



Reply to Commentators

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I

When I wrote *Epiphanies*, my hope was to begin to explore what I take to be some large, mysterious, and provocatively blank spaces on the philosophical map that most of us work from today, and to encourage others to join me in these explorations. Like my earlier books, *Epiphanies* is not meant to be definitive or conclusive, and its agenda is not logical arm-wrestling or argumentative coercion. I am not trying to close debates down, but to get them going. Nor to give the last word on anything. Nor even the first word; though I do aim to open up prospects and agendas that are new, at any rate, to modern moral philosophy. (“MMP” as I shall abbreviate it; the referent has changed depressingly little since Anscombe coined the name in 1958.)

The main thesis of *Epiphanies* is that epiphanic experience has always been central to humans’ knowledge and awareness of value, and should be central to contemporary ethical philosophy’s. If that thesis is right, it would be surprising if no one had said it before. But they have. Though my particular treatment of the theme of epiphanies was never there before, the theme is there all right, in philosophers from Plato to William James; and even more in poets than in philosophers.

Undeniably there is a pugnacious side to my book, because there are mindsets and methods in MMP that I think merit unequivocal and indeed vocal opposition. Still, my overall aim is invitational rather than combative. I hope to welcome into the adventure even the dissenting and sceptical reader; even, if possible, the devout believer in conventional MMP. The main message that I mean the book to convey is

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not “Burn it all down and start again” but “See some new things, and see some old things in a new light.” Or perhaps even “Let’s have an adventure”.

II

Simon Kirchin raises this question of whether I am, fundamentally, an arsonist or an accommodationist. He wants to hear more about whether I hope simply to displace and replace MMP with epiphanies, systematic moral theory with “an ethics of experience”; or whether my aim is rather to suggest further philosophical resources to supplement, in one way or another—perhaps in an uneasy alliance mediated by something like reflective equilibrium—the resources that MMP already knows about.

Though I am not quite sure which if any of Kirchin’s five options it fits, my answer to his question as I have just framed it is: Neither and both. There are *some* things in MMP of which I want to say, echoing Bernard Williams, that “the time cannot come too soon when we hear no more” of them. Chief among these is not consequentialism or utilitarianism, Williams’ target when, almost exactly half a century ago, in the closing words of *Morality: an introduction to ethics*, he voiced the aspiration that I have just echoed (an aspiration that, sadly, looks remarkably forlorn today). The biggest and most fundamental methodological choice that ethical philosophers have to make is whether or not to think that there can be (and perhaps one day will be) a uniquely correct systematic theory that just is the truth about moral reality—or whatever substitute for “truth” and “moral reality” comes closest for the non-realist. This aspiration to a single true theory is foundational to the project of MMP, even in its non-realist forms. And about *this* ideal, I most certainly am an arsonist. The ideal is an idol, and idols are there to be burned down; even twilight is too good for them. At this level, the deepest level of our strategic ethical thinking, there really is an all-or-nothing choice to be made. And about this choice, I am completely on the side of a historically sensitive and epistemically chastened “ethics of experience” which does not at all deny that there is such a thing as truth in ethics, but does deny that it can be operationalised; and I am completely against the ahistorical, contextless triumphalism of systematic moral theory.

I can say this without in any way denying that theories, and even systems, have their uses sometimes. Of course they do: they provide techniques and ways of looking at questions, and those techniques and angles can often usefully be deployed or consulted in practical or political or social choice. Sometimes, as in democratic elections or in civil-service arguments, the convention is that we allow them to be decisive. The vote is the voice of the people; the cost-benefit analysis, and only that, is what determines whether and where the bypass is built. We decide this way because we have *agreed* to decide this way, and because to go against this agreement, once made, would be to renege on previous commitments and to fail in public transparency. (And yet, though going against it would be a high price to pay within a public deliberative process, it might sometimes be *right* to pay that price, as e.g. when new factors that didn’t go into the cost-benefit analysis come to light at the last moment.) I can and do happily allow that there is room in our thinking for all sorts of moral-theoretical models for deployment in all sorts of contexts; as David Wiggins says in

a well-known passage in “Deliberation and practical reason” (in J.Raz, ed., *Practical Reasoning*, OUP 1978, pp.144–145), there are some snooker-table-type contexts such that in them there is even, heaven preserve us, a place for consequentialistic or decision-theoretic models.

