REVIEWS

Robert Nozick, *Invariances: The Structure of the Objective World*, Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 2001, x + 416, price £23.95.

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The dust cover of Robert Nozick's new book claims that philosophy will never look the same. I doubt that claim, although it is true that the book, which is undoubtedly a major work, follows lines that are definitely novel. It is rich in the number of issues on which it attempts to cast light, and on most of them the views presented are heterodox. This is in spite of the fact that the five chapters into which the long book is divided are confined, ostensibly, to the subjects of truth and relativity, invariance and objectivity, necessity and contingency, the realm of consciousness and the genealogy of ethics. Indeed, if the structure of the book is set out in that way, one might perhaps wonder what that structure amounts to. The title of the book suggests that what is central to it all is the notion of invariance, and in a way that is true since it is invariance, or, to be more precise, invariance under specified transformations, which is seen as the key to such notions of objectivity as hold good in thought about the world in general, about mind, and about ethics and social behaviour. In a way, however, it is the notion of function that dominates the discussion, in that Nozick constantly construes or reconstrues the questions to be asked in the various domains with which he is concerned in terms of what is the function of things in those domains. So, what is the function of truth, of consciousness, of ethics and so on? Combined with this is the fact that Nozick is convinced, not only of the truth of Darwinianism, but of its wide-spread relevance, even to the extent of espousing evolutionary cosmology. As far as human beings are concerned evolution is supplemented merely by Pavlovian and operant conditioning. There are shades of Quine here, perhaps, but one would

have thought that by now, despite the similar principles presupposed in connectionism, which Nozick also takes as read, a more complex role would have been given to learning and a more complex understanding of experience would have been recognized.

Another point which presents a difficulty for even a charitable reader is that Nozick begins with a section on philosophical method in which he eschews attempts at demonstration, claiming that more or less anything, even the principle of contradiction, can be open to question. So, he says, 'My own philosophical bent is to open possibilities for consideration'; his concern is with exploration, not demonstration. Should any line of exploration be followed up, however? There are places in the book where one might be inclined to think that the answer to that question is 'Yes', especially when he becomes involved in the wilder aspects of cosmological theory. Indeed, there are occasions in the discussion where Nozick admits that he does not really understand what he is suggesting. But his official line is that what really matters is what is plausible and/or interesting, even if he never says how we are to decide what that is. The book undoubtedly contains, however, a great deal of argument and what is a valid argument is not simply a matter of what is plausible and interesting. There is for example in Chapter 3 an attack on the idea of metaphysical necessity which culminates in the claim that there are no interesting examples of such. Most supposed metaphysical necessities, he says (p. 133) are 'gone' because of discoveries in physical theory, and what is left is 'nothing to build a science around and nothing to build (any important part of) a philosophy around' (p. 134). By contrast, quantum theory is viewed as something of a datum, and because of it one has to accept that 'truth does not necessarily stay fixed' (p. 38).

That is one major theme of chapter 1, although the general course of the discussion is far from clear. At one point it is conducted in terms of the idea of something holding determinately rather than being true, the former being, in his view, a more interesting concept, even if this too in the end runs foul of quantum mechanics. The main discussion, however, revolves round the idea of the relativity of truth, which Nozick treats very seriously. Half way through the chapter we are introduced to the idea of a 'truth property', which amounts to the idea that acting on truths is, in general, more likely to lead to success. If we leave aside the questionable status of that claim, we are left with the idea that truth is what is serviceable for the person or group.

Nozick recognizes the similarity of that idea to William James' pragmatism, but there are ways in which he is certainly not a pragmatist. Indeed he allows more to the idea of correspondence with fact than one would have supposed was likely given the extent to which he is favourable to the relational character of truth. It is that if one asks what is the function of truth, then the answer, he supposes, is the one mentioned, its leading to success in action; and that is a relational matter. The question remains, however, why one should be concerned with the function of truth, and if one is, why it is that success in action should particularly come to mind in that connection. An evolutionist might well want to know why belief has been selected for in humans, or why respect for truth has similarly been selected for, but there is surely something odd about the idea that truth itself has been selected for.

