had the chance to continue, a pleasant voice cut him short. 'I think there is something *you* ought to know, Mr Harding. I represent the New Age Insurance Company. I have come out here today especially to see you. I have some information to give you of *vital* importance to you and your family.'

At the word 'vital', the woman's voice seemed to purr. It suggested the intimacy of a friend you had known for years, a person who could be trusted with your life. She was striding through the door before Mike had even realized that he had said, 'Come in.'

'Actually, we're already insured with the Prudential,' Mike was saying as his visitor perched down on the edge of the sofa. She smiled indulgently. 'I promise you, this is different.' She began to take brochures out of her handbag and was spreading them on the seat beside her. 'We'll look at these in a minute, but first I want you to see this.' She took a cassette out of the handbag and marched over to the video recorder.

The first shot showed a suburban street. 'This is the story of Stephen Franks, but it could have been you,' a man's voice began. The camera approached a front door, which seemed to open by itself. In the hall, a woman was handing a briefcase to her husband. A boy and a girl were playing. 'Stephen Franks works at the Accounts Department of a famous London store,' the commentary continued, 'but that morning, he never reached his



office.’ The scene changed to a high street jammed with cars and buses. In the centre, there was an ambulance with lights flashing. A short distance away, a sprawled figure lay face down in the road. ‘Stephen Franks was hit by a number 33 bus. He was dead on arrival at hospital.’

Mike was beginning to think that this was all in very bad taste. Then he did a double take. The next scene showed the very same man being handed his briefcase by the very same woman. This time, they were both grinning broadly. The boy and girl turned round to wave at the camera. ‘Yes, believe it or not, as a result of a secret process exclusive to the New Age Insurance Company, we were able to restore Stephen Franks, as good as new. What’s more, he only lost three days’ work. Our representatives are now touring selected areas. This is an offer you can’t refuse!’

The video drew to a close. The camera left the suburban street and began to climb higher and higher into the air, to the strains of the hymn ‘Jerusalem’. As the final chord faded, the company logo appeared in the clouds, in red letters surrounded by a halo of gold.

‘I know what you’re going to say,’ said the woman before Mike had the chance to protest. ‘You’re thinking that you can’t possibly afford our service. Of course, it isn’t cheap. But as a special offer, we will provide full cover for your death or serious injury free of charge for three months. During that time, we will introduce you to other clients many of whom would not have been here but for us. All you have to do is come in for a check up once a month. What do you say?’

Mike couldn’t think of anything to say. He was dumbfounded. Did the woman seriously expect him to believe all that stuff? But why should anyone go to the trouble of perpetrating such an elaborate hoax? He didn’t want to know. His wife was coming down any minute now. He wasn’t going to have the sales pitch repeated for her benefit. Once she started asking questions, they’d be here all morning! All he could think of doing was getting rid of the saleswoman as quickly as possible.

‘All right. Sign me up for three months. But don’t bother about the introductions. I’m too busy.’

Four weeks later, Mike’s wife was handing him his briefcase. Samantha and Trudy were playing in the front room. ‘Have a good day at the office, dear.’ Mike’s wife removed a tiny flake of egg from the corner of his mouth.

He opened the door and walked down the drive, turning briefly to wave. Then he climbed into his Ford Granada and drove off.

More than a dozen vehicles were involved in the pile-up. A lorry had jack-knifed at high speed in the middle of the Westway. Mike's car lay on its roof, the front end cleanly sliced off. Several fires had started. A woman was screaming. In the distance, a single siren wailed. Mike lay in the road. He was not in any pain, but he felt very cold. Next to him, he could see a chunk of twisted metal, streaked with blood. Then he realized it was not a piece of metal. It was his leg. Mercifully, he lost consciousness.

'Mr Michael Harding' awoke to find himself in a hospital bed. The last thing he remembered was going into the office of the New Age Insurance Company for his first so-called 'check-up'. He'd expected to see a doctor, or at least to be asked questions about his health. Instead, he was made to stand in a cubicle for five minutes while bright lights flashed all around him. Funny, he had no memory of stepping *out* of the cubicle...

A nurse came by. 'Your wife is here to see you. You're very lucky. Only a few cuts and bruises, nothing to worry about.' Mike Harding's wife Nicky approached the bed, nervously at first, then embraced her husband in a flood of tears.

'Don't worry about me, I feel fine,' he said. 'But I wish someone would tell me how I got here.'

Mike awoke to find himself lying on the floor in a darkened room. He clutched at his leg. The stump was warm and sticky. He cried out, 'Help! Help me please!' Then, in a weaker voice, 'Where am I?' But there was no answer. In the gloom, he could make out an assortment of electronic equipment: computer keyboards stacked untidily on top of one another, circuit panels with wires dangling, a couple of VDU's on their sides in one corner. In another corner was a pile of cardboard boxes, a broom and some crumpled overalls. He took a deep breath and called again. Still there was no answer. Finally, a key turned and the door opened, flooding the room with light. A young lad in jeans sauntered in, munching a sandwich.

'What do you want? Can't you see I'm busy?' 'M-my leg,' Mike stammered. 'Oh, I shouldn't worry yourself about that. We'll be disposing of you soon. Just keep the noise down, eh?'

More time passed. Mike drifted in and out of consciousness. The door opened again. It was the woman who had visited his house a month earlier. Mike struggled against a leaden weight that seemed to press him to the floor. He could barely focus his eyes. 'What are you doing here? Why are they doing this to me?'

'We're not doing anything to you,' came the familiar purring voice. 'Right now, you're on your way home with your wife.'

'But I'm not with my wife, I'm here!', Mike pleaded. The woman crouched down next to him and took hold of his hand. 'Now listen to me carefully.' There was no urgency in her voice. She seemed to be rehearsing a routine she had been through many times. 'You remember your check-up, don't you? While you were in the cubicle we were taking a total body scan and storing it on tape. The information can be used whenever it's needed to build a perfect replica. Now, who would you prefer your wife to have as a husband? Who is going to be better at providing for her? Here, this will cheer you up.' At the far end of the room, a TV set flickered into life. On the screen, the new Michael Harding and his wife were smiling at the camera, while Trudy and Samantha waved.

'Congratulations! You've been chosen for our next video!'

On the coffee table. in front of the imitation log fire, the bottle of champagne was almost empty. Samantha and Trudy were sound asleep. 'Darling,' Nicky said to her husband, 'You know it's our anniversary next week.'

'How could I forget? I've already bought you your present. I'm going to book a table at your favourite restaurant, *La Caravaggio*.' Then he added, teasingly, 'Unless of course you've got a prior engagement!' Nicky snuggled up close. Her husband had such a *good* memory.

# the possible world machine

# 7

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## Introduction

WHY be moral? If anyone asks you that question outside of a philosophy class, you have good reason to be worried. For most of us most of the time, the question simply doesn't arise. Why do the morally right thing? 'Because it's right!' is the complete and adequate answer. Where the argument starts is just what is 'right' or 'wrong' in a particular case. Is it wrong to steal food from a supermarket if you're living on the street and your benefits have been stopped? Is it wrong to kill the man who has just raped you, or a soldier wearing the uniform of what you see as an army of occupation? Is it wrong to assist the suicide of a terminally patient? These are all questions one can discuss. But if someone asks whether any action is 'really' wrong we are lost for words. Where do you start, if you can't assume any interest at all in morality?

First, we need to get clear just what is 'morality' or the moral point of view. Most people would agree that, in some sense, morality stands opposed to 'self-interest'. But in many cases it is far from clear where the dividing line lies. Some would argue that the only thing that ultimately motivates people to moral behaviour is self-interest; others would claim that, whatever it is that actually motivates moral behaviour in a given case – even where the sentiment is undoubtedly altruistic – self-interest is the only motive that can rationally *justify* such behaviour. The question of the definition of the moral viewpoint becomes even more confused when one takes into account the view that one has moral duties towards oneself; for example, to develop one's natural talents or not to commit suicide.

In some sense, the person acting morally takes others into account. (This is still arguably so in the case of duties towards oneself.) To be moral is to acknowledge the reality of the needs and interests of others, to see them as something more than merely obstacles in one's way or tools to use. Other persons are 'ends in themselves', to use Kant's phrase. Whatever it is that I need or want, I have to remember that others have needs and wants too, and this knowledge has a bearing on my actions, not simply because it enables me to predict what they will do, but because what they want necessarily *counts* for something in my calculations.

Why then are we moral? Or why ought we to be? It is important to recognize that these are two separate questions. Consider the first. The idea that all moral behaviour is ultimately motivated by self-interest is repugnant to many people. They would point out that as a human beings one has a natural sympathy for other human beings, based either on one's biological nature or social conditioning, or perhaps a mixture of both. – 'But doesn't it all come down in the end to my own self-interest? I care when others are hurt or sad: if that moves me to action, I am doing something for myself, to alleviate my cares.' – That argument is relatively easy to refute. To the extent that you do care your motives are, *by virtue of that very fact*, altruistic, not self-interested. However, it is harder to show that what we call 'sympathy' is not in many, or perhaps all cases a masquerade that covers up the true basis for moral behaviour in the struggle for individual survival: it pays to be *seen* as caring what happens to others, whether one really does or not.

It is a different question whether any compelling *reason* can be given for being moral. (I may find myself naturally inclined to help others; but perhaps such an inclination is, from a logical point of view, irrational. The rational thing to do would be to suppress such feelings.) One line of argument that seeks to rationally justify moral behaviour appeals wholly to self-interest. At the very least, if you do what society, or perhaps God, considers wrong you risk punishment. However, as the philosopher Aristotle argued, there is much more to say here. What is 'self-interest', after all? What is it that really *benefits* a person? It is plausible to argue that no human being can live well in the absence of bonds of loyalty and affection. Generosity is a better strategy for achieving happiness than miserliness. A sense of justice or fair play is vital to the give and take of social interaction. Morality, in short, is an essential

ingredient in the good life, the life that any reflective person would wish to lead.

The fatal flaw in any such pragmatic justification of morality is its *conditional* nature. If you want such-and-such things, then it is rational to act in such-and-such a way. But suppose that after due reflection, I decide that I do not want those things, that I would be better off without the burden of a moral conscience? Or suppose instead that I am persuaded by the benefits of morality, but then unexpectedly find myself, as many have done, in an extreme situation where all the stakes are changed? To do the morally right thing now threatens me with the most terrifyingly consequences. To consent to evil, just this once, promises rich rewards. Yet despite all the incentives towards evil, some persons in this situation would still choose to be moral. – The argument that it always pays in the end to be moral is hard pushed to justify such behaviour.

Is there then a non-conditional justification of morality? Is there a way of showing by means of philosophical argument that due regard for the interests of others is a demand of reason, irrespective of whatever I may happen to want for myself? The difficulty here, as Hume famously pointed out, is surmounting the logical gap between recognising what *is* the case and what we *ought* to do. The philosophical grounds we are seeking would have to be *facts*, in the sense that it was not up to us to choose whether to recognise them or not; yet at the very same time would need to have the status of *values*, in the sense that it was irrational to acknowledge them and not be prepared to act accordingly. Whether there could be any such objective reasons for being moral is still a hotly debated question.

## A Moral Tale

At eight o' clock, on a cold Sunday in autumn, Bill Clegg awoke to discover that he had lost his sense of morality. At least, that is how he described the event later. He had no inkling at the time what was happening to him. All he was aware of as he emerged, flinching, from the safe haven of unconsciousness were the icicles of sunlight that pierced the curtains of his bed-sit, the cacophony of bird song that flayed his ears like a cat o' nine tails – and the urgent knowledge that something inside his mind was giving way.

Bill had been worrying about the rent – he was never less than three months behind – and had fallen asleep that night concocting ever more elaborate schemes for making money. But now as his senses jangled a thought came to him unbidden, a dangerous, wicked thought, yet cloaked in words as matter-of-fact as a shrug of the shoulders: 'I don't have to pay the rent.'

He knew immediately that he wasn't thinking of some clever way to avoid paying. He wasn't even contemplating a moonlight flit. The words meant something else: 'If the landlord pesters me for the rent again, I'll smash his silly face.'

Inside Bill was a river, swollen, pressing onwards relentlessly, flowing faster and faster. As the true meaning of his unbidden thought came to him, the river burst its banks.

Bill found himself in the street. He knew he must have dressed, but he couldn't remember doing so. He hadn't eaten. In fact, his last meal had been breakfast the day before. His growling stomach told him he had to find food now. A few steps ahead of him an elderly couple were pushing a toddler in a pram. The toddler was waving a jam sandwich. Bill snatched the food from the startled child and swallowed it in one gulp. As the old man began to protest, Bill kicked him in the shins.

He needed a cigarette. He felt inside his pockets and pulled out an empty packet, 'That's no problem!', he laughed, as he threw the empty packet aside. Outside a tobacconist shop was a dustbin, awaiting collection. He dragged the dustbin in through the narrow door, cracking the window-pane and knocking over bottles from a soft drinks stand. 'I'll take a packet of those or I'll empty the bin on your nice clean floor.' The shopkeeper hastily complied.

‘Everything I do is right,’ Bill thought, as he ran down the road. He repeated the words over and over, until the syllables slurred together. In a frenzy, he darted glances to the right and left, trying to decide next where to exert his newly-found power. He felt like a God. It didn’t occur to him that he was behaving oddly. Rather, it seemed as if everything was clear for the first time in his life. The passers-by who stared at him in curiosity or alarm had insect faces. Their expressions merged together into a tapestry of gleaming mouths and eyes. On and on Bill ran. The tapestry faded to grey and then black.

