

# The Burden of Philosophy: Evil and the Human Condition

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*This article attempts to identify certain shortcomings in analytic philosophy as practised today. First, it identifies a disconnect between the darker aspects of the human condition and philosophers' inability to engage with them. Second, it locates this inability in a certain logic of detachment, explored by Peter Strawson. Third, it points out problems with Strawson's analysis, which it then tries to overcome, using Constantin Noica's account of the Platonising attitude philosophers are perennially tempted by – one of several ways in which humans try to overcome their fallen condition. This is contrasted with Thomas Nagel's valuable but still deficient discussion of the "cosmic question". This brings us, finally, to a reconsideration of an older tradition in philosophy, which focused more explicitly on human fallenness. Petrarch's Secretum meum is used as an example to show that while the failure of analytic philosophers has deep existential roots, it is not commendable. Philosophers must learn, again, to reflect on the darkness of the human soul – their own darkness.*

**Keywords:** *Analytic Philosophy, Human Condition, Fallenness, Evil, Logic/Epistemology of Detachment, Platonising Attitude, Cosmic Question, Peter Strawson, Thomas Nagel, Constantin Noica, Petrarch*

## Introduction

A philosophically interested alien, capable of moral sentiments, might have a bewildering experience, if he visited our planet today. He would see that human affairs are far from perfect. The planet as a whole is threatened by human induced global warming. Wars still devastate many countries, and the threat of nuclear apocalypse has not abated, but is growing again. Societies, even in the free world, face major problems, are run by autocrats and corrupt elites, are internally divided or deteriorating, weakened by economic, political and structural crises. Corporations and institutions, including universities, are characterised by internal strife, and are often run by incompetent or unjust managers. Of course, life offers many pleasures, and in some parts of the world, especially in the West, societies are quite decent. But even here many humans feel, in their soul, sad and

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without hope, especially in their lonely hours – if they can bear their loneliness and don't try to escape it by means of some diversion or entertainment. Deep down any human being knows that, no matter what, his life is “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short”, and not just in the anarchical state of nature Hobbes had in mind.<sup>1</sup> And this is just the present. If the alien studies the history of the planet, say that of the last 100 years, the alien might be horrified. “There are periods in history – presumably most of them are –, whose representation vis-à-vis human meanness and coldness is bound to fail”.<sup>2</sup> The alien would be quite justified to conclude that he has arrived on a planet on which the general feeling is that of “the darkening of the world, the flight of the gods, the destruction of the earth, the reduction of human beings to a mass, the hatred and mistrust of everything creative and free”.<sup>3</sup>

Our alien will then be curious to see what philosophers have to say about the general state of mankind. To his surprise, a significant number of them, especially among those who belong to the leading philosophical current, analytic philosophy, do not have such pessimistic views at all. They can be divided into roughly three groups.

First, there are the zealots. These believe that things are looking pretty good and that mankind is actually awaiting paradise, to be reached through the marvels of technology, social engineering (including education) and the manipulation of our bodies and brains. Says one leading moral philosopher: “Since human history may be only just beginning, we can expect that future humans, or supra-humans, may achieve some great goods that we cannot now even imagine. In Nietzsche's words, there has never been such a new dawn and clear horizon, and such an open sea”.<sup>4</sup> Knowing that mankind has just passed through a century of unspeakable atrocities, some of them committed by the most advanced civilisations, our alien may wonder whether the task at hand is to advance yet another fantasy about the open sea before us or, instead, to reflect about the

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (London: Pelican Books, 1985), 186.

<sup>2</sup> Max Horkheimer, *Zur Kritik der instrumentellen Vernunft* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1992), 204.

<sup>3</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Gregory Fried and Richard Polt (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 40.

<sup>4</sup> Derek Parfit, *On What Matters: Volume Two* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 618.

disfigured skeletons lying at the bottom of the ocean on which we sail, a “dark ocean without a shore and lighthouses”.<sup>5</sup>

Second, there are the hermits. They have no particular views about the state of mankind. They philosophise about topics detached from this planet. They write articles with titles such as “I am not, nor have I ever been a turnip”, “To Be F Is To Be G” or “Finitistic and Frequentistic Approximation of Probability Measures with or without  $\sigma$ -Additivity”.<sup>6</sup> They use as data for their theories apparently innocuous sample sentences such as “Have you stopped beating your wife?” and “There are lots of US troops in Iraq”.<sup>7</sup> These philosophers already live in a paradise. It is a false paradise, the paradise conferred by the harmless beauty of quasi-mathematical formulas, which can be multiplied indefinitely. They can argue endlessly about the difference between “ $\Diamond \exists x Fx \rightarrow \exists x \Diamond Fx$ ” and “ $\exists x \Diamond Fx \rightarrow \Diamond \exists x Fx$ ”.<sup>8</sup> If asked whether God exists or how the gas chambers were possible, some of them might stutter or say that they have no “intuitions” about these topics.<sup>9</sup> They have insulated themselves from the rest of society, from the sorrows of the many and from the horrors of history. They may sit at our table, but have nothing to contribute to the conversation.<sup>10</sup> The alien will notice that some of these philosophers even pride

<sup>5</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Der einzig mögliche Beweisgrund zu einer Demonstration des Daseins Gottes* (1763), *Gesammelte Schriften* (Berlin: Königlich-Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin, 1900–), Ak. 2:66.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Josh Parsons, “I am not now, nor have I ever been, a turnip,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 83, no.1 (2005): 1–14, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00048400500043894>; Cian Dorr, “To Be F Is To Be G,” *Philosophical Perspectives* 30, no.1 (December 2016): 39–134, <https://doi.org/10.1111/phpe.12079>; Gerhard Schurz and Hannes Leitgeb, “Finitistic and Frequentistic Approximation of Probability Measures with or without  $\sigma$ -Additivity,” *Studia Logica* 89, no. 2 (July 2008): 257–83, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11225-008-9128-3>.

<sup>7</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983): §274; Herman Cappelen and John Hawthorne, *Relativism and Monadic Truth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 4.

<sup>8</sup> These are the so-called Barcan and Converse Barcan formulas, following Ruth C. Barcan, “A Functional Calculus of First Order Based on Strict Implication,” *Journal of Symbolic Logic* 11, no. 1 (March 1946): 1–16, <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/2269159>, 2, 7.

<sup>9</sup> As I have witnessed myself on several occasions.

<sup>10</sup> Witness Joyce Carol Oates’s description of Quine: “Quine’s family can’t read his work... so 90 percent of that person’s life is sort of unknown to them [...] Quine’s daughter said that about him, «Oh, he was the man who had dinner with us».” Madison Darbyshire, “So much of life is accidental,” *Financial Times* (August 4, 2023), <https://www.ft.com/content/f8854bba-6c82-405f-8d7f-8d22dd9c20f9>, accessed August 5, 2023.

themselves on the fact that “inspiration, moral uplift, and spiritual comfort” have been excluded from what they count as philosophy.<sup>11</sup> Their posture consists in claiming that they don’t assume any moral posture, and that they are, as philosophers, not qualified for moral crusades.<sup>12</sup> But are moral *crusades* the only way in which philosophers can be involved in moral issues, as philosophers?

