

THE DETHRONING OF IDEOCRACY:
ROBERT MUSIL AS A PHILOSOPHER*

Robert Musil was not a professional philosopher. He was a novelist—and according to the widely accepted canon, his contribution to the twentieth-century novel is only matched by very few.

Why then should there be a special issue on him in *The Monist*? The reason is that Musil was a philosopher—just a different kind of philosopher. He was trained in philosophy (he wrote his Ph.D. on Ernst Mach) and gave up a promising career in academia, turning down a job offer in Meinong's department because he thought it better to express his philosophical ideas by means of writing novels.

While Musil is often considered to be the 'philosophical novelist' *par excellence*, his attitude towards the 'philosophical novel', that is, a novel expressing philosophical views, is somewhat ambiguous. On the one hand, he did believe that philosophy, science, and literature all do the same thing, just by different means (Notebook 5, 1911, October 14 [Musil 1976]). And his explicit reason for giving up academic philosophy was that philosophizing by means of writing novels was more efficient. At the same time, he warned against the obvious pitfalls of philosophical novels. As he said, "usually it is not a pleasant experience when writers philosophize and formulate their thoughts directly" (Musil 1999, 409). This is very similar to Proust's famous dictum in *Time Regained*, according to which "A work of art that contains theories is like an object on which the price tag has been left." Is this a contradiction then? Was Musil for or against the philosophical novels he later became so closely associated with? I don't think there is a contradiction here. Musil was committed to philosophizing by writing novels, but he didn't do it directly. He did so, to use a distinction from Philip Kitcher's framework of talking about the philosophical content of novels, by showing and not by saying (Kitcher 2013, Chapter 1 as well as Kitcher's paper here; see also Nanay [2013b]).

Musil does not give us explicit philosophical theories. He simply shows us characters in various situations. But if we manage to put together these situations in the right way, we encounter philosophical ideas as clearly as if they were explicitly explained. A quick example. The protagonist of *The Man Without Qualities* is Ulrich and one of the least likable characters in the book is Arnheim. But their general outlook is very similar in many respects. Most importantly, they are both against taking the human mind to be fully and entirely rational and they both emphasize the nonrational elements in human behavior and life. But the similarity of their views highlights the very few but nonetheless even more important differences—that the denial of rationality can lead to a pan-romantic attitude and also to a cheerfully skeptical antiromantic attitude. Musil doesn't explain this as if he were writing a carefully argued philosophy paper about the way the mind works, but by showing us two examples that have so much overlap that we immediately focus on the differences and the reasons for these differences.

In this introduction, I would like to focus on what I take to be the main focus of Musil's philosophy, his account of the way the human mind works. I will largely ignore his extremely complex and sophisticated accounts of free will, moral responsibility, emotions, aesthetics, ethics, nominalism and naturalism. Many of these ideas foreshadow some important debates in contemporary analytic and continental philosophy. To mention just a few, he gives early formulations of the idea of moral luck, the narrative conception of the self, a neoformalist account of aesthetic experience, a fairly strong version of the embodiment of the mind, a similarly strong version of philosophical naturalism, and an outright radical account of human freedom (see Wilson's paper on some of these). But what I take to be the underlying theme of most of these ideas is Musil's insistence on, or maybe we should say obsession with, thinking of the human mind in a way that does not consider the functioning of the mind to be fully and completely rational. In short, he thinks about the mind without overintellectualizing it—another important theme in contemporary philosophy of mind. As he puts it in *The Man Without Qualities*:

Past centuries may have committed a serious error in attaching too much importance to intellect and reason, conviction, concept, and character; it was as if someone were to consider the registrar's office and the archives the most important part of a Ministry because they are housed at headquarters, although

they are only subsidiary departments that receive their instructions from outside. (Musil 1930–1932/1979, Volume Two, Chapter 90, 128)

Thus the title of this introduction, taken from one of the English translations of the title of Chapter 90 of *The Man Without Qualities*: The dethroning of ideocracy. In some sense, this was Musil's ultimate aim: to dethrone ideocracy, to dethrone the conception that the mind is fully rational, and that well-formed and explicit ideas hold the power in our mind.

