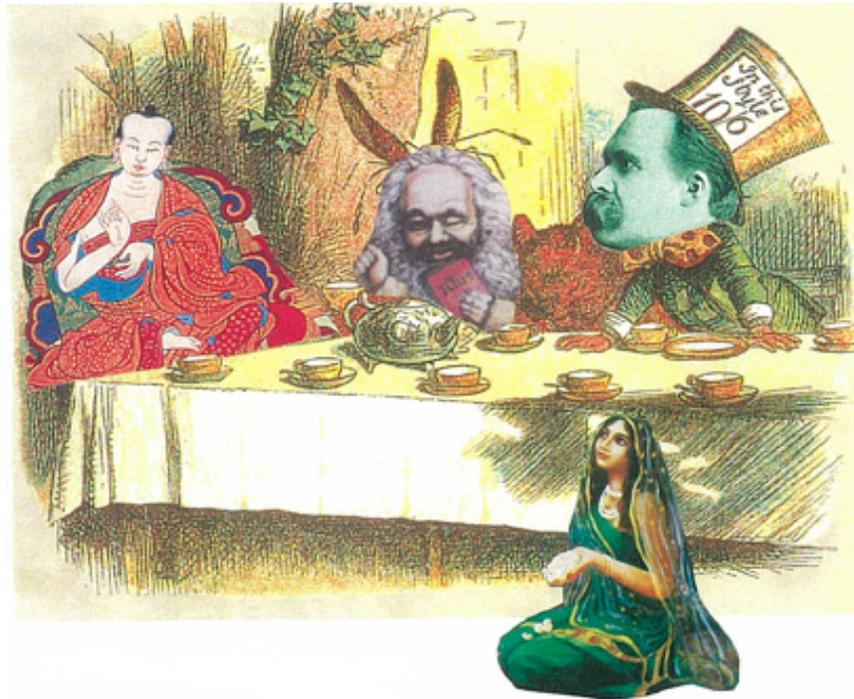

Anā G. Ārjuna in Wonderland

Or, *Avidyā-gīta* (Song of the Confused)

A Quodlibet on Life, Logic, Language and Love in the Spirit of Smullyan and Hofstadter (and offered with the greatest of apologies to the Rev. Charles Lutwidge Dodgson)

James Mark Shields

Assistant Professor of Asian Religions, Bucknell University



Dramatis Personae: *Anā G. Ārjuna*
 Lord Kṛṣṇa
 The Smoking Camusterpillar
 Garfieline, the Grinning Cat
 Russelldum and Wittgendee
 The Red Philosopher-King
 Heideggy Deideggy
 Jacques, the White King
 Candraknight and Bhāvaknight

Act One, Scene One

Anā G. Ārjuna, after nearly two millennia of searching the ends of the earth for an answer to the question of her origins, comes across a strange land (located where our mediaeval scholars placed the Antipathies...I mean Antipodes), in which things are not as they seem, or rather, things are exactly as they seem, and that is the problem. In short, Anā G. has stumbled upon the famed Wonderland, visited only twice before by “the quick”—a certain Florentine poet of the fourteenth century (who called it Limbo), and a precocious schoolgirl five hundred years later. Anā G. has only just arrived in Wonderland, and is sitting on a large rock, resting and trying to get her bearings.

“**A**las, Anā G., alas! Eighteen hundred odd years have you been wandering, and still no one has been able to solve the riddle of your existence. Who was your father, who gave the seed and set your sex? Who was your mother, who provided the milk from her breasts? You remember nothing of your childhood; recollection stops at the brink of maturity. But what use is maturity without wisdom? Knowledge you seek; knowledge you crave! An understanding of your origins will give you a complete understanding of existence, for every other riddle you have solved in your worldly sojourn upon the earth, in countless conversations with sages and fools, priests and libertines, knights and knaves. You have ridden upon regal elephants and trod upon lowly worms...”

Anā stopped suddenly, as she heard a distinct cough, the kind that people only give when they want someone’s attention, and usually when they are not altogether pleased with what is being said by that person. Such was indeed the case. Peering upwards, she espied a large worm, or rather, a sort of caterpillar, smoking a cigarillo, and looking at her pensively, and with obvious disrespect.

“Sir?” was all Anā could muster (she was only new to Wonderland, and hadn’t gotten into the habit of speaking to caterpillars and such). The caterpillar, or rather, the *Camusterpillar*, for so the creature was called, only looked more disdainfully at the young woman beneath him. After several long minutes of horrendous discomfort on the part of Anā G., the worm spoke:

“And who are *you*, to be standing there wringing *your* dainty hands and weeping over *my* rock?”

Taken aback by the worm’s forward tone, Anā puffed herself up somewhat, and replied: “Anā G. Arjuna.”

“*Anā G. Arjuna*. A silly name for a silly creature.” He paused to puff rings of smoke which made Anā cough. She wanted to respond with something suitably regal, like the phrase she had heard once and memorized for such occasions: “I shall endure hard words even as an elephant in battle endures the arrow shot from the bow,”¹ but as it was, her eyes started to well up with tears. The *Camusterpillar* took no notice of this, but went on in the same tone: “I heard you, just now, speak of someone who has been wandering for some time, in search of wisdom. Where is *that* person?”

“*That* person is *me*, sir.”

“But I am quite certain I heard you speak of this person as ‘you’, not ‘I’. Don’t try to fool me, miss, I am not to be trifled with.”

“Yes, what you heard is quite right. My burden is that I do not know my identity, though I know all else there is to know, in this plane of existence, at any rate. Because of this lack, I often feel it is presumptuous to use the *first* person, because *I* am in fact the *last* person that I know. I don’t like to dissemble, you see.”

“Harumph. Doesn’t like to *dissemble*. But tell me, please, do you hope to find some ‘reason,’ some sort of ‘meaning’ in your life? Why not be satisfied with what you have. Life is absurd, foolish, a Sisyphusian task, or game even, which ends in ignominious death. Someone might just kill you for no reason, maybe because a glint of sun hits their eye on a beach.”

Anā didn’t like this creature, or his way of talking, so she started to creep away slowly, hoping that he wouldn’t notice. “Crazy insect. No meaning to life, you just die. Hmmp. Sometimes I wish I *could* die, but I haven’t lived until I know that last piece of information, the secret of my identity. And maybe then I won’t *need* to die.”

¹ *Dhammapada* xxiii.1

“Come back,” called the Camusterpillar, “I have something important to say! Turn your despair around, transform it into a positive thing. We are all brothers in this situation, set your sights on human fraternity, revolt against the times...”

As she backed out of the glade, she heard the Camusterpillar mumble something about his mother’s death. “He smokes too much, that’s why he always thinks about death,” she mused, and felt pleased at summing up the annelid’s ideas so neatly. “He seems to think that life is typified by suffering and despair or futility. I can understand the first, and even the second, but the last doesn’t necessarily follow. Perhaps it is suffering itself which is the ultimate meaning in life.” She thought about this for a while. “No, then suffering would be made into a positive thing, and might even be worshipped or glorified for its own sake, which is an extreme we must try to avoid, lest we allow the most horrible despots and tyrants free reign to walk all over the poor and outcaste. There is a real danger in this man’s...er, in this *creature’s* words, a danger of nihilism, even if he says we have to pick up our bootstraps and get on with life, and all that business about fraternity (which he certainly didn’t display to me). Maybe he’ll think his way out of it, though I doubt it, sitting all day on that mushroom, like an *étranger* to the world of other beings (Anā liked to show off her French, even to herself). Or maybe he thinks too much, and *that’s* the problem. Maybe suffering *creates* meaning; maybe suffering and pain are somehow *necessary* to liberation, or release from suffering and pain, but are not made ‘holy’ thereby.”

Anā walked on for some time, lost in speculation, then began to grow tired, and longed for someone to talk to about her grief and her questions. The worm was certainly no help; not only did he not help her, he annoyed her, and made her own suffering worse. Again she began to lament out loud (as one does when the silence becomes deafening): “Just this one piece of wisdom which blocks my way, and commits me to this dreary immortality! One last time, oh gods, if you are really gods, save your wayward child!”