Finally, there are the hopeful believers. These are not entirely blind to mankind’s predicaments. They write books with titles such as *The Law of Peoples*, *The Morality of Freedom* and *Cultivating Humanity*, reflect on the relation between morality and legality, and between freedom and equality, attempt to develop, on paper, “in theory”, better economic and financial frameworks, and better systems of democratic representation.<sup>13</sup> They believe that there are still new things to be discovered about the concepts of rights, duties and justice, things that *can, may, might* have important practical consequences. Some of them are more attuned to the complexities and inertness of our nature, while others are not, resembling at times the zealots or the hermits. But in essence, the hopeful believers are all humanist Aristotelians: they believe in the possibility of *human flourishing* and the perfectibility of man to that end. Their theories presuppose an “If only”: *if only* humans, politicians, societies, adopted their theories, if only they accepted Marx or Hayek, Earth would be a better place and man would be a happy animal. But that “If only” never materialises as they expect it, or if it does, it introduces new problems and conflicts. Certainly, they are right that some progress has been made and that some societies are better than others. Nevertheless, despite the unprecedented wealth and freedoms liberal democracies offer today, the term “human flourishing” remains as much a hyperbole as ever. A simple walk through any busy shopping mall might give us a different picture.

Man is not a happy animal. He does not truly know what he wants, since he is a paradoxical creature, a mystery to himself, “a bundle of

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<sup>11</sup> Scott Soames, “Analytic Philosophy in America,” in *The Oxford Handbook of American Philosophy*, ed. Cheryl Misak (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 453.

<sup>12</sup> Cappelen and Hawthorne, *Relativism*, 5.

<sup>13</sup> Many years ago I had a philosopher colleague who described himself as a “quantitative social scientist” and claimed he had developed an *Excel spreadsheet* by means of which the current crisis of democracy can be solved. His reasoning was presumably of the form: “If only policy-makers adopted my spreadsheet..., then ...”. Some of our messianic phantasies have become more puerile, but maybe also less bloodthirsty.

uncertainty and error, glory and refuse of the universe”.<sup>14</sup> He is characterised by “unsocial sociability” (“ungesellige Geselligkeit”) and his will is evil.<sup>15</sup> The zealots, hermits and even the hopeful believers are detached from human reality, especially in the modern, secularised world, in which they seem to have settled themselves and in which they would like everybody else to settle themselves as well. Their misunderstanding of the (modern) human condition, which is also a self-misunderstanding, runs deep. They are heirs to the Enlightenment, an Enlightenment freed of its dark spots, an Enlightenment “light”.<sup>16</sup> But “the wholly enlightened earth is radiant with triumphant calamity.”<sup>17</sup>

The picture presented so far is no doubt gloomy and not fair to many academic philosophers. Still, the alien will be puzzled by the discrepancy between the sorry state of mankind and the fact that so many philosophers seem to belong to one of the groups described above. What explains the discrepancy? Why are those best qualified to engage in self-reflection so indifferent to “the human place in the cosmos”?<sup>18</sup> The reason appears to be connected with the widespread idea that philosophy is a cognitive discipline that generates knowledge. This idea gives rise to an *epistemology of detachment*, which in turn explains, in part at least, the alienation of philosophers from humanity.<sup>19</sup> To understand the logic of this detachment, I will now review arguments offered by some recent and some less recent thinkers.

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<sup>14</sup> Blaise Pascal, *Oeuvres complètes: Tome 1* (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1998), 580.

<sup>15</sup> Kant, *Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürgerlicher Absicht*. Gesammelte Schriften, Ak. 8:20.

<sup>16</sup> For the dark spots of Enlightenment, see Giorgio Tonelli, “The «Weakness» of Reason in the Age of Enlightenment,” *Diderot Studies* 14 (2017): 217–44; Jerome Schneewind, *Essays on the History of Moral Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Edward Kanterian, *Kant, God and Metaphysics: The Secret Thorn* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

<sup>17</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press), 1.

<sup>18</sup> Max Scheler, *The Human Place in the Cosmos*, trans. Manfred Frings (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2009).

<sup>19</sup> Contrast this with Cottingham’s epistemology of involvement, which he applies to the philosophy of religion. See John Cottingham, *Philosophy of Religion: Towards a More Humane Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 23.

## Strawson on Naturalism

The epistemology of detachment comes in a variety of forms. One is implicit in scientistic naturalism, the idea that everything real can be described and explained by means of natural science. An important discussion of naturalism is found in Strawson's *Scepticism and Naturalism* (1985). The most general distinction he introduces is between a naturalism concerning the limits and ends of reason, and a naturalism concerning what there is, especially with respect to the mental and moral domain. The first kind of naturalism deals with the sceptical challenge. Its proponent was Hume (and to some extent Wittgenstein, in Strawson's view). Reason is unable to justify our beliefs about the external world, the viability of induction, etc. But despite this failure, we cannot help but believe in the body, form expectations based on induction, etc. Nature, Hume suggests, forces us, even the sceptic in us, to adopt such beliefs "by absolute and uncontrollable necessity".<sup>20</sup> Naturalism taken in the second sense has *prima facie* no connection with scepticism. Strawson subdivides this naturalism into strict and liberal (or harmless) naturalism.<sup>21</sup> Strict naturalism is reductive, for example vis-à-vis moral attitudes. It claims that there is one, and one only, correct way to describe human beings. They are objects of nature and therefore everything about them can be explained with the terms we employ in explaining everything else in nature, by means of, say, Spinoza's monism, or by the hard sciences. Once we adopt this scientific point of view, we will realise, strict naturalism claims, that our usual forms of moral appraisal are illusory. Just as it does not make sense to blame an asteroid for slamming into a planet, it is equally pointless to blame Putin for bombing Ukrainian civilians. Strawson denies that the right response to reductive naturalism is to claim that there is a *sui generis* condition of freedom grounding the reality of our morality.<sup>22</sup> Instead, we can appeal to Hume's naturalism: "We can no more be reasoned out of our proneness to personal and moral reactive attitudes in general than we can be reasoned out of our belief in the existence of the body." Those reactive attitudes are inescapable, "deeply rooted in our

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<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Peter Strawson, *Scepticism and Naturalism: Some Varieties* (New York: Routledge, 1985), 11.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, 1, 31.

<sup>22</sup> Strawson (*Ibidem*, 32) gives no details here, but he gives as examples Kant's account of noumenal freedom and a faculty of moral intuition some moral philosophers believe to exist.

natures as our existence as social beings”,<sup>23</sup> and therefore a fundamental condition of our humanity. This is the default, the “involved” position we find ourselves in as a matter of fact.

