Mind & Numen

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Abstract

The purpose of this dissertation is to come to a better understanding of the nature of philosophical problems, and what it means to make philosophical progress.

It is proposed that it is the unsolvable nature of such problems that makes them truly philosophical. It is also proposed that philosophical progress is made by engaging with philosophical problems in a philosophically satisfying manner: neither abandoning unsolvable philosophical problems nor reducing all philosophical problems to formal problems. One such approach is to grapple with the pre-formalised notions that gave rise to the problem in the first place. By engaging with the dynamic interplay between the pre-formalised notions and their formal representations that inform the relevant problem, and by considering as many of the pre-formalised intentions of the premises as one can, the scope of initial pre-formal notions about the problems under consideration can be expanded.

One way to account for many of the pre-formalised notions that give rise to a given philosophical problem is by being receptive to the truth of these pre-formalised notions. Hence, informed by an analysis of philosophical problems and progress, this dissertation proposes an approach to philosophical problems called *receptivism*. Receptivism stands in opposition to methodologies that reject pre-formalised notions out-of-hand, because to deny the relevant pre-formalised notions is to avoid philosophically engaging with the given problem. Instead, the receptivist approach means striving to account for the relevant pre-formalised notions that inform a given problem, even if this means entertaining philosophical positions that one might normally overlook or reject, perhaps because they appear to clash with other philosophical beliefs and presuppositions that one holds.

The efficacy of this method will be demonstrated by applying it to current philosophical problems in the study of the human mind and the divine mind: *mind* and *numen*. The thesis engages with four specific philosophical problems: the *problem of consciousness for physicalism*, the *problem of possibilia*, the *problem of religious beliefs*, and the *problem of evil*. Part I shows that the philosophical view known as physicalism faces serious challenges, and ought to be reconsidered. Motivated by this scepticism toward physicalism, the case is then made for adopting a more liberal metaphysical perspective

that permits the actual existence of a broader range of properties, including consciousness that is not ultimately and fundamentally grounded in physical properties. Part II considers what it means to believe something. It is argued that religious beliefs are not only archetypal cases of belief that provide insight into the nature and meaning of belief, but that they are rational kinds of beliefs. Lastly, one of philosophy's most famous paradoxes, the problem of evil, is addressed. The argument is made that because the created world exists and God cannot be arbitrary, that therefore, nothing will be precluded from existence by God due to the presence of a kind and level of property that already exists in creation, in this case, evil. By this process, the receptivist approach is tested on problems in philosophy of mind, metaphysics, and religion, and in turn, genuine progress is made in these debates.

Contents

The safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato.

Alfred North Whitehead (Whitehead 1978, p. 39)

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Introduction: No Philosopher So Far Has Ever Been Proved Right

1.1 What Is a Philosophical Problem?

Philosophy is, by one measure, the art of approaching *philosophical problems*. Yet what exactly is a philosophical problem? Philosophical problems inform what counts as philosophy, and in turn, philosophy and philosophers inform what counts as a philosophical problem. Therefore, one might first try to answer that a philosophical problem is just any problem with which a philosopher is concerned. Historically, philosophical problems arose when philosophers who were aiming for a formal and clear understanding of the world baulked at issues that left them uncertain because they defied resolution. Such problems required further engagement because they could not be formally solved.

For now, take a philosophical problem to be any puzzle, issue, question, intuition, and so on, that presents a stumbling block common between various (often opposing) views on a given conceptual issue. An example of a philosophical problem is the *problem of perception*; the concern that the way a person experiences the world, through perception, could be disconnected from how the world actually is, independent of the perceiver. The idea is that the difficulty in coming to a definitive conceptual understanding of what perception is, how it occurs and functions, and how it relates to mental content and consciousness, gives philosophers reason to pause.

Philosophical problems play an important role in how philosophical progress is made, because although they can make one stumble, they focus the dialectic by revealing the obstacles upon which one keeps tripping over. Thus, a philosophical problem concentrates the debate and helps one understand what is at stake in the dialectic and why. For instance, the problem of perception presents a common challenge to competing theories such as direct perception theories and representationalism, or physicalism and idealism. This, in turn, prompts philosophers to investigate the distinction between personal experience and external objects and properties, and to analyse what qualifies as good justification for knowledge of these external objects and properties. One can appreciate, therefore, that one reason why one engages with philosophical problems is because how one responds to them informs their understanding of the given dialectic. Only once one understands the problem can one make progress.

The purpose of this dissertation is to come to a greater understanding of what a philosophical problem is, what a solution to a philosophical problem is, and, informed by this, how philosophical progress is made. The idea behind this investigation is that, through understanding what makes a problem a truly philosophical problem, it will help one understand what it means to address and solve philosophical problems and what it means to make philosophical progress. It is proposed that it is the unsolvable nature of such problems that makes them truly philosophical. It is also proposed that philosophical progress is made by engaging with philosophical problems in a philosophically satisfying manner: neither abandoning unsolvable philosophical problems nor reducing all philosophical problems to formal problems.

Given the scope of this monumental task, this dissertation will specifically present one novel approach to engaging with philosophical problems called *receptivism*. Before introducing receptivism and discussing the philosophical problems to which it shall be applied, the core issues of what a truly philosophical problem is, what a solution to a philosophical problem is, and how progress is made in philosophy, must first be addressed.

1.2 What Is a Solution to a Philosophical Problem?

What does it mean to solve a philosophical problem? Let us answer this question by way of a case study. According to the classical view of knowledge, a person knows something if it is true, they believe it, and they have justification for believing it. This is called a 'justified true belief' (*JTB*). Edmund Gettier (Gettier 1963) famously proposes that there can be situations where the conditions for *JTB* are met, yet they are insufficient for knowledge. For example, imagine a person reads '1:00' on a clock and so believes it is 1:00 but unbeknownst to them the clock is broken, however, coincidentally it is, in fact, 1:00. In these Gettier-type counter-examples a person can have a true belief that is also justified, but the belief is true by coincidence or luck, not *because of* justification. Therefore, Gettier argues that either *JTB* is not sufficient for knowledge, in which case an additional component is required for knowledge, or else the notion of justification must be re-conceived to make it sufficient for knowledge (Zagzebski 1994, p. 65). This challenge that *JTB* is insufficient for knowledge is called the *Gettier problem*. The Gettier problem is an interesting example of a philosophical problem. It presents a stumbling block for theories of knowledge, and hence, any philosopher engaged in epistemology is compelled to address it. If they did not, then they would be remiss in their philosophical duties because they would be willfully ignoring a significant challenge to understanding knowledge.

