

PHILOSOPHICAL LECTURE

CEASING TO EXIST

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IN his Third Meditation Descartes argues that finite substances depend on God's creative power not merely in respect of their origin, but equally in respect of their continuing existence.

For all the course of my life may be divided into an infinite number of parts, none of which is in any way dependent on the other; and thus from the fact that I was in existence a short time ago it does not follow that I must be in existence now, unless some cause at this instant, so to speak, produces me anew, that is to say, conserves me. It is as a matter of fact perfectly clear and evident to all those who consider with attention the nature of time, that, in order to be conserved in each moment in which it endures, a substance has need of the same power and action as would be necessary to produce and create it anew, supposing it did not yet exist, so that the light of nature shows us clearly that the distinction between creation and conservation is solely a distinction of reason.¹

I shall not discuss the notion of creation here. I will just remark in passing that, though I agree with Descartes that the relation of the world to God expressed in the idea of creation must be a *continuing* relation of dependence, it does not seem to me something to be established by the sort of metaphysical reasoning Descartes offers, or to be the sort of relation which that reasoning suggests. But to argue that would require another lecture of an altogether different sort from the one I propose. What I have to say will, though, have a bearing on Descartes's conception of the existence of finite things and, in particular, on his implied claim that there is nothing in the nature of any such thing considered in itself which supports any presumption that it will continue to exist from one moment to the next.

Descartes is not, of course, speaking of some power which counteracts the natural processes of decay or combats natural agents of destruction. What he says has nothing to do, for instance, with the speed with which my car rusts or the resistance of

¹ *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, translated by Haldane and Ross (Cambridge University Press, 1979), i. 168.

warships to Exocet missiles. Given as much decay and destruction as you like to imagine, Descartes would still think some explanation necessary for the degree of continuity in things necessary for us to conceive of any such processes as decay and destruction at all. He is concerned with the bare distinction between existence and non-existence; his contention is that there is nothing in the conception of a thing's existence at a given moment that implies anything at all about its existence at any other moment. If something does continue to exist from one moment to another, that needs explaining in terms of some external power.

It seems to be a presupposition of this claim that it is perfectly conceivable that anything should cease to exist, from one moment to the next, just like that. That is the claim I want to investigate.

I am assuming that Descartes's contention does not, at this point, bring into play any special considerations relating to *substances* in his quasi-technical sense of that term, but that it is meant to apply to the existence of finite things in an ordinary non-technical sense. The fact that his argument rests purely on considerations about the nature of time seems to me to point to its applicability to any temporal existent. But certainly the point of interpretation is controversial.

I hope that the reference to Descartes will establish my subject as one of serious philosophical concern, apt for a lecture under the terms of Miss Henriette Hertz's Trust. I say this because my next quotation, which I shall spend a good deal of time discussing, may strike some as altogether too frivolous for such an occasion. It is from a story by Isaac Bashevis Singer called 'Stories from Behind the Stove'.¹ In it Zalman the glazier is starting to tell a tale in the Jewish study house in a Polish village.

'People do vanish,' he said. 'Not everyone is like the Prophet Elijah, who was taken to heaven in a fiery chariot. In the village of Palkes, not far from Radoshitz, a peasant was ploughing with an ox. Behind him walked his son, sowing barley from a bag. The boy looked up and the ox was there but his father had gone. He began to call, to scream, but there was no answer. His father had disappeared in the middle of the field. He was never heard from again.'

'Perhaps there was a hole in the earth and he fell in?' Levi Yitzchock suggested.

'There was no hole to be seen—and if there had been a hole, why didn't the ox fall in first? He was in the lead.'

¹ Isaac Bashevis Singer, 'Stories from Behind the Stove', in *A Friend of Kafka* (Penguin Books, 1979).

'Do you mean that the demons carried him away?'

'I don't know.'

'Perhaps he ran away with some woman,' Meir the eunuch suggested.

'Nonsense, an old man of seventy—maybe more. A peasant does not run away from his earth, his hut. If he wants a woman, he goes with her into the granary.'

'In that case, the Evil Ones took him,' Levi Yitzchock said judiciously.

'Why just him?' Zalman the glazier asked. 'A quiet man, Wojciech Kucek—that was his name. Before the Feast of the Tabernacle, he used to bring branches for covering the Sukhoth. My own father bought from him. These things do happen. . . .'¹

The conversation is presented in the form of an argument in which, by appealing to an example, Zalman apparently seeks to convince his audience that a certain kind of event, which they believe never happens, does sometimes happen. The effrontery of his arguments is of course intentionally comic. I apologize in advance to Mr Singer for spoiling the joke by subjecting them to rather solemn analysis. But, as so often, a good joke conceals a deep philosophical point and I know no way of making that explicit without losing the joke.

My own purpose, at this stage of the lecture, is not to argue either for or against the truth of Zalman's claim. I have a perhaps more fundamental worry. I am not sure that I understand the claim, what it means. That does not mean that I fail to understand Singer's story. I understand that in somewhat the way I understand Escher's drawings of impossible situations and objects. And to that extent I understand the sense of Zalman's claim, 'People do vanish', too: I understand it as it occurs in Singer's story. But were I to be confronted with someone like Zalman who apparently tried to convince me in earnest that 'people do vanish', I do not think I should understand *what* he was trying to have me believe. I should like to suggest too that there are quite far-reaching considerations which ought to give pause to anyone who believes the sense of such a claim to be quite obvious.

Let me spend a little time examining the form of the argument between Zalman and his audience. Zalman wants to convince them of the general proposition that people (and things) do vanish. That is the *conclusion* of the argument. (It is quite important to remember that.) By 'vanishing' Zalman appears to mean just going out of existence, not as a result of any describable process of destruction or decay or disintegration or dissolution,

¹ Isaac Bashevis Singer, loc. cit., pp. 61-74.

etc. Not even, necessarily, as the result of supernatural intervention—though conceptions of the supernatural are not far away in Singer's story. At one moment the object in question exists, at the next moment not; and that is all. The form of the argument is to offer a case (and later another one) of something or someone's vanishing.

