

## Hedgehog Philosopher (Extracts 2010–2011)

*Thursday, December 16, 2010*

### Day 5

‘What is it that I see?’ — An illusion. That’s what I once called it. The Cartesian theatre, or the infinite regress of homunculi are merely naive expressions of that illusion, which reaches its ultimate refinement in the transcendental solipsism of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*: ‘The self of solipsism shrinks to a point of no extension, and there remains the reality co-ordinated with it’ (5.64).

Then I underwent an inexplicable conversion. And as a result came to believe that solipsism can be partially true. — But I said I wasn’t going to talk about that.

Let’s talk instead about detachment. If you accept that the self is essentially an agent, not a passive observer (Rorty *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Macmurray *The Self as Agent*) can’t you *also* accept that detachment is one of the permanent possibilities of action? You *choose* to remain detached, or choose to become detached, choose to attend to a particular aspect of experience which seems (although that semblance could also be illusory) to have no logical consequences for action. A double turn. Out into the world, then back into the self.

But this takes us no nearer to the thing itself. We’re just moving counters around. The other day I said I ‘felt increasingly detached’. That’s just a remark about personal psychology, it has nothing to do with metaphysics. Except... if it were *really* possible, through an effort of will, to bring the thing that’s at the periphery of my vision to the centre. Or find the right form of words to capture it — the way I captured that scene in the photograph...

As if! This has got nothing to do with efforts of will or any such rubbish.

(Maybe what I really ought to do is stare at the sun until I go blind, or hold my arm up until my elbow permanently seizes, like those Indian fakirs. Shows one thing though: the desperate measures some will take to catch a glimpse of that ‘something’ whatever it is.)

*Saturday, December 25, 2010*

### **Day 13**

Now comes the hard bit. I said I would ‘describe the thing itself’. To make a disinterested observation — if such a thing is possible — my anxiety levels have been steadily rising over the two weeks I have been writing these posts. This is no accident. It isn’t about me or my private psychology. It’s about the topic. *There is no possibility of a solution.*

I am walking through an empty landscape towards an endlessly receding horizon. This is it, there is nothing else. All I can do is describe what I see, as objectively and dispassionately as I can. It may all be illusion, but then, the whole thing turns on itself: an illusory ‘illusion’, or the illusion of an ‘illusory ‘illusion’ — you could go on forever. So I will just describe it.

To borrow a term: it is *existential horror*. This is not the ‘existential angst’ of Kierkegaard or Heidegger. This is something different. I’m not talking about *making a decision*. There’s no decision to make (other than to stop doing philosophy). All the stuff about free will is beside the point, a distraction, a red herring. Because *metaphysics is without consequences*. (I’ve said that so many times, over the years, but did I really believe it?) You can’t deduce a recipe for action from a metaphysical premise. There’s no such thing as ‘authentic’ or ‘inauthentic’ at this fundamental level. It doesn’t matter what you do. All that matters is *what is*.

And what is, is horror. One is speechless, struck dumb, before the thing itself. ‘Into this world we’re thrown.’ — That line from Jim Morrison captures an aspect of it (the allusion is to Sartre on facticity and thrownness). You throw dice. It’s all contingency, all the way

down. The 'I' is contingent, the world is contingent. But contingency is an affront to reason, an impossibility, a surd. — But then, as I've already argued, so is necessity.

Game over? (Pick an option to ascend to Level 2: acquiescence, defiance, irony, despair.)

*Monday, December 27, 2010*

### **Day 15**

I have a precious possession. My tiny inner theatre stage, my connection to the ultimate, the place where *metaphysics happens*. It's true, there's not much going on there at the moment. (Where were we? 'Walking through an empty landscape towards an endlessly receding horizon', Day 13. It's good exercise to walk.) So, no acquiescence or despair, certainly not defiance (defy what or whom? oneself? God? the rest of the universe?).

We shall call the hordes who don't know the existence of that theatre stage, 'the unconscious ones'. They are unconscious of their own selves, they don't even *know that they exist*. What *do* they think? I can't imagine. We won't bother about them. But now we sorcerer's apprentices are looking for something useful to do. It's boring staring at an empty stage. Well, I'm not going to do what I did last time (in my book):

**Taking our stand, then, in an ultimately illogical universe, we shall not ask why our world exists, or indeed why there is any world. Still, if there is no explaining contingent existence, nor even accounting for its inexplicability, there remains the modest but important task of definition. What is a world? What is it to be the world? or this world? or our world? (Whence the definite description? Whence the indexicals?) What is it, of which we were once prompted, so foolishly, to ask the question, Why? whose existing in the face of all**

**the alternatives — including the awesome possibility of nothing — has led human beings to wonder, to worship, to speculate, even at the certain risk of talking nonsense?**

*Naive Metaphysics p.2*

I've been there, done it, I'm not going there again. To stretch the metaphor, what I'm saying, in effect, in the quoted passage is: 'There's no reason to continue endlessly towards the horizon. I shall stop here and build my home.' And that's exactly what I did, or tried to do.

