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ROGER TRIGG

THE METAPHYSICAL SELF

I. SUBJECT AND OBJECT

What is the self? What is the 'I' that appears to be the subject of all 'my' thoughts and imaginings, my experiences and desires? This is not simply about problems of identification. How I pick you out or you recognize me are questions related to the problem of what it is to be or you, but they are not the same issue. If our 'true selves' are inaccessible to public scrutiny, how we are identified and re-identified publicly will be different from who 'we' are. The problem of the self is a genuinely metaphysical question which cannot be reduced to the epistemological one of how we know each other, without further argument.

Antony Flew argues that we use bodily criteria to establish bodily continuity and that is a 'large part, if not the whole of what is meant by personal identity'. He continues:¹ 'It would be, wouldn't it, if persons just are, as I maintain that we all know that we are, a very special sort of creatures of flesh and blood'. This makes it clear that whatever the merits of bodily continuity as a measure of personal identity, the major issue is a metaphysical one. Are we *just* creatures of flesh and blood?

This is a venerable problem in philosophy, and in modern times the terms of the discussion have been set by Descartes. He recognized that even though he could think everything false, nevertheless there was still a subject of that thought. He himself was thinking. This is the context of his '*cogito, ergo sum*'. He declared that he was a substance, the whole nature of which was to think, with no need of any location, and independent of any material thing. His conclusion was:² 'This "me", that is to say the soul by which I am what I am, is entirely distinct from the body, and is even more easy to know than is the latter: and even if body were not, the soul would not cease to be what it is.'

The notion of an unanalysable subject, the substratum of all thought, conceivable apart from the body, was thus given a powerful impetus. It is a notion that fits well with the structure of our language, dividing everything into subject and predicate. This may mean that we have been misled and have reified ideas that have a merely grammatical status. Certainly our

¹ 'The Presuppositions of Survival', *Philosophy*, LXII (1987), 28.

² *Philosophical Works of Descartes*, trans. E. Haldane and G. R. T. Ross, (Cambridge, 1931), p. 101.

language should reflect our metaphysics and not the other way round. Nevertheless the distinction between subject and object runs deep and the problem is how far the subject, particularly the subject of thought, can be devalued without affecting the position of the object. When I kick a stone, the presumption is that there is a relationship between two physical objects, but if I know a truth the position is not so clear. Is it possible to deny that 'I' refers to some thing (or substance) without thereby casting doubt on the separate status of what is known? Nearly every view of truth must distinguish what is the case from the beliefs of any individual. What I believe and whether it is true are totally different issues. Many would hold that what is true is objective, independent of the conceptions of individuals or groups. In contrast, beliefs are subjective, so that whether I believe something is a matter about me. Just because I am wrong in my beliefs does not mean that I do not hold them. The world is full of people who have beliefs and are mistaken. What makes beliefs true is what the beliefs are about.

These remarks may seem obvious but they utilize a strong contrast between the possessor of beliefs and the objects of that cognitive state. As a believing, and even a knowing, subject, I gain much of my status by contrast with the world I try to grasp. The real world does not become moulded to my will, but is what it is, whatever I think. It includes me and my so-called 'mental states', and it is not brought into existence by me. I discover truth and do not create it. Even an idealist, making a general connection between mind, or language, and reality, would differentiate between my beliefs and what is the case, or between what *I* think and what is generally thought. An identity could only result in solipsism, according to which my beliefs and my world are co-extensive. Solipsism, however, itself trades on the tacit distinction between self and reality, but merely refuses to detach the concept of reality from that of self. I create the world, while *I* still exist in splendid and impregnable isolation. It could be argued that this is the inevitable outcome of Cartesian dualism. The more sure I am of myself and my thought, the less sure I may be of anything lying beyond. At this point, though, dualism has been superseded by monism. Mind (and my mind at that) has become the only reality. Everything I believe has to be true, since I cannot be wrong about the world I myself create. The only complication that can arise is if my beliefs are internally inconsistent, although presumably this must mean that my world itself has inconsistent features, as dream-worlds often have.

