

Meditations on Western Philosophy

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Abstract:

In this project I shall explain how I came to realize that for as long as I believed that there exists an epistemic gap, or veil of perception, separating the world into that which is subjective and internal to the mind from that which is objective and external to the mind, I was unable to provide a compelling argument for the existence of this same Epistemic Gap ontology.

“...although the proofs I employ here are in my view as certain and evident as the proofs of geometry, if not more so, it will, I fear, be impossible for many people to achieve an adequate perception of them, both because they are rather long and depend on others, and also, above all, because *they require a mind* which is completely free from preconceived opinions and *which can easily detach itself from involvement with the senses.*”¹

Meditation I: On the Willful Suspension of Belief

Some time ago, as I was reading William James’ *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, I was suddenly caused to doubt a set of beliefs which I had accepted as true since at least my first undergraduate course in epistemology. First, I had believed that there is a mind-independent, objective world which is epistemically “external” to my subjective mind. Second, I had believed that the only epistemic access I have to that world is through my senses. Third, I had believed that my senses cannot be trusted, or at least not entirely, since I have occasionally been deceived by them. And fourth, I had believed that even if my senses were reliable, they would still provide me with nothing more than subjective representations of the “external” world. In sum, I used to believe that reality can be divided into that which is “internal” to my mind and that which is “external” to my mind, and the two are separated by an epistemic gap, or a veil of perception. I decided to refer to this cluster of beliefs as the Epistemic Gap ontology.

It is important that I be very clear here. As I saw it, there are at least two ways of thinking about the relation between epistemology and ontology. Either one can begin from a given ontology, and then draw inferences about what this entails for our epistemology, or

¹ Descartes (1641/2017): p. 5. (emphasis added)

one can begin from a given epistemology and then draw inferences about what this entails for what we can say about our ontology. As Jonathan Barnes puts this in his introduction to his and Julia Annas' translation of Empiricus' *Outlines of Scepticism*,

“During the mediaeval period, metaphysics had been the starting-point and foundation of all philosophical speculation: first determine what there is, and then decide what to do about it. In the modern period, epistemology took over the role of metaphysics, and an inquiry into the nature and the basis of human knowledge came to be regarded as the primary part of philosophy: first determine what we can speak of, and then speak about it.”²

Though I was inclined to agree with those scholars who think that this historical shift had as much to do with the philosophy of language as it did with epistemology,³ the point still remained – I could begin with an ontology which framed how I thought about epistemology, or I could begin with an epistemology which framed what I could know about metaphysics, and this, regardless of whether or not I thought, following many of the so-called “Analytic” philosophers, that I ought really to begin with a philosophy of language.⁴

In my case, I had been caused to doubt an *ontology*. That the Epistemic Gap ontology is an ontology, and not an epistemology, could be seen in the fact that it makes claims about how the world is, even if those claims bear directly on what I could know about that world. At the same time, however, the Epistemic Gap ontology was an ontology

² Annas & Barnes (2000): p. xi.

³ Marcondes (2020).

⁴ Even if I did start with philosophy of language, there is still a sense in which I would be assuming the Epistemic Gap ontology as soon as I started thinking about how (internally accessible) signs can refer to or represent (external) objects.

which remained neutral about more traditional metaphysical concerns, such as the distinction between abstract and concrete objects, as well as whether there exists only one kind of substance. This allows the Epistemic Gap ontology to be consistent with both monistic and dualistic substance ontologies; almost as though these substance ontologies were devised in order to answer questions first raised by the Epistemic Gap ontology.

Similarly, with the notable exceptions of certain Common Sense philosophers, Pragmatists, Radical Empiricists, New Realists, and Logical Empiricists, the Epistemic Gap ontology seemed to me to be consistent with most of the epistemologies of Western Philosophy.⁵ The basic theme is this: all real things have essences or natures, and these essences cannot be sensed directly, therefore, the mind must either find some other way of gaining knowledge about the true nature of things, perhaps by reasoning carefully about what is sensed, or it must concede that no such knowledge can be gained. Both the Sceptics and the Platonists were quite up front about thinking that the senses cannot tell us about the true nature of the world. And even Aristotle, who famously held that the senses are generally reliable for giving us knowledge, claimed that, "...men have a poor sense of smell and our apprehension of its objects is bound up with pleasure and pain, which shows that in us the organ is inaccurate."⁶ I could see the same theme in Descartes, Locke, Hume, Berkeley, Kant, and Helmholtz to name but a few highly influential figures.⁷

⁵ It is worth pointing out that there are important parallels between these strains of thinking in the West and the much earlier Mādhyamaka tradition in Buddhist philosophy. See Nāgārjuna (1995).

⁶ Aristotle *On the Soul* ii 9, 421a10-13.