In that respect the argument is very reminiscent of that used in one of the most notable philosophical lectures ever delivered to the British Academy: G. E. Moore's 'Proof of an External World', in which he held up his two hands, said 'Here is one hand and here is another' and claimed to 'have proved *ipso facto* the existence of external things'.¹ The comparison is instructive, because just as those who found difficulty with Moore's conclusion found equal difficulty in accepting the cases he offered them as cases of the existence of external objects; so those who find difficulty with Zalman's conclusion in Singer's story will find equal difficulty in accepting that he has offered them a genuine example of a person's vanishing. But there is an obvious difference between the two cases as well. Whereas Moore claimed, at least, actually to confront his audience with a case of an external object, neither we, the readers of Singer's story, nor the hearers of Zalman's, are actually confronted with anyone or anything that vanishes. We are confronted with words; and our primary problem is to be clear what sort of sense we can attach to those words. Specifically, can we make sense of envisaging ourselves raising a serious question about their truth and falsity? I apologize for this cumbersome formulation of the question. The reason for this should become apparent as I go on.

In the story itself Zalman's interlocutors resist his account of what happened. They suggest various naturalistic explanations, explanations of just the sort which are characteristically offered when someone disappears from view in the way people uncontroversially do. He counters these suggestions in a way which is again familiar, and telling enough, in uncontroversial cases. There was no hole; if there were, why didn't the ox fall into it? Peasants of seventy don't abandon their home and land to run after a woman. In the circumstances in which such rebuttals are familiar to us, their point is to pave the way to better explanations. The rhetoric of Zalman's persuasion exploits this, but in a way that is sheer effrontery. The rebuttals are of the form 'Things don't happen like

¹ G. E. Moore, 'Proof of an External World', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, vol. xxv, reprinted in G. E. Moore, *Philosophical Papers* (Allen and Unwin, 1963), 146.

that' and his listeners are supposed to conclude, 'So he vanished, went out of existence'. But it could only be reasonable of them to reach this conclusion if, *prior* to the argument, 'People do sometimes vanish' were *more* acceptable to them than, e.g., 'Peasants of seventy do sometimes abandon everything for a woman'. Otherwise the argument can exert no logical leverage on them. But in that case the argument would be superfluous, since 'People do sometimes vanish' is supposed to be its *conclusion*, is supposed to be what the argument is to convince them of.

A connected point is this. We have methods of investigating whether there are holes and whether people or animals have fallen down them; whether men have run away with women, etc. We understand and can evaluate claims that something of the sort has happened in a particular case in the context of our familiarity with these methods. Such a claim has logical force in the context of arguments like that in Singer's story just because there are means of assessing its acceptability *outside* the particular context of the argument. The situation is quite otherwise with the claim 'He vanished'. We do not have any general methods of investigating whether people have vanished. At best 'He vanished' is something we're driven back on: to say when we despair of finding any other explanation.

But I should not say, as I just did, 'any *other* explanation', since precisely because of the considerations I have been rehearsing, 'It has vanished' is not an explanation at all. It is just an expression of despair at the prospect of finding an explanation. So far, at least, I have uncovered no other logical force that it has. And if it *has* no other logical force, it seems to me clear that it cannot, as it is supposed to do by Zalman, support the general conclusion, 'People do vanish'. At best that would be a resigned admission that there are occurrences of a sort for which we cannot hope to find an explanation.

But occurrences of *what* sort? *Not* occurrences of the sort: people vanish! For to say that would precisely presuppose that we had fixed a use for this expression other than as an expression of resignation about the finding of explanations. And of course, were we to find a common or garden naturalistic explanation for the phenomenon that had been puzzling us, we would *cease* calling it a case of someone's vanishing (in the queer sense in which Zalman would like to have us understand that expression).

So the provisional and so far tentative conclusion I have reached is that when Zalman says of Wojciech Kucek, 'he vanished', this can be taken *neither* as an expression of the explanans

nor as a description of the explanandum. What status it has is still obscure.

Perhaps it will be thought perverse of me to link so closely the issue of what sense we are to attach to the claim 'He vanished' with the issue of what logical role it plays in an argument such as is displayed in Singer's story. For, it will be said, the sense of 'he vanished' is evident enough in itself quite apart from any role it may have during argument etc. All we have to do is to specify the truth-conditions, isn't it, and isn't that easy enough?

Let's try it with the second example cited by Zalman in Singer's story, in which such truth-conditions seem to be cited in some detail.

Near Blonia there lived a man, Reb Zelig the bailiff. He had a stove and a shed where he kept kindling wood, flax, potatoes, old ropes. He had a sleigh there too. He got up one morning and the shed was gone.

Zelig thinks he is mad. But everyone else confirms that the shed is no longer there. It has left no trace, the grass is growing high in the place where it was. A group of 'enlightened' sceptics dig a six-foot-deep ditch in the place. 'The earth was full of roots and stones. The shed could not have sunk in.' Various investigations are undertaken which seem to rule out any conceivable naturalistic explanation.

Does this not specify the truth-conditions of 'the shed had vanished' quite clearly enough for us to be in no doubt what is meant? Well, let's consider this.

No problem is raised for us by the truth-conditions of 'There is a shed in the field on Monday' or by the truth-conditions of 'There is no shed in the field on Tuesday'. Furthermore, we *so far* have no reason to doubt that these two statements are perfectly consistent with each other. Of course, in thinking of them as consistent we shall have expectations that there will be some acceptable story which accounts for the removal of the shed between Monday and Tuesday and, very importantly, these expectations will be shaped by our understanding of what sheds, fields, etc., *are*.

There is a point of some importance concealed here and I should like to bring it into the open. As I have said, we should not normally baulk at the conjunction 'The shed existed on Monday and did not exist on Tuesday'. We should suppose the shed to have been, perhaps, burned down in the interim, dismantled, destroyed by an earthquake, bulldozed—or destroyed in some other way *consistent with our understanding of what a shed is*. All right. There are all sorts of ways in which the shed may have disappeared; and our

acceptance of the above conjunction as consistent does not depend on any particular one of them having been responsible in the given case. That is, 'The shed existed on Monday' and 'The shed did not exist on Tuesday' are consistent independently of any *particular* story about what happened in the interim.¹

Now, a *very* simple-minded logician might think: 'OK. We have here two propositions p and q which are consistent with each other. There are all sorts of propositions $r_1, r_2, r_3, r_4 \dots r_n$, each of which describes a way in which the shed ceased to exist. The consistency of p and q is quite independent of the truth or falsity of any one of those propositions $r_1 \dots r_n$. Hence we can assert p and q and not- r_1 , and not- r_2 and not- $r_3 \dots$ and not- r_n .

