Religious Studies (2026), **62**, 95–106
doi:10.1017/S0034412524000532

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Values and facts and fancies

Stephen R.L. Clark

Emeritus Professor of Philosophy, Dept of Philosophy, University of Liverpool, Liverpool, UK and Honorary Resarch Fellow, Dept of Theology and Religious Studies, University of Bristol, Bristol, UK
Email: srlclark@liverpool.ac.uk

(Received 5 May 2024; revised 26 August 2024; accepted 27 August 2024; first published online 19 November 2024)

Abstract

An examination of the apparent gap – familiar in many branches of philosophy – between 'the facts' and 'values', focusing especially on Sam Gamgee's perception of 'Earendil's Star' and the real nature of 'the planet Venus': Is it possible to trust in the awe and admiration we may feel towards 'the heavens' in the light of current astronomical theory about the wider world? How can humane values, including love of beauty, survive in an inhumanly indifferent world? Can obvious fictions have more than allegorical significance? Must we rely on fictions to survive as humane creatures, or may those seeming fictions, and our initial emotional response, provide true guidance to the way things are, and how we might be?

Keywords: story-telling; science fiction; beauty; despair; Plotinus; Tolkien

Thesis: Eärendil's star

My topic is the gap between the conception of reality held by most educated moderns and the world infused with humane meaning: on the one hand, the world is to be conceived as vast, ancient, and indifferent; on the other, we still find inspiration in its beauty, and hope to discover friends. This dichotomy is one version of a common theme. Moral philosophers of the self-consciously modern sort insist on distinguishing supposedly 'objective' facts from merely 'subjective' values. In much popular philosophy of mind, and of science, 'consciousness' is regarded, at best, as a merely emergent or epiphenomenal feature of a world that is essentially mindless, meaningless, and mechanical (if such consciousness exists at all). To see things clearly, it is supposed, we must discard any 'participatory' consciousness of the world (see Barfield 1988): we must not attribute 'conscious' motivations, or even 'life', to any (at most) but human, talkative, animals (and maybe not to them). We must not read any human or humane value into the 'mere facts'. This is especially true when considering the cosmos at large: our predecessors found it natural to think that the cosmos was full of life and intelligent thought, whereas that is now to be considered a merely freakish fancy, on the same level as a belief in fairies (see Loeb 2021). The discipline required is hard, and may prove, in the end, to be pernicious. There are at least some signs that we might well discard it.[1] At least we should acknowledge that the picture of an alien, mechanical world, stripped of all 'merely imaginative' elements, is itself a product of the human imagination, conditioned by a particular social and philosophical history. The 'scientific enlightenment' had

© The Author(s), 2024. Published by Cambridge University Press. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412524000532 Published online by Cambridge University Press

other roots than the merely sceptical: it was a conscious decision to eliminate all mention of 'final causes', 'forms', *and fairies*:

> The poets of old to make all things look more venerable than they were devised a thousand false Chimaeras; on every Field, River, Grove and Cave they bestowed a Fantasm of their own making: With these they amazed the world … And in the modern Ages these Fantastical Forms were reviv'd and possessed Christendom … All which abuses if those acute Philosophers did not promote, yet they were never able to overcome; nay, not even so much as King Oberon and his invisible Army. But from the time in which the Real Philosophy has appear'd there is scarce any whisper remaining of such horrors … The cours of things goes quietly along, in its own true channel of Natural Causes and Effects. For this we are beholden to Experiments; which though they have not yet completed the discovery of the true world, yet they have already vanquished those wild inhabitants of the false world, that us'd to astonish the minds of men (Sprat 2005 [1722], 340).

A passage from Northrop Frye, describing how one might feel if shipwrecked like Crusoe on a deserted island, is perhaps enlightening, despite an unnecessary and unhistorical division between 'Oriental' and 'Western' mind-sets:

> Looking at the world as something set over against you splits your mind in two. You have an intellect that feels curious about it and wants to study it, and you have feelings or emotions that see it as beautiful or austere or terrible. You know that both these attitudes have some reality, at least for you. If the ship you were wrecked in was a Western ship, you'd probably feel that your intellect tells you more about what's really there in the outer world, and that your emotions tell you more about what's going on inside you. If your background were Oriental, you'd be more likely to reverse this and say that the beauty or terror was what was really there, and that your instinct to count and classify and measure and pull to pieces was what was inside your mind (Frye 1964, 217; see Lewis 1943b).