⁷ I would have named women in this list, but not only have women been very often unjustly excluded from philosophical conversations historically, but many of the women whose work I have read – Eleanor Gibson, Susan Oyama, Deborah Gordon, Lynn Margulis, Sonia Sultan, Kathleen Akins, Ann-Sophie Barwich, and Lucia

In sum, there seemed to me to be a sense in which the Epistemic Gap ontology came before each of these other ontologies and epistemologies conceptually. What is further, until I read James, I did not see how it could even conceivably be otherwise. Like everyone else, I too had been deceived by my senses, with straight sticks appearing bent in the water, and tables changing shape as I walked around them, and so on. However, I was aware that even if he was wrong, at least James, following Ernst Mach, had come up with an internally consistent alternative to the Epistemic Gap ontology. And I had been led to read about this alternative, which James referred to as Radical Empiricism, by my study of the growing and arguably highly successful research program known as Ecological Psychology.⁸ For as Harry Heft had persuasively argued in his *Ecological Psychology in Context*, James' metaphysics underwrite the tenets of Ecological Psychology.

Therefore, I reasoned, if Ecological Psychology seems to be on to something empirically, and if it is consistent with James' Radical Empiricism, and if Radical Empiricism is inconsistent with the Epistemic Gap ontology, then I must make a decision as to which ontology, if either, I ought to endorse. In fact, I realized, there could be a possibly infinite number of rival ontologies, so I was not just being forced to choose between Radical Empiricism and the Epistemic Gap ontology. Rather, I was being forced to choose one ontology over all other possible ontologies, and that is a significantly different decision, especially when I do not even know what these other ontologies might claim.

Jacobs – all tend to avoid making claims that would commit them to a strong endorsement of the Epistemic Gap ontology.

⁸ J. Gibson (1979/2015); Kugler & Turvey (1987/2016); Lombardo (1987); E. Gibson & Pick (2000); Chemero (2009); Banks (2014); Wagman & Blau (2020); Blau & Wagman (2023); Mangalam et al. (2024).

In light of this apparent impasse, it seemed to me, at least initially, that the reasonable thing to do might just be to suspend judgment, like the Pyrrhonians. For where equally plausible opposites for what is sensed and what is reasoned are discovered, whether by, as Sextus Empiricus put it, "...opposing what appears to what appears, what is thought of to what is thought of, and crosswise..."⁹ I am left with no good reason to choose one of the opposites over the other(s). If I could not discern which rival ontology was most plausible, then my choosing to endorse one of these opposite ontologies over the other would be arbitrary, and therefore, unwarranted.¹⁰

Having decided to suspend judgment should I discover that all of the possible ontologies were indeed equally plausible, I paused to consider what I should conclude if one of these ontologies, say, the Epistemic Gap ontology *did* have better epistemic support than all other possible ontologies. Would it follow from this that I ought therefore to actually endorse whichever ontology seemed most plausible? No, I concluded. Just because there might be more and better arguments to choose one of these ontologies over all others, it would not follow from this that that ontology was correct, and all of the rival ontologies were not. Perhaps, as Empiricus pointed out, it could be the case that just like a yet-to-be-discovered scientific theory, equally plausible arguments for even just one of whichever ontologies I did not choose might very well already exist, even if they remain hidden from me at present.¹¹ Just because I might find a given ontology more plausible

⁹ Empiricus, *PH* 1.4.

¹⁰ For those reminded here of William James' essay "The Will to Believe", I salute you, and invite you to just keep reading.

¹¹ Empiricus, *PH* 1.13.

than all the rest does not mean that that ontology is objectively the most plausible ontology. Others might disagree with me, and they might have very good reasons for doing so. In light of these things, I resolved to follow the Pyrrhonians in suspending judgment indefinitely concerning all ontological claims.

Then, like a good sceptic, it occurred to me to ask what warrants the Pyrrhonic method? Just because the Pyrrhonians say something does not mean that thing is true. Perhaps one of these ontologies really was more plausible than all the rest, and an equally plausible argument for its possibly infinite number of opposites will never be discovered. Did not Empiricus say that even when Pyrrhonians say things like, “I determine nothing”, they are not actually making positive assertions about what is real? Indeed, the only positive claims they seemed willing to make were reports *that* they were having certain experiences. As Empiricus wrote,

“...in uttering these phrases [the Pyrrhonians] say what is apparent to themselves and report their own feelings without holding opinions, affirming nothing about external objects.”¹²

I took it that the fear for the Pyrrhonians was that there is no way of determining the truth of such opinions about external objects. For not only have we experienced inconsistent appearances, but as the Pyrrhonians worked hard to show, reasoning can be so deceitful that it “...all but snatches even what is apparent from under our very eyes.”¹³ Meaning, I take it, that our capacity to reason is so powerful that we cannot possibly trust it to tell us

¹² Empiricus, *PH* 1.7.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 1.10.

whether our opinions concerning matters which are not immediately apparent to us are correct. For we can find reasons to convince ourselves of just about anything, regardless of what is actually the case. Yet, whether or not there might exist equally plausible arguments for two or more rival ontologies is not something which is immediately apparent.

Consequently, it was unclear to me what grounds the Pyrrhonians could possibly give me for thinking that there really might exist an equally plausible argument for even just one rival to the Epistemic Gap ontology.