But Strawson also acknowledges that a second attitude is possible: the attitude of detachment. “It is possible for us sometimes to achieve a kind of detachment from the whole range of natural attitudes and reactions I have been speaking of and to view another person [...] in a purely objective light.”<sup>24</sup> We then see a human being as a nonpersonal object in nature. We look at others, and even ourselves, as lumps of matter, and the world becomes morally colourless.<sup>25</sup> This self-alienating stance of objectification does not necessarily amount to a philosophical position. It can be adopted for other reasons, e.g. for reasons of policy, curiosity or emotional self-defense.<sup>26</sup> In some circumstances this stance can have methodological advantages. Think of studies of the behaviour of crowds of people in confined spaces. Statistical modelling and comparisons with fish swarms are useful approaches in this area. “Fear of death” is strictly just a quantifiable parameter in such a model, one of several, and the model will deliver a good approximation of how the crowd will act if panic breaks out even if the individuals are reduced to mere dots on the screen. The sociologist or computer scientist working with such models does not have to believe that humans are actually reducible to such dots and corresponding sets of parameters. That is only the proposition of reductive naturalism, which makes a claim about what we really are, despite appearances.

This, then, is the difference between harmless/liberal and reductive detachment. Harmless detachment operates on the basis of an “as-if”: we look at others and ourselves as if we were mere lumps of matter. Harmless detachment is just one among several cognitive *modi operandi* of humans. The reductive naturalist, by contrast, does not just look at us, for specific purposes, *as* mere lumps of matter, but believes that this is what we really are. Such a belief is not a mere *modus operandi*. For this reason, the reductive naturalist is in conflict with the “involved” standpoint, which carries with it the conviction that there are moral values etc. Of course, the view that moral values don’t really exist in nature has been refuted by a number of philosophers, most recently e.g. by Ronald Dworkin, in

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, 33.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*, 34.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*, 52.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*, 34.

*Religion Without God* (2013), and Fiona Ellis, in *God, Value, and Nature* (2014). Strawson, however, does not think that this conflict can be solved at a rational level. Both perspectives, the involved, non-reductive and the detached, reductive one are on a par. We cannot show, he claims, that either standpoint is the exclusively correct one, since that would require a third, neutral vantage point – and that does not exist.<sup>27</sup>

This is problematic: if the conflict is between two contradictory, or at least contrary, propositions (“We are mere lumps of matter” – “We are fundamentally moral beings”), then we are left in a logical quandary. Following Strawson, it is not that one might be true, the other false, and we just cannot know which. Rather, he suggests, both can be asserted, with justification, and that is the end of the matter. However, if the fundamental conflict is not between propositions, but between standpoints or attitudes, the tension can be resolved, although not from Strawson’s position of neutrality.

The solution is actually implicit in Strawson’s own account. We need to realise that the relation between the involved and the detached attitude is not a relation between equal options. The default position is that of *being involved*. In his methodological detachment, the scientist remains in fact fully, practically involved.<sup>28</sup> The optional position is that of detachment. As Strawson points out, the detached attitude cannot be sustained for long without lapsing into a pathological state, a state which would amount to a “loss of all human involvement in personal relationships”.<sup>29</sup> If we now shift our attention to the logical level, this means that the reductionist belief is underwritten either by a temporary attitude of detachment or it hardens into something more permanent, a form of life. In the first case, the belief is just an idle wheel, a false philosophical claim.<sup>30</sup> In the second case it is pathological. In both cases the belief that we are mere lumps of matter is refuted. In the first case it is refuted by what it presupposes: the continuous life of “involvement”, suffused with normativity, running in the background. In the second case “We are mere lumps of matter” is merely the expression of a pathological state, on a par with “I am Napoleon”, “Hilary Clinton is a Reptilian” etc. Both cases also

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*, 53.

<sup>28</sup> Fiona Ellis, *God, Value, and Nature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 26.

<sup>29</sup> See also Strawson, *Freedom and Resentment and Other Essays* (London: Methuen 1974), chp. 1.

<sup>30</sup> If it is not the verbal expression of the harmless detachment discussed above.



face the problem of internal incoherence; both carry normative commitments, which can be ascribed to *mere* lumps of matter only on pain of contradiction.

We have explained, with Strawson's help, the logic of detachment to which reductive naturalists subscribe. Does this not explain the alienation from mankind of the three groups of philosophers described above, the zealots, the hermits and the hopeful believers? It certainly explains the alienation of those among them who are reductive naturalists. But not all zealots, hermits and hopeful believers are reductive naturalists. However, as Strawson points out, detachment and self-alienation are inclinations we all possess. To the extent to which philosophers are detaching themselves from the moral state of mankind and developing "castles in the air",<sup>31</sup> they are subscribing to some version of the logic of detachment.

### Points Missing in Strawson's Account

This, however, is not the whole story. There are some things missing in Strawson's account. One is the status of the philosophical stance itself. A second is an explanation why humans, including philosophers, are so interested in engaging so persistently in detachment. And the third is an inquiry to see whether there are not some issues about detachment and self-alienation that point beyond them, issues of possibly major importance for the understanding of our condition.

It is a curious aspect of Strawson's argument that he does not realise that the position of neutrality he adopts is precisely a kind of third position between reductive and non-reductive naturalism. This is the case even if the attempt, just made, to refute reductive naturalism is not accepted. For on Strawson's account we have two standpoints sharply opposed to one another. From the involved point of view reductive naturalism looks morally repugnant; from the detached point of view looking at the world without our morally coloured spectacles is to see it aright.<sup>32</sup> It is only when taking a superior stance, *detached* from this conflict between two worldviews, that we obtain a true, and self-pacifying, understanding of the conflict. As long as we remain involved in one of the two sides, each professing an exclusivity claim, we remain captives to a one-sided

<sup>31</sup> Kant, *Die falsche Spitzfindigkeit der vier syllogistischen Figuren erwiesen* (1762), *Gesammelte Schriften*, Ak. 2:57.

<sup>32</sup> Strawson, in his characteristic fashion, tries to downplay the contrast at times. See Strawson, *Scepticism*, 43.

point of view. Such an exclusivity claim excludes itself, as it were. The superior, neutral third stance is of course that of philosophical reflection.

The remarkable thing about this philosophical reflection, however, is that it does not simply *reject* involvement with the other two positions, but rather presupposes prior involvement with them. The positions can be only overcome, if they are initially known, from the inside, from the “engaged” point of view. But even the philosopher does not remain permanently in the new state. He will lapse back to the “natural” attitude, which (depending on how we interpret Strawson’s argument) either includes reductive naturalism as a sub-variety of non-reductive naturalism or sees reductive and non-reductive naturalism as on a par, neither as more superior than the other from a logical point of view. The structure of philosophical reflection, as it applies here, involves a movement of switching into and out of detachment from the ways of our lives. What can be reproached to the philosophers described above as alienated from the moral state of mankind is not simply that they are detached from their own lives, for that is a necessary condition for philosophy. It is rather that (a) they don’t realise they are in a position of detachment (thus merely adhering to first-order detachment, as found in reductive naturalism), (b) they don’t see that they constantly reconnect to the “natural” attitude, and (c) miss, for this reason, the genuinely philosophical stance.

