What Ayer Saw When He Was Dead

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Philosophers have asked what it is like to be a bat, what it is like to be a disembodied mind, what it is like to be a biofeedback mechanism, and numerous like questions. The one question they seldom ask is what it would be like to be their professed selves, that is, actually and existentially to inhabit the confines sketched by their professed views. Amid all the rueful reflections—on the inconclusiveness, yet inescapability, of argument as the philosopher's prime instrument, on how, like dragon's teeth, an argument will no sooner be sown than its counterargument will spring up, on how both argument and counter-argument depend on assumptions that remain unargued for, or perhaps unarguable—it may not have been noticed that the only refutation that sticks is the one that carries against one's own views, when one can no longer *abide* them. At such moments, the trap springs shut. One stands refuted by the witness one cannot fool or long distract: oneself. So the whole effort of philosophic persuasion is to bring down that effect on another, while its frustration is no doubt due to the keen sightedness with which the other has schooled himself to see it coming and escape it.

It is the contention of this article that the late A. J. Ayer had an experience, which he publicized for London's widely-read *Sunday Telegraph* on August 28, 1988, which had just that fateful character of being trapped inside one's own unbearable views.

To his report for the *Telegraph*, Ayer gave the poetic title, 'That Undiscovered Country,' for which the newspaper substituted the catchier, 'What I saw when I was dead.'[1] It may be counted as in some sense a near-death experience, though it lacked some of the appurtenances that belong to the more scientifically interesting cases of that kind. Thus he encountered no dead relatives, much less relatives of whose death he would not have known. He passed through no dark tunnel. He was greeted by no beneficent white light. He lost no fear of death that he might otherwise have had. And he did not publicly credit the experience with giving evidence

[1] Reprinted in A. J. Ayer, *The Meaning of Life*, Introduction by Ted Honderich (London: Wiedenfeld & Nicolson; New York: Macmillan, 1990), 198–204.

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for an after-life.[2] On the other hand, his heart *had* stopped for four minutes and, as he reported, 'I know that the doctors and nurses were surprised by the speed of my recovery and that when I started speaking, the specialist expressed astonishment that anyone with so little oxygen in his lungs should be so lucid.'

What Ayer said, that astonished the specialist, was, 'You are all mad.' Beyond that, he recalled confiding in French to Francette Drin, the friend who came to visit him in hospital, 'Did you know that I was dead? The first time that I tried to cross the river I was frustrated, but my second attempt succeeded. It was most extraordinary. My thoughts became persons.'

This experience occurred in June of 1988. Ayer's account for the *Telegraph,* two months later, gave more details about what happened next in the course of what he now (more enigmatically) termed 'an experience closely encompassing my death.' Here is the story he told:

> I was confronted by a red light, exceedingly bright, and also very painful even when I turned away from it. I was aware that this light was responsible for the government of the universe. Among its ministers were two creatures who had been put in charge of space. These ministers periodically inspected space and had recently carried out such an inspection. They had, however, failed to do their work properly, with the result that space, like a badly fitted jigsaw puzzle, was slightly out of joint.
>
> A further consequence was that the laws of nature had ceased to function as they should. I felt it was up to me to put things right. I also had the motive of finding a way to extinguish the painful light. I assumed it was signaling that space was awry and that it would switch itself off when order was restored.
>
> Unfortunately, I had no idea where the guardians of space had gone and feared that even if I found them I should not be able to communicate with them. It then occurred to me that, whereas, until the present century, physicists accepted the Newtonian severance of space and time, it had become customary, since the vindication of Einstein's general theory of relativity, to treat space-time as a single whole. Accordingly, I thought I could cure space by operating upon time.

[2] There are many discussions of near-death experiences now in print. One that I found informative, with a useful bibliography, though it appears to be now out of print, was Gary R. Habermas and J. P. Moreland, *Immortality: the Other Side of Death* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1992).

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At that point, the ministers of time do turn up in his 'neighbourhood.' But, for reasons unclear, they fail to acknowledge his salutation. Frustrated, he tries to draw their attention to time, not to any particular o'clock but to *time itself*, by 'walking up and down' and waving his watch. This is no good either. 'I became,' he recalls, 'more and more desperate, until the experience suddenly came to an end.'

One thing stands out straight away. Within the dream, Ayer retains his intellectual resources (he knows about Einstein and the unity of space-time), and the philosopher's feeling about his peculiar vocation. If things are not rightly fitted together (philosophers would say, if they are misconceived or misdescribed), the philosopher is *pained* by the light that puts things in, and feels it his special obligation to set things to rights. Just as Joseph, in Thomas Mann's rendering, explains to Pharaoh that his dreams have been sent to him not as a private individual but in his royal and official capacity,[3] so this experience befalls Ayer in his philosophic capacity.

Another feature is evident and becomes more so as Ayer proceeds. He has to *tell* it. The experience seems to cry out for public decoding. But to him it is not obvious what it means. The data he takes into account include his first utterances on regaining consciousness, as well as his memory of the experience proper. He is thinking in print and erasing initial gambits as he goes along. It is this character of Ayer's own reactions, the need for a public decoding and the modesty with regard to his own stabs at it, that would seem to license others to get in on the act. But before we offer our own decoding hypotheses, in line with our opening remarks, it is only right to look over Ayer's suggestions, to see if they hold water.

He starts with the first thing he is reported to have said: 'You are all mad.' Perhaps, he ventures to suppose, 'I took my audience to be Christians and was telling them that I had not discovered anything "on the other side."'

His first suggestion must be rejected for the reason that it is simply false that he had discovered nothing on the other side. On the contrary. The philosopher had found himself in a strange, disquieting, and oddly portentous predicament. So, even in the doubtful case that his medical attendants had all been believing (as opposed to nominal) Christians,[4] the bourn from which Ayer

[3] Thomas Mann, *Joseph and His Brothers*, tr. H. T. Lowe-Porter (New York: Knopf, 1948), p. 946.

[4] Michael Smithurst advises me that the University College Hospital in London is a general public hospital with nothing denominational about it, and that in any case the British are on the whole less prone than Americans to let you know of their religious leanings.

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thought he had returned would not prove *them* deluded. The relevant, competing claims would be that death either does, or else does not, mark the end of personal consciousness. How could Ayer's *experience* refute the Christians by showing that death marks the end of experience? As to the other possible delusion (if anyone entertains it), that findings in the Undiscovered Country must necessarily be happy ones, Christians do not suffer from it. So nothing that Ayer experienced would prove *Christians* mad. Lastly, since Ayer claimed no personal recollection of why he said it, there is no memory datum to back his first suggestion. In sum, we have no grounds for accepting it.