Having said all this, I was still well aware of the different Modes of the Pyrrhonians, so I knew that they had taken themselves to have come up with a number of general apagogical arguments against all attempts to make “dogmatic” claims about the way the world really is. In turn, if these arguments went through, then I might still have had good reason to suspend my judgment indefinitely, regardless of how plausible any one given ontology might appear to me to be. However, it quickly became apparent to me that were I to have allowed the Pyrrhonian way of thinking to motivate my continuing to suspend judgment indefinitely, I would have actually been failing to thoroughly suspend judgment. This is because the Pyrrhonian’s motivation for suspending judgment is evidently itself grounded in their rather explicit endorsement of the Epistemic Gap ontology, and my task was to discern whether I should endorse that, or any other such ontology in the first place. Here is Empiricus again,

“We say, then, that the standard of the Sceptical persuasion is what is apparent, implicitly meaning by this the appearances; for they depend on passive and unwilling feelings and are not objects of investigation. (Hence no-

one, presumably, will raise a controversy over whether an existing thing appears this way or that; rather, they investigate whether it is such as it appears.)”¹⁴

Yet here I was, raising a controversy about precisely this issue. I was not denying that there exist phenomenal experiences, what I was questioning was whether these are really no more than just appearances. In turn, since I was trying to discern which ontology to endorse, I could not just beg the question in favour of the Epistemic Gap ontology. Instead, I had to regard this ontology in the same way that I regarded Radical Empiricism and all of the other possible ontologies – as possibly correct. This meant that I could not join the Pyrrhonians in suspending judgment indefinitely. For I could not take for granted that there actually is a meaningful distinction to be made between how things “appear” and how things “really are”.

In fact, once I saw this, it seemed to me that the Pyrrhonian method undercuts its own warrant. For this method was predicated upon precisely the sorts of ontological claims which employing this method ought to lead one to suspend judgment with respect to. Which is to say, if we follow the Pyrrhonian method consistently, then we must suspend judgment concerning the Epistemic Gap ontology, for this ontology is not just something that “appears” to us, and even if it was, we still would not be in a position to claim as much. But as soon as we suspend judgment with respect to the Epistemic Gap ontology, then we must further suspend judgment concerning whether one is motivated in employing the Pyrrhonian method to begin with, given that it is grounded on this ontology.

¹⁴ Empiricus, *PH* 1.11.

Leaving the Pyrrhonians to sort out this methodological muddle for themselves, I decided that I was under no obligation to suspend judgment indefinitely. Furthermore, I also determined that because the Epistemic Gap ontology was the incumbent, in that I had already endorsed it previously and with good reason, the burden of proof was upon the proponents of all rival ontologies to demonstrate that their proposed ontologies were more plausible than the Epistemic Gap ontology. This gave me a reasonable way to still choose which ontology to believe in the event that all ontologies appeared to be equally (im)plausible. In such a case, the tie would go to the incumbent Epistemic Gap ontology on the grounds that the challengers had all failed to demonstrate why I ought to prefer their ontology over the one I had previously endorsed.

Having put in a good day's work, I proceeded to pour myself a dram of Bowmore 25 and spent the rest of the evening re-reading Susan Oyama's *The Ontogeny of Information*.¹⁵

Meditation 2: On Thinking Things

The following day, I trudged out to my office, turned up the temperature on the thermostat which controls my gas fireplace, and sat down in my icy cold chair, ready to think further about my investigation.

Surely the strongest possible argument I could give in favour of endorsing a given ontology would be one which was necessarily true, I reasoned. For a necessarily true argument in favour of a given ontology would also count as a necessarily true argument

¹⁵ This is my made-up story, so I can imagine myself savouring any prohibitively expensive single malt I want.

against all other possible rival ontologies, at least insofar as these rivals were inconsistent with that ontology. But which ontology could I find a necessarily true argument for?

A brilliant piece of reasoning! Even though I had already determined that the burden of proof was *not* upon the proponents of the Epistemic Gap ontology, I realized that these proponents could nevertheless still use Descartes' famous *Cogito* to provide a necessarily true argument for endorsing their preferred ontology. This could even be seen as a generous move on their part, given that they were not obligated to provide any such argument to begin with. Here is how the argument worked.

It seemed to me that René Descartes had successfully proved that the proposition "I am, I exist" must necessarily be true whenever "...it is put forward by me, or conceived in my mind."¹⁶ For if indeed I am conceiving of this proposition "I am, I exist" in my mind, then it must necessarily be the case that I exist, since there must be that which is performing this act of thinking. In turn, as Descartes argued in his second meditation, it follows from this that whatever else I am, I must at least be a thinking thing. And not only this, but he also goes on to point out that we sometimes have sensory experiences, which implies that it must be possible for thinking things to have sensory experiences. This further suggests that these experiences are a form of thinking, or something which occurs within the mind.

To be clear, in his second meditation Descartes was not yet willing to concede that these sensory experiences are experiences of anything real. Rather, like the Pyrrhonians, he was at this point only willing to concede that he *seems*, "...to see, to hear, and to be

¹⁶ Descartes (1641/2017): p. 20.

warmed.”¹⁷ For on Descartes’ view, “This cannot be false; what is called ‘having a sensory perception’ is strictly just this, and in this restricted sense of the term it is simply thinking.”¹⁸ In other words, just as we have direct epistemic access to the fact that we are thinking, so too do we have direct epistemic access to the fact that we are engaged in different kinds of thinking, such as doubting, understanding, affirming, denying, willing, imagining and having sensory perceptions (in the restricted sense).¹⁹ It is only later in his sixth meditation that Descartes infers that the “passive faculty of sensory perception” which, involving a kind of thinking, could only exist as a mode of an intellectual substance, would nevertheless be unusable if there were not some corresponding “active faculty” which caused the passive faculty to have the ideas of sensible objects that it has.²⁰ In turn,

“...this [active] faculty cannot be in me, since clearly it presupposes no intellectual act on my part, and the ideas in question are produced without my cooperation and often even against my will. So the only alternative is that it is in another substance distinct from me – a substance which contains either formally or eminently all the reality which exists objectively in the ideas produced by this faculty...”²¹

What mattered here for my purposes was that Descartes had shown that there must exist something external to the mind, which is not controlled by the mind, and which supplies the mind with all of the ideas that it has about sensible objects. It mattered not whether

¹⁷ Descartes (1641/2017): 23

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 62.