In a bright flash, a man appears before her. Dressed regally, if somewhat self-consciously and a tad foppishly, he seems astonished to see the weeping young woman before him. The “man” speaks. Oh yes, his skin is blue.

“Yes, um, hello. I’m looking for a certain Ārjuna, do I perchance have the right plane of existence?”

“Well, Ārjuna is my name—my surname, sir. But if you’ll pardon my forwardness, who are *you*?” (Our heroine was already picking up Wonderland habits, but her interlocutor did not even seem to hear her query.)

“*You* are Ārjuna? Hmmph. Are you *quite* certain?”

“I should think I know who I am,” sighed Anā angrily, upset at the prospect of another Camusterpillar encounter. “*Anā G. Arjuna* is my name.” He remained silent, musing over this unexpected piece of information, then answered:

“I see. Well, so be it, then, the gods have erred, sending me to help you. They thought you were Ārjuna, hero of the Pāṇḍavas (also known as Bhārata, Dhānamjāyā, Guḍākeśa, Pārtha, and Pāramtāpa); in short, Ārjuna the dithering warrior, not Anā G. Ārjuna the...um...confused girl.”

“Wait. Don’t go away. I am not a ‘confused girl,’—or perhaps I am, it doesn’t matter—what matters is that you seem to be a knowledgeable man (if indeed a man you are, and not something greater) and maybe you can help me solve the riddle of my existence. Besides, from what I’ve seen, this is an odd place, and I would welcome your company, you being, like me, a stranger in a strange land.”

Lord Kṛṣṇa—for so it was—drank deeply from the young woman’s eyes, thought of his long-ago adventures with the *gopis*, closed his own, swayed his head a little, put his hand on his flute, and smiled. His eyes were still closed when he consented to be Anā’s “guide” in Wonderland.

“Ahem, sir. Now that we are friends... pray tell: What is your name?”

“*My* name. Let’s see. Most people call me Kṛṣṇa, at least in this incarnation, but I am also called Acyuta, Arisūdana, Madhava, Janardana, Madhusūdana, Vāsudeva, Govinda, and Hṛīśikesa. These last two I particularly like: ‘giver of enlightenment,’ and ‘lord of the senses.’ But you may take your pick.”

Anā, shocked that one figure could have so many names, when she could not even claim a single identity, wondered which was the worse condition.

Scene Two



Anā G. and her new friend Lord Kṛṣṇa walk out of the woods and along a large stream. They bypass several dwellings on the other side, until they come to a low wooden bridge. Crossing over the bridge, they walk by a house with a squealing pig in the yard. Anā began to think about pigs and their place in the cosmic scheme of things, and was just about to open her mouth to ask Kṛṣṇa his opinion on the Porcine Problem when both were startled to see a rather large, grinning cat perched on a branch directly above their heads. This felicitous creature was none other than Garfieline. He had been watching the pair closely for some time (cats, as you know, are blessed with extraordinary visual powers, and this one's eyes were as big as his grin).

Kṛṣṇa was the first to speak: “Hello. Say, can you tell me, kind creature,”—for the cat looked kind, though it had very long claws and a great many teeth—“which way we should be headed.”

Garfieline smiled wider (if indeed that were possible), and replied: “That, my friends, depends a good deal on where you want to get to.”

Kṛṣṇa was silent, thinking it best to let Anā handle this one; and so she did, after a few moments of thought: “Well, I do want to look around here a bit, but more than that, I want to find out something about my own identity, and the meaning of existence. In short, I want to know ‘what to do,’ rather than ‘where to go.’ Can you help me, dear Cat?” She gave her most winsome smile. The creature replied:

“I am not sure if I understand you. What is the difference between the question of ‘where’ to go and the question of ‘what’ to do? Are they not the same in this case?”

Anā thought about this, but decided it better to avoid philosophical disputes for the present, when she wanted pragmatic information (Anā was, after nearly two-thousand years, a convinced pragmatist of the Deweyan sort). She asked a different sort of question: “What sort of people live here?”

“Most of the folk around here are, how shall I put it, as loony as a one-dollar coin. There is the Mad Hatter, who lives over there, and the Marx Hare, who lives that-a-way, they’re both quite mad...”

“But I don’t want to go among mad people,” Anā interjected, thinking of the Camusterpillar.

“Oh, you can’t help that,” said Garfieline, “we’re all mad(hyamika) here. I’m mad(hyamika). You’re mad(hyamika).”

“How do you know I’m mad?” Anā demanded, somewhat perplexed not only by the cat’s assertion of her insanity, but also by the strange sound he muttered under his breath each time he pronounced the word ‘mad’.

“You must be,” said the Cat, “or you wouldn’t have come here.”

Anā thought about this, and was beginning to feel that he was quite right, when the Cat suddenly extended a long furry paw in which was held a somewhat dusty book. The young woman took the book from the cat’s paws.

“You, having been on the earth for so long, and traveling so far and widely, have read all of the books ever printed or spoken, but here is one of my own, that you will not have read, for I have saved it for you. Though it is not *completely* original with me, it will, I think, help you in your troubles. It has had great success in a land far away, a land of clouds and snow, a land which is, incidentally, also searching for its existence in a world which doesn’t seem to recognize it as having one.”

Anā was somewhat shocked by this sudden turn of events, and looked over at her companion, who was dozing at the foot of the tree, flaps of his royal garb placed neatly over his closed eyes. Seeing the kingly Kṛṣṇa so, she felt a surge of tenderness towards him, and walked over to wake him. When he was standing, she informed him of the Cat’s gift, and, inhaling deeply, blew upon the cover, to clear away the dust that had collected, obscuring the title of the book.

Anā read the title aloud: “Moola...mad...ya...ma...kaka ...rica. Hmm, let’s see, does it mean ‘money-madness-you-and-me-get rich’? No, I’ve left out the ‘kaka,’ though I can’t see how such a silly word could fit in to the title of this serious looking book...”

“No, no,” said Kṛṣṇa, “you’ve got it all wrong. It’s obviously in a foreign language of some sort. How about ‘woman-crazy-you-and-me-blind-but-rich.’ That must be it; it’s Latin.² It think it must have something to do with Dhṛtarāṣṭra, king of the Kurus, who is blind but rich...”

At this the grinning cat began to snort. The two looked up at him, and noticed that his body began to fade, though his grin remained, getting wider and wider, until they thought it would soon devour them whole. “Your own tongue, Kṛṣṇa, and yet you know it not.” The grin disappeared with a ‘poof’ and the tree was empty. Kṛṣṇa struck his

² L. *mulier* = woman, *caecus* = blind.

forehead so hard that both he and Anā fell to the ground, and were briefly dazed.

“Of course, it is indeed written in my own tongue, and I know what it means: “The Fundamental Stanzas of the Middle Way: *Mulamadhyamakakarika*.”

“Hmmm, sounds interesting,” his companion said aloud, but upon flipping quickly through the pages, she became less confident. What she really felt was “what is the use of a book without pictures or conversations?” But she kept this thought to herself. “Garfieline said that this would clear up my troubles—but did he mean our *immediate* trouble of not knowing where we are or where we should go, or my *eternal* trouble of searching for my identify and the meaning of my existence? This book sounds like it might help us get out of Wonderland, but what does it have to do with me? Then again, he *did* say that these two questions were really the same. But I *do* hope we see him again; I’d surely like to ask him more about this strange ‘MMK’.”

Scene Three

Anā and Kṛṣṇa continue to walk on the road beside the stream, talking of the book they had just received from Garfieline the grinning Cat.

Kṛṣṇa, dear Kṛṣṇa, Lord Kṛṣṇa, we have a key to our puzzle! At last.” Anā opened the book and began to read the first few words: “I prostrate to the Perfect Buddha, the best of teachers, who taught that whatever is dependently arisen is unceasing, unborn, unannihilated, not permanent, not coming, not going, without distinction, without identity, and free from conceptual construction.”³

Kṛṣṇa looked at her, to see if she was understanding these odd-sounding phrases as she spoke them. Unable to tell whether she was or not, he ventured to inquire whether she did. She replied:

“Yes, it is quite clear that whoever wrote this (and the ‘I’ we may never know, for there does not seem to be any indication of authorship here, and the Garfieline did not claim it was *originally* his own) is appealing to his teacher, who, he claims, said precisely that everything was, in fact, nothing. Or, in other words, that there was nothing to anything at all. Or rather that anything was nothing to speak of—I’m

³ MMK, “Dedicatory Verses”

sorry, I should have said that it is impossible to speak of anything whatever.”