What are we liable to lose in practising Sprat's discipline? Consider first an episode in Tolkien's Mordor:

> The land seemed full of creaking and cracking and sly noises, but there was no sound of voice or of foot. Far above the Ephel Dúath in the West the night-sky was still dim and pale. There, peeping among the cloud-wrack above a dark tor high up in the mountains, Sam saw a white star twinkle for a while. The beauty of it smote his heart, as he looked up out of the forsaken land, and hope returned to him. For like a shaft, clear and cold, the thought pierced him that in the end the Shadow was only a small and passing thing: there was light and high beauty for ever beyond its reach (Tolkien 1955, 266–267).

That star, the Evening Star, in Tolkien's fiction, is the chariot of Eärendil, made as 'a sign of hope to the dwellers in Middle-earth oppressed by the Great Enemy or his servants' (Tolkien 1955, 429), and shines with the light of the Silmaril rescued from that Enemy by Beren and Luthien. That jewel holds the light of the Trees that were destroyed by Ungoliant on the Enemy's suggestion. Eärendil's star, that is, is at once the youngest star, made long after the stars of Elbereth (Tolkien 1977, 44), and the oldest, as shining with a light that was before the Sun and Moon.[2]

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412524000532 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Sam knows enough of the past or imagined history of his world to recognize that that light is also present in the phial that the lady of Lothlorien gave Frodo:

> Beren now, he never thought he was going to get that Silmaril from the Iron Crown in Thangorodrim, and yet he did, and that was a worse place and a blacker danger than ours. But that's a long tale, of course, and goes on past the happiness and into grief and beyond it – and the Silmaril went on and came to Eärendil. And why, sir, I never thought of that before! We've got – you've got some of the light of it in that star-glass that the Lady gave you! Why, to think of it, we're in the same tale still! (Tolkien 1954b, 363)

That same phial was also enough to guard the hobbits from the greed of Shelob, 'last child of Ungoliant to trouble the unhappy world' (Tolkien 1954b, 376; see, 1977, 76–86).

Tolkien's fiction, of course, is exactly that: a fiction, whose development can be traced over several decades. But the richness of his invented mythology challenges even the most elaborate of ancient cosmogonies. We cannot now tell what motivated ancient mythmakers beyond the ordinary human wish to tell a decent story (a wish that Tolkien claimed was his, while also admitting his particular desire to create a language, and a world of people to speak it). 'The prime motive', he wrote, 'was the desire of a tale-teller to try his hand at a really long story that would hold the attention of readers, amuse them, delight them, and at times maybe excite them or deeply move them' (Tolkien 1954a, 4). Alternatively, or in addition, he wrote that he wanted to create a world and a history in which the phrase '*elen sila lumenn' omentielmo*' (that is, 'a star shines on the hour of our meeting') could be an everyday greeting (Tolkien 1981, 264–265) – a world, that is, in which the light of the stars was welcome.

Philosophers and theologians of all times and traditions have sought out meanings in the myths handed down to them, especially when the myths themselves – read 'literally' – have seemed plainly false or even more plainly wicked or obscene. The silly story of Hephaestus trapping his wife and her lover in a golden net, and inviting the other gods to see and snigger, represents the cosmological truth that Love and Strife are bound together in the Maker's cosmos, till their release (*Odyssey* 8.266–369).[3] That the Lord ordained a genocidal invasion of Palestine should rather be understood as an allegory for the overcoming of irrational or bestial impulse by a disciplined virtue. All such tales, some thought, were only ways of ensuring that important metaphysical or moral truths could be remembered.

> The more paradoxical and prodigious the riddle is the more it seems to warn us not to believe simply the bare words but rather to study diligently the hidden truth, and not to relax our efforts until under the guidance of the gods those hidden things become plain, and so initiate or rather perfect our intelligence or whatever we possess that is more sublime than intelligence, I mean that small particle of the One and the Good which contains the whole indivisibly (Julian 1913, vol.2, 105 [*Oratio* 7]).

This approach, whether or not the original fictions were devised as cryptograms, has merits. But Tolkien, at least, disliked allegorical readings: what counted for him was the story. 'I much prefer history, true or feigned, with its varied applicability to the thought and experience of readers. I think that many confuse "applicability" with "allegory"; but the one resides in the freedom of the reader, and the other in the purposed domination of the author' (Tolkien 1954a, 5).

Readers, that is, are to be encouraged to recognize an inner truth in the stories, a moment when their own experience chimes with the fiction, when – as it might be with the episode

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412524000532 Published online by Cambridge University Press

from which I began my reflections – some sense of the wider world draws us away from despair. Similarly:

> I am looking out of my window in an anxious and resentful state of mind, oblivious to my surroundings, brooding perhaps on some damage done to my prestige. Then suddenly I observe a hovering kestrel. In a moment everything is altered. The brooding self with its hurt vanity has disappeared. There is nothing now but kestrel. And when I return to thinking of the other matter it seems less important (Murdoch 1970, 82; see Clark 2019).