Before we go further, we must pause over the possibility that what he said when he first revived admits of no interpretation. It was just a senseless remark. Rightly or wrongly (but interestingly), this is the one supposition Ayer never entertains. Rather, he simply floods the experience with his repeated efforts to make sense of it. However, that very fact might prompt some to imagine that Ayer had quite frankly lost it, and was at this point on the downhill run.[5] His biographer however, Ben Rogers, cites a number of witnesses close to the philosopher who testify that, once released from the hospital and back on his feet, he was more 'like his old self' than he had seemed before the whole episode.[6] What the onlookers say is that the emotional atrophy they had noted in him prior to the near-death experience reversed itself. Ayer was taking hold as never before, both intellectually and in his engagement with life. It would seem a mark of charity then, in the ordinary as well as the philosophic sense, to look first for significance here, before we conclude against there being any.

With no presumption on Ayer's part in favour of his first hypothesis, he gives the decoding a second go. 'It is also possible,' he writes, 'that I took them to be sceptics and was implying that I had discovered something.' Surely this is more like it. That the medical

[5] David M. Armstrong has confirmed that to me as the view at the time in the Department of Traditional and Modern Philosophy of Sydney University. The general feeling, Armstrong recalled, was that 'Freddy had lost his cool,' and been 'singularly unscientific' when faced with his weakened condition and the hallucinations that can occur when one is in a strange bodily state. How widespread this estimate was around the profession I am not in a position to say, but the more established philosophers in the U.S. to whom I mentioned the incident generally responded with head-shaking smiles, as if—the less said the kinder—towards an elder statesman of the profession in some trouble or confusion, probably connected with oxygen deprivation.

[6] Ben Rogers, *A. J. Ayer: A Life* (New York: Grove Press, 1999), 349ff.

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team attending him would have been sceptical or agnostic is sociologically more probable. That he reentered their world minded to contest their modern scepticism would have been quite in line with what he had just been through. The only reason Ayer gives for thinking otherwise is that 'in the latter case I should more properly have exclaimed, "We are all mad." All the same I cannot be sure.'

Everything makes sense here except the misgiving. There must have been nonbelievers labouring to revive A. J. Ayer. They may well have outnumbered any believers in the room. At that moment, however, just back from what he took to be 'the other side,' Ayer could not have numbered himself among them. He was not yet ready to put his experience inside scare quotes as he would do later. On the contrary. Just then, he would have seen himself as in remission from what he might have deemed *the psychosis of the intellectuals*. So, for one bright, evanescent moment, it would have been *you*, and not *we*, who were 'all mad.'

Aside from 'You are all mad!' his first remarks include the longer recollection we have quoted above, and this Ayer shared in his fluent French with Francette Drin, his friend from Paris days. He 'crossed the river,' he told her, but only after he failed at his first attempt to cross it. What did that mean? By the time of the *Telegraph* piece, at least two months had gone by. The experience was no longer fresh. Now he says that he must have been feeling his student years in Classics, and no doubt thinking of Charon, the boatman who ferries the dead across the Styx. In a second educated allusion for the *Telegraph,* Ayer supposes he must also have had in mind David Hume, his 'favourite philosopher.' When Boswell, the pious gossip, called on the dying sceptic, Hume said of himself unrepentantly that, by taking so long to die, he must be trying the patience—of Charon![7]

Actually, despite Ayer's gloss, his remarks to Francette Drin had

[7] A shocked Boswell reported to Samuel Johnson that he 'had reason to believe that the thought of annihilation gave Hume no pain.' Johnson disagreed. "'It was not so, Sir. He had a vanity in being thought easy. It is more probable that he should assume an appearance of ease, than that so very improbable a thing should be, as a man not afraid of going (as, in spite of his delusive theory, he cannot be sure but he may go,) into an unknown state, and not being uneasy at leaving all he knew. And you are to consider that, upon his own principle of annihilation, he had no motive to speak the truth.'" James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson*, 1792, Boswell's second edition, with a Preface by the editor, Percy Fitzgerald (London: Swann Sonnenschein & Co., 1910), Vol. II, 205f.

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been nothing like Hume's to Boswell. Take his question, 'Did you know that I was dead?' If Hume believed anything, he must have believed that it is never possible for me to 'know' that I am, or was, dead. The disanalogies multiply. No Charon, boatman, or indeed figure of any kind got a credit for having *helped* Ayer cross 'the river.' What he'd told Drin was that he had crossed it by his own efforts, and that his first efforts had not worked. To my knowledge, the Classical tradition includes no case where Charon plied his oar ineffectually. Still less does it show us a spirit making its own way across the Styx after being 'frustrated' in its first attempt. Nor did Ayer *name* the river, although rivers in dreams sometimes do get names. It could be the Styx. It could be the Jordan. It could be the Thames. We aren't told. Presumably Drin wasn't told either.

What is more, the whole tone of Ayer's original remarks suggests a fresh experience, not one rewarmed from far-off student days. 'It was most extraordinary,' he said. In other words, it wasn't an iconically familiar moment. And then he goes on, still more arrestingly, 'My thoughts became persons.' There is nothing, in Ayer's conjectures for the *Telegraph,* that takes account of these two sibylline sentences. Nor do we learn why his first attempt to cross the river *failed*. So, whatever the explanation for his early remarks, Ayer certainly has not supplied it.

That is all we have of Ayer's interpretations of what he *said* when he first regained consciousness. Up to this point, they have been ingenious, but unpersuasive. There is more from him about the experience itself as a whole, however, and especially about whether it provides evidence for an after-life. I will try to summarize. Maybe, Ayer muses, his experience might be 'veridical' in providing 'rather strong evidence' for an after-life. What is the rather strong evidence? Francette Drin's mother also suffered heart death, during which she too reported seeing a red light. Never mind that two witnesses, she being one and he being the other, hardly constitute a representative sample, even if we discount the marked difference between them: that her red light felt kindly and Ayer's 'very painful.' We may still take the hint that, what Ayer went through, he took very much to heart.

Presently, the philosopher finds his feet again. After all, heart death does not entail the deaths of other parts of the body system, including the brain. In earlier philosophical argument, Ayer notes, he'd held out for the dependence of personal identity on 'the identity, through time, of one or more bodies that the person might successively occupy.' Even Christians admit this, he reflects, as their doctrine of bodily resurrection shows. If his earlier views were

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correct, he must not have been dead. His experience could therefore offer no evidence for a life *after* death.