What is the solution to the Gettier problem? The trouble with the Gettier problem is that there appears to be *no* solution. Why is this so? According to *JTB* accounts of knowledge, truth T and justification J are logically separate and require empirical coordination to deliver knowledge of a proposition p (Floridi 2004, p. 69). Yet Gettier-type counter-examples show that J does not guarantee T, so there is a disconnect between T and J, and therefore, they cannot be coordinated in such a way that will always avoid epistemic luck (Zagzebski 1994, p. 65). As Linda Zagzebski (Zagzebski 1994, p. 69) puts it in her analysis of the problem: as long as the concept of knowledge closely connects the J component and the T component, but permits some degree of independence between them, *JTB* will *never* be

sufficient for knowledge.

Luciano Floridi (Floridi 2004) concurs with Zagzebski that Gettier-style counter-examples are inevitable in principle, and therefore, concludes that the Gettier problem is logically unsolvable. According to Floridi, this is because the issue of coordinating *T* and *J* is logically equivalent to the *coordinated attack problem*. The coordinated attack problem (related to the *Byzantine generals problem*) involves two or more agents trying to coordinate an attack based on messages sent between them, where they cannot be certain that their messages have been received. The problem is this: in a situation where successful coordination is a prerequisite for guaranteeing a successful move, but common information is a prerequisite for guaranteeing successful coordination, and common information is unattainable in any distributed system in which there is any possible doubt about message delivery time, then doubt is inevitable, provided that the agents are logically independent and must interact through empirical protocols. So it is with *T* and *J*; they cannot coordinate in a way that will always avoid luck. If there is any chance that the *JTB* definition of knowledge can ever become adequate, it must somehow be possible to avoid or overcome every Gettier-type counter-example. Due to the element of luck in coordinating *T* and *J*, however, Gettier-type counter-examples will always be available. Hence why Floridi concludes that the Gettier problem is unsolvable in principle (Floridi 2004).

What can we learn about solving philosophical problems from the Gettier problem? Three lessons present themselves. The first lesson is that when one is confronted with a philosophical problem, there is often a temptation to definitively solve it. The second lesson learned is that truly philosophical problems cannot be solved. The third lesson learned is that we can generalise an approach to philosophical problems beyond specific cases. Let us consider each of these lessons in further detail.

Beginning with the first lesson, it can be asked: what exactly does it mean to *solve* a philosophical problem? Solving a problem means conclusively showing that the problem does not obtain. This might mean something like demonstrating that a philosophical problem is actually reducible to a formal or mathematical problem, and then solving the problem formally or mathematically. For instance,

if one adopts *modus ponens* as a rule of inference, then if one holds that X is true, and X implies Y, then Y is also true. Yet if philosophy is about reducing philosophical problems to formal problems with formal solutions, in this case to logic, then philosophy becomes simply the method of working through formal methods towards formal solutions. That is, substituting X and Y with the given propositions under consideration and determining if one follows from the other. Ergo, philosophical problems that can be definitively answered are thereby stripped of their philosophical nature, because turning a philosophical problem into a purely scientific, mathematical or logical problem and then solving it, strips the problem of its philosophical value.

For example, in the case of the Gettier problem, solving it would mean conclusively demonstrating that there is a circumstance in which no Gettier-style counter-example is available. In one sense, *if* there were a circumstance under which no Gettier-style counter-example is possible, then this would reveal that there never really was a formal Gettier problem in the first place, but rather that one suffered from a lack of relevant information before the solution was found. There is a benefit to revealing a formal solution to a philosophical problem, and that is that it no longer impedes the dialectic; ergo, no more tripping and resultant skinned knees. We can thereby progress on the given dialectic, for instance, by determining that the issue under consideration is solved and moving on to the next problem.

As for the second lesson, we saw that solving a philosophical problem means showing that the problem does not obtain; in other words, solving a philosophical problem is identical to revealing that there *never was* a philosophical problem in the first instance! If one reduces a philosophical problem to a formal problem and then solves the formal problem—such as by applying *modus ponens*—then there was only ever a formal problem to be solved. For instance, if hypothetically the coordinated attack problem had a formal solution—which it does not (Lamport, Shostak, and Pease 1982; Castro and Liskov 1999)—and the Gettier problem were reducible to it, then one could demonstrate that the Gettier problem is a formal problem with a formal solution. Yet in what way then was the problem ever

really philosophical? It seems that a problem is not truly a philosophical problem once it is reducible to a formal problem and then solved, for it is thereby demonstrated that there never was a philosophical problem in the first place, only a formal problem. It is embedded into the nature of a philosophical problem that one can only realise when a problem is *not* philosophical. This means that a problem is only *truly* philosophical if it is never solved. Yet one cannot prove that something is unsolvable without perfect knowledge!

This reveals that philosophical problems are historical by nature, not because of their historical origin, but because of the historical contingency of when they are philosophical and when they no longer remain so. Consider how the alchemical question about the structure of gold was once considered a philosophical problem. Let us call this the *number of protons in gold problem*. Today it is empirically known that Au79 has 79 protons in its nucleus. Of course, the number of protons in gold problem was eventually solved through scientific enquiry. If the philosophical problem is reduced to an empirical problem and then solved via observation, as with the number of protons in gold problem, then we should be reluctant to call the problem properly philosophical anymore. This is because, as Peter Hacker (Hacker 2006, p. 1) points out, the problems of philosophy are conceptual, not factual, so the process of solving a philosophical problem is not about increasing one's store of knowledge about the world. In this case, the number of protons in gold problem was a philosophical problem at time $T1$ but not following the scientific solution at time $T2$. This means that philosophical problems are fundamentally historical from the human epistemic point of view.