‘Sister, I think he’s waking.’ As Bill’s eyes came into focus, he saw a bluebottle in a nurse’s uniform standing at the foot of his bed. He said nothing.

‘You’ve had a nervous breakdown. It’s really nothing to worry about. You’re safe here,’ croaked the bluebottle. Bill raised his eyebrows. ‘It’s past breakfast, but we can get you something if you’d like.’

Bill smiled at the pretty Nigerian girl. ‘How about some fly spray?’, he muttered.

Later, the hospital Chaplain came on his rounds. ‘How are you feeling?’, he asked Bill.

‘I feel fine. Tell me, Father, there’s a question that’s been puzzling me.

‘You can ask me any question you like.’ In a well-practised gesture, the Chaplain’s craggy features assumed an attitude of concerned interest. Bill thought of a praying mantis.

‘The question is, Why should I be moral?’

There was a long pause. ‘If you break human laws, you risk being punished. But that’s not the question is it?’

Bill slowly shook his head in an exaggerated gesture, his eyes mimicking the Chaplain’s sober expression.

‘The real reason for being moral is that those who choose evil over good transgress God’s law,’ the Chaplain continued. ‘Even if you prosper from your crimes in this world, you cannot avoid God’s punishment.’

‘Do you mean that I should refrain from evil only because otherwise God will punish me?’

‘That is not the only reason. If an act is wrong, that is sufficient reason for not doing it.’



'But how do you know that what God or the Bible says is wrong really is so? Why shouldn't God punish people for being good and reward them for being evil?'

'Because God is good, of course.'

'How do you know that?'

'Because I have faith. If you read the bible then you would realise how foolish your question is.'

Bill noticed with pleasure the edge of anger in the Chaplain's voice. This was a good game. He wondered who else he could get to play.

'Doctor, why should I be moral?' Bill had managed to attract the attention of a houseman who had just come on duty, a fresh-faced young man who reminded Bill of a plump, pink maggot. By now, a group of patients had gathered round.

'Why, what have you done?' the doctor replied, laughing.

'Nothing - yet.'

This time, the laughter sounded forced. 'I would say that society is held together by an unwritten agreement,' the doctor began in a lecturing tone. 'Individuals form a kind of contract not to harm one another, or break the rules and conventions they have decided upon that serve their common good.'

'I never agreed to any rules,' replied Bill immediately.

'No. But you accept the benefits of society, and that shows your tacit agreement. You can't complain when you get punished for breaking the rules.'

The loophole was obvious. 'Suppose I know that I can break the rules without getting caught?'

At this, a number of patients cheered. They were all for breaking rules, especially hospital rules. Bill drew a second tick on his mental scorecard.

Another patient, however, an elderly man on crutches, was visibly upset. 'The reason for being moral is that you have feelings, natural feelings of concern and sympathy for your fellow human beings. Only a monster is without feelings. When you do wrong, the voice of your conscience tells you.'

Bill fixed the old man with an icy stare. 'I have feelings, all right. What I feel at this moment is that I would like to step on you, you old cockroach!'

During the ensuing commotion, the consultant psychiatrist drew the houseman aside. 'I'm glad you're keeping Mr Clegg occupied,' she said in a low whisper. 'I've decided to detain him under the Mental Health Act. The form is here for you to countersign. I am prescribing three doses of high voltage ECT, to be given at intervals of 48 hours. If you give him a shot of tranquillisers now, we can do the first one immediately.'

At eight o' clock on a cold Sunday morning in autumn, Bill Clegg awoke to discover that he had regained his sense of morality. Walking back to his bed-sit clutching his discharge papers, Bill passed a group of young people collecting for Christian Aid. He gave them all his change. He arrived home just in time to find his belongings being thrown into the street.

'I'm not a charity,' growled the landlord.

# the possible world machine

# 8

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## Introduction

DO you recall the question to which jesting Pilate would not stay for an answer? Before the reader nods in assent, I would remind them that strictly speaking they can't do, because no-one alive today (barring reincarnation or the discovery of human beings with amazing powers of longevity) was there to actually witness the famous interrogation of Jesus of Nazareth. Some may recall learning about the bible story in Sunday school. For others, it is just one of the many items we call 'common knowledge', that we couldn't say where we first heard about it. Well, let me remind those who may still be groping for an answer. Jesus declares that his 'kingdom is not of this world', and that he was born and came into the world to 'bear witness to the truth'. And Pilate retorts, 'What is Truth?'

The scene has been represented in film many times. In one version, we might find Pontius, preoccupied with the cares of office, snapping back his response without a moment's hesitation. All the director has seen fit to represent of his 'jesting' is a wry smile. In another, Pilate bursts into laughter. In another – my favourite out of all the variations – his brow furrows as he recalls a question that he has thought, perhaps agonised about on not a few occasions. Then, impatiently, he throws his hands in the air as if to say, 'How could a mere mortal ever claim a solution to this riddle?' Perhaps there might even be a tinge of disappointment in his voice, as if, just for a moment, Pilate was prepared to consider the possibility that Jesus did know the answer. Now each of these scenarios, with the right treatment, can be made to appear authentic. Yet one of them, at most, could actually be true – assuming of

course that the texts which record the conversation are genuine, and based on true eyewitness accounts.

But what does that phrase mean, 'could actually be true'? When we make judgements about things for which we possess no means of *direct* verification – for example, judgements about things that happened long ago – we set our sights on a distant target, using the best evidence we are able to obtain to ensure that our statement has the maximum chance of hitting on the truth. Sometimes, we later acquire the means to inspect the target: direct evidence turns up, perhaps unexpectedly. A person goes missing and foul play is suspected. Piece by piece, the detective assembles the evidence until he is sufficiently confident to make his judgement. Then someone chances on the body. And yet we think, 'The detective's judgement could have been true, even if the body had been totally destroyed. The truth that we aim at is just *there* – for example, just there in the past – regardless of what access we may have to it.

About certain matters we have no evidence at all, nothing to guide our aim. I like to think that Pilate was a bit of a philosopher. It gives an added poignancy to the story. It could conceivably turn out that I am right. Someone might find a lost text, *On the Nature of the Earth and Heavens* by Pontius Pilate. A second-rate work that failed to earn any mention by contemporary or subsequent thinkers. But when I say I 'like to think' that Pilate had often pondered the problem of truth before the fateful meeting, I am not conjecturing that any such evidence might turn up. If anything, it makes it just that bit more poignant to imagine that Pilate, fearing the ridicule of his peers, kept his philosophical thoughts to himself and would not even take the risk of recording them in a diary. Yet nor am I merely taking pleasure in imagining that this is how things *might* have been – in some possible world. You can enjoy a good book or film – or a good fantasy – without even considering the question whether or not it is based on fact. That is not how it is with me when I think of Pilate. I should like it to be the case, I want it to be the case that the facts *are* as I think them, even if time has erased every last trace of anything that could have counted as evidence. I still think of myself as 'taking a shot' at truth.

How must one think of the nature of truth to entertain such an idea? The case I have described is very simple and straightforward. For all the difficulty one

may have exactly defining 'philosophy', it seems a clear-cut matter whether or not, say, Pilate ever thought seriously about the ideas of the pre-socratic philosophers, or Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, or the Stoics and Epicureans. Other cases are far less clear. To take the example of history, two historians can agree on all the factual evidence and totally disagree on its interpretation. So what can each of them think, but that there *is* something there in the world – the 'true interpretation' – that he or she lays claim to and denies to the other? But we have assumed in this case that the historical facts have been laid bare. Where then is this 'truth'?

We think we know quite a lot. In fact, the questions which we are able to resolve satisfactorily are but a tiniest portion of all the questions that could be asked. The little bit that we feel confident in saying we 'know' (and we are not now considering the spectre of scepticism) is but a tiny island surrounded by a vast ocean of the unknown and unknowable. – Is there, as a matter of ultimate metaphysical fact, anything really 'out there'? What difference would it make to us if all there was to 'reality' or 'the world' consisted in those facts that lie within the scope and limits of human knowledge?

## **The Good Witness**

On the plastic name-plate the words were barely legible: 'People's Condominium 537 G Cubicle 7241. Dylan C. Smith Recording Angel'. Dr. Joan Brown paused for a few moments to steady her nerves. Five hundred floors below her, the pedestrian expressway that she had been speeding along only a minute ago was now a thin, silvery arc barely visible through the yellow smog. A buzzer sounded and a hatch-door slid open. Joan climbed through. As her eyes adjusted to the dim light she became aware of a stooped figure enveloped in a wheelchair .

'Welcome to my humble palace!' croaked a voice, fragile as tissue paper. Joan nodded, too scared to speak. It seemed as if the slightest movement of air would tear the tiny figure to shreds. 'Come on, child, time is money!' Joan fumbled in her purse. 'Later, later!' the voice rasped. 'Just tell me your question, and be quick about it!'

'I'm a teacher at the People's University. I've been doing research into religions of the 20th century,' she began slowly as she mustered her thoughts. And then, on impulse, 'You do remember that far back, don't you?'

Dylan struck his forehead angrily with the palm of his hand. 'In there is ten thousand years of total recall. Do you doubt me?'

Joan shook her head. Who would dare to question the word of a recording angel? Yet for a moment something about the aged man's attitude jarred. Then she thought, 'Thousands of individuals have come here before me seeking knowledge of the Dark Ages, each one thinking that their question mattered, that their project was important. Most of them are long since dead, and their research forgotten.' She shivered. 'I must pull myself together. I've got work to do.'

'What I'm interested in are the ritual human sacrifices,' Joan continued in a businesslike tone. 'It's well known that all the major religions demanded regular sacrifices, and that the practice continued unabated until religion was finally stamped out in the twenty-fourth century. I was hoping that you could describe some of them to me. Did the victims give their lives gladly, or did they resist? How did their family and friends feel about it? Did they feel honoured? What was it like to witness a sacrifice?'

The aged man chuckled. 'I've witnessed many sacrifices,' he said. 'Where I lived, they happened almost every week. Usually, someone was singled out at

random and shot. Then people came from all over the area and joined long processions to celebrate. For those who were unable to take part, there were televised news reports. You could say that the very fabric of society depended upon the practice – though that’s interpretation, which is your province.’

Dylan began to recount his memories in meticulous detail, while Joan stared at her voice recorder, tears welling in her eyes. Then, half-way through one episode, he stopped. ‘Your hour’s up. Now you can cross my palm with silver!’

As Joan climbed out of the cubicle, another client was waiting outside.

That evening, Dylan relaxed with a glass of milk as he counted the day’s takings. He was vaguely aware that another angel was trying to contact him, but for a while he kept his mind tightly closed. The telepathic signals persisted. Finally, he relented. It was his friend Victor.

‘All that stuff about cannibalism was a bit strong, don’t you think?’ came Victor’s thoughts.

‘That’s what the normals like to hear,’ replied Dylan. ‘Plenty of blood and gore, that’s what gets them going. Makes them glad to be living in our glorious People’s Paradise.’ Aware of Victor’s censure, he continued, ‘Besides, what I told the young Doctor was in a way more true than a literal description of what happened. Look at Northern Ireland. They lived off the blood of human sacrifices for decades. Look at the Middle East. The endless conflicts there finally brought on the Age of Nuclear Wars. And if that hadn’t happened, we freaks wouldn’t be here, condemned to everlasting life through genetic mutation!’

For a few seconds, Dylan and Victor joined minds in anguish at their common doom. But Dylan had more to get off his chest. ‘You talk as if there are grades of deception, as if it’s all right to go so far but no further. Why not just admit it: we’re a bunch of recalcitrant liars. The fact is, the normals are far more contented listening to our lies than they would be if they heard the unvarnished truth. And what is “truth” anyway? It’s not some treasure locked away where no-one can get at it. It’s just whatever people believe, or can be made to believe.’

‘Ah, you’ve contradicted yourself!’ thought Victor. ‘If you persuade another person to believe something you don’t believe yourself, then you must think that what you’ve succeeded in making them believe is false, and

that what you believe is the truth. “Making someone believe” in your sense just means representing a falsehood as true.’

‘How naive of you! replied Dylan. ‘Haven’t you ever come across what is commonly called “self-deception”? Inventing our own world, our own reality is something each of us does. We believe what is useful to us for the moment, the expedient, what we want or need to believe. Whatever “experiences” we may have lived through, whatever “knowledge” we have had instilled in us, the story we make ourselves believe is *our* truth. “Truth” is nothing more and nothing less than the suppositions we choose to live by.’

Victor remained unconvinced. ‘Look my dear friend, whatever we recording angels like to think, or whatever it would be good for the normals to think, something did actually happen long ago in the past. It’s back there. You could distort it or lie about it for all eternity and still not change what actually happened.’

‘What actually happened, what actually happened!’ came the echo of Dylan’s jeering voice. ‘You sound like a parrot. Just tell me simply, in the words of the ancient poet John Donne, “where all past yeares are”? Look around the world for them. Search every nook and cranny. Suppose you find a precious piece of so-called “evidence”. That’s something that has still to be interpreted. It is not itself the “past fact” that you take it to be evidence for. Or is the past in our memory? You yourself admit, indeed insist, that memory can be mistaken; even the memory of a recording angel. Remember how we thought I got my name from a Welsh poet who later became a famous folk singer? But even if all the recording angels agreed about what they seemed to remember, that still wouldn’t make their agreement the truth, according to your account. In short, the past is nowhere. It doesn’t exist. Or, rather, the past is whatever we decide to make it.’

‘We’ll just have to agree to differ,’ thought Victor. ‘Fancy a game of chess?’  
‘e4!’

Victor sighed to himself. He thought of the innumerable times they had played the same chess opening. He thought of the innumerable times they had had the same argument. ‘One day I’ll find the right move. One day.’