The conclusion does not, of course, follow. From the fact that the conjunction p and q is consistent with the falsity of any one of the propositions $r_1 \dots r_n$, it does not follow that it is consistent with the falsity of all of them taken collectively.² Nor is this in fact true. As I have already said with emphasis, our understanding of the conjunction: 'The shed existed on Monday and did not exist on Tuesday' is such as to presuppose that the shed was destroyed between Monday and Tuesday in *some* intelligible way. And what is an intelligible way is limited by our understanding of what a shed is. That is clear enough if one tries as a substitution for $r_1 \dots r_n$ a proposition such as 'It died', 'It dissolved in a tumbler of water', 'It went into liquidation'—i.e. some report of a mode of ceasing to exist which is conceptually inapplicable to a shed. And this brings out the important point that the sense of an existential assertion is not independent of what it is for something of the kind that is in question 'to cease to exist'. (Something analogous is true if we substitute for 'to

¹ Cf. L. Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, translated by Denis Paul and G. E. M. Anscombe (Blackwell, 1969), §237:

If I say 'an hour ago this table didn't exist', I probably mean that it was only made later on.

If I say 'this mountain didn't exist then', I presumably mean that it was only formed later on—perhaps by a volcano.

If I say 'this mountain didn't exist half an hour ago', that is such a strange statement that it is not clear what I mean. Whether for instance I mean something untrue but scientific. Perhaps you think that the statement that the mountain didn't exist then is quite clear, however one conceives the context. But suppose someone said 'This mountain didn't exist a minute ago, but an exactly similar one did instead'. Only the accustomed context allows what is meant to come through clearly.

² I talk as though there were a specifiable determinate set of propositions $r_1 \dots r_n$. I doubt if this is so, but I think this does not weaken the argument in the text.

cease to exist', 'to come into existence': though I do not wish to suggest that the considerations governing how these two concepts are applied are completely symmetrical.) To use Platonic language to express what is not, perhaps, a Platonic thought: in some respects the nature of Being is dependent on the nature of Becoming.

Still, the most my argument seems to establish so far is that there are some accounts of ceasing to exist which would be inconsistent with the assertion and denial of the existence of a certain x at times t_1 and t_2 respectively because conceptually incompatible with the kind of x in question. But of course what I am interested in is something different: whether we can consistently conjoin the assertion of the existence of, say, a shed on Monday, the assertion of its non-existence on Tuesday, and the denial that anything of relevance happened to the shed between Monday and Tuesday beyond its barely ceasing to exist at some instant during that interval.

In order to confront this issue I want to go back to something I said early on in my lecture. I said that I could understand Singer's story all right, and also understand Zalman's claims about the vanishing peasant and shed as they occur as elements in that story. What I said I should not understand is what someone would be saying who seemed to be seriously trying to convince me that something or someone had vanished in that way. My puzzlement about that, of course, goes along with a puzzlement about what I am supposed to represent to myself as a case of being confronted with such a vanishing object. Being confronted with a story about a vanishing shed is nothing like being confronted with a vanishing shed. From the fact that I understand the former nothing follows about the possibility of my understanding the latter, or about my ability to envisage what that would be. I have no difficulty in seeing Escher's famous picture *Ascending, descending*, as depicting a circular staircase which continually ascends and yet rejoins the point of departure; but I have no idea what it would be to encounter an actual staircase like that. In fact, outside the context of such a picture, I do not know how to take the expression 'an actual staircase like that'.

The distinction that has to be made here is hard to formulate satisfactorily. Another distinguished predecessor of mine in this series of annual Philosophical Lectures, Professor G. E. M. Anscombe, made a similar distinction in discussing the analogous question whether one could attach sense to the notion of some-

thing's beginning to exist without a cause.¹ She first formulated this as the distinction between 'really supposing this to happen' and 'just forming a picture of it as happening'. This approaches what is necessary without quite reaching it. The trouble is that the phrase 'really supposing it to happen' sounds too much like contemplating it as a serious quasi-physical possibility: rather in the way one may, without actually expecting it, contemplate the bursting of the banks of the Thames and the catastrophic flooding of London as a serious possibility. But we are not required to 'really suppose' a bare beginning or cessation of existence in *that* way—as something, for instance, we might think it worth taking precautions against. (Indeed, the fact that one has no idea what such 'precautions' would look like is certainly highly relevant to the problem of seeing how these controversial expressions might be seriously applied.)

A little later in her lecture Professor Anscombe came at the matter in a different way which, though it may look at first like changing the subject, in fact seems to me very much more promising. 'But what one ought to propose to one's imagination', she said, 'is perhaps not the existence of some object, but oneself seriously judging an object to have come into existence.' *Mutatis mutandis*, if I am to follow this suggestion I shall have to consider what it would be for me seriously to judge an object to have ceased to exist.

Why should this be a superior approach? The point is not, of course, that the existence, or cessation of existence, of an object is identical with my, or anybody else's, or a whole lot of people's, judging it to exist or to have ceased to exist. Rather, it is in the character of the judgement of existence that what we understand by 'existence' reveals itself rather than in anything about the object judged to exist. But that is *not* to deny that it is indeed the existence of the object that is in question. I shall defer to another occasion any discussion of how all this relates to traditional philosophical controversies over whether or not existence is a predicate. But it is worth making a remark or two at this point about something Hume says in his famous treatment 'Of the idea of existence and of external existence'.² Hume's view is summed up in the sentence: 'To reflect on anything simply, and to reflect on it as existent, are nothing different from each other.' The arguments

¹ G. E. M. Anscombe, 'Times, Beginnings and Causes', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, vol. lx, reprinted in her *Metaphysics and the Philosophy of Mind*, Collected Philosophical Papers, vol. ii (Blackwell, 1981).

² D. Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Book I, Part II, Section vi.

he gives for this *prima facie* outrageous thesis are tangled and to a large extent dependent on confusions arising out of his general epistemology of 'impressions and ideas'. But he does, in at least two remarks, make a point which stands on its own and in respect of which his position has been rightly compared to that of Kant.¹ The idea of existence, Hume writes, 'when conjoin'd with the idea of any object, makes no addition to it'. And a little later: 'But no object can be presented resembling some object with respect to its existence, and different from others in the same particular; since every object, that is presented, must necessarily be existent.' That last clause, of course, reintroduces the confusions from his general epistemology. He appears to mean by it that to reflect on an object is to have an idea of it and, in so far as someone has an idea, necessarily that idea exists. The confusion comes from his assumption that the *object* of one's reflection is that idea and that is what enables him to think that it is impossible to reflect on a non-existent object.