²¹ Ibid.

that which exists outside of the mind is a material world or some other all-encompassing mind, as Berkeley held. For I already had all the pieces I needed – from my knowing that I am thinking, I can know that I am a mind. Following this, from my knowing *that* I have sensory experiences, I can know that my mind must be capable of having sensory experiences. And since I cannot control these experiences with my mind, I am safe to conclude that there exists something external to my mind which causes me to have these experiences. Thus, there is that which is internal to the mind, and that which is external to the mind, and the two are separated by an epistemic gap. This is the Epistemic Gap ontology, and it follows from an argument that is necessarily true.

Therefore, since an argument grounded on a necessary truth could be given in favour of endorsing the Epistemic Gap ontology, I concluded that the decision to endorse this ontology over Radical Empiricism enjoys the strongest possible warrant. With this in mind, I decided to lie down and take a nap, assuming I had not already been lying down this entire time, dream writing again.

Meditation 3: On Content

Alas, like candle wax which has been set too close to a fire, the essential property of indubitable veridicality which I thought my intellect had perceived clearly and distinctly in Descartes' argument seemed to have now melted away. For I had awoken from my dreams and seemed once more to be plagued by a doubtful demon.

What bothered me is what Descartes assumed in his foundational premise. What did Descartes mean when he wrote that the proposition of "I am, I exist" can be

“...conceived *in my mind*”?²² If by “I” Descartes meant nothing more at this stage in his argument than a “thinking thing” or “mind”, which is cut off from the external world by an epistemic gap, then he was presupposing the very Epistemic Gap ontology which I had been given reason to doubt. Indeed, even when Descartes says earlier in his first Meditation that the “...senses occasionally deceive us with respect to objects which are very small or in the distance...”²³ he is making a quite substantive claim about what the senses are and what they can and cannot tell us about a putative external world. Thus, once again, Descartes is presuming an Epistemic Gap ontology.

In fact, upon further reading, I discovered that Descartes was actually quite explicit about his presuppositions. In addition to the epigraph cited at the beginning of this paper, consider what Descartes writes in his reply concerning the reliability of the senses,

“When I said that the entire testimony of the senses should be regarded as uncertain and even as false, I was quite serious; indeed this point is so necessary for an understanding of my *Meditations* that if anyone is unwilling or unable to accept it, he will be incapable of producing any objection that deserves a reply... when our inquiry concerns what can be known with complete certainty by the human intellect, it is quite unreasonable to refuse to reject these things [which our senses tell us] in all seriousness as doubtful and even as false; the purpose here is to come to recognize that certain other

²² Descartes (1641/2017): p. 20. (emphasis added)

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

things which cannot be rejected in this way are thereby more certain and in reality better known to us.”²⁴

Though he does not put it in quite these terms, I take it from this passage, and others like it, that if one does not already presuppose an Epistemic Gap ontology, in which that which is internal to the mind can be distinguished from that external world which the mind is separated from by a veil of perception, then one will not even be able to understand Descartes' *Meditations*.

It took me a little while to let the full import of this sink in. For not only is Descartes presupposing the ontology I was trying to find an argument for, but he is even doubling down by emphatically and repeatedly stating that unless one presupposes that ontology, then one will not be able to see how his argument leads to indubitable knowledge.

Granted, Descartes himself was not necessarily trying to provide an argument for the Epistemic Gap ontology, so there is nothing immediately problematic about his basing his premises on preconceived opinions. However, insofar as Descartes was explicit that what he was after was certain knowledge, and insofar as his method for discovering this knowledge involved doubting all that could be reasonably doubted and then checking to see what remained, and insofar as it seemed to me that the presupposition that the tenets of the Epistemic Gap ontology are correct is very much something that even Descartes acknowledged it was possible to doubt, even if he thought such doubt would be unreasonable, then this entailed that Descartes' argument was not actually warranted, even by his own lights. For in stipulating which preconceived opinions were necessary for

²⁴ Descartes (1641/2017): p. 76.

understanding his argument – namely, that one must accept the Epistemic Gap ontology – Descartes thereby failed to faithfully follow his own method of casting aside all dubious preconceived opinions.

Regardless of whether or not presupposing the Epistemic Gap ontology really was problematic for Descartes' own search for certain knowledge, I knew that it was certainly a problem for my own investigation. Put simply, the *content* of Descartes' premises presupposes one of the ontologies which I was trying to decide between. Thus, to employ Descartes' argument as an argument for the very ontology which Descartes presupposes would amount to my begging the question in favour of that Epistemic Gap ontology.

