Hermeneutic Circle and the Collapsing Positive Scepticism
Abstract

This project examines two problems in philosophy: The problem of a self-reflexive theory which interprets the world in a way which makes theorising impossible (the collapsing hermeneutic circle) and the problem of a multiplicity of incompatible theories (positive scepticism).

When we interpret the world we are also interpreting ourselves as well. This hermeneutic circle collapses when our theory about the world cancels out our interpretation of ourselves as interpreters. On the one hand we have a world from which we have become absent; on the other hand this world is a theory which depends upon our existence as interpreters. One solution to this paradox is to keep hold of the idea that we are interpreters of the world, and discard theories about the world which threaten this interpretation. Certain theories become impossible (but not necessarily false). Alternatively, we can keep hold of the theories which make theorising impossible. This preserves theories which are useful to us, but pays the price of a fundamental incoherence.

When people interpret the world they come up with a number of different interpretations. Sometimes these conflict with one another. At other times there is not enough similarity between them for anything like conflict to go on at all. Positive scepticism describes this labyrinth of aspects without mediating between the different claims that each aspect makes. This strategy enables positive scepticism to survey a multiplicity of worldviews, but leads it into problems when the situated nature of its own aspect becomes apparent. This forces positive scepticism either to paradoxically endorse its own aspect or to dismiss itself and embrace one of the aspects around it.

These problems are explored in two ways in this project. In the first two chapters they are described analytically. In the third chapter they are demonstrated concretely in a study of madness.
This is the perfectly pure demonstration of the perfection of wisdom. No one has demonstrated it, no one has received it, no one has realized it. And since no one has realized it, no one has therein gone to final Nirvana. Nor has this demonstration of Dharma ever made anyone worthy of gifts.

*The Large Sutra on Perfect Wisdom*, p. 311.

I listen and the voice is of a world collapsing endlessly, a frozen world, under a faint untroubled sky, enough to see by, yes, and frozen too. And I hear it murmur that all wilts and yields, as if loaded down, but here there are no loads, and the ground too, unfit for loads, and the light too, down towards an end it seems can never come. For what possible end to these wastes where true light never was, nor any upright thing, nor any true foundation, but only those leaning things, forever lapsing and crumbling away, beneath a sky without memory of morning or hope of night. These things, what things, come from where, made of what? And it says that here nothing stirs, has ever stirred, will ever stir, except myself, who do not stir either, when I am there, but see and am seen. Yes a world at an end, in spite of appearances, its end brought it forth, ending it began, is it clear enough? And I too am at an end when I am there, my eyes close, my sufferings cease and I end, I wither as the living can not. And if I went on listening to that far whisper, silent long since and which I still hear, I would learn still more about this.

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Redemptive moments:

People who love me and people who care about my attempt to do Philosophy

Have occasionally cut through the grey traffic days and silence.

Above all I would like to acknowledge my father and mother who have supported me both financially and emotionally throughout this PhD. Without them I would never have come to Essex and my work would have lacked all the stimulus and feedback that I have gained from this environment. I would also like to thank my supervisor, Simon Critchley, for finding a way for my work to become a PhD and for suggestions that have improved this project in countless ways. A thank you also to everyone else at Essex for your invaluable feedback and advice; especially Lucia Pizarro for two years of support and encouragement, and Havi Carel for checking through the final draft and making helpful comments.
A Few General Points Regarding Style and Content

Before I embark upon this project and sail off into a dark and stormy sea of theory it will be helpful to clarify a few points about the way in which it is put together.

To begin with, few (if any) of the theories within this project are my own. This project is a *phenomenology of theory*; a description of the multiplicity of ways in which we interpret the world and a study of their collapse. Most of the theories cited here are illustrations for the description that I am undertaking, and for the most part they are taken from our culture and philosophical tradition. Positive scepticism was inspired by Pyrrhonism and the homogenous zone was taken from a strand of thought within psychoanalysis. What is important here is not the theories themselves but the way in which they are pushed hard and torn apart at their limits. In many ways what I am engaged in here is similar to deconstruction – but this is a deconstruction of analytical theories and not continental texts.¹

Second, there is my use of quotations. At times I use quotations to illustrate scholarly points. In this context I will either explicitly discuss the content of the quotation, or make the relationship between it and the main text self-evident. At other times I use quotations to illustrate the general direction of what I am saying, but without an explicit discussion of them in the main text. In the this case they are being used both to clarify the point that I am making - by pointing to an author who explains it in greater detail - and also to acknowledge that what I am saying has already been dealt with before. These quotations are intended to be both a distillation and an elaboration of what I am attempting to communicate in the main
text, and although their explicit content will help to understand the main text, it would be better to look at the texts that they are taken from for a further elaboration of the point being made. Ideally these quotations would be hyperlinks that you could click on to move to the original works.²

Finally, there are two different ways in which I use footnotes. To preserve the flow of the argument I decided to place a lot of the scholarly material in extended footnotes on the right hand side of the page. Here you will find discussions of secondary sources and problems that there was not space for in the main text. At the bottom of the page are the usual footnotes, which provide clarifications and references that are more directly related to the central argument.

Now faithful reader, the safety instructions are over; you can sit back, stretch your feet out, and enjoy the ride!

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¹ Even the theories of relativism and hermeneutic collapse are not my own since they came from the culture that I was thrown into. What I am doing might best be described as Western culture talking about itself.
² Michel de Montaigne and Walter Benjamin use quotations in a similar way. For Benjamin’s use of quotations see Hannah Arendt’s introduction to Benjamin’s Illuminations (New York: Schocken Books, 1968).
Insight into the multiple ambiguity of philosophizing acts as a deterrent [abschrekend] and ultimately betrays the entire fruitlessness of such activity. It would be a misunderstanding if we wished in the slightest to weaken this impression of the hopelessness of philosophizing, or to mediate it belatedly by indicating that in the end things are not so bad after all, that philosophy has achieved many things in the history of mankind, and so on. This is merely idle talk that talks in a direction leading away from philosophy. We must rather uphold and hold out in this terror.\(^1\)

At a certain point, most philosophical discussions torture themselves with a plurality of self-enclosed and self-justifying theoretical positions. At other junctures, dizzying paradoxes of self-reflexivity bring reflection to a standstill. This project is an investigation into these strange, contradictory, self-undermining limit points.

Hyper self-reflexivity will be described using the notion of a stable and collapsing hermeneutic circle. Stable hermeneutic circles can account for the presence of theory in the world. Collapsing hermeneutic circles cannot. These invisible theories claim that theory is impossible.

The plurality of worldviews will be described using the notion of an *aspect*. Positive scepticism is an aspect which sees reality as a labyrinth of aspects, a multiplicity of different visions. It accepts that some of the claims in each aspect are right and others wrong, but suspends judgment about which is right in each particular case. Although positive scepticism is a *description* of reality it is not some kind of detached final truth

about it. Positive scepticism is itself situated within the labyrinth that it describes - problematised and thrown into question by the other aspects around it.

The theory of the hermeneutic circle and positive scepticism criticise and support one another. Positive scepticism collapses and the theory of the hermeneutic circle is just one room, one aspect, in the labyrinth. Furthermore, the collapse of a hermeneutic circle leads to positive scepticism, and positive scepticism does not negate or relativise the theories within the multiplicity that it describes.

Positive scepticism and the hermeneutic circle are descriptions of the ways in which theories work. However they are theories as well; their description of other theories is also a self-description. The structures that they articulate in other theories appear in themselves whilst they are doing this. My descriptions of positive scepticism and the hermeneutic circle are also enactments which embody the theories that are described. The theoretical first two chapters of this project are also studies in which this theory is applied.

The third chapter of this project uses madness to illustrate the structures of positive scepticism and the collapsing hermeneutic circle. The study of madness shows how positive scepticism functions in a particular area and makes it real by dissolving the distinction between madness and sanity. This study also demonstrates the self-reflexive collapse of positive scepticism when it looks back to examine the status of its own project.

Self-reflexivity and multiplicity are difficult issues to talk about; they ceaselessly reawaken the limit points where speech disintegrates into nonsense or silence. It can be more helpful to think about this project as an experience. When philosophy is pushed hard enough it dissolves through its own logic, and any attempt to describe this dissolution dissolves as well. This total liquidation is an experience of/ at the limits of philosophy.
Philosophy sets limits to the much disputed sphere of natural science.

It must set limits to what can be thought; and, in doing so, to what cannot be thought.

It must set limits to what cannot be thought by working outwards through what can be thought.

It will signify what cannot be said, by presenting clearly what can be said.²

Beginning ...  

The very point of view, which originally is taken on its own evidence only, must in the course of the science be converted to a result—the ultimate result in which philosophy returns into itself and reaches the point where it began. In this manner philosophy exhibits the appearance of a circle which closes with itself, and has no beginning in the same way as the other sciences have. To speak of a beginning of philosophy has meaning only in relation to a person who proposes to commence the study, and not in relation to the science as science.¹

There is a whole load of stuff that exists. The term I will use for this stuff is “reality”. The scientific term for it is “matter”. This stuff appears as trees, bees, computers, rocks, air and chairs. People are composed of stuff, but they can also speak about it using language. They create theories about the stuff. This suggests an opposition between theories about the stuff and the stuff itself. Although theories have reality as sounds, marks or neurological configurations, they are also separate from the reality they describe. A theory about a whale is different from a whale.

Every man woman and child stands before the world and declares: “This is so!” However, some people specialise in creating theories. Theologians, scientists, sociologists and philosophers are examples of such people. Generally their theories are proclaimed aloud

or written down in books or journals. People write books because they wish to communicate their theories; they want to persuade other people that their theories are correct. Libraries contain books filled with many such theories.

In philosophy the special status of people and their theories is traditionally captured by the subject - object distinction. More recently it has been described as the difference between ‘things’ that are for themselves and things that are in-themselves.

I am David Gamez. I am a person composed of stuff and I can also speak about the stuff using language - as I am doing now. I am 28 and I have lived in Britain all my life. The year is 2001 (according to the most popular calendar system in my country). I speak English. I am male. My age may make me naive and idealistic. The problems that I am interested in have been determined by the time and place in which I am living. I have been influenced by science, and by analytic and continental philosophy. Philosophy since Nietzsche has been morbidly preoccupied with the collapse of philosophy and this has influenced me too. I have also been influenced by Buddhism, mysticism, and by the idea of alternative logics and languages. The structure of the thoughts and arguments that I am presenting in this project may have been entirely determined by Western culture.

What I have just set out as my presuppositions are my presuppositions according to me. Someone from a later or earlier time might think that I have different presuppositions from the ones that I am explicitly articulating here; deeper underlying presuppositions that make my explicit thematising of these presuppositions possible.

I have just set out what seems to be a fairly common-sense view about stuff, people and theories. This is what I have been brought up to believe. However, what I have just
offered you is a particular *theory* of the stuff containing a host of presuppositions. It could be argued that the unifying concept of stuff is pure metaphysics in the *bad* sense. The *simplistic* picture of people unproblematically describing the stuff could be said to assume *far too much*. Furthermore, every word that I wrote contains a rich depth of further presuppositions and meanings. To *really* set out my presuppositions I would have to append a footnote to every word that I wrote and add a footnote to every word in the footnotes.

I am meditating upon the beginning and upon my presuppositions. But these clanking carriages of thought did not spring from nowhere. I am discussing the beginning because I know what ends and presuppositions are; because I place a value on being transparent to my presuppositions, because I already assume things and make deductions from them. The notion that the beginning is important is itself a presupposition.

Genuine beginnings are *naive*; they do not know what beginnings or presuppositions are; they do not *need* to find a starting point because they *are at* such a starting point. We can only thematise the beginning long after we have gone beyond it.

To really begin, to genuinely start from a few simple assumptions, is impossible in philosophy. We have always already begun. The days of Descartes are over.

Since I cannot deduce an entire system from a few simple presuppositions, I will *shamelessly* introduce many other presuppositions as and when I see fit with no argument or justification whatsoever. Not because I am a particularly crass or bad philosopher, but because this is the only way in which philosophy can proceed.

The presuppositions that I have set out are presuppositions within a greater whole
that cannot be *explicitly* presupposed. They are a useful theoretical strategy; part of that whole and not something that could be used to build the whole from nothing.

I cannot start without presuppositions. Since I cannot start without presuppositions, and cannot question my presuppositions without having started, I will stick with the presuppositions that I have outlined above. They are a door into the domain of philosophy. The nature and location of this door will become irrelevant later; but it must be passed through at this preliminary stage. At any rate the presuppositions that I have chosen seem to be a plausible starting point for me in the culture in which I am living. I cannot start from nowhere and wherever I start from will be erroneous from some points of view.

**Hermeneutic Circles**

To understand this sentence you need to understand each of the words in it. You need to know what “To”, “understand”, “this”, “sentence”, “you”, “need”, “to”, “understand”, “each”, “of”, “the”, “words”, “in”, and “it” mean. But the meaning of each of these words will be inflected by their location in the sentence. Only the entire sentence can tell you that “this sentence” refers to the sentence itself and not to a different sentence that has just been quoted.

The same problem is encountered at the level of an entire work. To understand a book you have to read it; you have to cast your eyes upon every one of its parts. But how can you understand these parts without grasping how they are integrated within the whole? How can you understand the fall of man in Genesis without relating it to the future redemption of the world by Christ? How can you comprehend the beginning of the *Phenomenology* unless you already understand the nature of Absolute Knowing?
These two examples illustrated the traditional problem of the hermeneutical\(^2\) circle: we cannot understand the parts without understanding the whole and we cannot understand the whole without understanding the parts.

To have understood the last paragraph you must have read the parts in the context of the whole and grasped the whole through the serial assimilation of parts. You also approached the last paragraph with a large number of preconceptions. You are sitting down and reading this project for a definite reason: because you are being paid to, because you are interested in the subject matter, or perhaps because this was the only text that could be saved from the nuclear holocaust of 2012. You may also have certain preconceptions about the subject matter: perhaps you are a hard-core objectivist searching for cracks and flaws in my

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\(^2\) In *Contemporary Hermeneutics* Josef Bleicher makes a distinction between the hermeneutical circle, which is primarily methodological, and the hermeneutic circle which is the ontological condition of understanding binding us to tradition:

I have chosen the terms ‘hermeneutical’ and ‘hermeneutic’ in order to signify contrasting conceptions of hermeneutics itself; this choice is not an arbitrary one in that I hope that the former conveys a methodological orientation whereas the latter should indicate a more fundamental, philosophical concern. A similar distinction applies to their respective relationships to history: ‘historical’ approaches strive for objective knowledge of past events in contrast to their ‘historic’ significances for an interpreting subject *hic et nunc*.


In these discussions I will use “hermeneutic” to label the circle that I am interested in. This will be set out shortly.
arguments; perhaps you are a relativist, already won over to the cause and seeking some
smug satisfaction from a confirmation of your views. Perhaps you are a linguist studying
twentieth century logic and grammar; perhaps you can barely understand this project
because its style and subject matter are wholly alien to you.

When something is understood but is still veiled, it becomes unveiled by an act of appropriation, and this
is always done under the guidance of a point of view, which fixes that with regard to which what is
understood is to be interpreted. In every case interpretation is grounded in something we see in advance—
in a fore-sight. This fore-sight ‘takes the first cut’ out of what has been taken into our fore-having, and it
does so with a view to a definite way in which this can be interpreted. ... In such an interpretation, the
way in which the entity we are interpreting is to be conceived can be drawn from the entity itself, or the
interpretation can force the entity into concepts to which it is opposed in its manner of Being. In either
case, the interpretation has already decided for a definite way of conceiving it, either with finality or with
reservations; it is grounded in something we grasp in advance—in a fore-conception.3

All the preconceptions that you have brought to my text will affect how you receive
it, how you unpack the contents that I have placed in it. Your understanding of this text
depends upon your approach to it - and you are not even aware of most of the biases that you
are introducing. This is the contemporary problem of the hermeneutic4 circle: we always
approach world, objects and texts with fore-conceptions which determine our subsequent
interpretation. We have always already made up our minds in advance when we interpret
something.1

4 Note the distinction between hermeneutic and hermeneutical made in footnote ‘2’.
A very concrete example of a pre-conception affecting our interpretation of something is given by Roland Fischer in his article 'Emergence of Mind From Brain, The Biological Roots of the Hermeneutical Circle'. He describes an experiment in which subjects are given distorting prism spectacles to wear. Subjects who remain immobile continue to see distorted images; but subjects who are free to move about correct the distortion using feedback from their head and limb movements. Their expectations about what things should look like determine what they actually see:

The image on the subcortical retina is usually conceived as a photograph-like rendering of environmental, i.e., excitatory perturbations, the retinal image being constrained by the shape of the lens and the refractor properties of light. Then, the visual cortex takes over and expectations based on past experience are integrated with reafferent information from head and limb movement, and counteradaptation results as a coordinate transformation process. Now the difference between excitation and expectation may be reduced to zero.

[Roland Fischer, ‘Emergence of Mind From Brain’, Diogenes, 38, Summer 87; p. 14.]

Although solutions have been put forward to this apparent problem; after Heidegger, and especially Gadamer, it has become something to be accepted and affirmed, rather than escaped from and denied. We are all historically situated beings whose approaches to texts and world have inevitably been conditioned by the culture that we have been thrown into. For Heidegger this hermeneutic circle is virtuous and must be leapt into in the correct way. According to Gadamer, we can develop better or at least more comprehensive perspectives ‘on’ the world\(^5\) if we open ourselves up to what the other is saying and allow our prejudices to be questioned:

\[^5\text{ Although I have spoken about perspectives ‘on’ the world, for Gadamer there is no difference between perspectives ‘on’ the world and the world itself. See the brief discussion of Gadamer in the section on aspects in the next chapter.}\]
We started by saying that a hermeneutical situation is determined by the prejudices that we bring with us. They constitute, then, the horizon of a particular present, for they represent that beyond which it is impossible to see. But now it is important to avoid the error of thinking that it is a fixed set of opinions and evaluations that determine and limit the horizon of the present, and that the otherness of the past can be distinguished from it as from a fixed ground.

In fact the horizon of the present is being continually formed, in that we have continually to test all our prejudices. An important part of this testing is the encounter with the past and the understanding of the tradition from which we come. Hence the horizon of the present cannot be formed without the past. There is no more an isolated horizon of the present than there are historical horizons. Understanding, rather, is always the fusion of these horizons which we imagine to exist by themselves.\(^6\)

You are seated reading a text, dutifully risking your prejudices by being open to what it has to say. Perhaps you have all kinds of fore-conceptions that are modulating the meaning of the text. But these do not affect the fact that the text is speaking about you; it is describing you as you are sitting down and reading it. A biological treatise describes how your lenses are focusing upon the text, how your retina is being stimulated by the patterned light conceptions, but these fore-conceptions can be modified by what we are studying. Schmidt believes that it is this openness of Heidegger’s circle which prevents it from becoming vicious:

In both discussions of the circle, Heidegger is concerned to defend the exposed circular structure in Dasein from the charge of vicious circularity. He argues the circle is not vicious, since the constant task of interpretation is to base one’s fore-structures upon the things themselves and not accept those justified by fancies or popular conceptions ... To enter the circle in the right way is to acknowledge its necessary presence and then work to warrant one’s fore-structures on the things themselves during the process of understanding.

[Lawrence K. Schmidt, ‘Recalling the Hermeneutic Circle’, Philosophy Today, 40, Sum 96, p. 264.]

However, this does not overcome the problems with an open hermeneutic circle. Even if we get feedback from the things themselves we still interpret this feedback in accordance with our preconception about what this feedback should be (Science discards results that deviate too far from its predictions). This does not make the hermeneutic circle vicious; but it does mean that correctly leaping is unlikely to leave us with an unmediated openness to things.

A more subtle approach would be to drop the distinction between neutral things and subjective Dasein and describe the world phenomenologically without distinguishing between ‘things out there’ and ‘our descriptions’. This approach is essential to Heidegger’s project; but it is a mistake to think that it needs to leap into in the correct way. Within this approach there are no sprightly subjects outside of the hermeneutic circle and no objects waiting to be interpreted by it.

reflecting off the page, how the signals from your eyes are being channelled and processed by your retinotopic maps, how the macro patterns in your neural flows are your consciousness of what you are reading in the book. A historical treatise describes how you are a person in a particular epoch, dressed in clothes fashionable for your time seated in a chair built from the technology of your day; a person at the end of a long line of people who have handed you your style, language, politics, technology, and concepts. Whatever the area of the text; it is the text that is interpreting you.

Texts are not facsimiles of God’s lapidary inscriptions; they are written by people. People set down interpretations of reality; they make statements about how things are. They write the texts that they and other people sit down and read. These texts provide interpretations of the people who write them - writing is an act of self interpretation. This creates a different kind of hermeneutic circle. A person writes a theory and this theory interprets the person who wrote it. This is the kind of hermeneutic circle that is central to this project. The notion of the hermeneutic circle will not be used to describe the relationship between whole and parts, or the effect of preconceptions upon our interpretations of texts and world. It will be used to describe the way in which an interpretation of reality interprets the interpreter who has created it.

A different way of expressing this is to say that we interpret reality and are also part
of it. Since we are both interpreters of reality and reality itself, our interpretations of reality apply to ourselves. The hermeneutic circles that I am interested in are circles of self-reflexivity.

People create interpretations in numerous different areas. We have biological, chemical, economic, sociological, physical, psychological, philosophical and political theories; all of which are self-interpretations to some degree. Many of these interpretations affect the naive presuppositions that I set out at the beginning of this chapter. They can affect them directly - an explicit theory about people or theories - or they can affect them indirectly when their consequences affect our theories about people or theories.

A theory can have two different effects upon these presuppositions. One possibility is to reinforce them. We create a theory of reality that, directly or indirectly, affirms our position as theorisers of reality. This is a stable hermeneutic circle. Alternatively, there are theories that criticise these presuppositions. We create a theory of reality that directly or indirectly denies that it is possible for us to create a theory about reality. This is a collapsing
hermeneutic circle.⁷

Not all theories touch upon areas relevant to these presuppositions; there are theories that are too small or local for it to be immediately apparent whether they hermeneutically circle or not. They have not been expanded to the point at which they affect language or the person articulating the theory. This does not mean that small or local theories should not be investigated carefully; many if not all of them presuppose larger theories or systems that are stable or collapsing hermeneutic circles.

**Stable Circles**

A stable hermeneutic circle is productive of itself; it is interpretation of reality in which theory is possible. In effect a hermeneutically circling theory says: “Reality is constituted in such a way that there can be people who create theories about it.” A theory about the world which accounts for the presence of theory.

![Diagram](image)

Person creates a theory about reality.

Reality

Person

The theory explains how the person could have come to create it. It describes structures of reality that make possible both the person and their theory.

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⁷ I am using the terms “stable” and “collapsing” to describe theories; not to evaluate them. Stable theories are not necessarily better than collapsing ones and the paradoxical structure of collapsing theories does not necessarily make them incorrect.
Hegel’s system is a good example of a stable hermeneutic circle. Hegel could write his *Phenomenology* because the history that he was describing made his description of history possible. The Calvary of Spirit enabled Spirit to turn back upon itself and attain self-consciousness in/through the person Hegel. The political conditions that Hegel was describing also made Absolute knowing possible. As Hegel sat down to write his *Phenomenology* the boom of Napoleon’s cannon shots outside heralded the end of the dialectic of desire and the arrival of an absolute state in which the *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences* could be written.

Absolute Knowledge became—*objectively*—possible because in and by Napoleon the real process of historical evolution, in the course of which man created new Worlds and transformed himself by creating them, came to its end. To reveal this World, therefore, is to reveal the World—that is, to reveal being in the completed totality of its spatial-temporal existence. And—*subjectively*—absolute Knowledge became possible because a man named Hegel was able to understand the World in which he lived and to understand himself as living in and understanding this World. ... By understanding himself through the understanding of the totality of the anthropogenic historical process, which ends with Napoleon and his contemporaries, and by understanding this process through his understanding of himself, Hegel caused the completed whole of the universal real process to penetrate into his individual consciousness, and then he penetrated this consciousness. Thus this consciousness became just as total, as universal, as the process that it revealed by understanding itself; and this fully self-conscious consciousness is absolute Knowledge, which, by being developed in discourse, will form the content of absolute philosophy or Science, of that *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences* that contains the sum of all possible knowledge.8

History (as described by Hegel) made Hegel’s description of history possible. Hegel and his theory of history coexist in a state of mutual complementarity - in a *stable* hermeneutic circle.

Although early Heidegger applied the notion of the hermeneutic circle in a different way from the one that I am using here, his system hermeneutically circles in a self-reflexive way as well. It is possible for Dasein to understand Being because understanding is a fundamental existential of Dasein. Being has understanding as one of its structures and so Dasein can both describe Being and ‘be’ Being at the same time. The Being that Dasein is describing ‘is’ the Being that Dasein ‘is’ and this Being ‘is’ capable of self understanding.
Heidegger is there-being; understanding is one of the modes of being of there-being. There-being can therefore understand itself and compose a theory about itself. Heidegger’s theory of there-being supports his position as a theoriser of there-being in a stable hermeneutic circle."

Collapsing Circles

Reality is an ocean of atoms. Atoms in clumps, flows and gaseous spaces. Atoms colliding, adhering and interacting with one another.

Reality is no more than atoms and the space and time that contain them. Everything can be explained in terms of the collisions, adherences and interactions of atoms.

These words are a jiggling mass of atoms; ink atoms bonded to paper atoms with interatomic forces.

The grey pulp that poured out these words upon paper is a swarm of atoms; atoms assembled into neurones and blood; atoms and charges shuttling back and forth

3* Although Heidegger’s theory of Being supports itself in a stable hermeneutic circle, his theory of time does not. In Being and Time Heidegger suggests that the present-at-hand time that we encounter in the clock is derivative from a more primordial time that makes it possible. This primordial time underlies and makes possible both language and care. However, if primordial time makes language possible then time will always be behind the saying of our language and never appear within what is said. We can only speak about “time” because we have encountered present-at-hand clocks or regular processes within the world. If these were removed “time” would vanish from our language and the primordial ‘time’ that makes our language possible would never be spoken about within it. Without clocks speech about “time” would fall silent. The existential theory of time might be correct – a more primordial time might make our clock time possible – but our attempts to speak about it depend upon time that has been made present; upon time that is not really time at all. Existential time does not appear within language; the dependence of “time” upon the clock makes it questionable whether we should call primordial time “time” at all.

A second problem with the stability of Heidegger’s hermeneutic circle is Lawson’s claim that Heidegger’s theory of Being is not self-consistent. According to Lawson Being is defined as that which is hidden and so any interpretation of Being that makes Being present will fail to describe Being.

The vortex that is opened up by what Heidegger calls the ‘cardinal problem’ – the question of the meaning of being – becomes apparent when we realize that if the meaning of Being is hidden from us we cannot hope to answer the question, and if it is not hidden from us it is no longer referring to that which Heidegger wishes it to refer to.

[Hilary Lawson, Reflexivity (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1985), pp. 70-1.]

Being cannot be spoken about because the moment we speak about it we are no longer speaking about Being. A phenomenology of Being can only be on the way to Being; Heidegger’s project would immediately undermine itself if it ever claimed to have arrived. One way out of this difficulty would be to argue that Dasein has a non-thematic understanding of Being, but this does not solve the problem about how Heidegger managed to write about this non-thematicity in Being and Time.
along arteries and nervous fibres constructed from atoms. Each of my thoughts can be broken down into a succession of atomic events.

Atoms atoms and nothing but atoms. Where are the people, the icicles, the smokestacks on a summer morn? Atoms atoms and nothing but atoms. People, icicles, smokestacks and everything else can be explained using the language of atoms. This language is a total system; nothing is missed by it.

A question hangs suspended in the air: "Who has been describing this ocean of atoms?". But the question has become irrelevant; it has missed the radicality of the atom. There are no longer any whos or people. People have become congeries of atoms that are barely distinguishable from their surroundings. The theory of the atom is itself a succession of blind atomic interactions and vibrations. No-one has constructed a theory of the atom. There is no more theory, no more speech, no more people to speak. Some ink atoms happened to end up adhered to some paper atoms; and that is it. The descriptive language of "people", "creation" "language" and "theory" has been discarded in favour of precise descriptions of the collisions adherences and interactions of atoms. The theory and the theoriser of atoms have ceased to exist. There are only atoms.

The atomic theory is not false for it has transcended all distinctions made in language. Atomic theory is invisible.9

A collapsing hermeneutic circle spirits away its own presence as theory; it interprets

9 Although atomic theory is rather simplistic and has been surpassed by much more sophisticated models, the same arguments can be applied to theories of quarks or superstrings which collapse in the same way. It is also worth pointing out that numerous scientists and philosophers believe that atomic theory can hermeneutically circle. For example Fisher claims that:

… mind emerges from brain functions as a Hegelian “change from quantity”, that is, on the order of $10^{12}$ profusely interconnected neurons, “into a new quality”: the collective phenomenon of the brain’s self-experience. This self-referential and self-observing quality we have in mind is capable of (recursively) observing its self-observations.

[Roland Fischer, ‘Emergence of Mind from Brain’, Diogenes, 38, p. 1.]

For a good summary of the argument against the ability of atoms to speak see Truth and Method, p. 410.
reality in a way that makes interpretation impossible. A collapsing theory claims that theory is not theory; it is a self-undermining description of reality.

A collapsing hermeneutic circle can be used to explain a number of phenomena. However its central limitation is that it cannot account for itself; it speaks about itself in terms of something that is not a person or a theory. A person has not described reality using a theory; reality has arrived at a particular state that we used to call “theory”.

Collapsing theories strip themselves of their autonomous descriptive powers; they weave themselves into the fabric of reality in such a way that they are unable to escape from it, unable to rise above it and articulate it in an autonomous description. A collapsing theory interprets reality in a particular way and then is soaked up by the reality that it has spoken about. It spirals underneath itself and redescribes its original description as something other than a description.

In general, theories collapse because they contradict the presuppositions (or a version
of them) that I set out at the beginning of this project. Anything which overturns the simple picture of people creating theories about reality opens up a mystical and strange world in which people cease to be people, theory ceases to be language applied to world, and/or the link between people and language is broken. A collapsing theory dislocates us from the comfortable presuppositions of theory and throws us upon a pile of broken paradoxes and twisted contradictions.

One theory that collapses in this way is the structural anthropology of Lévi-Strauss, which extends Saussure’s notion of the sign to include forks, village huts, relatives and weapons.

In Saussure representation is possible because he distinguishes between mental concepts and physical objects. When Lévi-Strauss converts the objects ‘out there’ into signs he erases this distinction between signifier and signified, and we are left with a multiplicity of signs operating in a structural system. In Saussure the mental concept of language (labelled with the sound pattern “language”) can be used to represent language. In Lévi-Strauss there is no distinction between signifier and signified, between sign and object, and so there is no longer any representation. A sign in the mind and a sign in

4 The problematic status of structuralism is also discussed by Charles Levin:

To work as Lévi-Strauss suggests, the sign must be conceived as an arbitrary unit of meaning. If the cultural unit or sign has no intrinsic relation to any referent, the meaning must be posited as a function of the systematicity of the signifying elements themselves. The meaning of anything functioning as a sign must derive from the differences between the elements of a conventional system of signification. Meaning thus appears as an endowment of the system: it comes from the sign, but not from what the sign ‘refers’ to, in so far as that is thought to be located outside of the system. But if it is the ‘system’ which ‘motivates’ the sign relationship (signifier-signified), in the absence of a functioning referent, there still remains some question as to the motivation of the system itself. Either there must be some agency (motivation) outside the system, constituting the system, or else the system itself, as a whole – as an effective structure – is not arbitrary, but natural, given, an ‘unmoved mover’. It must come into being ‘all at once’, as Lévi-Strauss said.

It is in the latter sense that structuralism tends to assume the immediacy and primacy of systems and the derived character of intentionality and human agency. Language is adopted as the paradigm of systems and structures – and the structures of language are endowed with a functional

10 Different aspects may not depend upon these presuppositions. They may, however, be dependent upon other presuppositions and collapse when these are undermined.
the world have the same status; they are differentiated from each other and are part of a single system. The signs are no longer about the world; they are the world. The world is no more than signs; a flux of signs differentiated from one other but no longer about each other. The concept of structuralism united with its sound pattern and the village hut represent the world to the same degree. It is this radicality of Lévi-Strauss that causes his hermeneutic collapse.

Lévi-Strauss’ own string of signs is so immersed in the structural system that it can no longer represent the system itself. To describe the world as a system of signs Lévi-Strauss needs to detach himself from it. But the moment he commences his description he falls into the endless play of signs and loses his power of representation. Lévi-Strauss’ description undermines its own status as a description and his hermeneutic circle collapses.

... as soon as one seeks to demonstrate in this way that there is no transcendental or privileged signified and that the domain or play of the signification henceforth has no limit, one must reject even the concept and word “sign” itself—which is precisely what cannot be done. For the signification “sign” has always been understood and determined, in its meaning, as sign-of, a signifier referring to a signified, a signifier different from its signified. If one erases the radical

autonomy and determining power which dispenses with acts of meaning and reference as aspects of the semiotic process. The logical problems with this approach still tend to be suppressed, perhaps because Western thought has acquired such a stake in the epistemological privileging of language. Nevertheless, if we accept the system definition of signification then we are stuck with a variant of Bertrand Russell’s paradox: the problem of the ontological status of the putative system of signs itself. Does the meaning of the term ‘system’ function like that of a sign, i.e. as a relationship between a signifier and a signified in a system of signs? If ‘system’ is part of “system”, then it can have no privileged reference outside the system of signs; so there can be no real “system” within which the meaning of ‘system’ (as a sign) can be determined.

On the other hand, if there is a real system, and the system of signs is not itself a sign, then the term ‘system’ must have an objective reference (to the actual system of signs), which means that the sign refers independently of the system to something beyond the system, namely the system itself, and therefore cannot be part of it. Like a Moebius band, the sign is always outside the system of which it is a part, and the system is always inside the play of the sign which it is supposed to contain.

difference between signifier and signified, it is the word “signifier” itself which must be abandoned as a metaphysical concept. ... The concept of the sign, in each of its aspects, has been determined by this opposition throughout the totality of its history. It has lived only on this opposition and this system. But we cannot do without the concept of the sign, for we cannot give up this metaphysical complicity without also giving up the critique we are directing against this complicity.\textsuperscript{11}

Lévi-Strauss’ structuralism cannot give an account of how structuralism could be spoken about by Lévi-Strauss. A theory about the world that concludes with the impossibility of itself.\textsuperscript{12}

\begin{itemize}
\item Lévi-Strauss is no longer a person writing a theory of structuralism. His signs are part of the structural system but they are no longer describing it.
\item Theory of structuralism.
\item Lévi-Strauss
\item World as a system of signs
\end{itemize}

\begin{itemize}
\item If the world is a system of signs there is no longer any representation and so a theory that describes the world as a system of signs is not possible.
\end{itemize}


\textsuperscript{12} A variety of collapse that I do not have space to deal with in this project is a collapse in which theory remains possible – we remain people speaking about reality – but in which the explanation of the possibility of theory vanishes from our sight. Theory posits something beyond itself which makes it possible and yet cannot be articulated within it. If theory is to remain consistent it has to give up its attempt to understand itself. We are left with an understanding which can grasp everything in the world except itself. After this kind of collapse theory is orphaned; abandoned on the steps of reality without a trace of its place of origin.

The existential theory of time is a good example of this form of collapse. Existential time makes our speaking possible and yet it is impossible for an articulation of it to enter language. It is always presupposed by speech but never appears within it.
The Invisible

When a theory collapses what are we left with? On the one hand we have an articulation of the world that seems plausible and makes good predictions. On the other hand, beyond a certain point we find ourselves unable to discuss this theory any further. A theory that we seeded has become monstrous and sucked us into itself. We started off as people describing reality; now reality starts to speak through us. It is the atoms or the structure speaking; or perhaps there is no longer any speaking at all. A flip over or reversal has occurred:

A person creates a theory about reality.  

Person \rightarrow Reality

The person and his theory become products of reality.  

Reality \rightarrow Person

There are two possible responses to this dilemma. One is to rule that theories that flip over or reverse in this way are illegitimate. We stay with the idea that people create theories about reality and dismiss any theory that undermines this picture. Theories that undermine themselves must be discarded and better, self-consistent theories must be sought. This leaves us trapped within a possibly erroneous assumption, and haunted by the uncomfortable sense that some collapsing theories might be true - that the world might be composed of atoms or structures of signs; even if we cannot legitimately describe it in this way. However, in spite of these problems this may be the only rigorous approach. What we cannot speak about must not be spoken about.