But let us set that confusion aside. A quite genuine point that seems to be involved in what Hume says could be put like this: the mode of representation involved in picturing an object, either in a mental image or on a canvas, or involved indeed in describing the object ('giving a picture in words') will not convey the difference between the existence and non-existence of the object.

Suppose I am reflecting on the yeti, and wondering whether it exists or not. I represent the yeti to myself perhaps as an animal with a certain-shaped body and head, a certain texture of fur, a certain colour, etc. Perhaps I also represent it in a painting. I am unsure whether its ears are pointed or drooping—travellers' tales conflict—and I imagine or paint it twice, each time with a different type of ear.

Compare that with a representation of the existence and non-existence respectively of the yeti. Would the difference appear in the painting of the yeti itself? Well, yes, it might. I might, for instance, represent it as non-existent by painting it in monochrome against a polychrome background; or I might paint it with a broken outline, etc. But whereas I show my correct understanding of the pointed-ear picture, for instance, by looking for a beast with pointed ears, I do not show my understanding of the monochrome or dotted line picture by looking for a monochrome beast, or one with a dotted outline (whatever that would be). I show it rather by, for instance, giving up looking altogether

¹ I. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Transcendental Dialectic, Book II, Chapter III, Section 4.

and perhaps discussing how the story of the yeti came to gain currency. I might indeed represent the non-existence of the yeti not by any feature of the yeti-representation itself, but, for instance, by a series of pictures, in the first one of which explorers study a yeti-picture-within-the-picture, while in the second they are shown scouring the mountains and in the third leaving the mountains with disgusted expressions on their faces and tearing up the yeti-picture.

Non-existence is here represented by way of a representation of a *judgement* of non-existence; and that brings us back to the starting-point of this excursus: Professor Anscombe's suggestion that to be clear about what coming into existence amounts to one should propose to one's imagination 'not the existence of some object, but oneself seriously judging an object to have come into existence'. Of course, a heavy accent has to fall on the word '*seriously*' and this places limits on what can be achieved here simply by 'proposing something to one's imagination'. Explorers behaving as depicted in my suggested series of paintings *might* be making a serious negative existential judgement and they might not. Unless we have a clear grasp of the conditions under which we would *count* someone as seriously making such a judgement we can get no further than what Professor Anscombe calls giving 'a mere title' to a picture, without becoming any clearer about what such a title conveys or what makes a picture (or a story) deserving of such a title.

If we look again, more closely, at Singer's story we shall see that we are really offered no more than the title 'the shed vanished' to the story Zalman is depicted as spinning. I want to follow Descartes in focusing attention on the importance of time in this connection, though the kind of importance I shall attach to time is far removed from what Descartes had in mind. We are told in the story that one morning (let's call it Tuesday) the shed that had been there previously (let's say on Monday) 'was gone'. In other words the tale is told in a temporally impartial mode. The situations, as they were supposed to hold on Monday and on Tuesday respectively, are given equal status as accepted data. The way things were on Monday is not represented as *inferred* from the way things are on Tuesday, when the judgement is made, but as standing four-square alongside it. What, now, *is* the situation on Tuesday morning when Zelig is supposed to judge that the shed has vanished? My question is: what in Zelig's situation then, on Tuesday morning, warrants us in saying that he is making a serious judgement that the shed has vanished? (Clearly it is

not enough that he utters—or says to himself—the words ‘The shed has vanished.’)

When Zelig gets up on Tuesday he sees no shed where he expected one to be, where he overwhelmingly seems to remember there to have been one the previous day. There is no sign of a shed’s having been removed by natural means. As a matter of fact, interestingly enough, his first reaction in the story is not, ‘It has vanished’, but ‘I must have lost my mind’. His wife and children and neighbours have reactions that agree with his. The whole village first goes berserk and then subsides into bewildered melancholy. The gentile squire rants about ‘Jewish tricks’ and yells ‘If the shed does not stand where it has always stood, and at once, I will whip you all to death’. The doctor says to the druggist ‘If a thing like this is possible, what sort of a doctor am I? And what kind of druggist are you?’ The enlightened ones give up playing cards and begin to think there may be a God. *Et cetera*.

What role does the thought ‘The shed has vanished’ play in all this psychic pandemonium? It is a thought that is expressed *both* by some of the villagers themselves and by Zalman the story-teller. Or rather, both some of the villagers and Zalman have thoughts which could be expressed in these words. Whether it is, in each case, *the same thought* is precisely the question I am raising. Zalman wants his audience to treat it as a sober objective report of what has caused and explains the pandemonium in the village. But *within* the village the thought that the shed has vanished is the focus, the expression, of the psychic disturbance itself. It is by no means simply accepted as the cause of the upheaval. Indeed, it is the impossibility of simply accepting it, in the face of the overwhelming urge to accept it, that is the immediate cause of the disturbance. The disturbance is not of the kind that would be produced by a very extraordinary and threatening, though intelligible, event such as, say, a totally unexpected pogrom, or an earthquake. Indeed, the loss of the shed is in itself no more than a relatively minor inconvenience and the intrinsic banality of the supposed occurrence is an important feature of the story. It plays its part in the story-teller’s dismissal of proposed supernatural explanations: a matter to which I shall return briefly towards the end of the lecture. What is disturbing is that no sense can be made of the situation; ‘the shed has vanished’ is not accepted by *anyone* (except Zalman) as making sense of it. It is an admission of failure and of a sort of failure which threatens the whole structure of their lives, their whole ability to make sense of anything—as is apparent from the typical examples of their reactions in the story which I have quoted.

