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Nihilism, Transcendence and Philosophy

[W]hen I say, magnanimously, 'all metaphysical positions are equally good', I am not taking any position; I am simply expressing a principle of tolerance which, however laudable, is merely formal, and can never produce or even encourage any metaphysical idea. But if I try to combine this principle with my particular position, I become incoherent, because what I then end up saying is, 'my position is as good as any other, even though it is incompatible with any other.'

Leszek Kołakowski, 1988,¹

1. Living with nihilism

Superstition reveals a primitive sense of a metaphysical appearance/reality distinction. Thus the superstitious person senses that things might have a different significance to that provided by the framework, and so clings irrationally to idle possibilities, providing them with inappropriate significance. They think that if they touch wood, or wear this shirt rather than that one, then things will turn out as they want them to. They could only be right if life is quite unlike what it appears on the surface. But although there being any real connection between these rituals and the person's framework goals bears no rational scrutiny, it is nevertheless possible; possibility is superstition's life-blood. The philosophical traditions began a systematic, rational approach to the possibility that things are not as they seem, which led directly to idea of transcendence. They opened up the prospect of *discovering* something game-changing, rather than just guessing at it; something which would turn everything upside down and put human life in a whole new perspective. Religion and science have often been inspired by the same prospect.

Nietzsche's nihilist loses this inspiration and becomes reconciled to the ordinary world being all there is; while retaining values that condemn it. His superior man of the future, however, demonstrates his overcoming of nihilism by taking delight in the thought of eternal recurrence. This curious doctrine, according to Heidegger's interpretation, goes back to the beginning of philosophy to complete metaphysical thinking, since it combines Parmenides' and Heraclitus's notions of existence – the opposition between which provided the appearance/reality distinction that defined such thinking. It combines Heraclitus's ever-changing flux, with Parmenides's unchanging

being, by holding that all change recurs in an eternal cycle. Eternal recurrence thereby provides, as Nietzsche puts it, 'the closest *approximation of a world of becoming to a world of being*.' And so in this way, Nietzsche sought to provide our fleeting lives with the eternity of heaven; their fleeting reality keeps happening forever.²

Now Nietzsche is right that there is a connection between concerns about the meaning of life, the possibility such meaning is concealed, and transcendence. He is also right that this connection has a lot to do with the history of philosophy and religion. But philosophical belief in transcendence is not simply a product of psychological needs; it is the product of a tradition of argument about how best to describe the kind of reality we occupy. This is not to deny that some philosophers have been driven by psychological need; reading Fichte leaves no room for doubt on the matter.³ But some may have been driven by nothing more than the bare suspicion that life has some other meaning beneath its surface, and perhaps also the hope that it does. There is a clear difference: somebody may suspect that another person loves them, and rather hope they are right; but it does not follow that they have a psychological need for love. However whether psychological need, bare suspicion or a suspicion motivated by the kind of engagement we have with the framework is at the root of interest in transcendence, the cause of an inquiry cannot discredit what is discovered. Recognizing that people want something to be true should make us wary, of course. But not wary about the transcendent hypothesis, since what people have wanted is a transcendent context of meaning; and the hypothesis denies that there is one.

The association between transcendence and belief in religious meaning has led to many false directions being taken in philosophy, and many fruitful directions being unduly neglected. On the one hand, it has led post-Nietzschean philosophers – who typically take the loss of religious meaning to be definitive of our age – to a dismissal of transcendence and ontology itself, as well as to attempts to overcome or otherwise respond to nihilism. It has led to nonsense such as eternal recurrence and blanket rejections of objective truth.⁴ While on the other hand, it has led analytic philosophers – who typically want to uphold the scientific world-view and see their efforts as contributions to a wider scientific agenda – to also dismiss transcendence, while regarding nihilism as a narrow, isolated topic; something with little or nothing to do with the central questions of philosophy. Cutting off this major source of interest in their problems has been a contributing factor in producing debates which interest only the debaters and those who would become the debaters; a kind of non-spectator sport.

But there is no need to associate transcendence with religious meaning; to think they must go together is to confuse ontology with enframing. The two have often been self-consciously aligned, of course; and not only in religion. Thus the physicalism of d'Holbach and Marx was meant to reinforce atheism; while Plato and Kant's transcendent hypotheses were motivated by belief in overall meaning. Kant wanted to 'make room for faith', of course.⁵ But there is no reason to link the two, since there is no reason a transcendent context should be a context of meaning; that would be an extra claim. It is true that a transcendent hypothesis, unlike metaphysical physicalism, provides an ontology which leaves open the possibility of that extra claim; as Kant saw. But seeing that there is no good reason to believe in this possibility provides no more

reason to endorse ontological physicalism than the transcendent hypothesis, since ruling the possibility out is otiose if you think it is idle. It is possible that Heidegger's death was faked and that he lives on as the world's oldest man; but nobody with any sense would feel the need to rule *that* out. Possibility, as I said before, is cheap.