13 Not all stable or collapsing theories make predictions. In Being and Time Heidegger does not tell us what will happen in the present-at-hand world.
14 Some of the other attempts that have been made to escape collapse are discussed by Lawson in Reflexivity (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1985), pp. 16-22.
The problem is that some theories are extremely compelling and useful, even if they undermine themselves at some point. Atomism and the structuralist theory of language are not that easy to let go of. Furthermore, there seems to be some sense to the idea that we can point to these theories, even if we cannot speak about them directly.  

An alternative response to a collapsing theory is to preserve the sense that we have of its validity, and deal with its collapse by describing it as invisible. Invisible theories are retained as theories about reality that can be described and refuted; the only difference between a stable theory and one that collapses is that the latter undermines its own status as a theory. Up to a certain point invisible theories can be spoken about in clear philosophical language; beyond that point they can only be spoken about mystically - through hints, metaphors, and allusions.

It could be objected that this notion of invisible theory is highly suspicious philosophically. Like the thing-in-itself, an

Wittgenstein’s showing/saying distinction may be able to go some way towards explaining how we could point to theories that collapse: “What can be shown, cannot be said.” [Tractatus, translated by D. F. Pears & B. F. McGuinness (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961), § 4.1212]. Concrete studies may be able to demonstrate the possibility, structure, and logic of collapsing theory, even if they cannot describe it directly.

Gadamer places a heavy emphasis on the situation of the interpreter in history. Knowledge is always part of a tradition and we can never fully detach ourselves from the prejudices that are given to us with our historical situation. The modern scientific use of an ‘ahistorical’ method is itself a historical production.

To exist historically means that knowledge of oneself can never be complete. All self-knowledge proceeds from what is historically pre-given, what we call, with Hegel, ‘substance’, because it is the basis of all subjective meaning and attitude and hence both prescribes and limits every possibility of understanding any tradition whatsoever in terms of its unique historical quality.

[Hans-Georg Gadamer, Truth and Method, p. 269.]

If our interpretations are conditioned by our prejudices, we face the problem of how we can ever come to a genuine understanding of a text that we are interpreting. Gadamer’s answer is that we can be open to what is being said in it. We can credit the text with possessing truth and allow our prejudices to be affected by this truth. In this way we can fuse our horizon with the horizon of the text and achieve a broader perspective that goes beyond both positions.

The problem with this is that it makes Gadamer’s hermeneutics little more than a blind endorsement of tradition. Our prejudices are handed to us by tradition and we modify these prejudices by being open to the same tradition. There is no reference to any kind of outside that could be used to evaluate the tradition itself. If, as Habermas suggests, the tradition is systematically distorted by social and economic factors, then there is no way in which we could become aware of this or correct it. This problem is brought out well in Warnke’s discussion of Gadamer:

... in discarding our initial assumptions about a text or subject-
invisible theory has something deeply counter-intuitive about it which we long to get rid of with a bold sweep. This objection is substantial, but it loses its force when we realise that there may not be any stable hermeneutic circles at all. I have cited Heidegger and Hegel as examples of hermeneutically circling systems. However, a careful reading of either of these authors could show that their hermeneutic circles collapse. Hegel faces problems about the relationship between Hegel the man and Absolute Spirit, and Heidegger’s later writings abandoned the hermeneutic circle in favour of an attempt to evoke rather than describe Being. Even Gadamer faces problems about his description of history being relative to the position in history that it is situated in. If all theories eventually collapse, we may have to live with invisibility for a while; even if we set up hermeneutically circling systems as our ideal.

Invisible theory can be thought of as a half-way concept at this stage - something we cannot yet dispense with that might eventually become matter in light of the truth that we find in the object, we seem simply to be replacing certain unexamined prejudices, themselves conditioned by the tradition to which we belong, with other views explicitly adopted from the tradition. But what guarantees that the views we explicitly adopt from the tradition are any less arbitrary than the prejudices we have previously held in an unreflective way? ... We seem to be able to revise the prejudices we have inherited from the tradition only by assuming the validity of other prejudices the tradition contains.


It is this conservatism of Gadamer’s thesis that creates problems for his account. If all theories are the outcome of the self-modification of tradition, then Gadamer’s description of this tradition must itself be the product of its particular historical circumstances. This is something that Gadamer freely acknowledges:

We are certainly entitled to ask the reflective historical question: Why, just now, at this precise moment in history, has this fundamental insight into the element of effective-history in all understanding become possible? My investigations offer an indirect answer to this question. Only after the failure of the naïve historicism of the very century of historicism does it become clear that the contrast between unhistorical-dogmatic and historical, between tradition and historical science, between ancient and modern, is not absolute. The famous querelle des anciens et des modernes ceases to be a real alternative.

[Forward to the second edition of Truth and Method, p. xxii.]

The problem arises when this situated, finite theory makes its claim to universality. Gadamer’s theory is the product of its historical circumstances and

\[16\] Lawson makes this point about Nietzsche, Heidegger and Derrida. All three of these authors struggle to speak within a paradoxical self-reflexive position because they are convinced (and attempt to demonstrate) that all theories are beset by these problems.

\[17\] This is related to Hegel’s theory of time which I do not have the space to go into here.
superfluous. A pole we climb up before leaping out into the void.

The Return

A yearning man in tight trousers. Uttering the words “Death oh death I long for thee!” he plunges the knife into his heaving breast. Snapping the spring flowers in his paroxysms of pain he gasps once again: “Death oh death I long for thee!”.

A twisted youth death-married with petal confetti. Not only is the man dead; his desire for death is dead as well. Since he is dead, the man no longer desires to die. He no longer craves death and so, for no reason, he comes back to life again. As life arises the desire to die returns, and the cycle begins again.

Invisible theory is an absolute halt. An abrupt termination of discourse. You understand the theory and then theory stops. There are no consequences, no plans of action, and no ethics. All theoretical manoeuvres are ruled out. Invisible theories leave people silent and helpless; they are the end of all consequences, the end of all yet he claims it to be universally valid for all places and all times:

If the principle of effective-history is made into a general structural element in understanding, then this thesis undoubtedly includes no historical relativity, but seeks absolute validity—and yet a hermeneutical consciousness exists only under specific historical conditions.
[Ibid., p. xxi.]

The effective-historical consciousness is so radically finite that our whole being, achieved in the totality of our destiny, inevitably transcends its knowledge of itself. But that is a fundamental insight which ought not to be limited to any specific historical situation
[Ibid., p. xxii.]

History has given rise to Gadamer’s theory and this theory claims universal applicability. However, there is nothing in the history that Gadamer describes that marks out his theory as superior to those of his predecessors. Whilst Hegel’s history does lead up to an absolute moment in which Hegel’s description of history becomes possible, Gadamer’s history has no kind of teleological structure that could be fulfilled in Gadamer himself. The possibilities for history lie open in Gadamer - we are not eternally destined to repeat the same dialectical movements. Without a telos, the history that Gadamer describes cannot be said to support his position as a theoriser of that history:

Gadamerian self-realization is not a Hegelian Bildung. If there is a teleology of truth and becoming for Gadamer, it is, as Merleau-Ponty would have said, a teleology without a telos. “The dialectic of experience,” he writes, “has its own fulfilment not in definitive knowledge, but in that openness to experience that is encouraged by experience itself” (TM, 319)

discussion and debate. Invisible theories do not inform us about anything and they are not useful. *People* cannot respond to them - although of course atoms or the structure may make all kinds of theoretical and practical gestures after an invisible theory has been put forward.

This silencing of speech affects the invisible theory as well. The invisible theory is itself a theory and so it cannot exempt itself from its general rejection of theory. Furthermore, invisible theories not only ‘claim’ that theory is impossible; they also ‘claim’ that theory has never been possible, that it has never taken place. No theories have ever been developed; there have never been and there never will be any theories. In a move which annuls all theory, invisible theories annul themselves as well.

We hold ourselves silent awhile ... and then exhale. The invisible theory has cancelled itself out, and in so doing it has cancelled out its nullification of theory as well. Theory returns in a great and glorious burst of song. But lurking amongst the joyous host returning is the invisible theory that cancelled itself out. Since its cancellation of all theory *has itself vanished* there

This problem is compounded by Gadamer’s identity between being and language. Since the world is not different from the views in which it presents itself, each view presents us with a portion of world. The multiplicity of views that went before Gadamer also present portions of world; and so do interpretations that are antagonistic to his position. Gadamer’s discourse claims to be applicable to all places and all times; and yet it also claims that the discourses of all places and all times have the same validity as his own. Gadamer describes a crowd of people with different perspectives and prejudices and then declares himself to be amongst them. He needs to separate himself from this crowd to give an absolutely valid account of it, and yet his absolutely valid account claims the same status as any other account that might be offered by this crowd. This does not directly undermine Gadamer’s position - Gadamer’s position as a theoriser of history is not made impossible by the history that he describes - but it does lead him into an affirmation of views that contradict his own position. The next chapter on positive scepticism will look into this problem in more detail.

Connected with this problem is Gadamer’s endorsement of situated finitude. Gadamer’s theory is absolute - applicable to all places and all times - and yet it affirms the finitude of the interpreter. A finite person has been determined by something greater than himself which he cannot rise above. This makes a finite person humbly: he does not know whether his account is correct, or whether the account that he is criticising is correct. He does not even have grounds to criticise another’s account. This ignorance of the finite person is so all-pervading that he is not even sure that he is finite. Although Gadamer claims that we are all historically situated and finite, his own finitude is not like this; he states finitude as an Absolute and ideological claim, and does not really open himself to the non-finite theories that he criticises. If Gadamer took his finitude seriously he would have to acknowledge that he does not have the final answer on things; that if there is a final answer it is not necessarily openness and finitude. This would also open up Gadamer to theories that contradict his thesis.
is no longer any reason for rejecting the invisible theory. Theory has returned; since the invisible theory is a theory we can now believe in it too. The cycle of collapse and return begins again. Invisible theories collapse, but when they collapse the grounds for their collapse collapses as well - setting the stage for their return.

1. We have or create a theory about reality.
2. This theory claims that theory is not possible and that it has never taken place.
3. This claim depends upon theory, and so it vanishes when all theory is annulled.
4. Now there is no theory and no longer any cancellation of theory either.
5. We are left nowhere for a while and then fall back into theory again.
6. The invisible theory is a plausible interpretation of reality and we take it up once again.

Invisible theories annul themselves and then annul this annulment of themselves. They have to be accepted as true if they are to cancel out all theory; but this truth is lost in the cancellation, and we return to the beginning again. An invisible theory collapses when it becomes the product of reality, and re-emerges after the grounds for its collapse have collapsed as well.¹⁸

¹⁸ This structure is similar to a person who says: “I am lying”. We start off believing a person who claims to be lying - we accept “I am lying” as a true statement. However, if “I am lying” is a true statement, then its claim to be a lie must be true and so “I am lying” must be a lie. But if “I am lying” is a lie then the person speaking must be telling the truth and “I am lying” must be a true statement. “I am lying” is a statement that compels us to reject it; and this rejection leads us to accept it once again. A dialectical cycle in which each assertion converts into its opposite.
Multiple Circles

In the last few sections I have been discussing the difference between stable and collapsing hermeneutic circles. I have not yet touched upon problems connected with a multiplicity of circles. This will next be addressed in a chapter on positive scepticism.

6* This potential for multiplicity is apparent in the two examples of hermeneutic circles that I cited above. In early Heidegger it appears in the notion of a leap into a virtuous circle. This leap is a leap into an ontological (Heideggerean) language and problematic that attempts to escape from the traditional problems of metaphysics. To the extent that it is a leap into a virtuous circle and not a continuance of metaphysics (which many have disputed, most notably Derrida), Heidegger does not appear to exclude other leaps into alternative hermeneutic circles - jumps into different languages and problematics that also circle virtuously. In later Heidegger the possibility of different circles emerges in his notion of origination. A beginning can originate a whole set of possibilities whose subsequent development remains under the guidance of that beginning. Different moments of origination lead to different 'systems' of thinking.

In Hegel, the possibility of other hermeneutic circles emerges in the relationship between Spirit and history. Spirit could describe history in the way it did because of the particular history that led up to the period in which the description was taking place. However, the possibility and nature of this description depend upon Spirit’s reading of history. A different reading of history could make Spirit’s articulation of history possible in a different way, and a different hermeneutic circle could be created.
Positive Scepticism

These examples made it possible for a librarian of genius to discover the fundamental law of the Library. This thinker observed that all the books, no matter how diverse they might be, are made up of the same elements: the space, the period, the comma, the twenty-two letters of the alphabet. He also alleged a fact which travellers have confirmed: *In the vast Library there are no two identical books*. From these two incontrovertible premises he deduced that the Library is total and that its shelves register all the possible combinations of the twenty-odd orthographical symbols (a number which, though extremely vast, is not infinite): in other words, all that it is given to express, in all languages. Everything: the minutely detailed history of the future, the archangels’ autobiographies, the faithful catalogue of the Library, thousands and thousands of false catalogues, the demonstration of the fallacy of those catalogues, the demonstration of the fallacy of the true catalogue, the Gnostic gospel of Basilides, the commentary on that gospel, the commentary on the commentary on that gospel, the true story of your death, the translation of every book in all languages, the interpolations of every book in all books.¹

I have no idea who or what you are; but I can say that you and I have different points of view, different styles of being.

Your thoughts, obsessions, interests and idle talk are different from my own.

Our philosophical beliefs diverge; we argue differently for different things.

We may even have a different native language.

Perhaps you are an insect....

In this chapter I will be discussing these differences between us.

If they are real, they provide evidence for what I have to say.

If there are no significant differences between us, this chapter will feel as if it has freshly sprung from your bright red cherry lips.

But it is a good thing for the reputation of scepticism that there are so many people about who are not sceptics, to show that man is quite capable of the most extravagant opinions, since he is capable of believing that he is not naturally and inevitably weak, but is, on the contrary, naturally wise.

Nothing strengthens the case for scepticism more than the fact that there are people who are not sceptics. If they all were, they would be wrong.²

Aspects

The truth is that we are separate, but not necessarily separated (by something); that we are, each of us, bodies, i.e., embodied; each is this one and not that, each here and not there, each now and not then. If something separates us, comes between us, that can only be a particular aspect or stance of the mind itself, a particular way in which we relate, or are related (by birth, by law, by force, in love) to one another - our positions, our attitudes, with reference to one another.³

... a study of continuous aspect perception can legitimately be viewed as philosophical investigation of human relationships with objects or phenomena in general.⁴

look out of my window and see a naked woman running along the beach; the woman is separate from the beach, pressing into its sandy surface and springing on in a succession of graceful bounds. The meaning of the woman and the meaning of the beach are completely separate for me. The woman is a sensuous vital erotic presence, the beach is a golden angled surface that I walk upon to see the sea.

Recognition dawns - she is my mother. In an instant the sexual possibility is replaced by the tender woman that cared for me as a child. Her breasts no longer arouse me - they are the source of the hot sweet milk that spurted between my infant lips.

As I look out of my window and watch the naked woman running along the beach I am seeing an aspect, experiencing the situation in a particular way. On a postcard the same scene presents a different aspect to me; the woman and the beach fuse into a single ‘holiday scene’, and the meaning resonances of both are cut short.

A geologist sees the beach as a particular sand type; he hardly notices the woman at all. A fisherman assesses features of the beach, the phase of the tide and the condition of the sea in his attempt to ascertain where fish might be concentrating.

Aspects are present all the time in our lives; we see a tree, not a vertical columnar form with branching excrescences and green planar surfaces. We see a rose, not a convoluted red form with linear green attachment. Although we may only ever see one aspect, there is nothing necessary about this. Some people are trapped forever within a world of geometrical

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5 This example was taken from Oliver Sacks, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife For a Hat* (London: Duckworth, 1986), p. 12.
forms; other people’s daily lives are permanently furnished with cats, cars, tv’s and trees.

An aspect is a whole way of seeing. Different ways of seeing discover themselves in different worlds.

I see a woman running naked on the beach and I can experience different aspects of her - see her in different ways. She is a finely tuned biological machine, a goddess, an assembly of soft curved surfaces of heady sensuality.

These aspects include myself. As she changes I change as well; I become a biological machine, a god, a man pinioned by the murmur of his erotic stirrings. These aspects may have complicated theories attached that penetrate my entire worldview.

But how is it possible to see an object according to an interpretation?--The question represents it as a queer fact; as if something were being forced into a form it did not really fit. But no squeezing, no forcing took place here.6

Aspect change can be caused by theory. We look at a duck-rabbit and see a duck. After someone has told us that we can also see a rabbit in the picture, the duck suddenly vanishes and a rabbit appears before us.

Art, science and philosophy are mediums which open us up to aspects; they are aspect reflectors and generators. Turner’s paintings of Venice lead us to see Venice in a different way; theories about genes and heredity generate a new experience of people; Heidegger’s visions change our way of relating to existence. Art, science, and philosophy are

transformative because aspects are real, because we do see the world in a particular way, and
because we can change this way of seeing.

Art, science, and philosophy cause changes of aspect. However this relationship is
reciprocal - they can emerge from aspects as well as create them. Art both reflects and
transforms the culture that it comes from. Normal science is determined by a paradigm, but
scientific theories can create new paradigms.

We can see aspects, but for the most part we inhabit them. When we see an aspect we
make a distinction between the aspect and the object. We look at an object and see an aspect
of it. When we inhabit an aspect there is no distinction between what is seen or experienced
and the object itself. When I am within an aspect the world is a certain way for me; and this
is not a representation of something else. The sadness of my friend is not an interpretation of
his biological body - sadness seeps, burns and stirs within him; it pours out of his face and
squeezes my heart in a sympathetic ache. My friend’s sadness is an aspect inhabited by me –
sadness stands before me in my friend; mingled with his blood, guts and bone.

There are many occasions in which one is profoundly struck by the particular shade of consciousness
manifest in someone’s expression or behaviour; on such occasions, it is not just that we see that the
person is fearful or joyful - we see the fear in his stare the joy in her face.\(^7\)

Aspects are ways in which the world is; they are not solipsistic bubbles or subjective
prisons. They can be shared by billions of people, or not inhabited by anyone. They are
cohabitable.

The most global aspects do not appear to their inhabitants - they are taken for granted and other ways of ‘seeing’ are not even considered. A global aspect is taken to be self-evidently correct.

We can only see one aspect at a time. The woman on the beach is either a sensuous erotic presence or she is my mother; the drawing is either a duck or it is a rabbit - it cannot be both a duck and a rabbit simultaneously.

When we look at an object we do not experience an aspect of the object; we experience the object. A little later we experience a different object. This second object is not experienced as an aspect of the first one - it is just there before us, appearing to us just as it is. It is only when we compare the two experiences that we begin to speak about aspects of a single object and start to detach the object from the aspects of it.

We see a drawing, we see a duck, we see a rabbit, we see some funny black marks on a piece of paper.

We look at a drawing and see a duck. We look at a duck and see a rabbit. We look at a rabbit and see some funny black marks on a piece of white paper. We look at some funny black marks on a piece of paper and see a drawing.

We can stay entirely within an aspect or we can make one aspect an aspect of another.

We often aspire to make one aspect fundamental; we wish to see all aspects as partial glimpses of one true aspect - an aspect so fundamental that it is no longer an aspect but reality itself. In the duck-rabbit example we want to make the drawing fundamental; we want
to see a single fixed physical drawing in a number of different ways. However, seeing a duck-rabbit as a drawing is just one way of seeing.

This desire to make one aspect fundamental leads people to theories that distinguish between aspects and an objective world. Aspects are said to be representations of the world, and only one aspect is the correct representation. Science is a search for this single correct aspect.

However, aspects can be interpreted in other ways:

The criterion for the continuing expansion of our own world-picture is not given by a ‘world in itself’ that lies beyond all language. Rather, the infinite perfectibility of the human experience of the world means that, whatever language we use, we never achieve anything but an ever more extended aspect, a ‘view’ of the world. Those views of the world are not relative in the sense that one could set them against the ‘world in itself’, as if the right view from some possible position outside the human, linguistic world, could discover it in its being-in-itself. No one questions that the world can exist without man and perhaps will do so. This is part of the meaning in which every human, linguistically constituted view of the world lives. In every view of the world the existence of the world-in-itself is implied. It is the whole to which the linguistically schematised experience is referred. The variety of these views of the world does not involve any relativisation of the ‘world’. Rather, what the world is is not different from the views in which it presents itself.⁸

According to Gadamer, aspects are indistinguishable from the world itself – there are no noumenal realms lurking behind them. The world is the sum of an indefinite number of aspects.⁹

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⁹ Latour’s notion of the hybrid or quasi-object in *We Have Never Been Modern* provides a similar interpretation of aspects. Quasi-objects are not conceptual interpretations of natural phenomena but networks in which
The aspects that we experience may be a categorically organised noumenal world, they may be the world itself, they may be direct perceptions of an objective world. However, the question of which interpretation of aspects is correct could only be resolved by abandoning aspects and taking up a detached omniscient position. Without this, each interpretation of aspects is itself just another aspect.

When we do relativize these matters to a background theory, moreover, the relativization itself has two components: relativity to the choice of background theory and relativity to the choice of how to translate the object theory into the background theory. As for the ontology in turn of the background theory, and even the referentiality of its quantification - these matters can call for a background theory in turn.\(^\text{10}\)

In this chapter I will attempt to describe aspects *phenomenologically* without attempting to judge which one is correct.\(^\text{11}\) Of course, this approach is itself an aspect - not a neutral standpoint that could survey aspects from nowhere.

Reality resembles one of Borge’s endless labyrinths. We pass from room to room and in each room we see things in a different way. Each room is an aspect of reality. In one room we see a duck, in another a rabbit, in another a drawing, in another a pattern of dark marks on a piece of white paper. We can only escape from the rooms by finding a room in which the rooms do not exist.


\(^{11}\) This approach has a lot in common with Foucault’s double bracketing of meaning and truth in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. 
Conflicting Aspects

The clashes between aspects brings them to our attention. If we all inhabited the same aspect we would never become aware of aspects at all. We would all face the same world and make the same judgements about it - that world and those judgements would simply be true for us. However, madness, different cultures, different languages and different forms of life have uncovered gaps between the worlds that people inhabit. The notion of an aspect developed from the experience of these fissures.\(^{12}\)

There is a spectrum of aspect differences. Some aspects disagree about everything, others disagree about a few things\(^{13}\) and other aspects do not share enough common ground for there to be any disagreement at all.

Aspects can only contest one another if they have some common ground. Two aspects need to agree upon what \(x\) is and what truth is if they are to make opposing claims about the truth of \(x\).

An evolutionist strikes a monkey with his staff and declares that this lump of matter is the result of natural selection. A creationist reveres the monkey as the work of God's hand and a \textit{debate} takes place which is based upon the fact that the evolutionist and creationist aspects overlap in many areas. They broadly agree about what a monkey is, what a monkey eats, the best way to cook a monkey etc. Their \textit{disagreement} about the origin of the monkey is founded upon their \textit{agreement} about so much else.

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\(^{12}\) Clashes between local aspects bring aspects to our attention. It may be impossible for us to become aware of clashes between global aspects.
Disagreement between aspects does not always end with a happy resolution. Facts within an aspect are often bent around into systems in which the parts mutually reinforce one other. Interpretations which challenge these systems are dismissed as erroneous.

When two aspects disagree, one is right, the other is wrong, or both are wrong. However this is a fairly empty claim without some means of establishing which side of the debate is correct (if any side of the debate is correct). Without this, the two aspects simply stand before us, each as seductive as the other. If one side of the debate is right and the other wrong, in some situations it will be impossible to determine which is right. In these cases the only option is to Pyrrhonically suspend judgement and describe the two sides of each debate.¹⁴

Within one aspect it is true that the monkey is the product of evolution; within a different aspect it is false that the monkey is the product of evolution. Two competing truth claims are encountered by the positive sceptic. If he had some kind of divine access to knowledge outside of his own aspect then he could easily resolve the disagreement. However, he has only his own knowledge and reasoning to go on, which itself comes from the finite and limited perspective of his own aspect. Since the positive sceptic cannot make an omnipotent judgement about who is the winner of each debate, he may conclude that it is

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¹³ In practice this is unlikely because of the interconnectedness of beliefs. If two aspects disagree about the existence of God they will also disagree about a lot of other things as well.
¹⁴ This is the strategy of positive scepticism, which describes the differences between aspects, from within its vision of the labyrinth, without deciding which side of each debate is correct.
pretty meaningless to speak within his own aspect about the truth or falsity of claims in other aspects.\textsuperscript{15}

If there is no common ground between aspects, they cannot disagree; they are just speaking about different things altogether. A creature that did not participate in the human form of life, and had no idea about monkeys, gods or men could not debate with the evolutionist and the creationist about the 'origins' of the 'hairy rock' that lay before him.

Both aspects that disagree and aspects that are totally different can affect one another. Parts of them can be exchanged through a kind of contact. But this exchange is not a conscious assimilation of the different. We just pick up parts of other aspects when we are exposed to them. If I hang around with a person for long enough I start to see things their way – and this has nothing to do with any conscious decision that I might make to do this.

Interpretation takes place after assimilation. I absorb interpretations and then apply them. I interpret someone in one way for a while, and then, after assimilating part of their aspect, I start to interpret them in the way that they interpret themselves.

\textsuperscript{15} This position would leave those looking for a conclusive resolution of debates frustrated, since it questions our ability to definitively discriminate between competing and mutually exclusive truth claims. The central part of this chapter makes a case for the claim that this frustration is something we may have to live with. Furthermore, if the distinction between sanity and insanity collapses, as Chapter 3 suggests, it becomes fairly meaningless to mediate between the competing claims of 'madmen' and 'sanemen'. This inability to judge about truth and falsity productively opens up our relationships with people inhabiting aspects different from our own.
Charting the Labyrinth

The labyrinth of reality lacks corridors; it is an assembly of rooms opening out onto rooms opening out onto rooms. Connections between rooms do not depend upon spatial proximity; from one room it is possible to access any other.

This labyrinth is irreducible to a spatial plan. All that can be attempted is a taxonomy of the ways in which the rooms vary. Amongst the vast array of shifting aspects some components can be discerned; components which constitute aspects and enable them to differ.

This classification is useful, but it is by no means definitive - it is not an attempt to articulate the differences between aspects in detail. Its main purpose is to describe some of the aspects’ components and the ways in which these contribute to the forming of an aspect. Although I hope that this description will make the labyrinth plausible to other members of my culture, the real test of aspect theory lies in detailed studies that create new aspects or display differences between existing ones.

The actual existence of some of the examples that I will be using is not important. This is a phenomenology of rooms that have crumbled away, rooms that are waiting to be built, and rooms that may never be built. The crucial thing is the ability of human beings to inhabit these aspects.

A major limitation of this description is that it misses the interconnection and interdependence of what it separates for the sake of clarity. I have separated certainties, epistemes, and the partitioning of reality, and yet the certainties of an aspect and its episteme are closely related; and both depend on and affect the way in which it partitions reality. This analysis will describe many of the differences between aspects but it will not attempt to capture the knitting together of all of these elements into a whole. All that I can offer are some incomplete glimpses of some of the parts that are assembled within an
A final problem is that my description of aspects is an expression of my own aspect, and so I am doomed from the start to colour the other aspects with my own existential feel. This description is offered in the impossible hope that something of the labyrinth’s other rooms will somehow shine through.

**Certainties**

95. The propositions describing this world-picture might be part of a kind of mythology. And their role is like that of rules of a game; and the game can be learned purely practically, without learning any explicit rules.

96. It might be imagined that some propositions, of the form of empirical propositions, were hardened and functioned as channels for such empirical propositions as were not hardened but fluid; and that this relation altered with time, in that fluid propositions hardened, and hard ones became fluid.

97. The mythology may change back into a state of flux, the river-bed of thoughts may shift. But I distinguish between the movement of the waters on the river-bed and the shift of the bed itself; though there is not a sharp division of the one from the other. ...

99. And the bank of that river consists partly of hard rock, subject to no alteration or only to an imperceptible one, partly of sand, which now in one place now in another gets washed away, or deposited.¹⁶

Things *are* a particular way for us. A reassuring framework of facts and certainties cossets us throughout our day to day existence. As children we were brought up to inhabit a particular way of seeing reality. In our culture this is a causal vision. I am here because
mummy and daddy mated. We are here because of natural selection. IT is here because the big bang banged.

Everything is processed by this vision. Furthermore, we are absolutely certain about it.

I want to say that I am a human being. I want to say that I have evolved from hairy apes and blobs of ocean jelly. I want to say that I can describe the world using language. I want to say that the world is a vibrating mass of multidimensional superstrings; a probabilistic interplay of different wave-particles. I want to say that I live in Britain in the twenty first century, that my name is David Gamez, that I have one head and two eyes. I want to say that:

There exists at present a living human body, which is my body. This body was born at a certain time in the past, and has existed continuously ever since, though not without undergoing changes; it was, for instance, much smaller when it was born, and for some time afterwards, than it is now. Ever since it was born, it has either been in contact with or not far from the surface of the earth; and, at every moment since it was born, there have also existed many other things, having shape and size in three dimensions (in the familiar sense in which it has), from which it has been at various distances (in the familiar sense in which it is now at a distance both from that mantelpiece and from that bookcase, and at a greater distance from that bookcase than it is from the mantelpiece); also there have (very often at all events) existed some other things of this kind with which it was in contact (in the familiar sense in which it is now in contact with the pen I am holding in my right hand and with some of the clothes I am wearing).17

Certainties are a system of beliefs and judgements that stand fast for us. A collection

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17 George Edward Moore, 'A Defence of Common Sense', printed in *Philosophical Papers* (London: George
of facts that we simply take for granted; the bedrock upon which our language-game rests. For Moore, these certainties include the duality of his hands, the pre-existence of the earth for millions of years, and the proximity of his body to the surface of the earth throughout his lifetime. My certainties include the belief that I am sitting in Prague, tapping words into a laptop, and watching smooth streams of people flow past.

If an ordinary belief is thrown into question, nothing of consequence follows. If I believe that I have just seen my friend Angelo in a white limousine, and it turns out not to have been him, then I will simply shrug and think no more about it. However, if one of my certainties is overturned, my whole worldview can collapse. If it turned out that there was no such place as Prague and that I had never owned a laptop, then I would become completely disorientated; I would no longer know what to believe - any and every wild and fantastic belief would become equally plausible. Any number of ordinary beliefs and facts can be refuted within a framework of certainties; but if the certainties themselves are questioned, the whole framework is put at stake. Some beliefs can be doubted within the framework, but other beliefs constitute the framework and cannot be doubted without throwing the whole belief system into question."

... the questions that we raise and our doubts depend on the fact that some propositions are exempt from

Wittgenstein is suggesting that for each of us there are some propositions (different ones for you than for me) that are contingent and quasi-empirical, and yet have the following two features: First, they are “beyond doubt” in the sense that if one doubted them one would not be sure of anything, including one’s understanding of one’s own language (“If this deceives me, what does ‘deceive’ mean anymore?”), and consequently one’s ability to reason, to judge, to investigate, and even to doubt, would be crippled - to put it paradoxically, some doubts would make doubting impossible! Second, there would be nothing unreasonable in one’s refusing to doubt these “framework” propositions, even in the face of the most astonishing happenings.


doubt, are as it were like hinges on which these turn. That is to say, it belongs to the logic of our scientific investigations that certain things are in deed not doubted.\(^\text{18}\)

Certainties are not taught as additions to knowledge that we already have. Facts, evidence, and the arguments connecting facts and evidence are all learnt together: “Light dawns gradually over the whole”.\(^\text{19}\)

Ordinary beliefs may be acquired on the basis of evidence. We investigate something and on the basis of this investigation we reach conclusions which become ordinary beliefs. If the evidence is later thrown into question or refuted, the beliefs are thrown into question or refuted. Certainties are not acquired on the basis of evidence; they are a network whose many parts interlink and depend upon each other - each certainty is evidence for the other in a kind of circle. Doubting and proving with evidence only take place after the network of certainties has been acquired - these procedures act against the


\(^{19}\) Ibid., remark 141.
backdrop of self-evident certainties.

However we can ask: May someone have telling grounds for believing that the earth has only existed for a short time, say since his own birth? - Suppose he had always been told that, - would he have any good reason to doubt it? Men have believed that they could make rain; why should not a king be brought up in the belief that the world began with him? And if Moore and this king were to meet and discuss, could Moore really prove his belief to be the right one? I do not say that Moore could not convert the king to his view, but it would be a conversion of a special kind; the king would be brought to look at the world in a different way.20

Moore and the king both speak the same language, but they have radically different beliefs about the duration of the earth. Moore knows that the earth has been around for millions of years; the king replies that he knows that it has only been around since his birth. Moore claims that the fossil record proves that the earth has existed for millions of years; the king replies that it is irrelevant that rocks in the shape of skeletons were created at the time of his birth. Both sides of the debate see the matter a different way and each has a different system of evidence to support his point of view.21

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20 Ibid., remark 92.
21 Peter Winch makes a similar point about the Azande who are as certain about the reality and efficaciousness of witchcraft as we are certain that it is superstitious mumbo-jumbo. The glaring inconsistencies that we see in the predictions of their oracle are explained by them in a way that reinforces their entire worldview:

Of course it does happen often that the oracle first says “yes” and then “no” to the same question. This does not convince a Zande of the futility of the whole operation of consulting oracles: obviously, it
The foundational nature of certainties makes them indefinitely resistant to change. Although they may be overturned by new experiences, new experiences can always be discounted as illusory and the certainties sustained. An unusual experience may suggest to me that I am an angel inhabiting a human body; but if I am an atheist I may dismiss this experience as anomalous brain chemistry.

Isn’t the question this: “What if you had to change your opinion even on these most fundamental things?” And to that the answer seems to me to be: “You don’t have to change it. That is just what their being ‘fundamental’ is.”

Although we are never compelled to change certainties, this may still happen. Loss of love, a near-death experience, religious ecstasy or a journey into unreality can strip our certainties from us and hurl us into a cataclysm of doubt, despair, and the sense that we are experiencing the world anew.

I want say that my nerves have a strong attraction for God. I want to say that this attraction leads to a special relationship with God that contravenes the Order of the World. I want to say that I am being unmanned and turned into a prostitute to decrease the attractiveness of my nerves and to renew the human race after its imminent destruction. I want to say that I am in continual contact with departed souls. I want to say that little men have attempted to destroy my body. I want to

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22 On Certainty, remark 512.

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cannot, since otherwise the practice could hardly have developed and maintained itself at all. Various explanations may be offered, whose possibility, it is important to notice, is built into the whole network of Zande beliefs and may, therefore, be regarded as belonging to the concept of an oracle. It may be said, for instance, that bad benge is being used; that the operator of the oracle is ritually unclean; that the oracle is being itself influenced by witchcraft or sorcery; or it may be that the oracle is showing that the question cannot be answered straightforwardly in its present form.

say that God spontaneously creates creatures through divine miracles. I want to say that:

... the miraculously created birds do not understand the meaning of the words they speak; but apparently they have a natural sensitivity for similarity of sounds. Therefore if, while reeling off the automatic phrases, they perceive either in the vibrations of my own nerves (my thoughts) or in speech of people around me, words which sound the same or similar to their own phrases, they apparently experience surprise and in a way fall for the similarity in sound; in other words the surprise makes them forget the rest of their mechanical phrases and they suddenly pass over into genuine feeling.

When someone converts to a new set of certainties, they are not convinced by arguments that they should change - their eyes are opened to a different way of seeing. After conversion new things exist, value judgements change, objects become beautiful and moving in ways that could not have been imagined before.

Certainties structure our world. If I see the world as the back of an enormous crocodile and you see the earth as a spinning sphere in a vast expanding universe, then the aspects that we are inhabiting are very different. If I am the next incarnation of Christ and you are just an ordinary human being it will be impossible for us to reach agreement, or even to effectively communicate, about certain matters.

When we encounter people we soon pick up on the kinds of valuations and judgements that they are inclined to make: whether they would be shocked if we made love in public, whether they are generous or what, whether they hate queers or not.

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Within each culture there is broad agreement about certainties.\textsuperscript{24} However there are local divergences. Some people are certain that all men are bastards, others think them kinder than women. Some people are convinced that preservation of the environment should be the highest cultural priority; others simply don’t give a damn.

These differences are more accentuated between cultures. Some cultures believe in complicated pantheons of gods; others have faith in strange systems of intangible particles. The justifications and confirmations of these beliefs also vary widely between cultures.

Differences between certainty frameworks are not connected to language differences. Two people with the same language can have different frameworks of certainties. In our own English speaking culture many people are certain that the movement of the stars has a tangible effect upon their lives and offer a whole system of evidence to support this.

Whilst there are clear differences between the frameworks of certainties that people inhabit, there will probably be a limit to the divergences that can arise between people who speak the same language. Furthermore, any people who speak a language may share certainties that are common to all people with the human form of life.