Now, I knew that my inability to utilize Descartes' argument did not entail that that argument was unsound. For all I knew, the Epistemic Gap ontology might still be correct, and if that were the case, then sensory experience really might be something which occurs only in the mind, and its inconsistency really could undercut its epistemic reliability. Nevertheless, what I had established, at least for myself, was that *when it comes to the matter of trying to decide between any two or more rival ontologies*, I was not allowed to argue from premises which are only meaningful on the presupposition that the ontology which I was arguing for is correct. For this would amount to begging the question in favour of that ontology. At the same time, however, it was also the case that I could not use premises which were only meaningful on the presupposition that the ontology I was arguing for was false. For this either would have amounted to begging the question in favour of one or more rival ontologies, or it would amount to a self-contradiction, or both. Realizing these things led me to formulate the following maxim:

Neutral Content Maxim (NCM)

On pain of viciously circular reasoning, all premises of any argument given for or against a given ontology must contain only terms which are meaningful according to all possible ontologies.

Try as I might, I confess that I was unable to formulate the sorts of neutral premises which would conform to the NCM. To be sure, I could formulate premises in terms which presuppose either Radical Empiricism or the Epistemic Gap ontology, but as soon as I would try to describe “experience” or “sensation” or “thinking” in a way which does not either contradict or beg the question in favour of either of these ontologies, let alone the possibly infinite number of other ontologies which I could not even conceive of, I ended up totally failing to do so. What I found especially problematic was trying to discern how to remain sufficiently neutral with respect to those claims concerning which the ontologies being considered were diametrically opposed. For instance, how is one supposed to argue for the Epistemic Gap ontology, say, without either affirming or denying the subjective-objective distinction?

Moreover, even if I had succeeded in describing a truly neutral set of premises, then any argument I could have derived from these premises would have had to be correct according to any and all possible rival ontologies. Yet it appeared to me that if I were to come up with such an argument it would either be so vacuous that it established nothing, or it would support a universal ontology which was necessarily true, since there could be no possible interpretation of the conclusion of that argument which was false. And in that

case, what need would I have then had for any of the specific rival ontologies? I would have discovered a universally true argument for an ontology which the proponents of every other ontology would be forced to recognize, *by their own lights*, as an acceptable ontology.

Either way, it seemed to me, I completely lacked the capacity to argue for even just the Epistemic Gap ontology, let alone any of the others, from premises which sufficiently conformed to the NCM.

Once again, I was not and am not about to claim that something is impossible just because I (still) lack the capacity to accomplish that task. Otherwise, it would follow from my own inability to ensure that I never work right through important meetings that no one else makes it to all of their meetings on time. No, just because I could not see how it was possible to come up with neutral premises that conformed to the NCM did not entail that it really was impossible for someone else to formulate NCM compliant premises.

Yet it seemed obvious to me that until such premises were forthcoming, then at least I would be unable to articulate a positive argument in favour of either of the two particular ontologies I was interested in. But then, how could I complete my task of deciding between Radical Empiricism and the Epistemic Gap ontology? One might imagine how discouraging I found all of this. Sure, I had already determined to endorse the Epistemic Gap ontology if sufficient reason could not be provided for preferring some other ontology, but that decision was contingent on it being the case that I had already good reasons for endorsing the Epistemic Gap ontology to begin with. The problem now was that I recognized that it would not be fair to hold the proponents of the Epistemic Gap ontology to a different set of rules than I was holding the proponents of all rival ontologies to. If

these other proponents had to ensure that their arguments were NCM compliant, then so too did the proponents of the Epistemic Gap ontology have an obligation to show that their own arguments were NCM compliant. For my own part, I knew that I was incapable of providing such an argument in favour of the Epistemic Gap ontology, and that was quite a blow for my project. For in shifting the burden of proof to the proponents of *all* ontologies, including the proponents of the Epistemic Gap ontology, I had no way of rationally deciding between rival ontologies, should two or more ontologies seem equally plausible, as was the case for me with respect to Radical Empiricism and the Epistemic Gap ontology.

This was a conundrum I would have to think further about over dinner.

Meditation 4: On Comportment

While I thoroughly enjoyed the possible food that I might have been eating with what I could have been wrong in thinking was my mouth, what I did not enjoy was the further realization that even if I were to somehow formulate premises which conformed to the NCM, this would still not be enough. For in addition to ensuring that the *content* of my argument neither begged the question nor contradicted whichever ontology I was arguing for, I also needed to ensure that my *method* of reasoning did not either beg the question or contradict the ontology in question. This meant ensuring that whatever criteria I used to determine whether a given argument was acceptable were not themselves motivated by epistemological norms and values which presupposed the ontology being argued for. Here we might imagine that proponents of ontology X prohibit illicit style of reasoning Y. If the reason for enacting this prohibition against Y is that Y cannot yield knowledge in the

sort of world that X describes, then any enforcement of this prohibition in our task of judging between ontologies would beg the question in favour of X. This led me to stipulate my second maxim:

Neutral Method Maxim (NMM)

On pain of viciously circular reasoning, all arguments given for or against a given ontology must conform to criteria for proper methods of reasoning which are acceptable according to the epistemological norms and values of all ontologies.