At this Kṛṣṇa nodded, and kept silent, trying to follow this barrage by the young woman called Anā G., who went on: “In short, the unnamed author is making the point that everything is impermanent. I kind of like the idea myself.”

Kṛṣṇa thought (to himself, for he saw that his companion was quite enraptured by these first words of the strange book) that this author must surely be pulling someone’s leg—to say that “nothing exists” is “schoolboy stuff,” he muttered contemptuously, “I, not even a philosopher, can see through that.”

Anā continued to read aloud, stopping every few lines to discuss what was being said. “Wait, wait. Here is an important point that was not obvious from the beginning. This author, whoever he (or she, I suppose,) is, is not saying that ‘nothing exists’, for that would be rather silly, after all,”—and Anā promptly kicked a stone out of the path in ‘refutation’ of this doctrine—“but that all that exists is ‘empty’ (*śūnyāta*).”

“But what does that mean, ‘empty’?”

“It means without essence, or without ‘self-inherent’ existence. But I don’t think it mean that ‘things’ are without *any* sort of existence.”

“So there are ‘levels of existence’?”

“No, not exactly, there is only one ‘real’ level: the *conventional*.”

Kṛṣṇa reflected for a moment. “But do we not distinguish (by we, I mean, those of us not privy to this author’s superior mind), in our mundane existence, different levels—for instance, I am an avatar, or a secondary existence of a primary higher existence, namely, God. And here’s a better one, for I see that last example doesn’t appeal to your democratic tastes: I can think of certain beasts, a unicorn, for example, which certainly exists and can be imaged and described. Is it existentially, or I should say, *ontologically* equivalent to a horse or a reindeer (this being a liminal case, both myth and reality, with different features accruing to each)?”

“Unicorns are, it would seem to me, no more nor no less existent than that tree, you, or I. We are all ‘empty.’”

Kṛṣṇa wasn’t quite convinced, but he could not come up with a suitable reply, and let that particular matter drop for now. For some time, he had been gazing with longing on his companion, and in their short time together a close bond had developed. Now his mind became

muddled.⁴⁴ Looking at Anā G. now, deep in the waters of metaphysical speculation, he ventured a hitherto unexplored level of intimacy.

“I love you.”

“Shhh. I’m thinking.”

“Why *think*, when *love* is so much greater, so much purer... One of the philosophers has said: ‘There are these three: faith, hope, and love; but the greatest of these *is* love...’⁵”

«*C’est faux! Il n’est dit «eros»; il dit «caritas»!*»

Kṛṣṇa’s mouth hung *agape*. “I have understood you, but I do not know the language you spoke just now. How can this be? Was it French?”

“*Oui, c’est ça*. The reason you understand me is that you know the context, and can glean my meaning from my tone, as well as my expression and body language. Besides, as any good classically trained avatar, you know Latin, which formed the significant words in the sentence. And Latin was not a barren woman; she gave birth to all the Romance languages.”

“Yes, the languages of romance...”

“No, no, silly. The languages of the Roman Empire.”

“You have hit upon something here, something I think might be important. You say I ‘know’ Latin, which is true, but not in the same way that I ‘know’ you (or in the way that, to speak biblically, we might eventually ‘know’ each other). Here we have a clear case of the inability of language to express words clearly, that is to say, in a strict or *formally logical sense*. When we first met, you said you did not know ‘who’ you were (in that you had no knowledge of your paternity), yet you certainly were offended when I questioned whether you ‘knew’ who you were (as in, you knew your ‘name’). Furthermore, in one sense, even before you reply to my declaration, we are *already* ‘lovers’...”

“But what does that mean: ‘I love you’?”

Kṛṣṇa was rather taken aback by her interruption, lapsing as he had, into metaphysical mode.

“It doesn’t *mean*, it *does*.”

⁴ A possible explanation for Kṛṣṇa’s weakness upon hearing the term *sūnyāta* is its ‘other’ meaning in Tantra, where, associated with the symbol of the *yonī*, it suggests the notion of a hidden germ within, so that *sūnyāta* means a ‘potent void’.

⁵ I Corinthians 13:13

“*All meaning is doing.*”

“Let’s get back to the book. I fear we are straying from the course of our philosophical investigations.”

“Wait, one more thing about Faith, Hope, and Love. The fellow who said that wasn’t a philosopher at all; he was a religious teacher, a theologian even.”

“What’s the difference.”

“Between a philosophy and a religion? That’s easy.”

“Tell me, please, no tricks.”

“*Love.*”

“But which kind? Compassion, solidarity, charity, sensuality, affection, kindness...”

“All of them, I suppose.”

“And *where* do these come from, pray tell?”

“Hmmm. I’m not sure what you are driving at.”

“They come from the self, the subject. It’s easy: everything is a mere thought in the mind of the Universal, and we, as secondary realities, have the same relation to the world as God to us. That is to say, everything exists merely nominally, as you have suggested, but that just leads us back to the agent, the subject.” Kṛṣṇa had quite forgotten about his tender words of a few moments back, as he gloried in salvaging the Self, one of his—it must be said—most prized possessions (to lose *that* would be to give up the ghost). What would Anā have to say about that!

“This is an important point you’ve raised, for I think that if we properly understand the relationship between agent and action, or agent and world, we will better understand relations between other phenomena—it’s a good starting-point. You, Kṛṣṇa, for all your talk of ‘self’ (and ‘Self’), miss the point that agency and action are ineluctably intertwined; they are *interdependent*. This is one thing that we cannot forget—the ‘agent’ is always ‘in-relation-with’ the world, or what we call ‘world’. Second: this relation is of course only a ‘conventional’ reality—it has no ‘inherent’, no ‘really real’ existence.”

“But does this mean that the subject-object dialectic is to be ‘maintained’, or is it ‘ultimately’ to be eliminated?”

“Again, my Lord, you’re missing an important point. It is not a matter of ‘getting rid of’ anything, for there is ‘really’ nothing to ‘get rid of’. Rather, the subject-object distinction (and thus ‘dialectic’) has

never ‘existed’ in the ultimate sense. This is precisely what we must come to see!”

“Okay, I understand that. But then what? Aren’t things (from a conventional perspective, which is where we ‘are’ most if not all of the time) just the same as before?”

“No—it is not just a matter of ‘saying’ that you now ‘see’ that all things are ultimately empty. You’re stuck within language again. It is not just a semantic-grammatical or even a conceptual change, but a *pragmatic* one—it must be manifested in your life, in your actions.”

“Ah! So actions are, ultimately, upheld.”

“Of course! If not, we would lapse into a negative reification of ‘non-action’ based on a reified ‘no-self’.”

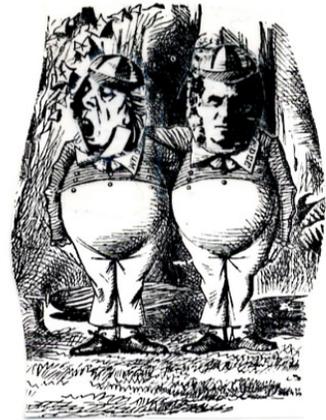
“And that is wrong because...?”

“Because it places thought and conceptualization above and beyond activity. Again, we’re back to love.”

Act Two, Scene One

Still mulling over their heated discussion about emptiness, Anā and Kṛṣṇa come upon a forest, and, having no direction (or at least, no geographical direction), they enter. After walking half a mile in silence, they see upon a strange sight—or rather, a normal sight, given the strangeness of the land in which they traveled. In short, two very roly-poly fellows in schoolboy garb, looking very much like identical twins. Without introductions—so much as a ‘by your leave’—one of them begins to speak to the newcomers.

