Dover Beach: Understanding the Pains of Bereavement*

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On Being Exiles In Our Own Land

Matthew Arnold, writing sadly of the receding Sea of Faith, gave his image a vast and deadly application —

> ... The world, which seems
> To lie before us like a land of dreams
> So various, so beautiful, so new,
> Hath *really* neither joy, nor love, nor light,
> Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain—
> (emphasis mine)

No joy, no love, no light? As Arnold saw it at that moment, the loss of Christian doctrines about God and the soul drained away all the normal meaning from life, leaving us desperately trying to make sense of a dead, empty world by pulling on our own bootstraps.

As we shall see, this passage was by no means all that Arnold had to say on the subject. It was the beginning, not the end of his long spiritual quest. But it is the part of his message that has been most clearly remembered because many later theorists have developed and preached the same vision. And they, like Arnold, have enforced it by strong ontological language. They have dismissed our natural sense of connection with the world around us as unreal, a mere illusion. Thus Jacques Monod, following Sartre -

> Man must at last wake out of his millennary dream and discover his total solitude, his fundamental isolation. He must realise that, like a gypsy, he lives on the border of an alien world, a world that is deaf to his music.[1]

* This is an expanded version of Mary Midgely's 'Dover Beach Revisited: Concluding Reflections' from the *Oxford Handbook for Religion and Science* edited by Philip Clayton and Zach Simpson (OUP 2006), by permission of Oxford University Press.

[1] Jacques Monod, *Chance and Necessity* (tr. Austryn Wainhouse, Glasgow, Fontana, William Collins & Sons, 1972) p.160.

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Who, however, (we might ask) are these mysterious figures that Monod calls 'we', these creatures living quite outside the normal system of nature? They are not much like ourselves. In fact Monod's whole vision is just one more optional imaginative picture, a fantasy as much at odds with modern science as it is with common sense.

This message—which has had enormous influence during the last century—draws its persuasiveness from exploiting the unreal split that Descartes introduced between human minds and the rest of nature. It assumes that the whole natural world is—as seventeenth-century physicists believed—alien to us because it is lifeless, just a mass of inert solid particles bouncing off each other in accord with a few simple laws. Animals are then unconscious automata. We ourselves, by contrast, are spirits imbued with animation that comes from outside. Life itself is something quite alien to nature. It is an import in the physical world, put in by God. Human minds are just intellectual spirits, an unearthly, supernatural kind of entity, colonists sent by him to inspect and supervise the natural process.

For the Newtonian age, this rather crude dualism was usable because Christian thinking still supplied a God to keep the two elements together. Later, as church influence waned, the faults of the system became obvious. But, instead of rethinking our relation to the outside world from scratch in the way that was then needed, people saved time by cobbling together parts of their existing ideas. For various reasons—perhaps largely due to the Industrial Revolution—they often opted to solve the problem of dualism by simply dropping half the subject-matter. They threw out Descartes' Ghost and kept his Machine. Thus they could get rid of God and the puzzling human souls that went with him, turn dualism into materialism and leave the inert, life-free physical world to manage on its own.

It has turned out, however, that this doesn't really work. The inert Machine and the active Ghost were carefully designed to fit each other. Neither can be effectively used without the other. The idea of a machine without a maker is a very obscure one, and it cannot be clarified by simply nominating Natural Selection to fill that post, as Brian Goodwin[2] and Steven Rose[3] have pointed out. Moreover, the inert-particle model itself no longer makes any sense

[2] In *How The Leopard Changed Its Spots* (London; Weidenfcld and Nicolson; 1994).

[3] In *Lifelines* (London; Penguin; 1997).

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because it is quite contrary to modern physics. On the human side, too, a world of objects without active subjects has been found not to make much sense, so that eventually Behaviourism collapsed, leaving us with the 'problem of consciousness' which is now giving us so much trouble. The behaviourists, dominated by a misguided obsession with parsimony, had tried to explain human life entirely from the outside, ignoring the inner experience that lies at the heart of all human action. In their ambition to simplify, they had cut psychology off from a crucial part of its subject-matter—from the very thing that it was trying to explain. This sort of conceptual meanness is always false economy.

What is Realism?

Besides these headaches, however, there is another rich pile of difficulties which are often discussed today. They are problems that arise when people try to restore various parts of the huge inner landscape that Arnold felt he had lost—the landscape that Monod thought he had demolished,

Several quite different topics are actually involved here. Besides religious matters they include such large subjects as the status of subjective experience and the nature of moral values. Some philosophers, however, have lately taken to lumping all these problems together under the heading of 'realism'. This approach suggests that they are all ontological problems, questions about the reality of doubtful entities which want to get themselves admitted to the charmed realm of things known to exist—items that are essentially trying to get classed as physical objects. The question then approximates to what might be called the Loch Ness Monster or Big Foot model, asking whether certain things—souls, gods, moral values—can actually be found in the physical world around us?