Can we regard it as some sort of hallucination then? Zalman considers, or pretends to consider, this possibility. 'The whole thing must have been an illusion. But how can a whole town be deluded?'¹ Needless to say, that is a mere repetition of the storyteller's effrontery, which I noted early on in the lecture in connection with the argument over the vanishing ploughman. Why should anyone be more disconcerted by the question 'How can a whole town be deluded?' than by the question 'How can a shed vanish?' In fact the onus lies very much on the other side. That a whole town should be deluded is indeed highly unlikely; but it is a *possible* explanation of events and one that could conceivably itself be investigated and accounted for. We might look for something in the drinking-water; or investigate the bread for evidence of ergot poisoning, etc., etc. But it is of absolutely paramount importance to remember that nothing of the sort is possible with the 'hypothesis' that the shed vanished. For to have a naturalistic explanation of the disappearance of the shed would be incompatible with treating it as a case of the shed's simply ceasing to exist in the sense Zalman (and Descartes, by implication, too) want us to accept. Even to look for such a naturalistic explanation would be at least to cast doubt on the peculiar metaphysical status that is philosophically interesting.

I have not, as may be thought, lost sight of my promise to focus attention on the importance of time in the putative judgement 'The shed has vanished'. The point I have been trying to make might be put like this: despite appearances, the words 'The shed has vanished' do not express a judgement in which the utterer, as it were, projects a thought into the past as he might, for example, were he to utter the words 'The shed has had a fresh coat of paint since yesterday'; it does not go beyond expressing present bewilderment at the senseless conflict of one's present impressions.

It is important for me to make my reason for saying this clear. My point is *not* that in the normal case (that of my thought about the shed's new coat of paint, for example), because all my present impressions converge, I am able to move beyond them and base on them a judgement about something that happened in the past. It is not that I have the present *impression* of fresh paint and the present *impression* of remembering that yesterday the paint was old and from that conclude . . . etc. No, the correct account seems to me to be simply that I see the shed has been freshly painted since

¹ In Singer's story this is said after the reappearance of the shed some weeks later as though nothing had happened. I omit this complication from my discussion.

yesterday. Furthermore, it is not just because my present impressions, in the abnormal, vanishing-shed case, are in conflict with each other that I find myself unable to go beyond them and make any judgement reaching out to a past event. For there are plenty of quite normal cases of our having conflicting impressions in which our thought ranges beyond our present experience without much difficulty: cases, for instance, in which we seek and find some naturalistic explanation of the conflicting impressions.

I may seem at this point to lay myself open to a charge of inconsistency. Am I not just dogmatically refusing to describe the abnormal case in the same mode as I would describe the normal one? Well, it is perfectly true that in the normal case I do not quarrel with a straightforward report of a temporal sequence in which all the stages of the sequence are given equal epistemic weight. I do not here insist on resting all the weight on my present impressions, sensory and memory. I simply state the sequence as a simple matter of observation: 'The shed has been freshly painted since yesterday.' It's true too that I am refusing to give 'The shed has vanished' the same treatment. Why?

The objection implied in the question is parallel to a claim made by Professor Roy Holland in a paper which I have found very rewarding.¹ Holland tries to isolate one conception of a miraculous event as that of an event which though 'conceptually impossible' is 'empirically certain'. The notion of conceptual impossibility is explained in terms of laws of nature which have become so entrenched in our thought and language as to be 'stipulative' and to constitute 'a framework through which we look at the world and which to a considerable degree dictates our ways of describing phenomena'.² Recognizing that this way of looking at things *prima facie* strengthens Hume's argument against miracles, Holland claims nevertheless that there is such a thing as empirical certainty, that is to say, that empirical observation can and does generate more than probability—contrary to what Hume thought; and that such certainty can prevail even in a case where what is observed conflicts with what our concepts stipulate to be possible, i.e. we can be empirically certain that something has occurred which is conceptually impossible.

The first part of this counter-claim against Hume seems to me obviously right. What we observe may be, and overwhelmingly often is, absolutely certain. It may be so, moreover, even in the face of very firmly entrenched expectations. It may even be so

¹ R. F. Holland, 'The Miraculous', in *Against Empiricism* (Blackwell, 1980), 169ff.

² p. 177.

certain as to force a change in our concepts. That, however, still falls short of what Holland claims, since he wants to recognize the possibility of cases where our observations cannot be accommodated to our existing concepts and where, nevertheless, *both* the reports of what we observe *and* the system of concepts which rules out what is reported are allowed to stand with unabated certainty. The trouble with this position, looking at it from the side of empirical certainty, is that this latter is an intentional notion, requiring an object. One is certain *of* something, or *that* something is so. Certain of what, or that what? The answer has to deploy concepts appropriate to the situation. But in Holland's 'miraculous' situations we do not have the concepts which allow us to formulate an intelligible answer. We are reduced to uttering a form of words to which, in these circumstances, we can attach no sense. So no answer has been given to the question, 'What are we certain of?' As I hope my previous discussion makes clear, I do not at all want to deny that we may be confronted with circumstances which defeat our attempts to describe them coherently. What I am objecting to is the idea that, in such circumstances, the notion of empirical certainty can still be thought of as standing with rock-like firmness.

The only counter-argument to this that I can find in Holland's article is that 'if it were granted that there can be no certainty in regard to the individual case, if there can be no real knowledge that a particular event has occurred in exactly the way that it has, how could our system of laws have got established in the first place?'¹ To that I first reiterate that I am very far from thinking that there is no such thing as 'certainty in regard to the individual case' (in regard to *any* individual case, that is); and I remark secondly that the question at the end of the sentence I have quoted, if it is meant to suggest that our frameworks of concepts somehow rest on certain empirical certainties which themselves have *no* conceptual content, must surely itself rest on a quasi-empiricist confusion.

To return, then, to my original question: Why do I not accord parity of treatment, in respect of their relation to the utterer's present experience, to the expressions 'The shed has been freshly painted since yesterday', and 'The shed has vanished since yesterday'? Why, that is, do I not allow the direct connection with the past in the report of the observer's immediate situation in the second case as with the first? After all, it may be said, in making such a report I would equally in each case have to rely at the

¹ p. 177.

moment of making it on my memory of how things were previously—yesterday in the case of the shed, a few moments ago in the case of the ploughboy's vanishing father. It's true that normally in making reports such as 'The shed's been repainted' I don't explicitly state what I remember—how the shed was yesterday—I take for granted, as do my hearers, an enormous amount about the immediate (and not so immediate) antecedents to the present situation. And it would not be incorrect to call this taking for granted, in large part at least, a memory phenomenon. So if I am saying that there is something suspect about my memory in the abnormal, metaphysically interesting, case, why can't suspicion be applied equally to the normal cases?