Once transcendence is disentangled from religious meaning, its philosophical potential is released. For this removes one of the most influential reasons for suspicion about the metaphysical appearance/reality distinction, and the central place of that distinction within the history of philosophy, thereby removing this rationale for trying to overturn that history. This leaves the considerable resources of the concept of transcendence free to be applied to its traditional problems, as I have been trying to do. It also allows us to make sense of the unity of philosophical problems – and hence of philosophy as an academic discipline – while providing the prerequisite resources to reconnect them with natural sources of interest; which is another thing I have been trying to do. And when we follow through on this agenda to the transcendent hypothesis, we find a description of reality which reveals that one important source of psychological need for meaning is a straightforward mistake. For people have felt this need because they have recognized that unless there is a transcendent context of meaning, nihilism must be true. But you do not *need* transcendent meaning if nihilism is morally neutral and simply a fact.

The straightforward mistake at the root of all elaborate attempts to escape from nihilism is an equation of 'meaningless' with 'socially worthless'. It is perfectly reasonable that people should want to avoid condemning life as worthless in this sense, of course; worthless things are bad, and unless we can reform them, we generally want to either ignore or get rid of them. Arguably mosquitoes are worthless.⁶ If human life were worthless, then extreme, unrestricted misanthropy and so-called antinatalism – the view that being born is bad and that the extinction of the human race would be good – would not be absurd.⁷ And if we did take this kind of view seriously, the solution to our predicament would be obvious, just as Epicurus saw: it would be to solve Camus's 'one truly serious philosophical problem' with suicide.⁸ Thankfully (if rather conveniently) the advocates of these views usually manage to persuade themselves that this is not the solution.

However, the judgement that life is socially worthless is an evaluation whereas the judgement that life is meaningless is not. The only way to bridge the gap is with the religious view that we should only value things valued within a wider context of meaning, which – to all intents and purposes – amounts to the view that we should only value what God values. So nihilism is only relevant to evaluating life for those who project all value into another world; a task which innumerable religious sinners have failed to consistently see through. But if we do not hold such a view, we will not care that our goals are not valued by something else, so long as we value them.

It is somewhat ironic that Nietzsche saw this point clearly, given that he inspired the twentieth-century flight from nihilism. Thus he said that 'value judgements concerning life, for or against, can in the last resort never be true'; that 'such judgements are stupidities'; and that for 'a philosopher to see a problem in the *value* of life thus even constitutes an objection to him, a question-mark as to his wisdom'.⁹ He was right. His mistake was to believe that a wave of nihilistic psychology was about to engulf the

world, and that without the religious meaning that once provided the bedrock of our understanding, all truth and value would collapse; and also to remain under the sway of the religious sentiment that 'everything seems far too valuable to be so fleeting' and thus seek 'consolation'.¹⁰ But nihilism does not require us to revalue the world, because all we need for truth and value are the framework and the objective world. And metaphysics should never be an exercise in wish-fulfilment. If only Nietzsche had possessed a little less faith in his own historical destiny, and a little more faith in ordinary people, he might have been content to simply point out that it is only a conflation of social value with the question of the meaning of life which makes the meaninglessness of life seem bad.¹¹

Nihilism has no moral consequences, then, and in itself it has no practical consequences either; in that it does not recommend one form of life over another. Realizing that there is no overall goal to life does not imply that we should take our framework goals less seriously, as for instance both Sartre and Camus thought. Neither, as Schlick thought, does it suggest that we should take play more seriously; Plato also thought that 'man's life is a business which does not deserve to be taken too seriously', and that we should 'pass our lives in the playing of games' in order to 'gain heaven's grace'.¹² But of course, Plato drew this implication for our framework goals not from nihilism, but rather from an overall purpose that the framework conceals; philosophers have sought respite from both directions.

But nihilism issues no such imperatives. It can liberate you from belief in overall goals – such as religious or hedonistic ones – although it leaves you perfectly free to pursue them if that is what you think best; or what you desire; or what society expects of you; or simply for no reason. Nihilism tells us that life has no overall goal, but we can still act as if it did; though any such commitment is our own, not an imposition from reality. In short, a metaphysical account of reality will not tell us how to live. Moral and political philosophy may have a useful social role to play in developing and clarifying arguments for and against various possible goals and courses of action; it may influence politicians and other decision-makers. And metaphysical reflection may throw up some interesting redemptive agendas – such as existentialism – which some people may profitably choose to pursue. But the truth of nihilism provides no platform for bossiness.

Nihilism's consequences outside of philosophy are all negative; in that it only has practical potential because of its ability to relieve us of false beliefs. And assuming that Nietzsche's cataclysm never happens, perhaps the most important such consequence is that it liberates us from the belief that we might one day discover something *game-changing*. This belief has been a driving force in philosophy, and has sometimes had practical consequences, most notably through Hegel and Marx's conceptions of 'what is really going on'. Religions have also claimed to know something of this kind, of course, and have thereby exercised an enormous influence on people's lives. And even science, our paradigm of rationality, often seems to be motivated by the same desire to find the hidden, transformative secret of reality. In the case of science, however, this motivation is liable to be confused, since science operates with a different appearance/reality distinction from that of philosophy and religion. Thus science can tell us that the planetary motions are different to what we might naïvely suppose, for instance, but

it could never transform our framework understanding by placing life within a wider context. For science tells us the nature of the objective world, which exists within this context, irrespective of whether there is a transcendent one.