Put this way, the topic naturally invites anyone with an Enlightenment background to reach for Occam's Razor, laying the burden of proof on the candidate entity—an immigrant begging for citizenship and most unlikely to deserve it. But to make any real headway with these questions what we actually need is a quite different model. We need the one which already comes to our minds naturally when somebody says, 'There are no real scholars any longer', or perhaps, 'no real shamans'. Or again, when we say such things as, 'I don't believe in progress' or 'in basic instincts', or

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'in the intentionalist fallacy' or 'in the hidden hand of market force'. Or indeed, 'in the death of the author'.

Here it is obvious that the question is not about admitting a particular item into the inventory of things in the world. In the first set of remarks, the word *real* has the same sort of sense that it has when we talk of real cream or real coffee. We use it to contrast proper examples of a certain class with faulty ones. For this use we always need a clear idea of the particular kind of wrongness or falsity to which we are opposing it (granulated coffee, synthetic cream, imitation eyelashes ...) This is indeed probably the clearest and most satisfactory use of the word *real* because it makes us attend to the conceptual background lying behind the use of that particular term. This focus becomes still more obvious in the second set of examples because there the intention is clearly not to banish particular objects from the world but to question the use of certain *concepts*—certain patterns of thought, certain ways of dividing and naming our experience—and to suggest that we try to find better ones to replace them.

The Loch Ness Monster approach is surely ill-omened for a number of reasons. Quite apart from religion, it has been discredited because it has proved disastrous in two other areas which are of the first philosophical importance. About subjective experience—a topic that the great empiricists, from Locke to William James, rightly treated as central—it imposed a paralysing, indiscriminate inattention during most of the twentieth century. Essentially, conscious minds were deemed not to be real since they were not part of the physical world, so consciousness itself could never be mentioned. This behaviourist frost is now beginning to thaw, but it has left us in the shocking chaos that surrounds the 'problem of consciousness' today.

Similarly about ethics, this archaic ontological thinking paralysed thought by ruling that values were radically shut off from facts. Since value-judgments were not statements about physical facts they could have no real subject-matter at all. Thus these judgments had no logical relation with the rest of thought and could never be explained. And so, for half a century, English-speaking moral philosophers solemnly maintained that rational thought about how moral problems relate to the world was simply impossible, because such thought would involve a 'naturalistic fallacy'.

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The Forgotten Earth

What is wrong with this counter-productive way of thinking is not just its neglect of mind. More deeply, it is its narrow, arbitrary conception of *facts* and *matter*. Thirty years back, I wrote of it in *Beast and Man*:

> The really monstrous thing about Existentialism is its proceeding as if the world contained only dead matter (things) on the one hand and fully rational educated human beings on the other—as if there were no other life-forms, The impression of *desertion* or *abandonment* which Existentialists have is due. I am sure, not to the removal of God, but to this contemptuous dismissal of almost the whole biosphere—plants, animals, and children. Life shrinks to a few urban rooms, no wonder it becomes absurd.[4]

Recently, Richard Mabey has made a similar point in his moving autobiography, *Nature Cure*:

> I can't do without wild creatures,. And I suspect that our species can't either. To lose contact with our origins, with the well-springs of life, with patterns of evolution and wisdom that are not controlled by us, with other ways of being against which to measure ourselves, with our friends, would have consequences we can scarcely bring ourselves to predict. To live with them only as dreams and legends is a vision of isolation it is hard to contemplate.[5]

Similarly, Arnold's impression of desolation on his stony beach and Monod's strange claim to the marginal, outlawed condition of a gypsy are, I think, simply expressions of the impoverished status to which the isolated, cerebral, seventeenth-century Self had sunk in Enlightenment thinking once it lost its celestial background. Deprived of Heaven, this Cartesian ghost belonged nowhere. It certainly could not think of itself as at home on the earth, which it had long regarded as simply the opposite of Heaven.[6] It had been separated most carefully from the human body and thus from its natural context in the rich life surrounding us.

[4] Mary Midgley, *Beast And Man* (Ithaca NY, Cornell University Press, 1978) pp. 18–19.
[5] Richard Mabey, *Nature Cure* (London, Chatto & Windus, 2005) p.105.
[6] See Chapter 19 of my hook *The Myths We Live By* (London, Routledge, 2003).

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Christian thinking had denounced reverence for the natural world as pagan, and secular thinkers still avoided it as idle and superstitious. Indeed, *reverence* itself tended to be viewed in enlightened circles as a dangerous state of mind, not suitable for an independent, autonomous, rational individual. As Maynard Keynes put it, remembering the attitudes of his youth, 'We lacked reverence, as Lawrence observed and as Ludwig [Wittgenstein] also used to say, for everything and everyone'.[7] (Actually, Keynes and his neighbours in Bloomsbury felt the deepest possible reverence for art and artists—which just shows the difficulties that attend the positivist reductive enterprise).

In consequence, human spiritual capacities—which are, after all, as real as our other faculties and as much a part of the natural world as frogs and daffodils—were viewed with deep suspicion; their cultivation was discouraged. The result was that this impressive, totally independent entity MAN was left with nothing to worship but himself. This of course he eagerly did, building technological shrines to his own glory. The heathen in his blindness bows down to wood and stone—steel and glass, plastic and rubber and silicon—of his own devising, and sees them as embodying the final truth. This goes on until he begins to find, to his surprise, that they are fast exhausting the resources of the earth that he lives on.