I never intended to deny any of this. As I say in the book, neither of “Don’t think, but look!” and “Don’t look, but think!” is really an imperative to take literally; in “a forced choice between the bloodless rationalism of systematic moral theory and the irrationalist blood-cult of a thinker, or perhaps I mean anti-thinker, like D. H. Lawrence”, my response is that “both alternatives strike me as both sinister and ridiculous” (p.133). I am not asking bypass-builders to base their policy decisions on the phenomenological feel of their own inner lives. *Pace* some critics (past and present) of my anti-theory agenda, the assertive side of my agenda implies no such absurdity as “the substitution of non-rational epiphanies for rational argument”.¹ Meanwhile on its concessive side, the agenda does allow that some situations can (and can usefully) be brought under some rule. The point is not to deny *that*, nor the wider claim that, for many decisions, there is some systematic-theoretical model that you can deploy to resolve them. What I deny is that there is some one unique systematic-theoretical model such that you can deploy it for all decisions. Not all situations fall under any rule, and of the situations that do fall under some rule, there is no one rule under which they all fall. That’s all.

So there is something rather Sartrean about my attitude to the deployment of moral-theoretical techniques. I see them as good servants—appropriately deployed; but bad masters. Often you can use such techniques; sometimes you even should use them. But it is *mauvaise foi* to fail to see that it is always a choice to use any such technique, and that using a technique is what you’re doing. And it is the theorist’s grand illusion to think that we are looking for a universal technique for use in all contexts. There is always a possible step back from the use of the technique, to the question whether this was the right technique to use in the first place. For the answering of *this* question, there is and can be no technique. As Sartre understood, the human craving to mechanise our moral thought goes deep; but for us to satisfy that craving would be for us to give up thinking.

III

This line of thought is a path out of systematic moral theory, and a move away from the domineering, greedy, and ambitious rationalism that is central to MMP. The focus on experience with which I want to replace that rationalism is likely to attract resistance of a simple and familiar form, which we may call the tie-breaking objection: “Experiences are fallible and can conflict, so we need moral theory to show us where they go wrong and to adjudicate conflicts between them.” As I pointed out in *Epiphanies* (p.55), the best retort to this objection simply stands it on its head. Moral theories are fallible and can conflict, so we need experience to break the ties—to show us where the theories go wrong, and to adjudicate conflicts between them.

¹ See e.g. Rachel Fraser, You Owe Me an Argument - Boston Review.

Kirchin comes close to the tie-breaking objection when he writes this:

As painful or insightful as epiphanic experiences are, we need to understand and then abstract from such experiences to think about many possible and actual situations: understanding why and when resistance [to an illegal invasion like Russia's of Ukraine] is right, if it is, and why it might be wrong and/or unjustified even if it might be understandable from an individual's point of view... We need to do this to understand what guidance needs to be given overall... Epiphanic experiences are an important starting point for understanding our ethical lives and showing us which features are important about situations and why. After that we need moral theory to help us decide what one should do in similar situations.

My response is not in the least to query or deny the need for such moves to a larger and more detached perspective. One of the numerous senses in which I am not a moral particularist is just this, that I have never wished to deny that there are some (*some*) general moral principles. Nor have I wanted to say that abstraction and generalisation—and universalising—is always and inevitably a bad thing.

Rather, my response is to ask why we should think that such generalising, abstracting, and universalising is something that only systematic moral theory can give us. Or, we might sometimes feel like adding, something that systematic moral theory is even particularly good at. Not just philosophers, after all, but poets too generalise and abstract. In Eliot's words: "Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality".² Often, indeed, poets—or novelists, or playwrights, or other kinds of artist—generalise and abstract more successfully than discursive arguers do. Don Cupitt evidently intended his book *The Sea Of Faith* to be a discursive philosophical meditation on the retreat of theism in the modern world comparable, to be sure in its own way, with its original in Matthew Arnold's great lyric poem "On Dover Beach". Whether or not you agree with me that Arnold's poem is more successful than Cupitt's book as this sort of post-theistic meditation, the comparison is at any rate intelligible.

Nor is moral systematising necessarily even particularly good in what it tends to claim as its strongest suit, namely dealing with fallibility and conflict. Ethical experience, and a philosophical ethics that is centrally about such experience, will be prone to both. But that is not a *special* problem for an experiential approach. There is nothing in the philosophical enterprise of system-building, either, that automatically insulates it against error or internal conflict, any more than any other philosophical enterprise.