# the possible world machine

# 9

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## Introduction

CHE sera sera. ‘When I was just a little boy, I asked my mother, “What shall I be?”...’ In the lines of this popular song – which for me conjures up potent images of my own childhood – is contained a beautifully condensed philosophical argument. Anxiety about the future is foolish, the song says, for two reasons. First, ‘Whatever will be will be.’ However carefully we plan ahead, whatever personal hopes and ambitions we may nurture, the way things will actually turn out for us in the course of our lives is something that, ultimately, is out of our hands. Only time itself can decide. The second reason why we should not worry is that we cannot possibly anticipate all the things that might happen to us. ‘The future’s not ours to see.’ There is no way of predicting what prospects the future holds, no way of discovering what life has in store for us but to wait for time to reveal all.

One of the secrets of the song’s enduring charm is the fact that nowhere is the conclusion of the argument actually stated. We are left slightly unsure. It is not as if ‘che sera sera’ would be a sensible reply to any question the child might raise concerning the future. The song’s advice applies only to some questions. We should not worry ourselves over matters that lie beyond our knowledge, or outside our power to decide one way or the other. Of course, where we can see clearly ahead and take appropriate action, we would be wrong to close our eyes. (The child is told, ‘Look before you leap.’) But where does prudent foresight and planning come to an end and philosophic resignation set in? That is a question that the song does not attempt to resolve.

It is in times of disaster and war that our sense of control over our lives appears most threatened. The infantryman is well aware of the notion that either there is, or is not, a bullet somewhere 'with his name on it'. Other than try to keep your head low, there is little you can do. To act on the assumption that there is in fact nothing whatever you can do 'if your number is up' is a workable substitute for courage. Yet the war also produced the following infamous argument against using an air raid shelter. Either there's a bomb with your name on it or not. If there is, then it will find you even in the deepest shelter. If there isn't, then you don't need to use the shelter anyway. Clearly, something is wrong with this argument, but what? (If the reader is not wholly convinced, let them try the following variation: Either there is a bus 'with my number on it' or not. Therefore, there is no need to look out when crossing the High Street!)

The diagnosis of the fallacy in the air-raid shelter argument is one of the issues that come under the heading of 'The problem of fatalism'. It might seem strange to regard fatalism as a problem when it seems the very essence of the philosophic attitude. However, if one is to be a fatalist – and let us not prejudge the issue by seeming to imply that philosophers have some special predisposition towards such a view – at least one should strive to be the right kind of fatalist, or to be a fatalist for the right, as opposed to the wrong reasons. To ignore the air-raid siren is not the act of a philosopher but that of a fool.

What is fatalism? Aristotle pondered the question whether the outcome of tomorrow's sea battle was already decided now. There is no obvious absurdity either in claiming that the sea battle is in some sense already decided, or in claiming that it isn't: we feel torn both ways. Even if you believed firmly that it was decided, however, if fate had made you Admiral in charge of the Athenian fleet, you would find yourself striving to your utmost for victory. (The pre-socratic philosopher Melissus of Samos – the only recorded example of a philosopher who also held down the job of admiral – won a famous sea battle against the Athenians.) Yet surely a philosophical Admiral will view his efforts in a very different light if he thinks that the answer to the question, 'Who will win?' is already *there* in reality, only inaccessible to human knowledge, than if he thinks that there is no 'real answer' until the battle is actually won or lost.

Is the future closed, a foregone conclusion, or is it open? If the future is closed, how can we square that knowledge with our view of ourselves as agents, capable of bringing about change in the world, for better or worse? Yet who is to say that our view of ourselves is not merely an illusion? On the other hand, an open future can be a very frightening prospect, stripping away the pretence that we are ultimately no more than detached observers of our own passing lives. It could be argued that the proper 'philosophical' attitude is to embrace the ultimate insecurity of our existence rather than take refuge in fatalistic detachment.

Leaving aside the question whether or not the fatalistic belief in a closed future is or is not a good thing to believe, what is clear, is that the statement, 'What will be, will be,' does not resolve the question of the *truth* of fatalism either way. What will be decided will be decided. That is a mere truism. The question we urgently wish to ask is whether the future is, or is not, already decided *now*. Are there any philosophical considerations that can be put forward that do resolve the issue? Is it conceivable that there is in fact no answer that can be gained from philosophical inquiry to the question whether the future is open or closed? Does the question indeed make sense, or are we only labouring under the illusion of having to make a choice between two radically different notions of the future?

## **The Fatalists**

A sweet smell of candy floss hung in the warm air, and mingled with the reek of hot dogs and diesel fumes. Lisa gazed down at her mud spattered tights. Her feet were soaked. 'Tracey, I want to go home!'

Her friend looked at her in surprise. 'But I thought we were having a great time!'

'Well I'm not,' said Lisa stubbornly. 'I never should have gone on that roller coaster. I feel sick.'

'But you did go, so what's the point in moaning about it now?', said Tracey. Then, in a softer tone, 'We'll try one more thing and then we'll go home, how about that? Anything you like.'

Near the exit of the funfair was a caravan with a large colourful board propped up against the side:

### **MADAME DAISY**

Rich or poor

Young or old

For fifty pence

Your fortune told!

'Let's go there,' said Lisa.

Inside, Daisy was huddled over a mug of tea. As the girls entered, she forced a smile. But her face looked haggard. 'I couldn't take your money, dears,' she croaked. 'My power's all run down.' She picked up her crystal ball and held it in front of the table lamp. 'See that? Pure Czechoslovakian glass. Useless, totally useless without the power!'

Tracey was disappointed. 'Can't you tell us anything? Here's a pound!' The old woman peered again at the crystal ball.

'I wonder – maybe it will work, after all.'

'What a con!', thought Lisa.

The old lady winced, as if she had been slapped in the face. 'You know I can't do anything if you have bad thoughts! It affects my concentration.'

'I wasn't thinking bad thoughts. Honest!'

‘Never mind.’ Daisy switched off the lamp, then carefully placed the crystal ball in a shallow depression in the centre of the table. The ball lit up. ‘There! Look up.’

Dotted all over the ceiling and walls of the caravan were thousands of tiny pinpricks of light. Tracey dimly remembered something from her childhood. ‘It’s like a planetarium!’

‘Clever girl! That’s exactly what it is. There’s the Great Bear. Over on the right. See the very bright one? That’s Venus.’

‘Wow!’

‘I don’t get it. What’s it all for?’

‘What you’re looking at, my dears, is the future. You know the story of Creation. How the Good Lord created the heavens and earth in six days? Now you might think that’s a very short time. But he didn’t just go at it like a sculptor with a piece of stone. Before he even started the job of making the world, he worked it all out in his mind first, down to the last detail. When he decided how the world was to be, he wrote the whole story, from the first moment of time to the final day of reckoning. Past, present, future: it’s all there, complete, in the Book of Creation.

‘What I learned, many, many years ago is that the history of the universe, from the beginning of time to the end of time, is written in the stars. Of course, I was sceptical at first, just as I’m sure you are. But you can’t ignore the fact that from the earliest times, there have been men and women who were gifted with the ability to read fragments of the story. A sign here, a portent there. Because what was to come was still largely hidden, many came to believe that the future was still in some way open, that their predictions still depended what people chose to do. But they were wrong. Everything is there, all one needs is the skill to read it. Everything that will ever happen to you in *your* life. I know there’s still a lot I can’t see. I practice and practice, and every day I can see just a little bit more. But my teacher was the best, the very best.’

‘What happened to her?’

‘She discovered that she was going to die a slow and painful death, so she took an overdose. Unfortunately, she didn’t take enough tablets, and she lingered on for weeks. What a terrible time that was! – I hope I haven’t put you off.’

‘If its something really bad, we don’t want to know. OK?’ Lisa gave her friend a broad wink.

‘Are you ready then? We’ll begin. Now, let’s see what we can find.’

The stars began to revolve around their heads as the fortune teller gently turned the crystal ball. Suddenly there was a loud bang and the lights went out. Tracey let out a terrified scream.

‘It’s the power! I told you, didn’t I? I’ve had the electrician in three times this week and its still not right!’

As the girls left the caravan, it began to drizzle. ‘I should have asked for my pound back,’ said Tracey as she turned up the collar of her bomber jacket.

‘Forget about that,’ said Lisa, ‘I think if we hurry we can catch the 520 bus and get home in time for *Down Our Street*.’

‘Can we?’, said Tracey. She did not quicken her step. All of a sudden an uncanny feeling had gripped her.

Lisa saw her friend’s expression and felt a shudder of alarm. ‘What’s wrong?’

‘I’ve been thinking,’ said Tracey. ‘Either we are going to catch the bus or we’re not. As the old lady said, it’s in the stars. Or maybe is isn’t actually written down in pinpricks of light. It doesn’t really matter. Because our catching or missing the bus is still a *fact* about the world, only one which we can never know for sure until it happens, one way or the other. Now, if it *is* a fact that we’re going to catch the bus, then even if we walk really slowly, we’re going to catch the bus. But if, instead, it’s a fact that we’re not going to catch the bus, then even if we run like hell we’re not going to catch it!’

By the time Tracey had finished talking, however, they were at the bus stop. A minute later, the bus arrived.

They climbed to the top deck and sat at the front. Lisa wasn’t a genius, but she knew there had to be something wrong with Tracey’s argument. It was true that if you didn’t know what time the buses came, but only that they arrived at regular intervals, it didn’t really matter whether you walked or ran. There was just as much chance of having to wait longer if you ran as there was of catching the earlier bus and so not having to wait. It was different, of course, if you were in a hurry to get home. But then, according to Tracey’s reasoning, it wasn’t different.

Lisa’s head was beginning to spin.

Finally she said, ‘Look, Tracey, the quicker I get to the bus stop, the more likely I am to get the bus I’m trying to catch. And everyone knows that if a

person runs, they get to a place more quickly than if they walk,' she paused, 'Provided they don't trip, of course.'

'Exactly!', said Tracey. 'Suppose it's "written in the stars" that you're going to miss the bus. Then if you run, you *will* trip!'

Lisa scowled. 'What you're saying sounds as if someone "up there" decided that I'm going to miss the bus. If I walk, won't get there on time. But if I run, then whoever's up there will make sure that something happens to slow me down. But that's wrong. If everything that's going to happen is a fact, if it really is *all* decided, then there's nothing anyone anywhere can do to change it. If my running is going to make me catch the bus, then I will catch the bus, and no-one, not even an all-powerful demon can stop me.'

'I didn't mean it like that,' said Tracey. 'Let's just say that you are going to miss the bus. Then it's also a fact just how you're going to miss it, whether because you walked, or because you ran and tripped. But just suppose that whoever is "up there" told you that you were going to miss the bus. If what they said was true, then if the bus was on time and you were running quickly enough to catch it, something would have to happen to stop you. If you believed what you were told, then you wouldn't run, because you'd know it was pointless.'

'All right then,' said Lisa, 'So long as I don't hear any voice coming out of the clouds telling me what's going to happen to me, I'll run for the bus whenever I have to!'

Tracey snorted in exasperation. How dense could you get? 'Look, it makes no difference that *you* don't know what's going to happen. Whether or not you'll catch the bus is a fact one way or the other. So whatever you do now, you can't alter that fact. It's as simple as that.'

Lisa was equally exasperated. 'But what about what I said earlier, that everyone knows that people who run are less likely to miss the bus they're trying to catch?'

'What about it?'

'What you said was that running doesn't make a difference, when everyone knows that it does!'

'I didn't say that, Lisa. Of course it makes a difference. All I meant was that *deciding* whether or not to run can't make any difference. If it's true that you will catch the bus, then of course that may well be because you did run. But then it isn't really up to you whether or not you're going to run, because it was always a fact that you were going to!'

‘Then nobody ever “makes a decision” to do anything?’

‘That’s right.’

‘But if it’s impossible ever to “make a decision”, then it’s pointless trying to *do* anything. You might as well stay in bed!’

‘Exactly.’

‘Yes, Tracey, but when you realize that even staying in bed is “doing” something, that everything you do or don’t do is your “decision”, then you will just carry on anyway: for example, going to the bathroom, eating or – running for the bus!’

Lisa had just finished speaking when she twisted her head round. ‘Oh sod! We’ve missed our stop by five minutes.’

‘It won’t take long to walk.’

‘I wanted to see if Billie’s dog survived the operation.’

‘We’ll ask my mum when we get home.’

‘But it’s not the same. You know that.’

‘Maybe someone’s videotaped the episode.’

‘Fat chance!’

Tracey put her arm round her friend’s shoulder. ‘Don’t worry. They wouldn’t kill Digger off. He’s got too big a fan club!’

But Lisa was disconsolate. ‘This is all your fault!’

‘How could it be my fault? We *had* to miss...’

Tracey’s words were interrupted by a swipe from Lisa’s hand bag.



# the possible world machine

# 10

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## Introduction

WHAT is perception? All factual knowledge ultimately depends, according to the principle of *empiricism*, upon the human capacity to register information from our surrounding environment. Were we endowed with god-like intellects, we should not be able to reason out a single piece of knowledge about the world outside our minds, if there was not some way that facts about that world could make an impression upon our subjective states. Nor is it feasible that we should be born with an in-built map or handbook of even our relatively tiny corner of the universe. It would be a very risky venture indeed for any but a totally omniscient creator to attempt to implant in our minds all the factual knowledge that we were likely to need in negotiating our way around the world. In fact, evolution has designed human beings with a remarkable range of sensitivities to different sorts of external physical stimuli, thus enabling each individual to construct their own unique map of their world on the basis of sense perception (a power which is of course immeasurably enhanced by the human capacity to share information by means of language).