Why Gaia Helps

It was at this point that James Lovelock suggested that we might instead start trying to understand the earth itself and our own relation to it. If (he said) we begin to attend properly to our own planet, to see that it is not an inert heap of resources but a self-maintaining whole, a vast, complex living system—if we begin to grasp our own total dependence as a miniscule part of it—we might indeed also sensibly view it with reverence rather than taking it for granted as exploitable. In order to make this huge shift of perspective clear, he called this living earth Gaia, after the Greek earth-goddess, the deeply-revered primal mother of gods and men.

This move suddenly opened the window which, for a century, had been firmly closed between modern scientific thinking and the spiritual world that our ancestors, and most other human cultures, had always assumed was there around them. Cold winds at once

[7] Maynard Keynes, *Two Memoirs* (London, Hart-Davis, 1938) pp.99–100.

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came through that window. Many people were alarmed, and the official scientific world, in particular, turned its back, firmly refusing, at first, to listen to the unwelcome message at all. In time, however, it became clear that, scientifically speaking, Lovelock was actually correct. Living things have indeed played a crucial part in moderating the earth's atmosphere and climate in a way that has made possible their own survival. Without their saving action, Terra would indeed quickly have become a dead, airless planet like Venus and Mars, and there would certainly be no researchers here to speculate about why this had happened.

In principle, then, scientists saw that life was indeed not an alien import but actually a crucial component of the earth-system. Geology and biology were not really separate studies but ought to be continuous. And universities, conceding this, did indeed begin to combine the two in departments of Earth Science where scholars now study the interaction. But the one thing that most of them still will not willingly do is to use the name 'Gaia' in this context. They see that this would mean acknowledging something rather more revolutionary than a mere link between two departments of study. It would mean taking on the wider implications of that insight for our whole outlook on life. It would affect our own status. This would be highly unsettling, so they often prefer at present to dismiss thoughts about Gaia by calling them 'flaky', 'new age' or 'Californian'.

Certainly the idea was taken up in quarters that might well be so described. But of course that alone is not a sensible reason for dismissing it. Lovelock himself was disturbed about these distortions and for a time he even considered dropping the name Gaia, replacing it by the term 'geophysiology'[8] In the end, however, he decided against this change because he thought that, in spite of their difficulties, the wider applications of the idea were still essential to it. His own writings are always sharp and clear, well-guarded against extravagant interpretations. As he says:

> When I talk of a living planet I am not thinking in an animistic way of a planet with sentience ... I often describe the planetary system, Gaia, as alive because it behaves like a living organism to the extent that temperature and chemical composition are actively kept constant in the face of perturbations ... I am well aware that the term itself is metaphorical and that the earth is not

[8] In *Gaia; The Practical Science of Planetary Medicine* (London, Gaia Books Ltd, 1991).

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> alive in the same way as you or me, or even as a bacterium. At the same time I insist that Gaia theory is real science and no mere metaphor ... [The metaphor is necessary because]... real science is riddled with metaphor. Science grows from imaginary models in the mind and is sharpened by measurements that check the fit of the models with reality.[9]

In fact the sense in which the totality of life is alive must obviously be rather different from the sense that fits the individual organisms within it. Its implications are wider. As Lovelock points out, this idea inevitably bears on matters that go far beyond the borders of science, but this does not mean that scientists must not envisage it:

> For me, Gaia is a religious as well as a scientific concept, and in both spheres it is manageable ... God and Gaia, theology and science, even physics and biology are not separate but a single way of thought.[10]

These notions are now becoming quite widespread. The idea that the biosphere is in some sense a living whole looks increasingly plausible as we are increasingly forced to recognise that this whole is *sick* and in trouble. For it is surely only living things that can be ill or well. Gaian thinking thus calls for a sudden return to realism (in the perfectly ordinary sense). That shift is, I believe, not only the best way of improving our conduct towards the environment, important though that is, but also something much closer to home. It makes possible a saner, more rational and more usable view of our own situation—a view that finally gets rid of dualism and shows up the hollowness of the Monodian melodrama.

For all purposes, we need to grasp finally that we are not machines or ghosts or loose combinations of those entities vacationing on this planet. We are earthly creatures who are thoroughly *at home* here—part of the system, native to the place, living in the only dwelling we could ever have and thus responsible for its upkeep. Mass migration to space is as idle a fantasy as any wish-fulfilment that religious people may have dreamed up in the past.

No ontological excesses are needed for this insight. Gaia is not an imagined figure but the earthly biosphere that has actually produced us, so Occam's Razor can, I think, be safely sheathed.

[9] *Gaia; The Practical Science of Planetary Medicine*, pp; 66, 11, 31.

[10] Lovelock, *The Ages Of Gaia* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1988) pp.206–7, 212.