And philosophical problems are not only historical but locative. This means, for instance, that the same problem might be philosophical for Martians and Earthlings, but once Earthlings have solved the problem it is no longer philosophical for them but remains so for the Martians. The number of protons in gold problem might no longer be a philosophical problem on Earth, yet remain one on Mars; it might not have been a problem at some point in England but remained one in Japan. Take a current example: some philosophers hold that physical properties and mental properties are distinct

because they are ultimately grounded in different fundamental properties. However, perhaps we may yet discover that what appears to be two different properties or laws are actually explicable as the same kind of property or law. Indeed, there is an analogue in the distinction between the sublunar and superlunar realms in Aristotelian physics. The sublunary sphere was a region below the moon that was subject to change and the powers of physics. From the moon upward, everything else was considered permanent and unchanging, and not subject to physics. Why there was a distinction between these two different kinds of properties or laws was a philosophical question. Call it the *lunar problem*.

Tycho Brahe observed The Great Comet through a telescope from November 1577 to January 1578, and concluded that the comet was superlunary. Yet The Great Comet changed, and this revealed that the sublunar/superlunar distinction was no longer tenable. It was slowly revealed that what appeared to be two different properties or laws in nature were later explicable as the same kind of property or law, and the lunar problem was solved. More generally, it was determined that a dualist conception should be correctly characterised as a monism. Perhaps the same may occur for the mind-body distinction, and it will be revealed that there is no long a philosophical problem, only a scientific problem that can be solved.

To reiterate, there is still value in demonstrating that a seemingly philosophical problem is reducible to a formal problem. With the *number of protons in gold problem*, it might have required a philosophical approach to understand what natural science or method was the correct domain by which to solve the problem. Hence, even when philosophy reveals a problem to be solvable and no longer philosophical, it is still philosophy that reveals the way forward. This is evidence of philosophy's value. Understanding when there is no remaining philosophical problem is one way to make progress in a dialectic.

Does this mean that there have been philosophical problems that were successfully left behind? Thales famously held that everything in physical existence was ultimately and categorically grounded in water. He may have held this view to explain fundamentality metaphorically, but if he meant it

literally, he has since been proven wrong. We might, therefore, be tempted to say that the philosophical problem regarding whether everything in existence is ultimately and categorically grounded in water has been left behind. Yet even the smallest crack in a solution can expose subtleties that reinvigorate a problem. A problem can always return in a manner reminiscent of Kripkenstein (Kripke 1982) or Goodman's *new riddle of induction* (Goodman 1955: a problem may be 'solved' at $T1$ but then at $T2$ conditions change, and so the problem returns or a new problem develops. In the case of Thales, questions about the nature of the fundamental level of reality are once more alive and well.

It is important to note that this does not imply subjectivism about philosophical problems, only historical and locative contingency. Indeed, according to Sextus Empiricus (Empiricus 2000), for God there is no logic because all solutions and statements are immediately apparent to him. Likewise, for God, who knows all solutions to all problems, there are no philosophical problems. It follows then that perhaps the set of truly philosophical problems is empty. This means that working through logical problems only makes sense to humans, and working through philosophical problems only makes sense to humans too.

It can appreciated that the history of the Gettier problem has shown that there is a temptation to solve philosophical problems, and that philosophy can reveal which problems can be reduced to formal problems and solutions. Yet it also reveals that true philosophical problems are unsolvable because they can never be reduced to formal problems and solutions, from the human epistemic point of view. As Bertrand Russell put it: "the answers suggested by philosophy are none of them demonstrably true" (Russell 1912).

What then is to be done with those problems that can never be definitively shown not to obtain because counter-examples are always possible? The answer lies in the third lesson from the Gettier problem: that one can generalise the role of philosophical problems beyond specific cases. The Gettier problem allegedly cannot be solved unless one gives up on the relevant notions that gave rise to the problem, for instance, that justification is somehow sufficient for knowledge. Hence, the broader

moral that can be gleaned from Zagzebski's analysis of the Gettier problem is that it is representative of a larger, general issue of what to do with seemingly unsolvable philosophical problems. Howsoever one responds to the Gettier problem should be how one responds to related problems. For instance, if one chooses to give up on the Gettier problem then perhaps one ought to quit on other equally frustrating problems, but if one decides one ought to adopt a new perspective or a new methodological approach to try and make progress on the Gettier problem, then perhaps one ought to do likewise for a host of other intractable problems.

1.3 What Is Philosophical Satisfaction?

True philosophical problems are by their nature not solvable, for if they were, they would not be philosophical problems. Rather, they would be something like a formal problem that can be answered from definitions and formal reasoning. If true philosophical problems are those problems which are *unsolvable*, what then are we to make of them? Why do we engage with them? And how can we make philosophical progress if true philosophical problems cannot be definitively solved? Is the lesson from the analysis of the Gettier problem that true philosophical problems should be abandoned or that one ought to continue to grapple with them?

Consider two responses to the above questions. First, if true philosophical problems are unsolvable then one could adopt an attitude captured by Emil du Bois-Reymond's maxim: *ignoramus et ignorabimus*, we do not know and will not know (Bois-Reymond 1912). This could suggest giving up on seemingly unsolvable problems—perhaps even philosophy altogether. Alternatively, one might reject the idea that true philosophical problems are unsolvable, perhaps because they think that all problems are in principle reducible to non-philosophical problems with solutions, and so one must provide a formal solution to any philosophical problem to make progress. This perspective is captured by mathematician David Hilbert (J. T. Smith n.d.), who on 8 September 1930, in an address to the Society of

German Scientists and Physicians in Königsberg, declared that:

> We must not believe those, who today with philosophical bearing and a tone of superiority prophesy the downfall of culture and accept the *ignorabimus*. For us there is no *ignorabimus*, and in my opinion even none whatever in natural science. In place of the foolish *ignorabimus* let stand our slogan:
>
> We must know,
>
> We will know.

Neither of the above approaches is philosophically satisfying. Yet a good approach to a philosophical problem should satisfy a philosopher interested in doing their due investigative diligence, for instance, by sufficiently addressing the reasons they had for posing the problem in the first place. Therefore, giving up on a problem because it is seemingly unsolvable is not an optimal approach to philosophical problems. Consider how conceding that the Gettier problem is unsolvable *and* then abandoning the investigation of the relationship between *JTB* and knowledge as a consequence, ignores the value of posing and analysing the problem in the first place. How one responds to problems like the Gettier problem matters because it teaches one something about how one ought to approach intractable philosophical problems in general. Hence why abandoning a philosophical problem because one suspects that the problem has an as-of-yet-undetermined formal solution, or no solution at all, are sub-optimal approaches. This is because they will not satisfy a philosopher who was moved to engage with the problem in the first instance.