To take just one prominent example of the currently widespread conflation of philosophy with science, consider Stephen Hawking – a scientist who makes no secret of his desire to find the hidden secret of reality. Thus he says that ‘the search for the ultimate theory of the universe seems difficult to justify on practical grounds’, given that ‘the partial theories that we already have are sufficient to make accurate predictions in all but the most extreme circumstances’.¹³ But he adds that ‘similar arguments could have been used against both relativity and quantum mechanics, and these theories have given us both nuclear power and the microelectronics revolution’; having just conceded that ‘our scientific discoveries may well destroy us’. So the practical consequences of searching for the ultimate theory may be complete annihilation or the development of useful technology. But although the ultimate theory ‘may not aid the survival of our species’ and ‘may not even affect our life-style’, he still thinks we are justified in searching for it because:

Since the dawn of civilisation, people have not been content to see events as unconnected and inexplicable. They have craved an understanding of the underlying order of the world. Today we still yearn to know why we are here and where we came from.¹⁴

And in the famous ending to his book, Hawking equates the ‘ultimate triumph of human reason’ he envisages – a unified physical theory – with coming to ‘know the mind of God’.¹⁵

The questions that motivate Hawking concerning ‘why we are here and where we came from’ are ambiguous between scientific and philosophical questions. Interpreted scientifically – within physics at least – they concern our physical understanding of the Big Bang. Interpreted philosophically, they concern the meaning of life and the fact of existence. Hawking supposes that answering the former questions will settle the latter ones and so the motivation he is expressing is *philosophical*; his book begins and ends with philosophy, with the science in the middle. Failing to see the distinction, however, he berates philosophy for not keeping up with developments in physics, and so abdicating, as he sees it, its traditional responsibilities; ‘philosophy is dead’ he later announced, thereby joining an unfortunate philosophical tradition.¹⁶ But when the two sets of concerns are held apart, we see that finding a physical theory that applies at the moment of the Big Bang has no potential to turn everything upside down for us; because it has no implications for enframement, or the conflict between the fact of existence and the principle of sufficient reason. It will not answer questions that have persisted since the dawn of civilization; rather it will tell us some more about the objective world within technical and thoroughly contemporary parameters with which we are already familiar, with the likely effect – as we become better at predicting and explaining at the subatomic level – of suggesting new technologies which might be useful, but might destroy us. What would happen if Hawking and others like him could keep the philosophy out of their thinking?

Science will discover anything it can, and that is the main social problem with it; if a physicist made a breakthrough which they could envisage leading to the development of a doomsday device, it is unfortunately hard to imagine them choosing not to publish.¹⁷ And even if they did refrain, someone with less moral fibre would probably arrive on the scene before long. The problem has already been made concrete with the advent of nuclear weapons – the ultimate reminder of our evolutionary past as aggressive apes – which brought us to the brink of destruction as recently as 1962. This technology is getting older, hence more accessible, and nobody knows what surprises science has in store for us next. Only politics can solve the problem, but political and moral philosophy may have a role to play in working out a balance between our desires for security, technological advancement and legitimate scientific curiosity.

However there may also be a role for metaphysical philosophy: namely, convincing people that science cannot answer the big philosophical questions, so as to keep these questions out of the minds of both scientists, and the policymakers and businesspeople who fund them. If this were achieved, maybe there would be less scientific interest in topics with clear philosophical overtones, such as the beginning of the universe, consciousness, immortality and life on other planets. And then maybe scientists would be less keen to recreate the conditions at the Big Bang; reverse-engineer consciousness; make eternal life a reality; and discover life on other planets – none of which would have any bearing on the kind of natural philosophical curiosity addressed by nihilism and the transcendent hypothesis, and all of which could – and in some cases clearly would – have a profound social impact.¹⁸ Of course, we might decide we want these impacts, and it may be that keeping the philosophy out of science would have little effect on the directions it takes in any case; since these are largely determined by factors such as the need for innovation to drive economic development, the personal ambition of scientists, and scientific curiosity about how things work and what the universe contains. But a little clarity on these matters would certainly not hurt. We would not want anybody to be influenced by a confused quest for a wider context of meaning.