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Parsimony and Pluralism

Why, however, was that razor so eagerly brought out in the first place? The principle at work here was, of course, conceptual parsimony, which is in itself a most respectable guide. William of Occam was indeed right to say that varieties of entity should not be multiplied beyond necessity—that is, we should not say that something exists unless we have a clear idea of what sort of thing it is and what work it does in the world. We do not want idle fifth wheels on our cart like phlogiston or the 'animal spirits'. But how do we decide just which explanatory entities are really needed? What constitutes necessity? Not all these ideas are fifth wheels. Some may be babies which it would be false economy to throw out with their bathwater.

It is often said that science easily resolves this problem of selection because science only deals in entities that it can prove to be present by experiment. But scientific practice does not really go on in this restricted way, least of all in that holy of holies, theoretical physics. Controversies about the physical workings of the universe do not usually revolve around whether a particular entity exists but around its function, the reason that there is for invoking it, the work that it is supposed to do in the larger conceptual structure. Current attempts to find the Higgs Boson may look superficially like expeditions to find the Loch Ness Monster, but they are actually something very different. What is really going on here is a comparison between various possible conceptual systems—large-scale ways of interpreting the whole. That comparison will be settled mainly by their coherence with other ideas and with the great mass of physical facts. Particular experiments play only a very small part in this process.

Throughout these large enquiries new items continually crop up that are far distant from any possible experience—strings, superstrings, branes, dark matter, dark energy, eleven-dimensional space. Sometimes indeed experiments are eventually found that seem to confirm their presence But the acceptance of these results always depends on a great structure of interpretation, an edifice of conceptual investigation, not the experimental kind.

In this area, perhaps the most remarkable anti-Occamist flight in recent times has been the Many Worlds Interpretation of Quantum Mechanics. This is a theory that accounts for the uncertainty belonging to quantum events by providing enough new universes to accommodate both alternative possible outcomes simultaneously on each occasion. It posits that an infinite number of new

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universes—universes, not just new worlds—comes into existence every moment, so that they always provide for both possibilities. As Roger Penrose puts it:

> Not just an observer but the entire universe that he inhabits splits in two (or more) at each 'measurement' that he makes of the worlds. Such splitting occurs again and again ... so that these universe 'branches' proliferate wildly. Indeed, every alternative possibility would co-exist in some vast superposition. This is hardly the most economical of viewpoints ... It seems to me that the many-worlds view introduces a multitude of problems of its own without really touching upon the real puzzles of quantum measurement.[11]

This is a discreet understatement. Actually the extravagance of the supposition surely dwarfs almost anything that the various religions have ever been bold enough to put forward simply because of its scale. How is such grandiloquence to be distinguished from mere empty talk? *In what context* is all this supposed to be happening? *Where*, so to speak, do we put all these universes ...? I doubt, in fact, whether it is actually possible to *believe* in this indefinitely accelerating creation of endless wholes in any normal sense because it is impossible to imagine it. But today a fair number of reputable scientists do entertain this idea, as they do many other strange visions, as a workable background for scientific thought – a pattern that they think may eventually throw up further ideas that they can use to make sense of experience. Indeed, Penrose himself—though he has other objections to it besides its extravagance—remarks later that 'despite ... the multitude of problems and inadequacies that it presents us with, it [the many-worlds theory] cannot be ruled out as a possibility'. (p.560)

Thus, in the world of theoretical physics, other considerations are often taken more seriously than parsimony. Occam certainly does not always rule. Ways of thinking are considered legitimate if they seem to explain the data—the facts of experience—more effectively than other available ways, even if they go a long way round to do it.

This may indeed be one reason why physicists are, today, often more receptive to religious thinking than biologists or social scientists are. They may be more aware that it is necessary to try out many different ways of thinking and sometimes to use different

[11] Roger Penrose, *The Emperor's New Mind* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1989) p.382

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ones together—that problems often do not admit of a single satisfactory solution—that, in fact, the world we are trying to understand is often a great deal more complex than our current thinking allows for. Or, as the great biologist J.B.S.Haldane put it, this world is probably not just much queerer than we suppose but much queerer than we *can* suppose. Our faculties, said Haldane, may simply not be adequate to begin to represent its queerness.

Because this complexity has now been recognised, we now know that it is vanishingly unlikely that a single way of thinking will ever explain the world's workings so thoroughly that we can dismiss all other ways as wrong, or as mere steps towards it. No one pattern of thought—not even in physics—is so 'fundamental' that all others will eventually be reduced to it. Instead, for most important questions in human life, a number of different conceptual tool-boxes always have to be used together. And unfortunately, there is no single law showing us how we have to combine them. We simply have to keep on doing this carefully as the necessities of each case dictate until we reach a result that appears satisfactory.

The profounder thinkers among today's physicists have, I think, indeed understood the need for this kind of pluralism, a need which Heisenberg made clear half a century back. But in doing so they have swung right away from the position that their eminent forefathers held at the dawn of modern science. Seventeenth-century thinkers were convinced that the world was ultimately simple in a way that really would allow it to be understood completely by a single pattern of thought, a pattern that would essentially reduce to something closely related to mathematics. And they set about developing physics as the candidate for that sublime role.