When a philosopher chips away at misunderstandings until the thing he wants to get at stands clear, we feel reassured. Here the feeling is more nervous. An after-life, Ayer remarks, would not give us good reason to believe there is a god in charge of the next world, since we have none to imagine a god in charge of this one. What sort of God has just been shown the door? We have not been introduced. Some philosophers—he mentions J. E. McTaggart and C. D. Broad—*have* believed in an after-life without believing in God. McTaggart thought reality consisted in souls to the exclusion of other things. This must be too 'fanciful' to detain us. Broad took mediums, at least some few mediums, seriously, but declined to assume that we must be nicer or wiser in an after-life. On that one, Ayer backs him. While a god *could* upgrade us (the intellectual upgrade being the one that interests Ayer) after we die, 'this is not something that even the most enthusiastic deist can count on.' Deism hasn't generated 'enthusiasm' for the past two hundred years. What is more, no major religious tradition offers a post mortem upgrade to humanity in the unrefined *aggregate*. Could Ayer be setting up straw men to knock down?

We do have a more telling turnabout in the penultimate paragraph. It seems that if we did find 'ourselves landed in a future life,' Ayer's own earlier philosophical argument (to the effect that this can't happen) would stand *refuted*. What would the upshot be? Philosophically, Ayer says, nothing less than the 'triumph of dualism.' But why dualism? His earlier view was that a mere 'sequence of experiences, guaranteed by memory,' would not be enough to make you who you are, because you also need your body to make you who you are. If, however, you *can* survive when your body does not, then you don't need your body for that purpose. The claim that it's needed for any other purpose has not been supported by argument *here*. In this context, all we know is that, when you don't need your body, you don't need your body. What would follow, if a person can survive bodily death, would not be dualism's triumph, but the drubbing of materialism.

The best we can do with Ayer's reflections on his near-death experience is to let them serve what must have been his real aim: to assure colleagues and the general reader that his public persona is intact and as jestingly unaffected as Hume's ever was. So we can view his closing observations that, if his philosophical belief in his own mortality has emerged from all this 'slightly weakened,' his public atheism still stands rock-ribbed. So too we can take his

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professed 'trust' that he will be allowed to jog on as a member in good standing of the British Humanist Association, the Rationalist Press Association and the South Place Ethical Society. On such self-ironical notes, Ayer's confession (if it is that), winds down.

We are not however quite done with Ayer on Ayer in this story. Two months after the *Telegraph* piece appeared, he submitted a 'Postscript to a Postmortem' for the *Spectator,* to 'correct a misunderstanding.'[8] In it he retracts as 'literally false as it stands' what he'd written about the near-death experience's having 'slightly weakened' a 'conviction that my genuine death will be the end of me.' The only thing weakened, he now says, was his 'inflexible attitude' toward that conviction. His distinction might do with refining, since the degree of grip with which one holds on to a belief is not unrelated (though it may be inversely related) to the degree to which one actually *believes* it. The rough difference Ayer makes of the distinction is that, prior to the experience, he would take up arguments for an after-life only for the 'purely polemical' purpose of refuting them. Now, he says, he can allow for disinterested inquiry on that question.

The trouble here is that it is not true that Ayer entertained the after-life question *only* for polemical purposes. In the course of his life work, he'd actually turned that and similar questions over and back, with apparent curiosity and open-mindedness.[9] The naïve dogmatism he now pretends to recollect would not have become a positivist, or a dedicated empiricist for that matter, and Ayer did not really seem prone to it. Bewilderingly, however, he now acts as if he'd already gone through the disinterested inquiry—the one purportedly never before attempted. Suddenly it's all been achieved, with the probability of survival coming up no higher than he'd ever thought it would. But when was the disinterested inquiry done? Not in his 'purely polemical' period surely. Instantaneously, then? And where? In a closet?

[8] It appeared in the *Spectator*, October 15, 1988, and has been reprinted in *The Meaning of Life*, op. cit., 205–8.

[9] See for example, Ayer, *The Origins of Pragmatism: Studies in the Philosophy of Charles Sanders Peirce and William James* (San Francisco: Freeman, Cooper, 1968), 265–77; also *The Central Questions of Philosophy* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1973), 108, 112f, 123; also "The Glass is on the Table," a 1971 televised discussion between Ayer and Arne Naess, moderated by Fons Elders, which first appeared in *Reflexive Water: The Basic Concerns of Mankind*, ed. Fons Elders (London: Souvenir Press; Ontario: J. M. Dent, 1974), and was reprinted in *The Meaning of Life*, op. cit., 99–132, especially 114 & 123.

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In sum, the remarks that purport to correct the 'misunderstanding' that Ayer's experience weakened his scepticism are themselves made of doubtful stuff. They seem pitched to distract, more than to clarify. Perhaps, then, there was no misunderstanding? One suspects that, rightly or wrongly, Ayer really is less of a sceptic about an after-life than he used to be.

He had two motives, he now says, for his piece in the *Telegraph*. The first was to record experiences 'sufficiently remarkable to be worth recording.' And this seems right enough. The second was to 'rebut' the claim "*which had been attributed to me*, that I had discovered nothing 'on the other side' [italics mine]." But this can't be right, since it was Ayer himself who offered that hypothesis, in almost those words. There is a bit of discomfort in recognizing that Ayer is projecting onto unnamed others what he had set down just two months before as his own first, proposed self-decoding—an odd sort of plagiarism in reverse, or denial. The sense of nervous chatter is there again. What *is* he trying to say?

Whoever exhibited it, the real 'misunderstanding' now turns out to be have been a logical mistake, merely. One could not have returned from an 'other side' where one had discovered nothing, since merely to have been to an other side and come back would have been to discover *something* (for example, the trajectory one had traversed). What he, or whoever said it, should have said was that his experience did not imply that there *was* an 'other side.' Here he is careful to add that it did not imply that there *wasn't* an other side either. Both points are equally valid. Yet Colin McGinn, who takes Ayer sharply to task for mistakenly implying that a perceptual experience could find out anything metaphysical, forbears to second Ayer's corollary observation that *it couldn't rule it out* either.[10] If Ayer were writing his 'Postmortem' just to stay in the club by scotching rumours that he had gone over to the supernaturalists, he

[10] Reviewing *The Meaning of Life*, Colin McGinn registers this objection to 'That Undiscovered Country': "The problem here comes from unclarity about what exactly Ayer means by 'delusive' and 'veridical.' …The trouble is that the words he chooses mean the opposite of what he means: to ask whether an experience is veridical is to ask whether the world was really the way the experience made it seem, not whether one really *had* the experience. Here, I fear, his faulty philosophy of perception let him down, causing him to utter words that would naturally be seized upon as an abnegation of his lifelong opposition to the supernatural." See McGinn, 'Ayer: Old Scores,' in *Minds and Bodies: philosophers and their ideas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 54–61, reprinted from the *London Review of Books* (August 30, 1990).

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too might have allowed the unclubbable second point to go without saying. The sociable Ayer seems to be wrestling with the philosophical Ayer. We don't know who's on top, but we know there's a scuffle going on.