I want to say that there is one true and living God. I want to say that this God is the Creator and Lord of heaven and earth, that He is almighty, everlasting, immeasurable, unfathomable, infinite in understanding, will and every perfection. I

want to say that the world was created six thousand years ago by Him. I want to say that Jesus Christ was his only Son. I want to say that Christ was conceived by the Holy Ghost and born of the Virgin Mary. I want to say that He descended into hell and rose from the dead on the third day. I want to say that:

I likewise profess, that in the Mass there is offered to God a true, proper, and propitiatory Sacrifice for the living and the dead. And that in the most holy sacrament of the Eucharist, there is truly, really, and substantially the Body and Blood, together with the Soul and Divinity of our Lord Jesus Christ, and that there is made a conversion of the whole substance of the bread into the Body, and of the whole substance of the wine into the Blood; which conversion the Catholic Church calls Transubstantiation.²⁵

**Epistemes**

... what I am attempting to bring to light is the epistemological field, the *episteme* in which knowledge, envisaged apart from all criteria having reference to its rational value or to its objective forms, grounds its positivity and thereby manifests a history which is not that of its growing perfection, but rather that of its conditions of possibility; in this account, what should appear are those configurations within the *space* of knowledge which have given rise to the diverse forms of empirical science.²⁶

...what I perceive in the dawning of an aspect is not a property of the object, but an internal relation between it and other objects.²⁷

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²⁴ ‘Madness’ is a category reserved for those who do not participate in this agreement.
The idea that different aspects can manifest different theoretical structures is demonstrated concretely by Foucault’s archaeological investigations into epistemes.  

An episteme is an invisible network that guides the philosophy, art, and science of a period (if these disciplines exist within it). It defines which objects are similar to which and the theories by which they can be related. Certain problems can be posed within an episteme and other problems simply do not exist. In the Classical period ‘representation’ defined a field within which analyses of wealth, general grammar, and natural history became possible. Our current episteme sets out a space haunted by the dark spectres of collapsing systems, relativism, and nihilistic despair.

In The Order of Things, Foucault describes two major shifts in the Western episteme over the last few hundred years. Beginning with the sixteenth century’s system of similitudes, he moves through the Classical age - characterised by its relationship to order - to our modern age infused with notions of man, life, labour, and history. Foucault deals with the epistemes of each of these periods in great detail, bringing out with great subtlety both the mutual reinforcement of 2* Although Foucault’s notion of the episteme is broadly similar to Wittgenstein’s river bed of certainties, there are a number of differences. To begin with, there is the way in which they illustrate the possibility of different certainties or epistemes. Wittgenstein’s examples are generally very ordinary situations that have been made bizarre by strange ways in which they could be different: “I cannot say that I have good grounds for the opinion that cats do not grow on trees” [On Certainty, remark 282]. He does not describe tribes who actually believe that cats grow on trees, and he does not even make a good case for the possibility that a human being could become certain about this. On the other hand, Foucault’s examples are much more rigorous and complete (to the extent that they constitute the majority of his work). He uses detailed studies of epistemes to make a historical, rather than a philosophical case for the claim that there could and have been epistemes different from our own. If Foucault’s interpretation of sixteenth century and Classical thought is accurate, we are forced to accept the fact that there have been radical ruptures in the epistemes that have constituted Western thought. This wealth of detail in Foucault makes him an ideal complement to Wittgenstein. Foucault’s histories demonstrate real ways in which aspects have been different, real tectonic shifts in the bedrock of certainties over the last four hundred years.

Connected with the level of detail in these two authors is the range over which their analyses can be applied. Foucault’s studies are generally confined to fairly narrow subject areas, such as medicine, sexuality, and punishment. Although these areas are connected with everyday life, there is a lot within everyday life which has remained unchanged throughout the epistemic shifts that Foucault describes. In every Western episteme people have been certain that they have two hands, that they were smaller when they were younger and that they have never strayed far from the surface of the earth.
their parts and the tensions between them which lead to continuous compensatory movements. To give a sense of the way in which epistemes differ I will give a very brief outline of the sixteenth century and Classical epistemes (with the proviso that this crude summary will inevitably fall a long way short of the complexity and detail that Foucault presents in *The Order of Things*).³

The sixteenth-century episteme was organised around resemblance:

Up to the end of the sixteenth century, resemblance played a constructive role in the knowledge of Western culture. It was resemblance that largely guided exegesis and the interpretation of texts; it was resemblance that organised the play of symbols, made possible knowledge of things visible and invisible, and controlled the art of representing them. The universe was folded in upon itself: the earth echoing the sky, faces seeing themselves reflected in the stars, and plants holding within their stems the secrets that were of use to man.²⁸

In this episteme each part of the world echoed all Wittgenstein’s emphasis on beliefs that are more prevalent in the human form of life leads him to discuss certainties that are more resistant to change (and takes him into surrealism when he suggests alternatives).

A final difference between epistemes and certainties is the way in which they change. Wittgenstein describes a gradual shift in the riverbed of thought, whereas Foucault speaks about discontinuous ruptures in which one episteme is abandoned and another forms in its place.

³ I decided to use Foucault’s notion of the episteme to illustrate the possibility of aspects with different conceptual structures both because Foucault’s examples are extremely detailed, and because they are all taken from our own culture and articulated using roughly the same language. However, I could have made the same points using Kuhn’s theories about stable and revolutionary science, Winch’s discussions of primitive societies, or Körner’s theories of categorial frameworks. For example, Körner’s notion of the categorial framework has a lot in common with Foucault’s episteme:

The manner in which a person classifies the objects of his experience into highest classes or categories, the standards of intelligibility which he applies, and the metaphysical beliefs which he holds are intimately related. To give an obvious example, the employment of the category of causally determined events, the demand that all or some explanations be causal, and the belief that nature is at least a partially deterministic system so involve each other that they are either all present in a person’s thinking or else all absent from it.


All of these thinkers could be said to

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²⁸ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, p. 17.
of the others in a network of similitudes that extended throughout the entire universe. This network had four principle figures: *convenientia*, *aemulatio*, *analogy*, and *sympathies*. *Convenientia* is a resemblance associated with the physical proximity of things. It has two components: Firstly, nature puts similar things in the same location and so things which are naturally found together resemble one another. Secondly, two things that are placed together influence one another and so further resemblance arises between them. Nature made the soul dense and heavy so that she could place it in the heart of matter. However, once the soul is in place it starts to pick up the body’s movements. *Aemulatio* is a form of resemblance that operates from greater distances. The bright colours of flowers emulate the stars in the sky. *Analogy* is a resemblance between relationships: “the relation of the stars to the sky in which they shine may also be found: between plants and the earth, between living beings and the globe they inhabit, between minerals such as diamonds and the rocks in which they are endorse some version of the theory that more than one conceptual scheme is possible. However, the conceptual schemes that they discuss are not as different from our own as those that can arise through a different reality partitioning or a radically different language. Their conceptual schemes all take everyday objects such as cacti, cattle, and ranches for granted, and suggest that there is more than one way to theorise about them. All of the schemers in their schemes use *hands* to *pour whiskey* and *mouths* to *drink it*.

Although this relatively mild form of conceptual scheming escapes many of the objections that are made to more radical versions, there are still problems. These centre around the question of what exactly a conceptual scheme is. The clearest and least problematic definition of a conceptual scheme is that it is a descriptive tool that we use to describe different organisations of knowledge. When we look at different peoples and periods, we use ‘paradigm’, ‘conceptual scheme’ or ‘episteme’ to describe the different ways in which they articulate their world. These terms are used to *summarise the fact that their knowledge is different* – they are not used to label a thing, gene etc. that might explain this difference. This use of ‘conceptual scheme’, etc. is purely descriptive; it has no explanatory function at all.

Problems with conceptual schemes start to arise when they cease to be descriptive tools and become metaphysical realities that actively slice up things and determine people’s scientific investigations. Conceptual schemes become something in the mind, language or brain that unconsciously forges experience from a noumenal and unknowable reality. Unsurprisingly, this metaphysical picture is found objectionable by many people. Although Foucault does speak about epistemes *determining* the thought of an era, his central project in *The Order of Things* avoids these problems by limiting itself to a *description* of the different epistemes that are present in different
Sympathy is an active principle that draws things together and mingles and assimilates them to one another. Fire is drawn up into the air, but as it moves up it cools down, mixes with the air, and loses its fiery quality. This mingling and assimilation is compensated for by antipathy which maintains the isolation of things and keeps them in tension and opposition. This sympathy-antipathy pair is more fundamental than the other three forms of similitude because it is responsible for all movement and dispersion.

The next important part of this episteme is the recognition of similitudes: “In order that we may know that aconite will cure our eye disease, or that ground walnut mixed with wine will ease a headache, there must of course be some mark that will make us aware of these things ... These buried similitudes must be indicated on the surface of things; there must be visible marks for the invisible analogies.”  

Similitudes can be recognised by their signature; each thing displays a sign that indicates what it resembles. The sympathy between aconite and our eyes is displayed in the similar appearance of the eye and aconite’s seeds. Aconite and the eye have analogous relationships between their parts and so there is sympathy between them. Analogy

29 Ibid., p. 21.
provides the signature for sympathy - one similitude acts as the sign for another. It turns out that the signatures for the other similitudes work in this way as well - each similitude is also a signature by which another similitude can be recognised. However, the same resemblance is never used twice; different resemblances are used for the signature and what it is a signature of. The sign of sympathy depends on analogy, the sign of an analogy resides in emulation, the sign of emulation depends on convenience, and convenience in turn requires sympathy for its recognition. The sixteenth-century episteme starts off with a system of resemblances, invokes signatures to explain how we come to recognise these resemblances, and then invokes resemblances again to explain the signatures:

And so the circle is closed. Though it is apparent what a complicated system of duplications was necessary to achieve this. Resemblances require a signature, for none of them would ever become observable were it not legibly marked. But what are these signs? ... What form constitutes a sign and endows it with its particular value as a sign? - Resemblance does. It signifies exactly in so far as it resembles what it is indicating (that is, a similitude). But what it indicates is not the homology; for its distinct existence as a signature would then be indistinguishable from the face of which it is the sign; it is another resemblance, an adjacent similitude, one of another type which enables us to recognize the first, and which is revealed in its turn by a third.31

In the Classical episteme this vast web of resemblances is replaced by representation which orders things according to their identities and differences. Representation analyses things by dividing them up into units or by comparing their level of complexity. The results of this analysis are displayed in an ordered table. The tool for this procedure is the sign. In the Renaissance, signs were part of the world and their similitude with the world enabled

31 Ibid., pp. 28-9.
them to represent it. In the Classical period signs became detached from what they signified; they became a transparent and neutral medium in which truth could be revealed:

The simultaneously endless and closed, full and tautological world of resemblance now finds itself dissociated and, as it were, split down the middle: on the one side, we shall find the signs that have become tools of analysis, marks of identity and difference, principles whereby things can be reduced to order, keys for a taxonomy; and, on the other, the empirical and murmuring resemblance of things, that unreacting similitude that lies beneath thought and furnishes the infinite raw material for division and distributions.

Although signs arose through the animal cries that give them birth, once they detached themselves from this origin they became entirely arbitrary conventions created and sustained by men.

In the Classical episteme the ordering of things was subdivided into *mathesis* and *taxinomia*. *Mathesis* is the ordering of simple natures using algebra; *taxinomia* is the ordering of complex natures using a system of signs. Both *mathesis* and *taxinomia* can be reduced to each other. Linked up with these is a *genesis* which explains the dependence of Order upon a resemblance situated at the margins of knowledge.

We can only compare things according to their

4* It is worth mentioning a couple of difficulties that are encountered by Foucault’s project in *The Order of Things*. To begin with, there is the problem that epistemes are largely unconscious networks, and so their central features are not apparent to the people within them. This lack of self-awareness forces Foucault to develop an external language to describe each episteme. This leads to the question of how much of the difference between epistemes is a product of Foucault’s vocabulary, and how much is due to their different organisation of thinking. It might be possible to decide this by looking at the sources that Foucault draws on to see if his interpretation is historically convincing. On the other hand, the degree to which Foucault has created what he is claiming to describe may not be that important here. Even if Foucault’s epistemes are not historically accurate, they are still aspects that we can inhabit. The historical reality of the epistemes that he

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32 This is not strictly true of the Renaissance interpretation of language. Originally language did resemble things when it was given by God to men. After Babel this transparency was lost and now only Hebrew retains a trace of this original similitude.

33 Ibid., pp. 57-8.
identities and differences because an underlying similitude makes them comparable. This similitude manifests itself through the imagination. The imagination compares past impressions to present ones, moves from one impression to another, analyses impressions into simple elements, combines them with similar impressions, and lays them out in an ordered table: 4

In any case, the Classical episteme can be defined in its most general arrangement in terms of the articulated system of a mathesis, a taxinomia, and a genetic analysis. The sciences always carry within themselves the project, however remote it may be, of an exhaustive ordering of the world; they are always directed, too, towards the discovery of simple elements and their progressive combination; and at their centre they form a table on which knowledge is displayed in a system contemporary with itself. The centre of knowledge, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, is the table. As for the great controversies that occupied men’s minds, these are accommodated quite naturally in the folds of this organization. 34

What can be seen in both the sixteenth-

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34 Ibid., pp. 74-5.
century and Classical epistemés is the way in which all of their components depend upon each other and work together. In resemblance the four similitudes act as signatures for one other. In representation mathesis, taxinomia and genesis are not separate domains but “a solid grid of kinships that defines the general configuration of knowledge”. This interdependence of the parts of an episteme makes it difficult to directly compare concepts from different epistemés. Two similar concepts in two different epistemés will have different relationships with the rest of the theoretical structures that they are situated in; making it difficult to say whether they are really similar at all. Both the sixteenth century and the Classical period made use of resemblance, but in the former, resemblance was the only form of knowledge - the resemblance between things was all there was to know - whereas in the latter, resemblance was something marginal to knowledge which made it possible.

Why spend so much effort constructing an orthogonal theory when detachment undermines any claim to meaning or seriousness that theory might have? On the other hand, if Foucault’s theory is merely one more permutation of serious discourse governed by new rules that have not yet been formulated, it also hardly seems worth the prodigious labor required to write it and read it.

Dreyfus and Rabinow interpret these tensions within Foucault’s project as signs that he is still trapped within the modern episteme. According to Foucault this episteme is characterised by three doublets: the empirico-transcendental doublet, the cogito-unthought doublet, and the retreat and return of the origin. According to Dreyfus and Rabinow, the tensions within Foucault’s theory of epistemés manifest the first two of these doublets in a modified form: “the move from description to prescription, from regularities to regulation, from empirical analysis to archaeological analytic, in short the claim to have discovered a “historical a priori,” bears a more than superficial resemblance to what Foucault calls in his chapter on the anthropological sleep, the “Fold [in which] the transcendent function is doubled over so that it covers with its dominating network the inert, grey space of empiricity …”(OT 341).” [Ibid., p. 93]. Despite his tentatively expressed hope that we are beginning to escape from Man, Foucault remains caught within many of his problems. His attempt to gaze at discourses from a sovereign point of view that enslaves itself within the discourses that it is describing is a typically modern problematic. Foucault perhaps only

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36 Something close to this point was made by Dreyfus and Rabinow in Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics:

The archaeologist finds that his elements (statements) are not only individuated by the whole system of statements, but that they can be identified as elements only in the specific system in which they make sense. Thus, although speech acts for Foucault as well as for Searle have some sort of fixed “information
What also emerges from Foucault’s studies is the way in which knowledge completely regroups itself at different times. One set of difficulties and preoccupations guides people’s thought for a while and then everything changes. Old problems are discarded along with their solutions and a new field opens up. In one period people are concerned with the similitudes between man and nature, God and nature, and man and God; in another period they are attempting to order natural history, general grammar and wealth into a table. The subject matter of each period is different; there is not a gradual development of a single science over time. Knowledge is guided by one configuration for a while, there is a rupture, it is guided by another configuration for a while, there is a rupture, and so on. The epistemé changes, but this is not a change that assimilates the past and learns from it. It is a change that is scarcely able to think how the past was.

I will not attempt to defend Foucault against these charges since they seem to me to be substantially correct. The question here is whether these methodological tensions and collapses are problems that could be avoided by recourse to another method, or whether they are features of a discourse that is both highly self-reflexive and which eliminates the sovereign subject. Dreyfus and Rabinow take their deconstruction of Foucault to indicate the need for another method (one which takes account of non-discursive practices); but this leaves a number of questions unanswered. Is a theory wrong because it is a child of its time? Are theories only correct if they have, as their explicit or implicit conclusion, man as the sovereign free knower of reality? Can the world be understood without anybody there to understand it? Could there be an archaeology that finishes after collapsing both modernity and itself – an archaeology that was not self perpetuating? These questions need to be addressed before Foucault is dismissed on the grounds that he is a product of his epistemé, or because he makes his own theory meaningless. We need to be clear about the kinds of theories that are possible and impossible; we need to make the value judgements that we bring to bear upon collapsing theories explicit; we need to be aware of the effect that a rejection of collapsing theories has upon other theories. Until some of these areas are clarified it is not enough to say that Foucault cannot speak within the theory that he has created; not enough to say that his own position is a product of the episteme that he is in. By themselves, these points are not arguments against Foucault’s method but observations about it.

A second problem with Dreyfus and Rabinow’s criticism is that their deconstruction of Foucault can just as easily

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content” or “sentence meaning,” whether or not two speech acts mean the same thing (that is, determine the same truth conditions) depends not merely upon the words that determine their information content but upon the context in which they appear.

Thus the real situation is quite different from the one visualized by the naïve empiricist, or the believer in inductive logic. He thinks that we begin by collecting and arranging our experiences, and so ascend the ladder of science. Or, to use a more formal mode of speech, that if we wish to build up a science, we have first to collect protocol sentences. But if I am ordered: ‘Record what you are now experiencing’ I shall hardly know how to obey this ambiguous order. Am I to report that I am writing; that I hear a bell ringing; a newsboy shouting; a loudspeaker droning; or am I to report, perhaps, that these noises irritate me? And even if the order could be obeyed: however rich a collection of statements might be assembled in this way, it could never add up to a science. A science needs a point of view, and theoretical problems.  

What Foucault is doing is opening up an aspect. Within this aspect all discourse, including his own and that of his critics, is the product of an epistem e and perhaps fairly ‘meaningless’ as a result. This aspect collapses because it eliminates its description of itself. Outside of Foucault’s aspect there are aspects that reject epistem es because they are wrong. There are also aspects that reject archaeology because of its methodological problems. We are either within the picture of epistemes or we are outside of it. Within it, we cannot criticise Foucault because our criticism has the same status as his account (both are manifestations of our current episteme). Outside of it, a criticism of Foucault has already been accomplished.

Polymorphous Reality Blobs

One kind of aspect might be called ‘aspects of organization’. When the aspect changes parts of the picture go together which before did not.

I emerged from the thicket, and a mushroom stood poised in the clearing before me: Velar remnants, cap, crowded gills, stem, ring, stem, and a basal bulb half submerged in the moist autumn earth.

This mushroom was a distinct object that I separated out within the general field of

the clearing. If I had been more interested in squirrels, I would not have seen it at all; it would have formed part of the general background to the squirrels that I was observing.

The mushroom has parts. The velar remnants, cap, gills, stem, ring and bulb can be made to stand out against the general background of the mushroom. When I focus on the gills, they become a distinct object for me and I cease to be consciously aware of the basal bulb and cap.

The divisions between the parts of an object can be nested or they can overlap. One part can be broken down into smaller parts or different overlapping divisions can be made. The mushroom can be divided into spore bearing parts and supporting tissues; it can also be divided into top and bottom.

Through the microscope another field of partitions opens up: divisions of the mushroom’s flesh into hyphae, spores, and all the structures within them. At higher magnifications further fields are revealed.

When I emerged from the thicket a mushroom stood poised in the clearing before me: A physically separate mushroom; similar to other mushrooms and yet distinct from them.

The presence of a mushroom is also a form of partitioning. Not because the mushroom is distinct from its forest backdrop, but because we separate it out from the millions of other mushrooms that bear its likeness.

I could have said that there was some mushroom in the clearing - that a portion of the totality of mushroom stood before me. Instead I separated the mushroom in the clearing from all other mushrooms; I partitioned the totality of mushroom into physically distinct objects. Mushroom became millions of mushrooms with parts that have many similarities between them.
This distinction between the totality of mushroom and physically distinct mushrooms is described by Quine as a distinction between mass and general terms:

The contrast lies in the terms and not in the stuff they name. It is not a question of scatter. Water is scattered in discrete pools and glassfuls, and red in discrete objects; still it is just ‘pool’, ‘glassful’, and ‘object’, not ‘water’ or ‘red’, that divide their reference. Or, consider ‘shoe’, ‘pair of shoes’, and ‘footwear’: all three range over exactly the same scattered stuff, and differ from one another solely in that two of them divide their reference differently and the third not at all.

So-called mass terms like ‘water’, ‘footwear’, and ‘red’ have the semantical property of referring cumulatively: any sum of parts which are water is water. Grammatically they are like singular terms in resisting pluralization and articles. Semantically they are like singular terms in not dividing their reference ... But semantically they do not go along with singular terms ... in purporting to name a unique object each.39

Mass terms do not divide what they refer to; there is just a mass of what they name. We do not describe a lake as a water; we say that there is water in the lake. The truck does not have a red on it; it is a red truck, a truck with a portion of red upon it.40

Masses indefinitely extend and they have no internal parts. However, they are still partitioned from one another.41 Water can be distinguished from alcohol even though there are not any individual waters or alcohols.

When I emerged from the thicket a young mushroom stood poised in the clearing before me. A mushroom at an early stage in its development; a mushroom that the days had not dilapidated.

40 Although I have distinguished general from mass terms, they can be used interchangeably: I might ask for “two waters” in a restaurant, or suggest that we “go out on the water” when we are windsurfing. On the other hand, I might ask for “some lamb” at the butchers, or offer to put “some apple” in the salad.
Young mushrooms are plump, beautiful, and firm. Older mushrooms are yellowing-soggy and scarred by the rasps of slugs.

Physical objects persist through time and change over this period. We divide up the span of an object’s existence into stages. These divisions can be very crude - the seven ages of man - or they can be articulated more finely - the stages of infant development.

The different states of a physical object are similar to its stages, with the difference that stages generally progress in a linear fashion. A mushroom can be healthy or diseased, soggy or dry. Water can be frozen, liquid, or gaseous. Different collections of an object’s properties identify its distinct states.

Different stages of an object cannot be present together. An object cannot be both young and old at the same time; although some of its parts can be young and others old. The same is true of different states.

States are distinct from the object which is in the different states; but they can overlap with the properties that indicate the various states.

When I emerged from the thicket, part of the clearing was white, firm, crimson, fragile, soft, slightly rubbery, loose, aromatic, tasty.

Part of the clearing has properties that are not present in other parts. There is fragile softness twelve centimetres from the ground and seven metres from me. Some sticky crimson below this, some rubbery white firmness, and then some more fragile softness.

Some properties are overlaid - the ones from the different senses - others cannot coexist in the same physical location. Aromatic and fragile can be co-present whereas red and blue cannot. When I am focusing upon one property, the others form a general diffuse

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They can also be measured, and they can be divided into internal parts at radically different scales.

This is true within each aspect. Different aspects that speak about the same object may attribute different stages to it.
Properties can be indefinitely divided: We separate out different colours and make fine distinctions between different shades of the same colour. Temperatures can be measured to fractions of a degree. We have numerous words and tests for different amounts of hardness.

At higher resolutions we encounter different properties within the mushroom - the viscosity of the fluids within the hyphae, the elastic rigidity of the spores. Further magnifications reveal the properties of molecules, atoms, electrons, and quarks.

This is a rough outline of the various ways in which reality is partitioned into objects, parts, stages, states, and properties. Within each of these partitionings there is considerable variation in the partitions that can be brought about. 5*

To begin with, the objects that we are accustomed to can be joined together, split into smaller objects, or the divisions between them can be horizontally displaced. In our culture we separate living biological creatures from inanimate objects; but there are aspects in which animals and things are amalgamated into single objects:

The chair-floor-dog is a ‘creature’ composed of a chair, a floor, and a dog. In many ways its structure rests half way between amoebic and hydric. It attaches its fixed base to parallel

5* It could be objected that the idea of aspects partitioned differently from our own is very close to the conceptual scheme-content distinction criticised by Davidson:

Conceptual schemes, we are told, are ways of organizing experience; they are systems of categories that give form to the data of sensation


This impression is not dispelled by the use of terms like “partition”, “segmentation”, and “division” which all imply a distinction between a divisor and something else that is divided.

The main reason why I settled on these terms, in spite of their dubious metaphysical connotations, is that an aspect with a different partitioning appears to us as the division or fusion of the partitions within our own aspect. The chair-floor-dog amalgamates our objects and so it makes sense to call it an alternative partitioning of them. Terms like “partition”, “segmentation”, and “divide” are intended to express the fact that when we compare two aspects some of our objects, properties and states are divided, and others are joined. They
vertical features in its environment. From this it extends its furry proboscis to find food. The chair-floor-dog reproduces using elaborate eggs which it sends out from the main body. These eggs can either metamorphose into entirely new chair-floor-dogs or they can utilise the carcass of a dead chair-floor-dog for their development. The eggs survive for up to eighty years without hatching but an individual chair-floor-dog will generally only live for around fifteen years; after which its furry proboscis becomes exhausted and disintegrates.

Chair-floor-dogs, wave-particles, lobster-telephones, and lemon-screams; there is no limit to the wild and unusual objects that can be invented by redistributing the divisions between things. Masses and properties can also be divided along lines that are finer, coarser, or superimposed upon our own. The Navahoe split our black into two colours and lump blue and green together.⁴³ Beyond this, there are aspects whose colours are based entirely on the electromagnetic spectrum – colours individuated using a mathematical division of shades that is independent of the cells in the human retina.

Secondly, the boundary between objects and masses can be moved in either direction.

⁴³ This was mentioned by Max Black in his essay ‘Linguistic Relativity: The Views of Benjamin Lee Whorf’,
Objects that can be individually recognised, and physically handled are usually collected together under general terms. Objects without these attributes are described using mass terms. We can pick up and recognise individual apples and so we differentiate the totality of apple into individual specimens. Different waters lack stable boundaries and a fixed independent existence and so we treat water as a mass term. These practical considerations have limited the partitioning of mass terms within the human form of life. However, there is nothing necessary about the balance between general terms and mass terms that our society uses. Objects can be treated as masses or masses can be treated as aggregates of physically distinct objects. If objects become masses, the world changes into a collection of masses that have different properties but no physically distinct objects within them. There is apple, tree and mama; but no individual apples, trees or mamas. According to Quine, our early experience of the world was structured in this way:

We in our maturity have come to look upon the child’s mother as an integral body who, in an irregular closed orbit, revisits the child from time to time; and to look upon red in a radically different way, viz., as scattered about. Water, for us, is rather like red, but not quite; things are red, stuff alone is water. But the mother, red, and water are for the infant all of a type; each is just a history of sporadic encounter, a scattered portion of what goes on. His first learning the three words is uniformly a matter of learning how much of what goes on around him counts as the mother, or as red, or as water. It is not for the child to say in the first case ‘Hello! mama again’, in the second case ‘Hello! another red thing’, and in the third case ‘Hello! more water’. They are all on a par: Hello! more mama, more red, more water.44

On the other hand, mass terms can be eliminated altogether by slicing them up into multiplicities of individual objects. A beach has a sand upon it; there is a water on the ground and a grass in the park.

*Philosophical Review*, 68, p. 231.
The boundary between states and objects is also volatile. At one extreme, all objects can be treated as different states of a single mass of matter (or energy) which extends throughout the entire universe. In the other direction, different states can be treated as different objects. We speak about a single person being born, growing old and dying, but we can imagine a culture that takes changes in the personality seriously and divides the different ages of a person into different people. They might even have special birth rituals at transitional ages and different names for the ‘person’ at different ages. Many existing tribes have initiations into adulthood that go some way towards this.

Although most properties are atemporal, there are some which include several changes within themselves.\textsuperscript{45} Goodman’s grue is a good example of such a property. According to our atemporal division of colours, a grue object starts off green and becomes blue after the year 2000. Within Goodman’s division, a grue object is grue before and after 2000. Before 2000 a tree by the lake is grue; after 2000 it changes into blueen. On the other hand, some grue jelly that I make before 2000 will continue to be grue after that date if I forget to keep it in the fridge. This way of partitioning colours could be based around a form of life. A culture that valued its bronze statues highly could use the single word “broween” to describe their colour. We would say that their statues change colour from brown to green; they would describe this ‘change’ as the maintenance of a single colour.

Finally, the distinction that we make between properties and physical objects can be altered. Although we speak about properties as if they were features of an objective world – “honey is sweet”, “the brick is hard”, etc. - they actually have more to do with the interaction between our bodies and physical objects. Properties are situated at the interface between bodies and things; they are objective features of things and they are the means by which we

\textsuperscript{44} W. V. O. Quine, \textit{Word and Object}, p. 92.

\textsuperscript{45} These changes can only appear as changes from the perspective of a different partitioning.
recognise and identify things. This position can be pushed in either direction. On the one hand, the things that we recognise through properties can be eliminated in favour of a Berkeleyan world in which there are only properties. On the other hand a scientific language can be created in which all properties are described as physical states of things. Rorty imagines something akin to this in his fantasy of an Antipodean language stripped of all reference to subjective minds:

In most respects, then, the language, life, technology, and philosophy of this race were much like ours. But there was one important difference. Neurology and biochemistry had been the first disciplines in which the technological breakthroughs had been achieved, and a large part of the conversation of these people concerned the state of their nerves. When their infants veered towards hot stoves, mothers cried out, “He’ll stimulate his c-fibers.” When people were given clever visual illusions to look at, they said, “How odd! It makes neuronic bundle G-14 quiver, but when I look at it from the side I can see that its not a red rectangle at all.” Their knowledge of physiology was such that each well formed sentence could easily be correlated with a readily identifiable neural state.46

All of these changes in partitions can have a profound impact upon our classification and theory. Objects that we previously grouped together fall into divergent categories; we need new analyses to understand new things. The attempt that I made to describe the chair-floor-dog using biology was inadequate because it failed to answer many of the questions that can usually be posed about a biological organism. The chair-floor-dog could be described using Newtonian mechanics, chemistry, or particle physics;47 but these also seem to miss something essential. What is needed is a description of the chair-floor-dog that is

47 These disciplines also express a partitioning which is vulnerable to variation. There is nothing necessary about the isolation of atoms and molecules as individual entities. If these partitions were overridden, a new mathematics and physics might result.
adequate to its reality as a chair-floor-dog; a description that does not artificially squeeze it into the categories of our current sciences. Such a description might need to create a new terminology, and at first glance it might be wholly unintelligible. A whole new way of seeing arises once reality is partitioned in a different way; new languages and laws need to be formulated to adequately express each vision.

**Languages**

At any rate it is important to imagine a language in which *our* concept 'knowledge' does not exist.\(^{48}\)

We inhabit aspects suffused with language. Our sensual encounters with the world are inevitably interpenetrated by the streams of words that flow around our minds and through our mouths. We see someone and they become the evaluative judgements that pop into our heads about them; we walk down the street and flip out into unreal worlds constituted by imaginings and internal dialogues. Languages are a second world superimposed on and intertwined with the physical and emotional worlds. Words are traced in the sky, trapped beneath stones, and smeared across the faces of the people we love. A storybook world in which the word is flesh and dwells amongst us.

Different languages open up different metaphysical worlds; different languages are played with different rules; different languages have different sounds, textures, and rhythms.\(^{49}\)

In the limits to which it is possible, or at least *appears* possible, translation practices the difference

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\(^{49}\) The aspect differences that I will be discussing in this section depend upon the theories of language that I am using. Different theories of language would lead to different differences between aspects - or perhaps to no differences at all.
between signified and signifier. But, if this difference is never pure, no more so is translation, and for the
notion of translation we would have to substitute a notion of transformation: a regulated transformation of
one language by another, of one text by another. We will never have, and in fact have never had, to do
with some “transport” of pure signifieds from one language to another, or within one and the same
language, that the signifying instrument would leave virgin and untouched.50

Language is often seen as a neutral tool that we use to speak about the world; a tool
that transparently reveals a subject matter distinct from it. However, according to Sapir and
Whorf,51 the world that is expressed by language is at least partially its product. Language
may be a tool that reveals the world; but the world that it unearths is shaped by it:

... the background linguistic system (in other words the grammar) of each language is not merely a
reproducing instrument for voicing ideas but rather is itself the shaper of ideas, the program and guide for
the individual’s mental activity, for his analysis of impressions, for his synthesis of his mental stock in
trade. Formulation of ideas is not an independent process, strictly rational in the old sense, but is part of a
particular grammar, and differs, from slightly to greatly, between different grammars. We dissect nature
along lines laid down by our native languages. ... We cut nature up, organise it into concepts, and ascribe
significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organise it in this way - an
agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language.
The agreement is, of course, an implicit and unstated one, BUT ITS TERMS ARE ABSOLUTELY OBLIGATORY;
we cannot talk at all except by subscribing to the organization and classification of data which the
agreement decrees.52

Different people inhabit different metaphysical worlds because of the language that they
speak. In English a swamp is an object like a house or a butterfly; a thing with individual

51 Saussure also makes our thought about the world dependent upon our language.
52 Benjamin Lee Whorf, Language, Thought, and Reality, edited by John B. Carroll (Massachusetts: The
separation, singularity, etc.. In Shawnee a swamp is more like a backdrop to an area:

In Shawnee we have to forget the English type of lexation and fall back on the perceptual situation. The referent of our preposition ‘among’ becomes actually the part of the picture with the most quality of outline - a limited, defined spot in the midst of an indefinite field - which is a field of swampiness. The picture is, as it were, rough sketched by placing first the figural element laa- ‘midst of area’ followed by its ground or setting tepki ‘swampy terrain,’ > laa tepki (f-xf) ‘(spot) among the swamps, in the swamp’ 53

English people experience swamps as objects in places - “there is a swamp beside our house” - Shawnee people experience swamps as the context for places - the areas beside their houses are set in swamp.

A second example of an aspect opened out by language is the Hopi experience of time:

Our own “time” differs markedly from Hopi “duration.” It is conceived as like a space of strictly limited dimensions, or sometimes like a motion upon such a space, and employed as an intellectual tool accordingly. Hopi “duration” seems to be inconceivable in terms of space or motion, being the mode in which life differs from form, and consciousness in toto from the spatial elements of consciousness. Certain ideas from our own time-concept, such as that of absolute simultaneity, would be either very difficult to express or impossible and devoid of meaning under the Hopi conception, and would be replaced by operational concepts. 54

English speakers live in a continuum of mathematically measurable space and time. Hopi speakers divide reality into two realms; the objective or manifested, and the subjective or

53 Ibid., p. 168.
54 Ibid., p. 158.
manifesting. The manifested is everything that has been or is being accessed by the senses - everything that we describe as the present and past physical universe. The manifesting roughly combines what we call the future with everything that we attribute to the mind; it is the coming-to-be-of-reality lying within things: “the realm of expectancy, of desire and purpose, of vitalising life, of efficient causes, of thought thinking itself out from an inner realm (the Hopian HEART) into manifestation”.\textsuperscript{55} This manifesting is not something that \textit{will} arrive at us from a distant point in time; it is ‘\textit{already}’ within things. Furthermore, it is not only ‘present’ within humans - it is ‘present’ within animals, plants and things as well as people. In Hopi neither the manifesting nor the manifested are described using the physical and spatial metaphors that we use to speak about time. Hopi can speak about nonspatial ‘items’ without ‘bringing in’ terminology from other ‘areas’:

Use of space terms when there is no space involved is NOT THERE—as if on it had been laid the taboo teetotal! The reason is clear when we know that Hopi has abundant conjugational and lexical means of expressing duration, intensity and tendency directly as such, and that major grammatical patterns do not, as with us, provide analogies for an imaginary space. The many verb “aspects” express duration and tendency of manifestations, while some of the “voices” express intensity, tendency, and duration of causes or forces producing manifestations. Then a special part of speech, the “tensors”, a huge class of words, denotes only intensity, tendency, duration, and sequence.\textsuperscript{56}

A more local example of language affecting our reality is the different loves that are possible in English and Spanish. Spanish has two verbs for love: "amar" and "querer". The former is an intense eternal undying love, the latter is a more familial neighbourly kind of love. For Spanish speakers there is a clear distinction between the two; they identify distinct emotional states. I querer my family, husband and friends all the time, but I amar someone

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., p. 60.
only in exceptional circumstances (a Mexican woman will only say “Te amo” when her soul trembles). Both of these words are translated into English as “love”. The English speaker has no idea that two types of love are possible; for him there is just a single love continuum with varying degrees of intensity. The English “I love you” serves both Christian and romantic purposes.