Since then, however, a depressing series of disappointments, diversions and surprises has interrupted the ideal straightforward progress that was hoped for. The most traumatic of these has, of course, been the sudden collapse, a century back, of the Newtonian paradigm which was expected to support the whole enterprise. That shock has indeed led many physicists to adopt a more realistic, more pluralistic approach to the capacities of their own discipline. Unluckily, however, many scholars in other disciplines do not seem to have noticed this explosion. They still back a 'physicalist' view of the world which assumes that this single ideal universal explanation will eventually be found.

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There is Inner Complexity Too

How does this point about pluralism bear on our questions about religion?

Here, what we are trying to understand and explain is the whole vast landscape of the religious experience and thinking of mankind. Confronting that range, William James famously found huge 'varieties of religious experience' to occupy him, even within the Western Christian tradition alone. He explained that, in order to do justice to that range, he had to leave aside other traditions, and also the public aspect of religious practice in the West itself. Even so, he found enough complexities to fill a packed volume of 500 pages which he concluded on an unpretentious and enquiring note, as far as possible from finality:

> Meanwhile the practical needs and experiences of religion seem to me sufficiently met by the belief that, beyond each man and in a fashion continuous with him, there exists a larger power which is friendly to him and to his ideals. All that the facts require is that the power should be both other and larger than our conscious selves. Anything larger will do if only it be large enough to trust for the next step. It need not be infinite, it need not be solitary. It might conceivably even be a larger and more godlike self, of which the present self might then be but the mutilated expression, and the universe might conceivably be a collection of such selves ... with no absolute unity realised in it at all. Thus would a sort of polytheism return upon us. But all these statements are unsatisfactory from their brevity, and I can only say that I hope to return to the same questions in another book.[12]

In writing that 'anything larger will do', James was not, of course, endorsing some kind of mindless subjectivism. He was not saying that each of us can pick any symbolic vision at random and use it to 'construct' a private world-view which will be as 'valid' as any other. He is taking the observer's point of view on the range of human spirituality and pointing out the extreme diversity of perceptions—the differences of temper and standpoint that underlie various beliefs. He was saying that those differences must inevitably produce different responses and would do so even if what confronts them outside is actually the same for all.

[12] William James, *The Varieties Of Religious Experience* (Glasgow, Collins, Fontana, 1960) p.500, cf p.141.

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Empiricist Visions

James, in fact, is making two deep points here and they are closely connected. The possible plurality of gods is for him only one instance of the more general plurality of aspects that pervades all life—the irreducible richness and complexity of the real world, constantly exceeding our powers of understanding, calling on us to look at the world in many different ways and still confronting us with mystery. For James, empiricism is not (as it was for Hobbes and Hume) one more reductive method, a rival simplification brought forward to outdo the order imposed by rationalistic systems. It is something much more ambitious—an attempt to stick much closer to experience, to do as much justice as possible to life's actual richness while still finding enough order there to make life navigable. As he said, 'A simple conception is an equivalent for the world only so far as the world is simple—the world meanwhile, whatever simplicity it may harbour, being also a mightily complex affair'.[13]

In particular, when we are trying to understand religious experience, the workings of our inner life make this complexity even more mysterious:

> Our normal waking consciousness—normal consciousness as we call it—is but one special type of consciousness, while about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different … No account of the universe in its totality can be final which leaves these other forms of consciousness quite disregarded. How to regard them is the question—for they are so discontinuous with ordinary consciousness. Yet they may determine attitudes though they cannot furnish formulas, and open a region though they fail to give a map. At any rate, they forbid a premature closing of our accounts with reality.[14]

But we are not (he said) entirely without ways of resolving our doubts here:

> Looking back on my own experiences, they all converge towards a kind of insight to which I cannot help ascribing some kind of metaphysical significance. The keynote of it is invariably a

[13] See his essay on 'The Sentiment of Rationality' in *The Will To Believe and Other Essays In Popular Philosophy* (New York, Dover 1956) p.70.

[14] *Varieties Of Religious Experience*, p.374.

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> reconciliation. It is as if the opposites of the world, whose contradictoriness and conflict makes all our difficulties and troubles, were melted into unity. Not only do they, as contrasted species, belong to one and the same genus, but one of the species, the nobler and better one, *is itself the genus, and so soaks up and absorbs its opposite into itself*. (p.374, James's emphasis)

This account surely reflects James's own experiences in the grim struggles with depression that he endured in early life, before finally reaching a sane and usable balance. But it seems also a fair description of what goes on in any of us when we grapple with conflicts between deep attitudes and the different sorts of thinking that go with them—including conflicts between what are viewed as purely intellectual 'paradigms'.

What Sort of God?

What all this surely shows is that the emphasis here needs to be on conceptual schemes rather than on entities. What comes first is not an exercise in metaphysics but a choice between wider patterns of thought and the attitudes that underlie them. The metaphysics must follow later. We cannot start from the question whether a particular entity, such as God or the soul, exists.