The answer to this is linked with difficulties in the remarks by Descartes with which I started. For Descartes, it will be remembered, what requires explanation is that something *does* continue to exist from one instant to the next, since what is the case at any given instant is not in any way dependent on what is the case at any other instant. In so far as there is continuity of existence, that must be sustained by some external power. So, if a shed suddenly ceases to exist, that, *so far as the nature of the shed itself is concerned, considered as an individual temporal existent*, is no other than we have a right to expect. The focus of my own discussion has been on the conditions under which we can regard certain kinds of utterance, ostensibly concerning temporal existents, as expressing significant judgements about such existents. I want to recall now that Descartes's conception of time as a succession of mutually independent atomic instants can be, and in fact is, at an earlier stage in Descartes's overall argument, applied with equal force to the relation between a thought expressed at a given moment and what may or may not be the case at any other moment before or after that given moment. So, whatever it is about my situation at a given moment that makes me certain that there was a shed in front of my window yesterday has no intrinsic connection whatever with what actually was the case yesterday. God is invoked by Descartes not merely to guarantee the shed's continued existence but also to guarantee some connection between my present apparent memory of the shed's existence yesterday and what was the case yesterday.¹ So, if we leave belief in God's sustaining power out of the matter, not merely do I have no reason

¹ And thus the deductive chain, avowedly involving memory of earlier links in the chain, by which Descartes seeks to establish the existence of a veracious God, is equally undermined. I am unconvinced by any attempt I have read to free him from the toils of his Circle.

for expecting the shed to go on existing from one moment to another, I would *also* never have any reason for making the serious judgement that a shed has vanished, since I would have no reason for supposing that my overwhelming present inclination to think there was a shed there yesterday had anything whatever to do with whether there was a shed there yesterday or not. So the same considerations which seem to make possible a shed's vanishing, at the same time make it impossible to see what the serious, justified, judgement that a shed had vanished could look like, or in what conditions there could be such a judgement. The confinement of the thinker to the circle of his own present impressions is thus inextricably linked with the conception of physical things as involving no continuity of existence through time. Indeed, it will be recalled that Descartes himself quite explicitly and emphatically, in the quotation with which I started, grounds his argument on considerations concerning the nature of time *per se*. So the difficulties about continuity which he expresses affect indifferently anything having a temporal existence, be it physical or mental, a shed or a putative memory.

According to this argument, then, I could never have any better reason for saying the shed had vanished than for saying that I was subject to certain disturbing perceptual and memory impressions.

It may seem, though, that my argument has no relevance to the question whether we could understand Zalman's utterances in Singer's story as expressing straightforward statements of fact. For Zalman after all does not buttress his tale with any such general metaphysical considerations as we find in Descartes; he simply tells his story about the particular case.

However, I believe that the conception which tempts us to think that we could understand Zalman's story as a factual account of something that had happened, is precisely the conception which underlies Descartes's argument. The existence of something or someone at one time, we think, is a totally distinct state of affairs from its existence at another time and is logically consistent with its non-existence at another time. So we can conjoin the judgement of the object's existence on Monday with the judgement of its non-existence on Tuesday with perfect consistency. Any further judgements we may or may not make about what happened between Monday and Tuesday are a completely different matter, having no bearing on the intelligibility of the conjunction under review.

My argument so far has been that such reasoning can have no greater authority than reasoning which calls the reliability of my

present impressions in question. And if I were, as of course I might be on some occasion, under the overwhelming impression that a shed had vanished, that would be at least as strong a reason for concluding I was subject to some cognitive disorder as for concluding that the shed had indeed vanished.

At a crucial stage of his philosophical development Wittgenstein wrote as follows:

The stream of life, or the stream of the world, flows on and our propositions are so to speak verified only at instants.

Our propositions are only verified by the present. So they must be so constructed that they can be verified by it.¹

His subsequent enquiries into the nature of following a rule, understanding, meaning something by what one says; and particularly his microscopic examination of the relation between the moment at which one is said to mean something and the temporally extended language games in the context of which alone this *can* be said of one—these are attempts to reconcile those two aspects of propositions: their place in ‘the stream of life, or the stream of the world’, and the sense in which they can be said to be ‘only verified by the present’. To regard time in the Cartesian way required by accepting that something like a human being, or like a shed, could just cease to exist from one moment to the next, is to remove both the object in question and oneself contemplating it from that ‘stream’. But this removal is a cancellation of the conditions under which anything one says or thinks has sense: *including* the words ‘It has ceased to exist’. There is nothing more we can do with these words. This point is dramatized with beautiful comedy in Singer’s story: the druggist, replying to the doctor’s remarks to him that I quoted earlier, says ‘There is some swindle here.’

He stretched out in the grass and examined the earth. He asked for a spade. He wanted to dig. But Zelig said, ‘I kept the spade in the shed. It’s gone.’²

In vanishing the shed has, as it were, taken with it the possibility of our making anything of its disappearance, the possibility even of getting clear about what its disappearance amounts to.

I should like to spell out further what is involved in the notion of ‘the stream of life, or the stream of the world’ in its relation to the main issue I have been concerned with. The main point

¹ L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Remarks*, translated by Hargreaves and White (Blackwell, 1975), v, §48.

² *Loc. cit.*, p. 63.

to elucidate here is the interconnection between my present understanding of the situation I am in at this moment, what I can recollect about the antecedents of this situation, and my understanding of the causal properties of, and relations between, the objects in my environment. I use the word 'causal' in this context very loosely indeed, as a mere abbreviating label to include, for instance, the characteristic ways in which such objects behave, typical shapes of their life-histories, their relatively stable geographical interrelations, etc., etc. Even more loosely, I include under the same label familiar and established functions of such objects in the lives and practices of human beings. For instance, I am writing these words on a piece of paper with a Parker ballpoint pen. Paper and pens (especially Parker pens) come into being in ways characteristic of them. Paper tends to blow about in the wind, a pen not. A pen's main use is writing; paper is used for writing on and for other things, too . . . My understanding of all this is covered by my use of the expression 'causal understanding' in the present context.