The opposite danger is that of the physicalist who is so sure of the reality of the physical world that the place of *me* and *my* thoughts becomes of secondary importance. I am a physical object, and knowledge becomes a matter of the relation of one physical object to another. The difficulty is how to differentiate one mode of causal interaction from another. Assuming, as a physicalist will, that all beliefs have a physical foundation and are

physically caused, there is no way left of saying which causes link our beliefs to the world and which do not. We can identify deviant beliefs, but that is all they are. The normal beliefs of the majority can set the standard for truth. Given our beliefs, we then have a standard to enable us to decide which are correct. A premium has to be placed on coherence and consensus, and it may be claimed that we cannot hope for more. We cannot step outside all our beliefs in order to confront reality. Yet the result is that the world then ceases to be independent of our systems of beliefs. It has to be a construction out of them.

The paradox is that the more that belief is thought the product of the physical world and itself an aspect of it, the more the physical world loses its status as something against which beliefs can be measured. We cannot start wondering which beliefs are justified and which are not, since we cannot discriminate between different causal chains. To do so would be to admit that we have a prior view of what is true and already know the proper paths to it. Without independent access to truth, we can only build up a picture of the world from the beliefs we already have. We cannot assume that these must mirror a world that exists apart from our conceptions of it. If beliefs are part of the physical world, identified perhaps with states of the brain, all that can be said is that we are physical organisms disposed to act in particular ways.

Evolution through natural selection has presumably ensured that these ways are likely to be advantageous to us. Some would imagine that this shows there is likely to be a 'fit' between our beliefs and the world. Creatures that misjudge their environment, it may be said, are unlikely to survive. Beliefs, however, do not have to be true to be advantageous, Sociobiologists are prone to argue that moral beliefs are advantageous even if illusory. The notion of a moral claim or obligation being 'objective' and demanding our allegiance is said to be beneficial, even though such a belief has been programmed in us to discourage anti-social behaviour, and need not correspond with the way things are. Reality may be morally neutral. It is the belief that is advantageous and it does not matter whether it is true, as long as we hold it. Questions of biological advantage are different from questions of truth. The monism of a physicalist similarly changes the subject from questions of what is true to those concerning the fact of belief. That people believe something becomes of greater significance than the content of their beliefs, since we have no independent means of adjudicating the latter.

Both forms of monism, whether mental or physical, can lead to positions which make us powerless to distinguish between truth and falsehood. The solipist can never be wrong. Even if he changes his mind, there is no guarantee that his second thoughts are better than his first. The physicalist has to take our collective beliefs on trust, and may indeed conceive it a virtue

that we cannot be radically mistaken. For both idealist and physicalist truth must depend on consensus, since one can appeal to nothing beyond people's conceptions of reality, however they are understood.

Is the desirable position to have two items which have to be fitted together? Idealism and physicalism typically deny this by accepting the dualist framework but then emphasizing one of the sides of the potential equation. Monists deny either the separate existence of 'mind' or 'the world'. Yet a critic might say that in so doing they are accepting and arguing within a distinction that should never be made. The distinction between subject and object lies at the root of the argument, and it may be suggested that this should be discarded. This would block the worry that we are all *only* subjects or *only* objects.

There is a powerful current in modern philosophy that tries to sweep aside the dichotomy. The metaphysical subject is as much anathema as the world existing in itself apart from human conceptions of it. Much of this approach can be exemplified in the writings of Nietzsche. He boldly asserted:¹

There exists neither spirit, nor reason, nor thinking, nor consciousness, nor soul, nor will, nor truth; all are fictions that are of no use. There is no question of 'subject and object'.

He maintained that the concept of substance is a consequence of our concept of the subject, and denounced the 'fiction' that beneath our various states there lies a substratum. Following Heraclitus, he believed that everything is in flux, so that we find in 'things' what we bring to them. Everything is linked to everything else. Nothing is determinate, and all is a question of interpretation and perspective. He says: 'Truth is the kind of error without which a certain species of life could not live.' It is difficult for anyone challenging the metaphysics which shines through our language to do so without apparently using language in contradictory ways. The question must not be whether one can transcend the categories to language without doing violence to language, but whether such a programme is rationally defensible.

