INTRODUCTION

The Thinning Out of the World

Theological beliefs forced late-medieval thinkers into an epistemically precarious situation. These thinkers were investigating the consequences of a certain philosophical position: that defined by an idea of the absolutely unconditioned willing of an omnipotent God. Because of that focus on the divine will instead of on God's intellect, such a position is called theological voluntarism. It seemed that if things in the world had an intrinsic metaphysical character, then there would be a limit on the power of God's free will to make anything move in any way at all. The world had to be radically thinned out, with a minimal degree of determinacy on its own, so that it became the most appropriate site for the free play of God's willing. God's ways are so superior to and incommensurable with ours that we can never hope to understand the metaphysical design that he has placed in the universe.

Humans might respond to this situation by resorting to prayer and by surrendering their metaphysical and epistemic ambitions. A different response is available as well, says Hans Blumenberg in studying this period.[1] We might give up, as we have to, the hope of understanding the metaphysical design of the universe itself, for that would require understanding the working of God's ineffable will. But we might then make a strategic retreat inward along the chain leading from reality to our beliefs about it. Here too we might encounter a problematic situation. God in his absolute freedom, not through evil intent but perhaps through doing what is necessary for an individual's salvation, might make certain sensory impressions appear to us even when there are no corresponding objects. So we might be wildly wrong in what we suppose is the metaphysical reality behind our experiences. Yet it turns out that epistemic modesty here can purchase a kind of epistemic ambition. Suppose I focus just on the sensory

[1] Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, Robert Wallace (trans.) (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983). See especially 125–226. My presentation relies a good deal on this richly insightful book.

appearings to me and use them as the basis for constructing a model of the world. This model, properly adjusted over time, allows me to make accurate predictions of future sensory impressions that come my way and to intervene successfully in the world, but I make no claims that it captures the metaphysics of how matters truly stand. I succeed merely in "saving the appearances." My strategy thus combines great modesty with a robust self-assertion: reality, so far as I can be concerned with it, will be what I can secure through my mental or linguistic constructions, as these work on data already well inward from the world itself. I have a machinery for handling and ordering the great pressure of stimulation upon my inner world, but I do not claim that it mirrors features of how matters are truly arranged, an achievement I cannot hope for in a world designed by God's free willing.

So there is excellent motivation in the late-medieval world for a radical emptying out of reality, for assigning a minimal content to whatever determinate character it may be said to have on its own. That project of emptying out will be aimed, first of all, at the Aristotelian metaphysics of Thomas Aquinas and of many other scholastics. If natural objects have an Aristotelian nature or essence of their own, if they have necessary properties and determine their own conditions of identity and sameness, then there would be an unacceptable limitation on God's free will, which might, for all we know, make oak trees produce unicorns. God in creating a particular individual cannot be limited by the confines of an already existing essence. So, for William of Ockham and others, God creates only individuals; sameness of kind is due not to shared essences but to our habits of applying the same word to what we take to have useful similarities. Thus, we join nominalism with voluntarism.

The turn inward will have further support. Augustine had made the Christian religion a more dramatically interior activity where one speaks to oneself in an immediate relation to God. One's internal ideas might have a certain autonomy in relation to the external world because they are illuminated, and thus given a definite character, directly by God's awareness of them. A long history of monkish meditation as well as an emphasis on a close examination of conscience to determine whether an act of willing consent had occurred, and thus a sin, trained thinkers to find the interior world a richly present one and to look there for the operations of a faculty of free will. Very soon this tendency to turn inward, and thus to find inner acts of willing or faith more real and important than external communal experiences, would be intensified in the Protestant Reformation with its theology of grace. God's address is immediate to

the inner self, not arriving through worldly items or through mediating institutions. So a religious support for innerness will join with the turn inward in the face of the unconditioned power of God's free will to make metaphysical reality impenetrable by us. A set of inner objects will then appear more reliably, independently, and describably present than any world exterior to the mind.