This dissertation suggests a kind of Goldilocks approach that acknowledges that true philosophical problems are unsolvable, yet also, that by engaging with them, philosophical progress can be made. The approach is revealed by our third lesson from the Gettier problem: we can generalise the role of, and approach to, philosophical problems beyond specific cases. Hence, if one cannot solve a philosophical problem, then one should not abandon it but instead seek a more satisfying path by adopting

a fresh perspective on how to approach it, and this lesson can be applied to other intractable problems.

The proposed measure of a successful, generalised approach to philosophical problems is *philosophical satisfaction*. To properly understand philosophical satisfaction, the concept of *pre-formalised notions* must first be explained. We can distinguish between what we shall call the formalised and pre-formalised articulations of any given problem, which are captured by two different kinds of statements: formalised notions and pre-formalised notions (Freire and Ryan 2023):

> *Formalised notion*: a proposition rigidly interpreted and subject to logical scrutiny.

> *Pre-formalised notion*: a proposition that is loosely interpreted.

A formalised notion is a proposition that is rigidly interpreted and subject to logical scrutiny, for instance, a premise in an argument or a contradiction. A pre-formalised notion is a proposition that is loosely interpreted, in simple language, uncommitted to only a particular formalisation, that has a truth-priority over the formalised notion: a pre-formalised statement ϕ is either literally true or it requires from the formalisation a reason for why it seems literally true but is only indirectly true. Note that in the philosophical tradition, to be indirectly true means something has to be perceived as true, even though it is not in fact true. Consider an example. Advocates for a *B* theory of time defend the idea that past, present, and future, all exist at once. According to them, there is no literal flow of time from the past through the present to the future. Yet philosophers in this tradition have always considered it crucial that we explain why we perceive the flow of time. It can be said that they are committed to accounting for the pre-formalised statement 'We observe the flow of time'. Indeed, these philosophers would be remiss in their philosophical duties if they ignored this pre-formalised notion, such as by outright denying that time seems to flow.

When philosophers encounter philosophical problems they often implicitly appeal to such pre-formalised notions. And this makes sense, for if one wishes to satisfy the philosophical community,

to say nothing of one's own sense of rationality, then the way one adopts premises must be coherent, and so it must be connected in some way to the notions behind the original premise. For instance, if one tries to approach a problem by changing a premise to something ludicrous or uncompelling then one will remain philosophically *unsatisfied*.[1] To 'satisfy' something in mathematics or logic means to meet the conditions required by a particular statement, equation, formula, or set of axioms. For example, in classical propositional logic, the assignment of $P = \mathit{true}$ and $Q = \mathit{false}$ satisfies the formula $P \vee Q$, because it results in a true statement under the considered semantics. If one fails to engage with pre-formalised notions when formalising the premises in a philosophical problem then any solution to the problem will not be satisfying, because the relevant pre-formalised notions will not be assigned and, therefore, will not be under consideration. Again, this would occur if say a *B* theorist ignored the pre-formalised notion that time seems to flow. However, if one modifies a premise or adds a new premise that is somehow connected to the pre-formalised notion that gave rise to the original premise, then one will not encounter this 'unsatisfaction'.

This criteria of satisfaction can be better appreciated by reference to the story of philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, who in his earlier years said that one can decline to engage with particular philosophical problems, for instance, if they involve metaphysical or religious content. Wittgenstein had in mind the rejection of subject matter that was not propositionally analysable. It might be said that he accepted the *ignorabimus* maxim and declined to engage with unsolvable philosophical problems. He admits that (Wittgenstein 1922, p. 6.53):

> This method would be **unsatisfying** [emphasis added] to the other—he would not have the feeling that we were teaching him philosophy—but it would be the only strictly correct method.

[1] 'Unsatisfied' is used rather than 'dissatisfied' as the prior is found in Wittgenstein 1922, p. 6.53 from which inspiration is drawn for the term, and the term ought to be distinguished from the non-philosophical meanings and connotations of the latter.

This dissertation suggests that philosophical satisfaction is the measure of the strictly correct method; philosophical satisfaction and unsatisfaction ought to be taken as guides to philosophical adjustment. Someone should feel that we are teaching them philosophy and that our methods are satisfying. Further, it is suggested that this satisfaction will not be found by merely declaring that all philosophical problems have as-of-yet-undetermined formal solutions, nor by disengagement with any philosophical problem that cannot be reduced to a formal problem and solved, as Wittgenstein concedes. Rather, satisfaction results from engagement with the pre-formalised notions when formalising the premises of a philosophical problem to come to a deeper understanding of the problem.

1.4 What Is Philosophical Progress?

We can now appreciate what a philosophical problem is, how philosophers approach these problems, and how philosophical satisfaction is a measure by which one can judge better or worse approaches. What of philosophical progress? How does philosophy make progress?

First, recall that even when philosophy shows that a problem is solvable, by say being reducible to a formal problem solvable by formal methods, it was philosophy that guided one toward applying the correct mode of analysis. By revealing which aspects of a problem are solvable and which are not, philosophy thereby aids the other sciences because it shows how these problems relate to their respective methodologies. In such cases philosophy does not abandon the problem, rather, it clarifies what aspects of the problem are appropriate for formal analysis. This is one way in which philosophical progress is made by engaging with philosophical problems. This sentiment is echoed by Russell who suggests that philosophy lays down the various approaches to problems (but does not make genuine progress beyond this).[2] He says:

[2]He also declares: ''Philosophy is to be studied, not for the sake of any definite answers to its questions, since no definite answers can, as a rule, be known to be true" (Russell 1912).

> Yet, however slight may be the hope of discovering an answer, it is part of the business of philosophy to continue the consideration of such questions, to make us aware of their importance, to examine all the approaches to them, and to keep alive that speculative interest in the universe which is apt to be killed by confining ourselves to definitely ascertainable knowledge (Russell 1912).

Russell sees philosophy as a therapy against dogmatism and the 'tyranny of custom', and as a means for guiding one to understanding when a problem has a formal solution, but he does not expect philosophical progress beyond this. What then would genuine philosophical progress beyond merely laying down these approaches look like?