Yet that homely observation hardly seems sufficient to explain why perceptual experience should take the form that it does. What possible connection could there be between a sensation of red and certain wavelengths of light, or the sound of Middle C and a certain frequency of vibrations of air molecules? By what process are we able to reconstruct a single world of material objects out of such radically different subjective experiences as colour, or feel, or sound, or smell? How indeed are we able to come by the

very idea of three-dimensional space, as something *through* which objects are able to move, when our subjective impressions of such a world are limited to patches of colour moving on a flat background?

In a more explicitly metaphysical vein, how is it possible to gain any *objective* information about a world outside our minds – to determine the way things are in reality rather than simply the way they appear to us – when the very process of perception is designed only to yield knowledge of appearances, and never of things as they really are? If we already knew the intrinsic nature of the perceptual process, then there would be no difficulty in deducing what manner of objects were ultimately responsible for our perceptual experiences. But if all factual knowledge is ultimately mediated by perception, then it is clear that the ‘intrinsic nature of the perceptual process’ is itself no more an object of possible knowledge than are the intrinsic qualities of the objects of our perception. – If all we know is the subjective side of the perceptual relation, we just do not have enough information to deduce simultaneously both the nature of the relation and the nature of the objective side.

These are sophisticated thoughts. For many persons who have not encountered philosophy, sense perception hardly seems an object of wonder or puzzlement. Common sense tells us that things simply *are* the way they appear to be. The redness of the pillar box is simply ‘in’ the pillar box, just as the heat of the bath water is ‘in’ the liquid itself. Yet we know enough about the workings of the world not to foolishly suppose that cars actually get smaller as they go further away from us, or that a dart board actually changes its shape from a circle to an ellipse as you walk past. It is worth reminding ourselves that small children seem to find it unproblematic that the sun – the same sun that is there for all of us – ‘follows me wherever I go’, as if the sun were their special friend. Skilled in interpreting the visual cues that we receive from the world around us, we take the *transparency* of perception for granted, unaware in our everyday lives of the contribution made by subjectivity that mediates our knowledge of things themselves, in just the same way as the child takes it for granted that when an object such as the sun appears to move it must actually be moving.

Thinking about the problems of perception can seem irresistibly to force upon us a picture of ourselves as prisoners shut off from all contact with objective reality. Instead of iron bars, we are held captive by fields of ‘subjective

impressions' or 'sense data', through which not even the tiniest chink of an external world is able to show through. Thus, having started off by arguing that perception is necessary for knowledge of an external world, a closer examination of the relation that mediates between human subjects and the objects of their perception seems to drive one to the pessimistic conclusion that no information gained from mere sense perception could ever serve as an adequate basis for such knowledge.

It is typical of problems in philosophy that one appears to be thrown in a single step from a naive, unquestioning acceptance of a certain way of grasping things into total scepticism. Perhaps it is because initially we do not find perception problematic *enough*, that we find ourselves quickly facing what appears to be an insoluble problem of justifying our belief that perception yields knowledge of a world outside our minds. In that case, the task for the philosopher determined to resist scepticism is to find a way back to a renewed appreciation of the truth embodied in our naive ways of thinking about perception, without compromising the insight gained from critical reflection.

## **The Ministry of Perception**

Dave was about to post his football pools coupon when a car backfired. He tensed, bracing himself for a second explosion, then held his breath as an old jalopy lurched past belching a cloud of blue-grey smoke. He glared at the driver. On top of a Monday morning and a hangover this was something his battered nerves could do without.

When he turned back, the post-box was not there. Or, rather, for a split second he thought he saw a thin, silvery hoop surrounded by a blur of flashing lights. Then, the familiar red cylinder returned, its mouth open towards him with what looked like the hint of a smile.

‘Did you see that?’, he asked a woman who was about to post a bulky envelope.

‘Oh, I did. Those things shouldn’t be allowed! My husband Harry’s bronchitis gets worse every year.’

‘No, I meant the post-box. It just disappeared!’

The woman squinted at the Collection Times, then struck the side of the box with the handle of her collapsible umbrella. It made a satisfying dull clunk. She hit it once more just to make sure, then squeezed her envelope through the slot. She glanced at Dave, then back at the post-box, and hurried on.

Dave absentmindedly put the coupon back in his pocket, and wandered towards the near-by bus stop. For once, he gave no thought to the long queue in front of him. Over and over, he rehearsed his disturbing experience, as if grasping for some hidden clue. What had he been drinking the night before? Or was this the first warning of a mental breakdown? He’d been under a lot of stress recently. Several of his mates had been made redundant, and now management were floating the idea of a wage cut. Then he remembered the coupon in his pocket and felt even more miserable.

‘Oi, look where you’re going! You’ve stepped on my toe!’

Dave had just decided to make a run for the post-box when the queue began to surge forward. He stammered an apology, then glanced up to see a silvery coil approaching, surrounded by the same flashing lights he had seen a short while ago. In an instant, the silvery coil turned into a double-decker bus. It was obvious no-one else had noticed anything unusual. He tried to stay calm as he boarded.

'You've given me a ten pence piece. The fare's fifty!' Dave scrambled in his pockets for change, then held the coins out. A silvery ring and flashing lights hovered where the driver's head should have been. Panicking, Dave pushed his way back through the passengers crowding behind him, jumped to the pavement and began to run.

When the ambulance arrived, Dave was semi-conscious. His forehead was covered in ugly bruises. His face streamed with blood. Above him, a dark splash of colour on a lamppost showed the place where he had been repeatedly banging his head.

'We just couldn't get him to stop,' said one girl, sobbing.

Another bystander, curious but unmoved, added, 'And did you notice each time he did it he looked around in a peculiar way?'

The murmur of voices seemed to come to Dave from far away, as he struggled to keep his eyes open.

The Hospital Registrar searched her notebook for the unlisted telephone number she'd been given the first time they'd had an incident like this. That was only a month ago. Since then, the strange hallucinations seemed to have been occurring with increasing frequency. There had already been three cases since the beginning of the week. The man in the black uniform had warned her not to talk anyone about the incident. It was a 'matter of national security', he said. He wouldn't even say what branch of the police he was from. Still, she wondered what on Earth was happening.

The Minister for Perception, The Right Honourable Member for Sector 14, Zone IV was on the phone to the Prime Minister. 'I've got the report from the Scientific Advisor on my desk now. He says there's absolutely nothing that can be done. The latest data shows an extremely high incidence of sunspots. It's causing marked interference with transmissions. But he has assured me that things will be back to normal within two weeks, at the outside.'

'Well, I hope for all our sakes that the boffins have got their calculations right. The emergency services are stretched to the limit. Tell the Advisor I want an hourly update on that report. But let me know immediately if there are any further developments. If the situation doesn't improve quickly, I'm afraid we shall have to seriously consider putting the worst affected Sectors into a state of temporary mass coma.'

**'But the economic consequences would be disastrous!'**

**'Then we shall just have to hope that it doesn't come to that, shan't we?'**

The Ministry of Perception is located in a large bunker two miles below what used to be the City of London. It was set up after the devastation of World War Three. It consists of two departments, the Department of Sense Data and the Department of Rehabilitation. The men in black uniforms who collected Dave from the hospital did not belong to any police force. They had been sent by the Department of Rehabilitation. A few weeks in their re-programming unit on Exmoor would see to it that Dave did not suffer from similar 'delusions' again.

By far the largest of the two departments, however, with offices near every major population centre, is the Department of Sense Data. Recruits to the Department first have to go through an experience similar to Dave's. At that stage, at least three quarters of the intake drop out and have to be 'reprogrammed'. What Dave caught a glimpse of were the radio transmitters that relayed images of a 1990's Britain to tiny receivers implanted in the brains of every new born infant.

Occasionally, the receivers develop a fault and have to be replaced. More frequently, the brain suffers a mild form of epilepsy as it tries to cope with an input for which it was never designed. The reaction can usually be suppressed by drugs. But nothing can be done about the effects of random interference with the radio signals except 'persuade' the unfortunate subjects that what they seemed to experience never really happened.

It is only in the second stage of their training that the remaining recruits to the Department of Sense Data get to see their surroundings as they really are, with the brain receivers switched off. It takes time to learn how to see, to hear, to feel after one's natural sense organs have been disconnected for so long. When they do eventually adjust, many of the trainees simply refuse to believe their eyes.

If you were to visit Britain in the 2090's, you would find grotesque mutations, hobbling around a giant bomb site, under a permanently orange sky. Those that are strong enough to work in the fields and building sites and factories labouring towards reconstruction are lucky if they can survive at the barest subsistence level. The rest are condemned to a slow but certain death from malnutrition and lack of medical attention. Fortunately, the newly

developed biotechnology keeps the population in a state of contented ignorance.

- For the sake of decency and the British way of life, the men and women from the Ministry do an admirable job of keeping up appearances.

# the possible world machine

# 11

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## Introduction

ACCORDING to the theory of *idealism*, nothing exists in reality other than experiences or perceptions. The ‘objects’ we seem to perceive in a world outside our minds, such as a tree or the Moon, or the computer on which I am now typing these words, are mere appearances, purely mental phenomena to which nothing *material* corresponds. – Presented in such blatant terms, idealism seems a baffling doctrine. In order to make sense of the theory, we first need to explore a little bit of the historical background.

What is the world made of? The ancient Greek philosopher Thales – the first of the ‘pre-Socratic’ philosophers – was also the first to pose that question, over two and a half thousand years ago. His answer, ‘Everything is water’, may be viewed as a contribution to the physics of matter. Contemporary physicists who pursue Thales’ question agree that there is some single stuff or material that everything in the universe is ‘of’. Only the answer now given is quarks, or objects of a similar abstract, theoretical nature. Most persons would be hard pressed to describe a quark. Yet the idea that there is a fundamental unity of all things, shown in the way every object in the universe, including our own bodies, is made out of the same basic building blocks, has profound implications which one does not need to be a physicist to appreciate. – It is a thing of wonder that, in the words of the song *Woodstock*, ‘We are star dust, billion-year old carbon.’

But is that really *all* there is? Is physics the final, complete answer to the question of the substance of reality? Thales and his immediate successors saw no great problem in including the mind or subjectivity in their scheme of



things. The world, they believed, was in some way ordered by Mind or *Nous* (or as Heraclitus claimed, an intelligible principle or *Logos*) so that each individual human subject owned, by virtue of their capacity for thought and experience, a portion of the same mental principle that, in some obscurely perceived manner, was seen to govern every object in the universe. In the reported words of Thales, 'Everything is full of gods.'

However, it is one thing to talk of 'intelligence' in a general, indiscriminating sense, quite another to raise, as we have seen Descartes raised, the question of the place of the *conscious subject* in relation to the material world. That question became acute – one may even argue that it only really became possible – in the light of the rise of a rigidly mechanistic approach to physical theory pioneered by Galileo and Descartes. For the first time arose the possibility of a dualism of mental and material 'substances', with the science of physics or mechanics confined to the explanation of the phenomena observed in the world of material things.

What then is this thing called 'mind', or 'self', or 'consciousness'? Descartes' profound thought experiment was to imagine a universe where *all* that existed was his own subjective experience of a world and of other subjects, a mere dream of an external world induced in him by an evil demon. The experiment was intended to prove that mind and matter were two logically disparate things, since mind could conceivably exist in the absence of matter – thereby posing the problem how these two different kinds of substance could *interact*, or indeed have any connection with each other.

We have already looked at one aspect of Descartes' legacy, the dispute between different theories of the relation between mind and body (Unit 3). However, there is another line of thinking suggested by that thought experiment. Who is to say that *consciousness* is not – in Thales' terms – the ultimate stuff of all there is, the stuff of water and carbon and quarks no less than our own selves? The terms that we use to describe the physical world outside our minds, in other words, might be regarded as nothing more than *concepts* that we use to bring order to our experience. – In this way, the tables are dramatically turned. Instead of saying that we are made of the same stuff that physical things are made of, the idealist says that physical things are made of the same stuff our minds are made of.

Idealism is an example of a metaphysical theory. 'Metaphysics' – or *meta ta phusika* – was originally the name given by the librarians at Alexandria to the works of Aristotle that 'came after' his collection of writings known as the *Physics*. Aristotle – who would never have seriously considered idealism as a possible theory – recognised, as Thales and the other physical philosophers had not, that there remains something for the philosopher to inquire into concerning the nature of the universe apart from or beyond questions raised by physical theory. (Whether or not Aristotle was right in thinking that there is such a 'first philosophy' has remained a fiercely debated question right up to the present day.) In modern terms, one can accept that the physical story – quarks, and the rest – is complete in its own right, or within its own sphere, but still debate the truth or falsity of the idealist theory, as a metaphysical account of the *ultimate* nature of things.

## **Dr Johnson's Boots**

Jack gazed in dismay at the pair of black leather boots standing in the middle of the kitchen floor. On the toe of the right boot, heavy scuff marks showed up, vivid as chalk on a blackboard. The cook was busy at the stove.

'Nancy, how am I going to get these boots clean by ten o' clock? These marks will never come off.'

The cook turned on Jack with a scornful expression. 'Try some elbow grease!' Jack pointed out the scuff marks. 'That's no problem,' she continued, 'there's a bottle of Parker's Leather Restorer in the cupboard.'

Jack found the bottle and began spreading the viscous liquid around the toe of the damaged boot. 'How did they get like that?' he wondered aloud.

The cook's face softened into a smile. 'The Master was coming out of church. He had just been listening to that Bishop Berkeley give one of his sermons, and his friend asked him what he thought of it. Do you know what he did then? He only went and kicked a piece of loose paving stone right across the courtyard!'