That heart death does not entail brain death is a point he says he did not stress enough in the *Telegraph* piece. Here he reaffirms his earlier view that personal consciousness depends on the body. Yet, he notes, even that dependency does not rule out an after-life, since one's body might be somehow revived, or a new one be on offer. The trouble with the value 'Christianity' attaches to the revived body is that it would forever fix us in our *present* bodies, which might revive in the same defective state as when we last quit them. (The objection would not delay a 'Christian,' since the Creator could surely return to us the bodies—improved or not—that it would be best for us to have.) Ayer finds two more barriers to the 'Christian' view: there would have to be a time lapse between quitting the earthly and assuming the post mortem body. Up till now he has held that we can't maintain personal identity except if we are *continuously* embodied. Also, there would need to be a 'future world.' Ayer can't make sense of a future world.

There is however one hypothesis that sidesteps most of these problems and still makes an after-life thinkable: reincarnation. Granted, there might still be that troublesome time lapse between quitting the present body and assuming the next. (If there were, Ayer's view that personal consciousness depends on its body would again suffer checkmate, unless we held out for an inter-incarnational body of some unfamiliar kind.) But at least we would not have to be fitted into the same ill-assorted bodies that we had before. A man might come back as a woman, a Christian as a Hindu—the possibilities are all left cheerfully open. Best of all from Ayer's standpoint, we could return to the same familiar empirical world we know! Furthermore, a case for reincarnation could in principle be built to scientific specifications. 'All that would be required is that there be good evidence that many persons are able to furnish information about previous lives of such a character and such an abundance that it would seem they could not possess the information unless they themselves had lived the lives in question.'

If all these conditions were met, one last conundrum would be left. One might be remembering, as one's own, 'experiences that one never had.' That would give an unfamiliar stretch to the concept of memory. In that case, 'there is a matter for choice' of interpretations: one could either change one's concept of persons so as to include reincarnation, or else stretch one's concept of memory, to

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exclude it. However frustrating it may seem, there is 'no fact of the matter' to tip it either way. One is left in the zone of freedom. On this note of metaphysical insouciance, we have now heard the last of Ayer on Ayer's near-death experience.

* * *

We have seen that Ayer tried, with various starts and stops, to decode an experience that came to him on the brink of death, which he thought 'sufficiently remarkable' to be brought to public notice. Right after it, he said clearly that he had died and come back from the after-life. By the time he was writing for publication, he doubted this, but said he'd been left more open to such possibilities. We have found Ayer's proposed decodings of his first post-revival *remarks* implausible and incomplete. Much was left unexplained and the rest badly explained. Of the main story—about space being out of joint and the painful light—he offered no interpretation at all. His musings on the philosophical implications of an after-life were airily inconclusive. They need not detain us here. There was however one question, on which he had done prior philosophical work, and that he came back to in both essays: whether we need a body in order to be who we are.

Earlier, he said, he had gone on record dissenting from the views of Hume and William James. Those philosophers had based one's identity just on the series of one's experiences. By contrast, Ayer had held out for the dependence of personal identity on the person's body or bodies.[11] Now, for the *Telegraph,* he concedes that he'd been 'unable to give a satisfactory account of the way in which a series of experiences is tied to a particular body at any given time.' Then, for the *Spectator,* he writes, slightly differently, 'nobody has yet succeeded in specifying the relations which would have to hold between the members of such a series for them to constitute a person.' So, in both essays, he concedes a philosophic *failure* to figure out the role played by the body in determining who we are. The near-death experience included a sense of frustration, and (as noted earlier[12]) it came upon Ayer in his philosophic capacity. Our most charitable course would seem to be to follow down these hints, and look next at his philosophical work on the body. Perhaps it can help us decode the predicament he found himself in when his heart stopped—better than he himself has done.

Ayer regarded the body as a special sort of physical object in

[11] In 'That Undiscovered Country,' in *The Meaning of Life*, op. cit., 202.
[12] See above, 509.

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space. One problem that seems to stand out in his long career, which he returns to in one way or another and professes to be troubled by, is how to get physical objects in space out of sense data.[13] By 'sense data' he does not mean the discrete blips into which Hume apparently deconstructed experience. Ayer allows sense experience to be a continuum, not marked by little cuts. Hume, he says, must just have meant the discreteness of sense items to be taken 'logically,' in that the presence of one item does not *entail* the presence of any other.[14] That said, Ayer still finds it necessary to talk about sense data. That is, the sense perception of the table must be distinguished from the real table, because the latter would endure in space and time even when *un*perceived. The existence of the real table, then, is known inferentially. The perceived table is known directly.

The various counters to this view—the ones that came before and the ones that supposedly have superseded Ayer's—he checks off and dismisses one by one. The alternative associated with G. E. Moore, that the real table is known to be that because it satisfies 'table' criteria, founders, for Ayer, on the point that table-satisfying criteria themselves shift and are permeable to cultural and historical influences. What the distant tribesman thinks he sees differs from what we think we see. To J. L. Austin's demurral, that it is not *good usage* to speak of the table I see as 'evidence' for an inference to a real table, Ayer rejoins: 'The fallacy in it lies in the assumption that if … it is not good usage to assert some proposition p, it follows that p is false.'[15] By the same token (we might add), proposition p might be false, yet its assertion *be* good usage (as when a misleading and nasty insinuation is deftly delivered). Nor can the problem be got round by more recent post-positivist trends in epistemology, like the causal theory or central state materialism.[16] In both these cases,

[13] For example, much of *The Problem of Knowledge* (Baltimore, Middlesex: Penguin, 1956) is given over to refuting the sceptic's claim that one can't pull an external world out of sense data. It is still a major theme of *The Central Questions of Philosophy,* op. cit. The topic dominates the discussion of current philosophical issues in Ayer's last essay, 'A Defense of Empiricism,' which was to have been presented to the August 1988 World Congress of Philosophy (it was read on Ayer's behalf, instead), and is reprinted in *A. J. Ayer: Memorial Essays*, ed. A. Phillips Griffiths (Cambridge and New York: 1991). The theme is again adverted to in the BBC's 'Interview with A. J. Ayer' of April 27, 1989, also reprinted in *Memorial Essays*. Ayer died two months later, on June 27, 1989.

[14] *Central Questions*, op. cit., 115.

[15] *Origins of Pragmatism*, op. cit., 295f.

[16] *Central Questions*, op. cit., 127–34.

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he holds, the causes and the brain states depend cognitively on our perceptions of them, so that perception is and remains primitive. If Ayer's counter-arguments are all sound, then his problem—of getting from sense perception to physical objects—endures.

Space is 'slightly out of joint' in Ayer's dream (as for simplicity's sake we will now call it). Let us remember the key role assigned to space by Ayer. The very meaning of objectivity is existence in space even when unperceived. The real table is the one that exists in space. Space is the guarantor. Without the space in which to locate physical objects, the latter would remain private and subjective. (Time is parasitic on space, since we mark off times by the motion of perceived things through space.)[17] The upshot is that, for Ayer, if space does not work right, one cannot get out of the private and subjective and into the real, common world.