Instead of analytic philosophy undertaking thankless tasks such as trying to ground science by reconciling common-sense commitments with physicalism, then – rather as it used to try to reconcile them with the strictures of positivism¹⁹ – it might provide a genuine service by persuading people to keep metaphysical issues away from science; so that science is not distracted and can mind its own business. And post-Nietzschean philosophy could contribute by ceasing to propagate the false notion that nihilism undermines scientific progress; when all it really undermines is the idea of progress towards an overall goal. Science can still progress in its search for objective truths, and perhaps even *the* objective truth – if we think of a fundamental physical theory this way (it would simply be a tool enabling us to find yet more objective truths). And it is certainly not helpful to suggest *abandoning* truth to focus instead on usefulness, as Rorty did; since this just encourages a continued conflation of philosophical with scientific concerns.²⁰

Nihilism creates no obstacle to progress in science or any other walk of life. It shows that we are not supposed to be creating a socialist or capitalist utopia, and removes a major reason for thinking that we inevitably will; but it does stop us from trying. We could seek to perfect humanity, or recoil from such ambitions.²¹ But either way,

our search for progress in politics and morality can continue unabated; the fact that we have gone badly wrong in the past may remind us there is no overall goal we are inevitably moving towards, but this provides no reason to stop formulating ideals and trying to achieve them. And we can seek progress in art too. Our art does not have to be fragmented and ephemeral because we have rejected an obligatory goal for humanity, and artistic sophistication does not require artworks to continually register the philosophical point that there is no meaning of life. We can take a genre-defying and eclectic 'postmodern' approach, or work diligently to progress a particular genre. Nihilism rules out the motivation that belief in wider goals provided great art of the past. But if we want to take up once more the genres of Greco-Roman or Gothic architecture, for instance, then we are perfectly free to do so without the remotest fear of a philosophical bad conscience. The idea that everything is a text we can interpret as we will, may have produced some interesting ideas and art, but there are innumerable facts we may run up against in our interpretations, even if some of these – such as authorial intention – can be hard to determine.²² And even where there are no facts, radical interpretations are not foisted upon us by the nature of reality; any more than traditional ones are.

In addition to progress, nihilism has been thought to threaten commitment; a view which has been influential since at least Kierkegaard.²³ But again there is nothing to it. For just because our goals are not imposed from on high, and we realize this, it does not follow that we cannot commit to them; because the framework is the principal source of our commitment, and gets on perfectly well without metaphysical reinforcement. We see this clearly in sport, where commitment is often total, with or without the waning motivation of religious glorification through athletic achievement.

Such commitment has no need of irony, and neither, *contra* Rorty, do we have to be ironic about how we describe the world.²⁴ Irony is useful when dealing with unavoidable burdens, such as ineffectual bureaucracy; but in most walks of life it is a pathetic attitude, revealing only lack of confidence and a misplaced sense of superiority. People listen to music ironically when they do not want to admit to genuinely liking it; from fear of suggesting they do not know better – that they lack an appreciation of the kind of music they are proud to like. But while it might be rational to remain aloof from certain kinds of bureaucracy – to register disapproval and keep the mind-set it encourages at bay – this can only be the right attitude when there is something else warranting greater commitment. Rorty thinks we must be ironic, since we cannot non-circularly justify our basic descriptions to those who reject them; to people who think the Earth is flat, or that might is right, for instance. But where there are objective facts, he is wrong, and even where there are not, we do not need to justify something to fully commit to it; the athlete does not need to be ironic because they cannot justify their commitment. Of course, sports can peacefully co-exist, whereas some moral commitments cannot. But irony is still the wrong attitude so long as we do not think the alternatives warrant greater commitment than our own. What really would warrant greater commitment, of course, would be descriptions justified by a wider context of meaning. So it is hard to avoid the suspicion that Rorty's irony is just another unwitting inheritance of the view that life is devalued without religious meaning.

2. The role of philosophy

The central claim of the transcendent hypothesis is that experience does not belong to the objective world. If it did, then it would have to be something objective; but it is not. So where does experience belong? Both experience and the objective world 'belong' – in the loosest possible sense – to transcendent reality. Since reality is transcendent, ontology is transcendent. So we cannot specify the independent being of an experience or object in any more precise way than to say it is transcendent. Given that this is to say very little, there is a sense in which we cannot say what things really are. But in the ordinary, non-ontological sense, we can indeed say what things really are, by using objective thought to relate things to each other, thereby defining them exactly; in principle at least.²⁵

To say that experience does not belong to the objective world is to reject ontological naturalism. It is because so many philosophers have considered such naturalism obligatory that they have tried in vain to show that experience is part of the objective world; they have thought it just *has* to be. The view that the physical world could not interact with anything non-physical goes some way to explaining this attitude, as does scepticism about ghosts and magic. But not as far as respect for science, and fear of setting up philosophy as its absurd a priori competitor – one which aims to tell us about the nature of the world armed only with reflection; when the scientists have equipment such as the Large Hadron Collider! However the transcendent hypothesis does not offer a rival nature of reality to challenge or supplement science; it does not tell us that it is really constituted of mind-stuff, for instance. Rather it says that we cannot substantively describe the independent nature of reality, and that this whole notion of independence is a philosophical one, distinct from science's ideal of objectivity. It reaches this conclusion through a priori reasoning, but unlike that of naturalism, this reasoning does not impinge on science. For naturalists try to unite philosophy with science a priori, in order to back science up; both because they think it needs backing up, and to counter anti-naturalist philosophies. But the transcendent hypothesis leaves science alone, because it does not construe the task of describing the independent nature of reality as a joint venture between science and philosophy, but rather as a philosophical venture suggested by the concept of transcendence.