My focus here will be almost exclusively on twentieth-century thinkers and on how elements of the theological picture just described can still be found in their work. I will not be offering a fine-grained analysis of the subtleties of historical transmission. That would surely be a worthwhile book but it is not what I have undertaken here. Yet I do find attractive a broad narrative that makes it plausible to speak of the continuing inertial effects of the intellectual terrain shaped by late-medieval philosophy and by early-modern responses to it. I think of the work of Locke and the British empiricists, of Kant, and, in a different manner, of Hegel, as serving as something like a transmission belt. They are responding to the outcomes of a theologically and religiously formed landscape and their work transmits important features of that landscape into the twentieth century, even for philosophers with no religious interests whatever. If we want to overcome these long inertial effects, we have to understand them better.

If the details of historical transmission are not my theme here, I do want to say something about the overall picture I have in mind. Locke is an important bridge between the late-medieval intellectual world and more recent empiricism, though peculiarities in his thinking make him differ from both his predecessors and his successors. His distinction between real essence and nominal essence is crucial but it can be difficult to articulate. Four different things might be in play when Locke talks of essence.[2] We might be referring to an earlier scholastic notion of that which in things not only makes them what they are but also, through something like a sharable substantial form, determines what kind they belong to. Locke rejects that version of essence. Since we cannot know the ultimate motions that God has designed into things, it is not impossible that God could have created such essences, but from the evidence we have we must conclude that there are only particular individuals in nature without any sharp boundaries that determine kinds. For example, says Locke, we see

[2] Some worthwhile discussions of Locke on real essence can be found in: Jean-Michel Vienne, "Locke on Real Essence and Internal Constitution," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, New Series*, Vol. 93 (1993), 139–53; David Owen, "Locke on Real Essence," *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (Apr. 1991), 105–18; and W. L. Uzgalis, "The Anti-Essential Locke and Natural Kinds," *The Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 38, No. 152 (Jul. 1988), 330–9.

monsters, mermen, ape-men, and changelings, and these show that nature's own boundaries are very fuzzy and porous. Then too there is in the background Ockham's idea that we show more respect for God's creative will when we assume that he creates each individual anew instead of according to the same model used on others.

A second Lockean notion of essence is that of the real inner constitution of something, the ultimate inner constituents and motions that produce its effects. Locke is happy with this notion of essence provided it is seen as belonging only to particulars (each thing has its inner principle or essence that makes it behave as it does) and not to kinds that are taken to have an essence that is sharable. Next for Locke is the nominal essence. This is conventional, based on the way our mental ideas or words sort the world into kinds to make scientifically useful classifications. Given our interests, we might always arrange such classifications differently. Finally for Locke is the real essence, though no longer in the sense of a shared substantial form that things have simply on their own. Instead this is, as it were, a shadow cast upon the world by a nominal essence that humans have shaped. That nominal essence has picked out certain similarities that are most relevant to our practice and understanding and we assume, as a regulatory idea, that these similarities in our experiencing must be based on real similarities in the deep constituents and inner motions of the items we take to be similar. That similarity of inner constitution among different items may be called a real essence, but we must note that it forms a kind only through being the mirroring complement of what the nominal essence has shaped into a sort. Nature on its own provides any number of different ways in which the inner constitution of different items might count as similar, so it is the human work of shaping the nominal essence that first makes it possible to talk of such real essences in things that account for their similarities. There is an analogy with artifacts. I might classify watches in several different ways and depending on how I do so, there will be different internal mechanisms that account for the similarities relevant to my classification. In the case of the universe, humans simply cannot know how the divine watchmaker designed the inner workings. While the real essence is the metaphysical complement to what we have mentally shaped, we ourselves do not have the power to penetrate into the basis in the things themselves for the similarities at issue. So we do not know real essences, though God may easily do so.