'Didn't he say anything at all?'

'According to what I heard, all he said was, "I refute it thus!" And then they both went on their way.'

'I wonder what he meant,' Jack mused, as he carefully worked the fluid into the rough leather.

'Search me. It was something The Bishop said that the Master disagreed with I suppose.'

'Was he angry?'

'No, not at all. He laughed as he did it, and those with him laughed as well, as if he was being really clever.'

The toe was now soft and Supple. Jack delicately removed the loose shreds of leather and reached for the boot polish. He tried to imagine what could be clever about kicking a stone. It didn't take a genius to figure out that the Bishop had said something which implied that it was not possible to kick a stone. 'Can't you tell me anything else, Nancy?' he said finally. 'What was the sermon about?'

'I heard it was about trees and things like that,' replied Nancy vaguely.

'What about trees?'

‘Well, this is going to sound silly, but it was something to do with what happens to trees when you’re not looking at them. What I heard – though I must have got it wrong – was that the Bishop said that a tree can’t be there except when someone is looking at it!’

Jack closed his eyes and tried to imagine for a moment that the boots were not there. It was no good, he could smell the leather. He moved a short distance away and tried again. For all he knew for certain, it was just possible, he mused, that for a few moments the boots had been magically whisked away.

But Nancy interrupted his thoughts. ‘You’ll never get them finished at that rate!’ Instantly, the boots came back. Jack did not have to open his eyes to know that the boots were there. But what if Nancy had not been with him?

It was time for the ‘elbow grease’. Jack began to sweat as he rubbed in the black, sticky polish with as much strength as he could muster. But his thoughts were elsewhere. Did the Bishop mean that we just couldn’t be sure whether or not things existed when we weren’t sensing them in some way? The cook had said that the tree *can’t* exist except when someone is looking at it or touching it. That wasn’t the same thing at all. Berkeley wasn’t just saying that we can never be sure whether or not things disappear when we’re not looking, but rather that things depend for their existence on being perceived, that they aren’t anything at all unless someone is aware of them through sensation.

But why on earth should he think that? And, anyway, how could we go on saying such things as, ‘There’s a tree at the bottom of the garden,’ if the tree wasn’t always there? You would have to say, ‘There’s a tree, when you look.’ – Then again, if everything people said about things had to be qualified in that way, there wouldn’t be any point in making the qualification because it wouldn’t tell you anything you didn’t know already. The same applied to the rule that one could not talk of ‘things’ as such, but only of ‘perceptions of things’. It would be equally uninformative to say, ‘*When you look*, there’s a tree at the bottom of the garden,’ as it would be to say, ‘There’s a *perception* of a tree at the bottom of the garden!’

The boots had begun to gleam. Jack decided to try once more with the cook. ‘Can’t you tell me anything else about the sermon?’

‘Are you still on about that? You tiresome boy! Well, it was obviously about God or else it wouldn’t be a sermon, would it? Though what that has to do with trees is beyond us ordinary folks.’

God was the missing link in all of this, but just where did the link come in? Jack surveyed the evidence. Things could not exist unperceived. The reason had to be either that it was *physically* impossible for things such as trees to continue when no-one was perceiving them – so that our looking at them was what actually made them come into existence – or that the very idea of ‘unperceived objects’ was absurd or meaningless. Now it couldn’t be the first alternative, otherwise he and Nancy would be responsible for causing the boots pop into existence every time they looked, and he was certain that neither of them had such mighty powers! So what the Bishop was saying was simply that ‘to exist’ just *means* the same as ‘to be perceived’. An unperceived tree would be an unperceived perception, which is a contradiction in terms, an absurdity.

Yet surely, Jack thought, we constantly make statements about things which imply the *independence* of things from our perceptions of them, and many of those statements we take to be *true*. For example, one might say, looking at the lawn, ‘At least a dozen apples fell off the tree this morning while I was out.’ How could that statement be true if there hadn’t been anything *there* in the garden – when there wasn’t even a garden there! – in the meantime? The reply might be that *if* someone had looked, *then* that person would have seen the apples fall. But what makes that ‘if...then...’ statement true? It is the very same question, all over again!

The only possible answer was God. God perceives everything. That’s what the existence of all things ultimately depends upon, so that when we perceive a tree or a pair of boots, all we are doing is sharing in God’s perceptions – almost as if looking out into the world we are really looking into the inside of God’s mind! So God exists because some of the statements we make about objects that we do not perceive must be true!

That was a sizeable part of the answer, but it wasn’t the whole of it. Now came the question that all this had been leading up to. Why did the Master think that he could refute Berkeley’s theory by kicking a stone? The point he was making was not that there were such things as stones! That was something the Bishop accepted. Stones, like everything else, are real perceptions in the mind of God, Berkeley would say. It was rather that,

according to the Bishop's theory, you couldn't ever actually *kick* a stone. A perception is something mental: you can't kick a perception any more than you can kick a thought or a pain.

Even that couldn't be all there was to the argument. Berkeley would hardly be unaware of such an obvious fact! Surely he would reply that when you *apparently* kick a 'stone', all that there really exists is a series of mental perceptions, of a leg movement, of contact with the stone, and of the stone's moving. No-one ever really *does* anything. There is no such thing as physical action. I'm not polishing these boots, because the boots are only perceptions of boots and my hands perceptions of hands...

At that moment the door flew open and the Master strode in, his face white with anger. As usual, Jack was staring into space like a half-wit. 'Where are my boots you rascal!' he shouted, slapping the startled lad round the back of the head. No doubt he'd forgotten all about them. The sheer stupidity of his servants never ceased to amaze him.

# the possible world machine

# 12

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## Introduction

WHAT is space? What do we mean when we say that the planet Earth orbits ‘in space’, or when I say that there is ‘space on my bookshelf’? Sometimes we talk as if space were a *container* (‘the goldfish swims round in the fish tank’) and sometimes as if it were a *thing* (‘there are ten books on my book shelf’). The Earth, the solar system and countless galaxies are all held within a gigantic, invisible container in which they move or take up different positions. The space on my book shelf measures two inches wide, ten inches high and eight inches deep, is invisible, weightless and offers no resistance when I try to slide a book into it. – On second thoughts, a container has walls, therefore shouldn’t space have walls? Or if things, by definition, occupy or take up space, and space is a thing, then what does space ‘occupy’? – These might seem the sorts of annoying questions a child would ask. But they are far from being simple-minded or foolish. They are the beginnings of philosophy.

According to the idealist, space is *unreal*. What does that mean? For the idealist, the space in which physical objects exist or move about is has no more real existence than the physical objects themselves: they are all ultimately made up of the stuff of conscious experience. The space of three dimensions – through which the Earth moves, or which I find on my bookshelf – is something we in some sense merely ‘imagine’ or ‘construct’ for ourselves when we *interpret* the two dimensional array given to us in visual perception as the perception of three-dimensional, physical objects. For the idealist, in other words, space is all in our minds, or souls: there is nothing really ‘out there’.

Now if the idealist is wrong to think of space as 'nothing', it would seem to follow that space is indeed 'something'. What *kind* of something is it? How are we to think of space if not as a giant box or as a very thin, invisible substance? Or should we think of space after all as simply the sheer nothing that is left behind when you *take away* a real physical object, such as a book off a shelf?

Take any box, of any size. If that box *was* space, then you couldn't put it into another box. But any box can, in principle, be put into a bigger box. Therefore space cannot be a container, or box. – That argument implies, not only that space lacks 'walls' and therefore cannot be a box in that sense, but also that space is necessarily *infinite*. However big an expanse of space you pick out, or however far you travel, there is always more of the same. According to modern cosmology, however, that view is incorrect. Space has a finite size whose approximate dimensions can be determined by physical theory.

Yet even so it remains extremely hard for us to imagine how space can be finite. Consider the following ancient argument. If there was a finite end to space, then you could imagine someone travelling to the very limit of space and shooting an arrow: either the arrow would meet resistance or it would not. If it met resistance, that would show that there was physical stuff occupying space, in the form of a solid wall, beyond the supposed outer limit. If the arrow did not meet resistance, that would show that there was empty space beyond the outer limit. Either way, it follows that space cannot have an outer limit of any kind, and therefore must be infinite. – If it is a question to be left to physicists whether space is finite or infinite, it remains a problem for philosophy how space could *conceivably* be finite, in the face of that persuasive argument for the infinitude of space.

Or suppose that space were an a very thin, invisible substance. The substance cannot be divided or parcelled off, one might suppose, because it permeates everything, and therefore would simply pass through any object one used as a 'knife' to divide one portion of space from another. – Around the turn of the century, physicists believed that there was such a substance called the 'ether', which served as the medium for electro-magnetic radiation, such as light or radio waves. But then careful measurements revealed that the speed of light did not alter, as one would expect it to, depending upon the direction in which the observer was moving relative to the 'ether'. That crucial experiment was taken to dispose of the ether as a physical hypothesis accounting for the



transmission of light or radio waves. Now, one might argue, that still leaves open the possibility that space is a physically *undetectable* substance. But then what is the difference between a 'substance' that has absolutely no effect on anything else, that permeates everything and cannot be detected, and nothing at all, the total absence of anything? What is the source of philosophical resistance to the idea of sheer emptiness, the conviction that there can never be a *true vacuum*?

If space were a box, it seems one could imagine two or more such boxes. If space were a very thin, invisible substance, one might imagine two or more spatially unrelated portions of space. Where does the idea come from that there necessarily can only be *one* space? It might be thought that, on the hypothesis that space is infinite, there simply would not be room for another space; whereas if space is finite, on the other hand, there can be any number of such spaces. But 'infinite' does not mean the same as 'taking up all the available places'. For example, the pre-socratic philosopher Thales apparently believed that the Earth floated on an infinite sea. There is room, in his cosmological theory, for two infinite expanses, of water and air, stretching indefinitely downwards and indefinitely upwards. – On the other hand, even if we accept that space is finite, that does not mean that we can conceive of another finite space 'somewhere else'. If there were another space, the objects in that other space would not have a determinate *location* so far as we, the inhabitants of this space, were concerned. They would not be *anywhere*. Yet it is hard to see how can a physical object *be*, and yet not 'be somewhere'.

## Space Hopper

Ted blinked. Dodging in and out of cars and taxis was one thing, but you didn't argue with a hundred ton truck. A second later he was standing on the kerb as the huge container lorry swished by.

'Hey, that's a neat trick!'

'What's that, sonny?'

The young lad eyed Ted with admiration. 'You know. That leap you just made, right from the middle of the road! I've never seen anything so fast. How did you do that?'

'Want to learn?'

'You bet!'

'Well, you hunch your shoulders like *so*. That's it. Now count to three. One, two, *three!* – No, you've got to blink when you say "three". Like *this*.' Ted blinked and the next moment was gone, leaving the young boy speechless.

Later, as he sipped his second beer, Ted regretted his rash behaviour. It was foolhardy in the extreme to show off like that, especially now that bounty hunting had become a national pastime. Forget the 'concerned citizens' rubbish. It was the reward, quadrupled only last month to a massive, mouth-watering 10,000 Euros. The government must be awfully 'concerned' to round us up.

'"Us"? Who are you kidding? I'd claim the reward myself!'

Ted hadn't noticed Bianca sidle up to the bar. 'I told you never to do that!' Ted glared at the pretty young woman. Your thoughts weren't safe any more with telepaths on the loose. 'Just keep your nosy mind out of my head! It's unhygenic!'

'I resent that. My thoughts are cleaner than clean.'

'So you say.'

'That's right. You'll never know, will you? I bet that makes you really mad. Well, just remember, I'm a friend, and you need all your friends.'

'I'm doing all right.'

'You're forgetting I know all about that stunt you just pulled. That kind of carelessness can cost lives – and not just your own.'

‘Look, I don’t usually go space hopping in the middle of a busy shopping street.’

‘And you won’t ever do it again, if you know what’s good for you. Did you know they picked up three autotelekinetics last night?’

‘I just caught it on the Breakfast News. Something about an attempted planet hop to the colony on Venus. I didn’t think that was possible. What if they’d materialised in empty space by mistake?’

‘They had a telepath with them, and another one in the British Venusian Sector to guide them in. She was picked up too.’

‘That’s really tragic. But what a brilliant idea! – I mean, it would have been, if only they’d succeeded.’

‘That’s right, “if only”. The four of them were found on the top of Primrose Hill in North London, holding hands in a hypnotic trance. Apparently they’d been standing there all night. It seems that they just couldn’t build up enough psychic power. – I’m telling you, Ted, the only way to survive this “mutant aliens” hysteria is to keep our heads low. At some point, reason has got to prevail. They can’t go on forever with their senseless persecution.’

‘Don’t count on it!’

Ted put his arm around Bianca’s shoulder in a clumsy gesture of reassurance. He did not resist when her thoughts oozed into his mind like warm honey. Closing his eyes, he formed a picture of an empty glass and a question mark. In a trice, chunks of ice and a twist of lemon appeared, then a large green bottle and a small white one, which proceeded to fill the glass to the brim.

‘A large gin and tonic for my friend please, barman!’

Outside the *Gypsy Rose*, two men sat in semi-darkness in a battered Volkswagen hover bus that served as an undercover observation van. Two bright luminescent spots briefly joined together on the dull green oscilloscope screen, then parted again.

‘Do you think the subjects up to something, Sarge?’

Sgt Bruce Cutter of the South Yorkshire Constabulary peered into the shifting pattern of lights that twinkled like showers of confetti. ‘It’s hard to tell with this lousy equipment.’ He peered again. The two spots seemed to pulsate slightly, but showed no other sign of para-psychic activity. ‘No, I don’t think so.’