How is philosophical progress made on truly philosophical, unsolvable problems? Unsolvability is a fact of philosophical problems, yet as discussed, disengagement with a problem will not yield progress because it is unsatisfying. By engaging with a problem and showing why it appears unsolvable one learns something. One learns that there is a permanent task of justifying one's justifications. For instance, from grappling with the Gettier problem one learns more about what pre-formalised notions are to be added, which are to be given up, and which are to be improved upon. In the case of the Gettier problem, engagement reveals the fallibility of justification, however, the issue is not that one's justification is wrong but that one might be mistaken when one thinks that one is justified. So by addressing the problem, one can continue striving to determine under what circumstances one is justified. This is the point of philosophy: engaging with seemingly unsolvable problems by grappling with the pre-formal notions that inform them. And this is because engagement is more philosophically satisfying than disengagement.

This is precisely why the third lesson from the Gettier problem is so important: that one can generalise the lessons from a particular problem to other unsolvable philosophical problems. By engaging with the Gettier problem, Zagzebski (Zagzebski 1994) realised that the form of this seemingly unsolvable philosophical problem is general and so philosophers need to develop new, general ways by

which to approach other such problems. This is something Gettier missed when he did not generalise the initial problem. Although Zagzebski did not solve the Gettier problem, by engaging with it, and in particular with the pre-formalised notions that gave rise to it, she learned something new about generalisation in philosophy. In this manner, she made philosophical progress!

Let us return to Wittgenstein to illustrate how addressing the pre-formalised notions that inform a problem can further philosophical progress. Wittgenstein famously quit philosophy only to return to the subject later in life. Hence, his thought is sometimes divided into the 'early Wittgenstein' of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (Wittgenstein 1922) and the 'late Wittgenstein' whose work was posthumously epitomised in the *Philosophical Investigations* (Wittgenstein 2001). Wittgenstein began his philosophical journey as an adherent of logicism, and he believed that language, meaning, and reality could be ultimately and categorically grounded in analysable logical propositions. In the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, he argued that the world consists of facts and that these facts can be described by propositions that correspond to states of affairs in the world. As mentioned earlier, he famously determined that many areas of traditional philosophy—such as metaphysics, ethics, and epistemology—were not philosophically analysable because they are not facts that can be described by propositions that correspond to states of affairs in the world: they failed to satisfy the above criteria. Wittgenstein thus boldly declared that "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent" (Wittgenstein 1922), which captures his idea that many philosophical problems result from misunderstandings about the limits of language.

Early Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy divides philosophical problems into those that are: (1) solvable by non-philosophical means: such as by the natural sciences, mathematics, or logic; (2) the result of linguistic confusion and hence are linguistic problems but not philosophical problems; or (3) genuine problems seemingly outside the purview of natural sciences, mathematics, logic, and language, and therefore unanalysable and unsolvable, and thus ought to be left alone. The parallels with the lessons from the Gettier problem are striking: we see a temptation to solve philosophical problems,

then the idea that there is a division between problems reducible to formal solutions and unsolvable problems, and a generalisation from the problem that informs how one ought to philosophise.

Early Wittgenstein generalised from his concerns that the correct course of action is to abandon philosophy. Yet he later reconnected with philosophy. The so-called late Wittgenstein argued that meaning is not (only) something that corresponds to a logical structure but is rooted in the social use of language. He held that many philosophical problems arise when we misuse language by treating it as if it corresponds to a fixed reality when, in fact, language is a dynamic, context-dependent tool for communication. In other words, Wittgenstein conceded that there was a purpose to, and value in, engaging with seemingly unsolvable philosophical problems. He was *unsatisfied* by his previous approach to unsolvable philosophical problems and returned to try and make philosophical progress.

In summary, the early Wittgenstein concludes that either philosophical problems have non-philosophical solutions and thus are not truly philosophical, or that they are truly philosophical but unsolvable, in which case we cannot progress on them, so they (and philosophy) ought to be abandoned. What is the moral of this tale? That this is a sub-optimal way to philosophise because it diminishes the role of philosophy in contributing to non-philosophical problems, for instance by revealing that these problems have non-philosophical solutions and why this is the case. It also abandons seemingly unsolvable philosophical problems. Wittgenstein was right to return to philosophy because he was unsatisfied. He was right to heed his compulsion to address the pre-formalised notions that gave rise to supposedly unsolvable philosophical problems. In this way, he made philosophical progress.

1.5 What Is Receptivism?

It is hoped that we have come to a better understanding of what a solution to a philosophical problem is, and informed by this, how philosophical progress is made. Truly philosophical problems are unsolvable, and philosophical progress is made by engaging with them in a satisfying manner, which

means striving to account for the pre-formalised notions that inform the relevant problem and generalising to related problems.

We have outlined a metaphilosophical position that cuts to the very heart of philosophy. This view is embryonic and will continue to mature. This is not yet the end of the story, however, for to satisfy those interested in this thesis, some application of the lessons is required. A famous test for judgdement is (*Douay-Rheims Bible* 2011, Mark 7:16): "By their fruits you shall know them." It seems that this dissertation ought to present some good fruit. Hence, the next step is to consider but one way in which the above lessons are fruitful.

Thus, the locus of this dissertation is more modest: it is an investigation of but one proposed general approach to accounting for the relevant pre-formalised notions under consideration in a given problem, called *receptivism* (Ryan 2024a; Ryan 2024b). This is the idea that to do one's due diligence as a philosopher, and to make progress on certain philosophical dialectics, one must account for as many of the pre-formalised notions that give rise to a given philosophical problem as one can. Unless one has every pre-formalised notion accounted for, one cannot formalise a correct account of a given problem, and if one cannot do that then one will fail to progress on the problem. One way to do this is by being *receptive* to the truth of these pre-formalised notions. Receptivism seeks the kind of philosophical satisfaction discussed. It cautions that a philosopher should shy away from methodologies that reject pre-formalised notions out-of-hand because to deny the relevant pre-formalised notions is to avoid philosophically engaging with the given problem. Sometimes this means entertaining philosophical positions that one might normally overlook or instinctively reject, for instance, because they *appear* to clash with other philosophical beliefs and presuppositions that one holds.