Locke's epistemology is developed within a generally voluntarist framework. Many aspects of how nature works are beyond our comprehension, he says, and flow from the arbitrary will and good pleasure of God the

designer (*An Essay on Human Understanding* IV. iii. 29).[3] How primary qualities produce secondary qualities in our experiencing is mysterious to us but is due to the arbitrary determination of the divine agent (*Essay* IV. iii. 28). The real essence or the metaphysical foundation of our complex idea of *man* is known certainly to God and perhaps to angels, who are not burdened by our flesh, but not to us (*Essay* III. vi. 3). It is unclear how far Locke wants to press this voluntarist aspect, with its emphasis on a level of arbitrariness in what we are seeking to explain. (Would he accept Newton's speculation that God is the active force everywhere that accounts ultimately for the motion and gravitational force of inert matter?) On the one hand, the idea of an omnipotent God whose freedom is unconditioned means that the universe with its laws might have been designed in many different ways and our human minds cannot hope to penetrate into those possibilities. So, there are many metaphysical questions for which the proper answer is that God might have designed matters in one way or another, and the ultimate design he chose works on such a complex and microscopic level that only he can survey with knowledge how the whole thing functions. On the other hand, Locke, unlike some radical voluntarists of the late-medieval period, does not wish to emphasize God's will operating in nature such that the boundary between what is natural and what is miraculous begins to break down. He wants to be a defender of rational science properly done and wishes also to defend some notion of natural law in his ethics and politics, though such a law is founded ultimately, he says, on God's will. Some of Locke's interpreters press the voluntarist aspect more than others do. Margaret Wilson and Rae Langton both argue that for Locke, God's free will may "superadd" certain ways of operating onto the inner motions of matter in order to make the experience of secondary qualities in humans possible.[4] M. R. Ayers is more skeptical about such a place for the activity of God's willing in a mechanistic process.[5]

Perhaps we can situate Locke at a point that Blumenberg describes for the late medievals: where an intense epistemic modesty, in the face of a universe designed by an omnipotent free will, is accompanied by a strong

[3] John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, rev. ed., Peter Nidditch (ed.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979).

[4] Margaret Wilson, "Superadded Properties: The Limits of Mechanism in Locke," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 16 (Apr. 1979), 143–50; and Rae Langton, "Locke's Relations and God's Good Pleasure," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Vol. 100 (2000), 75–91.

[5] M. R. Ayers, "Mechanism, Superaddition, and the Proof of God's Existence in Locke's Essay," *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 90, No. 2 (Apr. 1981), 210–51.

stance of human self-assertion. If God's omnipotence and will require us to take the world as metaphysically thinned out, as having little ultimate character of its own that we are able to take into consideration, we can turn inward and use the appearings and ideas that emerge for us as resources for shaping nominal essences that may then project a structure of kinds upon the world. Locke seems intent on emphasizing both these points. He offers an extreme humility about what humans are able to know about the universe as designed by God, so that there is a radical contrast between God's knowledge and ours. Yet he also seems strongly insistent that it is our human categories, the results of our workmanship, that ultimately set the key outlines that we take the examined world to have. That insistence is shown by his mention of changelings and mermen. We might easily hold that there are natural kinds in nature, but that these allow for rare exceptions and borderline cases, instead of transferring the task of determining kinds fully to the side of what subjectivity projects upon the world. But Locke defends the latter position. He thus expresses what Blumenberg calls the stance of self-assertion that emerges, along with epistemic modesty and a radical thinning out of the world, as a response to the conception of a universe designed by a voluntarist God, one whose workings are profoundly impenetrable.

The Kant who proves a strong influence on twentieth-century philosophy is often not Kant himself. When Rudolf Carnap and others are described as linguistic Kantians, the point is a double one. They replace Kant's conceptual conditions of the possibility of experience with logical and linguistic structures as conditions defining what can be a meaningful world for us. And they use a certain reading of Kant's anti-metaphysical critique to argue that there are boundary lines that we must not cross in attempting to say how matters stand on their own, independently of some linguistic scheme or other. So empirical reality is constructed from the side of subjectivity or language. Kant scholars argue that the linguistic Kantians of the twentieth century tend to misrepresent the philosopher. The latter use his overall pattern of thought to support a radical thinning out of the world; statements about many things that humans have talked about historically will turn out not to fall within the conditions that one's programmatical rules lay down for the meaningfulness of experience. Kant for his part believed that he had defended the notion of a rich empirical world of science and of ordinary life, one in which we are well at home as knowers. A key distinction for him is between empirical idealism and transcendental idealism. By the former we mean that what we experience is the world of our mental happenings and we have to be