It would not matter, on this account, what actual life and character the kestrel had, and neither does it matter that Tolkien's fictional cosmogony is only, vulgarly, a fiction. What is of moment is only a memory of the kestrel's flight, or the sudden beauty of the Evening (and Morning) Star – a beauty that those who now live in cities perhaps rarely notice but which was once exemplary: 'neither the evening nor the morning star are as fair as the face of justice (*dikaiosune*) and self-possession (*sophrosune*)' (Plotinus *Ennead* I.6 [1].4, 11–13, after Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 5.1129b28–29. See also *Ennead* I.6 [1].1, 34–36).

Both the star and the kestrel are to be recognized as *real*, as existing beyond our personal miseries. That indeed is what Plotinus saw in the recognition and admiration of beauty: 'Beautifulness is reality' (*Ennead* VI.7 [38].23 f). So also in *Ennead* V.8 [31].9, 41: 'for this reason being is longed for because it is the same as beauty, and beauty is lovable because it is being'. But even these realities, these beauties, only excite us when they are, as it were, illuminated. Without that, it is as if we were

> in the presence of a face which is certainly beautiful but cannot catch the eye because it has no grace playing upon its beauty. So here below beauty is what illuminates good proportions rather than the good proportions themselves, and this is what is lovable. For why is there more light of beauty on a living face, but only a trace of it on a dead one? (*Ennead* I.6 [1]. 4, 23 f).

Not only real, but living.

Antithesis: the planet Venus

So the story of Eärendil and associated legends are fictions, or even (Numenorean) fictions within fictions, but the beauty of starlight is real. But how easily can we even preserve that insight now that we know more thoroughly how different the sidereal world is from all our earlier fancies? The Evening and Morning Star are simply spots of light, revolving around the heavens, and turn out to be glimpses of the planet Venus, not of Eärendil's Vingilot, 'the Foam-flower, fairest of the ships of song' (Tolkien 1977, 294). Classical and Hermetic imaginings identified the planet, or the sphere in which it moved, as the source of love or lust, acquired in the soul's descent to Earth, or purged in its climb to Heaven. Lucian's *True History* imagined Venus, 'the Morning Star', as a desert which the inhabitants of the Moon and Sun both desire to colonize (Lucian 1913, 263–275). Later still, European poets and hopeful astronomers imagined that Venus was Earth's younger sister (while Mars was older): a world of monsters and magicians, swamps and jungles (see Westfahl 2022,164–174). Whether because of the mists that hid the planet, or more probably because of an unconscious association with the mythical birth of Venus/Aphrodite from the waves, it was widely imagined that it was a world of oceans or swamps or unceasing, maddening, rain. C.S. Lewis's Perelandra, a global ocean of floating islands, was the most hopeful vision, of Paradise Preserved (Lewis 1943a). Most other imaginings – like Edgar Rice Burrough's

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412524000532 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Amtor – were simply pretexts for heroic action, or easy targets for future exploitation: Olaf Stapledon's Venus, for example, is inhabited by warring marine life, exterminated by the fifth human species many million years in our future when our remote descendants are seeking a new home (Stapledon 2021 [1930], 363).

And none of these fables, whether hopeful or satirical, has matched the lately discovered real nature of the globe, now often fondly described as hellish rather than Edenic: a world with a carbon dioxide atmosphere, hurricanes of acid rain, and temperatures above 900 degrees Fahrenheit. Should we therefore simply forget the fictions, recalling instead Lucian's own deliberate apology for his imaginary 'true story'?

> Though I tell the truth in nothing else, I shall at least be truthful in saying that I am a liar. I think I can escape the censure of the world by my own admission that I am not telling a word of truth. Be it understood, then, that I am writing about things which I have neither seen nor had to do with nor learned from others – which, in fact, do not exist at all and, in the nature of things, cannot exist. Therefore, my readers should on no account believe in them (Lucian of Samosata 1913, 253).