These metaphysical differences between languages would be of merely philosophical interest were it not for the fact that our language is our world. We do not just speak a language in which a metaphysics is embodied; we experience the metaphysics of our language as our reality:

the “real world” is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group. ... We see and hear and otherwise experience largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation.

Within a different language we see things in a different way; a different language opens up a different aspect. The Hopi speaker has never experienced spatialised time; for him reality is manifesting or it is manifested. The English speaker has no idea that manifesting lies within things; instead, he patiently waits for things to arrive from a fixed point in the future. Spanish speakers amar some people and querer others. English speakers love their neighbours in the same way that they love the person who touches them in the innermost depths of their being.

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56 Ibid., p. 146.
57 The ancient Greeks had three words for love: eros (erotic feeling), philein (friendship or fellow-feeling) and agape (total dedication) - see John Hospers, Introduction to Philosophical Analysis, Fourth Edition (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 260. I am also told by a Mexican friend that speakers of Spanish are not conscious. The Spanish translation of consciousness is “conciencia” which lacks the clear distinction between conscience and consciousness that exists for the English speaker.
Although Whorf's claims are bold, there is a great deal of plausibility to them. No doubt people would find them even more plausible if they were familiar with Hopi and had experienced the problem of translating Hopi into English. Without a direct knowledge of Hopi or Shawnee it is very easy to criticise Whorf and miss the difficulty of an interlaced system of concepts which cannot be translated without contaminating them with a host of Western metaphysical assumptions.

However Whorf does face a number of objections. To begin with, his move from language to reality is extremely problematic. The fact that I speak one way does not necessarily mean that I experience the world in that way. For me “breakfast” is just the name of a meal; although I am breaking a fast this is not a central element in my experience of my morning meal. Although the grammar and vocabulary of Hopi may suggest a metaphysics very different from our own, it could be using metaphysically contaminated terms (according to us) to describe the same world as ourselves. “Break-fast” and “petit-dejeuner” (little lunch) could just be different sounds that English and French speakers use to describe the same meal. Hopi and English speakers may be words rather than worlds apart.

This objection is substantiated by the fact that it is possible to formulate many different metaphysical systems in a single language. Even if Hopi speakers have a different metaphysics, it is not necessarily a product of their language. As Max Black points out: “Languages that Hume and Hegel could use with equal fluency can hardly embody a unique philosophy” [Max Black, ‘Linguistic Relativity: The Views of Benjamin Lee Whorf’, Philosophical Review, 68, p. 236]. Furthermore, Whorf makes his point by translating the Hopi metaphysics into English. If the Hopi notion of time can be expressed in English, it can scarcely be a product of the Hopi grammar. Whorf can only prove his claim that language shapes reality by failing to adequately translate the languages that he uses to evidence this claim.

In Whorf’s defence it could be argued that he does not claim to adequately translate Hopi into English:

In order to describe the structure of the universe according to the Hopi, it is necessary to attempt—insofar as it is possible—to make explicit this
the components, this looser organisation defines
the larger structures that can be brought into play
at any point in the conversation. 59 “I’m fine thank
you.” and “Well, I’m a bit rough today!” are
acceptable responses to the phrase: “Good
morning. How are you?”; but “The toast is on the
table” and “The fish wraps the sheet around the
angel’s cog” are not. A network of social norms
sets out a field of sense for any particular
conversational context. 60

I shall also call the whole, consisting of language and
the actions into which it is woven, the “language
game”. 61

At all levels language is structured by rules that
shape the flows of words and regulate which flows
are possible in any given context. One of the
easiest ways to understand this is through
Wittgenstein’s notion of a language-game. In a
game there are players, something that the game is
played with, and rules that define how the game is
metaphysics, properly describable only
in the Hopi language, by means of an
approximation expressed in our own
language, somewhat inadequately it is
too, yet by availing ourselves of such
concepts as we have worked up into
relative consonance with the system
underlying the Hopi view of the
universe.

[Benjamin Lee Whorf - Language,
Thought, and Reality, edited by
John B. Carroll; p. 58.]

Whorf’s knowledge of both languages
demonstrates to him that one cannot be
rendered into the other without gross
distortion. The self-evident inadequacy of
his translations vindicates what he is trying
to say. A second point in Whorf’s favour is
that many philosophers implicitly believe in
his position. Philosophers are acutely aware
of the metaphysical presuppositions of their
language and expend much effort creating
new terms or reappropriating old ones in the
hope that they can somehow escape from
them. In this context the suggestion that our
language guides our way of thinking is
pretty reasonable. Thirdly, even if Whorf’s
rather simplistic move from language to
reality is questionable, people’s inhabitation
of different metaphysical worlds is still very
real. Even if Hopi can be translated
perfectly, there remain substantial
differences between their view of the
universe and our own. Although this may be
a difference of certainties rather than of
grammars, there is still something
characteristic about the Hopi aspect.

A second problem Whorf faces is
Davidson’s claim that the very idea of a
conceptual scheme is inconceivable:

Neither a fixed stock of meanings,
nor a theory-neutral reality, can
provide, then, a ground for comparison
of conceptual schemes. It would be a
mistake to look further for such a
ground if by that we mean something
conceived as common to

59 Searle’s speech acts and Foucault’s statements are descriptions of this level of language.
60 The move from association to association is also part of this area beyond grammar. In one language a word
evokes a whole train of associations; moving along this path of associations in a different language may make
no sense at all.
to be played. Chess is played by two people using wooden pieces and a board; some of the pieces are allowed to move diagonally whilst others must advance one square at a time.

Language is played with spoken and written pieces; some of these pieces can be placed together whilst other combinations are nonsensical. We are only consciously aware of the rules of these games whilst we are learning them. Once we have mastered the rules, we cease to see them and focus upon the possibilities that lie within their frameworks. When I play chess I consider moves that lie within the space of the game – castling, checkmating, etc. - but I no longer worry about whether bishops should move horizontally or fret about the inability of pawns to jump over other

incommensurable schemes. In abandoning this search, we abandon the attempt to make sense of the metaphor of a single space within which each scheme has a position and provides a point of view.

[Donald Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, p. 195.]

Davidson demonstrates the inconceivability of conceptual schemes by criticising the notion that conceptual schemes (or language) somehow fit or organise a neutral reality. Conceptual schemes cannot organise reality because organisation can only be applied to a collection of objects within a common space. A closet cannot be organised unless it is first divided it up into clothes, shoes etc.; in the same way, reality cannot be organised unless it has already been partitioned up into objects. And if it has been partitioned up into our familiar objects, it makes little sense to say that the conceptual scheme organising it is radically different from our own:

The notion of organization applies only to pluralities. But whatever plurality we take experience to consist in—events like losing a button or stubbing a toe, having a sensation of warmth or hearing an oboe—we will have to individuate according to familiar principles. A language that organizes such entities must be a language very like our own.

[Ibid., p. 192.]

One difference between language-games and ordinary games is that language-games are played with absent as well as present pieces. A move in a language-game not only has to relate to the pieces that are in play at any point in time; it also has to be in harmony with the background field of statements that are legitimised by the language:

I say ‘A cheetah can outrun a man’: in so doing I indicate that my conception of a cheetah, or running, of outrunning, or a man and so forth all stand in certain specific relations. It is as though a cheetah, a man, running, outrunning and what can be are all different points in some conceptual field: in telling a hearer that a cheetah can outrun a man I offer him, as it were, a bit of a map of a portion of that field indicating certain relations between the indicated points. But if he is to understand what is said then it is up to him to read the map aright.


When we speak we assume a whole field of other statements which make the statement that we are using intelligible. A move in the language-game is only legitimate if it relates to this background field in the correct way.

This is only true of the second language-game that we learn. We learn our first language-game by a kind of blind imitation. The learning of language-games is itself a language-game.
The problem with Davidson’s argument is that it misses the large number of different ways in which we can organise the objects of our day to day experience. Different theories of time, space and matter can all be used to describe the day to day objects that the human form of life is familiar with. Furthermore, a language can create a new set of objects and organise them - it does not have to presuppose our ordinary partitions. I can organise the clothes in a closet or I can organise the button-sleeves in it.

Davidson criticises the idea that a conceptual scheme ‘fits’ reality by claiming that the notion of fitting is indistinguishable from the notion of truth. A sentence ‘fits reality’ only if what it says is true, and there is nothing beyond sentences - facts, reality, experience, etc. - that makes them true; nothing that they fit onto: “The sentence ‘My skin is warm’ is true if and only if my skin is warm. Here there is no reference to a fact, a world, an experience, or a piece of evidence” [Ibid., p. 194]. If all we mean by fitting is that a sentence is true, then when we say that a conceptual scheme fits reality, we are simply saying that it is true. This problematises the possibility that there could be conceptual schemes radically different from our own. Such schemes would have to be both true and untranslatable, and yet it is difficult to see how we could judge whether a conceptual scheme is true without being able to translate it. The possibility of largely true and untranslatable conceptual schemes is in principle unverifiable.

Although Whorf does make the claim that the Hopi language is largely true and untranslatable, Davidson’s argument does not do much to undermine his position. Since it does not make much sense to say that the majority of Hopi statements are false (we do not want to claim that the Hopi people have been systematically deluding themselves for hundreds of years), the issue turns on whether we can make sense of the idea that a significant proportion of a language could be untranslatable. One situation in which this would be the case is two languages that are set up to describe two different sets of objects. The sentence ‘My quoichet is red’ is true if and only if my quoichet is red; however, if there is no word in English for the object designated by “quoichet”, then the statement is not translatable. We can see that it is true because a speaker of the other language can

pieces. The rules of chess structure a field of action which becomes a complete world whilst I am playing it. Without these rules my opponent and I would just be messing around with a few pieces of wood; with these rules something clicks into place and a world opens up in which we can interact and participate. As we struggle to master a language-game we are constantly aware of the rules; ceaselessly worrying about whether we are following them or not. After a while we start to speak, we begin to naturally move within the language-game without being aware of it. Certain possibilities open out for us and others are automatically discarded. We learn to breathe in a different medium.

Chess is not the only game. Above the world opened up by the grammar of chess perch worlds structured by different rules, games played with different pieces. Beyond chess there are draughts, blackjack, cricket, cockfighting and all of the other games that human beings invent. Each game has its own structure; once this structure becomes transparent we find ourselves immersed in a different world.

English is not the only language. Beyond
our native tongue language-games guided by different words and grammars encamp. In England we drink red wine; the Spanish drink vino rojo. Beyond these milder variations lie language-games whose looser organisations are different: surreal language-games, abstract language-games, language-games as different as chess and cricket.

Although the grammar of natural human languages can vary considerably, their structural variations are limited by the fact that they are all based around the human form of life. The form of life of a people who hunt buffalo on wide open prairies is different from that of a people who inhabit poky rooms in technological cities; but alongside these differences sits the fact that all people sleep, eat, make love, walk and interact with objects - all of which have some effect on the rules of the language-games that they play. However, whilst the human form of life may limit the language-games that we naturally play, there is no such limitation upon the language-games that we can play. Sitting around in idleness we can invent and play as many different and varied language-games as we choose. We can inhabit languages that do not relate to or communicate point out a quochet to us and explain in English how it is partitioned (whether it is a mass term, a property etc.). We can understand the sentence - we can see that it is true - and yet we cannot translate it.

The possibility of more radical languages whose structures are not isomorphic with English cannot be defended in this way. If a language is so different from our own that we cannot make any sense of it at all, it is hard to see how we could differentiate it from random sounds. However, in this situation it is still possible to make sense of the idea that it could be largely true and untranslatable. In fact we are faced with this situation whenever we encounter people who speak a language that we are not familiar with. When I am in Tunisia I cannot understand or read a word of their language - for me it is completely untranslatable - and yet I presume it to be largely true. If I went to live with the Apache my situation would be the same. This suggests that my belief that a language is largely true can be separated from my ability to translate it. I will naturally presume that a language is largely true if people are using it to speak in their daily lives; and this has nothing to do with whether I can translate it or not. I can even learn their language without translating it; just by participating in their society and relying on their reactions to tell me whether the sounds that I am making are correct. In these circumstances translation into my native tongue would hinder me more than it would help:

... translation into one’s own language does not aid learning but impedes it. Indeed one observes the language in use and attempts to use the perceived sounds correctly ... Correctness (or truth) is not determined by the application of the principle of charity and Tarski’s Convention but the acceptance or rejection of an attempted utterance by members of the target linguistic community.


As long as I can recognise a form of life similar to my own in this other society, I can acknowledge that they are speaking a language that is largely true. Truth and translatability can be separated and so the idea that a language (or the conceptual
anything; we can push the possibilities for organised flows of phonemes to their limits. These possibilities are hinted at in the languages that have developed in isolation from the human form of life - the abstract mathematical languages, computer code, music, and experimental literature. The twentieth century’s excessive leisure lead to an efflorescence of these language-games.

Once the rules for these different language-games become transparent we start to freely move within them. An expert programmer no longer struggles with the code - he speaks it. We master the rules of a different language-game and dive into a different world.

The game of chess is not altered if it is played with ivory or scraps of metal; but it does scheme that it is said to embody) could be largely true and not translatable is conceivable after all. Whether such languages exist in practice is something that could only be established through detailed studies.

A final criticism of Whorf is that he falls into an inevitable trap of self-reflexivity:

Yet Whorf manages after all to express his philosophy. In describing the “deeper process of consciousness” upon which language is a “superficial embroidery” (p. 239) he refutes his own claim that “no individual is free to describe nature with absolute impartiality” (p.239). Here is the familiar paradox that all general theories of the relativity of truth must brand themselves as biased and erroneous. The standard defence of claiming a privileged position for the theory’s own promulgator takes the quaint form in Whorf of a hope that the linguist “familiar with many widely different linguistic systems” (p.214) may be free from the metaphysical biases of any


If people’s worlds are conditioned by their language, then Whorf’s interpretation of other languages must be conditioned by his language. Whorf’s description is not telling us anything about the way in which our language affects our world; it is just a reflection of his own very Western way of thinking. I will not attempt to defend

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**64** Gadamer distinguishes between languages that we create and languages that we are already within; claiming that only the latter are true languages:

… invented systems of artificial communication are never languages. For artificial languages, such as secret languages or systems of mathematical symbols, have no basis in a community of language or life, but are introduced and applied only as means and tools of understanding. This is the reason that they always presuppose a living process of communication, which is that of language. The convention by means of which an artificial language is introduced necessarily belongs, as we know, to another language. In a real community of language, on the other hand, we do not first decide to agree, but are already in agreement.


However, even if we accept this distinction, there is no reason why the languages that we create should not be given to our children as the language that they are already within. Infants could be brought up in HTML instead of English.
make a difference to us if we caress jagged or slippery pieces whilst we play. A room lined with plush crimson velvet has a different texture to one that is whitewashed; the textures and rhythms that line languages give each its own particular feel. Even if the grammar of two languages is identical, a difference in their sounds creates a different atmosphere; textures our world in different ways whilst we talk. The Western languages share a roughly similar grammar, but our experience speaking them is different – each makes a different poetry possible. When we submerge ourselves in a new tongue everything becomes soft and squishy, hard and metallic, bouncy and rubbery. Vivid colours, pastel shadings, murky greenish hues. When we change the sounds that we sound we transform the texture of our world.

The textures of the sounds and their structure are to some extent interdependent - resemblance between the sounds of two words can lead us to more naturally flow between them.\(^{65}\) This effect is most noticeable in poetry which depends both upon the structures that are allowed by grammar and upon the textures of the words. The textures of a poem have to harmoniously resonate together, and the structure of its sentences needs to approximate the consensual grammatical structure if it is to communicate something intelligible. Poetry is a game in which the arrangement, colour, and texture of the pieces is more important than winning with them.

Whorf on this point since his position does collapse in this way. Nor will I pursue the effect that this has upon Whorf’s claims; since it has been examined in the previous chapter and it is one of the themes of this project as a whole (but see the discussion of Foucault in auxiliary footnote ‘4’ in this chapter which touches upon many of the same problems).

7* An important point about languages with radically different grammars is that they are not intertranslatable. Languages that are isomorphic because they are mapped onto the human form of life are intertranslatable - it is just a matter of changing the phonetic pieces that are used to play the language-games. Languages that are not isomorphic in this way are not intertranslatable simply because there is nothing to translate. Translation is an operation that assumes that languages are about something; it assumes a neutral subject matter that can transferred from one language to another. Once language is thought of as a game this picture collapses and translation ceases to be a possibility or an issue. There is nothing that games are about - games are just games, played for their own sake; different ways of manipulating pieces. It is possible to play football using the apparatus of cricket (by using the stumps as goalposts etc.) but it is not possible to translate one into the other - the idea that we could do so is simply incoherent. (See auxiliary footnote ‘6’ for a response to Davidson’s objections to untranslatable languages.)
Forms of Life

If a lion could talk, we could not understand him.\textsuperscript{65}

We are bald creatures that walk upon our hind legs. We do lots of different things and make different noises when we are engaged in these various activities. Our central activities are working (some kind of complicated productive activity), eating, drinking, shagging, and relaxing.

There are lots of other creatures that walk, work, eat, drink, shag and relax in different ways. Some are big and yellow with long sharp teeth and slitty pupils, others are small and light with pointy noses and thin twig-like legs. These other creatures also accompany their various activities with a variety of noises.

Other forms of life form aspects different from our own. Although there is a bridge between them and us (we empathise with them, see something of ourselves in them), there are also massive differences: Sensations from zero, six, or a hundred legs; lust for feathered breasts or colourful shells; fear of open or enclosed spaces; different spreads of delectables and inedibles. Noises and smells that frighten other forms of life are familiar to us; noises and smells that terrify us are commonplace to them. Furthermore, our form of life describes the noises that it makes as a transparent medium that represents the world. Other forms of life lack this unique attribute; they just make inarticulate bestial cries that do not represent anything at all.

These differences between forms of life are such that a human being who has been brought up in the human form of life can barely conceive of the aspects inhabited by an ant, an eel, a bat or a cat. However these aspects can be \textit{learnt} by a \textit{homo sapiens} that has not yet

\textsuperscript{65} And to etymological connections.
assimilated the human form of life.

At its margins the form of life vanishes into an indefinite haze. If we have enough in common with a creature we say that an aspect lies within it. Beyond this we have no idea what we can, could, or should attribute a world to.

### Constructing the Labyrinth

As the source of authority, I have in mind principally textbooks of science together with both the popularizations and the philosophical works modelled on them. All three of these categories ... have one thing in common. They address themselves to an already articulated body of problems, data, and theory, most often to the particular set of paradigms to which the scientific community is committed at the time they are writing. Textbooks themselves aim to communicate the vocabulary and syntax of a contemporary scientific language. Popularizations attempt to describe these same applications in a language closer to that of everyday life. And philosophy of science, particularly that of the English speaking world, analyses the logical structure of the same completed body of scientific knowledge... All three record the stable outcome of past revolutions and thus display the bases of the current normal-scientific tradition. 67

The schoolboy believes his teachers and his schoolbooks. 68

Sitting on a park bench looking around. A rose, a lawnmower, a man; each a separate object with its own name. Rose, lawnmower and man spread out before me; each with its own web of conceptual associations. The rose is an erotic flower, evidence for God’s miraculous creation, an organ for attracting bees. The lawnmower is an aesthetic interplay of gleaming surfaces, a useful tool, a mutilator of grass. The man is a human being, my friend

68 Ludwig Wittgenstein, On Certainty, p. 34.
Jean, a weedy looking fellow.

This is my world, a world that emerged at the mobile site which is me; it is this that is constructed when an aspect is assembled in the child.

Within the infant a world is built - a framework of certainties, an episteme, a field of objects, a language, and a form of life. A shifting blurred mass of emotions and colour condenses into a clear world, a global aspect inhabited by someone.

The child, and not noumenal reality, is the neutral stuff that is ‘moulded’ by conceptual schemes. We bring up blank children to inhabit an aspect.\(^69\)

The development of aspects in the child can also be seen as the replication of aspects – as aspect breeding.

*Homo Sapiens* is not limited to human aspects. The global aspects of wolves, bears and sheep can be placed in human bodies by allowing these animals to nurture them from an early age.\(^70\)

Their tongues hung out through thick red lips, they panted and frequently bared their teeth. They suffered from photophobia and day-blindness, and spent their days crouched in the shade or standing motionless with their faces to the wall. They livened up at night, howling and groaning and hoping to escape. Amala

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\(^{69}\) This does not make aspects into a merely subjective phenomena. It is just that if we are looking for aspects we will not find them in rocks or furniture, but in people (and other forms of life as well). The fact that we happen to encounter and place aspects within people has no implications for what the world is like outside of aspects, whether there is a world outside of aspects, etc.. Furthermore, this ‘biologistic’ reading of aspects is just one interpretation of them, an interpretation which arises within my own aspect.

\(^{70}\) There may be limits to the aspects that can be placed within the body of *homo sapiens*. As biotechnology
- aged one and a half - and Kamala - aged eight and a half - slept only about four hours in twenty-four.

They had two means of getting about: on their knees and elbows for short distances and on their hands and feet for longer distances or for running. They lapped up liquids and took their food in a crouching position. Their exclusive taste for meat led them to indulge in the only activity of which they were capable: chasing chickens or rooting around for carcasses and entrails. Though they took a slight interest in dogs and cats, they were completely unsociable and used to snarl at humans, showing particular hostility to Singh’s wife. When anyone approached, they used to arch their backs menacingly and shake their heads rapidly back and forwards to show their wariness.\footnote{Lucien Malson, \textit{Wolf Children}, translated by Edmund Fawcett, Peter Ayrton and Joan White (London: NLB, 1972), pp. 68-9.}

**Modes of Positive Scepticism**

For God, so to speak, turns on all sides and considers in all ways the general system of phenomena which he has found it good to produce in order to manifest his glory. And as he considers all the faces of the world in all possible ways—for there is no aspect which escapes his omniscience—the result of each view of the universe, as looked at from a certain position, is, if God finds it good to actualize his thoughts and to produce it, a substance which expresses the universe in conformity with that view.\footnote{G. W. Leibniz, \textit{Discourse on Metaphysics}, printed in \textit{Philosophical Texts}, translated by Richard Francks and R. S. Woolhouse (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 66.}

Positive scepticism\footnote{Positive scepticism} sees reality as a bodiless beast with many faces, a labyrinthine succession of different ‘visions’.

The positive sceptic has encountered other aspects, collided with visions radically opposed to his own. This made his aspect visible as an aspect. Before this encounter his aspect was coextensive with the world; there was no distinction between it and the world. develops these limitations may be overcome (and this may change the human form of life considerably).
After this encounter his aspect continues to be the world; but now there are other worlds as well.

Sometimes the labyrinth becomes visible when the dogmatic foundations of an aspect are uncovered. Once the bedrock certainties of an aspect have been exposed, the possibility of aspects with different dogmatic foundations opens up.

The collapse of a person’s aspect can also throw them into the labyrinth. The disintegration of everything that a person believes in can open up a space in which everything is permissible, a space in which the world unfolds as a multiplicity of aspects. When the velocity of a particle collapses into a precise measurement the particle becomes simultaneously present in all locations.

“Truth” is therefore not something there, that might be found or discovered—but something that must be created and that gives a name to a process, or rather to a will to overcome that has in itself no end—introducing truth, as a process in infinitum, an active determining—not a becoming-conscious of something that is in itself firm and determined.74

The positive sceptic does not rest with the visions that he encounters in his own and other cultures - although he takes much pleasure in exploring all of these. He creates and explores new vistas, populates new worlds with twisted morals and logics, constructs new rooms in his exploration of what aspects are possible for people.

73 “Positive scepticism” is just a name for a style of thinking – a residue from my earlier thought. This name makes it easier to discuss, but neither the “positive” nor the “scepticism” is that important.
The positive sceptic falls into the aspects that he creates. He imagines an aspect, develops it in detail, and suddenly a new world opens out before him.8

A multiplicity of aspects is problematic for people who stick rigidly within one aspect and claim that their aspect is the only correct one. They experience positive scepticism as a threat - an attempt to invalidate their single correct worldview. However the positive sceptic is not interested in invalidating aspects. He carries out a phenomenological description which suspends judgement about which aspect is right and which wrong.

A plurality of aspects is also problematic if you believe that reality is some kind of in-itself which each of us has some kind of partial glimpse of. In this case the contradictions between aspects lock against one another and leave the objective reality untouched. This picture is common in our culture and was important to the Pyrrhonic sceptics. However this juxtaposition of aspects depends upon a distinction between aspects and

8. A route towards understanding the positive sceptic's labyrinth of aspects can be found in Nehamas's discussion of Nietzsche's perspectivism in *Nietzsche, Life as Literature*. According to Nehamas, perspectivism is the claim that we form partial limited views of the world that are dictated by the values we hold. These perspectives are all perspectives on a single world, but they are too different to be coherently united into a single neutral picture (although many perspectives attempt such a synopsis). Furthermore, perspectivism does not make a distinction between reality and appearances. We do not see the perspective at the expense of some underlying noumenal reality. The perspectives are the perspective at a stylised and simplified form.

... perspectivism does imply that no particular point of view is privileged in the sense that it affords those who occupy it a better picture of the world as it really is than all others. Some perspectives are, and can be shown to be, better than others. But a perspective that is best of all is not a perspective at all. Perspectivism also implies that our many points of view cannot be smoothly combined into a unified synoptic picture of their common object. In effect it denies that our perspectives are all directed in more than a trivial sense upon a single object. In this trivial sense, all our perspectives are directed upon "the world." But in order to say what that is, beyond saying that it is what our perspectives are perspectives of, we must use terms that every point of view must acknowledge; and this is either to dispense with points of view altogether or to claim that one of them is inherently superior to the rest and represents the world as it really is, "as if a world would still remain over after one deducted the perspective!" (*WP*, 567).


Nehamas clarifies this through a discussion of painting. When we look at a painting of a boat from a distance we see a boat. When we press our faces to the canvas we see a mass of brushstrokes and the boat vanishes. The philosophically inclined might ask themselves whether the picture is really a
the world that they are an aspect of. Outside of this picture these arguments have little relevance.

The positive sceptic deals with the incompatible claims that he encounters by describing them as an interplay between two aspects. One aspect rises to the surface, we inhabit it for a while, and then a different aspect rises to the surface. Claims are inhabited sequentially but not simultaneously.

The duck-rabbit is both a duck and a rabbit. This contradiction is held together and overcome by the fact that both the duck and the rabbit are ways of seeing a single drawing. Some people are convinced that the drawing is a duck and argue strenuously against the suggestion that it might be a rabbit. Other people think that the issue of whether the drawing really is a duck or a rabbit is undecidable; they abandon all hope for a theory that could illuminate the essence of the drawing. The positive sceptic sees the drawing as an aspect as well. Now there is no longer any thing to which two incompatible predicates can be attached. There are no neutral marks which can be boat or really a mass of brushstrokes. Perspectivism claims that the idea that there is a single real picture is only true trivially in the sense that there is a single object upon which the different perspectives are directed. Outside of this, all we can say is that the picture is a boat within one perspective and a mass of brushstrokes in another. The attempt to unify the perspectives and see the picture as both a boat and brushstrokes simultaneously is both impossible and meaningless for us - as futile as an attempt to view an object from all sides at once. This illustration breaks down eventually because two perspectives on a picture can be unified within a theory about distance and human vision. However in the case of the world as a whole, perspectivism remains valid because it has no obvious outside that we can all step to to unify our different perspectives. Obvious outsiders are defined differently within each perspective.

One important feature of Nehamas' account (from the perspective of this project) is the way in which he differentiates between perspectivism and relativism (a distinction that I cover further in Appendix II). Nehamas rejects the equation that critics of perspectivism often make between interpretation and mere interpretation. The fact that something is an interpretation does not immediately invalidate it.

The general problem with both positive and negative approaches to perspectivism so far is that they have been too quick to equate possible with actual falsehood, interpretation with mere interpretation. The claim, however, that a view is mere interpretation can be made only in light of a further interpretation, which is of course not a mere interpretation itself in that context. Nietzsche's perspectivism claims that there is no view of the world that is binding on everyone. He believes that every view depends on and manifests specific values and attitudes toward life, that is to be accepted only by those who want to make those values their own. Even a serious alternative to (P), a view to the effect that at least one view, perhaps that very view in question, is not an interpretation, may still be shown to be just that if it is shown to depend on and promote its own specific values.

[Ibid., p. 67.]
interpreted in different ways because the ‘neutral marks’ have themselves become just one further way of seeing. All we can say is “there is a drawing”, “there is a rabbit”, “there is a duck”. We are left with a duck, a rabbit, and a drawing; and the ability to move between these three ways of ‘seeing’.

The things I directly perceive on my desk are books, envelopes containing letters consisting of words and sentences, a group photograph, a lamp, a pen and ruler; they are not most immediately encountered simply as material objects of varying form and colour. I can, of course, take up a perspective from which I can see these things as bare arrangements of colour and shape (I can try to see the photograph as an array of colour patches); but then the set of material property concepts occupies that second place in the schema ‘seeing x as y’ which permits us to label it as picking out an aspect of the object (its material aspect).  

Many people find positive scepticism unpalatable because the thought lurks at the back of their minds that everyone could somehow reach agreement. A fantasy of a world in which everybody is transparently in the truth. This Positive scepticism also rejects criticisms that attempt to reduce aspects to mere aspects. Within the positive sceptic's world there may be nothing more than an aspect, but there is also nothing less than an aspect as well, nothing that aspects can be compared to that they fall short of. Although positive scepticism sees the world as a labyrinth of aspects and accepts that some aspect beliefs are right and others wrong, since it does not decide which are right and which wrong it does not reduce different aspects to mere interpretations, but takes each as seriously as the other. It is this taking with equal seriousness that leads to the (non-relativistic) collapse of positive scepticism.

A second way in which Nehamas' account has close affinities with positive scepticism is the way in which it recognises that not everyone will endorse it. Both positive scepticism and perspectivism acknowledge that other aspects/ perspectives promote values that lead them away from positive scepticism/ perspectivism. They also recognise that the aspect/ perspective of positive scepticism/ perspectivism promotes values of its own which others do not share. Positive scepticism and perspectivism are limited finite views which organise the world in a particular way. However there is nothing necessary about them and no obligation upon everyone to believe in them.

What can be shown is that, in admitting its own status as interpretation, perspectivism does not require that it be accepted. It concedes that no one is obliged to believe it. This is where it differs from dogmatism, which, according to Nietzsche, makes just this claim. Perspectivism grants that some people may always refuse to accept it. [ Ibid., p. 67.]

One problem with Nehamas' account is the way in which he deals with conflicts between perspectives. He deals with conflicting readings of a text by limiting the problem to two conflicting complete readings. Partial readings are excluded because Nehamas claims that they can always be incorporated in a further reading. The difficulty here is that more than one further reading may be available to incorporate them, and there is a further question about whether this higher incorporation is justified. Simply

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thought generally takes the form: “If only everyone could see things in the way that I see them - in the way that is self-evidently true - then we would all agree and understand things perfectly”. Rarely does it take the form: “If only I could give up the beliefs that I hold - which may be mistaken - and take up beliefs that have been carefully checked by everyone else, then we could all agree”. Faith in the possibility of consensus creates resistance to the positive sceptic’s vision of a labyrinth of aspects.

The positive sceptic does not reject the possibility that this messianic vision may materialise upon Earth. However he does hypothesise that peoples and cultures will continue to die before reaching ‘the truth’; he conjectures that differences will remain between aspects that diverge as rapidly as they fuse. There are aspects in which there is a single communion of truth; but the distance between these aspects and positive scepticism only serves to confirm the positive sceptic’s hypothesis that the Absolute has not yet been achieved on earth.

The positive sceptic writes and speaks because a partial reading can be incorporated in a further reading does not mean that it should be, and if a reading is partial in one aspect it is not necessarily partial in another. Aspects often give readings of each other that incorporate an opposing point of view as a partial perspective on their own truth. When two aspects do this reciprocally to one another we are returned to the pragmatically irresolvable conflicts that the positive sceptic suspended judgement about.

Finally, there are also disagreements about the level at which perspectivism applies. Nehamas thinks that Nietzsche would say that the laws of natural science, for example, are present within the world independently of any aspect’s description of these laws:

… great movements in science as well as in morality produce something new to be described or evaluated in the very process of devising new methods of description and evaluation. And to the natural question whether the laws of motion did not exist before Galileo and Newton formulated and quantified them, Nietzsche's answer would be that of course they did—just in the way that all the surfaces of material objects were there to be painted before Picasso showed us for the first time how it could be done.

[Ibid., pp. 59-60.]

Against this, positive scepticism urges that even material surfaces exist within some aspects and not others - positive scepticism does not attempt to mediate between different assertions about material objects.

Overall, in spite of these disagreements, positive scepticism shares many features with perspectivism and these concluding remarks by Nehamas aptly summarise the attempt of this project to develop the arguments for positive scepticism:

Nietzsche's perspectivism, then, is a refusal to grade people and views along a single scale. It cannot be refuted simply because it applies to itself, and it need not be defended against attempts to refute it just on these grounds. In order to refute it, we must develop a view that does not depend on antecedent commitments and that does not promote a particular kind of person and a particular kind of life—a view
because he wishes to open other people up to his vision of the labyrinth. However he recognises that positive scepticism is just one aspect. His labyrinth of aspects is just one room in the labyrinth and not an absolute perspective on the whole. In his perambulations the positive sceptic has come across positive scepticism, and one day he may leave it behind. He is happy to inhabit aspects in which there is no positive scepticism and only one truth; visions in which there is a single framework of certainties.

Excrecent Doubt

(1) If someone knows something to be so, then it is all right for the person to be absolutely certain that it is so. For example, if it is true that Mary knows that there was a general called 'Napoleon', then it is (perfectly) all right for her to be absolutely certain that there was. And, if René really knows that he exists, then it is (perfectly) all right for René to be absolutely certain that he does. This is (the first part of) our second explanatory hypothesis.

Our second and final premiss, then, is this categorical proposition:

(2) It is never all right for anyone to be absolutely certain that anything is so.

This connects with (the first part of) our first hypothesis. According to this premiss, it is not all right for Mary to be absolutely certain that there was a general called 'Napoleon', nor is it even right for René to be absolutely certain that he exists. No matter what their situations, these people should not be absolutely certain of these things. When one understands what is that applies to everyone at all times and in all contexts. The task may well be possible, but simply saying that it can be done is not the same as doing it. Alternatively, we must show, in the same detail in which Nietzsche revealed the presuppositions of the views he attacked, that his efforts were a failure, that he was wrong to claim that these views made such commitments … Until this is done, and perhaps even afterward, perspectivism, freed from the notion of mere interpretation, can stand as a serious view in its own right. Just as it cannot support all the claims of its more enthusiastic admirers, so it cannot crumble at the first logical touch of its more bitter opponents. [Ibid. p.68.]

Our own position ... emphatically preserves the certainty-involvement of all our knowledge claims. It simply insists that the certainty of knowledge is the certainty of real life - the sort of certainty that is not timeless and untarnishable but can be abrogated by the difficult circumstances of an uncooperative world.

Accordingly, the "No Certainty" Argument becomes invalidated: It is not true that knowledge claims are committed to a demand for absolute certainty in any hyperbolically inaccessible way. They are indeed committed to a demand for certainty, but this "certainty" must be construed realistically - in the effective, mundane, and practical sense of the term. The certainty at issue in our knowledge-claims is not inherently unattainable; it is simply that the grounding in hand must be strong enough to indicate that further substantiation is superfluous in the sense of yielding every reasonable assurance that the thing at issue is as certain as something of its sort need
involved in being absolutely certain of something, one will presumably understand why it is never all right to be absolutely certain.

These two premisses together entail our conclusion of universal scepticism:

(3) Nobody ever knows that anything is so.

In particular, Mary does not really know that there was a general called 'Napoleon', nor does René really know that he exists.


appropriately be. To repeat: it suffices to ask for an adequate grounding of these claims; logically exhaustive grounding is not a reasonable requirement, for the simple reason - so eloquently stressed by the sceptic himself - that it is in principle incapable of being satisfied.