Another point not addressed by Strawson concerns the question of the *motivation* to engage so persistently in detachment. His account presents it as a mere natural tendency (which can turn into something pathological) that humans, and especially philosophers, choose the reductivist standpoint. This requires explanation especially from Strawson’s non-reductive point of view, since this view commits us to *paying tribute to everybody’s humanity*, including the humanity of the reductivist philosopher.

What might be then the gratification a reductive philosopher obtains from the idle wheels he turns and the castles he builds in the air? I can think of three answers at this stage. The philosopher might be involved in a strategy of detachment in order (a) to bust myths, (b) to create myths or (c) to take refuge from the sorrows of life.

The myth-busting motive was suggested by Wittgenstein. In his critical discussion of Freud’s psychoanalysis, Wittgenstein questions Freud’s appeal to a principle of explanation that posits hidden causal mechanisms

in the human psyche.<sup>33</sup> The plausibility of Freud's theory of the unconscious rests on two things, cultural prestige and imaginative speculation. The scientific mode of thinking, in particular the reduction of a "surface" phenomenon to something "deep" or "hidden", has, for good reasons, enormous prestige in our culture. This makes it a natural candidate for our general tendency to imaginatively extend methods, ideas, pictures beyond their legitimate boundaries. Dreams "really" are just the expression of unfulfilled sexual desires etc. In offering such explanations, we feel empowered, rising above the crowd, detaching ourselves from it; we are myth busters, destroyers of the prejudices of more naïve humans. For, as Wittgenstein puts it, "It is charming to destroy prejudice".<sup>34</sup>

This motive drives those contemporary philosophers who go for a reasoning pattern of the form "X is really just Y". One example are those who embrace a reductionist theory of the mind, e.g. that mental phenomena are really just brain phenomena etc. A related theory attempts to explain everything humans think and do by reference to our evolutionary development. What we call "love" is really just a behavioural pattern that has given us an evolutionary advantage etc. Of course, philosophical analysis tends to be practised as a reductive method quite generally today, especially among the hermits. What goes under the label of "explanation or definition of a concept" is often tantamount to the reduction of the concept to another concept, taken to be more basic, less problematic, maybe more easily formalisable. An example for this is the claim in the philosophy of language, going back to Frege, that the meaning of a sentence can be explained in terms of the apparently less problematic and more elementary concepts of functional application and possible worlds.<sup>35</sup> Other examples, equally phantasmagorical, are notions such as "quantified beliefs" or "all available evidence", which formal epistemologists employ to

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<sup>33</sup> For more on Wittgenstein on Freud, see Jacques Bouveresse, *Wittgenstein Reads Freud: The Myth of the Unconscious*, trans. Carol Cosman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995); Kanterian, *Ludwig Wittgenstein* (London: Reaktion Books, 2007); Edward Harcourt, "Wittgenstein and Psychoanalysis," in *A Companion to Wittgenstein*, eds. Hans-Johann Glock and John Hyman (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2017), 651–66.

<sup>34</sup> Wittgenstein, *Lectures & Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1966), 24.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Irene Heim and Angelika Kratzer, *Semantics in Generative Grammar* (Malden: Blackwell, 1998) for just one example for a handbook on semantics based on this fundamental error. For a critical discussion of Frege's views, motivating this error, see Kanterian, *Frege: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012).

explain what humdrum verbs such as “to believe” and “to trust” allegedly really mean.<sup>36</sup>

The myth-busting motive makes it understandable why some philosophers find deep satisfaction in reductive explanations. But this cannot be the whole story. There are other motivational aspects of the hermits’ detachment from the world, not to mention of the philosophers in the other two groups. One other aspect was just indicated: the phantasmagorical character of philosophical theories. We find it charming to bust myths, but we also find it charming to create new ones. Reductionists and revisionists of our conceptual schemes are mythmakers. They invent pictures and simplified stories, project them onto the confusingly complex (linguistic-conceptual) reality, press phenomena into a standardised pattern, and take pleasure in the order they believe to be discovering thereby. Wittgenstein saw this clearly with respect to Freud. Freud’s explanations, Wittgenstein argued, have themselves the character of myths.

Take Freud’s view that anxiety is always a repetition in some way of the anxiety we felt at birth. He does not establish this by reference to evidence – for he could not do so. But it is an idea which has [...] the attraction which mythological explanations have, explanations which say that this is all a repetition of something that has happened before.<sup>37</sup>

This is also valid for philosophers’ attraction to phantasmagorical points of view, as they are propounded not only by hermits, but also by members of the other two groups. It suggests that there is an aesthetic and even mythological element involved in philosophical theorising of the detached type.

### **The Platonising Attitude**

There is something perplexing about the fact that philosophers are engaged in mythmaking, even after more than 2000 years of activity, even in the most advanced, theoretically most sophisticated areas of contemporary research. Humans seem to enjoy creating distorted representations of reality, including the reality which is theirs. This tendency is particularly salient in modern art. But it seems that even philosophy is not free of it. Not many thinkers have reflected on this. Kant and Wittgenstein come to mind, since their work involved not only the uncovering of

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Glenn Shafer, *A Mathematical Theory of Evidence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976).

<sup>37</sup> Wittgenstein, *Lectures*, 43.

philosophical myths, but also an explanation of the roots of philosophical mythmaking. But their ideas have been explored in such great detail that they don't need to be rehearsed here again.<sup>38</sup> A striking, little known analysis, but most relevant to my discussion, was offered by the Romanian philosopher Constantin Noica (1909–1987), in his book *Mathesis sau bucuriile simple* (*Mathesis, or the Simple Joys*), published in 1934.<sup>39</sup>

Noica distinguishes between cultures of a historical and of a mathematical type. In historical cultures the world is assumed to be something real, alive, directly given. In them the flow of time, the present moment, the chaos of life, the concept of destiny have priority.<sup>40</sup> They are cultures that belong to nature. Mathematical cultures, by contrast, belong to the spirit. They are characterised by the geometrical spirit, to which belong formal order, unification, subjectivism and constructivism, immanence and atemporality. These features are interrelated. The geometrical spirit subscribes to the primacy of the “artificial over the given”.<sup>41</sup> It unifies the messy “data” and imposes onto them the orders it itself constructs. Human reason finds in nature only what it has itself put into it. In engaging in science, mathematics, philosophy, even culture at large, human reason, in its geometrical stance, only seeks the encounter with itself. Noica refers to Kant here, whom he takes to be a main exponent of our mathematical culture, like Plato, Descartes, Leibniz and Husserl.<sup>42</sup>

Although no civilisation is entirely of the one or the other sort, Western culture is at its core of the mathematical type, which Noica welcomes and defends. The philosophy it generates does not aim to understand or merely to be involved in the messiness of life, but quite the opposite. It *flees* life. One “cannot formalise anything unless it has been

<sup>38</sup> Their most relevant works are, for Kant, *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* (1766) and *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) and for Wittgenstein, most of his later writings.