As a stylist, Ayer is voluble, rapid, fluent, and nearly unerring. No word ever seems out of place. He gives the very impression of insouciance that must have led McGinn to complain, 'You never get the feeling, reading Ayer, that philosophy is painful—that thinking seriously about it *hurts*.'[18] Yet in his dream—where space is out of joint and he can't get it fixed—Ayer tells us, 'I became more and more desperate until the experience came to an end.' If his agitation is *philosophic*, then this is quite proper. For this dreamer qua philosopher, it is a matter of utmost urgency to get space to work right. Philosophers *ought* to be desperate when they meet what they cannot help but find important, but cannot solve either. The light in which that puts things *must* be 'painful.'

Qua philosopher, *did* Ayer succeed in getting space to work right? Let us first sketch out what he has to say about it. If, after explain-

[17] 'Our judgements as to what can exist are made in the light of a theory in which objects are ordered in a single spatio-temporal system. This theory may be flexible enough to allow for there being objects which are not located in space, but at least they must be located in time. But now the way in which we arrange things in an objective temporal order is by first assigning temporal positions to physical events, originally by correlating sequences of percepts which are obtained from different points of view … .' Ayer,*Central Questions*, op. cit., 125, and see also 80 and 86. In *Origins of Pragmatism*, Ayer repeats this in almost the same words, but there he clarifies what he means by 'points of view': 'Since the point of view of an observer depends upon his position in space, the correlation relies upon the fact that in general experiences are attached to bodies'(op. cit., 266f). To sum it up: existence, for Ayer, means membership in a spatio-temporal system, and temporal relations are cognitively dependent on spatial relations.

[18] Colin McGinn, in 'Ayer: Old Scores,' op. cit.

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ing and then evaluating his construction, we find conundrums in his thinking about space, we might look to see if his dream seems somehow to mirror them. If so, this might help us to crack the code of the dream, and perhaps to decode his first enigmatic remarks on reviving. If, as we have seen, Ayer was not able to do as much, it was not for want of trying. Our present task, then, is just, respectfully, to finish what he started. If he can help us, so much the better!

The earlier work that Ayer cites by name in the *Telegraph* piece, and alludes to in the follow-up for the *Spectator,* is *Origins of Pragmatism,* where he closely recapitulated William James's thesis about the genesis of space. One thing Ayer particularly liked about James's work was the 'attempt to show how the concept of space is capable of being "cashed" in sensory terms.'[19] In *Origins*, Ayer raised objections and proposed emendations to James. Later, he drew on the whole discussion for his own construction in *Central Questions of Philosophy*. As the latter is the work in which Ayer's own views may be said to stand clear, we will learn more about Ayer if we go to that work directly.

For Ayer, as we have seen, our knowledge of the world of physical objects in space must be inferential. The task he sets himself in *Central Questions* is to show how the primitive elements of experience (the 'appearances') can sustain those longer, wider inferences.[20] Such a project has a familiar and respectable history. From the beginnings of British empiricism, philosophers have tried, from sensory beginnings, to launch themselves on the wide sea of inference, but time and again we have seen them beached on a skein of 'insuperable difficulties.'[21] They run aground when they start with sense perceptions, which would seem to be occurrences private to the perceiver. For the question follows, how can the perceiver know that any other besides himself has similar private perceptions? Even if others do, how can mere sense perceptions give any perceiver sufficient reason to believe that physical objects in common space exist?

These familiar difficulties, Ayer proposes to *dissolve* by positing a sort of bare bones perceiver whom he calls 'the observer,' who is not yet a person and for whom, therefore, the public/private distinction has not yet arisen.[22] Out of this 'neutral' observer—in the course of the experiences he undergoes and builds up—private persons and public physical objects will eventually be produced, step by step.

[19] *Origins of Pragmatism*, op. cit., 232.
[20] *Central Questions*, op. cit., 91.
[21] Ibid., 98.
[22] Ibid., 93f, 98f.

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The 'construction,' of persons and objects, goes like this: at the most primitive stratum of experience we find qualia, defined as 'universals which can be exemplified in anyone's experience.'[23] These get particularized as 'percepts' only when our observer records, locates, or describes them. (Lest we wonder how he can *locate* percepts without having first acquired the concept of space, Ayer adopts from James—who might have had it from Bishop Berkeley—the view that qualia come already spatialized. So we don't just see a red dot. We see a red *surface*. Visual data have, as James put it, "'the element of voluminousness."[24] We see shades of colour in their adjacency to other shades. We don't superadd space as the framework into which these shades must then somehow learn to fit. James's concept of space is, we recall Ayer noting with approval, '"cashed" in sensory terms.' Starting where James does, Ayer's problem will be how to transform the space of experience into the space of scientific law. It will *not* be how to get extension-less data to be extensible.)

The observer will next encounter some of these percepts as 'patterns.' Although Ayer describes the patterns in terms 'borrowed' from physical objects (e.g., 'cat-patterns,' 'chair-patterns'), such descriptions are not to be taken literally for his posited observer, whom Ayer has not yet equipped with language or the concept of physical objects.[25] Rather, patterns represent experiences that have recurred for the observer, and thus prompt recognitions and rudimentary classifications—all corrigible in the light of further experience. As they become thus 'standardized' for the observer, Ayer will call them 'visual continuants.'[26]

Out of this primary mix of ingredients, qualia, percepts and patterns, the observer has next to evolve for himself the concepts of space and of time (both viewed as indefinitely extensible, or continuous, and thereby subject to scientific law). Space and time will each have a similar genesis. Because 'sense fields' recede from view gradually, and their successor fields replace them gradually, old formations linger, overshadowing the new, and the earlier formations come to be remembered. The new, ushered in slowly, come to be expected. (Presumably, memory begins as a holding on to the last bit of what we still see, and expectation, a grasping at what we already see, but as yet see only in part.) Memory and expectation are

[23] Ibid., 94.

[24] *Origins of Pragmatism*, op. cit., 225, citing James's *Principles of Psychology*, Vol. II, 134.

[25] *Central Questions*, op. cit., 90f.

[26] Ibid., 101.

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experiences that train consciousness to fill in the gaps in such visual field successions. So consciousness exerts its power-of-making-continuous, and from that exerted power comes the concept of 'temporal relations as being … at least indefinitely extended.'[27] The notion of spatial adjacency develops out of inferred structural analogies between successive visual fields, and this inference, extended from the seen to the unseen, comes to be conceived as space 'indefinitely extensible.'[28] So 'time' and 'space' have been delivered, as the concepts referring—beyond direct experience—to uniform and continuous fields of experience.