The negative sceptic doubts. In his formative years he believed something with absolute conviction; he inhabited one aspect and excluded all others. One day he was caught unawares by a different aspect. He did not really believe in it and yet its incompatibility with his original aspect robbed the latter of its former firmness. Now his old aspect is no longer certain; and yet he does not inhabit the new aspect either. The possibility of this other aspect has invalidated his own. How can he believe what he always believed when something completely different might be true? The negative sceptic could free himself from his agony by letting go of his old aspect and embracing the new one. Or he could dismiss the new aspect and continue to inhabit his old one. Or he could accept the positive sceptic's vision of a multiplicity of aspects. Unfortunately none of these options appeal to the negative sceptic. He still desperately wants to believe that his original aspect is the only correct one. In a paroxysm of despair he reaches the conclusion that no aspect can be believed in in this way; that no aspect is certain; that a misty cloud of doubt will forever haunt his knowledge.76

The negative sceptic’s exposure to another aspect has trapped him on the boundary between two aspects and deprived him of the certainty that either could give

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76 Most of Wittgenstein’s On Certainty is a criticism of negative scepticism. According to Wittgenstein, the doubt of the negative sceptic can only be applied within his framework of certainties. It makes no sense at all to throw the whole framework into question and so the negative sceptic’s attempt to doubt everything is nonsense.
him. Out of this lack of certainty he reaches the conclusion that certainty is impossible. The positive sceptic is also between aspects; but his emphasis is completely different. For him, the possibility of other aspects leads to an explosion of knowledge; not to a holding back from claims to know. Positive scepticism investigates all aspects – it does not throw one into doubt because another is possible. Negative sceptics believe that the evil scientist and the demon are possible, but they fail to realise that it is possible to really believe in them. Positive sceptics interpret anomalous events as bugs in the scientist’s software and make propitiatory sacrifices to the demon in the hope that his deceit will be carried out more favourably in the future.

A second important difference between negative and positive sceptics is the number of frameworks that they are comfortable within. The negative sceptic tends to integrate everything within a single framework of knowledge. Everything that he knows fits inside a single picture; if something throws this picture into question, there is no possibility of any other. The positive sceptic does not limit himself to a single picture. For him, there are an indefinite number of ways of integrating innumerable different sets of facts. New facts may open up a new worldview, but they do not necessarily close down the old one. It is this plurality of frameworks that saves the positive sceptic from the paralysing doubt of the negative sceptic. The demon cannot be integrated into the negative sceptic’s framework and so it throws the only one that he has into question. For the positive sceptic, the demon is an additional framework; annexed on to the ones that he already has. The aspects of positive scepticism do not cancel each other out.

\[77\] This boundary between aspects is itself an aspect.
An Outline of Pyrrhonism

The Skeptic Way is a disposition to oppose phenomena and noumena to one another in any way whatever, with the result that, owing to the equipollence among the things and statements thus opposed, we are brought first to *epoche* and then to *ataraxia*.... By "opposed" statements we simply mean inconsistent ones, not necessarily affirmative and negative. By "equipollence" we mean equality as regards credibility and the lack of it, that is, that no one of the inconsistent statements takes precedence over any other as being more credible. *Epoche* is a state of the intellect on account of which we neither deny nor affirm anything. *Ataraxia* is an untroubled and tranquil condition of the soul.78

In the course of his investigations into the world around him the Pyrrhonic79 sceptic has discovered that any argument for something can be contradicted by an argument against it. Every theory that he develops about the world appears to be opposed by a different theory claiming the opposite. Faced with this multiplicity of contradictions the Pyrrhonic sceptic suspends judgement about the problems that he is investigating.

This suspension of judgement brings about tranquillity. The Pyrrhonic sceptic had hoped to pacify his mind by understanding the world and then, almost by chance, he attained *ataraxia* by suspending judgement about the world. After attaining peace of mind in this way the Pyrrhonic sceptic does not close himself off from the possibility that truth might be found - he does not claim that it is *impossible* to know anything. He is also happy to describe the *appearance* of things. However he personally is no longer interested in discovering ‘the truth’ about the world because he has reached tranquillity by a different path. He may give up philosophy altogether and take up a trade, or he may remain within philosophy so that he

79 I will use the term “Pyrrhonic” to describe all sceptics with the style of scepticism that started with Pyrrho of Elis; even if they do not explicitly assimilate themselves to this tradition. For more on this see auxiliary footnote “9”.

can help other people to achieve the same calm state of mind.\textsuperscript{80}

Pyrrhonic sceptics juxtapose theoretical positions. Confronted by a person who dogmatically believes $x$, they put forward a different theory that proves $\text{not-}x$. If the Pyrrhonist’s interlocutor is unable to refute the proof of $\text{not-}x$, he is left with two contradictory positions, $x$ and $\text{not-}x$, and no way of choosing one over the other. Without a way of deciding between the two theories he has to suspend judgement about the issue; either until he can show that one of the proofs is false, or until he can discover a theory that can mediate between them. In response to the dogmatic assertion that honey is sweet in its nature, the Sceptic points out that honey tastes bitter to some people, and so honey must be bitter in its nature as well. Since the real nature of honey cannot be both sweet and bitter, it is impossible to decide what the real nature of honey is. Faced with this dilemma, the Pyrrhonic sceptic suspends judgement and abandons the debate. He is still prepared to state that honey \textit{appears} to him to be sweet, but he is not interested in assertions that go beyond a bare description of appearances.

Most of the work of Sextus Empiricus\textsuperscript{81} juxtaposes claims in this way. He sets out a large number of arguments dealing with the different appearance of things in different contexts, the multiplicity of customs, the various constitutions of observers, the frequency with which things appear, and the dependence of things upon their relationships with other things. All of these “modes” are intended to balance the assertions of the dogmatists with opposing claims. For example, in his discussion of the Stoic theory of signs, Sextus starts off by demonstrating the impossibility of the indicative sign:

\textsuperscript{80} This psychological reconstruction can be found in much greater detail in \textit{Scepticism} by Arne Naess (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968).

\textsuperscript{81} I have chosen to use the work of Sextus Empiricus to illustrate the Pyrrhonic ‘philosophy’ because it is set out by him with great clarity and detail, and because the important sceptics before him (Pyrrho of Elis, Arcesilaus, Carneades and Aenesidemus) either wrote nothing, or little of their work has been preserved. Furthermore, the work of Sextus is for the most part a compendium of the arguments of the earlier ‘Pyrrhonists’
Thus also, if we go by the usual statements of the Stoics, a concept of sign cannot be formed. For they say both that the sign is relative and that it serves to disclose the significatum to which they say it is relative. Now, if it is relative, that is to say, relative to the significatum, it certainly ought to be apprehended together with the significatum, just as the left with the right and the up with the down and the rest of the relative things. But if it also serves to disclose what is signified, it also certainly ought to be apprehended in advance in order that, being preknown, it may lead us to the notion of the object or state of affairs that becomes known through it. But it is impossible to form a notion of an object or state of affairs that cannot be known before that [object or state of affairs] before which it has to be apprehended; therefore, it is impossible to conceive of something that is relative and serves to disclose that existing thing relative to which it is thought. But they say both that the sign is relative and that it serves to disclose the significatum; it is impossible, therefore, to conceive of the sign.\textsuperscript{82}

After he has set out all the arguments against the indicative sign, he then goes on to argue for it:

These few arguments, out of many, will suffice for the present to support the position that there is no such thing as an indicative sign. Next we shall set forth those supporting the position that signs do exist, in order that we may show the equipollence of the opposed arguments. Either, then, the expressions that are uttered against signs signify something or they do not. But if they do not, how can they have any bearing on the existence of signs? And if they do signify something, there is such a thing as a sign.\textsuperscript{83}

After proving that indicative signs cannot exist, Sextus goes on to show that they must exist. This equipollence between arguments on both sides of the debate makes the question about the existence of indicative signs unanswerable. The only way out is to suspend judgement on the issue; to give up the entire debate about indicative signs. This technique of balancing

\footnotesize{and so it is a good example of this style of scepticism. \textit{The Sceptics} by R. J. Hankinson covers the other Pyrrhonists in depth.\textsuperscript{82} Sextus Empiricus, \textit{Outlines of Pyrrhonism}, Book 2.11, p. 144.\textsuperscript{83} Ibid., Book 2.11, p. 146.}
argument and counter-argument is used in all of the works of Sextus Empiricus to juxtapose the philosophical, scientific, and ethical theories of his time.

Although the Pyrrhonic sceptic has a method and a clearly defined goal, he is not someone who believes dogmatically that dogmas are bad, that ataraxia is good, and that ataraxia necessarily follows from epoche. In fact, all of these claims only appear to the Pyrrhonic sceptic to be the case - he does not believe that any of them are really true. The sceptic’s phrases express his condition; they are not a new set of dogmas about reality.  

For concerning all the Skeptic slogans it is necessary for this to be understood first of all: we absolutely do not firmly maintain anything about their being true, especially since we say that they can be confuted by themselves, as they are included among the cases to which they apply - just as cathartic drugs not only flush out the bodily humours but expel themselves as well.  

The main purpose of the Pyrrhonist’s phrases is to alleviate the suffering caused by dogmatism. Dogmatism causes suffering in two ways. To begin with, if a person thinks that truth can be found and fails to find it, then they will suffer because they are searching for something that is unobtainable for them. The sceptical phrases liberate people from this

9* This may have changed throughout Sextus’s work. Richard Bett suggests in his introduction to Against the Ethicists (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997) that in this work Sextus makes the claim that nothing is by nature good or bad, and does not suspend judgement on the issue (p. xiv). Pyrrho of Elis may also have maintained dogmas about the unknowability of things: “According to Timon, Pyrrho declared that things are equally indifferent, unmeasurable and inarbitrable. (4) For this reason neither our sensations nor our opinions tell us truths or falsehoods. Therefore for this reason we should not put our trust in them one bit, but we should be unopinionated, uncommitted and unwavering, saying concerning each individual thing that it no more is than is not, or it both is and is not, or neither is nor is not.” [quoted from A. A. Long and D. N. Sedley, The Hellenistic Philosophers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), Volume 1, p. 14]. Pyrrho’s tranquillity may have been due to a thesis that he held about the inherent unknowability of things, and not the result of equipollent arguments.  

Although early Sextus may have been inclined towards dogmatic claims, the Sextus of Outlines of Pyrrhonism consistently suspends judgement about everything and confines himself to assertions about how things appear to him. The sceptical phrases in this work are utterances intended to express the sceptic’s state of mind; they are not a series of dogmatic claims.

84 Ibid., Book 1. 28; p. 117.
dogmatic quest and bring about the peace of mind that they had hoped to obtain through truth. Secondly, the world’s ills are much worse if you believe that they are inherently bad. Hunger naturally causes a person suffering; but if someone believes that they should not be hungry, then they suffer both from the hunger and from the thought that their hunger is an evil - making their experience of hunger much worse. The sceptic counters this suffering by juxtaposing arguments for and against the inherent goodness and badness of things. People who suspend judgement about the badness of things no longer suffer from their badness.\textsuperscript{85}

This therapeutic dimension to Pyrrhonism explains their indifference to the quality of their arguments. Some of the arguments that Sextus uses are strong, whilst others are pitifully weak and unconvincing. This makes sense once we realise that they were not written down to convince us that they were true, but to cure people of their dogmatism. What matters is the effect that an argument has upon the person being treated; if a weak argument induces equipollence in the patient, there is no need for a better one. More stubborn cases may require stronger solutions:

Because of his love of humanity the Skeptic wishes to cure by argument, so far as he can, the conceit and precipitancy of the Dogmatists. Accordingly, just as the doctors who treat physical symptoms have remedies that differ in strength, and prescribe the severe ones for people with severe symptoms and milder ones for those mildly affected, so too the Sceptic sets forth arguments differing in strength. And in the case of those who are severely afflicted with precipitancy he employs arguments that are weighty and capable of vigorously disposing of the Dogmatists’ symptom of conceit, but in the case of those who have this symptom in a superficial and easily curable way, and are capable of being restored to health by milder persuasion, he uses the milder arguments. Hence the person motivated by Skepticism does not hesitate to advance at one time arguments that are weighty in persuasiveness and at another time such as even appear weak—he does this purposely, on the assumption that many times the latter suffice for accomplishing his task.\textsuperscript{86}

\textsuperscript{85} See John Heaton’s article ‘Therapeutic Scepticism’ for a more detailed exposition of the therapeutic aims of Pyrrhonic scepticism.
Linked up with this Pyrrhonic therapy is the way in which the Pyrrhonist’s arguments are drawn from the beliefs of the dogmatist who is being treated. Since the Pyrrhonist has suspended judgement about everything, he has no theories of his own that he could use to treat the dogmatist. Instead, he takes up the dogmatist’s own arguments (or develops arguments within the dogmatist’s framework) and demonstrates their opposition to one another. The Pyrrhonic sceptic deconstructs dogmatism by equiposing its own arguments; it is an internal critique without any dogmatisms of its own.

I have spent some time describing Pyrrhonic scepticism because of its similarity to positive scepticism. The labyrinth of aspects described by the positive sceptic has close affinities with the multiplicities of arguments that are juxtaposed by the Pyrrhonic sceptic. In

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86 Ibid., Book 3.32, p. 217.
87 See Hankinson on this point:

[Sextus’ arguments] are dialectical: he adopts the views of the Dogmatists for the sake of argument and shows how they lead the Dogmatist to sceptical conclusions. The Sceptic, already being in the condition of epoche has no need of arguments himself:

addition, both varieties of scepticism are self-reflexive and relatively indifferent towards their own beliefs. However, there are important divergences as well.

To begin with, the positive sceptic does not distinguish between appearances and reality in the way that the Pyrrhonic sceptic does. The Pyrrhonic sceptic has given up the attempt to discover how honey really tastes and so he contents himself with the way honey appears to taste. The positive sceptic is not committed to this distinction (although he does not reject aspects that are). He describes aspects in which honey really is sweet, and aspects in which it really is bitter; aspects in which it appears to be bitter and aspects in which it appears to be sweet. Positive scepticism freely moves between these different levels; it does not dogmatically stay within appearances at the expense of reality.

A second difference between them is that the Pyrrhonic sceptic juxtaposes philosophical arguments - which he abandons in favour of the appearances of real life - whereas the positive sceptic deals with aspects that he encounters in life as well as in philosophy. This situation of influence on the mind: or if it had, that its influence would be beneficial to society. On the contrary, he must acknowledge, if he will acknowledge anything, that all human life must perish, were his principles universally and steadily to prevail. All discourse, all action would immediately cease; and men remain in a total lethargy, till the necessities of nature, unsatisfied, put an end to their miserable existence. It is true; so fatal an event is very little to be dreaded. Nature is always too strong for principle. And though a Pyrrhonian may throw himself or others into a momentary amazement and confusion by his profound reasonings; the first and most trivial event in life will put to flight all his doubts and scruples, and leave him the same, in every point of action and speculation, with the philosophers of every other sect, or with those who never concerned themselves in any philosophical researches. When he awakes from his dream, he will be the first to join in the laugh against himself, and to confess, that all his objections are mere amusement, and can have no other tendency than to show the whimsical condition of mankind, who must act and believe; though they are not able, by their most diligent enquiry, to satisfy themselves concerning the foundation of these operations, or to remove the objections, which may be raised against them.

[David Hume, An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding, edited by Antony Flew (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1988), Section XII, p. 191.]

The main way in which Sextus defends himself against these charges is to make a distinction between non-evident reality and appearances. The sceptic can live a fulfilled and ordinary life guided solely by the way things appear to him, and at the same time suspend judgement about all non-evident matters. He eats honey because it appears to be sweet to him, and suspends judgement about whether honey in its innermost nature is really sweet. Furthermore, since the sceptic no longer has any dogmatic beliefs of his own, he is happy to go along with the customs around him. The Pyrrhonic sceptic eats, drinks, works, marries, worships the local gods, and follows the social conventions of his time. Practical Pyrrhonism is a life guided by the surface appearances of ordinary life. (Sextus was a doctor.)

A more subtle version of Hume's
aspects within life gives them a positive value for the positive sceptic, which is missing from the arguments offered by the Pyrrhonist. The positive sceptic cannot abandon theory for everyday life because we encounter and inhabit aspects in all areas of our lives. There are no domains that we could move into if we suspended judgement about aspects; we are always irrevocably within an aspect, and even the attempt to escape from aspects is a further feature of the aspect that we are in. We can move from one aspect to another; but beyond aspects there is nowhere for us to go.

The positive sceptic’s inability to escape from aspects gives him a different relationship to his identity. Both the positive and the Pyrrhonic sceptic are a certain way. Things appear in a certain way to both. In the Pyrrhonist’s case, there is something about them that makes the label “Pyrrhonic sceptic” apply; something that sets them apart from other men.88 They are people to whom honey appears sweet, people who think that argument was suggested by Myles Burnyeat, who also claims that the sceptic’s humanity will prevent him from losing all of his beliefs. According to Burnyeat, if the sceptic is to attain ataraxia, he must believe that the opposed claims that he is faced with are equal:

...ataraxia is hardly to be attained if he is not in some sense satisfied—so far—that no answers are forthcoming, that contrary claims are indeed equal. And my question is: How can Sextus then deny that this is something he believes?

I do not think he can. Both the causes (reasoned arguments) of the state which Sextus calls appearance and its effects (tranquillity and the cessation of emotional disturbance) are such as to justify us in calling it a state of belief.


If the sceptic believes that the opposed claims are equal then his claim to have escaped dogmatism is false, and the life guided by appearances is impossible.

Burnyeat’s argument turns on the areas in which a distinction between assent and impression can and cannot be made. One can make a distinction between assent and impression when the impression is an experience. We can have the impression that an oar is bent when we see it in water, and withhold our assent to the proposition that the oar is bent. However, at the philosophical level it is not possible to distinguish between assent and impression. To have the impression that $x$ is true is to assent to the truth of $x$: “In the philosophical case, the impression, when all is said and done, simply is my assent to the conclusion of an argument, assent to it as true.”[Ibid., p. 57.] If a distinction between assent and impression cannot be made at the philosophical level, then the sceptic cannot just have the impression that two arguments are equiposed; he must also

88 It could be argued that the Pyrrhonic sceptic only has a past identity. Once he reaches ataraxia he takes up his trade and becomes indistinguishable from everyone else. However, since everyone else is a dogmatist, the Pyrrhonic sceptic is presumably different from the common man in this respect. The Pyrrhonic sceptic could become an everyday dogmatist after achieving ataraxia (in which case this argument about identity would not apply), but if he continues to preserve his ataraxia through equipollence, then he remains a Pyrrhonic sceptic, even if he no longer practices philosophy.
helping people attain ataraxia may be a good thing to do, people led by the juxtaposition of arguments to equipollence and ataraxia. Sextus even admits that he has something like a ‘system’:

If one defines a system as an attachment to a number of dogmas that agree with one another and with appearances, and defines a dogma as an assent to something non-evident, we shall say that the Skeptic does not have a system. But if one says that a system is a way of life that, in accordance with appearances, follows a certain rationale, where that rationale shows how it is possible to seem to live rightly (‘rightly’ being taken, not as referring only to virtue, but in a more ordinary sense) and tends to produce the disposition to suspend judgement, then we say that he does have a system. For we do follow a certain rationale that, in accord with appearances, points us toward a life in conformity with the customs of our country and its laws and institutions, and with our own particular pathē.89

The positive sceptic also has something like a system. He sees reality as a labyrinth of aspects and has a certain way of dealing with this way of seeing. The difference between Pyrrhonic and assent to the truth of this - he must believe that it is true. The sceptic might be able to separate his philosophical assent from his impression by detaching himself from himself - one part of himself not believing what the other half is having an impression of. The problem is that although this might be possible on occasions, the sceptic’s humanity will prevent him from achieving this all of the time:

If the sceptic does insist, if he refuses to identify with his assent, he is as it were detaching himself from the person (namely, himself) who was convinced by the argument, and he is treating his own thought as if it were the thought of someone else, someone thinking thoughts within him. He is saying, in effect, ‘It is thought within me that p, but I do not believe it.’ In the right circumstances, that could be said. But not all the time, for every appearance/thought one has. Yet that is what it will come to if absolutely every appearance, higher-level as well as lower-level, is construed non-epistemically.

[Ibid., p.57.]

The problem with Burnyeat’s argument is that even if the Pyrrhonic’s impression does constitute assent, this does not invalidate the equipollence of contradictory arguments which is the sceptic’s starting point. When the sceptic studies arguments within the dogmatist’s philosophical framework, he finds himself assenting to arguments leading to x, and he finds himself assenting to arguments leading to not-x. It is this double assent that is so problematic for the Pyrrhonic sceptic, and it is the experience of this double assent that leaves him in epoche and ataraxia. The sceptic does not weigh the arguments and decide that they are equal; he finds himself in an inextricable paradox because he has already assented to both of them. If the sceptic expressed his experience of this paradox theoretically, he might say that the arguments are equal - he might temporarily assent to a proposition. However the sceptic would also assent to arguments for the opposite conclusion – for the thesis that the arguments are not equal - generating a second paradox from double assent and returning the sceptic to his state of ataraxia. The sceptic is always in a position of multiple belief and this applies even to his belief that two propositions are equal. It is

89 Sextus Empiricus, Outlines of Pyrrhonism, Book 1.8, p. 91.
positive scepticism lies in the way in which they relate to their fixed ways of being. The Pyrrhonic sceptic is very comfortable with the move from *epoche* to *ataraxia* and the taking up of the common life that follows from this. The positive sceptic’s preoccupation with aspects leaves him in a much less easy position; he is acutely aware of the limitations of an identity which is simultaneously problematic and inescapable for him. The Pyrrhonist thinks that he has left the labyrinth because he has discovered the multiplicity of rooms and suspended judgement about which is correct. In fact, all he has done is remain in the room called “Pyrrhonism”. The positive sceptic accepts that it is impossible to escape, he knows that no cunning little leap will shake off an identity which clings to him like a shadow. Doomed forever to wander in the labyrinth the positive sceptic is nobly resigned to it (and yet secretly sadly tired of its stale air).

The positive sceptic is trapped within aspects and so he is forced to take them seriously. He is aware that anything he does will just be a further exploration or creation of the labyrinth. This makes him less calm than the Pyrrhonic sceptic’s excessive assent that forces him to ‘suspend judgement about everything that he is assenting to’; however inhuman this may be.

A further problem connected with the Pyrrhonic life is that it is not self-evidently the best life to lead.

...it is not even clear whether the life of *ataraxia* is to be preferred. After all, it is a life without risk - and risk is exciting. There will be many who will think that the general Hellenistic emphasis on the avoidance of disturbance, the smooth flow of life as the Stoics called it, is profoundly misplaced. And against them Scepticism has nothing to say.


It appears to Pyrrhonists that the life of *ataraxia* is to be preferred, and for this reason they attempt to help dogmatists into this state. However, the example of the Epicureans shows that dogmatic beliefs can also lead to a calm tranquillity of soul. Furthermore, it is not even clear whether calm tranquillity is desirable at all. Personally I have little interest in detached tranquillity; I would much rather pack my life with all the richness and excitement of human emotion. A second problem, according to Rescher, is that the detachment that is needed to achieve *ataraxia* undermines our relationships with things, and turns our experience into an insipid copy of ordinary life: “This intellectual equivalent of a nuclear warfare that annihilates oneself along with the enemy offers what is clearly a very unattractive position.” [Nicholas Rescher, *Scepticism* (Totowa, New Jersey: Rowman and Littlefield, 1980), p. 15 footnote].

A life spent amongst appearances lacks the richness and concretion of a non-sceptical position. Apples taste better than the way appearances of apples appear to taste. More generally, it is easy to see how opposing arguments could be produced for and against the Pyrrhonic lifestyle. Any attempt that the Pyrrhonist makes to justify *ataraxia* can be immediately opposed by its opposite. All that a Pyrrhonic sceptic can say is that his life appears to be the best life to lead.

This collapse of justifications for the Pyrrhonic lifestyle points towards the complete collapse of Pyrrhonic scepticism. At a certain point the proliferation of juxtaposed alternatives affects the Pyrrhonist himself. Anything that he says or does becomes juxtaposed with other equally valid possibilities. Unable to continue, and yet lacking a reason not to continue, Pyrrhonic scepticism breaks up into the pluralities of arguments it has created.
sceptic. The positive sceptic finds himself ceaselessly moving between aspects, constantly exploring different visions. For him, nothing appears to be the best thing to do; no aspect shines forth as the correct aspect to be in. Unable to convince himself of the possibility of escape, the positive sceptic never leaves the flux of ambiguity and play; he never comes to rest anywhere in the movement, preservation, overturning and resurfacing of aspects. The way of being of positive scepticism is to be always on the way; the ‘system’ of positive scepticism is a ceaseless movement between systems.

**Collapse of Positive Scepticism**

Through language, theory, and text we close the openness that is the world. The closures we make provide our world – they are in a sense all that we have, and all that we could have. To want a final description of the world is to want more than this. We can provide many closures for our drawing – rabbit, duck, black lines on a white page, tiny particles impressed on a surface, analogy and of course drawing. Is it not ridiculous to want only one of these to be the ‘true’ version? Or perhaps that we might add all the interpretations together and thereby achieve a complete account? And so it is with the world. We do not have different accounts of the same ‘thing’, but different closures and different things. At any given point many closures are possible but this does not mean that any of them will do, or that they are all the same. Far from it, they are all different. What matters is not that there are a multiplicity of possible closures but that each closure textures the world and thereby enables us to do things in the ‘world’. The choice of closures is not a merely theoretical affair, for it determines the possibilities of action available to us. Closures not only provide a world but are tools that enable one to deal with the world. And what of reflexivity? The closure ‘closure’ is itself a tool, an instrument. It is not an account of the world, a world that stands outside and beyond it, but is instead merely a locality, a place from which to operate.⁹⁰

Positive scepticism is a position; it makes definite claims about the way things are. It
is a fixed way of being that does not attempt to theorise from nowhere, does not pretend that the theoriser does not exist.

Positive scepticism is extremely local. It emerged within the current Western episteme towards the end of the twentieth century. Although it has a lot in common with other sceptical positions; it remains a product of its culture, language and form of life.

Although positive scepticism is a finite philosophical position, it points beyond itself. It is a limited position that describes other possible ways to be. An aspect that situates itself amongst a multiplicity of aspects.

A map is a finite limited point of view, one opinion about the lie of the land. And yet a map points beyond itself; it indicates the possibility of places outside of the space occupied by the map. Even if the map is mistaken - for example, if the space occupied by the map is the only territory - it still remains part of its structure that it describes territories beyond itself.

Positive scepticism is a map that describes a territory populated by aspects. However, as you move over this territory, the map changes as well. Each part of the territory contains a different map of the whole.

How the different maps might be reconciled is not of interest to the positive sceptic. He suspends judgement about whether one map correctly describes the whole territory, whether the combination of all the incompatible maps is the territory, whether the territory is

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created by the map, or whether there is no distinction between map and territory.

Positive scepticism interprets scientific realism as an aspect; scientific realism interprets positive scepticism as a mistake. Two different maps are created in two different parts of the territory:

**The Positive Sceptic’s Map**
- Single objective interpretation of reality.
- False/primitive interpretations of reality.

**The Scientific-Realist Map**
- Single objective interpretation of reality.

At one point you are within positive scepticism; at another you are within scientific realism. The latter does not interpret itself as a map within the positive sceptic’s territory.

The relativistic thesis to which we have come is this, to repeat: it makes no sense to say what the objects of a theory are, beyond saying how to interpret or reinterpret that theory in another. Suppose we are working within a theory and thus treating of its objects. We do so by using the variables of the theory, whose values those objects are, though there be no ultimate sense in which that universe can have been specified. In the language of the theory there are predicates by which to distinguish portions of this universe from other portions, and these predicates differ from one another purely in the roles they play in the laws of the theory. Within this background theory we can show how some subordinate theory, whose universe is some portion of the background universe, can by a reinterpretation be reduced to another
subordinate theory whose universe is some lesser portion. Such talk of subordinate theories and their ontologies is meaningful, but only relative to the background theory with its own primitively adopted and ultimately inscrutable ontology.  

One cannot depart from positive scepticism by arguing against it. Within the aspect of positive scepticism even the arguments against it tacitly endorse its validity. When you shift aspects a different argumentative space opens up: different arguments emerge establishing different conclusions and supporting the aspect they are in. Some of these new arguments may be favourable towards positive scepticism; others may not.

One can escape from positive scepticism by moving to a point in the territory where the map no longer shows it. A point in the territory where positive scepticism no longer exists. If you inhabit an aspect without positive scepticism then you have escaped from it; even if positive scepticism continues to claim that you are in a labyrinth of aspects. There are rooms in which positive scepticism is relativistic nonsense, rooms in which cross-cultural differences can be explained more effectively, rooms without any of the problems posed and solved by positive scepticism.

I have presented the territory as if every point had a map, or at least the idea of a map or system. But at the limits of the positive sceptic’s map, there is territory without maps or systems.

Positive scepticism points towards mystical aspects; aspects incommensurable with everything; aspects that are not aspects. These aspects are the flip side of the reality

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91 W. V. Quine, *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays*, p. 50.
inhabited by philosophy. A flip side that haunts all other sides - rooms in which there is no labyrinth.

Radically different aspects are abysses in which positive scepticism ceases to exist. Positive scepticism annihilates itself when it looks back from such aspects upon itself. From these other aspects it gazes upon its own nonexistence. Positive scepticism is absent from these other aspects and suspends judgement about whether they are right or wrong.93

Positive scepticism describes aspects, but this description of aspects is itself an aspect. It is a fixed finite aspect which sees the world as a labyrinth of aspects and in which a phenomenology of aspects is the right thing to do. The problem is that if positive scepticism wishes to continue its project of positive scepticism, it must give up its suspension of judgement about right and wrong in one special case. It must decide whether positive scepticism itself is right about the issues on which it conflicts with other aspects.

The positive sceptic can claim that positive scepticism is right and continue to describe the world as a labyrinth of aspects. Or it can make the paradoxical claim that positive scepticism is wrong and fall apart into the aspects that it sees around itself. It cannot suspend judgment about its own activities because suspension of judgement is part of the aspect of positive scepticism - an unquestioning endorsement of this would be an implicit decision in favour of positive scepticism.

If the positive sceptic decides that positive scepticism is right, then he catapults

92 See Appendix III for a further discussion of mysticism.
93 See the ‘The Gorgon’s Mirror’ in Chapter 3 for a further elucidation of this structure.
himself into the paradoxes of relativism. The claim that the world is a labyrinth of aspects becomes an absolute statement that stands outside the labyrinth and surveys it from outside. Positive scepticism becomes the exception to its own rule that the world is a labyrinth of aspects.

If positive scepticism is wrong, then the world is not a labyrinth of aspects and positive scepticism collapses into the war between the 'aspects' around it. However the problem of resolving the debates between other 'aspects' remains. The situation that positive scepticism once described is still there; but positive scepticism has become a false way to describe it.

If positive scepticism attempts to suspend judgement once again it makes at least one right/wrong decision in favour of the merits of suspending judgement and enters an unsteady state which makes the impossible attempt of seeing the world through the eyes of each aspect simultaneously.

At a certain point positive scepticism bends back upon itself and undermines its conditions for speaking. Arguments that once supported it turn against it. A self justifying system collapses into invisibility. A bright vision cuts out suddenly into pitch black.

Positive scepticism returns because it captures something about the world. After its self-defeating logic causes us to reject it, we creep back towards it because we continue to experience aspects around us. Once we break free from a single dominating vision (Science
or Christianity for example) it becomes a way in which we can articulate a plural world.\textsuperscript{94}

In this chapter I have flagrantly twisted arguments in my favour; blatantly cobbled together only the facts which support 
my enclosed and self-justified theoretical position. Fortunately I am not alone in my madness. All theoretical positions work in this way - all of the academic discourses that we offer one another are hermetic fantasies cosily wrapped within their own worlds.

Furthermore, the aspect that placed itself in words upon these pages is just one particular ‘distortion’ of the post-modern aspect that is becoming increasingly common within our culture. I am only one among many inhabitants of an aspect in which reality is a labyrinth of aspects. In fact, none of the material in this chapter is mine at all: a collage of ideas assembled within me from a variety of ‘famous’ sources.

Perhaps it is the form and not the content of positive scepticism that is important. A form that functions as a mirror. As you study positive scepticism, as you accept and reject certain of its arguments and dismiss the whole thing as nonsense, the form of your own theoretical position is reflected back to you. I could have picked any aspect to serve as your mirror but this one seemed to have a particularly high reflectivity. A monad containing the entire universe within itself.

Positive scepticism cannot be argued for, but it can be evoked, embodied in a discourse that lives it out in practice. It can only hope to inspire people, for it will never

\textsuperscript{94} This was true at the time of the ancient sceptics and the death of God lead to a similar situation in the twentieth century.
convince them. In fact positive scepticism predicts that people will reject it, that its
certainties will always differ from those that structure other aspects, that there will always be
a gulf between positive sceptics and other people; a gulf that neither party has any particular
desire to erase.

And if I set forth, as in a final and absolute vision, the separation and transcendence which are the themes
of this book, these relations, which I claim form the fabric of being itself, first come together in my
discourse presently addressed to my interlocutors: inevitably across my idea of the Infinite the other faces
me—hostile, friend, my master, my student. Reflection can, to be sure, become aware of this face to face,
but the "unnatural" position of reflection is not an accident in the life of consciousness. It involves a
calling into question of oneself, a critical attitude which is itself produced in the face of the other and
under his authority.95

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95 Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, translated by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University
A Short Summary

A limp turtle climbs

Sky Plateau Mountain

A blind tortoise clumps

Into the vacant valley.\textsuperscript{96}

The last two chapters have described how theories collapse and outlined a way of speaking about a multiplicity of stable and collapsing systems that itself collapses. These chapters might loosely be described as a phenomenology of theory; a description of the ways in which theory works that is itself a theory.

Although I have presented positive scepticism and hermeneutic circles as two distinct theories, there is considerable overlap between them. On the one hand, the theory of hermeneutic circles can be used to interpret the aspects which the positive sceptic sees, and it offers a way in which we can speak about the collapse of positive scepticism into invisibility. Collapsing hermeneutic circles also act as mystical aspects, which negate the positive sceptic’s identity when he falls into them.\textsuperscript{97} On the other hand, the theory of hermeneutic circles is affected by positive scepticism because it is reduced by positive scepticism to a single room within the labyrinth of theory theory. This provides the theory of hermeneutic circles with a place to speak, but it problematises it as well since there are numerous other theories about theories and many different interpretations of the theories that I have used as examples. Within some aspects structuralism does not collapse because problems about self-reflexivity and conditions of possibility do not arise within them.


\textsuperscript{97} Other rooms can play this role as well. The aspect of a cat is not mystical (in the sense in which I am using it here – see Appendix III), but the positive sceptic’s identity is completely negated within it.
The next task of this project is to make these two theory theories more concrete. A collapsing system cannot just be described; it needs to be demonstrated and lived through. A convincing case for positive scepticism cannot be made solely by describing ways in which aspects can be different - concrete manifestations of positive scepticism need to be opened out.

The next chapter uses a theory of madness to demonstrates how these theories work and interact. It opens out aspects of the ‘insane’, which are often radically different from our own, and deconstructs the difference between sane and insane so that we are forced to take their aspects seriously as aspects - rather than as symptoms of a biological disease. Arguments from the ‘antipsychiatric’ literature are drawn upon to develop this theory. The structure of this chapter is similar to the chapter on positive scepticism; a field is set out containing a multiplicity of aspects and then a negating-sustaining relationship is developed with these aspects. The theory of the homogenous zone needs to be sane to be meaningful and yet in its language of sanity it overrides the distinction between a coherent scientific theory and the ramblings of a madman. The homogenous zone collapses when it reflexively applies its oscillation between sanity and madness to itself.

Hard to carve
   in worm-eaten
       wood;
No point in painting
   the rotten fence
       with turds.99

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98 The first two chapters in this project were illustrations as well as explanations of their subject matter.
99 Ibid., 228, p. 51.
The Homogenous Zone

Chirps in a box. If you abstract yourself far enough from a given context you seem somehow to create a new kind of concretion. It isn’t something you have or see but yet somehow. It’s being fascinated by the generative process of the mind. The thing is to be caught in it, yet abstract from it. Both be in it and out of it—revolving everything around me. You explode like when the stars explode. In the sky a plate which burned bright. Symbol of all light and energy with me contracted into this plate.¹

There are three ways to escape from prison:

1. After months of bleeding scrabbling at damp coarse mortar, you prise and yank free one of the bars and jump slide and run with pounding heart over the rooftops. A clutching-scrabbling razor-wire-shred leaves you blood-dripping in a wet field. You make a stumbling break for the dark sodden woods, tear off your prison uniform and take a deep fresh breath of earthy air.

2. Long months of solitary contemplation teach you that the prison’s dripping grey-granite walls, barbed yards and armed guards were all erected to protect you from oppression. Prisons shelter freedom; they keep it out of reach of the jack-booted dictators that wander in the countryside outside.

   Your prison clothes transfigure into the bold blue uniform of a brave new world. The taste of prison fare is enhanced by emancipation. You rush from your cell to

share your discovery with the shambling hollow-eyed ‘prisoners’ and the stubbled ‘guards’. Soon, people will start to club the ‘guards’, rip out the bars and tear down the walls to break into the ‘prison’; clamouring outside the gates they will beg for freedom.