The fear of fallibility is a philosophers' neurosis anyway. Obviously epiphanic experience is not infallible, no more than any other epistemic resource known to humans. That is no reason to steer clear of it; imagine an astronomer who gave up trying to understand the night sky because telescopes can create visual illusions, or a mathematician who eschewed further research into primes because mathematical reasoning is sometimes vulnerable to cognitive delusions. Quite generally, and not just in the specific case of epiphanies, there is no single magic-bullet method of ward-

² T.S.Eliot, "Tradition and the individual talent", quoted at *Epiphanies* p.100.

ing off fallibility, nor a single answer to the questions “What is *the* sign that tells when you’ve gone wrong?” and “What is *the* method for resolving conflicts in your evidence?” Such questions merely show how deeply we are gripped by what I have sometimes called the curse of the definite article (*Epiphanies* p.166). They replace an unreasonable aspiration to first-order infallibility with a no more reasonable aspiration to second-order infallibility.

IV

I confidently predict that, for many philosophers who won’t read *Epiphanies*, the reason why they won’t read it will be because they take it for granted, in advance, that it is a manifesto for irrationality. I am guilty as charged only if it is irrationality to reject rationalism, and specifically the very rigid and indeed blinkered kind of rationalism that is implicit in supposing that only systematic moral theory can give us a rational account of ethics. Actually *Epiphanies* is, if anything, a manifesto *for rationality*—for a broadened conception of rationality, and indeed of argument, that makes it possible to see a much more interesting and much wider range of possibilities than the tiny roster of alternatives that preoccupy most devotees of MMP.

There is after all more than one way of explaining what we mean by rationality; if I do indeed “owe” anyone “an argument”, there may be more than one way for me to discharge that debt. Accurately seeing (a passivity), and responding aptly to what is accurately seen (an activity), is an interaction with the world that ought to come out as rational on any plausible account. Nor is it any merit in an account of rationality that it has nothing to say about emotions, about what *Epiphanies* calls the continuum of experience, or indeed about epiphanies.

On one plausible characterisation, rationality (of a given type) is just a reliable ability to solve problems (of that type). When a mother chimpanzee cracks nuts with a stone in front of her daughter, the watching daughter is very likely to imitate her: at first with a soft and brittle stick instead of a hard and unbreaking stone, then with too large a stone, then with too small a stone, finally with a stone of the right size and weight, which successfully opens the nut. Or consider how a spider learns, perhaps through a lot of trial and error, to interact with air-draughts and gravity in order to build a web across a garden path. There is no particular reason why we should not regard both the successful interaction between the two chimps and the nuts, and the spider’s success in making the web, as rational processes in the problem-solving sense of “rational”. Perhaps these processes are even a kind of argument. After all, even within human argumentation, what counts as an argument is not a cross-cultural universal—as we learn from Wade Davis:

Mike Jones often told of the time in northern Ontario when he hired a Cree trapper, Peter Whitehawk, to assist him with an environmental assessment study. For several weeks and in growing frustration, [Whitehawk] watched as Mike set out tiny traps to capture small rodents. Finally, unable to restrain himself, Whitehawk left camp one morning before dawn. Mike awoke to find one of his mousetraps on the breakfast table. Placed beside was a carefully excavated

wolf track. Trained since childhood to avoid direct criticism, Whitehawk had nevertheless felt compelled to warn Mike that he would never catch anything worthwhile with a trap that small.³

If one upshot of all this is that we need to abandon certain kinds of prejudice that I already had in my sights in *Knowing What To Do*—propositional knowledge over knowledge-how and knowledge what-it's-like, discursive articulacy over effective problem-solving, words over deeds, humans over “animals”, static and disembodied cognition over enactive cognition, sentience over other kinds of intelligence—then so much the better. Those prejudices were all ripe for the bin anyway.