Science can tell us vastly more than philosophy; it can in principle describe and explain anything in the objective world – or as scientists say – the universe. But there is one thing it misses out, exactly because it does not belong there: experience. Looked at from a scientific perspective, this is minor in the grand scheme of things, since experience is absent from most of the universe. But philosophers consider it profound, at least if they are in touch with the roots of their subject and not in the grip of revisionism. Scientists may respond that 'profound' is here being used to mean nothing more than 'of philosophical interest' – and philosophers can only agree; 'fundamental' is often used in the same sense. But philosophy is no minority interest, since an abiding concern with transcendence – usually via the medium of spirituality and religion – has always been widespread. Reflection on experience is the rational route into that concern which emerges most clearly today. There are others, as we have seen, and others still we have not discussed.²⁶ But they all take us back to experience, since what is missing from the objective world, is the fact that we have

a perspective on it. And we think of that perspective – due to progress in the history of philosophy – as conscious experience.

It is a mistake to think that this indicates a shortfall in science, because if experience does not belong to the objective world, then it was never science's task to describe it in the first place. It is only when philosophy makes claims about how the objective world *must be* that scientific territory is infringed upon. Thus when dualism requires physically inexplicable events in our brains, for instance, this may understandably inspire scientists to investigate. But if they did then find something suitably anomalous, the only scientific implication would be that a new explanation must be sought. For the scientist to claim that the events could not be explained in principle would be for them to step outside their field of expertise to affirm a philosophical theory. And they would have been tempted to do so because the philosophical theory had stepped outside *its* own field of expertise, by making demands of the objective world, rather than simply interpreting it. For philosophy should have no scientific implications; when a philosophical theory does more than fit and draw support from objective facts, this is generally a sign that it has illegitimately tried to find perspective in the objective world. Science influences philosophy, but the influence is asymmetrical; because although philosophy can never be indifferent to science – since the objective world is part of what it interprets – scientific theories can and should be indifferent to how they are metaphysically interpreted.

The transcendent hypothesis requires nothing of the objective world. It does not dispute that the brain is an ordinary object, nor the block universe conception of time. Rather, it takes these deliverances of objective thought as confirmation that perspective is absent from the objective world. When it claims this, it is a mistake for scientists, *qua* scientists, to think they have been challenged; and to respond by claiming that science can indeed account for experience. For when they do, they are making philosophical claims – given that experience, unlike reports of experience and correlative brain states, are not part of the objective world. When scientists do take an interest in experience rather than its objective correlates, then, they have either been misled into taking an interest in philosophy, or have had latent philosophical interests and commitments aroused.

The transcendent hypothesis avoids both a denial of perspective and any attempt to objectify it; not just because such attempts are philosophically untenable, but also because they are motivated by the desire to make objective thought ontological, which, when we are clear about the distinct concerns of philosophy and science, can be seen to be unmotivated. Instead, it holds that our perspective on the objective world presupposes transcendent being, but that when we try to make sense of this being we can do so only with objective thought. We thereby misrepresent experience, but doing so maximizes our articulation of the objective world. Philosophy goes wrong when, driven by the desire for ontological naturalism, it seeks an accurate representation of experience as objective. Thus it realizes that the shadow concepts we apply to experiences mislead, but then seeks something *else* objective for experience to be – when in actual fact any representation of experience as objective is inevitably a misrepresentation.

All representation belongs to the objective world, but it is not all *of* the objective world; representation of fiction is an obvious case in point. But although we can

represent transcendent being, this representation has minimal content except when we misrepresent it. Misrepresentation of transcendent being as experiences caused by conditions in the objective world has plenty of content, and is highly informative. For it allows us to articulate the objective world, and hence accurately represent it in all the astonishing detail we have achieved through science. But our minimally contentful representation of reality as transcendent also has its role to play, since it tells us that the objective world is not independent being – unlike the transcendent being we misrepresent as particular experiences. Rather the objective world exists within a context created by consciousness. Once we stop trying to project experience into the objective world as anything more than indispensable misrepresentation, we reach a relative quietism on ontological issues; one which does nothing more than recognize transcendence and our misrepresentation of it. Misrepresentation is recognized through philosophical reasoning suggesting that consciousness cannot be objective; or that time is unreal; or that reality must have a universal nature reflecting the universality of thought. And science can help by discrediting attempts to find objective perspective; such as conceptions of time as a moving present.