3. A lightning-flash of sudden insight reveals that prisons and freedom, barbed enclosures and liberated spaces, are just so many man-made ways of dividing space; valid for certain applications and purposes, but of no real importance or significance. Life is happy and sad, monotonous and exhilarating on both sides of these artificial barriers. You sit and meditate ... chill out in the homogenous zone.

**Introduction**

Is your mind a tumult of twisting upheavals sliding reaching and marching to the rat tat tat of the soldier’s drum? Can you feel the surging explosion of brilliant light effaced by a thunder-clap plunge into empty black? Can you see your sanity spiralling off into a convulsing puppet that jerks, flips out as it twitches and disintegrates in despair?

Are your vomit-stained rags the softermine of royalty? Is your incoherent babble the ruminations of philosopher, scientist or saint? Is your un-reason reasonable?

Why are you not mad, mentally ill, insane, maniacal, abnormal, schizophrenic, of unsound mind, crazy, barmey, fucked-up, off your trolley, gaga, a loony? Prove that you have not lost it, flipped your lid, been taken by the fairies, abducted by the aliens.

You have never been diagnosed as mad - this is the shifting sand upon which you erect your sanity. But your illness has gone unrecognised ... you have been deprived of treatment because the steady-sure advance of science has taken too long to reach you.

This chapter will correct this oversight, it will prod science to progress a little further;
it will bare your craziness for all the world to see, it will demonstrate that you are a
demented fucked-up schizo who should be chucked into the loony bin. Unfortunately there is
no cure. Anaesthetisation, normalisation, lobotomisation, electrocution, and neuro-surgery
are all on offer; but they are all just as crazy as the illness that they attempt to heal.

Everyone is insane. We are a world of lost souls; five billion ghosts grope and
wander in the global weed garden ... blind, stumbling, reaching out.

Medicine recognises a continuum between the mad and the sane. There is a large
group of normal people who are pretty much sane, a number of people who are neurotic, or
marginal cases, and a number of people who act in ways that appear crazy to any reasonable
man. There are also any number of shadings in between these three groups. On this
continuum the majority of people stand within the zone of health which shades off
imperceptibly into mild and then chronic disease.

There is also a continuum of shadings of truth. The majority of people know the
truth, some are mildly deluded, and a minority have completely lost their grip on reality.

These two continua overlap and are, perhaps, ultimately the same. Mentally healthy
people stand within the bright light of truth which shades off into the dark deluded world of
the mad, lost in their delirious world of unreason. The more mentally diseased a person is,
the less seriously we take their beliefs; the further a person’s beliefs are from our own truth,
the more we are inclined to call them mentally diseased.

In the diagram above there is continuous shading between the different colours, it is a
continuum of colour. When we look at the diagram we see that the colour at the centre is not
the same as the colour close to the periphery. One is yellow, the other is dark red; there is an
absolute and essential difference between the two. However, according to scientific theory,
yellow and red are electromagnetic rays vibrating at different frequencies. The rays
reflecting off the diagram only differ quantitatively, and yet we perceive a qualitative
difference between them and separate them out with labels in accordance with this
perception.

The continua from health to disease and from truth to delusion gradually change
along their lengths. Normality and insanity are qualitatively different, each has its own
characteristics, but these qualitative differences can also be reduced to quantitative
differences - sanity and insanity can be understood as different levels of intensity within a
single homogenous zone. Furthermore, the use of “health”, “disease”, “truth” and “delusion”
to describe these differences is an arbitrary convention; whether we choose to say that a
certain intensity is healthy or diseased, the bearer of truth or falsehood, is purely a matter of
definition. Within the homogenous zone it is the intensities of qualities that are important:
the shadings from health to disease, from truth to falsehood, are secondary attachments to the
zone: temporary labels stabilised by the majority’s consensus.

In the diagram above there are incremental shadings between the different colours. However we can also see the diagram as a number of circular regions with discontinuities
between them - for example there appears to be a break, a dividing line, between the yellow
and the red. In many encounters between ‘normals’ and the mad the continuum is not apparent; the ‘normal’ experiences a disjunction, a hiatus, between herself and the madman.

This sense of discontinuity will be dealt with in the section on labelling in the first part of this chapter. Sociological explanations will be provided which explain how the differences between parts of the continuum can become accentuated to create the appearance of two discrete groups.

The rest of the first part of this chapter will highlight the traces of madness that are present in all parts of the continuum - it will reveal the electromagnetic spectrum behind the qualitative differences in colour. There is a great deal of schizophrenic \(^2\) thought in the ‘normal’ child, in our past as a culture, in our inner thinking, and in our philosophy and science. After the madness of ‘normality’ has been unveiled in the first part of this chapter the ground will be prepared for a vision of the homogenous zone that underlies both sanity and insanity.

In general, this chapter pursues a double approach to madness. At the most global level it critiques the whole notion of madness and sets all beliefs into a state of oscillation between truth and falsehood, madness and reason. Our beliefs cease to be CORRECT; other beliefs cease to be DELUDED; we are hurled into a labyrinth of aspects and stripped of our ability to choose between them. We no longer dismiss another aspect on grounds of madness; we no longer believe the aspect that we inhabit because it has become mad.

At a more concrete level, this chapter recognises that the distinction between madness and sanity in our culture (and in virtually every other according to cross-cultural comparisons) identifies a difference between people that cannot be simply dismissed as a

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\(^2\) Schizophrenic thought is being used here, and elsewhere, as an example of madness. However, neurotic or psychotic thought could be used as well.
social production or structure of language. Schizophrenics are different from your average nine to fiver. The homogenous zone describes these differences as different intensities of qualities. Certain collections of intensities of qualities are called “mad” by people within the homogenous zone, and other collections are called “sane”.

The second part of this chapter is a detailed study of the homogenous zone that deals with its structure, the disjunctions and reversals that arise within it, and with its mutation in isolation. In the last part of this chapter I will discuss some objections to the homogenous zone. These include medical theories of madness, and the reduction of madness to sanity. After a section on the mystical limit of the homogenous zone I will demonstrate the paradoxical impossibility/ possibility of a reasonable discussion of madness in a world which oscillates between madness and reason.

Beneath the flickering labels of consensus there is just the homogenous zone; thrown from nowhere onto the surface of spaceship earth. After the ‘sane’ have exchanged places with the ‘mad’, all past, present and future beliefs become equally valid and any belief system that we are mad enough to invent becomes just as true as any other. Mad disease collapses and the damp steps down to the labyrinth lie open."

... the Renaissance, after the great terror of death, the fear of the apocalypses, and the threats of the other world, experienced a new danger in this world: that of...
a silent invasion from within, a secret gap in the earth, as it were. This invasion is that of the Insane, which places the Other world on the same level as this one, and on ground level, as it were. As a result, one no longer knows whether it is our world that is duplicated in a fantastic mirage; whether, on the contrary, it is the other world that takes possession of this world; or whether the secret of our world was to be already, without our knowing, the other world. ... Reason, too recognized itself as being duplicated and dispossessed of itself: it thought itself wise, and it was mad; it thought it knew, and it knew nothing; it thought itself righteous, and it was insane; knowledge led one to the shades and to the forbidden world, when one thought one was being led by it to eternal light.³

Intimations of the Homogenous Zone

Labels, Clusters, and Thresholds

Social groups create deviance by making the rules whose infraction constitutes deviance, and by applying those rules to particular people and labelling them as outsiders. From this point of view, deviance is not a quality of the act the person commits, but rather a consequence of the application by others of rules and sanctions to an “offender”. The deviant is one to whom that label has successfully been applied; deviant behavior is behavior that people so label.4

Societies function according to explicit and implicit systems of rules. We drive on the left, shit in private and respect other people's bodies and possessions. Most deviations from these rules go unnoticed - we ignore minor deviations in public and excuse the small deviations of our family and friends. However, past a certain point or in a certain context a deviation from the system of social rules can no longer be ignored or excused, and the transgressing person is labelled deviant. This label creates a difference between the deviant and the people who label him. Before the person was labelled he was part of society and his family and friends accepted him as one of them - as like them. After the label has been applied the person becomes deviant, someone different, an outsider marginalised from the group.

Once a person has been labelled, our reification of language leads us to perceive a qualitative difference between the labelled person and a person who has not been labelled. This may motivate a search for an explanation of this difference - for a deviant physiognomy, deviant genes, a deviant childhood. Furthermore, labelling a person deviant may make his behaviour more deviant. A person who has been imprisoned for burglary
meets other burglars; when his record prevents him from getting a job he may organise his whole life around burglary. Labelling creates the perception of a qualitative difference between two parts of a continuum and increases the actual differences between labelled and unlabelled people.

According to labelling theory, most deviations - such as rape, obscenity, theft, etc. - are readily classified and a predetermined punishment is held ready for them. However, some deviant actions are difficult to classify and there is no obvious way in which they can be dealt with. If I stare intently at the left ear of a person who is speaking to me they soon come to feel that I am breaking some unwritten law of social etiquette. However, since there is no explicit law or punishment pertaining to the orientation of the eyes in conversation, they are forced to fall back upon a residual category of deviance which groups my transgression amongst all the other unclassifiable acts that break social norms. People who break social rules in ways that cannot be easily labelled are lumped together into a single catch-all deviant category: they are stamped “mentally ill” and shunted off into the asylum.

The culture of the group provides a vocabulary of terms for categorising many norm violations: crime, perversion, drunkenness, and bad manners are familiar examples. Each of these terms is derived from the type of norm broken, and ultimately, from the type of behavior involved. After exhausting these categories, however, there is always a residue of the most diverse kinds of violations, for which the culture provides no explicit label. ... For the convenience of the society in construing these instances of unnameable rule-breaking which are called to its attention, these violations may be lumped together into a residual category: witchcraft, spirit possession, or, in our own society, mental illness. In this discussion, the diverse kinds of rule-breaking for which our society provides no explicit label, and which, therefore, sometimes lead to the labelling of the violator as mentally ill, will be considered to be technically residual rule-breaking.  

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A person who has been labelled mentally ill may resist this label and continue to live their life as before. On the other hand, they may accept it - especially if they have been interned in an asylum and pressured to conform to the stereotype of mental illness in that environment. If they accept the label they may feel that they have a disease and need treatment. They may act in ways that confirm the diagnosis; they may behave in a manner that is stereotypically crazy or schizophrenic - especially if this helps them to resolve or hide from some of the problems that led to the labelling of their initial deviation.

When labelling first occurs, it merely gives a name to rule-breaking which has other roots. When (and if) the rule-breaking becomes an issue, and is not ignored or rationalized away, labelling may create a social type, a pattern of “symptomatic” behavior in conformity with the stereotyped expectations of others. Finally, to the extent that the deviant role becomes a part of the deviant’s self-conception, his ability to control his own behavior may be impaired under stress, resulting in episodes of compulsive behavior.\(^6\)

Labelling theory is open minded about the cause of the original deviation, but it does think that deviations are extremely common throughout the population and that most of them go unnoticed: “Relative to the rate of treated mental illness, the rate of unrecorded residual rule breaking is extremely high\(^7\). This is confirmed by investigations into the distribution of mental illness amongst the population at large. In The Social Creation of Mental Illness Cochrane cites studies which suggest that the prevalence of psychological ‘symptoms’ amongst the general population is between 20 and 60 per cent, with only a small proportion - perhaps 5 per cent - actually receiving treatment.\(^8\)

\(^6\) Ibid., p. 92.
\(^7\) Ibid., p. 47.
\(^8\) A great deal of caution should be exercised when interpreting the type of study that Cochrane cites. These surveys present a very simplified questionnaire to those people in the community who are prepared to answer it (or are capable of answering it). Cochrane discusses these surveys in some detail:
In our study of the distribution of psychological symptoms in urban areas of England we found that fully 36 per cent of the sample interviewed had four or more of the 22 symptoms asked about - a level which is sometimes used as a criterion for psychological ‘caseness’. Over 20 per cent met the more stringent criterion of 7 or more symptoms (Cochrane and Stopes-Roe 1980a). 9

This supports the idea that there is a continuum between normal and insane behaviour and that it is social factors extraneous to this behaviour that are responsible for separating society into two clearly demarcated groups, one mad and the other sane.

A central reason why some people with ‘symptoms’ of schizophrenia are labelled mentally ill, whilst others with some of the same ‘symptoms’ are not, is that a cluster of phenomena is much more noticeable than a single one: “several odd behaviours, even if they co-occur by chance, are more noticeable than only one.” 10 Although schizophrenic ‘symptoms’ - such as hallucinations, delusional beliefs, affectual withdrawal, etc. - are widely distributed throughout the population, we do not notice them when they are present individually or in small numbers. However, if a number of ‘symptoms’ are concentrated in an individual they can have a seriously disruptive effect on their life and they are immediately identified as being a bit “paranoid” or “strange”. It is significant in this respect that the criteria for diagnosing schizophrenia (DSM III) requires two or more of certain symptoms to be present for a positive diagnosis to be made. A large proportion of the population has ‘symptoms’ of mental illness, but only those with a number of them are

What they can do is to give a fairly sensitive estimate of the extent to which an individual has psychological traits or ‘symptoms’ which are characteristic of people who have been diagnosed as mentally ill and which are uncharacteristic of those deemed to be free of mental illness.


The questionnaires that are used in these surveys are designed to measure the kinds of symptoms that occur frequently amongst those diagnosed as suffering from mental illness, and rarely amongst those diagnosed normal. In the appendix to his book Cochrane gives an example of a typical questionnaire that is used in community surveys.

9 Raymond Cochrane, The Social Creation of Mental Illness, p. 158.
labelled “mentally ill”.

Related to the idea of a cluster of symptoms becoming noticeable, is that of a threshold - “Each culture has its own threshold, which evolves with the configuration of that culture”\textsuperscript{11}. When a threshold is applied to a continuum it separates it into two readily discernible groups. Everything that passes the threshold is sorted into one group and everything that falls below it is sorted into another. If we were asked to divide Block A in the diagram below into two regions, one white and the other black, we would apply a threshold to it.

\begin{center}
\includegraphics[width=0.7\textwidth]{threshold_diagram.png}
\end{center}

We would classify grey lighter than the threshold as white and grey darker than the threshold as black. After the application of the threshold we are left with a block divided into two regions wholly distinct from one another (Block B). This threshold has increased the perceived differences between different parts of the block. Before the block was classified Region A differed little from Region B. After the application of the threshold Region A

\textsuperscript{11} Michel Foucault, \textit{Mental Illness and Psychology}, p. 78. According to Foucault our threshold for the
becomes radically distinct from Region B. If there is a continuum of ‘symptoms’ of schizophrenia throughout a population - some people with a large number, some with only one or two, and some with none at all - and a continuum of intensities of ‘symptoms’ - some people who hallucinate a lot and some who only hallucinate occasionally - then people with more ‘symptoms’ and a greater intensity of ‘symptoms’ than our tolerance level for bizarre behaviour will be labelled “mad”. The application of this threshold separates the population into two distinct groups; one mad and the other sane. Those classified as sane become homologous with one another, those classified as mad become homologous with each other, and an essential difference is perceived between these two categories.

Overall, labelling theory, supported by ideas about clustering and thresholds, shows us how a population with a continuum of ‘symptoms’ of schizophrenia divides itself into two distinct groups - one mad and the other sane. People with 2* Connected with the labelling perspective - but not strictly relevant to the flow of my argument - are the reasons why schizophrenics are treated in the way that they are by society. Whilst it is understandable that people who deviate in some residual way will be excluded and marginalised, it is not obvious why they should be treated medically and taught to improve themselves through self observation. The reasons behind the ways in which the mad are treated are set out by Foucault in *Madness and Civilization*. This book traces the shifts in the complex web of interlocking religious, political, medical, economic, and moral contingencies that have left us with the experience of madness that we have today.

Economic depression, changed attitudes to poverty, the de facto withdrawal of the Church, the emergence of the new work ethic, the administrative expansion of the state, all of these factors combine to usher in what Foucault calls ‘the age of confinement’.


Parallel to this physical history, Foucault traces the history of the ideas that are assembled within the current attitude towards madness.

Foucault further maintains that the modern conception of madness as mental illness was unwittingly constructed from two key elements of the classical conception. The notion that the mad are animals was transformed into the modern view of madness as a natural phenomenon, governed by biological and psychological laws, while the Classical moral condemnation of madness was retained through the asylum system of confinement, which surreptitiously imposed bourgeois values on its inmates. He reads the emergence of modern psychiatry not as an ineluctable triumph of compassion based on scientific objectivity, but as

perception of madness has fallen considerably since the mid nineteenth century. After Freud’s psychoanalytic readings of everyday life we now see psychopathology in all of us.
clusters of bizarre behaviour that pass a culturally dependent threshold are classified as clinically insane by the rest of the population. The labelling and isolation of these deviants reinforces their ‘symptoms’ and makes them even more different. It is not an abyss, a qualitative difference, that separates sanity from insanity, but a quantitative difference, split into two labelled groups by a threshold.

Whilst labelling theory goes some way towards explaining many of the differences between the mad and the sane, it is only a partial theory, and it has little to say about how a person who is ‘normal’ one day can mutate into a madman overnight without any influence from labelling or institutionalisation. Barbara O’Brien woke up one morning and found herself immersed in a world of operators and things; a shoe salesman went berserk and journeyed from city to city purchasing shoe stores with money he did not have. The medical model cannot completely explain these transformations either, but it can at least point in a promising direction.

The limitations of labelling theory do not invalidate it, but they do mean that supplementary the product of scientifically and morally suspect forces peculiar to the social and intellectual structures of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. [Gary Gutting, Introduction to The Cambridge Companion to Foucault (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p.11.]

Duhem, one of Foucault’s distant mentors, claimed that the history of a principle’s development is at the same time a logical analysis of it. The numerous detailed histories in Madness and Civilization are both an analysis of the modern attitude towards the mad and an explanation of its strange mixture of morality and medicine.

I do not have the space to discuss all of the detailed histories that are presented in Madness and Civilization. However, one important factor that is discussed by Foucault is the unproductivity of the mad. Many people who manifest the ‘symptoms’ of schizophrenia cannot work. Their grip on ‘reality’ is too poor for them to be able to engage in alienated labour. Instead, they depend upon their families, begging, or state-‘care’ for survival. However both family care and begging can lead to their internment by the state. If a family runs out of money or patience - or if their relative is very violent or eccentric - they hand their relative over into state ‘care’ or kick them out into the streets. When begging becomes socially unacceptable (as it did prior to the great confinement in the eighteenth century), they are confined by the state, along with other delinquents who cannot earn a living. Once they have become interned in state care, the unproductivity of the mad separates them from other people who have been interned. A distinct category of human beings who cannot work is created in a society where work defines a person’s entire worth and existence. Eventually this disease of capitalist society becomes productive of disease entities.

Foucault’s history of folly has been questioned by a number of authors. A historical criticism was offered by Midelfort who claimed that “Foucault deliberately disregarded the way in which madhouses developed from medieval hospitals, and especially from monasteries.” [Erik Midelfort, ‘Madness and Civilization in Early Modern Europe: A Reappraisal of Michel Foucault’, printed in Peter Burke (ed.), Critical Essays on Michel Foucault (Aldershot: Scholar Press, 1992), p. 33].
explanations will have to be sought from other areas. Labelling theory explains our perception of the continuum of schizophrenic ‘symptoms’; but why there is a continuum of intensities at all, or why people move along it, are questions beyond its remit.2*

The Monstrous;
A Rich Chuckling Cry

6 years:
Fear of supernatural: ghosts, witches.
Fear that someone is hiding under the bed.
Spatial: fear of being lost, fear of the woods.
Fear of the elements: fire, water, thunder, lightning.
Fear of sleeping alone in a room or of being only one on a floor of the house....

7 years:
Many fears, especially visual: the dark, attics, cellars.
Interprets shadows as ghosts and witches.
Fears war, spies, burglars, people hiding in closet or under bed.
Fears now stimulated by reading, radio, cinema.

According to Midelfort, Foucault disregards the extensive medical history of madness and presents madmen as victims of a purely moral repression. Although Foucault does stress the importance of moral control, it is unfair to claim that *Madness and Civilization* disregards the treatment of the mad by medicine. As Foucault points out in a reply to Midelfort, *Madness and Civilization* has a whole chapter dedicated to the evolution of the medical treatment of the mad. A more subtle methodological critique was given by Derrida in ‘Cogito and the History of Madness’ where he questions Foucault’s claim to be able to write the history of madness itself and mocks Foucault’s mythical point of unity between madness and reason. However, since Derrida does not question most of the detail of the history that Foucault offers, his objections do not apply here (but see the short discussion of Derrida in the last part of this chapter).

Another criticism of Foucault is offered by Roth and Kroll:

The theories of Foucault, Laing, Szasz and their progeny can be used to explain all mental disease in all cultures and races at all times. It follows that they can explain nothing. They seek to prove a negative: that mental diseases as observed down the ages do not exist.


Although this criticism misses the contingency of Foucault’s theory – *Madness and Civilization* explains the current treatment of the mad in terms of events and ideas that are local products of a single age - Roth/ Kroll are right in that different contingent theories could be used to explain all mental disease in all cultures and races at all times. However, this is not Foucault’s intention; he is, in fact, attempting to save madness from the totalising treatment of its age, he wants to let madness speak for itself, untainted by the contingent historical productions of its time. Foucault is hoping to liberate madness from the category of mental disease; he does not want to eliminate it altogether.

One reason for the medical treatment of people who manifest
Worries about things: not being liked, being late to school.

8 to 9 years:
Fewer fears and less worrying. No longer fears the water; less fear of the dark. Good evaluation, and fears are reasonable: about personal inability and failure, especially school failure.¹²

Night, darkness, terror. Suggestive forms lurk, over there, out there, in the cupboard, in the corner. Embodied evil; under my bed, behind the stark dark form of my chair. A menacing presence, the monstrous there, approaching threatening fear. A cosy retreat under the enveloping duvet wins a brief reprieve - but it is still out there, lurking, menacing; behind the chair, in the cupboard, between the walls, sinister, waiting in that suggestive pile of clothes. Fear.

The child senses the presence of the monstrous, the uncanny; it fears the demons that lurk beneath the serenity of light. Adults provide the child with endless myths, tales and names to channel and dissipate this fear. It is the devil, the schizophrenic ‘symptoms’ that is not covered by Foucault is that they suffer, they are in a state of anguish, they cry out for help. Although some of the suffering of schizophrenics would be alleviated if they were not labelled, drugged, and interned (and if suffering did not offer a ready-made language for people to communicate in - see Thomas Szasz, The Myth of Mental Illness), it is undoubtedly true that many schizophrenics experience ‘delusions’ that are frightening; anxiety and despair that are real. People who suffer from physical pain are offered medical treatment; and a natural response to a suffering schizophrenic is to offer the same.

There are, however, alternative ways of dealing with the suffering that the madman experiences. Exorcism or spiritual cleaning can be used to help the foaming fool - although these approaches are often combined with medicine. These other techniques are not widespread in our society because we lack an effective religious language for dealing with suffering. The result is that our approach has become entirely medical - postulating diseases and symptoms along with their concomitant ‘cures’. This is not universal - psychoanalysis uses a number of potent myths to alleviate the suffering by dialogue; but even here, the assumption of an underlying organic disease is widespread. If the schizophrenic did not suffer, or if his suffering was interpreted as a purely moral or demonic conflict, then perhaps madness would be less of a disease in our society.

A final point worth making is that although people with schizophrenic ‘symptoms’ are medically treated more than other deviants, this is a different emphasis and not a radical break. In many ways schizophrenics are treated like other deviants; they are locked up, denied employment opportunities, and shunned as pariahs. Furthermore, there is a tendency towards treating all deviants as mentally ill. A person robs a bank, not because it is an easy way to get money, but because he lacks an appropriate sublimation for his aggressive drives; a person rapes not for the pleasure of it but because an infantile complex remains unresolved in him.

bogeyman, Freddy Kruger, a troll, an ogre, a wolfman. Eventually childish myths are discarded and replaced by adult ones (the F.B.I., K.G.B., C.I.A., B.N.P.), or sublimated and hidden in morality or other adult concerns. These hidden terrors are temporarily reactivated and relived in horror movies; or more subtly in detective thrillers where the lurking presence of evil is projected into an unknown criminal, and dissipated when the criminal is brought out into the light of day and punished.

*Evil* is a force of multiple shifting forms in the adult world but it is still there, *lurking*, menacing the adults coddled in their bedclothes of self-righteousness.

*Friends,* chatting and discussing, dancing and playing. A population of little girls and boys, bizarre benign cuddly creatures, animals that advise; the inanimate has feelings too. Talking toys, situations and jokes shared with invisible friends.

Stories and cartoons reflect this animated world of the child. Singing trees, dancing brooms and laughing birds populate a landscape that has

3* Although there are a number of parallels between the schizophrenic state and childhood - the presence of ‘fantasy’ friends, a lack of differentiation between the subjective and the objective, a low level of abstraction and self reference (this last is claimed by some authors but disputed by Sass) - there are many differences as well. Schizophrenia is not simply a regression to childhood or to the ‘primitive’. Although many schizophrenic behaviours are apparently childish, many of their beliefs are derived from the adult world (such as religious ideas, persecution by the state, telepathic communication, etc.). Norman Cameron tested schizophrenics on a number of tasks which he also presented to normal adults, senile adults, and normal children. He found that the schizophrenics’ results were markedly different from those of the other groups:

Nothing comparable to the data we have been considering resulted in these groups of subjects. It may be concluded that, in this respect at least, the disorganised thinking of our schizophrenics followed neither the pattern of a common deterioration nor that of the normal child. It is quite true that the child is in the process of developing adult social language and thought organization, whereas the schizophrenic is in the process of losing it. But one process is not, as often erroneously implied, simply the reverse of the other. It is hardly more correct to assert that as the schizophrenic loses his adult organization he becomes a child in his thinking, than it is to say of normal children that as they grow up they recover from schizophrenia. We maintain that, in disorganizing, the schizophrenic develops a product that is new and unique in his life history.


Foucault also criticises accounts that interpret schizophrenia as a fall back on a linear scale of development:

In these accounts there is the myth of a psychological substance which, progressing in the course of individual
not yet hardened into the opposition between objective and subjective. The child experiences neither of these abstractions; the living breathing buzzing world is simply there in all its richness. Adults used to believe that they were accompanied in their day to day goings-on by playmates in heaven and the people doomed to wander amongst the sad lands of the dead. They continue to ‘pretend’ that brute lumps of flesh and fur have thoughts and feelings too. In modern society it could be argued that our friends from heaven and amongst the dead have departed, and that animals really do have feelings too. Perhaps the animation of the child’s world actually does fade as we gain wisdom - or perhaps it is exchanged for the rather soulless quarks, arts and free democratic subjects that are alleged to feature the world as we know it. Perhaps we only rediscover our friendship with the world in brief instants; when we pat a proud stone lion, curse a malicious toe-blunting brick, or unite with a surging singing happy world along a woodland path in spring.

The imaginary of Disneyland is neither true nor false, it is a deterrence machine set up in order to rejuvenate the fiction of the real in the opposite camp. Whence the debility of this imaginary, its infantile degeneration. This world wants to be childish in order to make us believe that the adults are elsewhere, in the “real” world, and to conceal the fact that true childishness is everywhere - that it is that of the adults themselves who come here to act the child in order to foster illusions as to their real childishness.¹³

There are essentially only quantitative differences between the dream of the youngster who plays general

¹³ Jean Baudrillard, Simulacra and Simulation, translated by Sheila Faria Glaser (Michigan: The University of
on his hobby-horse ... the twilight state of the hysteric, and the hallucinations of the schizophrenic in which his most impossible wishes appear fulfilled. All these are but points along the same scale.\textsuperscript{14}

We \textit{were} schizo children. And perhaps we have yet to grow up.\textsuperscript{3*}

**We Were Deluded**

During the thousandth year the number of pilgrims increased. Most of them were smitten with terror as with a plague. Every phenomenon of nature filled them with alarm. A thunder-storm sent them all upon their knees in mid March. It was the opinion that thunder was the voice of God, announcing the day of judgement. Numbers expected the earth to open and give up its dead at the sound. Every meteor in the sky seen at Jerusalem brought the whole Christian population into the streets to weep and pray.\textsuperscript{15}

Traditionally we are a species that \textit{was} deluded. The primitive animistic world of spirits, religion and magic was an error that we have now grown out of. Moses was an embittered Egyptian, Christ was a megalomaniacal schizophrenic, Muhammad was epileptic. One of the most striking things about \textit{Madness and Civilization} is the weirdness, the craziness, of the theories of madness that Foucault describes - a world of spirits, elements, humours, coolings, heatings and frenzies.\textsuperscript{16}


\textsuperscript{16} See also R. D. Laing:

The madness of Europe is revealed not in the persons of the madmen of Europe, but in the actions of the self-validated sane ones, who wrote the books, sanctified and authorised by State, Church, and the repression of bourgeois morality. The history of madness documented here is the history of the projection into the few who were destroyed or forgotten, of the lunacy of the majority who won the day.

[‘The Invention of Madness’, printed in \textit{Critical Essays on Michel Foucault}, edited by Peter Burke, p. 26.]
Now we can assimilate these bizarre realms into our history as early tentative gropings towards Absolute Knowing. Religion was imperfect knowledge of the Absolute; Alchemy was a necessary precursor to modern experimental science.

The problems with this retrospective and euphemistic interpretation have been often enough stated. Even Popper admits that science rests upon a swamp and that the results of an experiment are partly, if not entirely, dependent upon the filters that we apply to our observations.\textsuperscript{17} The positivistic interpretation of history has competitors - Kuhn, Foucault, Adorno - and we are no longer sure which is the right one. We are no longer sure whether our early delusions were a partial grasp of the truth. We are no longer sure whether our early delusions were delusional. We are no longer sure that we are no longer deluded.

D: I see. So God was trying to straighten you out, you thought?
J: Ya.
D: Tell me more about how you knew it was His voice when you heard the thunderstorm.
J: ‘Cause nobody talks that loud.
D: The loudness.
J: Yea, the strength in His voice. Said, “OD,” like a giant, like a giant was screaming out loud.
D: Tell me, was His voice in the thunder or did you hear the thunder and then hear his voice?
J: No, I heard it in the thunder.
D: Was His voice the same as the thunder?
J: Yes, exactly the same as the thunder. He was speaking through the thunder.\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{17} See also \textit{Being and Time}, p. 192 for Heidegger’s similar point about our fore-conceptions determining our interpretation in advance.

We are Autistic

... when we think in complete security and with no strong integrating tendency at work we have nothing like language processes going on in our minds. We have almost nothing “in mind.” Certain recollections of past states of the organism flow and shift with extreme velocity to certain things which according to the old psychologists are associated with them, and we arrive at a realization that the intended action, for example, would fail; that is that. Then we begin again and presently we arrive at a series of hypothetical events which might work; and then we think. We think in various ways. The most striking way in which we think is how to tell our thoughts to someone else; if you think of anything in terms of how to tell it to a stranger, your mental process approaches the characteristics of good written language.19

We sit alone, staring into space, tuned to the inner murmurings of our souls. Inchoate experiences shift and stir; only partially carved into the clarity of words. Emotional complexes, memories, words, concepts and hypothetical situations lock and mesh, collide and drift together. Suddenly a meaningful constellation snaps into place; realisation dawns. We integrate this reconfigured congerie of image, memory, concept and language into our world picture; slot it into our vision of how things are. We may act upon this realisation, or begin the labour of assembling it into an articulate speech that we offer as a gift to another.

Vygotsky asserts that the structure or skeleton of normal adult thought is provided by a kind of “inner speech.” As he explains, the form of this speech derives from its function, its role as a medium of expression rather than communication, a way of symbolizing thoughts for oneself. It follows that all that is obvious to the speaker can be omitted. And so, in inner speech, language becomes abbreviated or telegraphic: syntax is simplified, explicit causal and logical connections are omitted, and there is an absence of framing devices such as those normally used to distinguish metaphorical from literal meanings of verbal images. Also, the topic is presupposed rather than asserted directly; and few explicit references

are made to speaker or addressee, or to temporal and spatial contexts, for all of these can simply be taken for granted.\footnote{20}

Our inner speech omits an enormous amount of contextual detail that is implicitly known by us, but not by a person that we talk to. Furthermore, a great deal of the thinking of inner speech is done with images instead of words. I do not think the word “Mother” when I am thinking about my mother; I bring brief flashes of a memory of my mother before me. If our inner speech was written down without the implicitly assumed context and images it would make very little sense, even to the person who originally thought it.

... the closest approaches to schizophrenic speech in your daily life occur when you do not need to be alert, because you are secure. The schizophrenic has given up any hopes of satisfaction and is concerned only with the maintenance of security. He shows, often with painful chagrin in retrospect, the autistic type of speech which is probably our second nature, and which we certainly show among our intimates when we are very tired and safe.\footnote{21}

 Sometimes, when we are very tired, or when we feel secure with friends or family, our inner speech becomes our outer speech. We omit context and framing devices, we use images instead of words, we bare our inchoate shifting autistic soul without the interlocking armour of speech. The only difference between ‘normals’ and schizophrenics is that the latter’s day to day mask of language has more cracks in it, more slits through which can be glimpsed the autistic world common to all of us.

\footnote{20} Louis A. Sass, \textit{Madness and Modernism}, p. 194.
The Megalithic Bio-Cruncher

For me, madness was definitely not a condition of illness; I did not believe that I was ill. It was rather a country, opposed to Reality, where reigned an implacable light, blinding, leaving no place for shadow; an immense space without boundary, limitless, flat; a mineral lunar country, cold as the wastes of the North Pole. In this stretching emptiness, all is unchangeable, immobile, congealed, crystallised. Objects are stage trappings, placed here and there, geometric cubes without meaning.

People turn weirdly about, they make gestures, movements without sense; they are phantoms whirling on an infinite plain, crushed by the pitiless electric light. And I—I am lost in it, isolated, cold, stripped, purposeless under the light.²²

Sometimes I am staring into the eyes of a person I intimately know and their personhood collapses. Two white and slimy orbs twitched by tiny muscles, automatic irises swelling and squeezing in response to light, conditioned clichéd responses, a programmed neuromatrix, an animal driven by instinct, an assembly of particles and fields, a machine, a thing.

A massive machine with billions of complex parts. Interlocking, ticking. A matrix of components resonating in response to one another. Delicate tremors sweeping through it, and occasional shock waves; ripping, tearing the tiny parts apart from one another. Then, slowly, the parts reassemble; linking up, interlocking until order is restored.

My body, an infinitesimal part of this machine; an assembly of microscopic parts. Each cellular part a tiny machine moving about, transmitting, receiving, manufacturing substances. Each machinic cell assembled from tiny components supplying energy, mobility, protection, duplication.

A gigantic sea of intensities, a twisted and folded field in a state of continuous
agitation. Waves, vibrating strings of knotted dimensions. Clouds of fuzzy particles showering backwards and forwards in time; splitting, fusing, joining; located everywhere and nowhere.

My consciousness, an indeterminate electron cloud modulated by events in the rest of the universe. My brain and body, small patches in the cosmological fabric. Millions of particles, vibrating rays and intersecting forces traversing me, constituting me every second. My body unstable; condensing into itself and diffusing throughout the universe; everywhere and nowhere; mingling with its surroundings; a body that is not the same body from moment to moment.

A vast web of meaning; sea of information. Data exchange, software structures modifying digital flows. Self enclosed artificial spaces; an encoded invisible real.

Wetware brain, software body; experiences in a virtual world. My thought, a succession of data modifications and flows; My speech swaps information between different processing algorithms.

Modern chimeras, mathematical dreams, invisible visions pouring into the dark eye of the intellect. Schizoid fantasies validated by consensus.

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A Bright and Preternatural Light

Often enough schizophrenics feel not farther from but closer to truth and illumination. One individual ... for example describes her madness as a land suffused with a bright and preternatural light; another ... recounts how his head was “illuminated by rays”; and a third, the poet Gerard de Nerval, describes a crystal-clear sight in his psychotic episodes: “it struck me I knew everything; everything was revealed to me, all the secrets of the world were mine during those spacious hours.”

According to Sass, madness is an involution in which a person becomes increasingly preoccupied with reality and language. The speech and experiences of the schizophrenic emerge from the solipsistic hyperreflexive stance that they take towards the world. This stance generates paradoxes through its self-undermining, reifies experiences as substantial independent entities, cuts itself off from instincts and emotions, and attributes an unspecifiable particular meaning to things.  

... schizoid and schizophrenic lived-worlds often involve ... not an overwhelming by but detachment from the instinctual sources of vitality, not immersion in the sensory surround but disengagement from a derealized external world, not stuporous waning of awareness but hypertrophy of consciousness and the conceptual life.  