That we are sometimes struck dumb by 'beauty', and by the recognition of something seemingly 'real', is simply – so we may suppose – 'emotional'. The 'really real' world owes nothing to our taste. How can its *real* reality be any release from our miseries? Wasn't the sight an illusion all along? This won't necessarily change our immediate responses: 'Do we not admire the blue canopy of the heavens, having understood long ago that there is no canopy?' (Shestov 1968 [1919]), Part 2, ch.8). But perhaps philosophers should at least try to strip themselves of illusion. We can easily persuade ourselves that 'beauty' – even a seemingly transcendent beauty – is only a projection of erotic fancy, associated with a momentary intensification of sensual awareness. Bishop Nonnus of Edessa, in contemplating the beauty of a dancer (the future St. Pelagia), 'took it as a subject for glorifying the sovereign beauty, of which her beauty was only the reflection, and feeling himself transported by the fire of divine love, shed tears of joy … He was raised', continues St.John Climacus, 'to a wholly incorruptible state before the universal resurrection' (Evdokimov 1998, 150: after *Patralogia Graeca* 88, 893). It is not necessarily unduly cynical to wonder a little about Bishop Nonnus's emotions! Certainly we might wonder about our own, and take care to discount such delusions. How we *feel* about such things tells us nothing significant about what they 'really' are (or so we are urged to believe). Why should we take those feelings seriously if they are only the ones that our past evolutionary history has promoted, as being more fertile in their day than any actual rivals? The gap between the immediate sight of the Evening Star and the planet's actual nature is such that Sam could not any longer suppose that the beauty he sees is any true part of the cosmos independent of his own transient emotions. Better (perhaps) to cleanse our thoughts of fancy, and see the unwelcoming truth.

But that decision – to discount our immediate 'feelings', and believe or remember all and only what we can find good reason to believe is 'true' – requires a sterner discipline than most of us remember (especially if only 'scientific' reasons are to be considered 'good'). That Venus is 'hellish', for example, is only to say that we would ourselves find living there – if we could live at all – more like Lucian's Isle of the Wicked than his Isle of the Blest. But of course it is not made for us to live in! If anything were evolved, or created, to experience that world first-hand (which is perhaps unlikely) we may presume that they would find it homely. Simply as an objective fact the globe that we call Venus is no more 'hellish' than the Sun itself, or Jupiter, or the rocks of the Oort Cloud. Purging our imaginations of the

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412524000532 Published online by Cambridge University Press

impulse to make things 'meaningful', whether for good or ill, is a never-ending exercise. And perhaps it is an exercise that we should practise only with caution:

> Don't you see that that dreadful dry light shed on things must at last wither up the moral mysteries as illusions, respect for age, respect for property, and that the sanctity of life will be a superstition? The men in the street are only organisms, with their organs more or less displayed (Chesterton 1962 [1929], 70).

The very effort to see things only 'objectively', without any emotional affect, may turn them into objects, lacking any significance – except their usefulness to the would-be 'objective' agent. For such objectivity is likely, for us, to be another fiction. We aren't thus 'objective' about our own desires and feelings, especially the crudest: rather, we take them as obvious.

There is a better way: the splendour and beauty of the sun is no less because the sun is hotter even than Venus, and uninhabitable by any form of life like ours. Purging our responses of self-regard, and so seeing the thing itself, does not require Chesterton's 'dreadful dry light'. Murdoch's kestrel is not just a thing merely because is it not a plaything. And Sam's conclusion, that 'there was light and high beauty for ever beyond [the Shadow's] reach', does not depend on the star's being Vingilot, and neither *need* it be blighted by the planet's lately discovered nature.

But there may be a further issue. That the stars and planets are seen to be beautiful, and such as both to exalt and humble us, need not be questioned.

> Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the oftener and more steadily we reflect on them: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me. I do not merely conjecture them and seek them as though obscured in darkness or in the transcendent region beyond my horizon: I see them before me, and I associate them directly with the consciousness of my own existence. The former begins at the place I occupy in the external world of sense, and it broadens the connection in which I stand into an unbounded magnitude of worlds beyond worlds and systems of systems and into the limitless times of their periodic motion, their beginning and their continuance (Kant 2015, 129 [5.162]).

The sheer *magnitude* of the sidereal cosmos is awesome. In the 'Dream of Scipio' – a text which much influenced Christian Europe – Scipio, on his own visionary ascent through the planetary spheres, saw

> stars which we never see from here below, and all the stars were vast far beyond what we have ever imagined. The least of them was that which, farthest from heaven, nearest to the earth, shone with a borrowed light. But the starry globes very far surpassed the earth in magnitude. The earth itself indeed looked to me so small as to make me ashamed of our empire, which was a mere point on its surface (Cicero *Republic* Bk 6, ch.3).

So also George Berkeley: 'Astronomy is peculiarly adapted to remedy a little and narrow spirit … There is something in the immensity [of astronomical distances] that shocks and overwhelms the imagination; it is too big for the grasp of a human intellect: estates, provinces and kingdoms vanish in its presence' (Berkeley 1948–57, vol.7, 207–208).