Especially the last. A sentientism of the sort currently fashionable in MMP, that sees no value in the world except where sentience is present, is at least as bad as the speciesism that it professes to replace. From Descartes on if not longer, Western philosophy's speciesism has made it a key ally to Europe's historic project of plunder and exploitation. The central “disenchanted” idea was that value exists in its own right only in tiny pockets demarcated by the presence of *homo sapiens*; the rest of the world was then seen as an inert evaluative void, ready and waiting to be subjugated and pillaged by men. Sentientism is simply another variation on this perennial theme of human-chauvinist moral exceptionalism. It is actually worse than speciesism if it comes together, as some prominent recent versions of sentientism certainly do, with a programme for replacing non-sentience with sentience where possible, in the interests of utility maximisation. By the point where we are replacing the zoosphere and the biosphere, wherever we can, with the noosphere, we might have thought that it is high time for this philosophical and ecological Ponzi-scheme to collapse; for at least some adherents of this programme of MMP to begin to sense a possible *reductio ad absurdum*. Certainly, if one wants to keep going as a proponent of such projects, it helps to have no sense of the ridiculous; or of a bad investment.⁴

One of my main targets in *Epiphanies*, as indeed in *Knowing What To Do Chap. 6*, was precisely this sort of moral exclusivism, whether it happens to be presented under the present guise of sentientism or the older guise of speciesism. *Epiphanies* is meant, *inter alia*, as an exploration of the possibility that a true understanding of Planet Earth will see value *everywhere*. I believe this vision of reality itself as pervasively valuable is not only correct but also, in the current environmental crisis, an urgently needed corrective.

V

Another family of processes that we ought to count as rational, but will be unable to if our account of rationality is, like MMP's, too narrow and indeed too rationalistic, is the broad and multifarious family that we call creativity. Creativity is one of Yann Ratajczyk's main focuses in his response to *Epiphanies*, and it connects closely with his other main focus—the ethical significance of the active/passive contrast. Any

³ Wade Davis, *Shadows In The Sun* p.244.

⁴ Cp. James Lenman, How effective altruism lost the plot | James W Lenman » IAI TV.

human who makes things—nut-crackers, webs, clay pots, model aeroplanes, kit cars, music, poems, theatre productions, philosophy books—will see the connection.

Among many other things that are stunted or warped by MMP, it has a stunted conception of action as, essentially, button-pressing to produce consequences. (Lever-pulling, if you're at a switch-point down a mine.) Creative activity is hardly ever at home with this stunted conception of action. Like most of the things that we do in the real world, creative activity is not so much merely action as *interaction*, between myself or ourselves and some (usually recalcitrant) aspect of the world: the stiff dry clay that needs kneading into pot-shape, the little ailerons that keep falling off the balsa-wood wings, the middle eight or the paragraph that won't come together, the cast who just will not learn their lines. In creativity I am both acting, on my medium, and being acted on, by that medium and the resistance of the world in general: entropy, gravity, loss of concentration or attention, the sheer cussedness of things, and indeed of other people. So in creativity—and elsewhere too—I am not a deist God who sets the world's clock going, then steps back to watch the effects pan out without further intervention. Rather, there is a continuing feedback loop between what I try to get the world to do, and how the world responds to my efforts: in real time, as the interaction goes on, I extemporise and improvise what is not only an action, but a response to the world's response to my earlier attempts to intervene in it.

So is there, as Ratajczyk proposes, a dimension of *our phenomenology* worth calling creativity, alongside other dimensions that I talk about in the book, such as our sense of place and our sense of the body? It need not be a fixed matter what the dimensions of human phenomenology are, or how to enumerate them. As I say in the book (pp.176–177), it is usually a bad idea to insist on closing a philosophical catalogue, to fight like hell for the right to say “That's it”. It is perfectly imaginable that the dimensions of human experience may change not only over evolutionary spans of time, but even within the much shorter time-periods that are measured by cultures. Indeed it is arguable that the internet has introduced new dimensions of experience, or at the very least made them more central to experience (*Epiphanies* p.214):

It is an interesting question in historical psychology whether it is a new thing for so many humans to have so much music in their phenomenology. I am tempted to think that it must be, simply because we now have so much music-recording technology, and make such constant use of it—whereas little more than 130 years ago, there was almost none at all in our everyday life.

Ratajczyk presents interesting reasons why we might propose that creativity is a dimension of experience in something like the sense that I intended. Still, my own instinct is, not too ungratefully I hope, to decline his proposal. In *Epiphanies Chap. 4* I identified ten (and more) aspects of what it is like to be a human being, to be the *dimensions* of human subjective experience. My idea was that identifying these “dimensions” of experience might be, to switch from a spatial to a chemical metaphor, identifying the *elements* of experience. It was that at the level of things like a sense of body, a sense of place, sensational pain and pleasure, and so on, we might be encountering the simplest recurring features of our experience, and that more complex phenomenological narratives might be put together by compounding those ele-

ments. It is at this less elementary level, the level of the phenomenological narrative compounded out of the elements of experience rather than the level of those elements themselves, that I myself would want to put creativity.