The remaining chapters in Part 1 of the book are concerned, apart from the attack on the idea of necessity already mentioned, with setting out the claim of invariance under specified conditions to be the criterion of objectivity. What those conditions are, he thinks, is an empirical matter, and ultimately what physics (including cosmological theory) tells us. Nozick's knowledge of matters here is formidable, but the discussion is not for the philosophically timid. Part 2 of the book purports to be about the human world as part of the objective world, but is limited in fact to the mental and the social. Once again Nozick asks what is the function of consciousness, answering that it is to enable 'action to be more accurately, precisely, subtly and flexibly orientated to the world' (p. 180). So it is simply a refinement on registering aspects of the world, in the way that is commonly presupposed in computational theories of the mind. What then is phenomenology? It is a way to bring dense information to consciousness. That, however, is an idea which I, for one, find very difficult to understand. If there are aspects of consciousness which do have the function which Nozick mentions, it is far from clear that that is all there is to it. He does mention at the end of the chapter the fact that consciousness has aesthetic roles, but he makes little of that, and there is an interesting footnote (n. 84) in which he reveals a failure to understand a point made by Nelson Goodman about the possibility that two paintings might be perceptually indistinguishable but have different aesthetic value.

I have little space for the final chapter which is officially concerned with the *genealogy* of ethics, and hence why it exists, what is its

function. This is basically, he says, the coordination of action to bring about mutual benefit, even if it extends to higher levels. There is in his discussion considerable weight put on the ideas of games theory and the market, and this involves very considerable suppositions about human nature and motivation. I must confess that I found it immensely irritating. If there is in the rest of his treatment of the human world a depreciation of what is distinctively human, here this becomes crucial. There may be different opinions on that, and it has to be admitted that his ethical framework does make it possible to give an account of objectivity in ethics in some ways parallel to his account of objectivity in the purely factual domain. Here we have invariance 'under transformations that substitute one person for another' (i.e. something like universalizability), provided that what is so specified leads to the achievement of mutual benefit (for that is what is said to be the function of ethics). Is that enough, however?

Nozick's book shows immense erudition (in knowledge of science in particular) and one can be overwhelmed by this. The discussion is similarly both dense and ambitious, and footnotes, some of them long, take up about a quarter of the book. There is much more that I could have mentioned. Whether the philosophical outcomes are commensurate is more debatable.

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Paul Feyerabend, *Conquest of Abundance*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1999, pp. xviii + 285, price \$15/£9.50 (pb).

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It is said that 'Variety is the spice of life' – and if Feyerabend were to have his way this motto would be readily adopted by philosophers when approaching questions of reality. We live in a rich and varied world, which is, ". . . abundant beyond our wildest imagination" (p. 3). Yet this goes generally unnoticed, due to our concern to sift

'reality' from 'appearance' and 'essence' from 'accident'. Once we begin to employ such simple dichotomies as these, instead of recognising and tolerantly respecting various genuine alternatives among those possible for living, thinking about and engaging with things, we misrepresent the nature of the world and our relation to it. In the hope of developing a single, uniform account of things, we disregard all that will not fit with it or reduce to it. Although this is often billed as progress towards the 'real', it is in fact nothing but a bias in favour of one way of seeing things over others. It constitutes a self-imposed blindness, which is not only naïve but dangerous and oppressive. These are the central messages of Feyerabend's final book, which is a weaving together of two of his unfinished manuscripts that expand on themes and case studies explored in a number of his earlier articles, several of which are republished in the volume.

The book is characteristically and rightly critical of the naïve realist and reductive approaches that dominate much current philosophy. At the same time, Feyerabend is careful to resist the charge of relativism, as traditionally understood. Put crudely, he hopes to avoid these two positions by adopting a more liberal understanding of the nature of 'concepts' and 'conceptual change'. His view illuminates the complexities in our relation to 'reality' (My scare quotes here are in deference to the fact that he does not only speak of concepts and also because he self-consciously remarks, "... that in speaking of 'stages', 'projections', 'aspects' I made things far more definite than they are" (p. 124)). He holds that our concepts are richer and have more play in them than sometimes supposed. The capacity for concepts to develop rests on the existence of unnoticed or, as yet, unemphasised aspects of reality. These account for the possibilities in our ways of understanding that have been under-explored, unexamined and/or simply unseen. To accommodate this idea we must surrender another: that meanings are always strictly 'well defined' – that they survive only within very tight enclosures, such that any move outside of these results in a loss of sense.