R*usselldum*: “When I was a wee lad, my brother played a trick on me. He told me one morning that he was going to fool me terribly that day. I spent the whole day cowering in fear, until, at bedtime, our mother insisted that he fool me and get it over with. He said that, in fact, he had already fooled me, precisely by making me think that I was going to be fooled, then not *actually* fooling me. The question was, and remains: Was I, in fact, fooled?”⁶



⁶ Smullyan 1978, #1

Wittgendee: “No, you were not ‘fooled,’ because nothing was actually ‘done’ to you. However, you were ‘taught’ something important, about expectations and the multiplicity of language. It’s really a matter of levels.⁷ I know of one author who does something similar to this in one of his philosophical (or religious, I can’t remember which) tracts. We think he is going to *actually* fool us, but he only fools us by *not-fooling* us, that is, by reasserting the most important tenets of his belief system, through which the less significant are perspectivized; in short by teaching us not to dwell too seriously upon the fear of illusion or disillusion. Put in another way, the reader is *conventionally* fooled, but *ultimately* enlightened. We must ‘wipe our glosses with what we know,’⁸ not with what we do not know or fear.

Anā was about to ask if he meant ‘glasses,’ when she heard a sound, like a chainsaw, and began to worry that someone was cutting down the entire forest. The twins, seeing her evident confusion, merely pointed to a nearby tree, where slept a regal-looking figure, snoring mightily.

Anā: “And who might that be?”

Russelldum: “It *might* be a rattlesnake, or a gryphon, or a wildebeest. But it *is* not. It *is* the Red Philosopher-King, sleeping.”

Anā (thinking his withering tone highly unnecessary): “But what is he doing *there*.”

Russelldum: “Silly girl, I just told you, he *is* sleeping. Not only that, but another thing he is *doing there* is dreaming—probably about you and me and these other chaps” (he indicated his brother and Kṛṣṇa).



Anā: “What so you mean? How can he be dreaming of me?”

⁷ See Hofstadter 1979 for a discussion of the significance of ‘levels’.

⁸ James Joyce in *Finnegan’s Wake*

Russelldum: “Quite simply, really. Some say that he has been asleep for a long, long time, and that he has dreamed us all, you, me, the Descarmouse, the Hatter, even the haughty egg-fellow, who seems to hate him so... indeed, there are those around here who say that we are all nothing but ‘footnotes’ to the sleeping philosopher-king’s primary dream.”

Kṛṣṇa: “But how can one be a ‘footnote’ to a ‘dream’—that seems illogical.”

Russelldum: “Hush! Don’t raise your voice so, or you might wake him, and then you (and we, who you seem to have forgotten about) would go out—‘poof’, like a candle!”

Anā: “Really!” She didn’t like this talk; it was very confusing, and, it seemed to her, highly irresolvable. Yet she spoke more quietly, just in case. She thought back to the twins’ conversation before the appearance of the Red Philosopher-King, and turned to Wittgendee, who seemed the more affable of the brothers: “So there is a difference between what you ‘believe’ and what ‘is’?”

Wittgendee: “Yes. If you believe so. If the tail of a dog were called a leg how many legs would a dog have? *Four* is the answer, for calling the tail a leg does not mean that it *is* one. To me, at least.”⁹

Kṛṣṇa (feeling somewhat excluded by this talk): “Harumph.”

Russelldum: “And who might you be, impertinent fellow?”

Kṛṣṇa: “I, sir, am Lord Kṛṣṇa, and I’d thank you to hold your tongue in my presence, if *that* is the language that spews forth from it. Keep your mouth shut.”

Russelldum: “But if I hold my tongue, my hand will be in my mouth, and unless I bite my hand off, my mouth will remain open. So make up your mind as to what I should do, ‘in sire’s presence.’”

⁹ This was favourite conundrum of Abraham (‘Honest Abe’) Lincoln.

Kṛṣṇa: “Come, Anā, let us go, these two tire my brain, and I feel an urge to fight, but the gods would not like to see that.”

Russelldum: “Wait, fellow, what ‘gods’ do you mean?”

Kṛṣṇa: “I tell you that I am an avatar of the Supreme God (*Iśvara*), who is also the Supreme Being (*Brahman*). Though I am unborn, and My self is imperishable, though I am the Lord of all creatures, yet, establishing Myself in My own nature, I come into empiric being through My power (*māyā*) Whenever there is a decline of righteousness and rise of unrighteousness, then I send forth, or incarnate, Myself.”¹⁰

Russelldum: “Well, well, well. But have you not heard that, in our times, your type (gods, I mean, not blue ones specifically) no longer exist. I heard the Mad Hatter say it just the other day: ‘God is dead!’”

Kṛṣṇa: “The Mad Hatter can go to the devil. If you need proof, listen closely. God is, by definition, the most perfect of beings, and is, also by definition, a being that has all properties. Thus God must have existence. Hence, God exists. Or, to put in more formally, to prove the existence of God, it obviously suffices to prove that there exists an existing God. There are two possibilities: 1) An existing God exists; and 2) An existing God does not exist. Now, clearly the second option is contradictory; thus we are left with the first: An existing God exists; and therefore, God exists. *Quod erat demonstrandum!*”

Russelldum: “Strange, your proof sounds a lot like one offered to me last week by the Descarmouse. But it’s silly: *existence* is not a property, as anybody can see; your proof is mere cant, verbiage, syllogism, sophism, and...Nieeeeeeeeeeeet-zscheeeeeeeeeee!” Russelldum sneezed, so hard that he fell over backwards and rolled several feet before being stopped rather rudely by a tree stump.

Wittgensee: (bursting into a horrifically loud guffaw, which subsided into a periodic titter): “Did you see that? My brother, the philosopher, the me-ta-phys-ish-ian (Wittgensee stressed each syllable and drew out the sounds). Ha! How can he take his metaphysics seriously when he

sneezes.¹⁰ That’s all one needs to break out of the dogmatic slumber of ‘philosophy’—to sneeze. That’s where logic and proportion break down completely. It’s where Kant... I mean *cant*, becomes idiotic!”¹¹ He calmed down enough to continue: “Brother, brother, you’ve taken the wrong tack. Indeed, *your* response is *also* filled with Kant. You’ve both terribly missed the point. We can’t come to a definite proof or disproof of the existence of God, because our human language games do not so easily conform to formal logic and symbols like *p* and *q*. The fallacy of Lord Kṛṣṇa’s ‘proof’ lies in the multiple meanings (or connotations) of the word ‘an’—which can mean ‘every’ or ‘at least one.’ This semantic instability allows for the casuistry of the ‘proof’. *Of course* ‘all existing Gods exist,’ but that doesn’t mean ‘there is an existing God!’”¹²

Anā: (who has been struggling to get a word in for some time) “But hold on one minute. Lord Kṛṣṇa doesn’t need to prove that ‘God exists’—*he is here*, speaking to us, and *he is divine*. *Quid erratum demonstrata*.”

Kṛṣṇa (by now fuming, despite *Anā*’s valiant attempt to side with him): “Forget the logic, for a minute. LIFE IS NOT LOGIC!!!” This last cry, delivered in a truly heraldic and stentorian voice, reverberated throughout Wonderland, no doubt tearing some holes in the lining of its sphere of existence. *Russelldum*, however, did not seem fazed by the tremor and succeeding aftershocks, or by his brother’s rebuttal.

Russelldum: “Yes, pure, sweet logic remote from human passions, remote even from the pitiful facts of Nature...an ordered cosmos, where pure thought can dwell as in its natural home, and where one, at least,

¹⁰ Kierkegaard posed the question: “How can a man in the midst of writing a ‘metaphysical’ sentence sneeze, and continue to take his work seriously?”

¹¹ See Kant’s Preface to a *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, where he credits Hume for awakening him from his own ‘dogmatic slumber’; and Nietzsche on Kant’s ‘becoming an idiot’ for rejecting the senses in favor of ‘duty’ (*The Antichrist*, #11).