'Motion' arises as a concept when the observer notices that similar percepts can 'appear successively at neighbouring places… .' In order to notice this, he has first to abstract the concept of place from its occupants. He may then treat all the members of the perceptual series as a single percept in motion (presumably the way a film comes to be experienced out of a rapid succession of stills). Or, if there is no actual series to be set in motion in this way, the observer may infer that the new but similar-appearing percept is an earlier one that must have moved from its earlier place (Somewhat absent-mindedly, Ayer adds that his observer may also conclude that the percept has moved if he has previously *seen* percepts of that kind in motion. With motion, it's less clear than with space and time, what the *concept* adds to the *perception*. Perhaps, by the concept of motion, Ayer means the sort of motion to which the scientific laws of motion apply, since this is what he meant by the concept of space. If so, his discussion treats of motion ambiguously, being both a psychology of the perception of motion and an account of the birth of an abstract concept of motion, without distinguishing these two aspects clearly.)[29]

The concept of 'the observer's body' will be crucial to the formation of personal identity. It comes about through a confluence of factors. First, there are constant visual aspects to the body experience that 'stand in constant spatial relation to one another.'[30] There are also unique correlations between visual and tactile data, as when we can simultaneously see and feel our fingers touching the wall, whose surface we also feel. There is the observer's capacity, uniquely through his control of his body in response to his desires, to shut out or to access new experience. Then there is the way

[27] Ibid., 99.
[28] Ibid., 100.
[29] Ibid., 102.
[30] Ibid.

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percepts associated with the body are a pervasive background to all our experience. Though the observer needs no more evidence than this to begin owning his body, the arrival of other observers thickens the identification.

What happens next is that additional observers do come into view. They will recognize him through his body, communicate with him through the shared language of physical gesture, and confirm his sense of his body as the medium of his presence to himself and to others. When others come on the scene in this way, the demarcations between private and subjective, public and objective will materialize with them. So the body is a key transitional concept in completing the construction of a full world. Others make gestures that our original observer interprets as informative 'signs.' Some of these confirm his prior experiences and support what's been taking shape as his 'main account' of the world. Some fail to do so, as when he reports dreams, hallucinations, daydreams, and other 'subsidiary accounts' that—even when alone—he had found dissonant with his 'main account.' As he reciprocally confirms or disconfirms their reports to him, he concludes that some happenings in experience are shared and public, whilst others must be private and unshared. For the first time, he conceives of himself as a bodily person—with a private side—among bodily persons, who also have their private sides, all in a world of shared, physical objects.

Such is the gestation process by which an independent world comes to be. The decisive cut comes when these sharable 'main accounts' are 'cut loose from their moorings' in perception, abstracted out and regarded as causally responsible for the percepts that originally engendered *them*. The Titans of scientific naturalism are engendered by the perceptual gods, but swallow their progenitors, we might say. Like the uniform space and time in which they are located, physical objects are known inferentially. They are products of our theories. As to whether they exist in themselves, that question is left open for decision. It is not decidable theoretically, since criteria for existence are internal to theories and there is no meta-theory or meta-criterion for the case.[31]

By now we have a fully furnished world, a completed 'construction.' The discussions that follow, in *Central Questions*, will fill in remaining philosophical blanks with reflections that don't necessarily depend on *this* construction. Thus Ayer will explain how we secure personal identity. It will not be by memory alone, since we can lose our memories; the body is the more reliable

[31] Ibid., 108–11.

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identifier. He will ask whether there are or can be mental substances. They cannot be *logically* excluded, but the concept does no work, since discrete thoughts, or signs, each referring to its own designated experience, will suffice for all the unifications we need. He will ask whether physicalism can be right. No, it can't be. Even its futuristic ideal of establishing a one-to-one correlation between experiences and brain events presupposes their distinctness—one cannot *correlate* a sameness. He will attend to the question of how it is that we know our own minds, or other minds. In the case of our own minds, it won't be behavioristically, for we have direct experience of our thoughts and feelings. As for other minds, we know them by inference to an hypothesis having unrivaled explanatory power.[32]

A critique of these further general reflections is not our business here. We will confine our own criticisms to the primary layers of the construction. Ayer has not offered his construction as a psychology of perception. Neither is it meant to be a history, either of the child or of the race. What status does he assign it then? He terms it 'a fictitious story … [where he has] represented what is in effect a process of analysis as a process of construction.'[33] As a method of philosophical exposition, the fictional story has a respectable history and purpose. It has been used to show the elements present in a compounded fact more vividly, by letting the reader feel that he has been present at the genesis of the compound. Such stories also show why the components were necessary to the compound, and vice versa.

So Plato's fictional story of an ideal state in the *Republic* helps us to see what psychic forces the dialectician must master, and why the quest for political justice is necessarily tragic. Hobbes's fiction of a state of nature in the *Leviathan* helps us to notice the factors any viable polity must restrain. Descartes' purported autobiography in his *Meditations* shows us the worst case for cognition, which it must be secured against.

To what extent does Ayer's fictional story belong in the venerable tradition? How can we tell? If the simple elements out of which he puts together the complex fact are described plausibly and unambiguously, if the complex is not found already present in the simples that are supposed to produce it, and if the fictional story actually permits us to notice features of the real-life complex that would otherwise remain dark to us, then we can admit Ayer's story into the

[32] Ibid., 112–36.
[33] Ibid., 106.

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company of the helpful philosophical fictions—those that give us an analysis in the form of a pretended history.[34]

With these questions in mind, let us go over Ayer's story. We recall that it starts with qualia, here defined as 'universals.' The definition is puzzling. Ayer's aim has been to start with sense appearance, yet avoid its problem of getting from the private experience to the common. Yet, if the simplest elements of sense experience are *defined* as already common, Ayer will never have to solve that problem. He need only stipulate it out of play. If qualia were true universals, we would be starting there. We'd have no problem of getting to commonality. Our problem would be Plato's, of saving the appearances. We would have left behind James, and all the empiricists who want to cash their concepts in sensory terms. Still, on Ayer's behalf it may be argued, even the most dedicated empiricist may reach beyond sense data, if there is no other way to account for some phenomenon. Might not Ayer's universals be that kind of useful hypothesis? It seems not. Qua universals, Ayer's qualia do no work, since commonality still has to be accounted for by a separate route. In sum, the last outcome of the construction (the complex), has been stipulated into its first phase (the simple). No light is thereby shed on any otherwise dark feature of experience. Rather this way of treating qualia is itself obscure. In sum, we find no reason for Ayer to stipulate that qualia be universals—save the strategic one of dodging a problem. As Galileo is supposed to have said, under his breath, about the earth—that, nonetheless, it moves—so we may say of Ayer's epistemological problem: nonetheless, it troubles.