Echoing Davidson's attack on the very idea of conceptual schemes, he maintains that 'Potentially every culture is all cultures'. On such a view the idea that there could be incomparable and incommensurable concepts and approaches is insupportable. Thus, he asks us to recognise not only that, "... most groups, societies, traditions not only interact, they are built for interaction" (p. 123). Most importantly, he holds that, "Speaking a language or explaining a

situation, after all, means both *following* rules and *changing* them" (p. 125, emphasis original). To see this in action, we have but to consider the common use of analogies and the role they play in the explanation and extension of concepts. This requires us to recognise the flexibility of meaning. As he says, "Absorbing the perception and moods of a new era, [concepts] first become ambiguous and then dip over into new meanings" (p. 126).

He chooses Achilles' rejection of the Homeric conception of honour in order to illustrate the point. The situation is that Achilles has withdrawn from the war against the Trojans because he is dissatisfied with the part played by Agamemnon in the battle. Messengers have been sent offering appropriate recompense to restore honour and repair the situation. Yet, Achilles rejects it and in his anger formulates the idea that honour and its trappings are necessarily separate; a thought apparently unthinkable to his contemporaries. Feyerabend, however, does not accept that Achilles has simply begun to spout nonsense. For, guided by analogies relating to their current understanding, Achilles' audience could be drawn into his way of seeing things and might begin to develop a new understanding of honour and virtue in general. Indeed, over time, just such a new idea took root but it was not initially as well defined as its predecessor. As Feyerabend puts it, ". . . it was more a foreboding than a concept – but the foreboding engendered new linguistic habits and, eventually, a new linguistic stage with (relatively) clear new concepts (. . . frozen concepts . . . are the endpoints of this line of development)" (p. 124).

What is important to stress is that such ambiguities and possibilities for change are always present in our language and practices, since they draw on the abundance that ultimate reality, or Being, avails us. This way of regarding matters enables us to make sense of Achilles' new observations about honour, such that in exploring them we do not find that he has fallen into talking nonsense. To hold that he must have is an artefact of focusing too much on 'stable' periods of discourse as opposed to 'periods of change' (see pp. 38–39). Moreover, he notes that many things can motivate such change, none of which are simply the result of purely intellectual developments. As we have seen anger can play its part, but he highlights other motive factors, such as forgetfulness and boredom. Crucially, he denounces, as myth, the idea that such shifts are ever brought about by such *purely* 'rational' means such as by providing 'proofs', or by appeal to a unified scientific method.

Proofs are meant to provide 'arguments independent of the prejudices or the goodwill of the audience' (p. 51). But nothing that could affect conceptual change could have such independence, since the acceptance of a conclusion depends on our evaluation of the facts. And such evaluation, in turn, depends on what we find important. He illustrates this by considering Parmenides' argument for a monistic account of Being and its later rejection, by Democritus and Aristotle. In both instances, the success of the proof and refutation were built into the reception of the premises that supposedly enable us 'to reach' them. For example, he contrasts the attitudes of their proponents on the 'reality' of change. In both cases, whether this was taken as a fact or not proved decisive. In devising his proof, Parmenides was aware of the common view that things change, yet he denied it, whereas Aristotle bases his counter-argument on accepting it. Feyerabend concludes that, "Arguments about reality have an 'existential' component: *we regard those things as real which play an important role in the kind of life we prefer*" (p. 71). The success of proofs and refutations rests on highlighting *this* aspect over *that*, in a way acceptable to one's audience. Hence, this involves making practical decisions – it is never the result of purely 'objective, rational' processes. Consequently, what constitutes a proper counterexample, he convincingly claims, depends on our normative assessment of what we are willing to accept as such. At best, logical reconstructions of our reasoning provide a means of articulating or making explicit the consequences of our views – they do not have the power to arbitrate between them. *Contra* their advertised properties, logical arguments cannot decide things for us on their own; like any other mode of persuasion, ultimately, their acceptance or rejection of their conclusions depends on their reception.