These witnesses found the sidereal heavens awesome – but perhaps those of a different and less hopeful temperament may find them terrifying, and populate the heavens – in their fancy – with monsters antagonistic to any human or humane ideal. 'The eternal silence of

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412524000532 Published online by Cambridge University Press

these infinite spaces [the heavens] terrifies me', so Pascal testified (Pascal 2012, 81: $206). That the planet Venus is 'hellish' may be simply a reaction to the discovery that it is not, after all, Edenic, and our pain in this may be easily overwritten: it is as beautiful as any other star. But if the heavens are indifferent – or worse still, *monstrous* – their very beauty may be overwhelming: How can we maintain a humane spirit in the face of the utterly inhuman? It is not only our paltry empires that are reduced to nothing, but every earthly achievement. We live on the margins of the real indifferent world: Should we or should we not forget this?

> That Man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; that all the labours of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of Man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins – all these things, if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain, that no philosophy which rejects them can hope to stand (Russell 1918 [1903], 47–48).[4]

So maybe Sam was mistaken: the Shadow has always already won. Any comfort we might hope to find is not aloft in the heavens but only here at home – and that comfort will decay. This was indeed an ancient conclusion: the gods may fight the monsters, but there is no guarantee of victory. Witness the likely end of the better sort of god in Norse mythology.

> Make it your hope
> To be counted worthy on that day to stand beside them;
> For the end of man is to partake of their defeat and die
> His second, final death in good company. The stupid, strong,
> Unteachable monsters are certain to be victorious at last,
> And every man of decent blood is on the losing side. …
> Know your betters and crouch, dogs;
> You that have Vichy water in your veins and worship the event –
> Your goddess History (whom your fathers called the strumpet Fortune) (Lewis 1994 [1964], 3–4).[5]

Atum, the One that became a Million in Egyptian lore, will someday be swallowed up by Apophis, or dissolved in Nun, in Nothing.

Synthesis: appreciating the real

There are obvious ripostes. First, mere *magnitude* has no definite merit, nor even a stable meaning, whatever our initial, emotional response, and whatever the initial challenge to our habitual self-absorption. There are as many mathematical points in Little Gidding as in Laniakea (the network of galactic superclusters in which our galaxy is embedded; the name means 'immeasurable heaven', in Hawaian), and quasars – to an infinite intelligence – bulk no larger than individual quarks. Dame Julian records a vision in which she was shown 'a little thing, the size of a hazelnut, lying in the palm of [her] hand', and told that this was 'all that is' (Julian of Norwich 2015, 45) Nor is any *period* either long or short, in itself – so the most distant galaxy (as it seems to us) is no further away than next door: indeed, from the point of view of a photon, all times and places are simultaneously 'here' (see Nerlich 2011).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412524000532 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Nothing is essentially distant (*Ennead* IV.3 [27].11, 22–23). Nothing is objectively either large or small.

And secondly, Russell's fantasy of 'omnipotent matter' was rightly mocked by the lay theologian John Wren-Lewis:

> Real science knows nothing of Omnipotent Matter, for it is a continual process of changing both our concepts and our experience of matter. The only constant factor in real science – the science of the experimental method – is Potent Man, man who constantly strives to use matter to express the creativity of his own inner life. Omnipotent Matter is as much a paranoid fantasy as the traditional concept of Omnipotent God, and serves the same neurotic purpose of providing grounds for not taking the inner life of human beings really seriously in its own right. Where traditional religion insists upon the subordination of man's inner life to the supposed Divine Plan behind the scenes, materialism overrides the inner life by dismissing it in the name of a 'tough-minded' assertion of man's utter insignificance in face of the inflexible laws of an indifferent universe (Wren-Lewis 1971, 70; see Clark 2023).

This in turn may seem too optimistic an extrapolation of the seeming success of 'science' (as well as being implausibly anthropocentric and unconsciously sexist): why should we suppose that our particular species has any certainly special status, and that 'we' (or our children) will easily – because we're clever as well as kind (or so we like to think) – be victors in a war 'against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places' (Paul, *Ephesians* 6.12)? Wren-Lewis's triumphalism has been shared by many Western writers of Science Fiction in the last century. They too have imagined that human beings might challenge and defeat the heavenly powers (see Clark 2015) – but there have also been those (like Lovecraft and Stanislaw Lem) that thought the reverse was obvious: the powers don't even need to fight us, since we exist only on the margins of their lives and may be casually dismissed at will. 'If there is a meaning', so Stapledon's Last Men say in their final hours, 'it is no human meaning', and so might as well be no real meaning at all. All that they can hold on to is 'the blind recollection of past light' (Stapledon [1932], ch.9.4: 2021, 862).