skeptical about whether there is an objective world beyond them. Kant vehemently opposes idealism in this sense. He is convinced that we experience an objectively real world that is independent of the mental appearings in our subjective awareness. On the other hand, he also believes that as we are aware of this world of empirical objects, our experience is conditioned by the fact that we as humans take in the world through a sensory apparatus and according to the forms of sensibility, of space and time. If we are experiencers of this sort, then simply to have experience at all, we must order it in accord with those forms of sensibility and, in addition, in accord with a set of conceptual structures that are related to various ways of ordering temporal experience (substance, causality, and the like). It is a mistake to assume that these features, the ordering conditions for having experience in the case of creatures like us, will apply to things as they are in their ultimate metaphysical character. Thus, we have the position of transcendental idealism.[6]

For some Kantians, the idea of things in themselves is meant only to make the point that we cannot step aside from the empirical and conceptual conditions that are deployed by us in bringing objects into view in our experiencing of them. But there is one case where Kant would like to offer a more robust story about things in themselves and what they must be like: the case of human selves. Kant's conditions of experiencing apply not only to the way we take in objects that are external to us but also to our inner experience of ourselves. So when I reflect on my activity of choosing or willing or intending something, I must experience my mental life in accord with the sensible and conceptual forms that are conditions for the experience of creatures like us in the first place. My own mental activity, therefore, comes off to me as a series of events succeeding one another in time, with each one causally determined by the set of causal events preceding it. Then there is no room, it appears, for human autonomy in the fashion in which Kant values this feature. But what if that sense of my being an aspect of a causally determined temporal sequence has to do only with the conditions that make possible human experiencing? As I am in my fundamental metaphysical nature I might not be an inhabitant of such a spatiotemporal, causal, deterministic realm. Perhaps I autonomously make a single, non-temporal act of willing that chooses my entire life all at once and then as I experience that act of will through my sensory apparatus, I experience it as spread out in time and in a causally determined

[6] For a subtle discussion of Kant's project, see Henry Allison, *Kant's Transcendental Idealism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983).

sequence. Perhaps there is a knower who could know me as such a willing agent outside of time, provided there is an entity that could have knowledge through a pure intellectual intuiting of what is known, that is, without any sensory apparatus and without any experience that takes a spatiotemporal form. God historically has been assigned this kind of knowing. The God of Aquinas and of other thinkers directly knows particular individuals, but does not do so through being given sensory impressions of them in time, so his knowledge of me would not automatically translate my autonomous act of willing into a set of causally determined temporal events. So the possibility of real freedom is saved for me by that idea, but unfortunately I can never have any experience of myself that could offer evidence that I do indeed have that metaphysical status.

Kant, it is true, does not follow the voluntarist program of the late medievals, nor does he truly show the kind of effects of voluntarism that Locke still does. For him we fail to comprehend certain contours of reality not because God's omnipotent free will introduces an unplumbable element of arbitrariness and unpredictability into the metaphysical structure of things but simply because of the conditions governing how an epistemic apparatus like ours must work. The scheme of categories we apply in experiencing the world is not a contingent, pragmatic model, one among many that might save the appearances in a situation of epistemic precariousness, but consists rather in necessary categories for any experiencer with a faculty of sensibility like ours. And we do not retreat to a realm of mental appearings that we arrange into constructions useful for prediction and control; we are fully ensconced as knowers in the empirical world itself, though we have to understand differently what it is to be so ensconced. Still, several elements of the Kantian picture can reinforce features of the late-medieval intellectual landscape. Human knowing contrasts itself with a kind of knowing that is incommensurable with and inaccessible to its own, such that only the latter kind has hopes of uncovering the ultimate metaphysical layout of reality. In this situation we have to practice a metaphysical parsimony, a radical thinning out, regarding features that reality may be taken to have strictly on its own. There is a "Copernican" turn: instead of the knowing apparatus having to adjust to the metaphysical character of the objects, the objects of experience will have to adjust to the conditions set out by the knowing apparatus. The extreme thinness that we must take reality to have is compensated by the fact that important features once thought to belong to things themselves, such as substance and causality, are understood to be imposed on experience by what we do

to make it possible, to give it the kind of arrangements that we can make sense of.