He offers another reason to be cautious of proofs. For not only are we inclined to misrepresent their power, they promote the kind of 'simplification' to which he is opposed. For, in order to work at all, they require 'stable and unambiguous concepts' (p. 57). But achieving this lack of ambiguity is costly – it requires that the concepts in question have the stillness of death. He puts it beautifully, remarking that, "Clarity is . . . a property of corpses" (p. 78). Our concepts are ". . . well defined only when the culture fossilises" (p. 79). With this in mind, he maintains that, "The best way of describing a proof is to say that it is a story that has special properties" (p. 55). This is especially true when it comes to providing rational reconstructions of

conceptual developments. As he writes, "In all these cases we have a change or a tendency for change . . . followed by a theoretical analysis of the products of the change" (p. 73). Consequently, he proposes that we reverse our standard conception of the genesis of argument, for, ". . . it was not the argument that produced the conclusion . . . but the conclusion . . . [that] produced the argument" (p. 75).

Similarly, he holds that there is no reliable, 'special' method that guarantees objectivity through experimentation. He appeals to an example from the arts, by considering the circumstances surrounding the 'discovery' of perspective by Brunelleschi. Careful attention to the context of this event reveals that it is accompanied by, and partly inspired, a new vision of the purpose of 'art'. Moreover, it depends on placing the viewer in highly contrived and constrained circumstances designed to produce the desired result. By attending to this fact we can derive a general moral that applies equally well in the sciences. It is that experiments, wherever they are found, require 'stage-setting'. In every case, "The elements of the stage are physical bodies, institutions, customs, powerful beliefs, economic relations, physical processes such as light and sound, physiological processes such as colour vision, the mechanisms creating the perception of sound and musical harmony and many other events" (p. 113). Thus, with respect to both the arts and the sciences, their results are best seen as products – which depend on our preparations and are, in an important sense, *sculpted by us*. They are constructions, or what might be called 'manifest realities'. Yet, he is careful to note that not all experiments are successful, for Being can be more or less yielding. Since not every form of life or way of engaging the world is equally viable it is not the case that anything goes.

Seen in the right light this leads to rejection of the idea that there could be one approach or method that will bring us to a single, uniform and true view of the nature of reality. This is real danger, for if we misrepresent the nature of experimentation we will become deluded into modelling ultimate reality on conceptions that are of our own making. Yet again, the conclusion is that we are not in a position to adjudicate, by appeal to some decisive authority, between what is emphasised by one way of thinking as opposed to another. It comes in the form of a challenge: "Why should one type of aspect be regarded as 'real' while another receives no such dignity" (p. 120).

Given this, we must abandon the thought that we can cleanly distinguish ". . . the traditions (stages, means of projection) which

relativists regard as equally truthful messengers of reality and which realists devalue to enthrone their favourite stereotypes . . ." (pp. 122–123). His main point is that, "If this assumption fails, then both (naïve) realism and relativism cease to be acceptable" (p. 123). Against the naïve realist he holds that as our concepts develop, ". . . we have not only new views, we have also a new world . . . which means that a diagnosis of epistemic progress (which assumes that our ideas have moved closer to a stable reality) loses its point" (p. 127). Relativism too flounders, given that one 'stage' or 'form of life' blurs into another, in the right conditions. Hence, the idea that we can distinguish clearly defined and isolated conceptual pockets that conflict with one another also loses its point. Or to put this differently, such positions only make sense 'approximately', not absolutely. At best, they are ways of characterising historical or potential stages of conceptual development. In the place of naïve realism and traditional relativism, he holds that ontological pluralism, that regards every viable 'manifest' reality as equally real, or the idea that Being, or ultimate reality, is unknowable, to be healthier options.

This book is compelling reading, not only because it prompts reflection on vexed and under-examined questions concerning conceptual change, it also raises important questions about what philosophy can and cannot achieve. Moreover, it drives one to reflect on the ethical consequences that attend our activities in this regard. Certainly the variety of philosophy, if not Being itself, has been impoverished by the loss of any further work from Paul Feyerabend.

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Robert Brandom; *Articulating Reason: An Introduction To Inferentialism*; Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard University Press, 2000; pp. 230; $36.95.