I will candidly admit that I did not even try to discern whether there are styles of reasoning which conform to the NMM. For how could I possibly guarantee that whichever norms and values I came up with would be consistent with not just Radical Empiricism and the Epistemic Gap ontology, but the possibly infinite number of rival ontologies which one might come up with? I could see no way of even beginning this task, let alone completing it.

Once again it seemed to me that I had just made it impossible for myself to judge between ontologies. For not only could I not come up with premises which were NCM compliant, but now I also could not come up with a way of determining whether the argument I used to draw a conclusion from those premises was itself NMM compliant. Again, I recognized that someone else might succeed where I had failed, so I was not concluding that it actually is impossible for anyone to ever come

up with an NCM and NMM compliant argument in favour of a given ontology.

However, with respect to my task at hand, I was stymied.

In fact, it was no longer even clear to me that the prohibitions against viciously circular reasoning and self-contradiction which I used to motivate the NCM and NMM were themselves grounded on sufficiently neutral underlying epistemic norms and values. I knew that these prohibitions against begging the question were warranted if I first presupposed the Epistemic Gap ontology, and it seemed to me that they might still be warranted even if I were to presuppose Radical Empiricism. For on that pragmatic account, what matters is whether acting on a given belief, or set of beliefs, results in the successful performance of the intended behavior.²⁵ Thus, should one discover, as I myself have discovered, that reasoning in a viciously circular way leads to beliefs which are not very useful for producing successful behavior, then this would serve as tentative warrant for continuing to prohibit the use of such reasoning. The warrant is tentative because the possibility still remains that viciously circular reasoning might lead to successful behavior in certain contexts.

Nevertheless, there could be yet other rival ontologies, difficult as these might be for me to imagine, which do not warrant the prohibition against viciously circular reasoning. Thus, regardless of whether I ended up endorsing Radical Empiricism or the Epistemic Gap ontology, I would have been violating my own epistemological norms and values were I to have assumed that those

²⁵ James (1912/2003): pp. 35-40.

epistemological norms and values which motivated my maxims were themselves universally accepted. It seemed to me, in light of these considerations, that my maxims might very well undercut their own warrant, should it be the case that there is a rival ontology which does *not* prohibit the use of circular reasoning. So much for trying my best to judge fairly between rival ontologies.

Meditation 5: On Absurdity

I was just about to give up on this whole venture of judging between rival ontologies when it occurred to me, were I to be able to level an apagogical argument against either Radical Empiricism or the Epistemic Gap ontology, then at the very least, I would have a reason *against* endorsing that or those ontologies. This is because, in such a case, the reductio would begin by assuming, at least for the sake of argument, the truth, or usefulness, or whatever else, of the tenets of the target ontology. In turn, it would then show how, even by this ontology's own lights, assuming the truth of these tenets leads to what even the proponents of this ontology would consider to be an absurd conclusion. Thus, were I to be able to level a successful reductio, I would not need to worry about formulating an argument which conforms to the NCM and NMM. For all of the argumentative work would be happening from within the conceptual framework of the target ontology.

To be clear, even if the proponents of a given ontology succeeded in levelling a reductio against all possible rival ontologies, it would *not* follow from this that I would be therefore warranted in endorsing whichever ontology was left standing. For it might still be possible that a reductio could be applied to that ontology as

well. All that would follow from a successful apagogical argument against the any given ontology is that, *by their own lights*, the proponents of that ontology would not be warranted in endorsing their own ontology.

Since I had already given the proponents of the Epistemic Gap first crack at providing a necessarily true argument for their ontology, before then learning that I lacked the ability to provide an acceptable positive argument for any ontology, it seemed only fair that I should start my search for negative arguments with an attempt to level an apagogical argument against the Epistemic Gap ontology.

Having determined this plan of action, I began by laying out what I took to be the relevant epistemological norms and values of the Epistemic Gap ontology, as was the necessary first step for anyone attempting to level a reductio against this ontology. The relevant tenets of the Epistemic Gap ontology were the following:

First, I noted that the proponents of the Epistemic Gap ontology generally prohibit both the use of viciously circular reasoning and the employment of claims and arguments which viciously contradict themselves.²⁶

Second, I noted that while this prohibition is intended to apply to the logical structure of all arguments, it is usually not actually applied to deductive arguments. For in these cases what we are interested in is teasing out what the premises logically entail. We are not basing our determination of the truth of the premises on the truth of that conclusion which follows deductively from them, except when we

²⁶ Even the proponents of Coherentism prohibit viciously circular reasoning insofar as they generally regard epistemic warrant as being a holistic property of a sufficiently coherent *system* of beliefs. See Olsson (2005). And even the proponents of Dialetheism hold that not *all* contradictions are true. See Priest (1987/2006).

have independent evidence for thinking that what does follow deductively is unlikely to be true. By contrast, for those arguments where the truth value of one or more of the premises cannot simply be taken for granted, evidence must be given for thinking that the premise(s) in question are likely to be true. And the only acceptable evidence for such premises is evidence which provides one with one or more good reasons for thinking that the propositions comprising the premise(s) likely correspond to, represent, and/or accurately refer to what they are intended to with respect to the real world. Since the truth value of a valid conclusion is always contingent upon the truth value of (at least some of) the premises, unless the conclusion is self-evident, it follows from this that that same conclusion cannot itself count as acceptable evidence for one or more those premises. This is because, instead of providing compelling evidence for thinking that the proposition(s) comprising the premise(s) likely correspond to the real world in some way, an appeal to the conclusion of the argument would amount to nothing more than a mere reiteration of the very propositions we are already in search of evidence for.