Philosophical problems arise from attempts to make sense of the world with the concept of transcendence, and such attempts are its proper aim. For although there is little content to our concept of transcendence, it is required to provide an ontological description of reality – which in turn is required to make a certain kind of minimal sense of it; the kind that answers a certain kind of curiosity. Thus it allows us to say what experience independently is, and tells us that we cannot explain the fact of existence in terms of the objective world – because the objective world is not independent reality. Asked of objective reality, the question of why it exists refers us to transcendence; and asked of that, we have no reason to think that the question even makes sense, since our notions of explanation are bound to the objective world.²⁷ Such answers tell us little compared with the substantive explanations of objective thought, which tell us about what exists within reality, rather than about reality itself (in the metaphysical sense). For transcendence lies at the edge of the objective world, rather as nihilism lies at the edge of the framework; because of its interest in overviews, philosophy, by its very nature, operates at the fringes.

Any statement about all of reality or life is bound to lack detail, then, because the detail comes when we talk about the things within reality, or the activities within life. Extension and intension are in inverse proportion, in the sense that concepts with very wide application will not tell us much about what they apply to. But just because philosophical answers typically lack substantive content, this does not prevent them from being *right*. And they will be – so far as we can tell – if they are coherent with what we know, survive reasonable argumentative scrutiny and answer the question. To answer the question requires that the answer fall within the parameters of the question, and thereby satisfies the curiosity that gave rise to it; and there is no principled reason why this cannot always be achieved in philosophy.

This goes against a certain tradition according to which there are unanswerable questions; and even that philosophy specializes in addressing such questions.²⁸ Thus Darwin, struggling with the question of whether the universe was designed by God, felt that:

The whole subject is too profound for the human intellect. A dog might as well speculate on the mind of Newton.²⁹

He later concluded that the 'mystery of the beginning of all things is insoluble to us'.³⁰ But this would be the right conclusion only if there were a wider context of meaning in which such answers existed but were closed off to us. As it is, we are free to develop our descriptions of the world, adjusting our concepts if necessary, until we find an answer that satisfies; when we do, we have every reason to think that it is right. If there were more intelligent beings somewhere in the universe, and they were able to communicate their alternative answers to us, we might change our minds. But if we were for some reason unable to understand their answers – which would be odd if they could speak us – it would not make sense for us to conclude, in philosophy at least, that there are questions we cannot answer.³¹ They might persuade us that we cannot understand their science, if they could show that their incomprehensible statements facilitated vastly superior technology; but even this would just be a defeatist philosophical view, and our scientists would keep trying. But in philosophy, however, we would not have heard a reason why we should reject our own philosophical answers; so we would be right to stick with them, secure in the knowledge that our new friends might one day discover even more intelligent beings, with their own incomprehensible answers – and that the cycle could only be halted by a wider context of meaning.³²

Philosophical problems are always answerable, then, assuming that the kind of natural block provided by Colin McGinn's Darwinian 'cognitive closure' thesis is the only candidate for preventing this in principle. But given the transcendent hypothesis, these answers are liable to keep ending up in the same minimally contentful place – namely with the recognition of transcendence. It is this recurrent destination, given its connection with nihilism, which drives philosophy on; usually in the wrong directions. The connection is that if reality is transcendent, then nihilism might not be true. There might be a wider context of meaning that puts life in a whole new perspective. This prospect provided the original impetus to philosophical inquiry, but it also generates powerful pressures to close down the conceptual space of transcendence – or else develop it in opposition to objective thought. Thus if we fail to realize that transcendence does not imply a wider context of meaning, and hence can peacefully co-exist with nihilism; and we also fail to distinguish objective thought from philosophical ontology – then transcendence will seem to challenge the scientific world-view. But there is no challenge, because transcendence does not imply a religious perspective, and ontology is a philosophical concern.

Philosophers rise to this illusory challenge nonetheless. Some welcome it, whether because they have religious convictions; because they relish the mystery of keeping all options live; or because they see it as their task to point out the shortfalls in objective thought to its overenthusiastic defenders. They consequently seek alternative articulations of transcendent being to that of objective thought through revisionary metaphysical systems. Not having embraced the transcendent hypothesis, however, they are unlikely to conceive their project this way; but rather as the project of describing the reality beneath illusory appearance; or of drawing up an ontology that

is true to the original phenomenology; or of working out what objective thought needs to explain in order to become adequate.

A different kind of philosopher rises to the illusory challenge in order to defend the scientific world-view, and thus block the various philosophical lines of thought which lead to transcendence. These efforts generally employ one of two strategies: either denying perspective while offering some supposed objective substitute for it, or else insisting that objective thought can in fact accommodate perspective. Overt revisionists, ontological block universe theorists and nominalists pursue the former strategy; while identity theorists, defenders of a moving present and immanent realists pursue the latter.