I sit down at my desk writing these words. It is about 9.30 a.m. on a cold September morning. I am a bit alarmed at how little time I have left to get ready this lecture to deliver to the British Academy, as I have agreed to do. Let that serve as a tiny scrap of what I would offer if asked to describe my present circumstances. It includes, as it were indiscriminately, references to what I can now perceive, to my state of mind, to my expectations for the future, to past circumstances that led to my doing what I am doing. I could expand the description and answer questions arising from it. If asked about the circumstances of my agreeing to give this lecture, for instance, I would say that the Academy's Secretary wrote to me with the invitation, to which I wrote a letter of acceptance. I would give that information quite unself-consciously and firmly, without a thought as to whether these are things *I remember* or not. If asked about that I would say, yes, I do remember receiving the Secretary's letter, but do not actually remember replying to it. However, I certainly did reply to it because I remember receiving a follow-up letter from the Secretary, and anyway, here is a copy of my reply in the file . . .

What I want to emphasize about all this is the extent to which expressions of recollection, reports of perception, quasi-causal inferences, are indiscriminately mixed up together. It is not merely that they exist side by side; they mutually support each other and it is not even always clear what status a particular report has. For instance, how did this pen come to be in my hand? Well,

I picked it up. Do I recollect doing that? To be honest, I am not sure whether I do or not but it does not matter, for there is certainly no other way it could have got there.

My point is not just that when I recollect something I draw psychological support from my causal understanding, though that is certainly true. More importantly, the concepts in terms of which I express what I remember are drawn from the background of that understanding. These concepts should not be thought of in purely verbal terms. This pen is something I reach for in my pocket (thus expressing my memory of where I put it), hold in a certain rather complicated way, and write with (thus expressing my understanding of how a pen behaves and how it is to be used).

This interpenetration of memory and causal understanding is one of the things Kant wanted to emphasize in the 'Second Analogy of Experience', I believe. I have in mind his question about how our idea of an objective temporal sequence is distinct from the sequence of our impressions and his claim that this distinction involves the idea of a necessary *causal* sequence. I do not wish to support everything Kant said about this, but his claim does seem to me particularly important for a proper understanding of what is involved in *remembering* a sequence of events.

The order in which I recollect the events in a sequence need not, of course, follow the order of the sequence itself. I might, for instance, recollect replying to the Academy Secretary's letter before I recollect receiving it. In suitable circumstances, indeed, I may be able to change the order in which I recollect something more or less at will. I should certainly not normally be tempted in such circumstances to identify the order of recollected events with the order in which those events are recollected.

Here is another example. Last week I travelled by air from New York to London. I recall travelling by subway from downtown Manhattan to Kennedy Airport, boarding a plane, and flying for about six-and-a-half hours, then disembarking at Heathrow and travelling by tube to Earl's Court. I recall making these segments of the journey in that order, although, perhaps, my recollections were triggered off by thoughts of the final stage of the journey and from that point I went back in memory over the earlier stages.

Suppose I were to be under the impression that I had travelled from, let's say, Manhattan to central London by subway, then by plane to John F. Kennedy, and thence by tube to Earl's Court. In that case I would naturally at once correct myself and if, in narrating my recollections of the journey to somebody else, I were to recount the events as having happened in that order, *he* could

easily correct me simply on the basis of our mutual knowledge of what is physically and geographically possible. Such a narrative would in fact *make no sense*, considered as a narrative. If a piece of discourse is to count as a narration of a journey from New York to London, a certain order is already imposed on it by the very fact that this is what it is supposed to be. This order cannot be overruled by my impression, however strong, of having travelled in a radically different order. If I do seem to remember it differently that only shows that I am confused or mistaken.

An ability to narrate a remembered sequence of events in their proper temporal order presupposes, then, as this example illustrates, an understanding of how things hang together, their causal interconnections, etc. This is manifest in the very terms, the very concepts in which the narration is expressed: 'travelling by tube', 'boarding a plane', etc., the reference to geographical localities and the relations between them. The fact that the terms in which a narration is expressed belong to such a background understanding of the way things behave, what can and what cannot happen, what you can and cannot do, is an important part of what makes it possible for memory claims to be accepted or rejected (and hence understood for what they are), for them to be corrected. That is, an account of what *did* happen, what *was* done, depends on an understanding of what *can* and *cannot* happen, be done. 'It can't have been like that', we say, 'because, look, that would have meant such and such and that's impossible.' That kind of discussion and criticism is a characteristic feature of the whole phenomenon of remembering (which it is very misleading to think of, as so often happens in philosophy, as just a matter of having certain sorts of experience or even as just a matter of issuing certain sorts of report). Someone who could not take part in such discussion would be someone who had, at best, only a very dim understanding of what it is to recount one's recollections. How would such a person distinguish such a narration from a fantasy?

What I want to emphasize most in this part of the discussion is that, within the complex forms of activity that we call 'expressing what we remember', the impression, however overwhelmingly strong, that *this* is what happened by no means has final authority. For the statement 'this is what happened' has to make sense, not merely on its own, but in conjunction with the whole narration to which it belongs. It is easy to be misled on this matter by the fact that, *given* that the requirements of sense and consistency—both internal and contextual—are met, a memory claim may indeed be

completely authoritative in a way which is not at all derivative from anything else in the narrative.

Suppose, for instance, that I vividly recall that in the course of a tête-à-tête conversation my interlocutor, out of character and right out of the blue, suddenly said something quite outrageous—perhaps uttered a gratuitous insult. He subsequently steadfastly denies it and there is nothing in the way of evidence to support me. It is my word against his, as we say. Others may or may not believe me when I tell them this. They may think I am lying or that I am subject to some delusion. As to the latter, well, that may be a possibility. My claim is *not* that a vivid memory-experience is self-authenticating in the sense that there is anything about the experience itself which guarantees that it is veridical. I am saying only that this kind of direct, non-inferential memory claim is as such perfectly intelligible to us. We all make such claims constantly without *arrière-pensée* and accept them unquestioningly when they are made by others. Their authority is *sui generis*. Overwhelmingly often, moreover, the claims are substantiated.

But this, obviously, cannot mean that a ‘memory-experience’, however vivid, and endowed with whatever degree of conviction you like, has any ‘authority’ to confer narrative intelligibility on a piece of prose which is otherwise unintelligible. However passionately convinced I am that I first travelled by subway from Manhattan to Earl’s Court and from there by plane to John F. Kennedy Airport, that will not be treated, by anyone who knows enough geography to assess the coherence of what is being said, as the expression of a possibly genuine recollection. The ‘authority’ of memory claims and memory-experiences is ascribable only within the limits of what is intelligible as an expression of the objects of those claims or experiences.