As should be obvious from my list above of different ways in which we “make things”, not all creative processes are in any way alike, nor need they share any common and proprietary phenomenology—not even that of epiphany. In one famous instance, that of poetry, it was characteristic of the Romantics from Coleridge to Swinburne to claim that poetic creation necessarily involves a particular kind of experience; indeed a particular kind of epiphany, the aha-moment that captures the wow-moment. The idea that poetry depends on *inspiration* is as old as poetry itself. But if only from my own experience of what it is like to write poems, I would say that the Romantic conception of poetic creativity is deeply misleading, and has done great damage by deterring many people from writing poetry who wrongly suppose that they can’t do it because they “have no inspiration”: they are too unlike the frenzied Delphic oracle, squatting on her tripod to inhale the divine fumes that rise to her from the chthonic chasm below.

Here and elsewhere, the overworked word “inspired” creates confusion. I am arguing that it is best reserved for a *particular account*, focally the nineteenth-century Romantic poets’, of how art gets created. But “inspired” is now used by very many people, for instance Radio 3 presenters, as a threadbare catch-all term for pretty well any stimulus-response process that an artist might undergo. In its actual denotation, “inspired” has come to mean merely “prompted”—while at the same time retaining as its connotation the Romantics’ very specific, very high-faluting, and as I think very mistaken, story of a magical process without which there cannot be any artistic creativity at all.

This conceptual mess is composed, in three roughly equal parts, of magical thinking, clichéd thinking, and lack of thinking. As an antidote we might cite one poet who is himself surely classifiable as a Romantic, namely W.B. Yeats, and another who both plays up to, and also actually has, the character of an anti-Romantic curmudgeon, namely Philip Larkin. Yeats is as prone to (literally) magical thinking as anyone, but he can write this about how one of his own poems got written:

The fable for this poem came into my head while I was giving some lectures in Dublin. I had noticed once again how all thought among us is frozen into “something other than human life”. After I had made the poem, I looked up one day into the blue of the sky...⁵

After I had made the poem: there is a pleasing air of down-to-earthness and simple practicality about that, and this, after all, from an author who is generally far from given to either. The down-to-earthness reminds me of the scenes in the film *Amadeus* where Mozart is seen composing, goose-quill in his hands, fingers and lips black with ink-spots, stooped over a half-size billiard-table in his cramped, messy, scruffy Viennese flat; he sends off the billiard ball to the far corner of the table, and by the time it has rolled back to his hand, he has written another bar of *The Magic Flute*.

⁵ Yeats, “Notes”, p.531 in his *Collected Poems* (London: Macmillan, 1933). Those who have read *Understanding Human Goods* will recognise the middle sentence of this quotation as that book’s epigraph.

Compare Larkin, interviewed in *Paris Review* in 1982:

Anything I say about writing poems is bound to be retrospective, because in fact I've written very little since 1974... But when I did write them, well, it was in the evenings, after work, after washing up (I'm sorry: you would call this "doing the dishes"⁶). It was a routine like any other. And really it worked very well: I don't think you can write a poem for more than two hours. After that you're going round in circles, and it's much better to leave it for twenty-four hours, after which time your subconscious or whatever has solved the block and you're ready to go on. The best writing conditions I ever had were in Belfast, when I was working at the University there... I wrote between eight and ten in the evenings, then went to the University bar till eleven, then played cards or talked with friends till one or two. The first part of the evening had the second part to look forward to, and I could enjoy the second part with a clear conscience because I'd done my two hours. I can't seem to organise that now...⁷

To be sure, Larkin is playing up, partly for self-parodic purposes, the contrast between his routine and quotidian model of poetry-writing and the hyper-dramatised, Romantic, hero-on-a-pinnacle picture of that same activity. The contrast is no less striking for that, and the moral that I draw from it is simply that there are indefinitely many possible experiences of creativity, both in poetry and elsewhere.