¹² Smullyan 1978, #241

of our nobler impulses can escape from the dreary existence of the actual world.”¹³

Wittgensee, looking at his brother with a mixture of pity and contempt, exclaimed at once that, despite their ties of blood, he was on the side of the ‘blue man’ on this point, which led them into another frightful quarrel, during which Kṛṣṇa and Anā exited the scene. As they walked away, they heard a voice behind them: “Don’t for heaven’s sake, be afraid of talking nonsense! *But you must pay attention to your nonsense!*”¹⁴

Scene Two

Soon Anā and her divine companion came to a brick wall, well-built but rather high and (Anā thought) precariously narrow. But most interesting was what was perched on the top of this wall: a large egg-headed—or rather, egg-bodied—figure, who seemed lost in his thoughts. The creature was singing softly to himself, seemingly unaware of their presence, so Anā, nudging Kṛṣṇa to follow her lead, began to tiptoe past the wall (Anā, you see, was growing rather tired of Wonderland logic, and Kṛṣṇa’s feelings were quite in line with hers). In this plot they were unhappily unsuccessful, at first the Egg sang along in a dream-voice “Heidegggy-Deidegggy sat on a wall, Heidegggy-Deidegggy had a great Fall, all of the Kaiser’s horses and all...,” but he suddenly bolted upright (as much as eggs can do so), and with a snort, called them over.

“So,” the egg inquired, Checkpoint-Charlie style: “please state your name and your business.”

“My name is Anā, but...”

“A silly enough name!” interrupted the egg. “What does it mean?”

“Well,” said Anā, taken aback by this second affront on her moniker, particularly as it ensued from such a fragile-looking creature, “it is, actually, not my *real* name, but a nonsense name which I made up myself...”



¹³ Bertrand Russell, quoted in Gardner 1970, 91, note 9.

¹⁴ Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value* #56e

“That’s all well and good. But it doesn’t say anything about you. My name, contrariwise, says *very much* about me!”

“Why do you sit here all alone?” asked Anā, not wanting to begin another argument over such a silly issue.

“Why because there’s nobody with me,” cried the Egg. Then he looked rather sad, and mischievous at the same time. Leaning down conspiratorally—so far that Kṛṣṇa put out his arms to catch him were he to plummet to the ground—he said, in a high-pitched but mellifluous voice: “Psssst. I have a secret.” He looked to the right and left, and then went on. “We have broken asunder our connection with Being (*Sein/Seyne*)—we have forgotten ‘It’. There *is* no dichotomy between Being (*einai*) and Thought (*noen*). Since that pernicious Red King came to power, so long ago now, and especially since the reign of his wayward son, the so-called Prince of Philosophers, man has become a ‘rational animal,’ one that ‘has *logos*’ (the hubris!). Yes, the most *successful* animal, but also the one most torn from its ground in Being—whose *only* being is *unheimlich*: not-at-homeness. ‘Truth’ is not a property of the correspondence of propositions with ‘facts’; ‘truth’ is *aletheia*: the ‘unconcealedness of being.’ But this turn, prompted by the Red King and his pages, or footnotes, was the beginning of the long slide into the dark night of nihilism!”

Anā and Kṛṣṇa were briefly dazed by the hypnotic words of this parrheisiast ovoid, declaimed in such an authoritative yet mystical fashion. Still, Kṛṣṇa fought the torpor, and managed to voice a query:

“But what is this Being? It sounds very much like another way of saying ‘God’ to me. You’re not a philosopher at all, but a theologian!”

“No! No! I tell you, I am not anything of the sort. Of course, I am not really a philosopher either, in the traditional sense. Philosophy is dead; I am its embalmer...”

“If not God, Being is surely some sort of primal Essence. For all your dazzling talk, you seem to be grasping onto something that you think Real—something that ‘is’.”

“H--h--have you been talking to the White King? He’s m-mad you know,” the egg stammered, its gnomic assurance gone. But Anā didn’t respond to this.

“I believe,” she almost shouted, “that my Lord Kṛṣṇa is right:

To say ‘it is’ is to grasp to permanence.

To say ‘it is not’ is to adopt the view of nihilism.

*Therefore a wise person
Does not say 'exists or 'does not exist.'*¹⁵

“It is the nature, the vocation of man, to ask the question, ‘What is it, to be?’ And yet we fail to ask it...” Heideggy’s voice began to trail off.

“No, no! Asking such questions is precisely *the problem*. We end up just talking, which suffering goes on and on, even in front of our very noses... You, of all people, should know that, with your talk of ‘being-in-the-world’ (*Dasein*), and the primariness of ‘concern’ (*Sorge*) and ‘conscience’ (*Schuld*).”

Heideggy-Deideggy turned pale, and grew very silent, only muttering cryptic words in what *sounded* like German, but which Anā, who *knew* the language, *knew* was not. “Rather,” she mused, “these must be his own inventions, his idiolect”—this happened to be one of Anā’s favorite terms in the whole world, so she could not help repeating it to herself—“indeed, an *idiolect* of the most refined sort.”

The Egg suddenly began to sing, in the same dream-like voice as before, and as if they had never even approached him. Indeed, Anā was not sure if the conversation had really happened, so odd was the Egg’s voice and tone when it betrayed its ‘secret’. Seeing that there would be no more conversation to be had here, our heroes left the wall, walked over to a nearby meadow, and lay side by side on the short grass.

“But what about suffering, then? You said that, for this oval chap, ‘concern’ and ‘conscience’ were essential parts of a ‘return to Being’ (whatever in the name of Time that might mean). But where do we go from here?”

Anā thought this a very good question, and very timely. She had also been wondering about this problem, ever since her encounter with the Camusterpillar. She opened the book again, and read for some time, before responding:

“Yes, I have long been of the opinion, even before I met with that smoking worm, that ‘all this is suffering.’ Indeed, this I consider one of the profoundest of ‘truths’. Yet if we take the doctrine of the inherent ‘emptiness’ of everything, then we are forced to concede that suffering, too, is ultimately ‘empty.’ Only remember that ‘emptiness’ is not some

¹⁵ MMK XXV.10

kind of ‘absolute non-existence’ (that would be merely a mirror or negative reification of existence) but is a sort of a ‘process of emptying’.”

“I must confess, Anā, that I am still a bit confused by this emptiness, perhaps you (and your reading of Garfieline’s book) can clear my mind on this.”

“As far as I can see,” said Anā, “emptiness has two different meanings, or functions—one which is ‘destructive,’ or perhaps, ‘deconstructive,’ and another which is ‘formulative,’ or, in my preferred terms, ‘pragmatic.’ The first enables us to think ‘laterally,’ about our words and our concepts, the second provides with an ‘outlet’ or a ‘ladder’ back to the ‘real world.’ Thus, when we say of anything, say the ‘self,’ is ‘empty,’ we might mean that 1) it has no ‘positive’ existence whatever, or 2) it is existent in a purely conventional, linguistic, or functional-pragmatic sense.” Anā mused. “The question is: ‘Is emptiness ‘dialogical’ or ‘discursive?’”¹⁶

Kṛṣṇa, who was leafing through the MMK: “Or both, or neither?”

“Precisely!” said Anā. “‘It’ ‘is’ ‘both’ ‘and’ ‘neither’”—for these terms cannot be ultimately disconnected, but act in concert, ‘dependently’. In short: ‘Emptiness’ ‘is’ ‘itself’ ‘empty!’”

Lord Kṛṣṇa tried to take this in, but was distracted by the prevalence of scare quotes around all of his companion’s words. He wondered whether it might be, now that everything Anā said was put so, the scare quotes themselves might be dropped. Anā, too, was getting tired of making little quote signals with her fingers, and ruminated upon the limits of language to express the inescapable tentativeness of the terms she wanted to present.

Scene Three

Following the path that led through the woods, Anā and Kṛṣṇa had walked only a short distance when a man dressed in imperial garb (looking very much like the sleeping Red King, only White, and awake) approached them from the other direction. He stops and salutes them, and Anā asks what his story is (for she knew by now that all the creatures of Wonderland had a ‘story’, and that they loved telling it to querulous young women and blue avatars.

¹⁶ See Streng 1967, chap. 9

“Once I was called Sextus,” began the White King, “and was an ordinary man. Now they call me a king—His Highness—and other names like Jacques, Michel, Jean-François...”

“Ah!,” exclaimed Anā, happy to show off her polyglossalalia: «*Parlez-vous français, monsieur?*»

«*Oui, bien sûre!*»¹⁷

“Tell me, your Highness,” queried Anā, without wasting any time, “what is Truth?»

The White King, laughing, replied: «There is no Truth!»

«But is that not a truth-statement itself?»

«No.»

Anā, thinking this rather insufficiently argued, but moving on anyway to more ‘pragmatic’ concerns, asked «How are we supposed to live, without any certainty, if all is ‘empty’?»