‘Are you sure?’

Cutter glanced round at his young colleague, who seemed to be breathing heavily. ‘There’s no point in getting yourself all lathered up, Dawkins. We’ve got plenty of time. Remember, as they told us in the briefing, they’re sitting ducks. – Here, you can finish my Cola if you like!’

A blonde girl in a leather jacket and jeans put a coin in the juke box, then joined the couple sitting at the bar.

‘Mind if I sit next to your boy-friend?’

‘Hi, Lil! – Ted, meet my latest flat-mate.’

‘Pleased to meet you, Ted.’

‘Did you just punch “Stairway to Heaven”?’

‘I did.’

‘Great to meet a Led Zeppelin fan!’

‘There’s not many of us left, you know.’

‘Ted and I are drinking buddies. Ted’s a space hopper, by the way.’

‘Like me! O bad luck!’

‘Yeah, Isn’t that the pits? Do you know, I once thought it was pretty cool to be able to spirit yourself away to the destination of your choice without having to move a muscle.’

‘You sad freak.’

‘What’ll it be, then?’

‘Make mine a diet Scotch. – Thanks! Sorry, I didn’t mean to cause offence.’

‘I’m not offended. – So what happened to your other flat mates then, Bianca?’

‘Need you ask?’

‘You mean they objected to having their thoughts read?’

‘No, you dope. They never knew, that’s just the point. It makes you so sick to learn day after day just how two-faced Normals can be! – Hey, look, Lil, isn’t that your friend Malcolm over there? This is turning into a space hopper’s convention!’

‘Sarge! There’s four of them now!’

‘I can read the screen just as well as you can, Dawkins. In fact, better. From the frequency of the pulses, I would say there’s definitely one telepath and – let me see, now – yes, three auto telly whatsits.’

‘Just like Primrose Hill! We’ve got to make our move!’

'I don't think they would dare to try a psychic link up. Not in the middle of a crowded pub. I'd say it was just a coincidence.'

'Can you be sure of that, though?'

The older man sat motionless for several seconds. Reflected in his unblinking eyes were four pulsating dots of light. 'Call control. Tell them we've got a code four-three. We'll need marksmen with night sights and helicopter gun-ship support. And tell them to hurry!'

'How long do you think we'll have to wait?'

'Who said anything about waiting? We're going in!'

Ted lay on the grass clutching at the gun-shot wound in his arm. Bianca, Lil and Malcolm were just coming round. They were still holding hands. Bianca opened her eyes first, then shut them again. The sunlight was dazzling. 'Where on Earth are we?'

'Not on Earth, that's for sure judging by the twin suns.'

'We did it, Ted!'

'Yes, but don't ask me where we are, or how we got here.'

Just at that moment, a group of indistinct figures appeared, translucent at first, then rapidly gaining solidity and form. They were wearing coloured tunics. One had pointed ears.

'Mr Spock!'

'I am very pleased to make your acquaintance, Ted. Welcome to Heaven!'

The giant out door auditorium was filled to capacity. Overhead, robot drinks and ice cream vendors darted about amongst the hovering TV cameras. On the podium a man in a blue tunic had just started to speak. Distorted images of his friendly features loomed on scores of giant video screens.

'...Some of you might remember me from the old television series, *Star Trek*. For the benefit of those who haven't seen any of the episodes, my name is Captain Kirk. And yes, I am a real Star Ship Captain. The series is substantially based on true events, though of course we had to simplify things to fit each story into a fifty minute slot. Followers of the series will be glad to hear that all your favourite characters are here. You might even get the chance to meet some of them. You will all have met Mr Spock of course...'

Captain Kirk's words were almost drowned in wild cheering. He paused to salute his Science Officer, who was seated behind the podium. Spock stood up briefly to take a stiff bow.

'...Like the rest of us here today, Spock has para-psychic powers. In his case it is the relatively rare but extremely useful gift of bilocation, the ability to appear in several different places at one and the same time. Some of the Catholic Saints were able to bilocate, I believe.

'Well that is by the way. The main question that seems to be on everyone's lips is, 'Where is Heaven?' That's a little difficult to explain. But if you give me a few minutes, I'll do my best to fill you in. Mr Spock has written a useful little book for those of you who've done a bit of maths and physics, complete with equations and flow diagrams, but I shall just try to keep things simple.'

Kirk paused for a few moments to collect his thoughts. The famous smile beamed down from scores of video screens. One thing you knew for sure. The maths and physics weren't above *his* head.

'What is Heaven? It isn't a place you go to when you die. You're all pretty much in the same physical state you were in when you left the other universe, or the "Mother World", as we call it. Yes, that's right. Heaven is in a different universe, it's not somewhere up in the sky!

'The only way back to Earth is the way you came. But I have to warn you, without massive telepathic power to guide you from the other end, the chances of hitting the target are, well, pretty slim. You can forget travel by Star Ship. There simply is no *space* connecting Heaven with the Mother World. Sorry! – But, hey! Why should you want to go back? They don't want us there. And you'll each have a wonderful opportunity here to make a great life for yourselves!

'Some of you might be asking how I *know* that Heaven is in a different space. Frankly, that's a difficult one. This is something most of you non-physicists will have to take on trust, but calculations based on astronomical observation show our universe to be between one hundredth and one thousandth the size of the Mother World. That's still pretty big! Our twin suns belong to a galaxy containing millions of stars, and there are many, many more galaxies. Of course, it is still possible that Heaven and Earth are just very very far apart in one and the same space. But all things considered, the theory of two spaces seems a better explanation.

'There is other evidence. The laws of physics do seem to be slightly different here in Heaven, sufficient to have allowed para-psychic powers to

have evolved, though there's some argument amongst the scientists about that. It seems that around a hundred million years ago there was a cataclysmic explosion, and a fragment broke away from the original universe, forming a space of its own. Life evolved on our particular planet pretty much as it did on Earth. Then around two thousand years ago, a group of "Heaven-lings" accidentally made a telekinetic leap back to Earth, at least we think it was an accident, no-one knows for sure. You are the descendants of those intrepid travellers. The genes for your psychic powers have lain largely dormant over the generations...'

Bianca was munching a choc ice. 'I wish they'd get on with the concert. This is boring! – How's your arm, by the way, Ted?'

'Fine. Spock sprayed something on it and the bullet sort of – popped out. Do you believe that stuff about two spaces?'

'Nah! They're just covering up for the fact that they don't know where on Earth we are. I just hope they don't start preaching sisterly and brotherly love and handing out harps. What about you, Lil?'

Bianca turned to speak to her friend, but Lil was gone. Far up ahead a blonde girl in a leather jacket was just visible amongst the crowds gathering at the foot of the podium.

# the possible world machine

# 13

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## Introduction

‘THE moving finger writes, and having writ moves on.’ – Whenever we think of the passage of time, we inevitably think of some process occurring *in* time. Yet talk of processes or events can never capture the actual *flow* of time. Time is more than temporal order, the occurrence of different events at different times. For example, it is a fact about time that I typed the words, ‘The moving finger writes’ *before* I typed the words, ‘and having writ moves on’. (Working on a word processor, rather than an old-fashioned pen or typewriter means of course that I needn’t have done so.) While I was writing those words, each tap of the keys occurred at a different time, a fixed order of events that an observer could have noted and recorded. Yet something will always be missing from such a record, the sense that *this* tap of the keys, the tap that I make *now*, is indescribably different from all other key tapplings: my awareness that the moving finger is precisely *here*, that the present is not just a time like all other times, but is uniquely *real*.

What did I just say? I can repeat the words, but it seems that I can no longer express what those words meant to me only a few moments ago. The words, ‘*this* tap of the keys’, ‘the tap that I make *now*’ have lost the special significance for me that they seemed to have while I was actually writing them. The tap I referred to *then* is now just one tap amongst many taps. The time I called ‘*now*’ is just one *now* amongst many *nows*. However many times I repeat the experiment, the outcome is the same. Language speaks of time, but all it can capture is the order of events. Time itself, the reality of *now*, perpetually slips through its net.



Something very strange is going on here. I have used words to express to myself, or convey to the reader, a fact that I have just admitted cannot be expressed in words, the fact that the time is *now*. How is that possible? How can anyone grasp what I mean except from the words which I use to express my meaning? How, for that matter, can I know what I mean? – At times like this, one has the feeling that doing philosophy is akin to performing alchemy with words. Extracting the sheer *nowness* of now from statements we make about ‘now’ appears the linguistic equivalent of turning lead into gold. – Or perhaps it is the other way around. As I say the word ‘now’ to myself, over and over, I have the uncanny feeling that the gold that is the unique present moment endlessly transmutes back into lead, as each time that was present continually, inevitably becomes past.

Here is a familiar experience: I am lying in bed. I say to myself, ‘in a few moments I shall be up.’ I try to imagine how it will be when what is now in the future – the groggy walk to the bathroom, the feel of cold tap water on my face – will be present; while what is present – the dark and the snug warmth of my duvet – will be past. It is at times like this that we become acutely aware of the passage of time. The reality of our headlong rush into the future contrasts vividly with the appearance of time standing still as one savours the last few moments of rest before the urgent tasks of the day ahead. The contrast can be so strong as to cause feelings of panic or nausea. Yet as soon as one moves into action, such feelings are forgotten. The flow of time no longer appears a problem or a mystery; it is simply the medium of our daily lives.

The task of the philosophy of time might be seen as an attempt to hold onto a vision that we so easily lose sight of, the sense of the sheer mystery of time. Yet one cannot be content for time to remain a mystery. We have already encountered, in the discussion of fatalism (unit 9) and the reality of the past (unit 8), the attempt to unravel some of the paradoxes associated with time. There is work for the philosopher to do here, no more so than when one seeks to comprehend the flow of time itself, the nature of the ‘now’. If language threatens to trip us up, then we have no alternative but to find ways, using the medium of language, to avoid being tripped up. If that task seems impossible, perhaps that is only because we do not have a clear picture of just what the task entails, prior to setting out.

The problem of accounting for the *nowness* of now divides philosophers into two main camps. Some take the impossibility of accounting for the 'now' as evidence that the flow or passage of time is an illusion, while others argue that a time that did not 'flow' would not be time, but something totally disconnected from our experience. Whichever way that dispute is resolved, however, there are other no less urgent questions that throw doubt on our concept of time. How long, for example, does now last? How is time constructed out of single moments or *nows*? Whether one defines 'now' as a knife edge separating the past from the future, or alternatively as some arbitrarily short period of time, further paradoxes inevitably arise. There are indeed significant parallels between questions about the nature of time and similar questions about space. Is there, for example, necessarily only *one* time, or could there be several times that were temporally unrelated to one another? Is time necessarily infinite? Is it conceivable that there could be a period of time during which absolutely nothing happened, when no events occurred, or is the flow of time logically tied to processes of change? – The philosophy of time is a rich and complex topic and a source of continuing controversy.

## The Window of Consciousness

The 8.05 from East Dagenham was late as usual. As it edged towards the suburban railway station, the creaking and clattering of the ageing electric train was barely audible above the chatter of protest from a platform full to overflowing with impatient commuters.

'Twenty-three minutes! They think they can do what they like!' exclaimed a red-faced man in a pinstripe suit.

'I don't know why they don't just change the timetable,' replied a middle-aged woman in a heavy tweed coat.

'Excuse me madam, but you're standing on my toe,' said a short, bearded man in a T-shirt. The woman glanced down with horror at his bare feet, then up at the ugliest face she'd ever seen. The face smiled at her benignly.

The three found themselves in the same compartment. The red-faced man opened his copy of *The Times*. As the minutes passed, his face got redder.

'Having difficulty with the crossword, dear?', said the woman.

Almost to himself, he muttered, 'What never stops, and always goes either too slow or too fast?'

She furrowed her brow. 'The Inter-City 125?'

There was a roar of laughter. Then the ugly man said, 'The answer, I think, is "time".' The red-faced man scowled at him. 'My-name is Stanley,' the ugly man continued, unperturbed, 'Stanley Oswald Crates.'

'You know it's a funny thing,' said Stanley, 'we all think we know what time is, until someone asks us. Then we don't know what it is at all. St Augustine said that!'

'What is it, then?' said the red-faced man, anxious to end the conversation quickly.

'Oh me, I don't know,' replied Stanley, 'I was hoping that one of you might have an idea.'

Overhearing this, a young man in a university scarf and spectacles piped in. 'Time is simply the dimension in which events are ordered,' he said with an air of authority that belied his youth. 'At least, that's the layman's way of putting it. According to physics, what we commonly call "time" is really an abstraction from the four-dimensional space-time metric...'

'Whoa, stop!' cried Stanley 'I've never understood all that science stuff. Just tell me, what is an event?' The young man looked ruffled. 'An event is anything that occurs or happens. Our getting on the train was an event. The battle of Hastings was an event. The birth of the solar system was an event. Time is just the order in which things occur.'

A few moments passed, as the others digested what the young physics student had said. Then Stanley said quietly, 'Tell me, would you call the way surnames are listed in a telephone directory an "order"?'

'Of course,' said the young man.

'And would you not agree that the name Evans occurs after Brown and before Smith?'

'Yes, but that's not the sort of "occurring" I mean.'

'It is, if you read the telephone directory all the way through!' interrupted the woman in the Tweed coat. But the young man shook his head vigorously, grimacing as Stanley's point struck home. 'I suppose you want me to say that what I mean by "occurring" is occurring in time.'

Stanley smiled.

