Introduction

> Insight into the multiple ambiguity of philosophizing acts as a deterrent … and ultimately betrays the entire fruitlessness of such activity. It would be a misunderstanding if we wished in the slightest to weaken this impression of the hopelessness of philosophizing, or to mediate it belatedly by indicating that in the end things are not so bad after all, that philosophy has achieved many things in the history of mankind, and so on. This is merely idle talk that talks in a direction leading away from philosophy. We must rather uphold and hold out in this terror.
>
> (Martin Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*)[1]

I open my eyes and see a star. Open eyes absorb colours and thrust them out again; open eyes allow starlight moving at 299,792,458 metres per second to stream inside; open eyes open wide as the ice pick slides between them; open eyes can be cured by aconite's glistening similitude. As the distant star shifts through the sky at 0.0000727 rad/s I turn and offer words to my companion: I speak about the star in time using language. The star is external to me, heavenly, a divinity, a G2 star with a lifetime of 10 billion years.

Theories structure our world. Theories are our world. Theory is not just something practiced in the academy by a collection of 'specialists'. We see our theories everywhere. We *are* our theories.

Some people study theory by taking a written sample and examining it extremely carefully. Perhaps the text contains internal contradictions or self-reflexive paradoxes that disintegrate it into nonsense or silence. Perhaps the text is structured by sets of oppositions - such as male-female, high-low, or speech-writing - and the

relationship between these oppositions can be reversed. Perhaps the text can be reduced to the cultural patterns that prevailed when it was written.

A problem with detailed readings is that it is easy to think that the difficulties raised by them are local to the text that is being examined. Perhaps some minutiae of the text could be easily changed, and we could continue to interpret the world within its framework. Another problem with detailed readings is that they often ignore the everyday theories that we use to interpret the world around us. They remained trapped within a 'criticism' that has little impact on our general worldview.

Theory can also be studied by building a *model*, which extracts common features from theories within a particular domain. Many theories have many features in common: they share a picture of the world and disagree over minor details. This picture acts as a framework for the disputes between theories. Without this picture, different theories would have nothing to talk about: they would not be arguing about the same thing.[2]

Scientists and philosophers create pictures of the world that are also absorbed by non-specialists. Although they might not master all of the mathematical details, the non-specialists do gain a rough understanding of the view of the world that is set forth. The (wo)man in the street today discourses on the big bang and DNA; (s)he sees the world in terms of these theories, even though (s)he does not fully understand how they work.

An abstract model of a theoretical domain enables us to understand it in a way that is free from many of its obfuscating details. One can see the metaphysics behind it

and examine the self-reflexive problems that it presents. If a picture of the world is unable to account for the fact that it is spoken about in language, then this cannot be solved by looking at some of the details and perhaps changing an equation or two. This kind of question can be better addressed by creating a model of the theoretical domain and analyzing how it functions at a more general level.

A second reason for abstracting out a model is that most of the time we only deal with small parts of single theories and vagueness fills in the places where it is all supposed to cohere together. We perch upon the mountain tops of particular theories and never venture down into the valleys where they unify into a single range of thought.

On the surface my wife is a beautiful creature with smooth skin, full breasts, brown eyes and curly dark hair caressed between curving hips. But when I slit her open and slip inside, I discover a beating heart, bloody liver, squishy lungs and shit-stuffed guts. These gruesome organs are essential to her functioning, but softly tucked away beneath her supple skin.

The theories that I am dealing with in this book present themselves with flawless complexions when we touch upon them in our day-to-day doings. But they are as frightful as my wife inside. If the brain hypothesis is correct, our phenomenal experiences *have to be* patterns in firing neurons and there *cannot* be any stretching out of our minds into the world. This is perfectly coherent, and yet it is also an extremely counter-intuitive claim when its full consequences are worked out. The process of condensation and abstraction into a model can highlight how utterly absurd some

theories are; how they are all-embracing monstrous metaphysical visions.

It could be argued that the monstrosity of the theories in this book comes from my treatment of them, and not because they are inherently implausible. You will have to make up your own mind about this as you read the detailed expositions in the later chapters. One claim of this book is that our current theories of perception, time, madness and knowledge become outright incredible when they are taken *seriously*.

The theory theory in this book operates in three interlinked stages:

1) A generalized model is abstracted from a theoretical domain.

2) The self-reflexive limitations and breakdowns of this model are described.

3) This abstraction and analysis make the metaphysics and monstrosity of the model more apparent.

This methodology is applied to philosophical and scientific theories of perception, time, madness and knowledge that are deeply embedded in our everyday way of interpreting phenomena.

The first chapter is an overview of the self-reflexive relationship between theorizers and their theories. When I create a theory about the world I am also creating a theory about myself because I am part of the world that I am describing. A self-reflexive circle is set up in which the description is part of what is being described. Within this self-reflexive circle a theory can support its status as a representation of the world, but it can also undermine the possibility of theory altogether when a theoretician writes a theory

which, explicitly or implicitly, makes theory impossible. This analysis of stable and collapsing theories provides the background for the chapters that follow.

The second chapter examines perception. Neuroscience hypothesizes that the brain is a physical object whose main operational components are billions of interconnected neurons and the firing of these neurons or groups of neurons generates (or actually *is*) our experience of the world. However, when we perceive colours, scents and sounds it seems as if the brain is reaching through the senses and placing the end products of its processing into the real physical environment. Neuroscience can only explain this semi-miraculous observation by claiming that our bodies and environment are *both* represented within a single virtual reality model that is entirely contained within the brain. Although this interpretation of neuroscience is unavoidable, it suffers from the fatal problem that it is based on evidence taken from our experiences with real brains, and yet claims that we have never seen or touched a real brain.