First consider a non-philosophical example. There is a pre-formalised notion that some people have blue eyes, yet there is strong evidence that no blue pigment is found in mammals. Should one deny that a person standing before one has blue eyes because it causes friction with one's established views on pigmentation? No. One must address how such people somehow have blue eyes and reconcile it

with one's understanding of mammalian biology. The blue of the human eye is, in fact, caused by the way light reflects off the eye. Humans see blue because there is blue, even though it is not caused by blue pigment. In this case, one should be receptive to alternative formalisations of the pre-formal notions motivating the problem, for instance, that 'Some people have blue eyes'. The problem may not be definitely solved, for instance, if one later encounters other eye colours that must be accounted for, yet by being receptive one still made progress on the initial problem and advanced the dialectic.

The value of receptivism becomes even clearer when we realize that there are two main avenues of advancement in philosophy: (1) analytic advancement that produces a synthesis from a dialectic; and (2) advancement made by articulating intuitions that should be captured by philosophical theory through examples. Philosophers can err by leaning too much toward either (1) or (2). Rather, what they ought to do is strive for equilibrium. Receptivism seeks equilibrium and generality by being open to all of the relevant pre-formalised notions that give rise to a given problem, to come to a greater understanding of what is involved, and thereby philosophically improve the pre-formalised environment from which one formalises philosophical problems. For instance, one might do this by changing the definitions employed in the premises of a problem's premise set. Of course, if one wishes to satisfy the philosophical community, to say nothing of one's own sense of rationality, then the way one changes the premises must be coherent. The change must be connected, in some manner, to the notions behind the original premise set. If one changes a premise by assigning it an unrelated meaning or by disconnecting it from the aetiology of the problem, then one will remain unsatisfied. However, if one modifies premises or adds a new premise that is somehow connected to the instinct that gave rise to the original problem, then one does not encounter this unsatisfaction.

In a nutshell, receptivism is the idea that one ought to appeal to explanatory useful, pre-formalised notions, and the interplay between possible ways of formalising them, even if such notions clash with one's current formalised commitments. The most effective approaches to philosophical problems are those that maintain the integrity of the accumulated pre-formalised notions, while less effective ones

either confront the problem head-on or disregard it entirely.

Now consider a philosophical example. On the day after Christmas, 1951, at a meeting of the American Mathematical Society at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island, in 'Some basic theorems on the foundations of mathematics and their implications', Kurt Gödel said (Gödel 1995):

> Either [⋯] the human mind [⋯] infinitely surpasses the powers of any finite machine, or else there exist absolutely unsolvable diophantine problems.

What does Gödel mean by this? He is a platonist, so when he says these problems are unsolvable, he means that they are formally unsolvable but still of philosophical value. This statement suggests that mathematicians and philosophers ought to take a different perspective and understand why a finite machine cannot solve diophantine problems but humans can.[3] This moral can be generalised: to approach apparently unsolvable problems, one needs must adopt a different philosophical perspective. For instance, if an anti-metaphysics ontology fails to account for what is needed to make sense of reality, then one ought to be receptive to doing metaphysics (Putnam 1971, p. 57).

Imagine a detective discovers a body with some concrete evidence indicating suicide. Yet this veteran sleuth has a hunch that foul play was involved. Ought this detective dismiss her hunch? Of course not, she should investigate it. A bad detective ignores a hunch and pursues one theory to the exclusion of others; trying to fit the evidence to the theory and disregarding evidence or interpretations

[3] Consider igo champion Lee Sedol's (이세돌) victory in Game 4 of the DeepMind Challenge Match in 2016 against the 'artificial intelligence' program AlphaGo. At move 78, Lee placed a stone which led to his ultimate victory, despite his being in a weaker position until that moment in the game. The AlphaGo program assigned a probability of 0.007% to this move being played by any player in Lee's position and estimated that only approximately 1 in 10, 000 players would play it. Yet Lee described the move as the 'only move' available (Kohs 2017). It was Lee's receptivity to a new perspective, and his ability to look beyond the usual formal solution, that allowed him to play a move that was beyond the ken of a finite machine.

that cause issues. A good detective starts by laying out all the theories and then eliminates them when appropriate, based on the evidence available. Receptivism is the theory that good philosophy should be like good detective work. For example, in the philosophy of mind, many philosophers consider it important to account for why consciousness seems distinct from other physically explicable things. Any purely physicalist explanation for consciousness will be insufficient if it ignores the pre-formalised notion that 'consciousness seems somehow distinct from physical things'. The correct way to make progress on this dialectic is not to reject this notion, but instead to explore the different ways in which it can be formalised. Any good physicalist explanation should account for the apparent uniqueness of consciousness and incorporate this into a physicalist framework, rather than simply ignoring the notion altogether. Likewise, dualists ought to account for mentality in a way that accounts for the pre-formalised notion that mentality appears to be strongly intertwined with a world full of physical properties.

What if one rejects receptivism? Then that philosopher may struggle to make philosophical progress. Friedrich Nietzsche poetically cautions about such an over-commitment to an established 'truth' or perspective on a philosophical problem (F. Nietzsche 2002, p. 26):

> Stand tall, you philosophers and friends of knowledge, and beware of martyrdom! Of suffering "for the sake of truth"! Even of defending yourselves! You will ruin the innocence and fine objectivity of your conscience, you will be stubborn towards objections and red rags, you will become stupid, brutish, bullish if, while fighting against danger, viciousness, suspicion, ostracism, and even nastier consequences of animosity, you also have to pose as the worldwide defenders of truth. As if "the Truth" were such a harmless and bungling little thing that she needed defenders! [⋯] In the end, you know very well that it does not matter whether you, of all people, are proved right, and furthermore, that **no philosopher so far has ever been proved right** [emphasis added].

Perhaps no philosopher so far has ever been proved right because no truly philosophical problem can be solved. Thus, by clinging to the safety of established formalisations or ways of philosophising, one might find themselves drifting closer to dogmatism than philosophy while coming no closer to solving the philosophical problems at hand.

Here is one more example to make the case for receptivism. Gödel's incompleteness theorems are powerful examples that capture the two stated ways of making philosophical progress: either by revealing that a problem is reducible to a formal problem and solvable, or by showing it is not reducible to a formal problem and solvable, and therefore, confirming that it is a truly philosophical problem. Consider specifically Gödel's *second incompleteness theorem* (Gödel 1932) which states that a formal system, if it is consistent, cannot prove its own consistency.