Why, then, should the fact that I can imagine myself, as I certainly can, feeling as though I remembered with complete conviction that yesterday a shed stood in a field in which there is now undisturbed ground, be taken to show that there might indeed have *been* a shed there, one that has simply ceased to exist? My question is: why should we treat that any differently from the obviously disordered memory-experience described in my previous paragraph?

It may be important to say in parenthesis that the force of that question is not weakened by the fact that *my* feeling of conviction might be shared by all those round me, as is the case in Singer’s story. If that is so, it certainly will make a difference to what account might be given of the whole situation and perhaps make it

more difficult to see what account *can* be given. But it will not make any difference to the unintelligibility of what people are claiming to remember. Suppose I had travelled to London with a large party of people, all of whom claimed to recollect the stages of the journey in the disordered way I have sketched. Would that make any difference to the intelligibility of the claim? No.

However, it is true that these two cases are not completely comparable. The difference between them might be put like this. The route I have the impression of having taken between New York and London can be shown to be impossible by reference to generally known geographical facts, the acknowledged powers of human beings along with their limitations, the capabilities of trains and aeroplanes, etc. And the process of showing the impossibility of one route is, at the same time, a step in the direction of showing how others are possible. (Or, of course, there may be cases where *no* route is possible—but that too is shown in some determinate way.) But Zalman the story-teller does not describe a route from existence to non-existence, in the cases of the ploughman and the shed, which we can similarly show to be impossible by reference to our knowledge of the world. The fact of the matter is that he describes no route whatever. One moment something is there, the next moment it is not there; and that is all. The various positive accounts which are suggested by members of Zalman's audience, or by Zelig's neighbours, of the mysterious disappearances are quickly dispatched. But the arguments by which they are dispatched cannot be said to point in the direction of the story-teller's account since, as I just said, he gives no account. Indeed, it is not just that he *omits* to explain how the ploughman and the shed ceased to exist. He is using the words 'He (It) vanished' in such a way as to preclude there being any determinate way in which he (it) ceased to exist. That is the whole point of his tales. His words do not locate any definite point in the stream of life. So it is not so much that what is said *conflicts* with our understanding of things (as with the impossible route from New York to London). It just *fails to connect* with it.

Perhaps this is more obvious if we take an analogy from the imperative mood. Suppose I am told to destroy the shed in the field in front of me by fire. If I have no means of ignition available I shall not be in a position to comply, but I shall understand perfectly *what* it is that I cannot do. Suppose by contrast that I am told to make the shed cease to exist—*not* by *any* means. In this case I have not been told to do something beyond my powers, I have not been told to do anything at all. What has been said to me

merely apes the form of an order. Similarly, the sentence in the indicative mood merely apes the form of a factual report.

Finally, I want to disown two interpretations of what I have been saying which might seem natural, but which would be over-hasty. First, I have not wanted to say in any absolute sense that purported reports of some physical thing's ceasing to exist can only have a sense when it is presupposed that we could, with sufficient knowledge, give some naturalistic account of what has happened. I have concentrated on the bewilderment that we—that is, you and I—are liable to feel at a claim about the bare cessation of existence of some physical thing where any sort of naturalistic explanation is ruled out. I have done so simply because the expectation of such explanations plays such a dominant role within the mode in which we are brought up to make sense of things. That is the prevailing direction in which the stream of *our* life goes.

The cultural context of Singer's story, for instance, is rather different from what I imagine most of the people in this room would be at home in. And Zalman does not merely reject naturalistic explanations; he is equally dismissive of suggestions that demons or the Powers of Darkness were responsible. ('What did they have against the shed?' he asks at the end of his story.) I should not want to deny that people in whose lives thoughts about the Powers of Darkness played a central role could make a sort of sense of accounts of happenings which remained opaque to us. The same goes for miracles. My grounds for criticizing what Holland writes about this concept have to do mainly with his attempt to bring it into usable relation with the habits of naturalistic explanation which are so predominant in our *Weltanschauung*. His failure—as it seems to me—in this attempt is a necessary and not a contingent failure. As such it shows something important. We do not have the same *kind* of difficulty with the concept of a miracle as we do, say, with that of a cause. *Cause* is a notion we are constantly using and it is hard to conceive what our lives would be without it; our puzzlement with it is a purely philosophical puzzlement about giving a satisfactory account of it. *Miracle* is not like that. It is not merely that we find a satisfactory account of it hard to give; we are puzzled—practically puzzled—about how we could ever put it to use. Our lives involve the propensity to ask kinds of question, and to press those questions in kinds of way, which conflicts with the possibility of untroubled talk about miracles. Our first task in trying to understand what a miracle might be would be the imaginative reconstruction of a mode of life in which there could be such untroubled talk.

To return to my disclaimer: I am far from wanting to deny the possibility of people's making sense of their lives in terms of such a concept as that of a miracle. I certainly do not want to say that all sense must have a basis in a predominantly naturalistic understanding. My objection to the idea of a bare cessation of existence is that it has no basis in *any* general understanding of things, naturalistic or otherwise.

This brings me to my second disclaimer. I have not 'proved impossible' a bare cessation of existence of the kind the idea of which is deployed in Singer's story and required by what Descartes wrote about the dependence of finite things for their continued existence on the operation of some outside conserving cause. I have done no more than raise some doubts about what it would be to understand stories like Singer's as straightforward factual reports. That does not mean that I regard a sentence like 'It has vanished' as meaningless. It obviously is not: it has a perfectly good meaning, for instance, in a story like Singer's. I can even, without great difficulty, imagine myself in circumstances in which I have the overwhelming impression that there was a moment ago and is no longer a shed in front of me with no possibility of explaining what has happened; and I can imagine that I might be driven to say 'It has vanished' in such circumstances, accompanying the utterance with successive mental pictures in which the shed is first there in front of me and then not there. If anyone wants to insist that to imagine this *is* to imagine the shed to have ceased to exist, I can do no more than remind him again how *thin* a context of utterance this is, how many of the connections with other ideas, expectations, possibilities of investigation, etc., are lacking which normally surround our thoughts concerning the coming to be and ceasing to be of things and people. And I would try to convince him that the nature of the thought can hardly remain unaffected by such a drastic impoverishment of its surroundings.