So also the writer of 'weird fiction', H.P. Lovecraft:

> To me there is nothing but puerility in a tale in which the human form – and the local human passions and conditions and standards – are depicted as native to other worlds or other universes. To achieve the essence of real externality, whether of time or space or dimension, one must forget that such things as organic life, good and evil, love and hate, and all such local attributes of a negligible and temporary race called mankind, have any existence at all. Only the human scenes and characters must have human qualities. These must be handled with unsparing realism (not catch-penny romanticism), but when we cross the line to the boundless and hideous unknown – the shadow-haunted Outside – we must remember to leave our humanity – and terrestrialism – at the threshold (Lovecraft [5 July 1927]: Lovecraft et al. 2014).

It seems widely supposed that the search for living intelligence in the wider world requires us to discover 'Earth-like' planets, and organisms at least a little sympathetic to our technological and exploratory enterprise: But why should we imagine that such intelligence is any

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412524000532 Published online by Cambridge University Press

closer to us than squids, or eusocial insects, or bacteria, or something wholly unimagined or wholly hostile?

Maybe we need not suppose that the completely 'inhuman' powers are *bound* to be victorious, nor that the cosmos will forever be unmeaning. Maybe the cosmos will in the end be gathered together by the Minds of the Very Last Days, even if those Minds are not of our biological kind (nor even descended from us), powered by the decay of indefinitely many black holes or other arcane energies, as Freeman Dyson imagined: 'there are good scientific reasons for taking seriously the possibility that life and intelligence can succeed in molding this universe of ours to their own purposes' (Dyson [1979] 1996).[6] The more likely that outcome may be, incidentally, the likelier it also is that the world of our common experience is virtual (see Clark 2002): merely a drama enacted by the Last Minds, as much as Tolkien's Middle Earth is also a deeply imagined fiction.

Those Last Minds may intend, at any time, to end the drama. And this story too is a variant of an ancient myth. We may, like John the Divine, expect Apocalypse, when the God beyond all gods at last fulfils His promise, and 'the skies will be rolled up like a scroll, and all their stars will fall like withered leaves from the vine, like foliage from the fig tree' (*Isaiah* 34.4; see *Revelation* 6.14). The Lord 'rules the surging sea, calming the turmoil of its waves, [and crushes] the monster Rahab with a mortal blow, [scattering His] enemies with [His] strong arm' (*Psalm* 89.8–10) – but this may be a hopeful prediction, rather than a record of past, conclusive, success. If there is any hope of this it rests on the conviction that there is Another World than this, whether it be Dyson's scenario or the more ancient and respectable story of God's Eternal Word. We can neither predict nor prohibit such an intrusion from Outside on the basis of past experience.

> Science is the study of the admitted laws of existence; it cannot prove a universal negative about whether those laws could ever be suspended by something admittedly above them. It is as if we were to say that a lawyer was so deeply learned in the American Constitution that he knew there could never be a revolution in America. Or it is as if a man were to say he was so close a student of the text of *Hamlet* that he was authorised to deny that an actor had dropped the skull and bolted when the theatre caught fire. The constitution follows a certain course, so long as it is there to follow it; the play follows a certain course, so long as it is being played; the visible order of nature follows a certain course if there is nothing behind it to stop it. But that fact throws no sort of light on whether there is anything behind it to stop it. That is a question of philosophy or metaphysics and not of material science (Chesterton 1957, 137).

The Evening and Morning Star is at once an effect of the planet Venus, and a sign from Outside Over There, and Sam was right – or at least entitled – to be relieved of despair.

Consider a passage from Lev Shestov that helpfully summarizes the crux:

> In his *Metaphysics of Sexual Love* Schopenhauer brilliantly develops the idea that love is only a fleeting illusion. The 'will' desires to realize itself once more in an individual, and so it suggests to John that Mary is a rare beauty and to Mary that John is a great hero. As soon as the goal of the 'will' is achieved, as soon as the birth of a new being is assured, the will abandons the lovers to themselves and they then discover with horror that they have been the victims of a dreadful mistake. John sees the 'real' Mary – that is, a dense, stupid, and ill-natured woman; Mary, on her side, discovers the real John – a dull, banal, and cowardly fellow. And now, after the delusions of love have

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412524000532 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> been dissipated, the judgements Mary and John pronounce on each other agree perfectly with the judgements of all, with what *semper ubique et ab omnibus creditum est*. For everyone always thought that Mary was ugly and stupid and John cowardly and foolish. Schopenhauer does not doubt in the least that Mary and John saw true reality precisely when they saw what everyone else saw. And not only Schopenhauer thinks so. This is again *quod semper ubique et ab omnibus creditum est*. But it is precisely because this truth appears so unquestionable that there is good reason to raise the question of the legitimacy of its pretensions. Did John and Mary really deceive themselves during the short time when, the 'will' having kindled its magic flame in them, they abandoned themselves to the mysterious passion that drew them together and they saw each other as so beautiful? May it not be that they were right precisely when they were alone in their opinion and appeared to all others as poor idiots? May it not be that at that time they were in communion with true reality and that what their social natures oblige them to believe is only error and falsehood? Who knows! (Shestov 1968 [1919], Part 1:ch.6).