Qualia enter into experience (becoming 'percepts') when so designated by a percipient called 'the observer.' Such a being might be supposed to entertain percepts of his own and, if he does, to force on our notice the unbridged gap between private experience and the public world. But again, Ayer spirits him away from that gap. He is *defined* as not anyone, not yet a person, neither private nor public, just because these categories have not yet surfaced *for him*. Does the fact that he doesn't know himself to have his own experience mean that he doesn't have it? After all, he's been granted memory. He can operate logically, since he will reject patterns he has previously recognized, in case they are not born out in subsequent experience. So he can classify and then reclassify, corrigibly. We have seen him able

[34] I owe particular thanks to Jerry L. Martin for his illuminating discussion of the function of fictional stories in philosophical exposition.

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to fill gaps in perception, making experience more continuous than his immediate percepts look. Soon he will abstract space and time, as indefinitely and uniformly extensible, from the percepts that merely take up space. He will learn that some of his own experiences do cohere, while others do not. All this before anyone else comes on the scene to help him discover that he is a private person. These combinings, discombinings, recognitions, rescindings and progressive syntheses of experience into a main account of the way the world works are constantly presented as 'the observer's'—yet, just as often, as *no one's*.

(Parenthetically I am moved to recall that, in the only conversation I had with A. J. Ayer, he told me that he had left Classics and gone into Philosophy to find cures for 'Plato's bad arguments.' Let us hope Plato is feeling better now.)

Ayer denies that he is presupposing, in the reduced account, the 'system we are purporting to construct.' This denial is based on his claim that percepts don't 'logically entail' physical objects. However, the entailment he is here denying doesn't run from simples like percepts up to the full complex of a system, but runs the other way (from surreptitiously presupposed complexes to the simples they already contain). Before we deny *that* sort of entailment, we will need to see more clearly what's in a percept, and who or what is locating the percepts in space and time. If 'qualia' (inexplicably, 'universals') become 'percepts' (locatable particulars) only because they are registered by an 'observer,' and if the observer turns out to have many of the features of a person in a physical and cultural world (of chairs and tame felines, a.k.a. 'chair-patterns' and 'cat-patterns'), then it may well be the case that the concept of a percept follows from the concept of pattern, which in turn follows from the concept of a physico-cultural object, just as the concept of an observer follows from the concept of a person. The vagueness of the postulated simple elements cannot do duty for certainty on this point. Nor can Ayer's disclaimer, 'I have taken care not to characterize persons as private entities, but equally I have not characterized them as public,' do more than call attention to a strategy. By its very twists and turns, the strategy keeps reminding us of the epistemological problem it was devised to sidestep.

The birth of space in this narrative turns on a feature of primary experience that Ayer continues to assume: its discreteness. The experiential bits are no longer momentary. Ayer follows James in blending sense data into such continuities as 'sense fields' (defined in rather veiled fashion as qualia, designated, 'with their spatio-

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temporal relations').[35] Space will be constructed out of sense fields, each continuous internally, but discontinuous with its neighbouring sense field. What consciousness must learn, in order for space to come into its own as indefinite extension, is how to fill in the gaps between these discrete sense fields.

If we are to evaluate Ayer's story about space, we have to ask the right question about it. Whether he succeeded in showing how consciousness acquires this gap-filling skill is the wrong question. He succeeded as well as anybody does, who gives himself this assignment. The right question is, how and when did this realm of experience get cut into discrete parts in the first place?

The story purports to be fictional, so we don't get the answer by consulting a psychology or a history. Ayer is not claiming that we ourselves put the pieces of space together that way. It's a philosopher's story, but not an original one. Its defenders are defending their philosophical ancestors, the founders of British empiricism: John Locke, George Berkeley, and David Hume.[36] Did the founders find their experience cut into discrete bits? We don't know, we may never know, what they actually saw or felt. We know that they went to work reconnecting experiential bits quite as if they had found them broken apart and in need of reconnection. Why?

We think of the founding 'empiricists' as oppositional to Descartes, their arch 'rationalist' counterpart. But it is Descartes who first claimed to have *the experience* of, say, a shade of red, peeled off the table that *is* red. He did not claim to have that experience naively. It was, he concluded, 'hyperbolical.' It may be viewed as a device for exploring the limits of epistemological doubt.[37]

There is reason to doubt that this doubt ever got doubted. In one of the many fateful moments in the trauma of modernity, a whole train of argument was set in motion by the mistaken assumption that a philosopher had uncovered the primitive rudiments of experience itself. At best, Descartes had devised a thought experiment. His meticulous intellectual biographer, Stephen Gaukroger, 'found

[35] *Central Questions*, op. cit., 92f.

[36] 'I have a Humean picture of the world as consisting in discrete observable episodes, with no room in it for modalities or intentional objects.' So writes Ayer, in 'Philosophy,' originally in *The Owl of Minerva: Philosophers on Philosophy*, eds. Charles J. Bontemps and S. Jack Odell (New York: McGraw Hill, 1975), and reprinted in *The Meaning of Life*, op. cit., 60, 53–62.

[37] Rene Descartes, Meditation VI, in *Meditations on First Philosophy*, *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, tr. Elizabeth S. Haldane and G. R. T. Ross, Vol. I (London: Cambridge University Press, 1931), 198f.

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no evidence that Descartes ever went through a sceptical crisis of any kind: he had plenty of intellectual crises, but none of them, so far as I have been able to tell, were sceptical.' Gaukrager found no evidence that methodic doubt was anything other than a rhetorical device resorted to by an adroit politician of ideas 'in the context of providing a metaphysical legitimation of his natural philosophy, a task which he never even contemplated before the condemnation of Galileo in 1633, and which was a direct response to that condemnation.'[38]

Experiential doubt arises when someone or something occasions it. Otherwise, absent such occasions, we see red tables—*not* reds—and they have their dimensions in a space *not* cut into puzzle pieces, thus in no need of being fitted together. We see the visual occurrence and its interpretation inseparably—hence the properties of objects inseparably from their objects *and* in spatial relations—not because it is good usage to see them that way, but just because it is impossible not to. We may nest our original seeings-cum-interpretings inside more inclusive and speculative interpretings, and these may raise questions of how to correlate the original with the wider, more consciously inferential views. But our original *take* on objects in space was not in need of assembling. So Ayer's construction of space would perhaps 'work,' if the thing needed to be constructed. As it is, the construction fits no need. The pieces were never disassembled.