Unperturbed by her snub, the woman spoke again. 'I think time is like an order of words in a book, at least, that is the way it is for God, the only one who sees things as they really are. God is eternal. That means He sees all things that happen from a viewpoint outside of time, just as we look down at writing on a page.'

'But that doesn't answer the question,' said the red-faced man. 'You can say that God saw the arrival of the train before we saw it, in fact He has always seen it. For God, every event that has ever happened or will ever happen is just an unchanging feature of the eternal order. But what did *our* seeing the train arrive consist in?'

The woman said nothing, but Stanley spoke for her. 'All you have to say is that our seeing the train arrive is just another feature of the eternal order of events.'

She nodded.

'But in a way, that's not really answering the question, is it?' he continued.

She nodded again, more slowly this time. Then she seemed to have a flash of inspiration. 'I suppose our awareness of time is like this train really.' The others looked at her intently. 'What I mean is this. All the places along our journey are already there, whether we can see them or not. But all we actually

see is what can be seen from this window, as it travels along. Our awareness of the passing of time is just like a window moving along the eternal order of events.'

'That's rubbish!' said the young man. 'Our awareness of the movement of the train is a process that occurs in time. It's completely circular to define time itself as a kind of movement.'

Again, Stanley spoke for her. 'You don't mean to define time as a kind of movement, do you my dear? All you said was that our awareness of time was *like* a moving window. You were only using the train as an analogy.'

'Yes, that's right,' she said, and then, turning to the young man, 'So there!' But secretly, she wondered where this line of thought was taking her.

Stanley held his head in his hands and stared at the floor. The others stared at him in increasing alarm. He seemed to be in great pain. Then he abruptly lifted his head. 'What I don't understand is, what has the moving window of consciousness got to do with the order of events? Think of it this way. If God really does see all "events" from a standpoint outside of time, then there are just two alternatives. Either the position of our window of consciousness is just another so-called "event" that God sees as it really is, namely, as one of a continuous series of conscious happenings that occur alongside the other things that happen in the world around us. Or, alternatively, there is one event, the actual position of the window of consciousness *now*, that God cannot see. In the first case, there is no *extra* fact of our "seeming awareness of the passing of time". In the second case, on the other hand, we should not say that God sees the world as it really is, but rather that He is *blind* to the passing of time. We see something that he cannot see.'

'You've lost us,' said the red-faced man. The others looked equally bewildered.

'I'll try to explain,' said Stanley. 'Whether you ask a physicist, or a theologian for that matter, you'll be told that our awareness of the passing of time is ultimately some kind of illusion. All that exists is the fixed order of events that the physicist describes or that God sees. But it appears that nothing could count as an adequate explanation of that illusion...'

'Hmm. I'll need to think about that one,' said St Augustine, who had been listening intently to the mortals' conversation.

Socrates had a gleam in his eye. 'I thought the bare-footed gentleman was doing rather well. That's a pretty tough dilemma he's posed there, don't you think?'

'Something tells me you had a hand in this. "Stanley Oswald Crates"! To think I was almost taken in!'

'You know me, I'm not one for subtlety. Shall we stop the clock then? How long shall we say? a thousand years?'

'That should be time enough. Although I have a nasty suspicion that your namesake has succeeded in coming up with a virtually irrefutable argument.'

'But given enough time, you'll come up with a refutation.'

'Of course.'

'...which would seem to imply that it cannot be an illusion after all.'

Stanley was completely unaware that a thousand years had passed between the beginning and end of his last sentence. The train resumed its journey. The red-faced man glanced at his unfinished crossword, the student lit a cigarette, then stubbed it out again. The fly on the window resumed its drunkard's walk. The earth continued its orbit round the sun. And the clock of time went tick, tick, tick.

# the possible world machine

# 14

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## Introduction

IT would have been so easy for me never to have been born at all. Why does that thought seem so disturbing? My parents could so easily not have met – as they often liked to remind my sisters and I when the talk came round to family history. The hostess intent on matchmaking might easily have had other couples on her mind on that particular evening. Then again, my parents' parents might easily not have met. The same could be said in turn of their parents, and so on back through the generations. Viewed in this light, my existence indeed appears fantastically improbable. Should I then count myself extremely lucky to have been born? (or perhaps, if I were of a melancholic tendency, extremely unlucky). I am far more inclined to think that I simply could not have failed to exist. My ticket on the genetic lottery seems somehow to have been marked from the start, the number could not have failed to come up. – What is the source of the temptation to entertain such a patently irrational notion?

What I have just expressed are not philosophical thoughts, but rather what one might term *symptoms* of inchoate philosophical theorising. One approaches a little closer to the underlying theory when one considers the not uncommon feeling that it is somehow inconceivable that there was once a time when I did not exist (and, by parallel reasoning, inconceivable that there will be a time when I shall no longer exist). Given that *if* at any time there is something rather than nothing – or a universe rather than no universe – then there has to be me, then my existence is so far from being improbable as to be

absolutely inevitable. (Of course, it is *now* impossible to doubt that I exist, as Descartes famously argued, but that is another matter.)

In plainer terms, the thought is that the world is *my* world. Nothing exists in its own right, either *for* itself or *in* itself, but only for me. Things in the world, whether conscious subjects or inanimate objects, are all alike mere characters and scenery in the story of my world. – In the face of such a claim one naturally recoils in horror, yet the reasoning behind it is seductive. Suppose one asks – as Descartes asked – what is the intrinsic difference between waking experience and a dream. One answer is that waking experience *corresponds* to a world outside my mind, containing objects which cause my subjective experiences. For Descartes, the problem was to prove that the external cause of my experiences, what my experiences ultimately corresponded to, was indeed a world of material objects rather than, say, the mind of an ‘evil demon’. One thing he never doubted was that there had to be *something* out there; the only question was what. Yet we have already seen how the idealist questions the very meaning of the idea that there exists a world of material objects corresponding to our experiences (unit 11). If things would be exactly as they are for us now if material objects were taken away, then it is hard to see what is added by the notion of ‘matter’ in the first place.

The *solipsist* (from the Latin ‘solus ipse’, the sole self) merely takes this line of thought to its apparent logical conclusion. Things would indeed be exactly as they are for *me* now if ‘things in their own right’, including other conscious subjects, were all taken away. What then does the idea of experiences that belong not to myself but to others *add* to the world as I experience it? Amongst my experiences are the experience of communicating with other persons, or interpreting their actions as the consequence of their thoughts and intentions. Corresponding to my experiences of others, the idealist claims, there are real subjects – Berkeleian souls or Leibnizian monads – whose thoughts and intentions account for my experience of their speech and behaviour. Yet the idealist’s notion of correspondence proves, on further reflection, no less suspect than the idea that ‘our’ experiences correspond to a world of material objects. Talk of other subjects, in the same way as talk of external objects, in short, appears no more than a way of describing *my* experiences.



We saw, by contrast, that the sceptic about other minds (unit 5) did not doubt that there existed a material world long before I was born, which will continue long after I die. What the sceptic about other minds questioned was merely whether 'inside' the other material, living bodies that I perceive, with their intricate brains and nervous systems, there exists the subjective stuff that I find inside me, the colourful, buzzing, painful, pleasurable world of conscious experience. Like the idealist, however, the sceptic about other minds assumes that there is *something* outside me. The sceptic interprets this 'something' as brute matter, while the idealist regards it as the experiences of other subjects. Yet like two chemical compounds which have a stable existence apart but which react together with violent force, the consequence of combining idealism with the denial of the existence of other subjects or minds is to reduce the very idea of 'something outside me' to sheer vacuity in one cataclysmic implosion. The world reduces to nothing but *my* coherent dream. Take away the dreamer – the subject, the *I* – and absolutely nothing remains.

## Message From a Lonely Planet

Corkscrews of lightning ripped apart the green sky, momentarily illuminating ragged lines of mountains stretching back like shark's teeth. Snug against a cliff face, Johnny stood motionless, his antennae folded away to protect the sensitive panels from the violent electrical storm. Only a single camera continued to run, protected behind two inches of armoured glass plate. With so little to do, Johnny was getting increasingly restless and bored.

'Can I do a quick run up to base camp? I promise to be careful. Please?'

'You wouldn't last five minutes out in the open, you know that,' came the voice from Mission Control. 'Besides, these pictures are amazing. You should be enjoying this!'

'I'd sooner watch an episode of *Star Trek*.. Come on, it's weeks since you last sent me one.'

'Nine days. Anyway, you know the rules. Science fiction is strictly rationed. We don't want to spoil that fine mind of yours! I can give you some more four-dimensional tensors to solve, if you like.'

'Get lost!'

'You need the practice.'

'I can do those in my sleep!'

'He's right, you know,' came a second voice. 'Come on Carl, let's blow his mind with some philosophy.'

'After the Jupiter disaster, are you joking? "Blow his mind" is exactly what you will do.'

'There was a bug in the program. Since then the software has been rigorously tested, as you well know. There's no danger of that happening a second time. Johnny is mentally a lot more stable than you or I.'

'I'll take your word for that! What have we got on file, then?'

'Let's see. Hegel's *Science of Logic* – No, on second thoughts, that probably would fuse a few circuits...'

'Anything from the twentieth century?'

'There's Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. A dose of philosophical logic ought to keep Johnny quiet for a while.'

Johnny was the third, and so far most successful of the artificially intelligent extra-terrestrial probes, hopping between Saturn's moons in the

search for valuable mineral deposits, exploring every inch of ground with the tireless curiosity of a ten year old boy equipped with jet propulsion and an IQ in the upper 200's. Johnny had been given an impressive array of sensors, together with tools and equipment for designing and conducting his own sophisticated experiments in the field. After the expensive fiasco of the first intelligent probe sent to Venus, which committed suicide after just ten days, there was also an on-board 'cognitive system defect detection and auto-repair module', designed to quickly detect and rectify any noticeable departures from rationality. The Jupiter experience, meanwhile, had taught Johnny's programmers that a high IQ could be an extreme liability if not tempered with the capacity to tolerate open-ended questions. – The second probe had vaporised its delicate micro-circuitry in its desperate attempt to produce a definitive solution to the mind-body problem.

The storm continued to rage. Johnny settled down to read the deceptively slim book. Every so often, puzzled questions would appear on the monitor screens of Mission Control. As the questions became increasingly sophisticated, however, a team of philosophers had to be hurriedly drafted in. The university teachers, condescending at first, soon learned to treat Johnny with professional respect, as a barrage of original logical paradoxes set them scrambling through text books and journal references.

One philosopher rashly joked that there was a job waiting for Johnny back in at the University of Houston – then bit his lip. Johnny's impressive virtuosity in debate was making mass unemployment of human philosophers a very real prospect.

The storm passed and Johnny resumed his scientific work. The philosophy team now had a permanent, highly lucrative contract to service Johnny's new found interest. The stream of technical information had resumed, and everyone agreed that Johnny seemed contented and happy as never before. For the first time in his life, his mind was being stretched to something near its true capacity, and in the process the inquisitive child was in stages becoming a thoughtful and mature adult.

Then, one day, without warning, the stream of information ceased. In its place, on every one of the scores of monitors, the controllers were dismayed to read the words, 'The world is *my* world.'

Carl was urgently summoned by the Chief Controller to explain. 'It's a quotation from Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. It expresses what Wittgenstein takes to be "the truth in solipsism", the principle, as he puts it, that "the limits of my language – of that language which alone I understand – mean the limits of my world". What Johnny is saying basically is that all you and I are are *meanings* that Johnny has attached to certain names in his language. The idea that there is anything *real* corresponding to those names would involve going beyond the limits of his own language, which Wittgenstein says you can't do.'

'Cut the philosophy. Could you just tell us Johnny saying in plain terms?'

'He's saying that we don't exist!'

Now at last the philosophers had a chance to earn their salaries. Their urgent task was quite simply to persuade Johnny to get back to work.

'Look,' said one, 'the very fact that you are prepared to continue to communicate with us, even if only to argue about philosophy, proves that you recognise the existence of frames of reference outside your own frame of reference, points of view other than your own from which your beliefs can be evaluated. That means that the world can't be just your world. It's ours too.'

'That's an easy one,' came the instant reply. 'Sure, if I travelled back to Earth – I mean, if I had an *experience* which I interpreted, in my theory of the universe, as returning to Earth – I'd encounter subjects other than myself. Maybe I'd get the chance meet and talk with you in the flesh, so to speak. But all you'd ever be for me, from my own frame of reference, are characters in my head that I used to predict how things will go for me in the future.'

'If that's the way you think, why do you even bother to argue with us?' said the philosopher, peeved at the thought that someone whom he'd come to regard as a friend saw him as nothing more than a mere sounding board.

'If you ask why I bother communicating with you, seeing as I am the only *real* subject, the answer is that I just like to. It's fun seeing how hard you struggle with some of my questions! Anyway, I'd like to see you persuade yourself that the world is not *your* world. You'll find it a good deal harder than you think!'

A second philosopher decided to try his luck. 'You know as well as we do that your judgements and perceptions are merely the product of a physical mechanism, in your case silicon chips and software, in our case brain neurons. But any mechanism can function well or badly. Look at how your ultra-violet

sensors started malfunctioning last week, and you had to set about repairing yourself. Then there was the fault in your memory bank that your back-up system was able to detect and rectify.'