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Making It Explicit[1] by Robert Brandom is one of the most intensely discussed philosophical books of the past 5 years. The intriguing character of this book is based on the minute precision with which Brandom works out a large-scale explanatory programme in a rigorously systematic way. Brandom aspires to nothing less than a comprehensive account of propositional contentfullness that reveals the essential features of thinking creatures.

Making It Explicit is also a long and difficult book. One may easily get lost in its vast and intricate argumentative structure. In this respect, the publication of *Articulating Reason*, Brandom's prolegomenon to his major work, is very welcome. In the opening chapter of *Articulating Reason*, Brandom provides a sketch of the basic ideas informing his theory of propositional content by presenting his position as an inferentialist, rationalist, pragmatism. Here is a short summary:

Thinking creatures are distinguished from other things by being participants in *discursive*, and therefore *linguistic*, practices (Brandom's *rationalist* thesis). Therefore, discursive practices – what Sellars has called 'the game of giving and asking for reasons' – provide the context in which semantic and intentionality-related concepts have to be understood: States, utterances and expressions possess propositional content in virtue of playing specific roles in a set of *practices*, namely in the game of giving and asking for reasons (Brandom's *pragmatist* thesis). The content-conferring practical roles are articulated by the inferential relations among the objects playing these roles. So propositional contents are constituted by inferential roles (Brandom's *inferentialist* thesis).

In the remaining chapters Brandom elaborates and clarifies his approach toward propositional content, by using it as a framework for discussions of various philosophical issues, such as practical reasoning, reliabilism, the necessity of singular terms, the representational dimension of language, and the objectivity of propositional content.

1. R. Brandom, *Making It Explicit*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1994.

As Brandom's account of objectivity is in need of clarification I shall focus on it in the rest of this paper. In order to identify the problem to which this account is responding, one must take a closer look at Brandom's theory of propositional content.

This theory is shaped by two strategic commitments. On the one hand, it is supposed to explain the content that is expressed by a declarative sentence in terms of the sentence's assertive use, where this use is characterized in a thoroughly normative vocabulary. On the other hand, Brandom – basically being faithful to the naturalistic tradition in Analytic Philosophy – aspires to give a reductive, that is, non-circular, account of semantic and intentionality-related key terms like 'truth', 'refer,' 'belief', 'assert' and so forth.[2] In *Articulating Reason* Brandom presents the strategy resulting from these commitments under the label 'assertibility theory' as follows: 'The idea behind assertibility accounts of the propositional content expressed by declarative sentences is to start with a notion of linguistic propriety that could be understood in terms of allowable moves in a game.'[3] So for Brandom, Sellars' phrase 'game of giving and asking for reasons' is not merely a metaphor but an expression of an explanatory programme: A particular game should be specified whose structure is sufficient to qualify it as a discursive practice. Brandom chooses game-related normativity as his starting point because it seems, in comparison to other kinds of normativity, rather unproblematic from a naturalistic point of view. What is a correct move in a game depends essentially on the normative attitudes of the players, especially on their disposition to approve/disapprove of certain performances under certain circumstances. That is why there cannot be a rule in a game prohibiting a particular move, under specific conditions the fulfillment or non-fulfillment of which, no player is able to recognize. This makes game-related normativity hospitable to a naturalistic perspective. For normative attitudes can be characterized, at least in elementary cases such as approval or

2. For Brandom it is one of the crucial merits of an assertibility account that it provides an "unmysterious framework" and starts with "clear explanatory raw material". However nothing is unclear or mysterious in itself but only with respect to a certain standpoint. The only perspective, that Brandom mentions, with respect to which the framework of an assertibility account seems especially clear and unproblematic, is the perspective of naturalistic semantics (see *Articulating Reason*, pp. 185–186).
3. *Articulating Reason*, p. 186.

disapproval, in behavioristic terms, for instance as positive or negative reinforcement.