May it not be after all that the recognition of a transcendent beauty is more reliable than the easy agreement that things are only as they happen, meaninglessly, to be? Maybe Sam was right.

That may be Tolkien's point as well, in contrasting Saruman's mind with Gandalf's: Saruman 'has a mind of metal and wheels; and he does not care for growing things, except as far as they serve him for the moment' (Tolkien 1954b, 76). Gandalf insists instead that 'he that breaks a thing to find out what it is has left the path of wisdom' (Tolkien 1954a, 287). To see and understand a real thing is to see it whole, and see what lies beyond it. To see it as a sign or shard of beauty.

Of course, these stories offer us no *proof* of any humane conclusion. It may be that Russell was right to suppose that 'that the whole temple of Man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins'. It may be that Stapledon in turn was even more realistic than Russell, in acknowledging that the Last Men, despite their earlier, over-confident, promise to abide the destruction of their hopes without despair, would be themselves as ground down as poor Frodo, who can neither himself complete his mission nor long endure the loss of all he loved. It may be that Lovecraft was right to think that we need to hide from the heavens. But is the absence of proof any reason to give up, to settle simply for whatever transient pleasures we may be lucky enough to enjoy for a very little while? We have no proof that heroism will 'succeed' (it would hardly be heroic if we did), but equally we have no final proof it won't. Better persist in 'faith' than succumb either to doubt or to despair. Lucian, despite his openly cynical approach to all established philosophies, had a particular disdain for 'Academicians', who withhold judgement from any substantive claim and so never win any prize:

> The Academicians wanted to come [to the Isle of the Blest] but were still holding off and debating, for they could not arrive at a conclusion even on the question whether such an island existed. Then too I suppose they feared to have Rhadamanthus judge them, as they themselves had abolished standards of judgment. It was said, however, that many of them had started to follow people coming thither, but fell behind through their slowness, being constitutionally unable to arrive at anything, and so turned back half-way (Lucian, 1913, 321 [2.18]).

Better, like Sam and Frodo, to keep going.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412524000532 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Notes

1. For a recent study of the history of a conscious 'romantic idealism' not unlike the story I shall be telling, see Taylor (2024). It is noteworthy that 'panpsychism' is now an almost respectable theory even for strict materialists: see Goff (2017).
2. For the story of Eärendil see Tolkien (1977, 295–302); on the making of the Silmarils see Tolkien (1977, 68). Tolkien was hesitant about whether Middle Earth was originally round or flat, and correspondingly uncertain whether the Moon, the Sun, and the Evening Star were created only late in the life of Middle Earth. His own preference was for a 'Round Earth' story rather than the 'Flat Earth' imagined in the published *Silmarillion*: this latter, and other associated stories, are best conceived as fictions within the larger myth. 'The cosmogonic myths are Númenórean, blending Elven-lore with human myth and imagination' (Tolkien 1993, 374).
3. See Lamberton (1986, 228), citing Proclus *Commentary on Republic* 1.141.17–21. Of course, this exegesis ignores the charm of the story, as Lamberton insists: 'the whole emotional texture of the Homeric passage is lost', he complains, 'the rage and bitter frustration of Hephaestus, the comic impatience of Ares to jump into the trap, and the laughter of the gods' (Lamberton 1986, 229).
4. We may suspect that these claims are strictly 'unfalsifiable', but they are not therefore meaningless. They constitute a 'blik', in Richard Hare's terminology quite as much as Plotinus's reverence for reality: see Flew and Hare (1955, 96–103).
5. See also Tolkien (1983 [1936], 25–26): 'It is the strength of the northern mythological imagination that it faced this problem, put the monsters in the centre, gave them victory but no honour, and found a potent but terrible solution in naked will and courage.'
6. Dyson was offering a riposte to 'the taboo against mixing knowledge with values', which he associated with an historically mistaken anecdote about 'the great battle between the evolutionary biologists led by Thomas Huxley and the churchmen led by Bishop Wilberforce'.