Hence, *pace* Ratajczyk, I don't think there is proprietarily "anything that it's like" to be creative, in quite the way that there is something specific that it is like to have a body, or to experience pain or pleasure or the passage of time, or to see things as humorous. One day, maybe there will be; but for us now, there isn't. What I think *is* true is that there are some *compounds* of the elements of experience that very often go together to create phenomenological narratives that are very typical of the creative process as we know it: for example impatience and frustration, with yourself and with your media, during the process, and relief and (all being well) pride and delight upon its completion. It will be worthwhile to explore these phenomenological narratives in future work. I look forward to doing so myself, if no one (better still) beats me to it.

VI

Hans Maes asks the very interesting question what the opposite of an epiphany might be. He quite rightly exploits some (largely but not entirely intentional) indeterminacies in how I set things up in the book, to explore a number of possibilities. For instance, he explores the possibility that the opposite of an epiphany is a dysepiphany, an experience of negative value; or a failed epiphany, an epiphany that "doesn't stick". Or maybe the opposite of an epiphany is an experience of "melancholy", by which Maes means something he has explored elsewhere—an epiphanic experience that mixes the positive and the negative, one where our emotions are mixed, bitter-sweet, or (as journalists like to say) "poignant". Connectedly, he is also somewhat perplexed as to whether I *do*, in fact, allow at least some negative experiences to be epiphanic.

⁶ A concession to his American interviewer.

⁷ Philip Larkin, *Required Writing* p.58.

The answers to some of these questions come together. I certainly do consider epiphanic experiences of mixed value, and give numerous examples of them. Despite what Maes says in his second footnote, it is not exactly my position that epiphanies, as soul food, must always be pleasant. Soul food, I say on p.235, is notable for occurring in three dimensions (a different sort of dimensions this time—my apologies), those of pleasure, interest/excitement, and reality/truth. So something could be soul food, and be epiphanic, without scoring very high in the pleasure dimension at all.

Of the numerous examples of epiphanic experiences of mixed value that I presented within the book, four involved reproducing poems of my own: “Elephants” (p.111), “Music Recalled” (p.156), Sappho, Poem 31, in my translation (p.268), and “Scan” (p.319). In all of these poems, and in other poems that I quoted such as Hopkins’ last sonnet (p.32), I most certainly meant to be depicting a mix of positive and negative experience. That is perhaps most obvious in the case of Sappho 31, which is a poem about the combination of extreme erotic attraction and extreme jealousy: there is mortal desperation in it, but that desperation is exactly what makes the poem sublime. More widely, as I meant to be showing in “Elephants”, “Scan”, and “Music Recalled”, there is lyrical emotion, both sadness and delight, in most of our experience of natural beauty; we can and do derive a certain tenderness towards things from our sense of the sheer *vulnerability* of so much of the world’s beautiful things, even in those sadly rare cases where what we are contemplating is not as seriously and directly threatened as elephants now are. It is hardly possible, especially perhaps today, that any sensitive and accurate response to the loveliness of the world should *not* be undercut with sadness; by an undertow of “climate grief” apart from anything else. That undercut is certainly part of my experience, and it has to do, in its most general and perennial form, with *lacrimae rerum* in their most general and perennial form: the form of theodicy, or the failure of theodicy, about the world as a whole.

It is worth thinking, though, about two quite different senses of “an experience of negative value”. There is sadness, melancholy, the “tragic sense of life”—as seen in Maes’s own array of Tolstoyan and Dostoyevskian examples. There is also, quite differently from experiencing the world as *sad*, experiencing the world as *empty*—as happens to Sartre’s character Roquentin (p.393). The former experience does not, I think, present much of a problem to an epiphanies-centred approach, for reasons that I have just been presenting: if the world is as I claim crowded with value, then we should expect that encountering that value will sometimes be a sad experience, as it obviously is in cases of bereavement and loss and tragedy.

The latter type of experience, the experience not of sadness but of emptiness, is more challenging for the proponent of epiphanies (at least when, like me, she is an objectivist). And in a sense, we come back here to the question of fallibility and disagreement that I raised earlier. As a Christian theist, I have to contend with the fact that there are epiphanies not only of the Christian faith, but also of other faiths—and indeed of atheism. As someone who believes that the world is charged with the grandeur of good, I have to contend with the fact that for some, Roquentin for instance, the world is not suffused with value and delight and awesomeness that flames out like shining from shook foil; for them, the world is *empty*. This kind of dysepiphany is rarer than the type that merely involves sadness, which we can explain as the loss

or deprivation of positive value; but it also seems a deeper and more radical phenomenon—the experience of the absence of any value, either positive or negative, at all.