A sorcerer's apprentice knows that there is more to metaphysics than describing everything you see from where you stand — regardless of where that might be, even if it be in the middle of nowhere and no matter how *boring* the description. We know better. Don't we? (That's not a rhetorical question, and, for once, I'm not being ironic.)

*Tuesday, January 4, 2011*

**Day 21**

When Descartes in the First Meditation asked, 'How do I know that I am not being deceived by an evil demon?', his question was about *science*. It concerned the very possibility of *putting questions to nature* and receiving a truthful reply. This was something we take for granted, but the idea of Nature, as such, was an astounding discovery. Nature never deceives, although we often confuse ourselves not knowing the right questions to ask. The *same* question will always receive the *same* answer. That's the essence of the idea that a scientific experiment is always reproducible.

Descartes' proof that a God exists who is 'not a deceiver', was, in his eyes, not only proof that an external world exists, but also proof that the external world is a natural world. Scientific knowledge is possible, provided we use our (God-given) powers of judgement responsibly.

— One thing that comes out of this is the idea that human beings are in *dialogue with the world*. Once philosophy has paved the way for science, human beings can freely put their questions in the hope and trust that they will never be lied to.

However, there is something else here too; a resonance which is easy to miss. Holed up in his stove room, Descartes is engaged with a monumental struggle with *reality*. Reality is either God or an evil demon, one or the other. Not for one moment does he seriously consider the solipsist alternative, that I, and I alone exist. (Hence, critics of Descartes who deploy Wittgenstein's private language argument miss the mark. There is no private language for Descartes. My experiences or ideas have a *reality* which goes beyond the face they present to me.)

— But this raises a suspicion about my bare question mark. Am I secretly *personifying* it? And if God is out of the picture, once and for all, has the world become *my evil demon*?

*Sunday, February 27, 2011*

### **Day 32**

I wait. I understand better now about why I am, and am not here. What I need to know, what I don't need to know, what I need to *not* know.

I remember the first time I understood, really understood, what Berkeley was saying. 'When you look out at the world, you are looking at the inside of God's mind.' There's that mystical aspect in Heidegger and Levinas too. The world, reality, as something *alive*, not dead, not 'stuff'. And Spinoza too, of course. I understand all this, but it is not my ultimate concern, because I am not in this world, not of it, but apart, different, separate. 'The world is, and will always remain, absolutely *other* than I.'

I am above this, I am above *you*. Don't even think of trying to join me here...

*Wednesday, March 30, 2011*

### **Day 37**

*Letting the cat out of the bag.* Last time I reached an important conclusion. Or maybe made a fatal admission. The 'hedgehog philosopher' is just a *construction*. Likewise, the philosopher-writer engaged in the process of constructing that construction. Likewise... *ad infinitum*.

So, what then of the purported *object* of the hedgehog philosopher's inquiry — the world? — No. Not that. The problem, the mystery remains. — But why? Just because *I* feel gripped by that problem? Who says? *I do*. That's enough. There is *I*, and there is *the world*. That's where we came in. I'm just explaining how the game is to be played. Play it with me, or not, it's your choice. (Some 'games' are serious.)

Not a construction, then, but the 'object of a game'? What's the difference, between a construction and a game? A construction is for a given purpose. Whereas the game *is* the purpose. The aim of writing is to communicate. Performing for an audience. That's all blogging is, I've said it before. Even if I kept these thoughts strictly to myself, under lock and key in my own private notebook, there would still be the question of how *my future self* will read the words written therein. It really makes no difference whom these words are for. (I admit they are mostly superfluous.)

The game is something else. You can write about football, or you can play football. You can spill a million words and not score a single goal. Yes, of course, words can *help* (e.g. a manual on football tactics and technique). As words are helping me. But they are not the essential thing. If I knew of an effective non-verbal technique for attaining my goal, I would try it. Meditation works for some people, but I don't

believe in that. (Call it a fault of my one-sided philosophical education.)

I believe what Plato believed, that there is *something to be seen*. The rest is just technique. For example, the technique of ‘dialectic’ — I’m a fair dialectician but no more than fair. (Too enamoured of rhetoric.) It worries me that I don’t see anything (out there, up there — or in here?). No ‘Form of the Good’, to be sure. I see my desk, my keyboard, my half-finished luke warm mug of tea, my various knick-knacks. Shadows.

Everything, but *Reality*.

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