This is clear in the case of God if we notice how much his situation differs from that of BigFoot or the Loch Ness Monster. In a seriously religious person's world God is not an optional component. That person's entire world is shot through with divinity. It is a world in which God is not one item but a basic principle determining the whole structure. As Wittgenstein pointed out, different attitudes to life as a whole do not alter facts but they do profoundly alter a person's world—the enclosing context which gives those facts their meaning:

> The effect must be that it becomes an altogether different world, It must, so to speak, wax or wane as a whole,
>
> The world of the happy man is a different one from the world of the unhappy man.[15]

Or, as Francis Thompson put it:

[15] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logicophilosophicus*, tr D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuiness (London. Routledge, 1961) 6.43.

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Does the fish soar to find the ocean,
The eagle plunge to find the air—
That we ask of the stars in motion
If they have rumour of thee there? (The Kingdom of God)

God, then, is not just one item among others but the principle at the root of the structure. That principle may or may not be conceived in personal form and the gap between these two approaches remains one of our most disturbing mysteries. For Taoism and Confucianism the central principle is quite impersonal. And Christian thought too contains a strong mystical tradition, drawing on Neo-Platonist sages such as Plotinus, which altogether rejects the personal approach, crying out with Meister Eckhart, 'Pray God to be rid of God'. Buddhism too dismisses the idea of a central, personal God, though it does have a special role for the Buddha's personality and allows for minor gods who may be part of the whole.

But by contrast, the mainstream of Christian, Judaic and Islamic thought is strongly personal, attached to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. That God is, of course, also believed to be universal and immanent—not a fully human god like Homer's Olympian deities, but a creative power underlying the structure of the Cosmos. It has never been easy, however, to combine these aspects. The difficulty of doing so has surely been central to our culture's recent increasing unease about the whole concept of God, an unease that was already rampant in Arnold's time. And in this friction between the two aspects of deity, the personal aspect is the one that, on the whole, modern thought has found it hardest to assimilate.

An interesting indication of this has been the recent change in the fortunes of the word 'spiritual'. That word, which was long banished from intellectual circles along with the rest of the religious vocabulary, seems lately to have been paroled and returned to circulation in a favourable sense and is used to describe a wide range of matters pertaining to the inner life. It is clear that many people outside the churches are no longer happy to dismiss all such topics briskly as superstitious. And many of them are friendly to the idea of an immanent God or life-force though they can no longer bring into focus the idea of a fully personal deity.

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Is Heaven Elsewhere?

Of course this kind of position is not new in Western thought. Despite the political dangers of maintaining it, many major thinkers such as Spinoza—besides the Christian mystics already mentioned—have asserted it. There are, however, still special difficulties about accepting it in a Western context because the idea of a personal God has traditionally been conceived in a way that still shapes the imagery. And imagery is profoundly important here.

Part of the trouble here is political. In the Judaeo-Christian tradition God has been seen as an absolute ruler and one specially interested in punishment. This imagery, which seemed so natural to our ancestors, now strikes many of us as alien and objectionable. That shift in perception may not actually be an unmixed blessing. The current adulation of 'celebrities' suggests that the habit of misplaced worship may have been redirected rather than cured. But in literal politics this disenchantment with monarchy is surely necessary and it cannot now be reversed.

Another difficulty is the local, indeed parochial character of the biblical God, especially the God of the Old Testament. The many justifications of tribal warfare and genocide given there are not easily forgotten, and the mere fact that these Bible stories are so powerful strengthens the imagery and makes it hard to dismiss them. The New Testament is indeed less pugnacious, more universal in its message, but it contains many stories of miracles, stories which grate against today's scientific outlook. And the most important of these miracles—Christ's incarnation and resurrection—also raise a wider difficulty of perspective.

The Gospel treats these events as central to the whole history of creation, but, in the context of the much vaster, much less tidy and anthropocentric universe that we now inhabit, they are inclined now to strike us as local.. In fact, much of the difficulty centres round the changes in our notion of the cosmos itself that have followed the Copernican revolution, changes which not only disturb the traditional placing of God in the sky but perhaps afflict the whole notion of seeing him as a person in a way that continues the earlier trend.

The trouble is that, since persons—people—are particular beings, it is natural to place them *somewhere* and this placing affects their character. Traditionally, the most obvious place for divine persons was either above us or below us—in the sky or under the earth. Thus there were sky-gods and earth-gods, or rather, quite often, sky-gods and earth-goddesses. Jehovah, like Zeus, was

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originally a sky-god, wielding his thunderbolt from above, and in his early days he seems (like other chief gods) to have had colleagues and a family to balance his special interests. But after King Hezekiah, who was anxious to unify his distracted realm, threw out these other gods and made Jehovah an absolute ruler,[16] this balance was disturbed.