This endeavor turned out to be particularly difficult against the backdrop of a widespread pan-romantic sentiment (see Mulligan's paper) when Musil wrote *The Man Without Qualities*. For this pan-romanticism also rejected the primacy of the intellect and rationality, but it did so in favor of some kind of depth—soul or deeper meaning or a real grip on the world to be contrasted with the more superficial grip that intellect could provide.

It is difficult to overstate just how much Musil loathed this approach. He had a great appreciation for science (see Misselhorn's and Wilson's paper) and for precision in general—for talking about touchy-feely subject matters in a precise way. Even more importantly, Musil did not believe in any deeper meanings and the pan-romanticists' rejection of intellect made his job of doing the same very difficult. He had to criticize two views at the same time: the ideocracy idea holding that the human mind is primarily intellectual and the pan-romanticist rejection of this idea, that is, the thought that the human mind is primarily 'soul' (whatever that means), which raises us above our mere intellect.

In other words, Musil struggled to differentiate his view from this pan-romantic fashion in much the same way as Ulrich's views, on the face of it, could at first sight be confused with Arnheim's wishy-washy 'let's unite the intellect and the soul' slogans (a similarity Arnheim likes to emphasize). Both Ulrich and Arnheim are anti-intellectualists. But they are very different kinds of anti-intellectualists. And Musil is a very different kind of anti-intellectualist from the mainstream pan-romantics of his time.

Pan-romantic anti-intellectualism is a familiar trope. But how can one be anti-intellectualist and at the same time anti-romanticist? This was Musil's challenge. Throughout his life (and throughout *The Man Without Qualities*), he tried different routes of articulating and making precise such an anti-intellectualist and anti-romanticist view. I will talk about three such attempts that I take to be the most significant and philosophically the most interesting ones.

First, Musil emphasizes the importance of emotions in our mental life (see Döring’s paper). He did not consider emotions to be a contingent coloring of our otherwise cold and calculated thought processes, but took emotions to be the *sine qua non* of any thinking. As he evocatively put it, there is always an “envelope of feeling around concepts” (Musil 1999, 216; see also 401). Note that Musil’s strategy here is to question an assumption that both of his opponents share: both the pan-romanticists and the intellectualists accept some version of an intellect-emotion contrast: it is just that they tend to emphasize different sides of this contrast. Musil rejects this contrast altogether when he takes any thought to be ‘enveloped’ by emotions.

Second, he emphasized the importance of unconscious mental processes: “all the decisive processes in life are completed outside the scope of conscious intelligence” (Musil 1930–1932/1979, Volume Two, Chapter 114, 332; see also Kitcher’s paper and Varzi’s paper). Here is a famous passage that sums up this approach nicely:

I have never caught myself in the act of willing. It was always the case that I saw only the thought—for example when I’m lying on one side in bed: now you ought to turn yourself over. This thought goes marching on in a state of complete equality with a whole set of other ones: for example, your foot is starting to feel stiff, the pillow is getting hot, etc. It is still a proper act of reflection; but it is still far from breaking out into a deed. On the contrary, I confirm with a certain consternation that, despite these thoughts, I still haven’t turned over. As I admonish myself that I ought to do so and see that this does not happen, something akin to depression takes possession of me, albeit a depression that is at once scornful and resigned. And then, all of a sudden, and always in an unguarded moment, I turn over. As I do so, the first thing that I am conscious of is the movement as it is actually being performed, and frequently a memory that this started out from some part of the body or other, from the feet, for example, that moved a little, or were unconsciously shifted, from where they had been lying, and that they then drew all the rest after them. (Musil 1999, 101; see also Varzi’s paper, Nanay [2013a], and Goldie [2004, 97–98]).¹

This emphasis on unconscious mental processing—an approach that has become fashionable in the last couple of years among cognitive scientists and philosophers of mind—was also a difficult route for Musil to take, mainly because of the extreme popularity of another approach that emphasized the importance of the unconscious: Freud’s. Musil was not a Freudian—in fact, he disliked psychoanalysis very much, partly for its imprecision

(see, for example, Musil 1942/1957, 94–97). But note that the pattern here is the same as in the case of emotions: Musil questions an assumption both the intellectualists and the pan-romanticists share, namely, that we have access to what is the most important in our mind: the intellect or the soul. For Musil, the most important aspects of our mind are always hidden and will always remain hidden. They only manifest themselves in some odd behavior on our behalf.