Talk of reality as indeterminate or chaotic, and reference to 'becoming' instead of 'being' may be to attack a particular kind of metaphysics, but it is hard to make much sense of it except as a way of telling us something of the character of reality. When Nietzsche says² 'facts are precisely what there is not, only interpretations', he is not saying anything at all unless he is talking about what there really is. He senses a difficulty when he asks whether an interpretation implies an interpreter. He maintains that even this is 'invention' but, again, the notion of invention only gains its power by contrast with what is not invented. Our whole metaphysics can be questioned, but there has to come a point at which denial stops. If everything is

¹ *Will to Power*, [no. 480,] ed. W. Kaufmann, (New York, 1967).

² *Op. cit.* no. 493.

fiction, and nothing is real, we so lose our grip on the concepts of fact and fiction, truth and falsity, and reality and unreality, that the argument cannot even be stated. There comes a point at which an attack on the presuppositions of *our* language becomes an attack on those of *any* language.

The world may be indeterminate, and Nietzsche alleges there is no limit to the ways in which it can be interpreted, but if any interpretation is as good as any other, nothing can ever be ruled out. Nietzsche's own objections to Platonic and Christian metaphysics fall to the ground. The problem is that if they are mistaken in claiming objective truth, Nietzsche apparently wants them to be 'objectively' mistaken. Their views, in that case, do not match the character of the world. In fact, the dichotomy between the world and what is said about it can never be finally transcended. Anything can be said with impunity, without some distinction between what is and is not the case, and that can only mean that language is reduced to meaningless sound. It is no coincidence that Heraclitus was much admired by Nietzsche and that his followers were confronted with this very difficulty by Plato.¹ The less check that is put by reality on what can be said, the less in the end can be said.

What is the connection between the possibility of metaphysics and the notion of the self? Since my beliefs about the world are seen to be *about* something, we have to take the possibility of mistake seriously. That means that we must differentiate between the stance I take to the world and 'the world'. The basic distinction between subject and object makes language possible. The distinction between what is the case and what is thought to be the case runs very deep. Part of what enables me to differentiate myself from the world is the knowledge that my conception of the world is not co-existent with the world. *My* world is not necessarily *the* world, not just because of my limitations but also because of my proneness to error.

2. THE IDEA OF THE SELF

The distinction between what is taken to be true and what is true provides one of the bases for conceiving of the self. Yet impressions of the world can be distinguished from it, without invoking any notion of a principle of unity underlying them. Why should one talk of *the* self, as if there is one thing underlying reactions to the world? It might perhaps be sufficient for perceptions, beliefs and so on to be associated in some way with a particular body. The question remains why the nature of *the* self needs a metaphysical rather than a physical basis. It is even alleged that the idea of an incorporeal substance somehow subsisting within the human personality is dangerous. It inevitably invites a contrast between the self and the body, so that the body

¹ E.g. *Theaetetus* 182D.

can be thought of as weighing down, impeding and limiting the true self. The latter yearns, it may be imagined, for its freedom, not wishing to be restricted by place and time. Further, the notion, it is claimed, is excessively individualist. The self is envisaged as totally apart from other beings. The 'solitary ego' is, it seems, independent of the influences of biology or society. Just as it is distinct from the body, it is detached from its social background, in which, it is claimed by some, human beings find their identity.

A doctrine of the metaphysical self envisages it as something more than the product of biological and social influences. The uniqueness of each individual is stressed in a way that transcends the context, whether physical or social, in which the self is placed. Without such an idea, our notion of the human person becomes exceedingly problematic. It is always tempting to wield Ockham's razor, and the intrinsic difficulty of discovering the self in the midst of myriad experiences (as Hume found) can make it tempting to dispense with the notion. We do not need to give up a distinction between the subject and object of belief to reinforce the idea of some substance or substratum. There perhaps need not be one thing making me what I am, and 'I' may be produced in a different way. Certainly our genetic inheritance and our social environment are powerful influences and interact in a complex manner. Yet the subtraction of the metaphysical self means that our dispositions, beliefs and desires are merely the effects of particular causal chains. We are then (whoever 'we' are) merely responding to a combination of biological and environmental pressures, and the individuality that seems so precious is merely the result of different causal influences. Some would even go so far as to claim that not only is the 'self' created in the main by social pressures, but that the idea of the individual self that we have is itself social in origin. It is not something we each naturally have, and may not, indeed, be present in the same way in each society.