«I should rather ask you: ‘How should we live *not* knowing that all is ‘empty’?’.»

«It’s really dreadful,» Anā muttered to herself, «the way all the creatures argue. It’s enough to drive one crazy!» Then she remembered the Garfieline’s words, and decided that, since madness was indeed the norm in this world, it was no surprise that this fellow before her was a monarch—the only waking monarch, at any rate.

«Any other questions,» my young friend, the White King asked, winking and smirking with a truly regal mixture of affability and condescension.

«But what am *I* to do?» asked Anā, losing her metaphysical verve.

«Why, anything you wish.»

«Oh, there’s no use talking to him, he’s perfectly idiotic! The Egg was right.» And with that thought Anā began to walk on. But the White King called her back.

«I’m sorry child; I was merely jesting. I once believed, indeed, that since we can never be sure of nothing, we must live our lives like everyone else—conforming to the customs of our culture and time. Now, however, I see that this is not a very good solution at all. I changed my

¹⁷ The following conversation occurred in French, as can be seen by the use of « and », but has been translated here according to Kṛṣṇa’s first-hand report. Unfortunately, Kṛṣṇa’s Latin was not enough to allow him to join into the dialogue, so he contented himself with watching the lips of Anā and the White King as they formed their words. Thus any faults of the translation, he has asked me to relate, belong entirely to him.

mind when I first met the Marx Hare (who, as you may know, has daily tea with the Mad Hatter—though the latter is somewhat more voluble and more popular these days). Anyway, I learned something from the Marx Hare about critical thinking and the workings of power. You know, he used to brag that he had turned his own master, the Dialecticorn, on his head, but I never really believed that, because his (the Dialecticorn’s, that is) horn would have stuck into the ground, and...»

Anā felt her eyelids begin to droop, and decided she had better say something to get the wordy King back on track, as well as to keep herself awake. «So?»

«Oh, yes, very good—‘so?’ Good question, well formed and well executed. In short, it is not a question of throwing everything ‘away’, but rather of *extending our questioning*, without attempting to put an end to them, even multiplying our questions precisely where we think them best answered. When I ‘answered’ your query about ‘truth’ before, you seemed confused, but only because, in your logocentrism, you neglected to ‘read’ my answer. You asked, what is ‘Truth’, and I answered, truthfully, ‘there is no Truth,’ which, as you can see if you *read* it, is not the same as saying, ‘there are no ‘truths’ or even, there is no possibility of ‘truth’...»

Anā was having a hard time following, but the King did not look like he would take interruption well at this point in his harangue, so she held her tongue.

«And this is particularly *significant* in terms of language: our words do not refer to a ‘real presence’ behind them—this is a mistake with tragic consequences. Real consequences, I might add: sexism, racism, oppression...»

«Hmmm» was all Anā could think to say. «Truly this man has a way with words» she thought. «But at least he’s more comprehensible than the Egg!»

«It is not that speech is ‘wrong’ or ‘bad’, but rather that we are duped—everyone, I mean, from the Red King to Heideggry Deideggry—when we seek an essence or form, which stands



as our principle of intelligibility. What language expresses is nonexistent. The sphere of thought is nonexistent...»

«Hey, this sounds like the book!» Anā suddenly exclaimed, and proceeded to hand over the MMK to the White King.

«I'm afraid I don't have much time to read these days...»

«But this is a very old book”—Anā guessed this from the layers of dust that had covered the tome—“and a wise one; perhaps you read it long ago or had it read to you as a child.»

At this point Kṛṣṇa interrupted: «With all due respect, dear Anā, sometimes I don't believe there's *any* meaning in it.»

«If there's no meaning in it,» remarked the King, «that saves a world of trouble, you know, as we needn't try to find any. And yet I don't know,» he went on, spreading out the pages on his knee, and looking at them with one eye; «I seem to see some meaning in them after all. This author of yours likes to play with language, to show the limits of language—the gaps where meaning lies latent and deferred. Perhaps (as with certain poets) this text will give some new insight into what has been taken for granted.»

«But it is not 'poetry', your grace. There seems to be a *point* beyond beauty or pleasure.»

«Oh dear, do you think so?»

«Well, it seems to me that there is a guiding 'spirit'—a religious ideal—behind this text, which keeps it from being 'mere play for play's sake.' In short, this book was written to benefit all beings. Whether it succeeds...»

«But isn't this a renewed search for a Real Presence?»

Here Kṛṣṇa joined in: «No, because it is not a Presence but rather an Absence. No, not even an Absence, but neither each nor both, nor neither.»

Now it was the White King's turn to be perplexed, so he did what he always did in such cases: he changed the subject. «Pardon me, young lady, but if you do not know *who* you are, why do you call yourself 'Anā G. Ārjuna'? I overheard you telling the Egg that this was a 'nonsense' name of your own making.»

Anā smiled: «What I said was true: Ana (*ανα*) is Greek, it means 'along, over', and refers to my endless travels and adventures, and 'Ārjuna' comes from a story I once heard somewhere—I think he was some sort of warrior who wasn't sure whether to fight or not, and this

reflects my own indecision on significant matters. And the ‘G’, well, what’s a name without an initial in the middle?»¹⁸

«An initial in the middle! How can that be? Doesn’t an *initial* need to be *first*?»

«No, you highness; remember, there *is no* ‘full name’, but only a congregation of aggregate names, all existing and arising dependently. You’ve missed the trees by looking only at the forest.”

The White King glanced from right to left, quite certain that he did see the trees, despite the young woman’s assertion, then shook his head.

«I’m afraid, my young friend, that you and I will never understand each other. We might be on a similar path, but we are heading in very different directions.»

«You are right; but this I think we *can* agree on: Once one stops trying to posit anything Real—for instance, behind the aggregates of a ‘self’—the problem of where the properties ‘themselves’ ‘are’, withers away (like the Marx Hare’s state).»

«Indeed, We»—here the White King used his royal prerogative, disregarding the first person pronoun—«are accused of saying that ‘nothing is real’, because everything is ‘conditioned.’ But We reply that nothing is any *less* real for being so, because there is no longer any really Real to compare with.»

Anā turned to her friend, in excitement: “Don’t you see, Kṛṣṇa, the Camustepillar’s *Angst* disappears once emptiness is realized!”

*One who does not grasp onto “I” and “mine,”
That one does not exist.
One who does not grasp onto ‘I’ and ‘mine,’
He does not perceive.¹⁹*

Kṛṣṇa, who was glad to have returned to the common tongue, nodded in agreement, though he was still not sure what *Angst* meant. “So,” he ventured, by way of clarification, “one goes blind, then?”

¹⁸ Please note that Anā’s *idio*-lect is, in fact, an *ana*-lect; that is, her private language is actually the language of the entire world, and of the history of civilization of the past two thousand years. Indeed, she is a true *analectus* (L.=a slave who collects crumbs after a meal).

¹⁹ MMK XVII.3

“No, no. It is not blindness, but rather ‘true sight!’”

When Anā and Kṛṣṇa looked back to the White King, he had vanished. Instead, they saw a large feline grin, where the King had lately stood. “How are you getting on?” asked the grin (which, of course, belonged to none other than Garfieline).

“I don’t think they play at all fairly, and they all quarrel so dreadfully one can’t hear oneself speak—but for all that, it is going all right. But tell me please, what became of the White King?”

The Cat began to fade, as it said: “The White King may help you sharpen your (s)words, but he may also shield your way. You are on the path. Go.” And with a ‘poof’, he was gone, grin and all.

“Kṛṣṇa, did you hear whether Garfieline said ‘words’ or ‘swords’?”

“No, Anā dear. But I don’t think it matters much at this point.”

Act Three, Scene One

After the disappearance of the White Knight, and the subsequent appearance and disappearance of Garfieline, our wanderers do not meet another soul for some time, and have a chance to talk about some of what they’ve recently discussed. Anā flips between the elation of comprehension and the agony of confusion.

“Who in the world am I? Ah, *that’s* the great puzzle.”