Following this, I observed that the reason we require acceptable evidence for thinking that a given claim about the world might be true, is because we cannot fully trust either our senses or our reasoning to provide us with certain knowledge about the true nature of the world. This is not to say that all proponents of the Epistemic Gap ontology think that we cannot know anything positive about the world, like the Pyrrhonians. Rather, it is to say that, because of the epistemic gap separating what

is in the mind from what is external to it, all such knowledge claims must be warranted before they can be accepted, even tentatively. Thus, in addition to a prohibition against circular reasoning, proponents of the Epistemic Gap ontology also prohibit the arbitrary acceptance of a given as-of-yet unsupported claim about the world as true.²⁷ Another way of thinking about this prohibition is as a prohibition against just helping oneself to whatever claims one wants. Just because I assert that I am right, or that you are wrong, does not entail that these things are the case. If I want to convince you of something, I have to provide you with good reasons for thinking as I do. For none of us are oracles.

Having established what I understood the relevant tenets of the Epistemic Gap ontology to be, I then pointed out that on pain of contradiction, the proponents of the Epistemic Gap ontology could not arbitrarily accept their own ontology unless or until sufficient evidence had been provided for thinking that this ontology was true. For to do so would violate their own prohibition against just helping oneself to whatever claims one wants. Just because someone asserts that the Epistemic Gap ontology is true does not entail that it actually is true. This meant that, by their own lights, the proponents of the Epistemic Gap ontology really do have a burden of proof to provide a positive argument for their ontology.

²⁷ While it should be noted that the Foundationalists have gone to great lengths to try to provide us with good reasons for accepting all properly “basic” beliefs, where these are supposed to be unsupported by inferential justification, it should also be noted that the Foundationalists have gone to great lengths to try to provide us with good reasons, or inferential justification, for accepting every member of the set of all properly “basic” beliefs, even though each of these members is supposed to be unsupported by inferential justification. Then again, this may not be a problem if the Agrippan Trilemma is possibly not itself well-motivated to begin with.

What is more, until such an argument has been provided for endorsing the Epistemic Gap ontology, it is not clear how the epistemic norms and values which are predicated upon that ontology are supposed to be motivated either. If there might not actually exist any sort of epistemic gap, then why should we worry about contradicting ourselves, or utilizing viciously circular arguments, or just helping ourselves to whatever claims we like? It is not clear what answer the proponent of the Epistemic Gap ontology could provide.

Moreover, if these proponents cannot provide acceptable reasons for enforcing these prohibitions, then what is to prevent the proponents of rival ontologies which do not enforce the same prohibitions from just baldly asserting that endorsing the Epistemic Gap ontology is unwarranted, or that endorsing their own preferred ontology is warranted? Such assertions might not impress the proponent of the Epistemic Gap ontology, but the best they can do in that situation is make their own arbitrary assertions in return. Though doing so would be an explicit contradiction of their own epistemic norms and values.

Following this, I then observed that again on pain of contradiction, the proponents of the Epistemic Gap ontology were also prohibited from utilizing a positive argument for their preferred ontology which begged the question in favour of that same ontology. And this, both in terms of the content of the premises and the argumentative methodology employed. For begging the question in favour of the Epistemic Gap ontology would violate their own prohibition against viciously circular reasoning; a prohibition which would, ironically, then be ultimately

motivated by precisely that which it prohibits. This, I took it, was the most vicious that a circular argument could possibly get.

Just as before, with respect to the prohibition against arbitrary acceptance, were the proponents of the Epistemic Gap ontology to violate one of their own epistemic norms and values by utilizing a viciously circular argument in order to endorse their preferred ontology, their doing so would not only undercut the warrant for those same epistemic norms and values, but it would also open the door for their opponents to do likewise.

In sum, by their own lights, the proponents of the Epistemic Gap ontology were on their own hook to provide a positive argument for endorsing their preferred ontology which neither begged the question, either in terms of its content or its style of reasoning, nor arbitrarily accepted the truth of any of its premises without sufficient evidence. Otherwise, and again by their own lights, no one would be warranted in endorsing the Epistemic Gap ontology, and any prohibitions which were contingent upon the truth of that ontology would likewise be unwarranted.

It was at this point that I realized that while it may certainly be possible that there are others, or at least may one day be others, who might be able to provide an acceptable positive argument for the Epistemic Gap ontology, such that they would indeed be warranted in endorsing this ontology, the same could not be said for me. This is because, for all of the reasons I have laid out in this paper, I was and still am unable to come up with an acceptable positive argument for the Epistemic Gap ontology. This meant that while the reductio against this ontology might not apply to

others, it does apply to me. Thus, I am presently not warranted in continuing to endorse this ontology.