This raises the possibility that people could live in an ordered way in society without distinguishing themselves from other people. Yet notions of such arrangements are difficult to grasp. If there is a 'self' it must be the starting point for my interaction with the world. One can imagine communities in which there are different ideas of who or what may belong to me. Human society does not inevitably have to rely on ideas of property or the nuclear family. My responsibilities can easily vary. How though, could a society function in which I do not understand that there is any difference between myself and others? Biological organisms may have evolved so as to interact with each other, without understanding what they are doing, but it is hard to believe that a human society could work like that. Indeed a strong sense of one's own identity could prove to be biologically advantageous. I am better placed to pursue my own advantage when I can appreciate who 'I' am. This notion of a self, however, involves not much more than a grasp of oneself as a physical organism in a world of other such organisms. It seems that more has to be added before any idea of a metaphysical self is arrived at.

Yet the concept of a physical organism is not as metaphysically empty as might first appear. Any such conception necessarily involved the thought that I am the *same* organism persisting through time. There would be no point in the conscious pursuit even of biological advantage if I did not have the concept of myself as a continuing entity. Even if a desire for children has biological origins, I have to have the idea that they would be *my* children and that presupposes that *I* persist through their conception, birth and growth. Similarly, there must be a presumption that they persist *themselves* through the various stages of their growth. It may well be that the fact of consciousness, and even of self-consciousness, has helped to give humanity a major evolutionary advantage.

The idea of the self would seem also to be more a precondition of society than a consequence of it. Our moral views are based firmly on questions of personal responsibility and thus on the idea of a person. Without a strong conception of the self, I could not hold myself responsible or other people either. I must be able to hold that the same person can persist through time, to be able to feel remorse or pride myself or to praise or blame others. I cannot feel guilty if someone else did something wrong. I should not punish anyone for something they did not do. Perhaps this reflects a particular view of morality, so that notions of personal responsibility could change if we no longer believed in the persistence of persons. It is difficult, however, to envisage a society whose members could not be re-identified. There would be a succession of different persons, so that the society would exist in a flux of constant change.

A remark made by Nietzsche draws attention to the problem of a society whose members do not continue through time. In a slightly different context he asks:¹

To breed an animal with the right to make promises – is not this the paradoxical task that nature has set itself in the case of man? Is it not the real problem regarding man?

Yet to make a promise, I must be able to recognize myself as persisting into the future. To enter into an obligation with others implies that I will try to fulfil it. This obviously entails that 'I' will still be 'me'. I cannot now promise to act in the future in a particular way without assuming that I will still exist at the future time. However much I may change, I must still be bound by the promise. Part therefore of what should be meant by what gives the 'right to make promises' is the fact of the continuance of the self. Indeed without some notion of persons persisting, it is difficult to see how many of the central notions of morality can be retained. Some forms of utilitarianism encouraging pleasant experiences and discouraging unpleasant ones, might be possible, even if the experiences had no persisting owners. Whether, however, this could provide a sufficient basis for a stable society is dubious.

¹ *Genealogy of Morals*, ed. W. Kaufmann (New York, 1969), p. 57.

Certainly there could be no moral responsibility for the conduct of such a policy. No one could be wrong in failing to maximize pleasure and minimize pain, since 'they', whoever 'they' are supposed to be, would not exist long enough to be blamed for what they were or were not doing. No society can exist without some conception of the human subject, responsible for his or her actions, and ready and willing to accept that responsibility.