Third, Musil's view about the human mind is difficult to understand without appealing to a distinction he had been making throughout his life, between the 'ratioid' and the 'nonratioid' domain. Here is the best (and earliest) characterization of this distinction from his 1918 essay 'Sketch of what the writer knows':

Roughly delineated, this ratioid territory embraces everything that science can systematize, everything that can be summarized in laws and rules; primarily, in other words, physical nature. [. . .] The ratioid area is characterized by a certain monotony of facts, by the predominance of repetition. [. . .]; but above all the chief characteristic of this area is that in it facts can be unambiguously described and communicated. (Musil 1918/1990, 62)

If the ratioid area of the domination is the 'rule with exceptions', the nonratioid area is that of the dominance of the exceptions over the rule. [. . .] In this region facts do not submit, laws are sieves, events do not repeat themselves but are infinitely variable and individual. (Musil 1918/1990, 63; see also Musil 1923/1990).

Musil claims that much of what is interesting about the human mind (for example, morality and aesthetics) is supposed to be part of the nonratioid domain. This immediately yields an early version of moral and aesthetic particularism, but it has even more interesting implications for the way Musil thinks about the human mind. The problem with both intellectualism and pan-romanticism is that they emphasize thought processes that are repeatable: logical arguments or soulful exaltations. So both intellectualism and pan-romanticism treat the mind as part of the ratioid domain. And, as a result, they both miss out on a very important aspect of the human mind: those experiences that are unrepeatable (see, for example, Musil 1990, 27; see also Varzi's paper). Musil thinks that it is these experiences that are worth living for, these "experiences that can never be completely repeated, that cannot be fixed but [are] individual, even anarchic" (Musil 1925/1990, 205; see also Kitcher's paper).

And it is the anarchic nature of these experiences that gives rise to Musil's perhaps even more anarchic concept of inner freedom, a notoriously underappreciated aspect of his philosophy (but see Sattler's paper):

Inner freedom consists in being able to think everything, in knowing—in every human situation—why one need not bind oneself to it, and in never knowing what one would wish to be bound by. (Musil 1930–1932/1979, Volume One, Chapter 63, 314)

Both intellectualism and pan-romanticism have difficulties allowing for such a concept of 'inner freedom': for the intellectualist, we may choose our premises and our preferences, but the conclusions about what we should do follow with the force of necessity. For the pan-romanticist, we need to do whatever our religion/romantic love/patriotic feelings demand of us. Given that they take the mind to be a through and through ratioid phenomenon, they cannot allow for the radical conception of freedom Musil is trying to do justice to. Again, as Musil would say, they are missing out on something really important about human existence.

The last aspect of Musil's anti-intellectual anti-romanticism I want to talk about is his concept of the 'other condition', which is very closely related to the discussion of the 'nonratioid domain'. The 'other condition' is a way of perceiving the world that is very different from the way we normally perceive it (see Döring's paper). This 'other condition' is what we find ourselves in when we have aesthetic experiences, but also when we have a mystical experience or if we are in what he calls the 'ardour of love' (Musil 1925/1990, 199).