<sup>39</sup> For more on Noica, see Kanterian, “Hegel’s Tale in Romania,” in *Hegel’s Thought in Europe: Currents, Crosscurrents and Undercurrents*, ed. Lisa Herzog (London: Palgrave, 2013), 49–68, [https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137309228\\_4](https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137309228_4). Three books by this remarkable philosopher have been translated into English so far: Constantin Noica, *Becoming Within Being*, trans. Alistair Blyth (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2009), idem, *Six Maladies of the Contemporary Spirit*, trans. Alistair Blyth (Plymouth: University of Plymouth Press, 2009) and idem, *The Romanian Sentiment of Being*, trans. Octavian and Elena Gabor (Santa Barbara: Punctum Books, 2022).

<sup>40</sup> Noica, *Mathesis sau bucuriile simple* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1992), 18.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibidem*, 15.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibidem*, 11, 13. Cf. Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft, Gesammelte Schriften*, Bxviii, A125.

brought to rest. Water can only be described when it is frozen. What is *alive* cannot be grasped – at least not through the means to which our culture has committed itself from the outset”.<sup>43</sup> But while our culture cannot capture life, we can be confident that one day, “a happy day from a scientific point of view”, our culture will give an answer to all well-formulated questions.

Noica gives as an example for this attitude the school of French positivism, which tried to mathematicize all sciences.<sup>44</sup> He could have equally well referred to one of the founding documents of analytic philosophy, the manifest *Wissenschaftliche Weltauffassung* (1929) of the Vienna Circle, according to which the only meaningful questions are those that can be answered by logic or scientific experiments. Questions such as “Is there a God?” or “What is the meaning of life?” drop out as nonsense on this view.<sup>45</sup> Since this is the spirit in which much of analytic philosophy has been carried out, we are beginning to understand, with Noica’s help, not only the detached attitude of the hermits, but also that of the zealots, with their disproportionate belief in the goodness of the future. Both try to flee away from the unsavoury, unpleasant present. But this means that they too are saddled with the burden of existence. Their forms of detachment are simply strategies of coping with this burden, according to Noica. This is evident from the aspects of immanence and atemporality that characterise mathematical cultures. Mathematical structures are atemporal objects of self-sufficient contemplation.

When you take a triangle and consider a problem about it, you don’t think for a moment about any external existence or the framework you have set for yourself. The geometrical fact does not make the intellect go beyond itself. [...] In a sense, the whole of geometry is in us and never transcends us, no matter how many things we draw on paper.<sup>46</sup>

When we do mathematics, we don’t learn anything about real things, but remain in the realm of pure, infinite possibilities. This, according to Noica, has a major advantage: it makes us avoid or boycott history. We must shun history. History is tantamount to transience and perishability, and it represents merely one among infinitely many possible worlds.

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<sup>43</sup> Noica, *Mathesis*, 8.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibidem*, 10.

<sup>45</sup> Verein Ernst Mach, ed., *Wissenschaftliche Weltauffassung. Der Wiener Kreis* (Vienna: Artur Wolf, 1929).

<sup>46</sup> Noica, *Mathesis*, 16–17.

“Ah, history! How am I not to hate it, to reject it with all the orderly sensibility I have in myself! This messy, asymmetrical history. [...] This non-geometry.”<sup>47</sup> We see here clearly that Noica’s “mathematical” thinker is not without an inner life, not oblivious to his own mortality. He knows that all things perish and decay, and this troubles him. So he chooses an activity that connects him, he imagines, with eternity, the realm of ideas, in which nothing perishes.<sup>48</sup>

Noica’s text, written in beautiful, poetic prose, confers a lot of dignity to the Platonising detachment from the world. It presents this detachment as a human drama, characterised by a kind of nobility. Of course, one may wonder what evidence there is in favour of Noica’s diagnosis. Philosophers engaged in what according to his analysis is a form of detachment from the burden of time and history might simply deny, in all honesty, that his analysis applies to them. They, the hermits and the zealots, don’t care about their death and mortality when they speculate about “absolute generality”, “belief functions”, “the set of all possible worlds”, etc., or when they fantasize about the bright future awaiting the species. But perhaps like other humans, philosophers too may fail to know themselves and might miss the point of their lives.

This brings us back to a problem we encountered in Strawson as well, in his failure to account for the position of philosophical reflection itself. We saw that philosophical reflection is a third position, one that presupposes, but also transcends the opposing views of non-reductive and reductive naturalism. This third position cannot be achieved by remaining attached to one of the two lower level views. It requires instead reflection about oneself, as one is immersed in the course of life (non-reductive naturalism) *and* then detached from it in one’s theoretical beliefs. The problem with the non-reductive naturalist was that while he is *de facto* immersed in the course of life, he adopts *de jure* a theoretical position that does not consciously reflect that. The Platonising detachment from the world is similarly unreflected. The Platonist’s position is merely *characteristic* of his rootedness in life, since it is a human option, a reactive attitude to his own existence. He flees from what he is troubled by, but does not work his way, as a philosopher, through the source of his fear. This is why his theory, or rather his whole mode of thinking, even the topics he

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<sup>47</sup> *Ibidem*, 39.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibidem*, 33.

immerses himself in, like Noica's geometer, look so alien when compared to the world around him – because they are meant to have as little as possible to do with the troubles of mankind. But this sharp, unmediated antagonism betrays their existential role. They are human attempts, opaque to themselves, to escape the human predicament. Our alien is beginning to understand the discrepancy that initially puzzled him.

### **The Religious Temperament**

The view presented here has something in common with, but also differs somewhat from the view defended by Thomas Nagel in his recent essay "Secular Philosophy and the Religious Temperament" (2010).<sup>49</sup> Nagel argues that contemporary philosophy, especially in its analytic strand, is thoroughly secular. Not only does it not provide an alternative to the consolations of religion, but it denies that it is meaningful to seek out such consolation. Hard physical science explains the universe in a way that does not affect the sense we make of our lives. It does not offer "an understanding of the totality of which we are a part [that] can in turn become part of the self-understanding by which we live".<sup>50</sup> Whether or not the charge of an electron can be given a more precise measurement, whether or not the Higgs boson really exists – either alternative will be acceptable, if supported by solid investigation, and will contribute to the unstoppable progress of science. Following this model, philosophy aims today also for a detached understanding of reality.<sup>51</sup> It is simply driven by intellectual curiosity and it will accept whatever answers turn out to be the right ones, without that having any deep transformative effect on the questioner. Possible worlds are real objects, existing independently from each other, or they are just reconfigurations of our actual world – either answer will do, given the better argument.<sup>52</sup> The meaning of the logical constants is fully stipulated by their introduction and elimination rules,

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<sup>49</sup> For a related view, see Ronald Dworkin, *Religion without God* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2013).

<sup>50</sup> Thomas Nagel, *Secular Philosophy and the Religious Temperament: Essays 2002-2008* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 9.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibidem*, 3.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. David Lewis, *On The Plurality of Worlds* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986); Robert Stalnaker, "Possible worlds," *Noûs* 10, no. 1 (March 1976): 65–75.



or it is stipulated by additional logical facts or constraints – again, either answer will do, given the better argument.<sup>53</sup> And so on.