In classical logic, *inconsistency* is taken to mean that any proposition can be proved. This is formalized in the principle that from a contradiction anything can be proved: known as *ex falso quodlibet* or the principle of explosion. The idea is that if a contradiction, such as $A \wedge \neg A$ (both A and not A), is allowed in a logical system, then any arbitrary proposition can be derived from it, no matter how absurd or unrelated it may seem. For instance, if a system permits contradictions, one could logically 'prove' statements like "If $2 + 2 = 5$, then I am the pope," as famously noted by Russell. This illustrates the absurdity of allowing contradictions within a logical system, because if contradictions are possible, the distinction between true and false propositions breaks down entirely, leading to triviality.

To avoid this, logical systems seek consistency. For instance, classical logical systems try to ensure that contradictions cannot be derived within the system. A consistent system guarantees that not every proposition can be proved, meaning that there are some propositions that cannot be derived, such as false statements like "$2 + 2 = 5$". However, it is important to clarify that consistency itself does not imply that specific propositions (such as "$2 + 2 = 5$") cannot be proved; rather, it means that no contradictions can be derived within the system. This prevents the system from collapsing into triviality, where anything can be 'proved' as a consequence of allowing contradictions.

If one demonstrates that a system cannot prove something, such as $2+2 = 5$, this provides evidence that the system is consistent, because a consistent system does not allow contradictions to be proved. However, Gödel's second incompleteness theorem shows that a formal system powerful enough to express arithmetic cannot prove its own consistency. In other words, proving that the system is consistent would require the system to prove something about itself that it cannot prove. The issue is that if the system were able to prove its own consistency, it would be incomplete, because there would still be true statements within the system that it cannot prove. This means that there are things that are provably unprovable within the system, which illustrates the system's incompleteness.

The conclusion of Gödel's second incompleteness theorem is that a system that is consistent cannot prove its own consistency from within itself. This does not mean that the system is inconsistent; it simply means that the system's consistency cannot be proved using only the resources of the system itself.

Gödel's second incompleteness theorem is significant because it exposes a gap between what is true and what is provable, because some truths are beyond provability within any given system, even if that system is consistent. The second incompleteness theorem suggests that truths about the world may not always be accessible through purely formal, logical, or scientific methods (Gödel 1995). Gödel understood this to open the door to metaphysical inquiry. One needs metaphysics to make sense of certain problems, just as Hilary Putnam learned that one cannot do science without metaphysics (Putnam 1971). In other words, the unsolvability of this philosophical problem reveals not that we ought to dismiss the problem nor that the problem is purely formal, but that we ought to be receptive to new philosophical approaches! There is no stopping point to metaphysic: we cannot rely on it up until this point, to say ground mathematics, and then abandon it from that point onward. There might be truths about reality, such as consciousness, existence, or time, that require some imaginative detective work.

1.6 From Whence Comes Receptivism?

Receptivism is essentially Platonic in its approach. Towards the end of Plato's dialogues, Socrates and his companions often become stuck in their analysis of the definition of something like 'knowledge', 'courage', 'justice', or 'wisdom' (Plato 1961). Socrates then declares they have reached a state of *aporia*: an impasse, a sense that the path forward is petering out. This is evidenced in the Greek: the prefix '*a*', α, negates the meaning of the root word '*poros*', πόρος, which means a path or passage. Thus, ἄπορῐ̈ᾱ means 'there is no path'. One ought not to take this negatively, rather, one should appreciate that *aporia* captures an essence of Platonic philosophical methodology: grappling with definitions to advance a dialectic.

Socrates employs this methodology all the time. He begins with a definition of a concept, then he questions if the definition captures the pre-formalised intentions that motivated the concept. Thus, the measure of success is that all the intentions motivating the concept are accounted for *and* the definitions avoid contradiction or incoherence. A notable example is Socrates' consideration of 'virtue' in the *Meno* (Plato 1981). Ultimately, Socrates never does accept a definition that accounts for all the implicit intentions motivating the concept. Yet this is not a failure on Socrates' part because by grappling with the definitions he can come to a new understanding; he can discard bad definitions and develop good ones, and in this manner, advance the dialectic. This is why Socrates is in a better position at the end of a dialogue than at the beginning, even if all he has learned is how little he knows. Socrates does not always end up where he expected or hoped to be: sometimes the path ends or becomes obstructed, but this *aporia* helps him to hew a new path that proceeds in a better direction.

This is connected to Plato's theory of recollection, also known as the theory of *anamnesis*, ἀνάμνησις, which is found in several dialogues, including the *Meno* and the *Phaedro* (Plato 1961). The theory holds that knowledge is innate and a kind of *anamnesis*, meaning recollection or reminiscence, of knowledge that the soul already possessed in its previous existence. According to Plato, the soul is im-

mortal, but before being physically embodied it existed in the realm of the Forms where it had direct knowledge of eternal truths. During the process of becoming embodied, this knowledge was buried, and thus, recollection of it is limited. Yet people can strive to recall what is forgotten by engaging in dialectics or the Socratic method. Through the Socratic method, they can strive to remember the relevant pre-formalised notions.

Moving forward to the 20th century, echoes of this Platonic approach can be found in the works of Rudolf Carnap. Carnap distinguishes between *observational language* and *theoretical language* (see Rudolf Carnap 1967; Rudolf Carnap 1975). Observational language ought to be simple and taken as more concretely true, while theoretical language deals with representations that fit observational language. Carnap appeals to this distinction to introduce the idea of *explication*, which is (Rudolf Carnap 1950, p. 3):

> [⋯] the transformation of an inexact, prescientific concept, the *explicandum*, into a new exact concept, the *explicatum*.

This is part of the inspiration for the distinction between formalised and pre-formalised notions, although instead of talking about replacing the *explicandum* with the *explicatum*, instead the formalised notions reveal the relevant pre-formalised notions (P. F. Strawson 1963, p. 506). One might wish to formalise the pre-formalised notions so that one can eliminate all the inappropriate meanings and capture the correct meaning of a concept. In this way, the pre-formalised notions can be accumulated in one's background investigation like that of observation of nature, which adds to scientific investigation. One should seek to account for all the pre-formalised notions so that the formalised notion is sufficiently expansive. This is why one ought to be receptive to them.

Indeed, being receptive to these pre-formalised notions has proven historically successful. In addition to the earlier lessons from Gödel, one can appreciate how Saul Kripke's work in modality (Kripke 1980) was receptive to new notions of necessity, and what followed was a metaphysical renaissance.