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4* The overemphasis on reason detected by Sass in schizophrenia led him, in *The Paradoxes of Delusion*, to compare it with some of the over-intellectual philosophical diseases that were criticised by Wittgenstein: “Solipsism was one of Wittgenstein’s most central examples of a metaphysical or philosophical disease, a disease born not of ignorance or carelessness but of abstraction, self-consciousness, and disengagement from practical and social activity. He saw it as closely related to— at times as a kind of ultimate logical conclusion of—other philosophical diseases such as idealism or sense data phenomenalism”[p. 8]. According to Sass, both solipsism and schizophrenia (and a number of other extreme philosophical positions) arise when attention is focused upon thoughts and sensory experience at the expense of day-to-day contact with ordinary life. When these aspects are over-emphasised some rather strange, detached, unreal philosophical positions are the result. Sass is not suggesting that schizophrenics argue their way into madness (the causes of schizophrenia are left entirely open); his purpose is rather to understand the structure of schizophrenia by comparing it with some fairly well understood philosophical arguments. 

A second purpose of *The Paradoxes of Delusion* is “to clarify Wittgenstein’s speculations about solipsism (and certain related issues) by grounding these in the phenomenological
Madness, on my reading, … is, to be sure, a self-deceiving condition, but one that is generated from within rationality itself rather than by the loss of rationality. The parallels between Wittgenstein and Schreber reveal not a primitive or Dionysian condition but something akin to Wittgenstein’s notion of a disease of the intellect, born at the highest pitches of self-consciousness and alienation. Madness, in this view, is the endpoint of the trajectory consciousness follows when it separates from the body and the passions, and from the social and practical world, and turns in upon itself; it is what might be called the mind’s perverse self-apotheosis.\textsuperscript{25}

For Sass madness is a condition of excessive intellectualisation - it is not a lapse into Dionysian delirium. In madness all contact with the body and the passions withers away to leave an icy-clear transparent reason that locks itself up in paradoxes and knots as it tries to rationalise about itself. Madness is what happens when reason is pushed to its limit, when the totalising claims of reason are taken seriously. Our highest cerebral moments are slashed by the cold-burn sting of schizophrenia. The madman is more reasonable than the man of reason; his hypertrophy of consciousness and conceptual life pushes philosophy and science a little further; it is more detached, more objective and more reflexive than these disciplines – their distilled essence. Our striving after truth is completed in the madman whose reach for the pure concept has left the blooming buzzing confusion of the phenomenal world behind. Compared to the enlightenment of the mad, the average wisdom of philosophers and scientists are meagre things indeed.

Madmen intensify reason, they are more reasonable than reason - they are hyperrational.

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., p. 12.
Collapse into the Homogenous Zone

Suddenly ... we are here, thrown into reality from the nothingness of the beyond. We look around. There are other people here too. Collected together on the surface of a single sphere we all share one thing at least, that we popped out of nowhere and appeared on the surface of this planet. Our common origin and physiology bind us together; we are a crowd of open-eyed children staring with wonder at the world. This vast assembly of thrown people is the homogenous zone.

Hyper-Humans

Psycho-analytic research finds no fundamental, but only quantitative, distinctions between normal and neurotic life.26

...we must recognise that the psychical mechanism employed by neuroses is not created by the impact of a pathological disturbance upon the mind, but is present already in the normal structure of the mental apparatus.27

We are all people. We are all Dasein. We are all Homo sapiens. However we end up attempting to get to grips with reality we all start from the same place, with the same tools. We all are.

Within this homogenous space of the human there are differentiations. These are features of this space; presupposing it they are not ruptures within it.

Each of us is a small part of the homogenous zone, a patch within it. Each patch has a

certain way of being, a certain style. The homogenous zone traces a different contour within each of us.

Although the homogenous zone is contorted in different ways in each of us, a trace of every one of its different qualities is present in all of us.

The homogenous zone can be thought of as a piece of cloth woven from many different colours. Each section of this cloth has at least one thread of each colour running through it, but some parts have many threads of the same colour. This variability gives each section of cloth its own individual character.

The different colours of threads can be thought of as different qualities. All parts of the homogenous zone contain at least a trace of all the different human qualities. However, each part also has its own unique style - some qualities are present more intensely in some parts than they are in others.

We are a gathering of different qualities. The pattern of intensity of our qualities gives us a particular emphasis, strengths in particular areas. Some people are more abstractly intelligent, some are more technically or practically minded; others have musical or artistic gifts.\(^\text{28}\)

There may be people whose qualities are all low in intensity, people who are ‘deficient’, without any amplification at all. Such people exist a patch of the homogenous zone that is grey; a patch with only one thread of each colour.\(^\text{29}\)

We have different labels for people who intensify different qualities. We label strong

\(^{27}\) Ibid., p. 607.

\(^{28}\) Intensity is always taken from zero; there is no negativity. If ‘normal’ people were defined as zero it would be necessary to speak about positive and negative amplification. However, the zero here is a kind of non humanity - someone with a single thread of each colour - and so there are no negative values. The catatonic might be an example of someone who is close to this absolute zero.

\(^{29}\) This statement is necessitated by its logical possibility, and supported within our society; but it should be taken with caution. It is possible that there are people who are flat, unresponsive, at degree zero of the human. Catatonic schizophrenics might be examples of such people. However, many people who are labelled deficient have richness and intensity in areas that most of us neglect. In *The Man Who Mistook His Wife For a Hat*
and fast jumpers and runners “athletes”. We label people who are talented at manipulating sounds “musicians”. “Schizophrenia” is a label for people who have more intense solipsism, more intense non-consensual visual and auditory perceptions, more incoherent speech, excessive intellectuality, and a greater capacity for unorthodox thought.

The schizophrenic intensifies certain qualities which we all share. He exaggerates the style of being that we call schizophrenic. He is one possible contortion of the homogenous zone. His style of being is a feature of the zone; it does not detach him from it.

If the schizophrenic is hallucinatory, it is because he exaggerates our tendency to misperceive peripheral and distant objects; because he experiences his daydreams more intensely.

If the schizophrenic is cut off, divided, and solipsistic, it is because he emphasises this aspect of being human - we are all cut off, divided, and solipsistic to some degree.

We all speak incoherently at times and we all make unintentional slips, errors and omissions when our unconscious surfaces in conversation. The schizophrenic does this more, but he does not do this differently.

If the schizophrenic is thrown into a world which he invents hypotheses to explain, it is because we are all thrown into worlds that we attempt to understand - using conceptual resources that are also thrown to us (thrown as us). We are all thrown into aspects which we have to presuppose before we can question them. The schizophrenic’s aspect may be different, but his ontological structure is identical.

We all abstract and objectify; we are all self-reflexive to varying degrees.

The amplification of the schizophrenic is relative: relative to the majority of ‘normals’ he appears to be exaggerated; relative to schizophrenics who are even more

Oliver Sacks uncovers the humanity of many people who are traditionally dismissed as deficient.
amplified in the schizo qualities the same madman appears ‘normal’. Who is classified as mad and who is classified as sane depends upon the level of intensity defined as ‘normal’.

![Scale of increasing intensity of schizo qualities]

According to V, B and S are stupid, and blind to certain phenomena.

According to B, V is mad and S can’t understand anything.

According to S, both B and V are complete nutters.

The *qualities* associated with madness are also relative. Our society associates “non-consensual visual perceptions”, “unorthodox conceptual schemes”, “excessive solipsism” and “incoherent speech” with madness; but ‘madmen’ judge ‘normals’ to be mad on different grounds - because they intensify *different* qualities. According to the ‘normal’ the madman is mad because he hallucinates, he is solipsistic and because he incoherently slips, neologises and omits. According to the madman, the ‘normal’ is mad because his excessive greed and aggression will provoke a karmic catastrophe that will end the world in 2012.  

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30 This relativity may not be a cultural one since cross-cultural studies do indicate something akin to our medical notion of madness in most other cultures:

All societies throughout the ages have recognised the existence of insanity or mental illness among some of their members, and have distinguished these from conditions such as feeble-mindedness, criminality, and incongruent gender roles or sexual behaviour. ... Furthermore, the indigenous descriptions of mental illness within very disparate cultures are extraordinarily similar and demonstrate the repetition of a few basic elements: incoherent speech, bizarre and idiosyncratic beliefs, purposeless or unpredictable or violent behaviour, and apparent absence of concern for one’s own safety and comfort.


However, if the general diagnostic qualities that our ‘normals’ associate with madness are confirmed by other cultures, different explanatory theories continue to disagree about the qualities that are said to be emphasised in the schizophrenic. Cognitive interpretations of schizophrenia postulate that certain processing modules are
According to X, J is mad because she has an excess of qualities c and d relative to X. The qualities p, q, r, and s do not exist for X.

According to J, X is mad because he has too much q and too little r. The qualities a, b, c, and d do not exist for J.

On the scale of qualities which the ‘normal’ associates with madness, the ‘madman’ is an amplified man. On the scale of qualities which the madman associates with ‘madness’ the ‘normal’ is an amplified man.31

In some parts of the homogenous zone all of the qualities are intensified or reduced.

more or less amplified, molecular theories hypothesise that it is the neurotransmitters that are exaggerated, and Sass thinks that reflexivity and self-awareness are more intense in madmen. Even if these different explanations are felt to complement rather than exclude one another, there are still divergences within our own culture between the qualities that ‘normal’ people claim to be exaggerated in madmen and the qualities that madmen claim to be abnormally amplified in ‘normals’.

31 The qualities which are present throughout the entire homogenous zone are also relative. I have described this zone as a cloth woven from threads of many different colours. If the madman and the ‘normal’ disagree over which colours are associated with madness, they may also disagree over which colours of thread were used to weave the zone - which qualities are common to all parts of it. Non-consensual visual and auditory perceptions, excessive solipsism, incoherent speech, and unorthodox conceptual schemes are not neutral self-evident qualities of the zone but qualities of the zone according to the normal. Perception, communication and cognition are not neutral absolutes, but part of the ‘normal’ rational perspective. Furthermore, the ‘normal’ and the ‘madman’ may disagree over whether there is a homogenous zone at all.

Linked up with this is the issue of where I am speaking from to describe the homogenous zone. All I can say is that my vision of the homogenous zone – along with this analysis of my vision – is an aspect which I happen to inhabit. The problems that this raises will be dealt with in more detail in the last part of this chapter.
A person whose whole being is amplified relative to some ‘normal’ person is called “manic”. A person whose whole being is reduced relative to some ‘normal’ person is called “depressed”.

**Disjunction and Delusion**

... sanity or psychosis is tested by the degree of conjunction or disjunction between two persons where the one is sane by common consent.

The critical test of whether or not a patient is psychotic is a lack of congruity, an incongruity, a clash, between him and me.

The ‘psychotic’ is the name we have for the other person in a disjunctive relationship of a particular kind. It is only because of this interpersonal disjunction that we start to examine his urine, and look for anomalies in the graphs of the electrical activity of his brain.\(^{32}\)

Where two principles really do meet which cannot be reconciled with one another, then each man declares the other a fool and a heretic.\(^ {33}\)

People who are far apart on a continuum of intensities find it difficult to understand or relate to one another. When they come into contact they may accuse each other of madness.

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People with a continuum of hair length.

The same people interacting. People with long hair come into contact with people with short hair and a disjunction of hair intensity arises between them.

*Disjunctions of intensity often become disjunctions of truth.* When two separate areas of the continuum come into contact with one another, each declares the other deluded.

The more insane a person is (the more he differs in intensity from some ‘normal’ person) the more the content of what he says appears to be alien, false, wrong, crazy, untrue. From a standpoint of faith in his own world the self-appointed ‘normal’ person experiences the madman’s world as a ‘delusion’, a ‘hallucination’, as something that is deficient in the truth that he experiences within himself. Certain things that the madman says are unacceptable to him. Madness is a reason given by the ‘normal’ person for not believing what the madman says.

The intensification of schizophrenic qualities often leads to the development of unorthodox aspects.

A disjunction between aspects is also a reason for the attribution of madness. People with similar intensities of the same qualities see each other as mad if there is a significant difference between the worlds that they inhabit. Madmen are prolific in unorthodox aspects and since these rarely coincide there are divisions between madness and sanity even within the confines of the asylum. Each inmate thinks that all the others are insane.

Madness thus arises when two or more people’s qualities have different levels of
intensity or when they inhabit substantially different aspects. A world in which everyone maniacally believed the same thing would have no madness in it.

People do not only believe different things in the abstract, they can also see and hear totally different sets of concrete phenomena. Some people’s worlds are packed with strange creatures, others have no living beings at all. Some people hear voices that other people cannot hear. Some people can read minds, broadcast thoughts, and influence the weather and seasons. People who are far apart on this continuum of concrete phenomena declare each other mad. Schreber thought that his psychiatrists were mentally blind; they thought that he was hallucinating.

Related to the differences between intensities, aspects and concrete phenomena are the kinds of fantasies that different people have. Madmen have fantasies about aliens, God, and the K.G.B. which are relatively trivial and obvious to sober well-educated psychiatrists. Scientists, psychiatrists and philosophers have strange fantasies about eternal underlying structures, bodies without organs and spaces of appropriation which make no sense at all to the intelligent madman. People with different areas of fantasy accuse each other of madness.

These differences in intensity, conceptual schemes, concrete phenomena and fantasies alienate people from each other. They no longer listen to one another, they dismiss what the other has to say - the other is mad, he has nothing to say; he is incapable of saying anything meaningful.

Groups of people coalesce who share the same intensities, conceptual schemes, concrete phenomena and fantasies. They may recognise a continuum between themselves and other people, but they will dismiss anyone who deviates too far from their consensual sanity. People outside of these groups are labelled deviants.

When these groups are large enough - when they form a majority - the pressure of
their numbers may convince the people labelled mad that they are indeed mad and in need of treatment. In this case, the deviant minority accepts the judgement and standards of the majority; and at the same time acknowledges that they fall short of them. This temporarily stabilises the deviant labels - if they are accepted both by the majority and the minority there is no-one left to contest them.

However, even if the madman believes that he is deluded, he is still part of the homogenous zone; and if delusion is a matter of consensus it is also reversible.

**The Gorgon’s Mirror**

The Other is first the permanent flight of things toward a goal which I apprehend as an object at a certain distance from me but which escapes me inasmuch as it unfolds about itself its own distances. Moreover this disintegration goes by degrees; if there exists between the lawn and the Other a relation which is without distance and which creates distance, then there exists necessarily a relation between the Other and the statue which stands as a pedestal in the middle of the lawn and a relation between the Other and the big chestnut trees which border the walk; there is a total space which is grouped around the Other, and this space is made with my space; there is a regrouping in which I take part but which escapes me, a
regrouping of all the objects which people my universe. This regrouping does not stop there. The grass is something qualified; it is this green grass which exists for the Other; in this sense the very quality of the object, its deep, raw green is in direct relation to this man. This green turns toward the Other a face which escapes me. I apprehend the relation of the green to the Other as an objective relation, but I can not apprehend the green as it appears to the Other. Thus suddenly an object has appeared which has stolen the world from me. Everything is in place; everything still exists for me; but everything is traversed by an invisible flight and fixed in the direction of a new object. The appearance of the Other in the world corresponds therefore to a fixed sliding of the whole universe, to a decentralization of the world which undermines the centralization which I am simultaneously effecting.

But the Other is still an object for me. He belongs to my distances; the man is there, twenty paces from me, he is turning his back on me. As such he is again two yards, twenty inches from the lawn, six yards from the statue; hence the disintegration of my universe is contained within the limits of this same universe; we are not dealing here with a flight of the world toward nothingness or outside itself. Rather it appears that the world has a kind of drain hole in the middle of its being and that it is perpetually flowing off through this hole. The universe, the flow, and the drain hole are all once again recovered, reapprehended, and fixed as an object. All this is there for me as a partial structure of the world, even though the total disintegration of the universe is involved.34

Would it not be possible that people came into my room and all declared the opposite?—even gave me ‘proofs’ of it, so that I suddenly stood there like a madman alone among people who were all normal, or a normal person alone among madmen? Might I not then suffer doubts about what at present seems at the furthest remove from doubt? 35

As my gaze sinks into the writhing pools of the madman’s eyes I glimpse another world; within that world I observe another soul; within that soul I see the heart of a believer. Surrounded by incontrovertible realities the madman has faith in the world he encounters. He is part of a Soviet plot to take over the world. He is being observed by

aliens. He is the recipient of rays from God. Within this whirling world I see a tiny figure, a miniature effigy of myself. Within this world I am a KGB conspirator disguised as a doctor, a lifeless puppet controlled by aliens, a fleeting improvised man.

When my glance penetrates the cold eyes of the hospital psychiatrist I tentatively grasp another world; within that world I touch upon another soul; and within that soul I feel the heart of a believer. Surrounded by incontrovertible realities the psychiatrist has faith in the world he encounters. He is assembled from an interplay of molecules and forces. He is no more than a twilit heap of interlocked instincts and drives crystallised around a complex formed during childhood. He is a palpitating mass of cosmic energy, a puppet in the hands of power. In this abstract world I encounter a tiny figure, a miniature representation of myself. Within this world I am a repressed homosexual, a man whose inhibitions inhibit the flow of energies at orgasm, a person infected by power fantasies from the world around him.

When we study the madman we encounter a miniature world folded in upon itself, a world that interprets everything in its own terms, a world trapped behind its filters and limited to a single aspect. When we look a little closer at this world we see ourselves within it: distorted and caricatured, effaced or enlarged, we have become a devil or a demiurge; an operator or a spy, a machine or a fleeting improvised man.

But a reversal takes place. Once we have seen a miniature caricature of ourselves in the madman’s world, we notice the miniature caricature of the madman that we have created in our own world. Once we have seen the way in which the madman encloses everything within his own way of thinking, we begin to question whether we are like that too, whether we squeeze the world through the fish-eye lens of our certainties, whether our cursory rejection of the madman’s ideas is a product, not of truth, but of the indubitability of our
preconceptions.

The madman sees us as mad because we are too stupid to perceive what for him are self-evident realities. We look at the madman and wonder whether, perhaps, we are mad too. United within the homogenous zone we see that he is exaggerated in a different way from ourselves, that he has different opinions, but we can no longer dismiss him with a label. Reflected in the madman’s eyes we see ourselves as mad; exchanging places with him in the homogenous zone we attune ourselves to the sanity of madness, and awaken to the insanity lying at the heart of our reason.

This reversal is only possible within the homogenous zone - we can only exchange places with the madman because we have the same standing as him, because we have both been thrown in the same way, because we have both been *given* our certainties, episteme, object partitioning, language, and form of life. From our bedrock of truth we once saw the madman wallowing in the swamp of error. This arrogance drains away once we realise that the homogenous zone is suffused with the instability of being thrown. Without God, without external guarantees, now that the omnipotence of science is over, free flow and reversal becomes possible between ourselves and the madman.36

This reversal reverses. We fall back into our own aspect .... and fall away again. Although we see ourselves as mad through the madman’s eyes, we still believe in our mad certainties. We cannot entirely reject them ... and yet they are absurd at the same time. Madness and reason swap places with each other in a confusing and despairing dance. Ceaseless fluctuation between madness and sanity over all parts of the zone.

We are left with the thrown zone of the human; its quirks and exaggerations and the

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36 Although this mirroring is most obvious with madmen, it can also be experienced with children, ‘primitives’ and other people.
concrete beliefs of the people constituting it. Within each aspect some of these beliefs are a lived reality, a reassuring framework of certainties; within other aspects the same content is deluded nonsense, the fantastical productions of deranged minds. Given this instability, we can no longer take what we have been given to believe entirely seriously; and we are unable to dismiss the madman on grounds of madness. Perhaps we should be open to thinking about the world using the madman’s language; open to the possibility that perhaps he might be right about the aliens, the CIA, about God having a special relationship with one human being, about psychokinetic control over the weather....

Human beings who are fortunate enough to enjoy healthy nerves cannot (as a rule anyway) have “illusions”, “hallucinations”, “visions”, or whatever expression one wants to use for these phenomena; it would therefore be desirable if all human beings remained free from such experiences; they would then subjectively feel very much better. But this does not imply that the events resulting from a diseased nervous system are altogether unfounded in objective reality or have to be regarded as nervous excitations lacking all external cause. I can therefore not share Kraepelin’s astonishment which he expresses repeatedly (for instance Vol. 1, pp. 112, 116, 162, etc. 6th Edition) that the “voices”, etc., seem to have a far greater power of conviction for hallucinated patients than “anything said by those around them”. A person with sound nerves is, so to speak, mentally blind compared with him who receives supernatural impressions by virtue of his diseased nerves; he is therefore as little likely to persuade the visionary of the unreality of his voices as a person who can see will be persuaded by a really blind person that there are no colours, that blue is not blue, red not red, etc....

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Planet of Fools

Once upon a time, in some out of the way corner of that universe which is dispersed into numberless twinkling solar systems, there was a star upon which clever beasts invented knowing. That was the most arrogant and mendacious minute of "world history," but nevertheless, it was only a minute. After nature had drawn a few breaths, the star cooled and congealed, and the clever beasts had to die. —One might invent such a fable, and he still would not have adequately illustrated how miserable, how shadowy and transient, how aimless and arbitrary the human intellect looks within nature.\textsuperscript{38}

By denying us the limit of the Limitless, the death of God leads to an experience in which nothing may again announce the exteriority of being, and consequently to an experience which is \textit{interior} and \textit{sovereign}.\textsuperscript{39}

Setting aside the possibility of alien lifeforms, God, and intelligences from higher planes of consciousness, our culture has no outside. Four billion people clinging to the surface of a rocky sphere - \textit{and that is it}. We are aware that our aspects are self contained, we know that we interpret what we see in terms of what we expect to see, we realise that we \textit{cannot} see what does not fit.

Because we are many and not one, we seem to have a way of maintaining the objectivity of our words and phrases. Our language-games are stable and our words retain their meanings because we check up upon each other. If one person makes a mistake, a thousand will correct him. If someone makes a claim, I can independently verify this claim. The problem with this ‘independent’ verification is that our culture as a whole lacks an


outside. When we test our claims for correctness, we are not getting independent verification because any person that we ask will be at least partially within the same aspect as ourselves. If I ask my neighbour to confirm that Schreber was deluded I do not learn anything that I did not already know before. If my neighbour claims that Schreber was sane I will think that she is insane. Dismissing her opinion as lunacy, I will work my way through all my neighbours until I find one that agrees with me.

It might be thought that rigorously independent confirmation could be found within a wholly independent aspect. This has two problems. To begin with, it might be impossible to formulate the claim that I want to verify within this alternative aspect - a statement about time could not be confirmed by a Hopi Indian who had no word for time. Secondly, there are no wholly independent aspects within the homogenous zone. All people – simply through the fact that they are people – share a common form of life. To be truly independent, an aspect would have to have no connection with our form of life. The problem is that a check like this would have very little meaning for us. Within our form of life, such a confirmation would hardly be a confirmation at all; it would be music, animal noises, random sounds - and no-one hopes to get independent confirmation from random sounds.  

I cannot compare the soul more properly to anything than to a republic or commonwealth, in which the several members are united by the reciprocal ties of government and subordination, and give rise to other persons, who propagate the same republic in the incessant changes of its parts.

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40 The idea of the homogenous zone is not intended to dismiss or ignore the fact that there are a large number of different aspects on our planet. Although they lack radical independence there are still substantial differences between them. When we move away from the delineation of an abstract space of the human towards a concrete investigation of the content of what we are to believe, we are confronted by a wide variety of certainties, epistemes, object partitionings, languages and forms of life. The purpose of this discussion of the homogenous zone is to remove the automatic filter that each person and culture applies to thoughts, beliefs, and worlds that are different from their own. If we are as crazy as the madman, we cannot dismiss the content of his ‘delusional’ world on the grounds that he is ‘possessed’ by disease.
If there is no independent verification within the homogenous zone, the difference between an individual confirming his beliefs by reference to himself and a number of individuals cross-checking each other vanishes. When individuals are isolated, their old ideas silently mutate, and new ones are accepted less critically. Our culture also multiplies modifications; it blindly shifts twists and drifts whilst all the time believing that it has never changed. New ideas are suggested and taken up; conservative elements attempt to preserve old ideas in response to innovation, but conservatism metamorphoses too - it is often a reaction to change; never a pure preservation. Collectively, we do censure each other and check the cultural drift, but these censures and checks come from the culture that is drifting, and so they inevitably drift too. Nothing holds our culture fast to one position, there is no absolute outside that could tell us whether we are going crazy on our spherical island.

In addition to the drifts in religious and scientific ideas, there are a couple of more subtle ways in which our culture changes over time. To begin with, our genetic material is constantly recombining and mutating across the generations. Any language or thought structures that have a neurological or genetic basis will be affected by these alterations, and we may be completely unaware of such changes if they occur. In The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat, Oliver Sacks describes Dr. P. who gradually lost his ability to recognise faces and visualise narrative scenes. What is strange about this loss is that

42 This is especially clear in the case of the Orthodox Jews. One might be tempted to believe that the austere clothes and hairstyles of the Orthodox Jews are the way in which Jews always used to dress prior to their ‘corruption’ by liberal ideas. However, their style of dress, and many of their customs, are recent innovations linked with the Jewish history in Eastern Europe. Prior to the Jewish Reform movement, Jews never dressed like this - there were no Orthodox Jews. Orthodox Judaism does not preserve an older style of Judaism; it started as a reaction to the reform movement that created something new. A similar claim about tradition is made by Latour: “One is not born traditional; one chooses to become traditional by constant innovation.” [Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, translated by Catherine Porter (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 76].
Dr. P. was not at all troubled by it because he no longer possessed any idea of what he had once had: “Dr. P. was not fighting, did not know what was lost, did not indeed know that anything was lost.” 44 This man simply changed and a whole area of his experience disappeared without mourning or trace. We exist our neurology and genetic makeup; when these change our ways of thinking can change without leaving any mark of this change upon us.

Against this it could be argued that evolution holds our neurology in check, that certain mutations will be thrown out because they leave a person too out of touch with reality to be able to survive or find food. This argument ignores the fact that ‘primitives’ have survived for tens of thousands of years with structurally complex ‘delusional’ beliefs. Animals also seem to do quite well despite their inability to grasp even the first principles of modern science. Some kind of stable and consistent view upon things may be necessary for eating and breeding, but the way in which this is put together can vary a great deal without affecting its bearer’s chances of survival. Most, if not all, of the detail of our complex human aspects is irrelevant to our longevity as a species. If physiological changes affect our ways of thinking, it is unlikely either that we will notice, or that it will alter our chances of survival.

The second subtle way in which our culture drifts is through the continual mutation and evolution of our language. The division after Babel would have happened without divine intervention. In the Course in General Linguistics Saussure describes how over time any language splits up into local dialects which grow more distinct from each other the further they are apart. Sounds change through accident, innovation, neologism,

43 Warnke makes this point in her discussion of Gadamer: “We seem to be able to revise the prejudices we have inherited from the tradition only by assuming the validity of other prejudices the tradition contains” [Georgina Warnke, Gadamer (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987), p. 91].

in response to writing, and through contact with other languages. A change in one word can alter its relationships with other words, and so the possibilities of the entire language can be reconfigured by a single shift. These language changes are important because Saussure thinks that there is an intimate link between the structure of our language and the structure of our thought. Language is not a neutral medium that is separate from the ideas that it expresses. For Saussure, the objects of our thought are constituted together with the differences in our language; and so changes in the sounds of a language also alter its conceptual possibilities:

Psychologically, setting aside its expression in words, our thought is simply a vague, shapeless mass. Philosophers and linguists have always agreed that were it not for signs, we should be incapable of differentiating any two ideas in a clear and constant way. In itself, thought is like a swirling cloud, where no shape is intrinsically determinate. No ideas are established in advance, and nothing is distinct, before the introduction of linguistic structure. ... we can envisage the linguistic phenomenon in its entirety - the language, that is - as a series of adjoining subdivisions simultaneously imprinted both on the plane of vague, amorphous thought (A) and on the equally featureless plane of sound (B).45

Once sound change has created a regular phonetic difference between two series of terms contrasting in value, the mind seizes upon this material difference and endows it with significance, making it a bearer of the conceptual difference.46

46 Ibid., p. 157.
Within the structuralist picture, there is no overall direction or order governing change. The web of differences shifts over time in response to local idiosyncratic mutations. Furthermore, these changes are invisible to the people who speak the language. They cannot think about how they used to think within the framework of their new tongue.

Microcosmically embodying this large scale linguistic drift are the incoherent slips, neologisms and omissions of schizophrenics – an intensification of this process of linguistic and conceptual mutation. Our culture changes in this way all the time; contacting God, controlling the cosmos, drifting into madness in its festering flat in Peckam.

Planet Earth is a ship of fools floating through space, drifting through time on a voyage from nowhere to nowhere. We have gone insane on our island; the homogenous zone has lost it, flipped its lid after prolonged isolation. Or rather, the zone never had it; it has always been insane, we have always been foaming fools pouring out an endless stream of fantastical metaphysical religious and cosmological imaginings.

5* The neologisms of schizophrenics and their unusual conceptual schemes suggest that they are capable of inventing new concepts. However Kasanin claims that schizophrenics are actually less capable of creating new concepts than ‘normals’: “The results of the statistical analysis of the test scores indicate that the reduction of conceptual thinking is an integral part of the schizophrenic picture.” [Eugenia Hanfmann and Jacob Kasanin, ‘A Method for the Study of Concept Formation’, *Journal of Psychology*, 3, 1937, p.46]. Whilst schizophrenics do perform less well on Kasanin’s standardised tests for concept formation, Kasanin misses the intimate link between new words and new concepts. Within the structuralist picture, a schizophrenic who invents a new word invents a new concept as well. Even the simple replacement of consensual words with a new vocabulary creates a new set of etymological connections. Furthermore, the innovation of the schizophrenic may be more of a response to, or component of, a differently organised world; and not something that can be exhibited voluntarily in block-sorting experiments attuned to our ‘normal’ way of thinking.

6* A strange corollary to this drifting madness of the planet of fools is the way in which consensual sanity has fallen into what it defines to be insanity over the last hundred years. In *Madness and Modernism* Sass draws numerous comparisons between modernist and schizophrenic interpretations of reality. For Sass, madness and modernism have many similarities - the cultural products that we value most, and pay large amounts of money for, have a great deal in common with the worldviews of the insane. During this century the middle ground of our culture has remained safely ‘normal’; but art, literature, and philosophy have become increasingly hyperreflexive, alienated and schizophrenic. (It should be pointed out that this is not Sass’s own claim - which is the attempt to understand madness using modernism - but a consequence I have drawn from his book). This interpretation of modernism goes against the central claim of this chapter - that the homogenous zone has always been insane - because it presupposes that our culture was once sane before it lost it. However, at a different level it does illustrate the way in which a culture can drift into madness once it has lost the absolute outside that once sustained its sanity.
Problems with the Homogenous Zone

....the concept of ‘mental disease’ has proved of great value in the practice of medicine. It has advanced a set of testable hypotheses which have already borne fruit concerning the nature, causation and treatment of several of the very common and incapacitating forms of human suffering. \(^{47}\)

The most obvious objection to this interpretation of madness is that schizophrenia is a disease that was discovered by Kraepelin and relabelled by Bleuler. The disease of schizophrenia has a well-defined complex of symptoms (set out in the American Psychiatric Association’s document DSM IIIR) which progress in an orderly way and respond to drug treatment. In addition, there is good evidence that schizophrenia has a genetic component; and there are similarities between neurologically damaged patients and those suffering from schizophrenia. Furthermore, the argument that schizophrenia is a cultural product does not work since madness has been recognised in the West since the Greeks, and something akin to our notion of schizophrenia can be found in most other societies. \(^{48}\) If schizophrenia is a real disease, the hallucinations and thoughts that emerge from it must be malfunctional, delusional, out of touch with reality.

A first response to this objection is that beneath the veneer of medical confidence lies a ‘disease’ that is very poorly defined; a ‘disease’ that is perhaps no more than a


\(^{48}\) This point is made by Cochrane:

Schizophrenia is perhaps the only concept [of insanity] which seems to have an almost universal acceptance. In many cultures and indeed in many historical periods, extreme social and emotional withdrawal, auditory hallucinations, delusions and flatness of emotional response have been taken to be indicative of some serious psychological disturbance (Murphy *et al.* 1963), although it has not always carried the stigma associated with the concept of schizophrenia in the West. Equally it appears that there is a relatively uniform rate of schizophrenia across different cultures - sometimes estimated at between 0.5 per cent to 1 per cent of the adult population.

[Raymond Cochrane, *The Social Creation of Mental Illness*, p. 84.]
cluster of ‘symptoms’. In *Schizophrenia, A Scientific Delusion?*, Mary Boyle claims that scientifically respectable diseases, such as diabetes, are not just clusters of symptoms, but clusters of symptoms with definite *signs* which indicate the presence or absence of the disease. You can *test* for diabetes by measuring the level of sugar in the urine. A person who shows all of the symptoms of diabetes and tests negative does not have diabetes and a different diagnosis must be found. In the case of schizophrenia, there are no tests that can be used to establish whether or not a person is suffering from it. Each of the ‘symptoms’, taken in itself, does not make a person into a schizophrenic, and yet once they are brought together they become a disease with a hypothesised underlying abnormality: “the variable cluster from which schizophrenia is inferred contains no sign, but only a number of presumably overdetermined behaviours called symptoms and which have never been shown to be systematically related”.

Boyle also describes how the group that Kraepelin isolated in his ‘discovery’ of schizophrenia included many people suffering from post encephalitic Parkinsonism, and possibly syphilis. The modern schizophrenic is all that is left of this diverse group, after all the people with known diseases have been removed from it. It is possible that a single underlying cause will be discovered that explains the behaviour of this remainder; but it is also possible that a variety of diverse causes will be found that will gradually remove people from the group of schizophrenics until there are no pure schizophrenics left. In the latter case, there would be no people with the disease of schizophrenia - there would only be people who manifest schizophrenic behaviour as part of the course of a different illness. Boyle also

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49 This is true for diagnoses made according to DSM IIIR, but probably not in practice, where even one symptom, such as hearing voices, can be enough for a diagnosis of schizophrenia - see Rosenhan’s ‘On Being Sane in Insane Places’, printed in Thomas Scheff (ed.), *Labelling Madness* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1975).

offers a detailed criticism of the alleged genetic evidence for schizophrenia.\(^\text{51}\)

A second problem with a dismissal of *diseased* schizophrenics is that an underlying genetic, neurological or cognitive cause of schizophrenia (if it exists) does not create an *essential* difference between the schizophrenic and the ‘normal’ that would justify a dismissal of the schizophrenic’s ideas and experiences:

Implicit in a great deal of biological psychiatry is an asymmetry of explanatory principles. Normal (or healthy) forms of consciousness are assumed to be, to a great extent, under one’s intentional control and, in addition, to operate according to rational principles and to be oriented toward the objective world. While these normal mental processes are certainly assumed to be *correlated* with physical events occurring in the brain, seldom are they viewed as being *mere* causal by-products of such events, since the meaningfulness and directedness they exhibit seem intrinsic to the psyche, to the realm of meaning rather than of physical event. But *abnormal* modes of consciousness, at least those characterizing the insane, have often been seen very differently: as involving a “fall into determinism,” a lapse from dualism whereby the malfunctioning physical processes (in brain and nervous system) disrupt the mental or psychic stream, depriving it of its intrinsic rationality and meaningfulness.\(^\text{52}\)

Schizophrenics may think in a particular way because of a gene or a neurological

\(^{51}\) Roth & Kroll would respond to Boyle’s arguments by claiming that her absolutist conception of disease is mistaken and that medicine can be used to treat malfunctioning at both mental and physical levels. According to Roth & Kroll, the idea that schizophrenia must demonstrate specific physical lesions or signs to be counted as a disease is a gross distortion of medical theory and practice.

\(^{52}\) Louis A. Sass, *Madness and Modernism*, p. 375. Latour makes a similar point about the asymmetry of explanations in our sociology of knowledge, which takes ‘modern’ reason for granted and explains the deviance of other theories by invoking social factors. Different standards are applied to theories that are different from our own.

Error, beliefs, could be explained socially, but truth remained self-explanatory. It was certainly possible to analyze a belief in flying saucers, but not the knowledge of black holes, we could analyze the illusions of parapsychology, but not the knowledge of psychologists; we could analyze Spencer’s errors, but not Darwin’s certainties.

[*We Have Never Been Modern*, p. 92.]