It may be objected that the notion of a responsible agent does not of itself add up to the concept of self, particularly a metaphysical one. There is, however, something of great importance common to the two ideas, and that is the fact of persistence through change. The concept of substance has had a chequered philosophical history, but it began by picking out that which persists through alteration. A substance is at least the subject of change, and without such a conception there can only be a confusing flux of characteristics and properties. That is a desperate enough position for would-be physical objects, but in the area of human experience, it means that nothing can bind together different feelings, thoughts, memories and experiences. Without a common subject, even the idea that experiences can come in bundles is suspect. What criteria are there for gathering them up into this bundle rather than that?

The problem is not just that we need some principle of unity which can relate the pain in my leg to the thoughts I am at present having. They may not be causally related, but they have in common the fact that they are all *mine*. We also need to be able to relate past experiences, and present memories, present actions with future memories. My whole life is an on-going unity in which each part is related to every other by virtue of the simple but crucial fact that it concerns me. It is not enough to introduce questions of causation and argue that my present memory is caused by my past experience. This already assumes a grasp of who or what is to count as me. We will still have to distinguish which causal chains begin and end with me and which involve other people. Even some casual links between my previous experience and my memory of it can be deviant, in that they rely on other people's accounts of what happened to me. It is only a short step from this to my apparently remembering as an event in my life something which in fact happened to someone else. Memory is not so much a source of a sense of personal identity as a consequence of it. I cannot remember what I once felt without some preconception of myself as a persisting person. Otherwise all I can be confronted with is a flux of ownerless impressions and feelings.

It is a common human experience to be aware of oneself as continuing through time and space. One can be convinced that one is the same person as when one was a child, even though one may have changed in many ways, both obvious and subtle. This may indeed be one of the main foundations for a belief in the metaphysical self, transcending the various stages of bodily growth and decay. Yet as a philosophical argument, it is not perhaps very

convincing to those who vehemently deny having any such experience and who claim their life (whoever 'they' may be) has no overall unity. Maybe they conceive of it as a series of overlapping experiences, each causally related to one another, but in no way united by any common principle. Yet it is very difficult to conceive of one's life in this way. Indeed, conceiving 'it' as a whole, to be divided into stages, would already be self-contradictory, just as thinking of 'my' life would be.

Without any overall unity for a life, notions of meaning and purpose become very elusive. I cannot discover any overall purpose for my life if the very notion of what it is for a life to be 'mine' dissolves into the mists of uncertainty. It is perhaps not a coincidence that the most vociferous atheists, such as Nietzsche, tend also to be the major opponents of any notion of a metaphysical self. It might be just an aversion to all metaphysics, so that all metaphysical entities are fair game, but there may be more to it than that. The idea of a continuing self, as the subject of consciousness, and as a moral agent, giving unity to the personality, stems from a picture of the world in which stability rather than flux, purpose rather than chance, and meaning rather than nihilism all play important parts. This then inevitably raises the question as to the source of such stability and purpose. Who or what has endowed the world with meaning? Merely to raise such a question begins to point the way to a theistic answer. The alternative view, which Nietzsche exemplifies at its extreme, has to make individual humans the source of meaning. Life is what the 'will to power' makes it. 'Stability' is what we put into the world and not what we find there. Because there are no substances, no continuing entities, there are no selves and no God, and even the idea of an individual seems hard to sustain.

There is certainly a general connection between the notion of the metaphysical self and belief in God. What point is there in looking beyond this world to a loving Creator, who loves *me*, if my life has no unity and hence no meaning? Any God would certainly have no interest in *me*, because in a real sense, I, as a continuing person, do not exist. Similarly an attack on the notion of God can in the end undermine belief in my own importance and my own value. This can lead to doubts about my own substantiality, in the sense of continued existence. Whilst it might be pointed out that a strong sense of one's own importance is not an unmixed blessing, what is at issue is the value of anyone. If 'I' am not important, because no sense can be given to the notion of 'I', it follows that no-one else is either. Yet that is a conclusion with tremendous ethical consequences. Although Nietzsche thought¹ that religion 'has debased the concept man, by extolling the paltry and weak, and belittling the strong and great', what he meant was that Christianity had preached the value of each individual. He complained² that

¹ *Will to Power*, no. 136.

² *Op. cit.* 240.