After introducing the concept of the 'other condition', Musil warns against understanding the contrast between ordinary perception and the 'other condition' as a difference between intellect and the senses. This, he argues, would amount to embracing some kind of anti-intellectualist pan-romanticism, and this is certainly not something he would want to do. Instead, the contrast is between the repeatable (ratioid) and the nonrepeatable (nonratioid) domain. While our ordinary perception groups things together in categories the instantiations of which are repeatable and interchangeable, the 'other condition' takes everything as a unique individual—not as something repeatable and interchangeable. So here Musil's ratioid/nonratioid distinction meets his brand of formalism (Musil 1931/1990): when we are looking at the world in a practical manner, say, when we are

hungry, we see things as belonging to these two categories only: edible or nonedible (or, maybe, edible in case of emergency . . .). This is clearly a phenomenon in the ratioid domain. But when we have an aesthetic experience, when we are in this ‘other condition’, we see things for what they are and for what they uniquely are: not as an edible thing that could be interchangeable with other edible things, but as a unique, not interchangeable entity (see also Nanay [2014] for analysis).²

This concept of course bears various traces of Kant’s thinking—a connection Musil would probably not like. At one point in *The Man Without Qualities*, he even describes the ‘other condition’ as “a state entirely free from purpose” (Musil 1930–1932/1979, Volume Three, 238). But it is a very specific and very unusual way of cashing out the general idea of ‘disinterested pleasure’: what makes it disinterested is that we appreciate the object’s uniqueness, without trying to find a template of what to do with it or how to think about it. Note that Musil is also against taking the contrast between ordinary perception and the ‘other condition’ to correspond to a conceptual/nonconceptual distinction, as, for him, this distinction stands at every level of perceptual processing—just like the ratioid/nonratioid distinction.

So far, I have talked about the ‘other condition’ as a synonym for ‘aesthetic experience’ and this is indeed the most important aspect of the concept. But it also has important consequences for morality (see Mach’s paper). This is a relatively underexplored aspect of Musil’s thinking, but if it is true that real morality is only possible in the ‘other condition’ and that morality is part of the nonratioid domain, then something much stronger than moral particularism follows: namely, that morality presupposes that we take the other person to be noninterchangeable. So Kant’s dictum that Musil dislikes so much—about treating the other person as the end and not the means—gives way, in Musil’s system, to a structurally similar dictum: we should treat the other person as noninterchangeable.³

Even more importantly, we should treat ourselves as noninterchangeable: not as someone with such and such qualities, which qualities would then determine my choices and preferences. I shouldn’t choose a macchiato and not a cappuccino because I know that I am the kind of person who prefers macchiato (or, let alone, that I am the kind of person who knows that in Italy people after 11 A.M. don’t drink cappuccino), but because I

feel like drinking macchiato. This way of thinking about ourselves provides a very cheerful and liberated perspective, especially if we contrast it with the solemn pan-romantic and the nerdy intellectualist perspectives.

This idea of treating ourselves as noninterchangeable is at the very core of Musil's novel and of his philosophy in general: treating ourselves as noninterchangeable means not treating ourselves as determined by the qualities we happen to possess. It means exercising our sense of possibility when it comes to ourselves.

It means treating ourselves as persons without qualities.

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NOTES

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1. Peter Goldie was writing a paper for this special issue on exactly this aspect of Musil's philosophy. The paper was not finished because of Goldie's tragically sudden death.

2. This account of aesthetic experience is somewhat similar to the one offered by the Russian formalists (for Musil's version of formalism, see Musil [1931/1990]). But rather than describing aesthetic experience on the analogy of our experience of unfamiliar objects, like the Russian formalists did, Musil takes a more nuanced approach. We can, after all, experience unfamiliar objects in a variety of ways: if we have some strong practical inclination, we will experience this object as one that can or cannot be used for these practical purposes. But this has little to do with aesthetic experience. Nonetheless, it could be argued that the Russian formalists and Musil were really after describing and understanding the same experience: When Shklovsky says that "Habitualization devours work, clothes, furniture, one's wife, and the fear of war. [. . .] And Art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*" (Shklovsky 1917/1965, 11; see also Thompson 1988, 10–11 for analysis), it is easy to see how habitualization is a part of the ratioid domain and dehabitualization, therefore, must be a nonratioid phenomenon.

3. Note that for Musil this does not imply some kind of essentialism, according to which it is really the other person's essence that we need to react to and not to the specific (interchangeable) qualities that she possesses. Musil thought of essentialism of this kind as a version of pan-romanticism.

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