Perhaps it is a benefit of being thoroughly free of the usual constraints and conventions of MMP that I can be content to note this difficulty for my view, without feeling that I must hustle in instantly to close the threat off. For all I know, in the last analysis Roquentin could be right and I could be wrong; I have no way of ruling that possibility out *absolutely*. But then, as I argue at some length in Chap. 8, it is not obvious to me that I must have a knock-down argument to rule it out. We keep talking, Roquentin and I, and see where our conversation gets to, without patronising pre-emption on *either* side. Possibly he is right. But also, possibly he was just having a bad day (or a bad decade), or has been evaluatively numbed by shattering traumas in his own life (this certainly happens to the victims of extremes of terror and horror, for example in wars).

Or again, a further possibility, Roquentin may be a victim of another kind of opposite to epiphany that Maes identifies—what he calls “antiphany”, the “silting up of the soul”:

The opposite of [epiphany on the enumerated definition of it at *Epiphanies* pp.8–9] would be a (1) barely noticeable but (2) existentially significant withdrawal from (3) value, (4) often gradual, (5) which starves and dulls the psyche, (6) which can be facilitated and encouraged by one’s environment but for which one ultimately bears some responsibility, which (7) prevents one from seeing the world afresh, which (8) further entrenches existing convictions, habits, routines, and which (9) obstructs the paths to genuine love, pity, and creativity.

Antiphany is the opposite of epiphany not in being an experience of negative value, such as sadness or loss; nor in being an experience of a Roquentin-like evaluative void; but in being a failure to experience properly at all—a kind of evaluative blindness. That such a condition exists is something on which Maes and I clearly agree. That plenty of others agree with us too is evidenced by the fact that antiphany has many other names already. We might call it the hamster-wheel or the rat-race; or capitalism; or original sin.

We might also call it, at least in one of its manifestations, modern moral philosophy. After all, it was in noting and denouncing the loss of evaluative vision that is all too often either a cause, or a symptom, or both, of the practice of systematic moral theory that I came, in the last chapter of *Ethics and Experience*, to quote this description of the condition of antiphany from *Howards End*:⁸

One guessed him as the third generation, grandson to the shepherd or ploughboy whom civilisation had sucked into the town; as one of the thousands who have lost the life of the body and failed to reach the life of the spirit. Hints of robustness survived in him, more than a hint of primitive good looks, and Margaret, noting the spine that might have been straight, and the chest that might have broadened, wondered whether it paid to give up the glory of the animal for a tail coat and a couple of ideas.

⁸ E.M.Forster, *Howards End*, Ch.14.

VII

It is no aim of mine in *Epiphanies*, or anywhere else in my work, to be a solitary pioneer who mines out any lode, or sucks dry any spring, of ideas, all on her own. Here as elsewhere the live and fruitful metaphor is not extractive or exploitative—or controlling; the live and fruitful metaphors are indeed *life* and *fruit*. The aim is to create possibilities for thought and understanding that are not a one-time deal; not “intellectual property” that someone might copyright or a turf they might stake out as their own manor; but an enduring and perennial resource, like an orchard or a field or a well that we can return to again and again, and still go on getting some good out of—indeed, some soul food. The developing of such resources can owe much to individual ingenuity and creativity. But as Peter Adamson has recently reminded us in the title of a splendid study of mediaeval philosophy, *Don't Think For Yourself*, these resources are best understood as resources for us all: to be developed together, and to be enjoyed together.

If it is possible to write an epiphanic book about epiphanies, then I hope I have done that. But if *Epiphanies* makes the difference to philosophy that I want it to, that will be because of its readers as much as its author. Every author owes a debt of gratitude to her readers. In the first instance this is simply gratitude that, in a world where time is sadly short and books are absurdly abundant, they have read her book at all; obviously this debt is especially large when the book, like *Epiphanies*, is especially large. Beyond that, and when all goes well, an author is in deeper debt to her careful and attentive readers, and above all to those readers who strike just the right Aristotelian balances between accurate reading and creative reading, and between critical reading and appreciative reading. In the case of *Epiphanies* I am an author who has, so far, been very fortunate in her readers; and I am particularly grateful to Simon, Hans, and Yanni for giving my work such serious and careful attention.⁹

SGC

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⁹ Thanks also for helpful questions to Alex Barber, Cristina Chimisso, Sean Cordell, Manuel Dries, Mark Pinder.