Nagel does not ridicule this Stoic position, which sounds very much like that of the “hermits”. But he still considers it to be a wrongheaded form of detachment, an evasion from what he calls the “cosmic question”: “Is there a way to live in harmony with the universe, and not just in it?”; or, more simply, “What am I doing here?”.<sup>54</sup> This question arises from a “desire for completion”, which Nagel calls the religious temperament. It attempts to make sense not simply of our lives, but of the universe as a whole, and of our lives in relation to it. Obviously, religions provide an answer to this question. They allow believers to live “a life in the sight of God” or some other spiritual thing that represents the deepest reality of the universe.<sup>55</sup> Nagel argues that one can possess the religious temperament even if one, like Nagel himself, does not subscribe to a particular religion. The cosmic question makes sense, no matter how much science and secular philosophy have pushed aside religion in the public discourse in the West. Philosophers like Plato were driven by this question. Humanists, like Kant, Sidgwick and Rawls, were also driven by it, Nagel argues, even though they only managed to give an “imminent” answer to it.<sup>56</sup> At the bottom of their theories lies a faith in humanity and its moral progress, which transcends the individual, but rests content with an understanding of “eternity” or “totality” as limited to the community of rational creatures. Clearly, these are the hopeful believers mentioned above. Their modesty consists in giving at least some answer to the cosmic question, if only with respect to a sub-set, not to the whole of reality. This is no surprise. For, as Nagel argues, the cosmic question is a deeply philosophical one.

The question results from one of those stepplings back that constitutes the essence of philosophy. We find the familiar unfamiliar by reflecting

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<sup>53</sup> Cf. Arthur Prior, “The Runabout Inference-ticket,” *Analysis* 21, no. 2 (December 1960): 38–39; Nuel Belnap, “Tonk, Plonk and Plink,” *Analysis* 22, no. 6 (June 1962): 130–34. Note that I am not denying here that such philosophical debates cannot be conducted, and even solved, by rational argument. My focus here is on the role such debates have in relation to the existential phenomena of involvement and detachment.

<sup>54</sup> Nagel, *Secular*, 5, 8.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibidem*, 5.

<sup>56</sup> This may be true of Sidgwick and Rawls, but it is not true of Kant. Kant offered not only a humanist response to the cosmic question, but a more genuinely religious one. See Kanterian, *Kant*.

on features of our situation, or forms of thought and action, so central and pervasive that we are ordinarily submerged in them without paying notice.<sup>57</sup>

Nagel reconstructs the religious temperament in the following way:

We wake up from our familiar surroundings to find ourselves, already elaborately formed by biology and culture, amazingly in existence, in the midst of the contingency of the world, and suddenly we do not know where we are or what we are. We recognize that we are products of the world and its history, generated and sustained in existence in ways we hardly understand, so that in a sense every individual life represents far more than itself. It is a short step, easily taken on a starry night, to thinking that one is a small representative of the whole of existence. That creates in susceptible minds the need to grasp that life and if possible to lead it as part of something larger – perhaps even as part of the life of the universe.<sup>58</sup>

What Nagel describes here, very plausibly, is of course a thought process as old as philosophy. Like reductive naturalism and the Platonising attitude, it involves a form of detachment, from the immediate course of life. But unlike those two positions, it does not try to deny or reject empirical life, but transform it, by embedding it into something much larger. This is pointing towards the attitude I have identified above as the genuinely philosophical stance, the “third position”, the position of reflected detachment. But that is not quite Nagel’s account. In his view secular, analytic philosophers are simply evading the cosmic question. But how can this be, if the cosmic question arises from a logic of detachment that belongs to the essence of philosophy? Nagel is not able to explain why so many contemporary philosophers miss something so obvious and easily explained as the cosmic question. This is because he does not engage in the wider anthropological inquiry, which would account both for the emergence of the religious temperament *and* its denial. Such an inquiry was hinted at above, in the discussion of naturalism and the Platonising attitude.

Nagel does not look at the human predicament, as the common root of these two phenomena. His focus on the cosmic question is valuable, because it deepens our inquiry into the logic of detachment. But his “derivation” of the cosmic question, quoted above, does not address what

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<sup>57</sup> Nagel, *Secular*, 9.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibidem*, 9.

is so peculiar, or maybe so deficient, about us that we develop a desire for completion and totality in the first place. Other animals don't have this desire. They live in their environment, and they don't ask themselves "Why am I here?" or "What may I hope?", nor do they reject such questions as meaningless. So why do we ask the cosmic question, or evade it?

### **A Forgotten Tradition: Petrarch's Example**

To answer this question, we need to become clearer about an issue which was mostly implicit in the views of the thinkers I have considered so far (Strawson, Wittgenstein, Noica, Nagel). This requires a better understanding of the sort of creatures we are. We need, in other words, hermeneutics, i.e. what Cottingham calls an "epistemology of involvement" and Nagel calls the reflection on "features of our situation, or forms of thought and action, so central and pervasive that we are ordinarily submerged in them without paying notice".<sup>59</sup> But some features of our situation might escape even this method, especially if they have fallen out of our philosophical sight. For this reason it can be a useful exercise to change tack and consult a tradition alien to us, to the sensibility of 21<sup>st</sup> century analytic philosophers.

The issue I am concerned with can be traced from at least Plato to early 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophers in the continental tradition. Nagel is not oblivious to it, although he mentions it only *en passant*. He points out that Plato had not only a religious temperament, but that he also "suffered from a version of the more characteristically Judeo-Christian conviction that we are all miserable sinners", and that he "hoped for some form of redemption from philosophy".<sup>60</sup> This motif, *the fallenness, wickedness and frailty of man*, was a pervasive topic in European philosophy for much of its history. It is a motif that is entirely absent not only in the theorising of today's zealots and hermits, but missing even from the considerations of the hopeful believers. To elaborate, I will limit myself to only one example, from the earliest period of the modern age, that of Francesco Petrarch's moral anthropology.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>59</sup> Cottingham, *Philosophy*, 22; Nagel, *Secular*, 9.

<sup>60</sup> Nagel, *Secular*, 6.

<sup>61</sup> While my focus is here the early modern period, it should be noted, as one anonymous reviewer has pointed out to me, that ancient and Hellenistic philosophers, especially in the sceptical tradition, were perfectly aware of the problem I am trying to ad-

Petrarch lived at the end of the Middle Ages, in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, but in some respects he was a modern man, and also a major forerunner to Renaissance humanism. He was a humanist in the strict sense, a teacher and student of the *studia humanitatis*, comprising grammar, rhetoric, poetry, history and moral philosophy.<sup>62</sup> He was a humanist in the wider sense as well. He harboured a passion for ancient authors, especially for Plato, Aristotle, Cicero and Vergil, discovered forgotten ancient manuscripts, cultivated an elegant writing style, and he disliked scholastic philosophy and its dry style. He was modern to the extent that he was much preoccupied with himself. One aspect of this was a certain self-indulgence. Like other humanists, he liked the genre of letters, which allowed him to write from the first-person point of view. He also sought fame, was curious about the world and enjoyed travelling around, “a forerunner of modern tourism”, as Kristeller has described him.<sup>63</sup> Petrarch was also inclined to solitude, and melancholy, *accidia*. *Accidia* had been considered a vice in medieval monastic life. It is true that in one (famous) passage, from his dialogue *Secretum meum* (ca.1347–1353), published only posthumously, he gave this feeling a more positive gloss, admitting that it involved a form of suffering that was also enjoyable.<sup>64</sup> Still, he characterised it overall as a deadly plague of the spirit, and the joy it involved he actually considered to be a false joy.<sup>65</sup> “In this sadness”, he wrote, “everything is bitter, miserable and terrible”.