As a kicker, this also entails that I failed and still fail to meet Descartes' criteria for what it takes to see that his argument is true. For I am no longer convinced that reality really can be divided into that which is internal to my mind and that which is external to my mind, or that the two are separated by an epistemic gap. Until I can be convinced otherwise, I do not see how I can even conceive of the proposition "I am, I exist" as existing *in* my mind, let alone how it follows from this that therefore I am a thinking thing which is separable from the "active faculty" of my senses. Nothing of substance follows from this proposition. I think, therefore nothing.

Strictly speaking, my task was not finished. I had not come up with an apagogical argument against each of the possibly infinite number of other ontologies that might (one day) exist. But even if I discovered one and only one ontology against which I could not level a single *reductio*, it would not follow from my inability to reason against endorsing that ontology that I was therefore positively warranted in endorsing that ontology. Thus, as long as I was unable to come up with an acceptable positive argument for endorsing even just one ontology, I would be forced to suspend judgement, just like the Pyrrhonians.

Having thus reached the end of my investigation, I poured myself a fantastic Four Roses Single Barrel, went out to my front porch, and waited for tranquillity to happen upon me by accident.

Meditation 6: In Conclusion

As I sat on my front porch swing waiting impatiently for Pyrrhonian tranquillity, like a skeptical CEO who had paid very, very good money to have an instructor come in and teach her how to follow them in freeing her mind from all material concerns, I was struck by the sight of two men wearing baseball caps, walking slowly down the sidewalk in front of my house. It did not occur to me to wonder whether I was in fact only looking at cleverly constructed robots, for what difference would that really have made to my being able to sip my bourbon quietly in the shade of my almost tranquil porch? Besides, I was too preoccupied with the implications of what I had just discovered. If I was not warranted in endorsing the Epistemic Gap ontology, then I was certainly not warranted in employing the sceptical methods of the Pyrrhonians and the Cartesians to determine what can and cannot be said about the world. I was no longer obligated to be sceptical.

Bizarrely, I found this liberation quite paralyzing, like when a grad student is told that they can select five books and only five books to keep from the department library give-away pile, even though there are at least thirty books in that pile which that totally hypothetical student would have loved to have. What was I to think now that I was leaving the Epistemic Gap ontology behind? The options seemed endless, or if not endless, at least not obvious. I needed something to constrain my thinking, so that I could discern which direction to take intellectually.

It was tempting, in the light of the implausibility of the Epistemic Gap ontology, to just endorse Radical Empiricism in its place. Afterall, it was this latter

ontology which first caused me to doubt the Epistemic Gap ontology. Nevertheless, I knew that just because the Epistemic Gap ontology might be implausible, this did not entail that this ontology was actually false. Nor did the implausibility of the Epistemic Gap ontology entail that Radical Empiricism was itself plausible, let alone true.

That was when an indescribable voice suddenly spoke to me from on high, asking, “What makes you think that ontologies are the sorts of things that can be true or false? Why could it not be the case that ontologies are better thought of as more or less useful?” I could tell right away that this mystical plot device was saying something that I needed to take seriously. There I was, still worried about whether whatever ontology I endorsed might turn out to be false, when even this worry presupposed a particular way of thinking about and interacting with the world. As long as I was worried that my internal conception of the external world might be false, I would *still* be presupposing the Epistemic Gap ontology! Perhaps, what mattered most was not whether God and Her angels *actually* exist, or whether this or that ontology was true, or whether a given object might have some kind of mysterious inner essence, but rather, what effects someone’s doxastic attitudes with respect to claims about such things might have upon their actions.²⁸ This, at least, seemed to be what the Pragmatists thought, and I began to find it useful to think the same way as well. For if I were to adopt a more Pragmatic approach, even

²⁸ This passage is inspired by William James’ *The Varieties of Religious Experience* as well as his *Pragmatism*.

just tentatively, to see how it goes, I would at least have a set of constraints that could help to guide my next steps.

From this perspective, I could see how someone might in fact be warranted in believing that the Epistemic Gap ontology was “true”. For if acting on this belief resulted in the successful performance of that person’s intended interaction with their environment, a result which is also contingent upon the state of that environment, then that belief would be warranted for that person, at that time, and in that context. At the same time, and for the reasons outlined above, I myself could no longer honestly believe the tenets of the Epistemic Gap ontology. Therefore, it would not even be meaningful to ask whether I was warranted in endorsing this ontology. For that is a question that could only be answered empirically, and by those who were capable of acting on their genuine belief that the Epistemic Gap ontology was true. In this way, I saw that if I were to be a tentative Pragmatist, I would also need to be a tentative Pluralist. For I had just shown that the question of whether one is warranted in endorsing the Epistemic Gap ontology may admit of different answers for different people and in different contexts. Though to be clear, my being a pluralist about warrant in this way would not entail that I therefore think that everyone’s beliefs are “true”.

As far as I can tell, all this only follows for those of us who are pluralistic pragmatists. By contrast, for those starting from within the conceptual framework of the Epistemic Gap ontology, there remains the task of devising a positive argument for this ontology which would be acceptable in terms of both its content

and its methodology to the proponents of every one of the possibly infinitely many rival ontologies. Moreover, that argument would still need to be neither vacuous nor a necessarily true argument for some universally acceptable ontology. Otherwise, it would still fail to demonstrate why one should endorse the Epistemic Gap ontology.

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