References

Barfield O (1988) *Saving the Appearances: A Study in Idolatry*, 2nd ed. Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press.
Berkeley G (1948–57) *Works*, Luce AA and Jessop TE (eds.). Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson.
Chesterton GK (1957) *The Thing*. London: Sheed & Ward.
Chesterton GK (1962 [1929]) *The Poet and the Lunatics*. London: Darwen Finlayson.
Clark SRL (2002) Deep time: Does it matter? In Ellis G (ed.), *The Far-Future Universe*. Radnor, Pennsylvania: Templeton Foundation Press, 177–195.
Clark SRL (2015) Atheism considered as a Christian Sect. *Philosophy* **90**, 277–303.
Clark SRL (2019) Death, depression and a passing Kestrel. In Tandy C (ed.), *Death and Anti-Death 17: One Year after Mary Midgley, Twenty Years after Iris Murdoch*. Ann Arbor, MI: Ria University Press, 69–92.
Clark SRL (2023) Atheists and idolaters: The case of John Wren-Lewis. In Harrison VS and Harris HA (eds), *Atheisms: The Philosophy of Non-belief*. Abingdon: Routledge, 90–125.
Dyson F (1996 [1979]) Time without end: Physics and biology in an open universe. *Reviews of Modern Physics* **51**(3) Reprinted in *Selected Papers of Freeman Dyson*. Providence, RI: American Mathematical Society, 529–542; www.aleph.se/Trans/Global/Omega/dyson.txt (accessed 4 April 2023).
Evdokimov P (1998) *Ages of the Spiritual Life*, Plekon M (tr). New York: St.Vladimir's Seminary Press.
Flew A and Hare RM (1955) Theology and falsification. In Flew A and MacIntyre A (eds), *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*. London: SCM Press, 96–103.
Frye N (1964) *The Educated Imagination*. Bloomongton: Indiana University Press.
Goff P (2017) *Consciousness and Fundamental Reality*. New York: Oxford University Press.
Julian (called 'the Apostate') (1913) *Speeches: Works, Tr. W.C.Wright*. London: Heinemann, Loeb Classical Library.
Julian of Norwich (2015) *Revelations of Divine Love*, Windeatt B (trans.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Kant I (2015) *Critique of Practical Reason*, Gregor M (trans.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Lamberton R (1986) *Homer the Theologian: Neoplatonist Allegorical Reading and the Growth of the Epic Tradition*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
Lewis CS (1943a) *Perelandra*. London: Bodley Head.
Lewis CS (1943b) *The Abolition of Man: Reflections on Education with Special Reference to the Teaching of English in the Upper Forms of Schools*. London: Geoffrey Bles.
Lewis CS (1994 [1964]) *Poems*, Hooper W (ed.). New York: HarperOne.
Loeb A (2021) *Extraterrestrial: The First Sign of Intelligent Life beyond Earth*. London: John Murray.
Lovecraft HP, Joshi ST and David E. S (2014) Letters to Farnsworth Wright. *Lovecraft Annual* (8), 5–59. www.jstor.org/stable/26868482.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412524000532 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Lucian of Samosata (1913) *Works*, Harmon AM (tr.). Cambridge, MA: Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press.
Murdoch I (1970) *Sovereignty of the Good*. London: Routledge.
Nerlich S (2011) 'A photon's point of view'; https://phys.org/news/2011-08-photons-view.html (accessed 10 August 2024).
Pascal B (2012) *Pensées*, Trotter WF (trans.). Oxford: Benediction Classics.
Russell B (1903) The free man's worship. In *Mysticism and Logic*. London: Allen & Unwin, 47–48.
Shestov L (1968 [1919]) *Potestas Clavium*, Martin B (tr.). Athens: Ohio University Press. www.shestov.phonoarchive.org/pc/pc2_3.html.
Sprat T (2005 [1722]) *History of the Royal Society*, 3rd ed. New York: Elibron.
Stapledon O (2021) *Collected Works*. Bexhill-on-Sea, East Sussex: Delphi Classics.
Taylor C (2024) *Cosmic Connections: Poetry in the Age of Disenchantment*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press.
Tolkien JRR (1954a) *Fellowship of the Ring*. London: Allen & Unwin.
Tolkien JRR (1954b) *The Two Towers*. London: Allen & Unwin.
Tolkien JRR (1955) *The Return of the King*. London: Allen & Unwin.
Tolkien JRR (1977) *Silmarillion*, Tolkien C (ed.). London: Allen & Unwin.
Tolkien JRR (1981) *Letters*, Carpenter H (ed.). London: Allen & Unwin.
Tolkien JRR (1983 [1936]) *Monsters and the Critics*. London: Allen & Unwin.
Tolkien JRR (1993) *Morgoth's Ring*, Tolkien C (ed.). London: HarperCollins.
Westfahl G (2022) *The Stuff of Science Fiction: Hardware, Settings, Characters*. Jefferson, CA: McFarland.
Wren-Lewis J (1971) *What Shall We Tell the Children?* London: Constable.

Cite this article: Clark SRL (2026) Values and facts and fancies. *Religious Studies* **62**(1), 95–106. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412524000532

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412524000532 Published online by Cambridge University Press