Philosophy proceeds as a perennial debate between these two factions, with one side reminding us of the fact of transcendence only to take it in the wrong direction, and the other side trying to deny it. Thus the first provide alternative articulations of transcendent being to that provided by objective thought – typically achieved by treating our shadow concepts of experiences as accurate representations – with this then producing a clash with commitments which the other side consider obligatory, such as physicalism, positivism or common sense. The debate is fuelled by a certain (well-concealed) mutual sympathy, since transcendence provides philosophy's subject-matter even when it is being denied; and objective thought is unavoidable even when it is being challenged. The debate is further fuelled, and sometimes loses track of itself, through the invention of imaginative thought-experiments which enclose thought in an alternative possible world; or by arguments for linguistic decision in cases where objective thought and the framework leave matters undecided. When this gets out of hand, we may find ourselves worrying about idle possibilities – which is practically impossible in everyday life (for good reason) – or else addressing questions akin to 'how long is a piece of string?'³³ But however far-flung philosophical debates have become, whether profitably or not, the backdrop is almost always the same however far it recedes – namely a stand-off between the wrong answers about transcendence versus attempts to deny it.

From a metaphilosophical perspective this is all good, because the space of transcendence is kept open by the two sides debating each other. This is important for three closely connected reasons. First, it preserves an understanding of rational routes to transcendence, together with highly developed modes of inquiring about it. This allows people growing up with a natural philosophical curiosity to join a tradition of inquiry; or simply gain satisfaction by reading about it – either way irrationality is kept at bay. According to the hypothesis, such curiosity is practically inevitable, given that transcendence is a fact; and that without it we cannot make a certain kind of minimal sense of reality. And in any case, it is a kind of curiosity which is clearly widespread – so we need a rational area of culture catering to it. Secondly, philosophy is part of our heritage, and if we lost it our culture would be diminished; just as if we lost art, poetry or music. It gives people pleasure, understanding, and for its active participants, something worthwhile to do. And thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, it allows us to understand the meaninglessness of life. For if the concept of transcendence became as obsolete as a scientific concept such as phlogiston, the judgement of meaninglessness would only retain the humanistic meaning of social

worthlessness. This is not to suggest the potential for a Nietzschean cataclysm, for if such a judgement survived in a world in which the space of transcendence was lost, it would be applied only to individual lives we disapproved of. The problem, rather, is that we would have lost a means of distancing ourselves from the framework. We would have become more closely bonded with it, and part of the significance of our existence would have been lost; withdrawals from the framework would retain only practical significance.

As things stand, the debate goes on and shows no sign of abating, as various approaches to affirming or denying transcendence are developed from generation to generation; taking in new discoveries and reflecting new interests. This constitutes progress in philosophy; a progress which reflects life in that it has no prospect of completion. Frustration about this has led to announcements of the 'end of philosophy'. The antidote is to realize that philosophy, like life, needs no end; its lack of an end is lacking in consequences. There are purposes within philosophy, just as there are purposes within life – but its main purpose within life is personal, transient understanding. At its best it 'makes nothing happen', as Auden said of poetry.

There would only be a problem if one side were to win. But the transcendent hypothesis gives us good reason to think this will never happen, as does the history of philosophy. The side drawing up alternative articulations will not win, because there are so many different ways to do this; as can be seen from the variety of metaphysical systems history has produced and continually reinvented. Philosophy of this kind is as inexhaustible as our capacity for misrepresentation. None of them will receive definitive confirmation from objective thought or the framework – which they will always challenge or seek to supplement in some way – and they will only be on firm ground in reminding us of the bare fact of transcendence. But the side denying transcendence will not win either, because transcendence is a fact. Facts can be covered over and forgotten, but so much in life points to this one – and so many iconic figures have written about it – that even if a misplaced philosophical attitude to science were to cover it over for a while (which is itself unlikely), it would almost inevitably resurface before long; somebody would find an interesting new way of drawing it to our attention and overcoming previous objections.

Of course, although this perennial debate is good from a metaphilosophical perspective, it is not ideal philosophically. Ideally, everyone would accept the transcendent hypothesis. For then we would have the right attitude to transcendence – we would no longer try to deny it, since we would not think it challenged science, and we would no longer search for something unexpected to change our perspective on life, since we would accept nihilism. Nihilism and transcendence would be in harmony. There would still be plenty for philosophy to do, of course, because there are many routes to transcendence to explore; some of which have doubtless yet to be discovered. And there is endless potential for investigating the nature and scope of our misrepresentation of transcendent being, as well as the interrelations within it – which change as concepts develop and new discoveries are made. The task could not end, because every new generation needs to make philosophical ideas their own. Before long, the hypothesis might become barely recognizable, with new forms of opposition springing up to replace the old stand-off between denying and affirming

transcendence. That would be the ideal, then; but the status quo is good too, and I am not holding my breath.

3. Spirituality and the framework online

As prosperity has increased exponentially in recent times, thanks largely to technology, the framework has moved on. What seems to have been its most significant development, from our current perspective, is that it has gone online. Computers now increasingly dominate the lives of those who have them, providing a continual feed of new tasks that apparently *must* be accomplished. There are more goals than ever before, because we can interact with far more people without the need to actually meet them; we no longer even need to interrupt their lives by phoning them up. We can enter into these tasks almost instantly, finding or creating new ones as soon as our engagement subsides, whether we have just completed a goal or not; we need only move our fingers to switch between email, social media and all manner of websites and applications designed to draw us in immediately. Time flows at just the right rate and leaves no room for boredom or anxiety; since we have learnt to care about these goals, and alternating between them is effortless. We can even carry them around with us now, and engage with them whenever offline life lets up for a second. In short, the framework is getting better at suppressing our attunement to nihilism, and it will get better still; the process will not stop but accelerate.