No doubt it was intended that Jehovah should absorb all their former symbolism into himself. That, however, did not happen. Instead he treated the deities themselves as vanquished enemies and the provinces of life that they had formerly represented as conquered territory. Milton, who loved both worlds, feelingly displayed this débacle in his Hymn On The Morning of Christ's Nativity—

The lonely mountains o'er,
And the resounding shore,
A voice of weeping heard, and loud lament,
From haunted spring, and dale
Edged with poplar pale,
The parting genius is with sighing sent,
With flow'r inwoven tresses lorn
The Nimphs in twilight shade of tangled thickets mourn,

... Nor is Osiris seen
In Memphis grove, or green,
Trampling the unshow'red Grass with lowings loud,
Nor can he be at rest
Within his sacred chest,
Naught but profoundest Hell can be his shroud ...

In the new monotheistic world, an agricultural deity such as Osiris could expect no mercy. As Milton saw, although there were deeper and more universalistic insights in the Christian tradition—although Christians did indeed often celebrate the glories of the world that God had created—Jehovah still remained in a way a partial arbiter, essentially a patriarch, ruling human earthly life from outside. From his base above us in Heaven he used the earth itself—that sink, situated at the lowest point of the cosmos—simply as a trying-ground for souls and a convenient container for the punishments of Hell that lay at its centre. After the Last Judgment, when he would no longer need this earth, he intended to burn it up.

[16] See the Second Book of Kings, chapter 18. verse 4.

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For human souls, therefore, the life that really counted was always the next one—their destiny in Heaven or Hell, not on the place where they were actually living.

This earth-despising bias is something that we need to be aware of because—to an extent that we scarcely ever notice—it is still with us today. It did not evaporate along with the political influence of the churches. It continued to determine the status, not just of God but, more crucially, of MAN as well. The confidence with which thinkers like Bacon undertook to remodel nature did not fade along with the habit of backing it by Biblical texts. Instead, that confidence remained, even without the texts, as a core support of the scientific and industrial revolution that followed. Anthropocentrism, which in many ways took over from theistic religion, freely presented modern MAN with the news that the physical world had no independent value and was therefore simply his oyster. That (it seems) is how we have got into the mess where we find ourselves today. And the point of Gaian imagery is precisely to correct that illusion.

Difficulties of Deicide

Thus the figure of a personal God that has been handed down by our tradition did indeed have plenty wrong with it. No wonder many people have vowed to destroy it altogether. The more cheerful of them, indeed, have often thought that this would be quite easy, that they could amputate the useless organ without trouble.

Nietzsche, however, working at the centre of the operation, never made that mistake. When he first launched his project of eliminating the divine Lawgiver he was racked with guilt. He wrote, 'Doubt devours me. I have killed the Law, and now the Law haunts me as a cadaver haunts a living person. *If I am not more than the law, then I am among the damned souls the most damned*.' (my emphasis) And in *The Joyful Wisdom*, where there is much discussion of the project, he developed that thought further in the Madman's Speech:

> *We have killed him*—you and I. We are all his murderers! ... Do we not hear the noise of the grave-diggers who are burying God? Do we not smell the divine putrefaction—for even Gods putrefy! God is dead, God remains dead! And we have killed him! How

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> shall we console ourselves, the most murderous of all murderers? ... Is not the magnitude of this deed too great for us? Shall we not ourselves have to become gods, merely to seem worthy of it?[17]

This is indeed Nietzsche's solution to the problem. Humans who have gone beyond religion have (he says) no choice except to transform themselves, by efforts hitherto unheard of, into a quite new species of being who can perform all that was formerly expected of deity. They must take on God's functions, becoming a species of gods, namely Supermen. Each of them must become his own lawgiver, acquiring by independent thought the authority needed to back his moral precepts. (Since this is a men-only story there is of course no question of writing 'his or her own lawgiver' here.) Moreover they must recognise that the 'death of God' which makes this effort necessary, is not an accident. It is something for which they themselves are responsible, something that is still being brought about by their own choice. That death is not (as people often seem to imply) a historical event like the extinction of the dinosaurs, which just happened to occur in the late nineteenth century. It is a choice that still constantly has to be made—a choice between two different ways of seeing the world.

Since Nietzsche wrote, this vision of turning ourselves into gods—this conception of autonomy as a spiritual regeneration by will-power that shall make each of us into a final authority and the only proper object of our own worship—has been much admired and widely developed. While it has certainly made possible certain good qualities belonging to our individualistic age, I think we can see by now that it cannot do the work he expected of it. The choice of moral solitude—indeed of moral solipsism—a choice that he constantly glorified as a proof of heroic courage—can just as easily be a sign of weakness, a fear of other people. And the vices that are encouraged by this kind of inward-looking self-importance certainly have not turned out to be less dangerous than those that were associated with lazy-minded conformity.

What is the right course here? It seems reasonable to ask why Nietzsche insisted on finding a new absolute monarch rather than questioning the institution of monarchy itself. Why did he want to re-fill what he took to have been God's legislative function rather than re-examining it? It was already a bad idea to suppose that the

[17] Friedrich Nietzsche; *Joyful Wisdom*, tr. Thomas Common (New York, Frederick Ungar Publishing Co. 1960) Book 3, para. 125.

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reasons for doing right come from an infallible authority even when that authority was supposed to be divine. It is still a bad idea when that authority is yourself. In fact the whole demand for an authority here is surely a misguided form of foundationalism, as unhelpful in morals as it is in the theory of knowledge. If there is indeed a God-shaped hole this cannot be the right way to fill it.