There is more, and we could go on, but our task was neither to provide close commentary on nor a general critique of the philosophical findings of Ayer. It was, from the beginning, to decode his dream. We looked first to Ayer's own decoding efforts, but did not get help there. We then followed out the suggestion we made at the outset, that his dream came to him in his philosopher's office and capacity. For the sake of our assignment, we have summarized the foundation layers of his philosophical construction of bodies in space—a construction to which, at a higher level, he refers ruefully in 'That Undiscovered Country,' and 'Postscript to a Post Mortem.' In our evaluation of that construction, it has seemed to us a building that would fall down if anyone tried to live in it. Did Ayer think otherwise? Did he think the building would stand? For if he himself viewed his construction negatively, then his dream may well have the significance of a self-refutation.

How did Ayer view his construction? It carried forward the anti-sceptical project of *The Problem of Knowledge*, and of that project

[38] Stephen Gaukroger, *Descartes: an intellectual biography*, (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1995), 11, and cf.12ff, 180, and 184ff.

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Ayer later said, 'I think I rather cheated in *The Problem of Knowledge*. It seems to me that I gave scepticism a good run, and then in the end … I took away from the sceptic the victory he had won, like a corrupt referee in a boxing match.'[39] In a final interview with the BBC, just two months before his death, Ayer once more likened himself to a bribed referee—again in connection with the way he'd overruled scepticism in *The Problem of Knowledge*.[40] The construction of an external world from sensory beginnings that we have studied in *Central Questions* was Ayer's major philosophical effort to disarm scepticism. An earlier version of the construction is in *Origins of Pragmatism*, (Chapter 3, subsection 4, 'The construction outlined'). It is somewhat less detailed, but—in its account of the generation of space and of the public/private distinction—it is the same construction that we have here outlined and criticized. Toward the end of it, Ayer writes, 'An unkind critic might say of it that it abundantly illustrated what Russell has called the advantages of theft over honest toil.'[41] These self-criticisms are not the usual fare. They don't speak of a task yet uncompleted, or of powerful inherent difficulties. They say that the way Ayer effected the 'leap' from sense data to an external world, and the way he later constructed an external world out of sensory beginnings, recurrently seemed *to him* a cheat, a rigged game, or a species of intellectual theft. His best efforts pricked his philosophical *conscience*, and continued to do so to the very end of his public life as a philosopher.

We shall decode Ayer's dream by homing in on his construction. Let us try to imagine ourselves as inside the body and the perceptual apparatus of Ayer's 'observer,' and as right now *doing* the observing. Of course, he or it has been described by Ayer as 'no one'—at least no one like us. But he is, minimally, a being capable of experience, and as such we are fully as entitled to imagine ourselves having his experience as Ayer must have been, since Ayer constructed it. If he is, as Ayer avers, a work of 'imagination,' we are free to imagine what it would be like to *be* him.

This is, of course, a highly subjective experiment, but I submit that, directly one imagines *oneself* as the observer, collecting the dubious puzzle pieces—the qualia, the percepts, the patterns, the continuity of space—and putting them together in *one's own* consciousness (the consciousness of a personlike being-that-is-not-

[39] Ayer, 'The Glass is on the Table,' in *The Meaning of Life*, op. cit.,101.

[40] 'An Interview with A. J. Ayer,' in *Memorial Essays*, op. cit., 220.

[41] *Origins of Pragmatism*, op. cit., 315. In his last BBC interview, Ayer says of his construction (more forgivingly), 'It's a trick, but I think it's a legitimate trick,' An Interview," *Memorial Essays*, op. cit., 224.

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one), one arrives at a place quite like the land of Ayer's dream. One gets the distinctly uncomfortable feeling of living under a sky, and in a landscape, the pieces of which, 'like a badly fitted jigsaw puzzle,' don't fit. Space, assembled like that, *must* be 'slightly out of joint.' It is the least one can say. Since the laws of nature, in Ayer's construction, depend directly on space, they too would predictably fall out of synch, and cease 'to function as they should.' The ministers of space, who might help, are not reachable. The powers of the ministers are clearly delegated powers, and derive from the 'light responsible for the government of the universe' (the highest explanatory level). Nonetheless, the ministers' work has to be done correctly on its own level. Ayer, trying to bring the present disarray or dereliction to their attention, stands—like the philosopher he is—betwixt and between the account *he* has given and its so-far inaccessible corrective. As for the painfulness of the light, the demand for intelligibility cannot cease to pain the philosopher—till he has met it. Nor can he get at the flaws of space through time, as he hopes to, since he must first wave a physical object (his watch) through space (as, qua philosopher, he has frequently noted), just in order to bring time into cognitive view. No other interpretation of Ayer's dream that we have canvassed fits it so well as this: that it is a bodying forth of Ayer's construction of physical objects in space from sense perception. If reality were like Ayer's construction, the dream shows what it would feel like to live in it. It would feel like a self-refutation.

So far, the model we have followed finds Ayer's dream reflecting a pained philosophical conscience in regard to a central and unsurpassed block of his work, which in his dream he is compelled to *inhabit*. In this respect, we are reminded of Dante's Inferno, where the souls are condemned to live their own fateful choices. (Thus suicides are perpetually turned into trees, because they chose not to respect their human forms, and so on.) The moral seems clear. If philosophers foreknew that they would have to *live inside their own constructions*, it might sober them more sincerely than mere fears of peer refutation could ever do. And we in the profession might come to see Ayer as a sort of Marley's Ghost, coming back to warn his old colleagues, colleagues who—unlike Marley's partner—have been visited with no premonitory dreams of their own in the sixteen 'wild Decembers' that, since then, have 'melted into spring.'

We turn now to Ayer's first remarks on awakening. The earliest and briefest, 'You are all mad!' is, as we have already concluded, the report of a person who, on his own instant view, had outlived his body, *despite* the conventional opinion that one can't do that. The

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approved opinion now seems to him so out of touch that it counts as mad.

Ayer's remarks to Francette Drin seem in a case by themselves. Why was it an effort, the first time a failed effort, for Ayer even to die safely (to cross the river)? We can suppose that this reflects the unexpectedness of his passage. Why did his thoughts become persons? We can suppose that this reflects the consequential character of lifelong thoughts that suddenly bodied forth for him as real and conscious existences. But here we venture beyond what we claim to have seen, and must simply admit to the reader, 'Your guess is as good as mine.'[42]

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[42] A first sketch for this paper was presented to the Philosophy Society of Brooklyn College of The City University of New York in the spring of 2000. Among those I must thank, who participated by their objections and expansions, are my philosophical colleague Jonathan Adler, the writer Carey Harrison, and the wonderful Philosophy majors at Brooklyn College. Michael Smithurst provided helpful materials and indispensable views of Ayer, the man and the thinker. Only a hint of that appears here, but it nerved me to go on. Elmer Sprague prodded me to take up the project when it languished, and also supplied references. Mary Wiseman gave the sustenance of her refinement of mind. Jerry L. Martin discussed many points with me, and my debt to him is large indeed. Together with D. M. Armstrong, all these colleagues have sustained my sense of the close links between philosophy and friendship.

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