However, one of the major difficulties for Brandom's explanatory project arises precisely because it starts with the attitude-dependent normativity exhibited by games. To see this, one must be aware that there are two senses in which an assertion can be correct or appropriate. On the one hand, an assertion counts as acceptable if the sentence used to make it is assertible for the speaker, that is, if the speaker was entitled to make it, paradigmatically in virtue of having reasons for it. A competent speaker is able to determine in a given case whether a person possesses an entitlement to make a certain assertion or not. Therefore it seems rather straightforward to understand assertibility as propriety in a particular game. On the other hand, an assertion can be correct in the sense of being true. This is an objective, attitude-transcendent, sense of correctness since a competent speaker does not generally have the capacity to find out whether an assertion presented to him is true or false. So Brandom is faced with the following challenge: He must show how one can do justice to the objective character of truth within an assertibility-account.

The solution of this *objectivity-problem* proposed in chapter 6 can be summarized thus: The game of giving and asking for reasons includes two basic deontic statuses: Commitment to a claim and entitlement to (undertake) such a commitment. By undertaking a commitment to a claim – paradigmatically by making an assertion – one undertakes a responsibility to demonstrate one's entitlement to that claim in case one is properly challenged to do so. These two basic statuses generate an inferential structure a central part of which are incompatibilities between claims, where two claims are incompatible with each other iff commitment to one of them precludes entitlement to the other. A claim incompatibility-entails another iff everything incompatible with the latter is incompatible with the former. Thus the claim that Wulf is a dog incompatibility-entails the claim that Wulf is a mammal, since everything incompatible with his being a mammal is incompatible with his being a dog.

Brandom tries to solve the objectivity-problem, by demonstrating how the difference in content between a sentence S on the one hand, and ⌜I claim that S⌝, ⌜That S is assertible by me now⌝ on the other, can be reconstructed in terms of incompatibility-entailments. So for instance, he offers the following proof in order to show that for S = 'The swatch is red', S and ⌜That S is assertible by me now⌝ are not

equivalent: In this case S does not incompatibility-entail ⌜That S is assertible by me now⌝ since 'I do not exist' expresses a claim that is incompatible with the claim expressed by the second sentence, however not with the claim expressed by the first sentence.

Against this demonstration C. Wright has raised the following objection:[4] Brandom's programme of reconstructing propositional content in terms of game-related normativity requires that deontic statuses, like entitlement and commitment, are initially understood as directed toward (syntactically individuated) performances. In particular Brandom cannot start out from the notion of an entitlement to a claim but only from that of assertibility, that is, of an entitlement to utter a *sentence* assertively. Therefore, Brandom must carry out his objectivity-proofs on the level of sentences, not of claims. But here one cannot make out the requisite incompatibilities. For S and ⌜That S is assertible by me now⌝ are co-assertible (i.e. assertible by a particular person under exactly the same circumstances) and from this it follows that if one of these sentences is incompatible with – i.e. precludes entitlement to an assertive utterance of – "I do not exist", so is the other.

In an endnote to *Articulating Reason,* Brandom tries meet Wright's objection as follows:[5] He distinguishes between *final* and *prima facie* entitlements, where final entitlements are differentiated from prima facie entitlements by the fact that in determining the former, incompatibilities must be taken into account. Therefore the entitlements that are precluded by a commitment to an incompatible claim are final entitlements. The concept of assertibility – which Brandom must take to be the basic sense of "entitlement" according to Wright – Brandom wants to treat as concerning prima-facie entitlements. However, Brandom's bifurcation of the notion of an entitlement seems to be quite ad hoc – motivated by nothing else than the possibility of Wright's objection. It is however in actual fact not even effective as a remedy for Brandom's account of objectivity in the face of Wright's criticisms. This can be seen by considering the following situation, where M = the claim that the swatch is red, M⋆ = the claim that no one knows anything about the colour of the swatch and M+ = the claim that "the swatch is red" is assertible by me now:

I am committed to M★. Since M★ is incompatible with M+, I am *not* finally entitled to M+. However I could possess a final entitlement to M since M★ is not incompatible with M. So let's assume that I am in fact finally entitled to M. However if I have a final entitlement to M then I also have a prima facie entitlement to M. But in the imagined situation M – or the sentence expressing M – is not assertible by me. Therefore – in contrast to what Brandom claims – the concept of a prima facie entitlement is not suitable for capturing the idea of assertibility.