What it means to be Social

The reason why we are not Nietzschean supreme gods is that we do not live alone, 'creating values' in a moral vacuum. We make our choices in a social context. Though we are indeed each 'autonomous' in the sense of relying on our own consciences, those consciences are not isolated from the consciences of others. They are part of a wider workshop which is, as it were, the joint conscience of our society. We need constantly to take part in its discussions. Of course we do indeed sometimes have to make the kind of sharp protests there which chiefly engaged Nietzsche. But much more often what we are doing is engaging to an ongoing conversation—hearing, welcoming and developing the suggestions made by others and adding our own items to the mix, The mantra on Dover Beach is never 'Cogito ergo sum', always 'Cogitamus, ergo sumus'. If there is any salvation we will have to find it together.

Arnold indeed made this other-regarding aspect explicit at the outset of his lamentation, crying out:

> Ah love, let us be true
> To one another!

and it is the key to all his later work on the problem. He insists that our relation to other people is not just an irrelevant comfort, a consolation, a distraction from the chilling truth of atheism. To the contrary, it is the guide to a deeper and fuller truth beyond atheism. It is a light that is very hard to follow but that can, if followed, show us how the world is meaningful after all.

This is the sense of his startling remark that '*God*… is really, at bottom, a deeply moved way of saying *conduct* or *righteousness*'[18] This is not just a reductive move because what he means by *conduct* and *righteousness* is so tremendous. He is proposing that, if we take

[18] Matthew Arnold *Literature And Dogma; An Essay Towards a Better Apprehension of the Bible* (London, Smith, Elder & co.1873) p.46.

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other people really seriously, if we try our hardest to understand them and to treat them properly, we can, in that way, gradually become aware—through them—of 'an enduring Power, not ourselves, that makes for righteousness'.[19]

Michael McGhee, in a most illuminating discussion, calls this 'a modest non-theistic transcendentalism' and connects it with various Buddhist philosophical positions on the matter. He comments:

> In Arnold we have the beginnings of the notion that 'conduct' or 'righteousness' increasingly opens us to realities that were formerly and otherwise concealed. In other words, changes in the human subject, to be understood as reciprocal ethical changes, understood, that is, in terms of *sangha* or spiritual community, alter the initial conditions of possible knowledge. There are, on this view. realities that are concealed from the unregenerate consciousness ... Arnold is invoking the idea of a gradually revealed *given* that cannot he traced back to our choice or construction, though we do indeed construct a great deal around it when we reflect upon it theoretically.[20]

This suggestion is not fishy epistemologically. It is already a familiar fact that moral changes can alter people's cognitive capacities. We know that people's power of understanding each other's feelings and motives depends at least as much on the understanders' virtues and sensibilities as it does on their IQs. And in that field we can also understand that there is always a special difficulty when the less tries to understand the greater. As McGhee puts it:

> The 'not fully grasped object of the speaker's consciousness' is just this obscurely present given that opens out progressively to conduct and, of course, *towards* it, The use of God-language is therefore to be understood in terms of assertions that can be verified in experience ... Arnold's account of theological language makes its use no more than a cultural contingency, a means by which the intimation of a progressive disclosure of reality is articulated. This is not a revisionist voluntarism that

[19] Ibid, p.323.

[20] Michael McGhee. *Transformations of Mind: Philosophy as Spiritual Practice* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000) pp. 132 and 142.

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> makes belief a *commitment* that saves us from futility ...What he put in the place of 'belief'or faith is the notion of a revelatory *life*.[21]

This seems not to be far from William James's idea that 'beyond each man and continuous with him there exists a larger power which is friendly to him and to his ideals ... [a power] both other and larger than our conscious selves'.

At this point, however, modern thought is liable to get stuck on the question of *otherness*, insisting on a verdict about whether the power is actually a part of each self—perhaps, as James suggests, 'a larger and more godlike self—or is, as Arnold puts it, simply 'not ourselves'. But is the estuary part of the river or part of the ocean? What makes us think that we can cut each self off from all the others like this and map them so exactly as to draw lines here? What stops us thinking about the properties of the whole of life to which they belong?

This dichotomy, this atomistic view of individuals, seems to me to show far more confidence than is justified in our knowledge of our own inner selves. Certainly William James's suggestion does depict a self much larger and more mysterious than any that modern psychology recognises. But, since modern psychology has resolutely turned its back on any problems that might call on it to recognise such vastness and mystery, this does not necessarily mean very much. Heraclitus, by contrast, remarked that, 'you would not find out the boundaries of the soul, even by travelling along every path, so deep a measure does it have' and he surely had a point[22]. Carl Jung, too, suggested such an approach to the psyche. It seems reasonable to suggest that, to make any sense of these difficult questions, we had better follow their example.

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[21] Ibid p. 144.

[22] Heraclitus Fragment 232 in Kirk, G.S., Raven, J. E. & Schofield, M, *The Pre-Socratic Philosophers* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. 1983) p.203

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