'through Christianity, the individual was made so important, so absolute, that he could no longer be sacrificed'. A universal love for man is in practice, he says, the preference for the suffering, under-privileged and degenerate. Christian altruism is, he holds, 'the mass egoism of the weak'. We should not hesitate to sacrifice the weak for the strong in the interests of eventually producing a 'higher kind of man', as superman. It may be unfair to hold Nietzsche in any way responsible for the Third Reich, but it is notable that nothing in his outlook could have acted as a moral restraint on an Adolf Hitler.

Nietzsche portrayed in graphic terms the consequences for human life of overturning Christian metaphysics. In some ways, he was more honest than those who would abandon the metaphysics but wish to retain the morality depending on it. He believed¹ that 'the soul is only a word for something about the body' and emphasized the role of basic instinctual drives, an emphasis which to some extent echoed Darwin, and which was certainly to influence Fraed. Nietzsche's views nearly made it impossible for him to talk consistently about 'the world' or 'bodies' in the first place, but his statement is very close to Wittgenstein's that 'the human body is the best picture of the human soul'. The metaphysical self thus becomes the physical self and everything, it might seem, can go on virtually unchanged. Some may wish to introduce the notion of humans as 'psycho-somatic unities', and this is certainly a nod in the direction of recognizing that we are not *just* bodies. Once, however, the idea of self that can be distinguished in any way from a body is denied, there is a problem. Experiences which are causally related to a body do not add up to being *me*. We still need a principle of unity. It is hard not to conclude that if we are identified in some way with our bodies, then our individual distinctiveness and indeed our very existence as persons is put at risk.

3. THE SELF AND LANGUAGE

The Cartesian idea of the solitary ego may seem to open up an intolerable gap between mind and body, but closing the gap can bring about a diminution of the ego to the point of extinction. The later Wittgenstein was opposed to any form of dualism, and his celebrated argument against the possibility of a private language symbolizes his deep suspicion of the self-conscious ego as a source of knowledge. His belief that language has to be public and social was all the more significant when coupled with his reluctance to give credence to any notion of the pre-linguistic. Thoughts were not firmly enough anchored for him until they were expressed in language.

¹ 2.14.

Language, in fact, was to be a formative influence on thought, with linguistic categories determining how we saw the world.

The picture of an isolated self trying to come to grips with the real world was then rejected as radically ill conceived. Instead, the social world is thought to have logical priority over the private world of the individual. We are all participants in forms of life of varying complexity, and membership of a linguistic community becomes of greater importance than who we individually are. One recent commentator on Wittgenstein can interpret him as saying:¹

I discover myself not in some pre-linguistic inner space of self-presence, but in the network of multifarious social and historical relationships in which I am willy-nilly involved.

I become, it seems, what I am, not because of some metaphysical fact, but through the social practices in which I grew up, and the language I learn. Language, indeed, apparently grants us the power of self-consciousness, and the self has been created by society. The public has become the pre-condition of the private, and the community is logically prior to the individual. Perhaps most significant of all is the way in which language is no longer viewed as being about an independently existing reality. The later Wittgenstein emphasized that the meaning of a word lay not in its relation to what it referred to, but in the way it was used in a particular community. The very same position which removes the autonomous self from the philosophic stage also lays waste any notion of extra-linguistic reality. Indeed, since the extra-linguistic self is part of that reality, it is hardly surprising that it is treated in the same way.

Kerr associates the notion of a self and that of extra-linguistic reality when he remarks:² 'Perhaps it is only if we are already strongly tempted to treat the self as a solitary intellect locked within a space that is inaccessible to anyone else that language looks instinctively like a system of referring to things.'¹

According to Kerr, Wittgenstein was right to insist that we do things with words, rather than simply associate them with objects. He considers that as a consequence the locus of meaning has been moved 'from the ego's mental enclosure to the social world'. Instead of a relationship between three independent items, a private self, a public language, and an objective world, we have only one left.³ For Wittgenstein language creates the self and moulds the world. There is an intimate connection between his repudiation of the metaphysical self and his apparent rejection of an objective world. If we each had the power to abstract ourselves from language and recognize the world independently of its categories, the objectivity of reality would not

¹ F. Kerr, *Theology after Wittgenstein*, (Oxford, 1986), p. 69.