This is not a conspiracy; the framework is not an alien force trying to suppress the truth of nihilism, and neither is its progress an expression of an inner desire to suppress the truth from ourselves. Rather, we have so wholeheartedly embraced the new technology for economic benefits, and for the ability to more easily obtain many of the things we want, particularly knowledge, goods and services, and attention. And we have also done so because boredom is typically unpleasant – interest and enjoyment almost always require us to engage with the framework in some way. As increased prosperity has increased our leisure time and distanced us from survival issues, then, the framework has developed to fill the gaps and thereby drive away boredom. And as the framework becomes more engaging, falling back from it becomes less likely and stepping back from it harder.

Philosophers since Heidegger have seen modern technology as a threat to the meaning of our lives. It is not hard to see why, since while immersed in the framework we cannot impose our own self-determined meaning on life, in the way early Heidegger recommended; and engagement in a virtual reality is clearly antithetical to finding meaning in the natural world, as Heidegger later thought we should.³⁴ Nevertheless, there is no shortage of those who embrace new technologies as an opportunity for creating better meaning. The Heideggarian ‘thrownness’ of our existence is something that an online existence promises to leave behind, for instance, and the possibility of re-engineering our own bodies opens up yet more opportunities for crafting our existence. Slavoj Žižek takes a third line between pessimism and optimism; against those who worry we will become cogs in the machine, and those who think technology will lead us to paradise, he argues that where the changes to

our lives are as far-reaching as those presently envisaged – and there may of course be much more we have not envisaged – then we cannot apply our current standards to make judgements about them.³⁵

This debate concerns only social meaning, however; the truth of nihilism will not change whatever we do to ourselves with technology. The problem is that it may become more difficult to see. And this may also be true of transcendence, since the technology that now preoccupies us encourages a misunderstanding of consciousness: it inclines us to think of it as akin to a computer. This is philosophically untenable, of course; it is not so far removed from thinking of it as akin to a television, given that both analogies can only occur to us when we fail to ask the question of *who* it is that has the awareness (whether of the computing or the TV screen). But when we are surrounded by these mind-like things all the time – mind-like because we designed them that way – then the comparison is hard to resist. It is because nihilism and transcendence may become harder to see, then – as social meaning becomes more all-consuming and we increasingly immerse ourselves in interactive virtual worlds – that philosophy's task of tending the space of transcendence may become more important.

It will always be important for the simple reason that we do not want to lose contact with any body of knowledge; and we certainly do not want to acquire false beliefs. But that is not the only reason. For philosophy provides a kind of understanding that is important to people, and may become more important as technology moves on. Consider how young children want to believe in all kinds of magic, and will do so given only the slightest encouragement. Most parents pander to this to some extent because they see a harmless benefit. As the child gets older, however, belief in magic becomes untenable. They still want to believe it, but the belief will not stand up to reason; so it fades away and something is lost. Religious believers are not in an altogether different situation, except that the desires that make them want to believe – as well as the reasons that sustain or count against their beliefs – are adult ones.

Now many atheists think that religious belief is a straight-forward mistake; but it is simply incredible to suppose that the majority of people who have ever lived, including the majority of the wisest ones, have been wholly wrong.³⁶ And they were not, because reality is transcendent – they were wrong only to believe in a wider context of meaning. As such, although we may have developed the desire to believe in a hidden dimension to reality for the wrong reasons on the whole, this is nevertheless a desire which reason allows us to satisfy. For there really is more to reality than meets the eye; this does not make it special or magical in any way, but knowing about it changes your perspective on everything, if only for a short while. It is a recognition that wakes you up, or better, enlightens you. Just as you could not continue to experience a dream in the same way once you recognized you were dreaming – and would probably be woken up by the enormity of the realization – so the metaphysical understanding that you are making sense of a transcendent reality makes it almost impossible to experience reality in the same way; not until you once more re-engage with the framework.

There are both producers and consumers of philosophy. The producers are also the most ardent consumers, and their preoccupation makes them better able to take the consumption to a higher level at which they do not simply follow a variety of philosophical views with interest, but rather identify with one of them and use it to

think about reality; although you do not have to be a producer to do this. I became a producer, but most of the time I am simply reading, writing, talking about, or listening to philosophy, all in order to do my job; I am in the framework. On occasion, however, the ideas come alive, and I find myself realizing once more that my life belongs to a transcendent reality which serves no overall purpose, and which I cannot and should not hope to make any more than minimal sense of. Many kinds of philosophical reflection can get you to this place, and when you arrive, everything takes on a new significance; this is the most sense I can make of the idea of spirituality. The funny thing about philosophy is that there is not much to discover, not that matters, but it is everything.