When the madman states that two plus two equals four, or that lithium has an atomic weight of 3, his claims are *not* reduced to his biological state.
configuration, but ‘normal’ people also think in the way they do because of genes and a neurological configuration. ‘Normal’ people and schizophrenics are equally dependent upon the genes that patterned their brains, and the present structure of their brains. Schizophrenics may have a ‘faulty’ gene or neurological configuration; but it does not follow that ‘normal’ people are independent of genes and neurones - the genes and neurological configurations of schizophrenics are simply different from those of ‘normal’ people. If a majority of the population had the schizophrenic gene, normality would become abnormal and people would start to search for mutant genes in ‘normal’ people. If a majority of the population had the same neurological set up as the schizophrenic, this would become the normal way of dealing with reality, and a person judged normal today would become a mental patient. Which gene or neurological configuration is the right one is a matter of consensus, just as delusion is a matter of consensus. Shifting the problem down to a neurological or genetic level does not change anything. Definitions of normal physiology are democratic.

Seen from a more general perspective, the medical model of schizophrenia and the homogenous zone are not that incompatible. “Continuum of disease” and “continuum of intensities of qualities” are equally valid ways of describing the homogenous zone. Even the possibility of treatment is not excluded by the description of the zone that I am offering here. Some people may want to permanently adjust the intensities of their qualities, and there is no reason why they should not attempt to do this medically. The main point of divergence between my account of the homogenous zone and medicine’s is that medicine tends to dismiss the content of the madman’s world because it is the product of a disease. Biological factors are said to cause a person’s delusions. In my account, the association of a biological state with delusion or truth depends upon the aspect that one is in - aspects are not rejected because of a biological state that is said to cause them. To the extent that “disease” is a synonym for “untruth” I disagree with the medical model - and it may be impossible to
interpret madness as a disease without bringing in the negative and normative connotations that “disease” has in our society.

The fact that certain amplifications of the homogenous zone have their neurological and genetic correlates is not an adequate criticism of the argument presented in this chapter. Labelling is a matter of consensus at all levels. There is no reason why we should not listen to diseased madmen.

A second major problem with the homogenous zone is that schizophrenics’ ‘delusions’ can be reduced to their case histories. If we can reduce a schizophrenic’s ideas to sexuality or to an unfortunate childhood there is no longer any need to take them seriously, and there will no longer be any reversal or exchange between ‘normality’ and madness. The schizophrenic will have simply gone astray. This dismissal by reduction can be clearly seen in the numerous studies of Schreber. At first glance, Schreber’s Memoirs of My Nervous Illness presents a radically different world, a unique aspect that appears to be entirely independent of our own. It is this radical otherness of Schreber’s madness that makes it so tantalising, so seductive. Schreber is so autonomous that we have to take him seriously - his book is blunt testimony to the reality of positive scepticism. However, closer inspection reveals that many of the supposedly autonomous elements in Schreber’s world are actually just by-products of our own.

According to Freud, Schreber’s illness was caused by an outburst of homosexual libido. At first, this homosexuality was directed towards his doctor, Professor Flechsig,

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53 These include Freud’s famous study in Case Histories II, Sass’s in Madness and Modernism and The Paradoxes of Delusion, Morton Schatzman’s study in Labelling Madness (edited by Thomas Scheff) and Canetti’s in Crowds and Power. Sass gives a number of further references in the introduction and conclusion to The Paradoxes of Delusion.

A dismissal by reduction can also be observed in Barbara O’Brien who carried this out on herself after her ‘illness’ had passed, with the help of psychological and psychoanalytical literature.

54 This analysis is taken from ‘Psychological Notes on an Autobiographical Account of a Case of Paranoia’,
towards whom he felt a great deal of warmth and affection after his first attack of nervous illness had been cured. This erotic desire was not acceptable to Schreber - although it was fairly openly expressed throughout his illness - and so it was transformed into hatred. This hatred was projected outside of Schreber as the hatred of Flechsig for him, and this imaginary persecution enabled Schreber to openly acknowledge his love (transformed into hatred) for Flechsig - since he could now hate Flechsig in response to Flechsig’s persecution of him. These four stages in the development of Schreber’s paranoia are summarised below:

1. Schreber loves Flechsig.
2. Schreber hates Flechsig.
3. Flechsig hates Schreber.
4. Schreber hates Flechsig because Flechsig hates Schreber.

Later on, Schreber’s erotic desire for Flechsig was transferred to God. This satisfied his ego and allowed his feminine fantasies fulfilment without conflict. Freud further reveals that Schreber’s desire for Flechsig was actually an erotic desire for his older brother (who died before Schreber’s illness). Schreber’s transferral of affection from Flechsig to God during his illness probably repeated his earlier transferral of affection from his brother to his father after his brother’s death. Freud found confirmation of this hypothesis in the fact that Schreber’s relationship with God mirrored many of the features of his relationship with his father. The similarities include a mixture of respect and insubordination in both relationships and the fact that both his physician-father and God were workers of miracles. This link between God and Schreber’s father enabled

Freud to interpret all the complexity, religiosity, and strangeness of Schreber’s relationship with God as the working out of an infantile conflict with his father:

Thus in the case of Schreber we find ourselves once again on the familiar ground of the father-complex. The patient’s struggle with Flechsig became revealed to him as a conflict with God, and we must therefore construe it as an infantile conflict with the father whom he loved; the details of that conflict (of which we know nothing) are what determined the content of his delusions.... In infantile experiences such as this the father appears as an interferer with the satisfaction which the child is trying to obtain; this is usually of an auto-erotic character, though at a later date it is often replaced in phantasy by some other satisfaction of a less inglorious kind. In the final stages of Schreber’s delusion a magnificent victory was scored by the infantile sexual urge; for voluptuousness became God-fearing, and God Himself (his father) never tired of demanding it from him. His father’s most dreaded threat, castration, actually provided the material for his wishful phantasy (at first resisted but later accepted) of being transformed into a woman. His allusion to an offence covered by the surrogate idea ‘soul-murder’ could not be more transparent.55

A second reduction of Schreber is offered by Morton Schatzman. In an article in *Labelling Madness* he compares many of Schreber’s delusions and miracles with the treatments that Schreber received whilst he was growing up. Schreber’s father was an authority on child rearing and his methods included cold baths, eye exercises, and a strict emphasis on posture. He also invented a number of restraining devices which he probably tested on his children. These included a bar to maintain posture, a head-holder to prevent the child’s head from falling forwards or sideways, and straps to hold the shoulders in position. Schatzman makes a number of connections between the exercises

55 Sigmund Freud, *Case Histories II*, pp. 191-2. Interestingly, at the end of his analysis, after a complete reduction of Schreber’s cosmic theories, Freud opens up the possibility that Schreber might be right after all:

It remains for the future to decide whether there is more delusion in my theory than I should like to admit, or whether there is more truth in Schreber’s delusion than other people are as yet prepared to believe.

*Case Histories II*, p. 218]
and restraining devices that Schreber may have been subjected to as a child and his later hallucinations; suggesting that Schreber’s madness was in part a re-enactment of his early experiences. Schreber’s compression of the chest miracle may have been a memory of the bar that was used to maintain his posture, the little men on Schreber’s eyes may be linked to the concentration and vigilance that he was forced to apply to his eye exercises, and the baths Schreber experienced as a child may have resurfaced as the miracles of heat and cold. Schreber’s world seems strange and alien to us because Schreber had an unorthodox childhood, not because it has any kind of independence from our own world. There is little reason to take Schreber’s cosmological worldview seriously if it is little more than a re-enactment of his father’s child rearing experiments.

Schreber suffers from reminiscences. His body embodies his past. He retains memories of what his father did to him as a child; although part of his mind knows they are memories, “he” does not. He is considered insane not only because of the quality of his experiences, but because he misconstrues their mode; he remembers, in some cases perfectly accurately, how his father treated him, but he thinks he perceives events occurring in the present of which he imagines God, rays, little men, and so on are the agents. 56

There are other reductions of Schreber, including Canetti’s explanation in terms of power, and Sass’s Wittgensteinian analysis which compares Schreber’s delusions with the end points of certain ‘diseased’ language-games.

We can reduce any system to its antecedents. At one level, there is no free creation of the new. All innovations are products of rules manipulated by meta-rules manipulated by meta-meta-rules. This kind of reductionistic explanation is a total and

56 Morton Schatzman, ‘Paranoia or Persecution: The Case of Schreber’, printed in Thomas Scheff (ed.),
self-consistent system. It cannot be contradicted or escaped from. On the other hand, all theories and realities can be reduced and explained away by this method. It is not just schizophrenic systems that can be dismissed on these grounds, but any system whatsoever. No theory does anything more than emerge from its past. If we can dismiss the theory of a schizophrenic because it is reducible to its antecedents, we can do the same with the theories of ‘normal’ people like Freud, Schatzman, and Sass. Freud’s theory of psychoanalysis is a product of his lust for power over his patients; Schatzman wants to explain Schreber in terms of his past because such an explanation functions as a reassuring father-like presence in his life, satisfying a yearning for security that he developed in childhood; Sass’s conceptualisation of Schreber in terms of solipsism is just a reminiscence of infantile confinement. (Sass’s problem is that he misconstrues the mode of his reminiscence; he imagines that he is analysing Schreber, when in fact he is just re-enacting an earlier closeted situation.)

If a theory can be dismissed because it is a product of its creator’s past, then there can be no theories. This is fine, except that this dismissal of all theories is itself a theory which, in turn, can be dismissed as a product of its past. If all theories are dismissed, including the theory that dismisses the theories, then we are left upon strange oscillating ground; shifting between theories and no theories; emerging, falling and rising again as different aspects of the problem are brought to light. We are in a region of collapsing hermeneutical circles and positive scepticism, which it is the purpose of this project, but not this paragraph, to attempt to explain.

A second, related reason why the reduction of the schizophrenic world-view to our own is not sufficient to dismiss it, is that such a reduction is reversible. We can explain the basic features of Memoirs of My Nervous Illness on the basis of Schreber’s...
homoerotic drives; but we can also claim that Freud wrote his essay on Schreber because ideas were planted into his head by Flechsig (or perhaps God). This manipulation of Freud was probably an attempt to discredit Schreber further - unmanning him through a dismissal of his religious experiences. The ‘normal’ can explain the madman’s deviation from the system of beliefs which he regards as true; but the madman can explain the ‘normal’’s attempts to explain him as a deviation from the system of beliefs which he regards as true.

The Limit

Some - farm houses - in a farm yard - time - with a horse and horseman - time where - going across the field as if they’re ploughing the field - time - with ladies - or collecting crops - time work is - coming with another lady - time work is - and where - she’s holding a book - time - thinking of things - time work is - and time work is where - you see her coming time work is on the field - and where work is - where her time is where working is and thinking of people and where work is and where you see the hills - going up - and time work is - where you see the - grass - time work is - time work is where the fields are - where growing and where work is.57

At its limit schizophrenia ceases to be a play of alternative conceptual schemes, logics and language-games. We no longer see another world opening up within the chronic schizophrenic; just a wilderness of twisted words and broken phrases - the empty blank stare of silence.

Neologisms, repeating words resurface, different personalities scrap and bicker over the body’s vocal apparatus.

At its limit, at the margins of madness, do we draw a line and say that beyond this line the madman is no longer one of us; that he has spiralled off into something no longer recognisable as an aspect, something no longer recognisable as anything - a surface play of words and feelings; inertia immobility and silence? Does an abyss now yawn between us and the madman? Is there now an essential difference between us - such that we no longer feel threatened by his madness?

Or are our words the same as his; a mumbled mish-mash of incoherent sounds and repetitions mixed with feelings, gestures, thoughts; a raving delirious discourse; a rambling flood of sounds vomiting from our mouths?

… just the mouth…lips…cheeks…jaws…never…what?...tongue?..yes…lips…cheeks…jaws…tongue…never still a second…mouth on fire…streams of words…in her ear…practically in her ear…not catching the half…not the quarter…no idea what she’s saying…and can’t stop…no stopping it…she who but a moment before…but a moment!..could not make a sound…no sound of any kind…now can’t stop…imagine!..can’t stop the stream…and the whole brain begging…something begging in the brain…begging the mouth to stop…pause a moment…if only for a moment…and no response…as if it hadn’t heard…or couldn’t…couldn’t pause a second…like maddened…all that together…straining to hear…piece it together…and the brain…raving away on its own…trying to make sense of it…or make it stop…58

Sanity in the homogenous zone is always contaminated by madness at its limit.
Madness is the absolute break with the work; it forms the constitutive moment of abolition, which dissolves in time the truth of the work; it draws the exterior edge, the line of dissolution, the contour against the void.  

A zone taunt and fluctuating between extremes. Ripping itself into tiny shreds spinning and dissolving into nothingness; bursting apart with an aching clanging groan. Coalescing again into a spinning sphere in a state of perfection from every direction. Shudders and tremors trumpet the next explosion of this eternally dissolving and returning dialectic.

If we are mad, we cannot describe our madness; where there is a work, a theory, a description there is no madness. The hypothesis that we are mad is, like Descartes’ cogito, a moment of hyperbole that leaves reason and unreason behind, a moment of excess “in the direction of the nondetermined, Nothingness or Infinity, an excess which overflows the totality of that which can be thought, the totality of beings and determined meanings, the totality of factual history”. The hypothesis that we are mad is a leap into ... nowhere. Speech before this leap becomes (retrospectively) the discarded foam of fools. Speech after this leap bubbles up into the booming otherworldly laugh that echoes down the corridors of the asylums.

To define philosophy as the attempt-to-say-the hyperbole is to confess—and philosophy is perhaps this gigantic confession—that by virtue of the historical enunciation through which philosophy tranquilizes itself and excludes madness, philosophy also betrays itself (or betrays itself as thought), enters into a crisis and a

59 Michel Foucault, Madness and Civilization, translated by Richard Howard (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 287. I have translated “oeuvre” as “work” to preserve the fuller meaning that is lost with “work of art”.
60 Jacques Derrida, ‘Cogito and the History of Madness’, printed in Writing and Difference, translated by Alan
forgetting of itself that are an essential and necessary period of its movement. I philosophize only in terror, but in the confessed terror of going mad. The confession is simultaneously, at its present moment, oblivion and unveiling, protection and exposure: economy.

But this crisis in which reason is madder than madness—for reason is non-meaning and oblivion—and in which madness is more rational than reason, for it is closer to the wellspring of sense, however silent or murmuring—this crisis has always begun and is interminable. It suffices to say that, if it is classic, it is not so in the sense of the classical age but in the sense of eternal and essential classicism, and is also historical in an unexpected sense. 61

Even the hypothesis that we are mad becomes meaningless, falls away from us. If we are mad we cannot know that we are mad. We remain in an empty space for a while, and then fall back into reason; fall back into discourse, into the work. But once we are back inside the work we recommence our mad hypotheses, fly out to the hyperbolic point ..., and return again.

If we are sane our self-descriptions are valid. The problem now is an excess of sanity. We have described a world in which no-one’s worldview is rejected on grounds of madness. Our theory of the homogenous zone and an alternative description of reality offered by a madman are both parts of the homogenous zone, and both sane. For our part, we think that there is a homogenous zone. This forces us to take the madman seriously. But the madman disagrees, he does not see the homogenous zone the way we do, he has a different metaphysical picture of reality. We argue that it is a matter of opinion, that no-one can really know whether or not there is a homogenous zone; but the madman is adamant, absolute, will not accept compromises: “There is no homogenous zone and that is it!”. If we believe in the homogenous zone, we also have to believe in perspectives which reject it, we have to accept worldviews in which it has not the slightest shadow of existence.

The idea of the homogenous zone collapses either because it is crazy or because it believes people who dismiss it. An excess of insanity, an excess of sanity. Even if we drop the distinction between sanity and insanity, or the link between sanity/insanity and truth/falseness, in favour of an account in terms of intensities we would still be stuck with a multiplicity of aspects - and only prejudice to mediate between them.\textsuperscript{62}

If there was no homogenous zone, the theory of the homogenous zone could be sane and differentiated from other theories - and therefore true.

We cannot hypothesise that we are mad because this hypothesis states that we are no longer making hypotheses. It does not hermeneutically circle, it is not a possible conjecture. But where does this leave the statement that we are not mad? Can this continue to speak when its opposite has fallen silent? If I cannot claim that I am mad, “I am sane” becomes a truism, a tautology, an affirmation that I am hermeneutically circling within reason. “I am sane” no longer tells us anything about the world, it no longer situates me within a group of people or describes a state of being or mind. At most it affirms the presence of meaning or reason themselves - but affirmations of meaning or reason have to be meaningful or reasonable; and we are caught again in the same vicious/virtuous circle.

“There is a cat” says something because there are other animals that the furry form in front of me could be - there is the possibility of being wrong about my attribution of catness to this animal. However “I am sane” cannot be wrong because its opposite is not another statement but the end of statements, the end of right and wrong, the impossibility of a speech that says anything. “I am sane” is grammatically worthless; philosophical nonsense.\textsuperscript{63}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{61} Ibid., p. 62.
\item \textsuperscript{62} See the discussion in Appendix II on the possibility of abandoning “madness”.
\item \textsuperscript{63} See Wittgenstein’s discussion of the statement “There are physical objects” in paragraph 35 of \textit{On Certainty}. We cannot observe the fact that there are physical objects any more than we can observe their absence and so
The collapse of an opposition is painful: schizophrenic philosophers, reasonable madmen; agitated struggling reason, calm clear delirium. Faith in our own world; belief in mad alternative worlds. We gaze with wonder at the white-marble structures of reason; we dissolve into Dionysian delirium.

I have presented you with a mad world, an inverted world, a schizophrenic fantasy in which madness changes place with reason - a world in which madness is reason. This is my vision, the aspect I inhabit. There are other worlds, other aspects, in which lines, barriers and walls are erected between sanity and insanity, between reason and schizophrenia. I am only a small patch in the fabric of the homogenous zone, I can only offer you a personal vision. You can dismiss me as deluded. I am one and you are many. You can ignore me, beat me, burn me, tear out my eyes and lock me in a conceptual prison. But I am already free and you are imprisoned; only you are not aware of this yet. Soon you will want to join me in my homogenous zone, soon you will be ripping out the bars and tearing down the walls that you have created around me.

But of course, you are already within the homogenous zone. Only .... you don’t realise it.... yet!

Why, thou sayest well. I do now remember a saying, ‘The fool doth think he is wise, but the wise man knows himself to be a fool.’ The heathen philosopher, when he had a desire to eat a grape, would open his lips when he put it into his mouth; meaning thereby that grapes were made to eat and lips to open.⁶⁴

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I would like to try and delineate a fifth response to nihilism, that borrows heavily from the work of Heidegger and Adorno. With this fifth response, it is not a question of overcoming nihilism in an act of the will or joyful destruction, because such an act would only imprison us all the more firmly in the very nihilistic logic we are trying to leave behind. Rather than overcoming nihilism, it is a question of delineating it. What will be at stake is a liminal experience, a deconstructive experience of the limit - deconstruction as an experience of the limit - that separates the inside from the outside of nihilism and which forbids us both the gesture of transgression and restoration.\(^1\)

**The Beginning of the Beginning**

Tight choking black muffled noise; shifting writhing squashed, crushed; choking slide; heave slip-grasp ease; crush; cold-steel pain; ease; sudden whack scream blurred light.

I was born - a fact I can scarcely comprehend. Memories of growing up that I can barely relate to. Blurred unreal glimpses of my past - doing things, seeing and hearing things, asking things, interpreting things. Memories as grainy as the 8 mm images that silently link them to existence.

I was *given* a framework of certainties, an episteme, an object partitioning, a

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language and a form of life. I was given a way in which I could understand the commencement of my existence.

Now I sit and contemplate the bloody thrust that threw me into the world. Retrospectively I contemplate and interpret. My beginnings began when I started to look back upon my history.

**The Beginning of the End**

We look at a person and tremble before the rock of their existence.

We look at a person and see a friend.

We look at a person and drool over their meat.

We look at a person and their dirt and ugliness nauseate us.

We look at a person and look away.

Philosophy is about the real that we find around us, the reality that we inhabit in our day-to-day lives. It is an attempt to comprehend the world that we take for granted. This search has many sects. Some call it “science”; others use “economics”, “politics”, “philosophy” or “religion” to describe it. We are people thrown into the world and talking about it.

As we attempt to comprehend the real we come across limitations; we encounter blind spots, self cancellations of our descriptions, an excess of equally plausible descriptions. Cataracts cast dark spots over philosophy’s clear vision.
We want to *describe* reality; but some of our most promising theories cannot be spoken about. We reach out towards the world and our theories slowly sadly surely melt away.

We want to *fix* reality, but it explodes into a labyrinth of aspects. This vision crumbles into an oscillation between a paradoxical theory and irresolvable differences between systems.

Reality destabilises. The world that we grew into as a child starts to crumble and fragment. Sliding systems, partial systems, vague drifting clouds of thought. We slip into madness; we watch madness tumble from our grasp forever.

This project was built within the territory that I have just described. The first chapter dealt with theories which describe the world, describe themselves, and then freeze up and fall into the world that they were describing. When some theories develop past a certain point our ability to speak about them drops away. However, these invisible theories are not invalidated by our silence about them. They drift on with a shady twilit existence that continues to haunt our other attempts to do philosophy. Structuralism is an example of this kind of collapse - and there may not be any theories which can avoid collapse.

The second chapter attempted to think within a multiplicity of overlapping and self-enclosed systems. The notion of an aspect was used to understand the problem of a number of conflicting interpretations of the world, and the differences between aspects were investigated. The aspect which described the aspects (positive scepticism) collapsed when it turned back to describe itself.
The third chapter developed a schizoid theory of insanity which illustrated the theories developed in the first two chapters. ‘Madmen’ were used to demonstrate the possibility of aspects different from our own, and the deconstruction of the difference between sanity and insanity was used to open us up to their ‘mad’ aspects.

The main aim of this project was to identify two problems in philosophy; structural weaknesses that we need to bear in mind when constructing, criticising or believing in philosophical theories. We need to know if a theory collapses, and whether a criticism on these grounds matters; we need to be aware both of the aspectual nature of all theories and of the collapse of this vision of aspects. The description of these problems was intended to raise their profile within contemporary philosophy; helping us to become aware of them when we create or criticise philosophical theories.

Connected with this central aim were a number of other points. To begin with, there is the effect of invisibility upon our attempts to philosophise about the world. When we philosophise we need to be aware of the self cancellation of the theories that we come up with. Invisible theories (especially those of science) can be extremely useful at some levels, but if we attempt a complete understanding of reality through them, it is important to realise that they cannot be spoken about. Positive scepticism enables us to articulate a plural world, but it vanishes from our sight if we take it seriously as a system.

Related to this is the ready way in which we reject theories because of their collapse. The arguments of this project suggest that we may have to revise our criteria for acceptable theories if few theories remain visible and if the notion of invisibility can be sustained as a theoretical concept. There is also a question about the status of visible theories (stable
hermeneutic circles). If these are the only theories that we can argue for, what is the point of such arguments? If we are forced to put them forward because we cannot speak about alternatives, are we not in some sense merely moving within their presuppositions? The distinction between sanity and insanity cannot be argued for because it has to be presupposed by any argument. We have to assume that we are not mad before we attempt to reason.

Another important point is the circular nature of collapse - philosophy's strange habit of returning to its starting point. After a collapse that eliminates language or the human subject, we 'discover' that our attempt to philosophise never took place; that there never were any philosophers or a language that they could philosophise in. After positive scepticism collapses we continue to face impossible debates within a plural world and inevitably start to shuffle back towards the sceptical paradoxes.

There is also the attempt of this project to forge a path from normal theories about the world to the strange ground that it is investigating. It is not just a few obscure metaphysical theses that are challenged by these problems, but our ordinary distinctions as well. Our everyday understanding of the world falls apart in the way that I have described – collapsing aspects do not just lie within the dusty tomes of past thinkers.

Connected with this is the very Pyrrhonic way in which I have attempted to draw you into my world. In my exposition of the theories of this project, I have done my best to start with what I take to be your presuppositions, and to move from these to the position that I am attempting to articulate. I want to softly seduce you into my aspect; to draw you further, a little further, ... until it is too late.

Finally, there is the way in which this project is inextricably trapped within the
problems that it describes. This has been a project about philosophy and the world; but it has also been a project within philosophy and the world and a project that has been philosophy and the world. Although it has attempted to set limits to philosophising and to enact these limits, it has not thereby hoped to overcome them. Its main aim has been to open up a couple of ways in which we can limn philosophy’s limits without seeking solutions. We can accept these limitations, or move into a different room in which they no longer appear - a room that, perhaps, no longer has anything to do with philosophy.

The end begins when philosophy finds itself unable to escape from the limits that it discovers within itself. This end never ends because the attempt to wrap it up in a conclusion only succeeds in deferring it. So long as the end is a philosophical theme it is an end that is just beginning.

**The Extension of the End**

The thought that I have presented in this project can be extended in a number of directions. So far I have shown how two theories of positive scepticism and madness collapse. Beyond this there is the question of how many other theories have this structure and to what extent any theory at all can escape from this problem. If all theories collapse, where does this leave philosophy and our attempt to understand reality? Furthermore, if invisibility is widespread we may have to re-evaluate the theories that we previously discarded because of their collapse.

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2 If you set limits to something you also overcome this limit. A delimitation determines the territory on both sides of the limit.
I have focussed here on one kind of collapse, a collapse that undermines the presuppositions that we have about people and theories. However there are other varieties of self-reflexive collapse. Theories can collapse because their object is theoretically untheorisable (the mystical God). They can also collapse because it cannot be explained how their object came to be spoken about in language (an epistemological collapse). The existential theory of time and the hypothesis that we have brains are both vulnerable to the latter kind of criticism. This project is just a starting point for an exploration of these other self-reflexive areas.

Finally, this project has concentrated on fairly concrete theories about the world, and ignored the whole question of the ethical. Sextus Empiricus made the move from scepticism to a way of life, but there are reasons why positive scepticism cannot do the same. A new ethics could be found that applies the insights of positive scepticism. Such an ethics would have to identify what different ethical rooms (or economies) have in common, and perhaps devise a number of utopian rooms on the basis of this information. Even if this analysis could not prescribe a single room or collection of rooms for us to live in, it would be a useful phenomenology of the various self-enclosed ways in which we organise our ethical lives.

3 An approach that was pursued in a very different way by Simon Critchley in Very Little... Almost Nothing.
4 This was dealt with in my essay Virtual Flesh (unpublished) where I used examples taken from virtual reality to suggest that there is no evidence for the hypothesis that we have brains.
5 See the section ‘An Outline of Pyrrhonism’ in Chapter 2 for more on this.
6 The notion of the hedonistic economy which Henry Staten outlined in his mini-course at Essex (February 1999) goes some way towards an analysis of the ethical in terms of a labyrinth of aspects.
The Ending of the End

… nihilism is impossible, because it is still a desperate but determined theory, an imaginary of the end, a weltanschauung of catastrophe.

(Post) modern nihilists bugger cats, treat patients, flip burgers, and/ or write long books on absolutist knowledge.

Prescriptive limits are part of philosophy; they do not substantially limit it at all. They extend philosophy by partitioning it into legitimate and illegitimate areas. The limits to philosophy that I am interested in do not prescribe what we should say or do in philosophy. They create a kind of play within which prescriptive limits become less important.

We can only go so far within philosophy, within language, and yet this limitation can extend indefinitely. A folded space within which we can advance continuously without resistance, and which returns us insensibly to the beginning.

When some theories are pushed to their limits they abolish speech; but the practice of speech is not affected. We do not fall silent - we keep our aimless chatter going - but our hopes for language die. We give up even though this giving up is completely unjustified. This giving up is a further move within the language game; not an escape from it.

At the beginning people spoke about the world to each other. People discovered that speech is possible and impossible, and that if it is impossible it does

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not really matter.

At the end people spoke about the world to each other.

We continue to attempt to speak (a problem endemic to the human form of life) and this speech endlessly disintegrates into nonsense or silence.

The death of tragedy; the end of grandiose endings.

Dog's breath smoky on a mountain. Pumping blobs watch the rocket dawn. Red's chain lives to the wall's feet. “Was Is Reality ....
A Contrast Between Positive Scepticism and a Caricature of Relativism

Since positive scepticism occasionally approaches one of the deadliest sins in philosophy it will be helpful to clarify the degree to which it succumbs to the charges made against relativism.

Relativism is the claim that many if not all of the features of our experience are relative to the people who experience them. Reality appears as it does, not because it really is that way, but because it has been structured by our perceptions or interpretations of it. Our language structures our interpretation of time; our episteme determines how we experience life; our culture indicates the actions that are sinful and permitted. I look out of the window and see a sheep: relativism tells me that the sheep that I thought I saw was almost entirely the product of my imagination. If my mind had not shaped it into an object and defined it as a domestic animal the sheep would never have happened for me. Relativism makes the self-evident sheep into a construct moulded from an unknowable objective reality.

This theory is often criticised because it makes a special exception for the relativist’s own claims. Relativism describes a situation in which people’s interpretation of reality is guided by their culture and conceptual schemes, and fails to describe its own situation in the same way. The relativist is himself a person within a culture and conceptual scheme, and so the relativism that he creates must also be the product of a culture and conceptual scheme. Relativism relativises all interpretations to their situation and so relativism itself must be relative to the relativist and of no general significance:
If the relativist thesis involves either of the following two claims: (a) What is true just is what is true for each individual believer; or (b) What is true just is what is true for a particular belief system; it can be pointed out that the relativist thesis itself can only be true for either (a) an individual believer, or (b) a particular belief system; more correctly, truth is identified with and, so restricted to, what is believed to be true in a particular belief system. The relativist, however, seems to require at least one statement of universal truth, this being the statement that truth is relative.¹

The most important difference between positive scepticism and relativism - what is, in some sense, the point of positive scepticism - is that positive scepticism is an attempt to face up to, explore and live through the paradoxes that relativism sweeps under the carpet. Positive scepticism develops the case for relativism, pushes it to its limit, and then documents its own collapse into invisibility. The analysis of hermeneutic circles in the first chapter provides the theoretical framework that is used to understand the collapse of positive scepticism. The evidence that is presented for positive scepticism in the second chapter, together with the examination of madness in the third chapter, demonstrates why we need to take these structures seriously in the first place. Whilst the collapse of relativism is felt by its detractors to signal its unworkability, the collapse of positive scepticism is a positive and necessary feature of its structure; part of the way in which it works and not something that invalidates it or should motivate a search for a better theory.

A second difference between positive scepticism and relativism is that positive scepticism is not committed to the metaphysics behind relativism. The positive sceptic is someone who happens to see the world as a labyrinth of aspects, but he does not base this aspectual vision on a distinction between some kind of amorphous stuff and the conceptual schemas of people who gaze upon this stuff. Positive scepticism is an aspect that sees the

world as a labyrinth of aspects, it is not an aspect that sees the world as a blob that is chopped up in different ways by the people who gaze upon it. Positive scepticism champions aspects over an ontology of stuff.

Finally, the positive sceptic is not interested in the claim that everything is relative to an aspect. He observes that some theories and ethical judgements are present within some aspects and not present in others, but he does not extend this observation into the claim that these things are merely relative to aspects. Situating a theory within an aspect just describes where it occurs; it does not dilute its potential for truth or falsity. Some theories within an aspect may be right and others may be wrong, but since the positive sceptic has no easy way of determining which are right and which wrong he limits himself to describing the theories within each aspect, without attempting to evaluate the aspect as a whole. The positive sceptic is interested in describing different aspects phenomenologically, \(^2\) he is not interested in mediating between their various claims.

\(^2\) Although the idea of pure description is also problematic.
Once we have understood the madman as a local amplification (or diminishment) of the homogenous zone relative to someone less (or more) amplified, once we have accepted everything that the madman has to say, what will become of “madness” within the zone. Will we continue to think of the zone as simultaneously sane and insane, or will “madness” dissolve into the detritus of history; join the vast crowd of surplus words that lie unused and abandoned from earlier times and places?

If we did manage to completely open ourselves to the other, to understand and accept the way that each person is, there would no longer be any disjunctions between people. We would no longer use “madness” to dismiss someone different (although we might continue to use it as a label for the collection of schizoid qualities). This would leave us with a culture with no differences, a culture with perfect harmony and understanding, a culture stripped of its outside and reeking of the visible - Baudrillard’s beatific nightmare.

But something would have been lost. The homogenous zone that I have described here is one that oscillates between madness and sanity, one that is both sane and insane. If we achieved a perfect understanding of the madman we would uncover a homogenous zone saturated by the light of reason, one that has forgotten that it ever glimpsed an outside, a homogenous zone that is no longer mad. The aspects of madmen and ‘ primitives’ would all be understood as contortions and exaggerations of the homogenous zone.

If we understand the madman without at some point abandoning our self-comprehension, we will lose the tensions and collapses of positive scepticism. If the
opposition between sanity and insanity dissolves in this way there will be nothing left but a superfluity of reason, a rich dense weight of reason no longer contrasted to anything else. The homogenous zone will become hypersane.

Perhaps our vision of an alternative, of the other, of madness as something that collapses reason, is just a by-product of our inadequate understanding, a misconception generated by insufficient reason. Or perhaps the expansion of our culture across the globe has given us an insight into something precious that we will soon forget; an insight into the instability, thrownness and madness of the homogenous zone.

We cannot tell. We will have to wait and watch. Perhaps there are gods or aliens who could reinject us with a notion of otherness. Baudrillard places his hopes in terrorism, viruses and catastrophe. Any of these could sustain the instability of the zone in a different form, even if the tag "mad" is no longer used to label the flickering of the light of reason. But perhaps there is no otherness. We will have to wait and watch; wait and see which conceptual scheme ends up recreating history.
But the difficulty is that one manages neither easily nor completely to silence oneself, that one must fight against oneself, with precisely a mother’s patience: we seek to grasp within us what subsists safe from verbal servilities and what we grasp is ourselves fighting the battle, stringing sentences together – perhaps about our effort (than about our failure) – but sentences all the same, powerless to grasp anything else. It is necessary to persist – making ourselves familiar, cruelly so, with a helpless foolishness, usually concealed, but falling under full light: the intensity of the states builds up quite quickly and from that moment they absorb – they even enrapture. The moment comes when we can reflect, link words together, once again no longer silence ourselves: this time it is off in the wings (in the background) and, without worrying any longer, we let their sound fade away.³

When some systems are pushed to their limits they vanish from the field of theory. No further conclusions can be drawn about them; nothing further can be said. They become mystical systems.

Two kinds of mysticism can emerge from a hermeneutic collapse. The first loosely coincides with negative theology: Some systems endorse the idea that we are people who can speak about reality; but they make parts of reality wholly inaccessible to human experience or language. The Christian mystic can speak about worms but he cannot speak about God. God is infinitely removed from his experience and can only be defined by negative attributes. Within this kind of mysticism human speech is possible; the only problem is that some subject matters cannot be spoken about.
The second kind of mysticism completely subverts the idea that we are people speaking about reality. Mystical systems of this type make our speech impossible - all subject matters, and not just a restricted number, are put completely out of play. A total interpretation of reality that has no place for people who understand it; people who can articulate it. This kind of mystical system sucks us up, absorbs us and starts to do our speaking for us. We no longer have a theory about atoms; our speech becomes the patterned flows and interactions of atoms. We no longer play a language-game; we are played by a language-game. This kind of mysticism does not have a positive content; it is a complete annihilation of the idea that thought or language is a representing medium with a positive content. A Buddhistic as opposed to a Christian mysticism. It is this form of mysticism that plays the most important role in this project.

Although these two varieties of mysticism have a lot in common with traditional mysticism, there are a number of differences as well. To begin with, neither is connected with the emotions. Whilst intense feelings of love may be associated with a collapsing system, the traditional connection between ecstasy and mysticism is not important here. Second, there are a number of mystical systems. There is not one ineffable truth which language fails to refer to - numerous collapsing aspects cannot be spoken about from within them. Third, alongside the multiplicity of mystical aspects there is the possibility of stable aspects as well. Some aspects collapse into mysticism, but there may be other aspects which give a complete account of reality that includes their ability to interpret it. Finally, the mysticism that is most important to this project is not connected with any praxis or rituals. The first kind of mysticism might lead to action, but the second is an abrupt halt to

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4 One example of this kind of mysticism is the objective theory of time (see Chapter 1).
5 They both deal with an ineffable that is real and yet cannot be expressed within language.
6 The Cloud of Unknowing describes a self-induced collapse that evokes a dart of love from God.
everything cognitive and linguistic; an abrupt halt to everything human. From the second kind of mysticism there is nowhere to go; at best one can arbitrarily recommence what one was doing before. This second kind of mysticism is a number of disintegrating points at philosophy’s limits; not a system that one could move within by contemplation, fasting, or prayer.⁷

⁷ Although one could say (along with Nietzsche) that my description of this kind of mysticism is a liturgical act within the religion of truth
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**Mystical Writings**


Miscellaneous Works