This plague holds me at times so tight in its grip that it chains and tortures me for days and nights. During such periods there is nothing of light and life for me, but only ever so much hellish night and most bitter death. Moreover, and this can be called the pinnacle of misfortune, I revel so much with a sort of dark delight in my tears and pains, that only reluctantly do I wrest myself free from it.<sup>66</sup>

It is important to realize that Petrarch is not simply interested in a dispassionate theory of the mind, but rather in a self-examination that aims, at

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dress in this essay. See e.g. Pierre Hadot, *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2002).

<sup>62</sup> Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Eight Philosophers of the Italian Renaissance* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1964), 3.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibidem*, 13.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibidem*, 15.

<sup>65</sup> Francesco Petrarca [Petrarch], *Secretum meum* (Mainz: Dieterich'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 2013), 179. My translation.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibidem*, 181.

least in principle, for a therapeutic resolution. But the ill from which he suffers is not simply a matter of individual psychology. As *Secretum meum*, and other works, suggest, Petrarch identifies here a general anthropological problem, which is merely exemplified by *accidia*. Other examples of regrettable inclinations are envy, arrogance, avarice, ambition etc.<sup>67</sup> The root of all these is the fundamental fallenness of man. This manifests itself not only in our proneness for those vices, but also in our restlessness, our mortality and the weakness of our reason. Our inner life is in constant motion, hardly ever managing to come to peaceful contemplation. Our mind is overwhelmed, indeed “picked and slashed to pieces” by “a deadly variety” of sensory impressions.<sup>68</sup> We are also harassed by countless worries that constantly compete against each other, keeping the mind unstable even when it has taken a good resolution. This leads to an “inner discord [...] and distress of the soul that is angry with itself, disgusted by its own dirt, without removing it, recognising its own devious paths, without quitting them, fearing the imminent danger, without averting it”.<sup>69</sup> When Francis, the protagonist undergoing treatment in *Secretum meum*, announces that he aims to reach happiness by pursuing a self-sufficient, harmonious life, “living neither in hardship nor in abundance, neither presiding over others nor being subordinate to them”, he sounds like today’s hopeful believers in a way of life, which, guided by good intentions and maybe some theoretical calculations, may bring happiness to most of us. Augustine, the “instructing”, wiser interlocutor, rebuts this hope sharply: “You would have to abandon your humanity and become a god in order to cease being afflicted by hardship. Don’t you know that man is the most destitute/needy [egentissimum] of all animals?”<sup>70</sup> There follows a longer paragraph outlining the destituteness of man, from his birth to his death.

He has a frail body, a restless mind, is assailed by numerous illnesses, succumbs to countless passions, is clueless, sways between joy and happiness, cannot finalise a decision, is unable to retrain his appetites, does not know what is good for him, and how much of it [...]. He is greedy and fearful, does not want anymore what he has already acquired, bewails what he has lost, and is at all times worried about the

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<sup>67</sup> Cf. *ibidem*, 131.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibidem*, 97.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibidem*, 101, 103.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibidem*, 150.

present, past and future things, haughty when struck by misfortune, while still aware of his frailty. He is inferior to the lowest worms, has a short life, an uncertain life span, an inevitable fate, and is exposed to a thousand possible kinds of death. [...] Stop hoping for the impossible, be content with your human fate, learn to live in exuberance and hardship, and to preside over and be subordinate to others. Live thus, and do not try to overcome the burden of your lot, which hangs even around the neck of kings.<sup>71</sup>

True happiness, Augustine tells Francis, will only be reached if one acquiesces in one's fate, defeats one's passions and lives under the rule of virtue. But Petrarch remains realistic enough even about this resolution, for Francis retorts: "Already I regret what I have done, and I desire to not desire. But perverse habit carries me away, and I always feel something unfulfilled in my heart."<sup>72</sup> There is no simple solution, no practical syllogism to solve the human predicament, for Petrarch. All is vanity. Reason and knowledge offer no salvation either.<sup>73</sup> Particularly useless are the "dialecticians", i.e. the formal philosophers of his time, who sketch countless definitions, but have no understanding of anything, especially not of what humans are. They behave in an arrogant way, but are really to be pitied, for they torture their own minds with "futile pitfalls" and have forgotten reality.<sup>74</sup> Clearly, Petrarch is less forgiving towards certain forms of philosophical detachment than, say, Noica. But philosophy still has a useful role, even for Petrarch. It consists precisely in this, the recognition of reality, the full nature of man. The main object of philosophy is man and his problems, as he argues elsewhere.<sup>75</sup> Philosophy is moral philosophy for him, although not the discipline detached from its practitioner, as this is the case today. Philosophy looks at humans as they really are, with all their limitations.

The reason why Petrarch has a rather accurate and undistorted anthropology is connected to his religious temperament. But unlike Nagel's understanding of it, his religious temperament is not simply aiming for an integrative recognition of man's position in the universe. Petrarch thinks that *there is something wrong with mankind*, and integrative recognition

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<sup>71</sup> *Ibidem*, 151.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibidem*, 155.

<sup>73</sup> Cf. *ibidem*, 91, 287, 315, 389.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibidem*, 69, 71.

<sup>75</sup> See Kristeller, *Eight*, 15.

will not change that. Of course, to speak of something being wrong with mankind is just another way of speaking of its wickedness, of the many ways in which it is connected to *evil*. Can anything change its state? The first imperative, raised by the interlocutor Augustine in *Secretum meum*, is to truly know oneself, the miserable condition we find ourselves in. This might not be so easily accomplished, given the restlessness of our minds. But it is knowledge that we already have, if “knowledge” is the right term. What philosophy can do, is teach techniques that remind us of our condition, help us reflect on our suffering and mortality. This is done repeatedly in *Secretum meum*. Death has a central role here. At one point a detailed description of a dying man is given, of how his extremities are slowly becoming cold, while the body is heating up and dissolving in sweat, how the eyes are watery and tearful, the cheeks shrunken in, the teeth yellow, the lips foamy, the whole human covered in stench, etc.<sup>76</sup> Compare this with Nagel’s more harmless “We wake up from our familiar surroundings to find ourselves, already elaborately formed by biology and culture, amazingly in existence.”<sup>77</sup>