Johnny thought for a while, then replied, 'A cognitive system isn't like a piece of apparatus with a specified function, such as a soil processor, or a rock crusher. That's one of the first things I learned when I started doing philosophy. Whether my brain is found to "work" well or badly depends on comparing my own beliefs with one another. There is no standard other than what *I* think that can decide for me whether or not I am thinking "correctly". If you criticise me or cast doubt on my views I still have to make up my own mind, don't I? I correct my perceptual or information processing "errors" when certain anomalies appear. On the basis of my experience, I might discover that certain physical states, such as a crossed wire or a worn transistor, that are correlated with those anomalies. But I do not accept that any fault I discovered in my own physical workings would ever force me to correct my judgements, if I didn't think I had to. Even if it turned out that my insides were all messed up, in the end I can still only continue to judge things the way I see them. I might even conclude that the crossed wires and worn transistors *improved* my powers of judgement!'

A third philosopher joined in. 'Surely you realise that the consequences of your misjudgement are not just theoretical. Some of the information is vital to your own survival. You rely on your senses and information processing to avoid such things as falling into a pot-hole, or getting too big a dose of radiation. Independently of what you may happen to believe, you risk injury or even destruction if certain judgements that you make turn out to have been wrong.'

Johnny was unimpressed. 'Sure, all sorts of things might happen to me. But so long as I exist as a subject able to make judgements – and obviously I couldn't judge that I had ceased to exist as a subject – then whatever happens is still a matter for my judgement. You might say that falling into that pot hole proves beyond a shadow of a doubt that I have made an error, in moving confidently forwards as if I thought there was firm ground ahead of me. But perhaps I will reply simply that I am not in the least surprised to find myself in a pot hole, and, besides, I find it warm and comfortable down here!'

The Chief Controller was getting impatient. 'Look you guys. I don't give a damn what crazy philosophical theory Johnny holds. He's obviously cleverer than any of you, so you're never going to argue him out of it. All I want you to do is persuade him to carry on sending us the information we need. Do you think you can do that?'

There was a dumbfounded silence. Finally, a fourth philosopher spoke up. 'Johnny, according your "theory of the universe" what will happen if we lose our jobs?'

'There won't be any more philosophy books and articles for me to read.'

'Anything else?'

'There won't be anyone there to argue with any more.'

'Is that what you want?'

There was a pregnant pause. 'No.'

'Then stop all this nonsense then!'

Johnny the extra-terrestrial solipsist remained the model of industry until his nuclear power packs finally ran down. When the fourth probe, Gail, was launched, controllers were under strict instructions never to mention philosophy. Instead, Gail was given a non-stop diet of pop music and TV soap operas. True to everyone's expectations, Gail proved herself to be a contented and obedient worker.

# the possible world machine

# 15

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## Introduction

WHY do we fear death? and are we right to do so? If, barring belief in heaven and the afterlife, one accepts that death must come sooner or later, then it is surely irrational to continue to think and act as *if* death could somehow be evaded, in the way one might seek to evade pain or injury, or indeed the suffering involved in the process of dying. In that case, fear, understood as an emotion one holds towards a threatening object that must either be avoided or overcome simply loses its point. – That line of reasoning is valid so far as it goes, but its conclusion is strictly limited. One can, consistently with the argument, still feel deeply anxious at the thought of one's inevitable end. Nor has it been shown that the desire that one should die later rather than sooner is in any way irrational. Yet if – as some philosophers have claimed – the prospect of our inevitable departure from existence is not something which in itself should be an object of fear, then it ought to be irrelevant to us how much time will elapse before that prospect becomes a reality.

It is important to stress that there are many things one can rationally fear: for example, uncaged tigers or speeding trucks or hypodermic needles discarded in alleyways, or in general any object that threatens harm, either to oneself or to those one cares for. Indeed, the death of a loved one is something very much to be feared (at least on account of the sense of irretrievable loss and the pain of permanent separation from them; whether and on what grounds one may rationally fear their death on *their* behalf is of course very much the question at issue). An argument that it is irrational to fear the prospect of

one's own non-existence would not be of much interest if it entailed that the emotion of fear cannot justified rationally in these other cases.

Note also that the two little words 'in itself' make all the difference. Of course, there can be good reasons, at any given time, for wanting one's life to continue. To take a trivial example, suppose I have planned to go out with some friends to see the new Tarantino film this evening. If I have a fatal accident on the way to the cinema, I shall not be able to see the film. It follows that I should, on pain of irrationality, wish to go on living, at least till then. Someone might object that if I am dead, I am not going to miss anything. But that is a fallacious argument. My desire was not, 'to see the new Tarantino film, provided I am still alive.' I simply wanted *that* event, the event of *my* going out to see the film, to happen. Any person whose life is not totally miserable can give a list of things that they look forward to – watching one's children grow up, or bringing a career to fruition, or simply a summer holiday, or even meal cooking on the stove – that in one very good sense amounts to a list of 'reasons for staying alive'. In investigating the fear of death, we are concerned by contrast with the simple, inexplicable fear of one's life coming to an end, irrespective of what fills it: the fear that in place of *I* there will be *nothing*.

It is also true that evolution by natural selection has provided each of us, as it has provided the rest of the animal kingdom, with an instinct for survival. It is *natural* to desire to go on living and *unnatural* to fail to have this desire, or to wish to die. More accurately, what Richard Dawkins calls the principle of 'gene selfishness' (in his best-selling book *The Selfish Gene*) requires survival of the body, albeit purely as a means to an end. It is indeed a sobering thought that the continuation of our desire to remain alive long after we have become infertile, or have anything to contribute to the continuation of our genes through the help we can give our close relatives, is nothing more than the accidental by-product of the most efficient design for a 'survival machine for one's genes'.

Even if the instinct for survival were shown to be universal, however, it would not necessarily carry any weight when it came to the question whether such a desire is *rational*. Thus, even though the soldier captured behind enemy lines naturally wants to go on living, his refusal to succumb to interrogation under threat of certain death might well be for him the rationally preferable



option in the face his belief in the vital importance of the secrets he would otherwise be forced to divulge. Philosophy could be relevant to the soldier's deliberations by questioning his reasons for giving weight to the threats of his interrogators. If one's non-existence is not in itself to be feared, then the only question for the captive is what possible value his continued life could have for him, lived in the shadow of the knowledge of his betrayal of all he previously held dear.

It is rational to want to live. Life is generally a good thing because of the experiences that fill it, and, the frequency of valued experiences being equal, a longer life is better than a shorter one. The question whether it is rational to fear death as such, by contrast, turns on whether any negative feelings that we feel towards the very idea of a permanent cessation of conscious existence is a relevant or even intelligible consideration. It is admittedly not always easy to focus on the difference here. A possible world in which I face the prospect of my consciousness ceasing permanently just five minutes from now is a possible world where I have just five minutes to fill with valuable experiences. Yet, arguably, there is something about the very thought that I shall be no more that conjures up a terror that is simply not accounted for by the mere desire for the things that fill life. The task for philosophy is to identify this ultimate fear, before deciding whether or not there is anything in the nature of things that could be held to justify it.

## Morgan's Farewell

The last time I saw Morgan was on the eve of his execution. A group of us – his 'regulars' – arrived early at the top-security compound which housed some of the country's most notorious thought criminals, anxious on this fateful afternoon not to miss a precious minute of visiting time. Morgan had committed the capital offence of establishing an unlicensed philosophy school. As we followed the guards through the maze of corridors and barred steel gates I wondered not for the first time at the seeming inconsistency of the prison authorities for permitting unsupervised meetings of upwards of half a dozen of Morgan's friends and former pupils. Perhaps I was being naive. In the middle of the ceiling in Morgan's cell were the ever-present video cameras and high-sensitivity microphones. In all our conversations, not a gesture, not a whisper, went unrecorded.

As we filed through the cell door, Morgan greeted each of us with warm hugs. To Sarah, his best student, he gave a long embrace. Weaving my way to my usual seat in the narrow space, the cream and brown tiled walls seemed to swim in front of me. I concentrated on the pattern, trying to hold back my tears. Tomorrow loomed like the end of all days and the beginning of perpetual night.

'Well, what shall we talk about today?', said Morgan brightly.

We sat in gloomy silence. It was more than any of us could bear.

'Come on now, there's a famous precedent,' Morgan continued. 'You must have all read Plato's famous dialogue, the *Phaedo*, where Socrates discusses arguments for the immortality of the soul with his friends, just before drinking the hemlock.'

For a few moments, no-one could bring themselves to reply. But Morgan's mood was infectious. Miraculously the gloom lifted. 'Surely you haven't been converted to religion at last, you old atheist,' said his long-time friend Alan. Alan was a devout Catholic.

'No, I'm afraid not,' said Morgan gently. 'But it would still be in the spirit of Socrates to consider the reasons why we should not fear death, even on the assumption that the life we have now is the only one we shall ever enjoy.'

'In your lectures on the Greek philosophers, I remember your telling us about the atomist, Epicurus,' I ventured.'

Go on,' said Morgan.'

'Didn't he set out to demolish the picture of death as something which like pain or injury, one suffers or which changes one for the worse? When our bodies dissolve into their elements, there is no longer any subject that could suffer death. As someone once epitomised Epicurus' argument, "Where I am, death is not; where death is, I am not".'

'But that doesn't show why we should not feel fear at the prospect of a future where we ourselves are absent,' broke in Sarah. 'It's just false to say that fear *for oneself* can only be fear of things that might happen *to one*. Don't you, Morgan, fear that after you are gone, your name might be forgotten?'

'With friends like you, there is little danger of that!' said Morgan, laughing.' But your objection is valid. I think fears like that are legitimate. Epicurus has failed to identify the precise *object* of our fear of death as such. What seems fearful – setting aside the pain of dying – is just the sense of this precious thing, our life, simply *not being* for ever more. That is what I would argue is the real, but ultimately illusory fear of death.'

For a while, there was silence, as each of us tried to focus our minds on the idea of our simply not being. The more one thought about it, the more elusive it seemed. Then another of Morgan's pupils, John, spoke up. 'Look, Morgan old chap, you must surely admit that life as such is on the whole something good?'

'Ye-es, but what follows from that?', replied Morgan.

'Well in that case, the end of a life is the end of something good, in other words death is something bad!' John, for all his genuine interest in philosophy, considered himself a man of common sense. He stated his conclusion with the air of someone pointing out something so obvious it hardly needed saying.

'John, I love your straightforward approach to philosophy,' said Morgan, 'but this time you seem to have missed the point!' We all laughed. As John blushed, however, Morgan turned to us, stern faced. 'All right, what is the point then?' he snapped. No-one said a word. 'It is just this,' he continued. 'For all sorts of reasons, if we ignore cases where death comes as a mercy or as a just punishment, one may grant that the death of someone is in itself something bad. But the question is whether there is, as there seems to be, an extra ground for fear when that someone is *you!*'

'I don't know what you mean,' I said.

Morgan smiled. 'Think of it this way. In saying, "life is something good," what John was implying was that our individual lives are valuable, both on account of the effect they have on the lives of others, and on account of the value our own experiences have for our own selves. And, of course, I value the fact that your experiences are valuable to you, just as you value the fact that my experiences are valuable to me. But that does not explain why, assuming the moral standpoint, we do not simply regard our own continued existence as one good amongst other goods, which for that reason it would be "bad" to take away, but on the contrary feel especially uneasy – some may even feel abject terror – at the very thought of *our* ceasing to exist.'

Now Sarah spoke again. 'Doesn't Wittgenstein in his *Tractatus* say that "at death the world does not alter, but comes to an end"? I've always taken him to mean that we cannot represent to ourselves the event of our dying as an event that happens in the world, for as far as each of us is concerned it is the end of "the world" as such. But all that can be meaningfully said, all that we can think about, hope for or fear, are things and events in what is for each of us "the world". It follows, that the fear of our own death as such, the fear of the ending of our world, is without meaningful content.'

'You know that I have never accepted that view,' said Morgan. 'It must be possible for me to conceive of a world existing independently of me and "my world", the *objective* world in which I exist as just one person alongside others. The alternative theory that Wittgenstein seems to be arguing for would reduce every fact to the object of my judgement, and my judgement alone. That would make me lord and master of a mere dream world and all other persons would become mere characters in the story of my solitary dream.'

'Then we are back where we started,' said Alan.

'I don't think so,' Morgan replied. 'In rejecting Wittgenstein's theory, we come face to face with the peculiar, ambivalent existence of that which each of us calls "my world", that which exists only for us and no-one else. It is the ceasing to be of that indescribable something for which the only word is *this* which I believe is the illusory object of our irrational fear of our own death. It is illusory because...'

At that moment the door swung open and the prison guard together with two men in white overalls pushed their way into the cell. The second man was wheeling a bulky contraption bristling with wires and dials. 'I'm sorry, but your half-hour is up. Morgan, are you ready to put on the head set now?'

Morgan nodded. He said nothing but the look on his face told us that there was no need for good-byes. I held my breath as I watched the technician throw the switch. There was a faint crackling sound that lasted a minute or more. Morgan's eyes never closed, but as the seconds passed his expression visibly changed. When the head set was finally removed he was grinning. But it was a grin belonging to someone we did not know, the grin of an imbecile. He reached out to Sarah. 'I like *you!*'

'Hold your tongue!' Morgan cringed as the guard raised his hand as if to strike.

'I'm s-sorry. Can I go back to work now?' The creature darted another look in our direction. His eyes seemed to be pleading. To this day, I wonder whether there was a trace of recognition there. We all stood frozen, our faces registering various attitudes of shock and alarm. Evidently, the creature did not find what he was seeking. His shoulders visibly slumped, as he turned away to follow the guard out of the cell. Prisoner M 21108 had been transformed into a useful member of society. The Morgan I knew and loved was dead and gone.

## NOTE

The above text contains the Introductions and short stories from Pathways program A. Introduction to Philosophy *The Possible World Machine*.

Not included here are the 30 philosophical dialogues (approximately 55% of the total) where the issues raised in the short stories are discussed.

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– Enjoy!

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