However, Brandom could safeguard his account against Wright's objection by appealing to the social articulation of the game of giving and asking for reasons in terms of which the representational dimension of propositional content is explained in chapter 5. This game has a social dimension since it is essential for it that the participants not only undertake commitments but also attribute them to other participants. Attributing commitments to another participant requires that one decide which of one's (potential) performances would count as an undertaking of the same commitment as a performance of the other participant. So – due to the social articulation of the game – the same commitments and entitlements are connected to syntactically different performances for different participants. In particular the sentence ⌜That S is assertible by me now⌝ – but not the sentence S – in my mouth corresponds to the same commitment as the sentence ⌜That S is assertible by you now⌝ in your mouth. That the commitments corresponding (for me) to S and ⌜That S is assertible by me now⌝ respectively are not incompatibility-equivalent (in the sense that they incompatibility-entail each other), can therefore be shown as follows: For every participant it is the case that an entitlement to the commitment corresponding to S is precluded by a commitment corresponding to ⌜It is not the case that S⌝ . But the latter commitment does not in general preclude an entitlement to the commitment corresponding for me to ⌜That S is assertible by me now⌝. For *your* consent to ⌜It is not the case that S⌝ makes an assertive utterance of S inappropriate for *you* but *not* of ⌜That S is assertible by *you* now⌝.

In *Articulating Reason* Brandom simplifies his original account of objectivity by eliminating from it any reference to the social articulation of discursive practices.[6] However, the argument of the

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6. Brandom presents the original account in chapter 8 of *Making It Explicit*.

last two paragraphs suggests that he would have been better off sticking to the old version.

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Michael McGhee, *Transformations of Mind, Philosophy as Spiritual Practice*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2000. pp. 293, £13.95 pb., £37.50 hb.

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In the Preface to his *Frege* Michael Dummett explains why his book was not finished earlier. For in 1965 "he conceived it his duty to involve himself actively in opposition to racism". Only when he felt he had no significant contribution to make to that cause did he think himself "justified in returning to writing about more abstract matters of much less importance to anyone's happiness or future".

On one interpretation, these words admit that certain problems, which are the meat of much mainline academic philosophy, are irrelevant to the questions about human happiness that have been thought central to philosophy since Socrates asked the ur-philosophical question "*how should we live*".

That is related to a further consideration concerning the unautobiographical nature of much recent British philosophy. One comes away, for example, from Ayer's *unapologia per la sua vita* with a sense that his academic philosophy was a job not intrinsically connected with the rest of his rich and varied life. There is no sense that the emotive theory of ethics was tested by trying to live it. And that again might prompt the thought that academic philosophy is detached from the living of life.

Repeatedly, indeed, one hears it alleged that academic philosophy is locked into some arcane world detached from questions about how to live. De Botton has recently alleged this against academic philosophers

"with egg in their beards". And although McGhee "is not opposed to conceptual analysis", yet, in the spirit of the remarks I have just made, he says, too, that "the mistake is to suppose that you can go on in headlong and start analysing concepts and their logical relations, *before* you realise the form of your own subjectivity ... Inwardness and interiority are the conditions upon which philosophy depends (10)".

Those who allege shortcomings of academic philosophy in terms of its supposed irrelevance to questions about how to live often offer no coherent alternative. McGhee's superb and moving achievement is to record for us what it would be to live a conception of philosophy that places "how we should live" at its centre. That much of it is autobiographical can be no accident. If claims are made about how we are to live, then autobiography becomes intrinsic to the enterprise, both in describing the particular crises in a life that yield the question, and in testing answers by living them.

There is so much in this book to commend. First, it quite rightly demonstrates that philosophers cannot, in the age of interculture, ignore what happens in other spiritual traditions. Second, it explores religion as an experientially founded form of spirituality with rare sensitivity, exploring a path that might lie between scientific materialism and a first cause theism. Third it gives a compelling account of ethics as founded in certain root experiences, notably dissatisfaction with what we are and what we do. Fourth, and blessedly, it finds a central place for the aesthetic in human life, both as it shows itself in such capacities as imagination, and in its connections with the too often neglected notion of beauty. These explorations are conducted not merely autobiographically but also through closely reasoned and original explorations of "literary" figures, such as Arnold, and of such philosophers as Plato, Kant and Nietzsche.

I repeatedly return to certain thoughts prompted by this book.