For Petrarch, philosophy’s first role is to remind us of our creatureliness, to teach us how to die. His protagonist Augustine quotes Cicero: “The whole life of the philosophers is a preparation for death.”<sup>78</sup> But philosophy has a second role as well, which is inseparable from the first, lest philosophy be a pointless suicidal exercise: to develop an intense desire and striving to ascend, to reach the higher. This, of course, is God, the source of the good and the true.<sup>79</sup> In *Secretum meum* God is appealed to only occasionally, as an object of faith and love, not as an object of knowledge, but elsewhere Petrarch leaves no doubt that he is first and foremost “not a Ciceronian or a Platonist, but a Christian”.<sup>80</sup> This is why he is inclined to “practical” philosophy, to a way of changing himself. Working on the will is more important than gaining theoretical knowledge. In his *De sui ipsius et multorum ignorantia* [*On His Own Ignorance and that of Many Others*] (1367–1370), Petrarch argues that “it is safer to cultivate a good and pious will than a capable and clear intellect”, since goodness is the object of the will. It is therefore better to love God, rather than to try

<sup>76</sup> Petrarch, *Secretum*, 75, 77; cf. also 65, 89, 243, 325, 385.

<sup>77</sup> Nagel, *Secular*, 9.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibidem*, 395.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibidem*, 37, 39, 261, 289.

<sup>80</sup> Kristeller, *Eight*, 11.

to know him. One can love something ardently, without fully knowing it, as is the case with God.<sup>81</sup>

Petrarch's moral anthropology could not be further removed from a philosophy that is detached from the moral state of mankind. At the same time, he reaches a position structurally similar to Strawson's, a third position which requires a reasoned dialectic of attachment and detachment. This third position, that of a truly enlightened philosophy, transcends both natural man and his theoretical self-misunderstanding, while accounting for the very possibility of that misunderstanding, which for Petrarch is just another aspect of our fallenness. This self-misunderstanding takes many forms, of which a few were mentioned above (the zealots, the hermits/Noica's Platonisers, the hopeful believers). Noica works out elements of the sublime found in the Platonising attitude, which points to Nagel's attempt to make sense of the cosmic question in a non-naturalistic and not merely humanistic way. The sublime and the cosmic question are evidently in Petrarch as well, but his anthropology has deeper roots and branches reaching far higher. Moreover, his focus is on offering a heuristic method for the actual transformation or even rebirth of the patient in question – in the first place the philosopher himself. The framework of this heuristic is for Petrarch genuine religious faith, Christianity more specifically. Such a framework is difficult to accept, but without it, as Nagel admits at the end of his essay, the cosmic question leaves us with a sense of the absurd.<sup>82</sup>

Petrarch was a brilliant writer, but not an altogether original thinker. His ideas were based on various sources, for example on the medieval *De contemptu mundi* tradition, on Plato, Cicero, Augustine, and others.<sup>83</sup> *Secretum deum* is a beautiful dialogue, but its moral anthropology was not unique to Petrarch. Similar positions were articulated by others as well, during the Renaissance and the Reformation. Ficino, Valla, Luther, Calvin, Montaigne, and many others, were much concerned with their own frailty, and that of man in general. Luther, for example, thought that metaphysics is a misguided discipline, because it is obsessed with the present state of things, merely interested in describing their essence by

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<sup>81</sup> Cf. *Ibidem*, 17.

<sup>82</sup> Nagel, *Secular*, 17.

<sup>83</sup> Cf. Margaret Holland, "Petrarch and *De contemptu mundi*," *The European Legacy* 2, no. 4 (1997): 730–32, doi:10.1080/10848779708579802; Bernhard Huss and Gerhard Regn, "Kommentar," in Petrarca, *Secretum*, 403ff.



means of Aristotle's abstract categories. It is thus "a study of empty illusion", since it fails to see a creature's creatureliness, focusing on what it is, rather than on what it *desires* to be. Man abhors the present and longs for his salvations. He is, for Luther, directed towards the future.<sup>84</sup> "We praise a science dealing with that which is saddened by itself and unhappy", he wrote, a "gay science" which overhears "the sighing of the creature".

This weakness or fallenness motif continued throughout modern philosophy, in Malebranche, Pascal, Locke, even Hume and Kant, in Schopenhauer, and in some of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century German philosophers.<sup>85</sup> But it then fell out of sight, even in the continental tradition, and it was hardly ever an issue in the analytic quarter. Is it because the problem has been solved? "Only madmen", Petrarch writes, "would not at least sometimes realise their own frailty, the feebleness of their body, their mortality".<sup>86</sup> Philosophers today seem to have forgotten, as philosophers, about their all too human condition. Is this forgetfulness itself not all too human? It probably is. But philosophy is in the business of truth and has a duty to account for everything there is, including the condition of those who practice it. And the fact remains that they do not hear the "sighing of the creature" any longer, or, if they hear it, they ignore it and or at best relegate it to psychology or literature.<sup>87</sup> I have tried to indicate some reasons for this failure, not all of which are historical or based on the darkness of the age. Nor are they all based on errors that can be easily rectified. This failure, I have suggested, needs to be explored with charity, because it is generated by the *alien in us*. Patterns of religious understanding, with their necessary reference to notions of fallenness, wickedness, evil, might be of help here, to cast some light on what and who we are. Nevertheless, the failure is not excusable.

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<sup>84</sup> See his lectures on the Epistle to the Romans (WA 56, 371f.). See also his *Disputation Against Scholastic Philosophy* (WA 1, 224ff.). Martin Luther, *D. Martin Luthers Werke* (Weimar: Herman Böhlau, 1883–2009). Calvin shared this attitude towards philosophy, see Richard Muller, *After Calvin: Studies in the Development of a Theological Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 122.

<sup>85</sup> For example in Heidegger, Jaspers and Scheler. For more discussion of the earlier part of this tradition, see Tonelli, "The «Weakness» of Reason"; Kanterian, *Kant*.

<sup>86</sup> Petrarch, *Secretum*, 63, 65.

<sup>87</sup> I am speaking here also from personal experience, having witnessed time and again how professional philosophers, especially in the analytic camp, dismiss or avoid the topics discussed in this essay with an almost Freudian anxiety.

Plotin, raconte Porphyre, avait le don de lire dans les âmes. Un jour, sans autre préambule, il dit à son disciple, grandement surpris, de ne pas tenter de se tuer et d'entreprendre plutôt un voyage. Porphyre partit pour la Sicile: il s'y guérit de sa mélancolie mais, ajoute-t-il plein de regret, il manqua ainsi la mort de son maître, survenue pendant son absence.

Il y a longtemps que les philosophes ne lisent plus les âmes. Ce n'est pas leur métier, dira-t-on. C'est possible. Mais aussi qu'on ne s'étonne pas s'ils ne nous importent plus guère.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Emil Cioran, *De l'inconvénient d'être né* (1973), here cited from Cioran, *Œuvres* (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 2011), 762.

I would like to thank the following people for advice and help with this essay: Rotraut A. Barth, Florin Calian, Fiona Ellis, Ruben Fernandez Guerras, Michael Inwood, and an anonymous reviewer.