The third chapter examines objective theories of time. This covers both our ordinary notion of time as some kind of flow or thing and the spacetime of relativity theory. Both of these are essentially cinematic and this chapter develops a model that pictures time as a projector of a sequence of static nows. Everything within the world is placed inside the static now and all changes are reduced to the replacement of the current now by a now in which everything is slightly different. This has the result that objects no longer move *within* time, but are moved *by* time through a succession of states. The problem with this model is that it eliminates the people who are describing it. If time is objective, people become helpless puppets in the hands of time: objects *into*

which language is projected by time, and not subjects who use language to describe time. Furthermore, although a vague notion of objective time is something that we all believe in, it becomes an absurd metaphysical fantasy when it is concretely developed as a cinematic model.

The next chapter draws on the antipsychiatric literature to model madness as a quantitative difference in the qualities manifested by people. All people share the same set of qualities, but some exaggerate the schizophrenic style of being, whilst others exaggerate different collections of qualities. This interpretation of madness is developed through labelling theory and by highlighting the schizophrenic dimension of childhood, art and knowledge. The outcome of this merging of madness and reason is a homogenous zone that incorporates the mad and the sane within a single space. This is a compelling interpretation of madness, but it suffers from self-reflexive difficulties connected with an excesses of madness, an excess of sanity and the proliferation of 'mad' theories in the homogenous zone.

The final chapter is a study of knowledge and scepticism. It is an empirical fact that the thoughts, languages, ontologies and forms of life of people are synchronically and diachronically different. Positive scepticism is a theory that accounts for this fact by modelling the world as a labyrinth of overlapping aspects structured by different thoughts, languages, ontologies and forms of life. Although this theory describes itself as an aspect, this does not invalidate it (the relativist's problem) since there is not necessarily anything more real behind aspects that could invalidate them. However, positive scepticism is self-reflexively challenged because it does not place the aspect of

positive scepticism above others. This forces the positive sceptic to endorse aspects that directly challenge it, and positive scepticism is led by its own arguments into an unstable sustaining/ negating relationship with the labyrinth of theories around it.

Taken together, the theories in this book integrate into a single picture of reality that can almost be believed in, even though it cannot be coherently described, justified or even thought about. Within this picture, the models of perception and time in chapters 2 and 3 form the invisible metaphysics and chapters 4 and 5 analyze the thought that currently thinks this metaphysics. Although this vision is to some extent a caricature and simplification of our everyday theories, my claim is that it corresponds to them in their essential aspects – it is a caricature with all their metaphysics and self-reflexive contradictions intact. We are so immersed in this picture that we cannot escape from it and even if we could break free, it is far from clear where we would go. Any alternative would inevitably suffer from similar self-reflexive difficulties and absurd premises as the theories that we are currently inhabiting.

One can think of this methodology as dialectics. Not negative dialectics or an ascent towards Absolute Spirit, but an attempt to sense the self-reflexive *movement* of the theories that we are thrown into and find around us. As we think about these theories they collapse, shift into a different space, and then we find ourselves returning to embrace them again.

It is worth noting that few (if any) of the theories in this book are my own. What is important is the way in which they break down at their self-reflexive limits. In many

ways what I am engaged in here is similar to deconstruction – but this is a deconstruction of philosophical and scientific worldviews, not Continental texts.

Mortals cast away from God, we are damned to a land of shifting theory in which self-reflexivity is our only possible support. However, this is almost impossible to talk about as it ceaselessly reawakens the limit points where speech disintegrates into nonsense or silence. Contrary to Lawson,[3] I do not believe that we can freeze the quick sands with yet another semi-stable theory. This book attempts to move through the unstable moments and perhaps chart a little of them as they evanescently shimmer and glimmer in the moonlight. When philosophy is pushed hard enough it dissolves through its own logic and any attempt to describe this dissolution dissolves as well. This total liquidation is the circling limits of philosophy.

> Philosophy sets limits to the much disputed sphere of natural science.
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> It must set limits to what can be thought; and, in doing so, to what cannot be thought.
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> It must set limits to what cannot be thought by working outwards through what can be thought.
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> It will signify what cannot be said, by presenting clearly what can be said.
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> (Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*)[4]

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1 Martin Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, translated by William McNeill and Nicholas Walker (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995), p. 21.

2 This notion of a picture or model that is embedded in a number of different theories can be found in Wittgenstein's analysis of the Augustinian theory of language, which is described by him as a pervasive worldview that underlies a number of accounts of meaning that are superficially quite different. According to Baker and Hacker's commentary on Wittgenstein, "Augustine's picture of language might

be represented not as an explicit theory, but rather as a proto-theory that shapes the development of many philosophical theories of meaning. It is like an invisible force, evident only in its visible effects; like a prevailing wind that affects the growth of a tree, it might show itself only in the asymmetric shape that it gives to explicit theorising." (G. P. Baker and P. M. S. Hacker, *An Analytic Commentary on Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations*, Volume 1, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988, p. 46.)

3 See Hilary Lawson, *Closure* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), pp. xxix-xxx.

4 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, translated by D.F. Pears & B. F. McGuinness (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961), § 4.113 - § 4.115.