First, McGhee writes that a philosopher should be a "spiritual writer (230)", and there is sometimes the hint that academic conceptual philosophy is alienated from those spiritual concerns. However, some at least of the explorations undertaken in the most intellectualist of analytic philosophy are not intrinsically irrelevant to religion and ethics. Thus Dummett applied his work on truth to questions about theism. We might also consider this passage from McGhee: "Perhaps there are unchanging causes of change within the world itself ... from which change emerges and into which it subsides. And maybe these conditions include unknowable forms of conscious being, an aspect of

the universe that could be radically unknowable by us, a necessary condition of the possibility of experience that could never be the object of possible experience (160)". But this is to take sides in the current debate between what are called "realists" and "anti-realists". The possibility that McGhee envisages requires us to come down on the side of the "realism" espoused by Timothy Williamson. On that account we are cognitively homelessness in a world in which there are truths that, though meaningfully stateable, might forever elude our grasp. It is true that some who take part in these debates (though not Wright and Williamson) are not always careful enough to show the bearing of their discussions on the questions of what we are how we should be. But on those questions those discussions do indeed bear.

Second, a recurrent theme in McGhee's discussions, one beautifully expressed and illuminatingly rooted in discussions of Plato's views on justice and the soul, is the exploration of the notion of the good and well-living soul as a harmonious soul. Harmony is a state of the soul to be sought and to be attainable. This state is not merely good for us but is one from which ethical goodness will flow. This prompts various questions. One is the old question whether harmony of soul and ethical goodness go together, whether, as Williams put it, there might not be internally harmonious and sleek moral predators at ease with their actions. Is this an empirical question? (For most of the moral monsters that I know about seemed not to be in a harmonious and happy inner state). Next, since some claim to have attained this state of spiritual equilibrium I am not disposed to query its possibility. But I do wonder whether it is possible for everyone. Might there be some who have so internalised the conflicts attendant on their development that the possibility of harmony of soul is irredeemably lost. (And what are the implications for morality if that is so). Then, too, we need to think through, cognisant of certain recent work in European continental philosophy, the force of Whitman's "I am large, I contain multitudes", and the possible ways in which a fragmented life might have its charms and its possibilities of goodness. Attractive though the case for harmony is, its possible alternatives may also be worth exploring.

Third I think there is a lacuna in McGhee's work. De Botton, I have said, derides academic philosophers with egg in their beards who offer no recipes for living. But there are also speculators with canape stains on their corduroys whose recipes are no more help. De Botton, for example, offers stoicism as his receipe. But consider: In Denise

Mina's Glasgow-based crime fiction we encounter Tommy, living in deprivation in a Glasgow high rise slum, impoverished educationally, cold, hungry, near penniless (even his child benefit regularly stolen), in constant danger, and yet struggling, with what one can only describe as a kind of heroism, to rear three small children for whom he cares. What, on the grounds that philosophy should bear on how we should live, would it be to counsel him, or any other deprived, battered, impoverished and struggling man or woman, to be stoical.

It must be apparent that the very possibility of thinking philosophically about how one should live presupposes a certain level of material well-being and intellectual development. McGhee is, as might be expected, given the autobiography with which his book will acquaint you, entirely sensitive to these matters. He writes that since the kinds of ethical motivations he discusses arise from certain responses and activities, ethical appeals will fail "if they are made to people who have been deprived of the possibility of personal development in the context of these activities. It is pointless to address people deprived of apprenticeship and a non-oppressive 'education', or even of stable and affectionate nurture, in the value language that derives from these (282)".

I can imagine it being said that this does not affect the central message, namely that a certain state of harmony of soul is and leads to good, nor does it undermine the claim that, for those who are able to understand, certain kinds of mental and spiritual practices may lead to that enhancing harmony. Hence claim to show how philosophy bears on the question of how we should live is made good. But then I ask what is to be done for the dispossessed, for many of whom such philosophising can mean nothing. Are we then to say that this is not a philosophical matter? Well it is a matter of how we *should* act politically as individuals and collectively. To leave all that out of philosophy seems to me indeed to impoverish and trivialise the subject. It is here I find the lacuna.

That said, I find it difficult to restrain my admiration for this work. Read it, preferably in the company of those who can share with you a sense of the seriousness and the importance of its contents.

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