“Anā, dear kind Anā, Anā my love. You are still harping about ‘you’? Haven’t you learned anything from our discussions with Heideggy Deideggy and the White King. That is precisely the *wrong* question to ask. Rather, the question is, what happens to this thing called ‘I’ in-the-world, and how is it properly ‘eliminated’. In short, how do you (who is not an ultimately existent ‘you’) attain enlightenment, or liberation?”

“How, dear Kṛṣṇa, does ‘one’ come to enlightenment, then. Is it even possible, if there is no ‘you’ to make the effort?”

Kṛṣṇa (who by now was feeling less secure in his own beliefs on this issue) replied: “Yes, yes of course one can come to enlightenment. But there are different paths. Think of liberation as a mountain, which you can climb by way of the path of knowledge (*jñāna-yoga*), devotion

(*bhakti-yoga*), or action (*karma-yoga*). The view from the summit is identical for all.”²⁰

“But Kṛṣṇa, my sweet Lord, is it not the path itself that is liberation, that *is* enlightenment? And if so, is it the same mountain once you climb it and return to the bottom? Or is it another mountain altogether?”²¹

Kṛṣṇa had no immediate answer for this dilemma, but thought it sounded suspiciously foreign. “The Āraṇyakas²² do not give an answer, thus the question must itself be poorly formulated,” he thought, but didn’t feel like this was the answer that Anā would want to hear, so he kept it to himself.

“I do not long for victory, O Kṛṣṇa, nor kingdom nor pleasures. Of what use is kingdom to us, O Kṛṣṇa, or enjoyment or even life?²³ Even the knowledge I once craved I no longer desire. But there is still the path to follow, to get out of these woods. That I would like to know.”

Here she looked about, and seeing that the forest was growing darker, quickly took out the book and turned to the end, where, she felt, the ‘answers’ must lie. Suddenly, as she saw that her very own words ‘must lie’—since the White King, she had become something of an adept at reading her words as she spoke them—Anā was struck by a serious fear: What if the answers, what if the whole of this book, this MMK, is a ‘lie’? She did not express this new fear to Kṛṣṇa, for she suspected (and quite rightly) that her friend placed much weight on the Truth of all written texts, especially old and cryptic ones, and thus would not empathize with her concern. Pretty soon, however, her spirits rose, as she remembered that ‘Truth’ and ‘Falsity’ are based on correspondence with a ‘reality’ behind statements and ideas. Since this ‘reality’ is empty, she need not worry about the ultimate ‘truth’ of it—

²⁰ Radhakrishnan 1957, 102

²¹ Cf. 13th c. Japanese Zen master Dōgen’s famous remark that, after 30 years of studying Zen, “mountains were really mountains.”

²² “Forest books” — a category of Vedic literature (*śruti*) dealing mainly with the cosmic significance of the Vedic rituals. No doubt their situation in the forest prompted Kṛṣṇa’s turn to these books for answers.

²³ *Bhagavad-gītā* 1:32

but only how she should, as she put it, get out of the woods. Her old pragmatism was reinforced by this charming doctrine of emptiness.

Anā flipped to Chapter twenty-five and began to read. When she came to Verse 19, she stopped suddenly, and dropped the book onto the dusty path, where it sent up a cloud disproportionate to its size and weight. When the dust finally settled, and the two travelers had ceased coughing, Anā nearly shouted:

*There is not the slightest difference
Between cyclic existence and nirvāṇa.
There is not the slightest difference
Between nirvāṇa and cyclic existence.*

*There is not even the slightest difference between them,
Or even the subtlest thing.²⁴*

“But whatever does this mean, Anā?”

“It seems to me that it means exactly what we might expect it to mean, given the means by which the author arrived here, or there—given, that is, the *emptiness* of all things. To *distinguish* between *nirvāṇa* and *samsāra* would be to assume that each had a nature and that their natures were ultimately different. But, like everything else, and perhaps more so because they *encompass* everything else, *nirvāṇa* and *samsāra* are ultimately ‘empty’ by nature, thus there can be no inherent difference between them. Thus, in an important sense, in *the* important sense, they are one and the same. To ‘picture’ anything as inherently existent—in other words, as an ‘entity’—is a mistake. Even more so with respect to *nirvāṇa*: talking about *nirvāṇa* is ‘ultimately’ nonsense.”

Scene Two

Anā and Kṛṣṇa walk for a few miles, in silence, of course, resting occasionally and thinking about their adventures in this upside-down land. After a short rest by a small lake, they hear two voices, apparently in conflict.

²⁴ MMK XXV: 19-20

First voice: “The answer to the questions posed in terms of everyday speech can only be answered on those grounds, and moreover, *nirvāṇa* is...

Second voice: “Stop! Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must keep silent!”²⁵

Coming upon the scene, our two nomads see a pair of knights, each the mirror image of the other, jousting, and accentuating every parry with a declamations like those above. These are Sir Candraknight and Sir Bhavaknight, and they have been battling for countless years without cease.

Candraknight: “I tell you: the principle of relativity is also called *nirvāṇa*, the quiescence of equalization of all plurality, because when it is critically realized there is for the philosopher absolutely no differentiation of existence to which our words (and concepts) could be applied. The very essence of relativity is called *nirvāṇa*, the quiescence of plurality, for which there are no words. Thoughts and feelings do not arise in this undifferentiated whole, there is no subject and no object of knowledge, there is consequently no turmoil like birth, old age, and death, there is eternal bliss...”²⁶

Kṛṣṇa: (placing himself between the battling knights) “When the Self is no longer attached to external contacts, or objects, one finds the happiness that is in the Self (*ātman*). *Such a one who is in union with God enjoys undying bliss.*”²⁷

Candraknight: (frowning): “What is this ‘god’ compared to *nirvāṇa*?”

²⁵ These being, of course, the famous last words of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus*, and are quoted by Radhakrishnan (without reference to their source) as summarizing “the great tradition of the mysticism of the Upaniṣads, as well as the Buddha’s own reticence on questions ‘metaphysical’” (Radhakrishnan 1957, 272).

²⁶ Candrakīrti (c. 600-650), in his commentary to the MMK (translated by Stcherbatsky, cited in Radhakrishnan 1957, 340).

²⁷ *Bhagavad-gītā* 5:21

Kṛṣṇa: (feeling rather plucky) “Phooey. A *ham sandwich* is better than *nirvāṇa*.”

Bhāvaknight, about to charge his opponent, suddenly drops his lance: “How do you mean, blue fellow?”

Kṛṣṇa: “Well, nothing is greater than *nirvāṇa*, right.” The knights nod in assent to this. “And a ham sandwich is better than nothing, agreed?” Again, no disputes. “Ergo... a ham sandwich is better than *nirvāṇa*!”²⁸ *Kṛṣṇa* beamed widely, quite pleased to have pulled the logical wool over these Wonderland chaps for a change. Neither was laughing, however. Both, and *Anā* as well, seemed deep in thought.

Bhāvaknight: “But a ham sandwich is, ultimately, ‘empty’—so therefore there can be no ‘greater’ or ‘less’, except, of course, on conventional terms.”

Candraknight: “No, no—*not even on conventional terms!* Why do you try to argue with these fools? You are using their own weapons, and will destroy your ‘self’ (that is, if ‘it’ didn’t already not exist in any way), for logic and language are doubled-edged swords. Just like this one.” And he lunged at his foe, nearly chopping off poor *Anā*’s nose in the process.

Anā: “Wait! I think I agree with you”—pointing to *Bhāvaknight*—“To ‘reify’ silence would be to grasp onto another concept as an ultimate.”



Candraknight: “There are two levels or stages of meditation, leading to the realization of emptiness. The first is the experience of emptiness where there is *no* sense-experience present; the second is a mode of

²⁸ Smullyan 1978, #245

cognition in which the presence of sense-experience *may* accompany the cognition of emptiness. The first is called meditation on emptiness between space (*ākāśa*) and the latter as illusion-like (*māyopama*) meditation on emptiness.”²⁹

Bhāvaknight: “In principle, I have no problem with this. But *you* seem to be stuck on the first level—you’re always climbing the mountain itself, and seem to forget about saving sentient beings. You make ‘existence’ meaningless, by wiping it out altogether, and thus, backhandedly glorifying it!”