Perhaps Kant does not have to link his noumenal realm to a kind of knowing that might be practiced by an omnipotent divine being. All he really needs, he supposes, is the limiting idea of a noumenon, of the correlate of a kind of knowing that does not involve sensibility. It might be that all knowledge must begin with some sensory apparatus or other and that there simply is no being that knows human persons as they are in themselves. Or such persons might form a community of ends in themselves, of autonomous rational willers who, in one of their aspects, know each other as free but who, in another of their aspects, must experience each other as causally determined. But the history of theology provides the richest example of the kind of knowing that might bypass time, space, sensation, and causation in an all-at-once intellectual intuition of particulars. In a broad sense, then, Kant contributes to what I will call in Chapter 1 the colonization of the metaphysical by the theological. Aristotle believed that there were metaphysical features intrinsic to things themselves, such as being a substance and having a certain form, that human reason could properly comprehend. But in medieval philosophy many came to believe that if there were such features, they could be knowable only to God. Any robust metaphysical claim about what is there in things themselves involves an attempt to trespass onto a territory that we in principle cannot inhabit. So metaphysical features, thus fully colonized by the theological, must vanish from the reality of our experience insofar as we can take it into consideration, and must be replaced by structures that we impose on the world. Kant can very easily be used by later thinkers to support a stance like that one. He is so concerned that assigning such apparently metaphysical features as substance and causality to things in themselves must lead to a profound skepticism that he must find a new approach to ensure that we can know these features. If they are the outcome of our constructive activity as experiencers, then we can do so. Defeating skepticism seems to require transferring as many central features as possible from reality's side to our own, so that we must take reality itself to be radically thinned out. That habit of thought was part of Kant's influential legacy.

The Kantianism that made it into the twentieth century, especially as an influence on analytic philosophy, will typically leave behind distinctions central to Kant himself. Instead of an empirical world that is emphatically non-phenomenalist for Kant (in the sense that it is not about mental appearings that might not reach out to the world), several logical positivists would see us as arranging a realm of sensory impressions. Instead of a single

necessary conceptual structure that had to be in operation for experience to be possible in the first place, we have a range of contingent linguistic schemes that determine what objects are experienceable and what is meaningful and that are chosen for pragmatic goals. But there are features crucial to my narrative that are retained from that Kantian program. These include the sense that we are forbidden to cross over into a metaphysical realm that defines things as they truly are; a fervent metaphysical parsimony regarding features we can take the world to have without reference to our experiencing apparatus; and the self-assertion that what we once took to be features fully independent of us are due to a conceptual scheme that we impose as experiencers or speakers.

As we look across the twentieth century, we see important philosophical work that continues features shaped by the late-medieval landscape, though we also see philosophers working hard to overturn that picture. In the first camp are such thinkers as Bertrand Russell, Rudolf Carnap, and W. V. Quine. John McDowell, Saul Kripke, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Daniel Dennett are in the second camp. Russell believed that physical objects are logical fictions that individuals construct on the basis of their sense data. To say that this is the same parrot as the one in the green cage yesterday is to say nothing about what the parrot itself does to secure its own sameness from one moment to the next. It is to report instead on similarities in the pattern of appearances of one's own sense data. So we have the radically thinned-out world on its own that was described earlier. Quine also seems to press toward such a metaphysical minimum. In his familiar thought experiment in which he argues for the indeterminacy of reference, he considers a native speaker using a certain verbal form when rabbits are in the vicinity.[7] An interpreter of the native's speech, he claims, cannot determine from the available evidence if the speaker is referring to individual rabbits, to rabbit time-slices, to undetached rabbit parts, or to a section of a rabbity mass that can be distributed across the landscape in the way that water is. The ordinary person might assume that rabbits on their own do rather a lot to individuate themselves. They have sophisticated mechanisms for establishing, maintaining, and defending their boundaries as individuals. They compete with other rabbits and other animals for food and reproductive opportunities. They have distinctive DNA and immunological systems. And so forth. If Quine holds that

[7] W. V. Quine, "Ontological Relativity," in Quine, *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), 26–68. Also see Quine, *Word and Object* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1960), Chapter 2.