Such was the case too with Wittgenstein's rediscovered receptiveness to ideas and content that had been heretofore rejected because they were non-propositionally analysable, according to his Tractarian prescriptions.

1.7 Whither Receptivism?

It is said that the proof of the pudding is in the eating. Therefore, this dissertation shall employ this experimental theory of receptivism to engage with some current problems in metaphysics, philosophy of mind, and philosophy of religion. Specifically, it investigates the following four philosophical problems:

1. The *problem of consciousness for physicalism*: the concern that physicalism—the view that the only fundamental properties in the universe are physical, and all other properties are ultimately and categorically grounded in them—cannot account for consciousness.

2. The *problem of possibilia*: the issue of determining under what conditions it is the case that, if something possibly exists, it actually exists.

3. The *problem of religious beliefs*: whether or not religious beliefs are distinct from non-religious beliefs in any philosophically important manner, and how our understanding of religious belief should inform our concept of 'belief'.

4. The *problem of evil*: the alleged inconsistency of the existence of evil with the existence of an omnipotent and omnibenevolent God.

Regarding (1), it is argued that consciousness is not ultimately and categorically grounded in physical properties. Regarding (2), the case is made for metaphysical *liberalism*; the view that many more possible entities and properties actually exist than is usually taken to be the case. As to (3), it is shown that religious beliefs are not exceptionally distinct from other kinds of beliefs, and why this supports

a revision of a strict demarcation between religious and non-religious beliefs. And regarding (4), the case is made that because the created world exists and God cannot be arbitrary, that therefore, nothing will be precluded from existence by God due to the presence of a kind and level of property that already exists in creation. Concerning evil, because every existing thing apart from God is equally evil with respect to His perfection, then one cannot appeal to how evil something is as a reason to block its existence.

This analysis is divided into two parts: *Mind* and *Numen*. Part I, *Mind*, addresses some challenges to physicalism and concludes that it ought to be reconsidered. Motivated by this scepticism toward physicalism, the case is made for adopting a more liberal metaphysical perspective that permits the actual existence of a broader range of kinds of properties, including consciousness that is not fully grounded in physical properties. Following this reconsideration of physicalism and consciousness, in Part II, *Numen*, it is contended that religious beliefs are archetypal cases of belief that provide insight into the nature and meaning of belief. It follows that debates in the philosophy of religion can be re-examined with renewed vigour. Thus, it is shown how the receptivist approach allows one to make philosophical progress, by applying it to one of philosophy's most famous paradoxes: the problem of evil.

Admittedly, this dissertation makes for some rather controversial philosophy. In a sense, it appeals to philosophical work from the famously anti-metaphysical *Wiener Kreis*, or Vienna Circle (Hahn, Neurath, and Rudolf Carnap 1929, p. 10), to argue in favour of the reality of fundamental consciousness, metaphysical liberalism, the importance of religious belief for understanding belief, and God's goodness. It also argues against the plausibility of physicalism, metaphysical conservatism, naturalistic beliefs as exclusively rationalistic, and the persuasiveness of the problem of evil. The irony of this project is not lost on us. Regardless, by the above process, the efficacy of receptivism is demonstrated by testing it in the fires of some of the more difficult debates in philosophy of mind, metaphysics, and religion, to show how one can make genuine progress on the problems under consideration. Given

the Platonic inspiration, in the end, this work might be best summarised by the humbling proposition that it is but another footnote to Plato (Whitehead 1978, p. 39). If this label is verily earned, then it is received as a badge of the highest honour.

The object of opening the mind, as of opening the mouth, is to shut it again on something solid.

G. K. Chesterton (Chesterton 1936, p. 212)

6

Conclusion: Opening the Mind

This analysis has come a long way. Together we sought to understand the nature of philosophical problems, what it means to solve one, and how we ought to approach seemingly unsolvable philosophical problems, especially if we seek philosophical satisfaction and progress. Truly philosophical problems are unsolvable, and philosophical progress is made by engaging with them in a satisfying manner, which means striving to account for the pre-formalised notions that inform the relevant

problem and generalising to related problems.

Specifically, a novel metaphilosophical approach called receptivism was presented. The case was made that due philosophical diligence requires that one engages with a dynamic interplay between pre-formalised notions and their formal representations, and this means being receptive to all the underlying pre-formalised intentions of the premises that motivate a given philosophical problem. The most effective answers to philosophical problems are those that maintain the integrity of the accumulated pre-formalised notions and the interplay with possible ways of formalising them.

This approach was applied to current issues in philosophy of mind, both human and divine. In doing so, it was determined that physicalism encounters serious challenges. It was also argued that there is a compelling case for adopting a more liberal metaphysical perspective that permits the actual existence of a broader range of properties, including consciousness that is not fully grounded in physical properties. This opened the door to reconsideration of claims in the philosophy of religion. Our analysis of religious beliefs provided a deeper understanding of the meaning of belief and the correct characterisation of religious beliefs. Lastly, the receptivist approach was applied to one of philosophy's most intractable puzzles: the problem of evil. By grappling with the pre-formalised notions that inform the problem, and proposing an answer which appeals to non-arbitrariness and plenitude, a novel answer to the problem was presented.

In exploring these issues, we dug to the depths of fundamentality and monism and climbed the heights of plenitude and infinity. This perfectly captures the value of an approach to analysis of philosophical problems that is receptive to all the pre-formalised notions that motivate the problem, no matter where the analysis leads us. To paraphrase Jean D'Arc: even if answers to philosophical problems hang from the clouds, yet we shall have them! Of course, the idea is not to be receptive to that which is ludicrous but to follow our philosophical hunches and be sceptical of unnecessarily dogmatic philosophical methodologies and presuppositions. If we wish to be reductive, we might characterise this project as a modest proposal to keep an open mind, with the usual caveat that one's mind should

not be so open that one's brain falls out.

In being receptive, this thesis has opened one's mind to a novel way of addressing philosophical problems. It is hoped that through this approach, one has gained new insight into the given problems and made progress on the appropriate dialectics. It is also hoped that one can generalise from these specific problems to learn more about how to approach other philosophical problems. With that, it is now time to conclude this extended footnote to Plato, by bringing this opening of mind and *numen* to a close. And what is that 'something solid' upon which we should close our open minds? Perhaps it is this simple lesson: whereof one may speak, thereof one ought not to be silent.

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