² *Op. cit.* p. 57.

³ See my 'Thought and Language', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, LXXIX, (1978-9).

seem so problematic. If we were able to recognize parts of reality *before* we learnt language, and only afterwards learnt the relevant words, our own independence from language would be as assured as the independence of reality. Many have held, and would still hold, that this is precisely what makes language learning, not to mention translation between languages, possible in the first place. Wittgenstein's understanding of our social immersion makes it impossible to explain how we ever learnt language, since if we cannot identify *things* independently, we cannot learn to use language in the appropriate contexts. We must, indeed, be able to recognize a context as appropriate before we can learn how to use the word properly.

There is no such thing as language in the abstract, because there are only particular languages. It follows that being given one's identity and one's world by the concepts of the language one learns reduces the fundamental concepts of metaphysics to the quirks of a particular language. It may be alleged that the alternative vision is to erect the parochial standards of one's own linguistic community into eternal ones binding on all times and places. This is to reiterate the point that the subject-predicate form which makes talk of selves and substances seem so natural is merely a feature of a particular set of languages. Nevertheless, the result is to remove the possibility of all metaphysics. The more explicitly relativism is embraced, the easier it is to slip into the kind of nihilism which confronted Nietzsche. Once one has lost grip on the notion that certain things *are* the case, and becomes content with the idea that this is merely what is agreed in one form of life, it is not long before one is confronted with the question why one should go on accepting even that. There can be no satisfactory answer to that, and the denial of metaphysical underpinning becomes a prescription for total despair.

The concepts of reality and of myself as a continuing person set in that reality, but also in a sense separated from it, are indissolubly linked. Denying one must lead us into difficulties with the other. In this sense, any proper theory of the self must be dualistic. It must recognize that I cannot be wholly identified with 'the world'. The subject and object of belief cannot be absorbed into each other, as long as we take the possibility of error seriously. *The* world is not necessarily *my* world, since my judgements often do not coincide with the way things really are. I am not a passive recipient of would-be knowledge, but also an active agent, having to make my way in a world of objects and other people. I have to decide how to behave, and there are moral, as well as epistemological, claims on the self. How I treat others depends very largely on the kind of person I am.

This distinction between the self and the world, between subject and object, separates human agents from the rest of the world in a manner that may seem anathema to many. There are clear connections between such a view of the self, and religious conceptions of the soul. Those who search for a monistic vision of a unified self and world will vehemently oppose any

sharp distinction between mind and matter of the kind practised by Cartesian dualism. This is, of course, one of the most important and long-lasting controversies in Western philosophy, stemming from the pre-Socratics and Plato. However, if anyone persists in the wholesale repudiation of metaphysics, there are obvious dangers, not least that of self-refutation. The most ardent physicalist will find it difficult not to view himself and his beliefs as somehow claiming truth, and distinct from the rest of the world. Yet the concept of the self is one of the central notions of metaphysics. Any notion of the self has to be metaphysical and is linked very firmly to other metaphysical conceptions, such as that of objective reality. Those who begin by attacking the one will inevitably find themselves also attacking the other.

If thought and language are to be possible (and presumably writing this sentence shows that they are) questions of truth and of the nature of those beings who can accept reject truth can never be set aside. The genuine nihilist has no alternative but to be silent. This of itself does not prove that any particular religious claims about the soul and its eternal destiny are correct. It merely leaves room for them to be made. To these metaphysical conclusions about the necessary pre-conditions of language must be added the importance of the moral responsibility of the persisting self for the existence of society. So far from being the creation of language or society, the existence of the self is the absolute precondition for both. Some form of dualism seems inescapable in our view of reality. Indeed, the very notion of such a view already encapsulates a dualistic approach. How far we are thereby led towards theism is another question. Many theists would themselves repudiate any dualistic vision. There is, though, no doubt that many philosophers have followed Nietzsche in his repudiation of the distinction between subject and object, precisely because they feared a connection.

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