Candraknight: “Rubbish! It is you and your kind who superimpose a false nature on phenomena, and thus lead us back into a belief in ‘essences’, even if you call them only ‘conventionally’ real!”

Bhāvaknight (exasperated): “But how, pray tell, can we even speak a word, if conventional reality has no reality, meaning, or use whatever?!”

With these words he charged, trampling poor Kṛṣṇa, who was still between the disputants. Bhāvaknight managed to unseat Candraknight, jumped off his own horse, and chased the latter on foot through the forest. Anā was momentarily transfixed, but soon realized that her companion could be seriously hurt, and rushed to his aid. Kṛṣṇa—who was, after all, divine—was not physically hurt, but his pride had taken a beating.

Kṛṣṇa: “The deluded despise Me clad in human body, not knowing My higher nature as Lord of all existences. Partaking of the deceptive nature of fiends and demons, their aspirations are vain, their actions vain, and their knowledge vain, and they are devoid of judgment.”³⁰

Anā said nothing, so as not to hurt her companion’s feelings, but she did not feel that Candra and Bhāva (or Russelldum and Wittgendee, for that matter) were deluded ‘demons’. Rather, she felt they had helped her in her quest, even if she was more divided in her opinion of the meaning of the MMK itself. Besides (and this was very important to Anā) they were quite funny, quite funny in-

²⁹ Candrakīrti, in his commentary to the MMK (cited in Fenner 1990, 88-89).

³⁰ *Bhagavad-gītā* 9:11-12

deed, knocking each other about like that. She had to suppress a laugh, because she noticed that Kṛṣṇa was still ruffled about the treatment he had been receiving at the hands of these strange Wonderland folk.

Scene Three

Kṛṣṇa and Anā come to a small lake, which cuts across the path. Too deep to cross by foot and too far to swim (if they could swim, which they could not), they found a small raft near the shore, and without a second thought, set to ‘sea’. As soon as they began to paddle, however, the opposite shore seemed to get further and further away, so they contented themselves with drifting slowly. When they made no effort to get across the lake, they succeeded in crossing it slowly. As it was a warm and sunny day, and she was exceedingly tired, Anā lay down and began to sing softly.

*Don’t row, don’t row, don’t row your raft,
Gently ‘cross the pond,
Merely, barely, warily, drearily,
Life is but a...*

—she couldn’t for the life of her remember the last line of the song. “What could possibly rhyme with ‘pond’ that would make sense here,” she wondered aloud. “Bond,” that must be it—

Life is but a bond.

Kṛṣṇa laughed. “Dear Anā, you’ve messed it up terribly. The last line is: “Life is but a *dream*.”

“That doesn’t rhyme,” was Anā’s first thought, but then she reflected on the line “Life is but a dream” and decided that she liked it infinitely more than the other. So she sang it again.

“You know,” said her friend, “that sounds like something I heard a few millennia ago from that Subhūti fellow. One day he gathered a number of us gods together and said quite plainly that liberation is a ‘dream’ (a remark, I must say, which shocked us *devas*, and almost caused fighting among the *asuras*). I was less stunned than the others though, and asked him what I thought was a pertinent question: ‘Subhūti,’ I said, ‘if liberation is indeed ‘empty,’ and if there is no ‘one’

to liberate nor any ‘one’ to be liberated, then why bother with the whole mess in the first place?’ He pondered my question, but rather than answer right away, he said he would ask his master, who was...hmmm...Wait! His master was the same as the master of the author of your book—the ‘Buddha!’”

“Curiouser and curiouser. But what, dear Kṛṣṇa, was the answer to your question?”

“Oh yes, the answer. I don’t think I ever saw Subhūti again. I was very busy at the time, you see, there were things happening everywhere.”

“If this fellow Subhūti said that *nirvāṇa*, or release, is a ‘dream’, and we have just realized that *nirvāṇa* and *samsāra* are ‘ultimately’ the same, then does it not follow that ‘life is a dream’?”

“Hold it, remember the warnings of Wittgendee and the White King about language. The song says ‘Life is but a dream,’ implying that it is *nothing but* a dream, not that it *is* a dream.”

“Exactly—to say that it *is* a dream implies that there is some sort of non-dream life, which there *is not*; thus we must say, like the song, that life is *but* a dream. Similarly,” here she flipped to Chapter seventeen of the MMK, “our author says that

*Just as the teacher, by magic,
Makes a magical illusion, and
By that illusion
Another illusion is created,*

*In that way are an agent and his action:
The agent is like the illusion.
The action
Is like the illusion’s illusion.*

*Afflictions, actions, bodies,
Agents, and fruits are
Like a city of Gandharvas and
Like a mirage or a dream.³¹*

“When speaking of illusion and dreams, it is better to clarify what we mean by saying ‘like’ or ‘as’ rather than ‘is’—because ‘is’ always

³¹ MMK XVII: 31-33

implies an ultimate reality of some sort. But that doesn't mean, just because we use similitude or metaphorical language, that there is an ontological distinction between 'illusion' and 'dream' and 'reality' (or *nirvāṇa* and *samsāra*, for that matter)."

"In other words, life, viewed rationally and without illusion, appears to be a nonsense tale told by an idiot mathematician... We all live slapstick lives, under an inexplicable sentence of death, and when we try to find out what the Castle authorities want us to do, we are shifted from one bumbling bureaucrat to another."³²

"No, no! You sound just like the Camusterpillar. We can't go back to that after all we've been through!"

"What, you mean talking to all these madmen!"

"But if life is illusion, and dream, and release is illusion and dream, does not talk with 'madmen' prepare us more 'rationally' for life and release? When we are dreaming and, as often happens, have a dim consciousness of the fact and try to wake, do we not say and do things which in waking would be insane? May we not then sometimes define insanity as an inability to distinguish which is the waking and which the sleeping life?"³³

As Anā said this, their raft bumped against the shore, and getting off of it, they began to walk, when they realized, to their horror, that they were back on the same shore from which they left some hours before. And they had already tossed the raft back into the lake. Kṛṣṇa was in despair, but Anā brightened up: "Kṛṣṇa, dear Lord. Listen to me. Take a look around you, do you see the world as you did when we left." Kṛṣṇa was about to nod, when he looked about and realized that, indeed, the forest, though the same forest, was no longer so dark and forbidding as it had been earlier on. At that instant, the forest vanished, Kṛṣṇa vanished, and Anā was left alone by the side of the lake (which remained). She lay down on the soft sand, and, as she drifted off to sleep, thought she could hear, in the distance, snoring.

Finis

³² Martin Gardner (Gardner 1970, 15)

³³ Lewis Carroll, in his Diary (Feb. 9, 1856); also see Plato's *Theatetus*.

Epilogue & Apology

G. K. Chesterton once remarked, with Martin Gardner's approbation, that to make a humourous parody of a humourous parody is silly. With all due respect to Messrs Chesterton and Gardner, I am prone to disagree. I follow Wittgenstein's comment that you may indeed speak nonsense, so long as you listen to it seriously. (Oscar Wilde agreed, when he said: "Life is far too important a thing ever to talk seriously about." And Oscar is always right.)

My Avidyā-gita is an "intertext" of several well-known works, most obviously Lewis Carroll's Alice books (which I have not bothered to reference, given the frequency of my borrowings from and allusions to those texts), and Nāgārjuna's Mūlamadhyamakakārikā, but also feeding off classic tales from other traditions, such as the Bhagavad-gita and Dante's Commedia (or Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress, for the more Protestant-inclined). The story itself is a derivation of the popular genre of the "quest," during which our heroes meet and converse with various figures, representing various responses to the most fundamental philosophical issues—about life, love, language, and logic. The Leitmotif in the story is the danger (and fear) of nihilism—a danger and fear that, while seemingly a creation of the contemporary West, spans across centuries, traditions, and cultures.

I chose to write this piece as a 'dialogue' for several reasons, but mostly because I wanted to explore the MMK vis-à-vis other philosophical (and religious) approaches to similar questions. Anā, who is progressively enlightened through her contact with the MMK, but also through her conversation with others, has her own distinct reading of the text, based largely on her previously held beliefs and values. By and large her vision accrues with Jay Garfield's, but she is also deeply affected by her various encounters, not least with the Hindu deity/avataṛ Kṛṣṇa, who plays an important role as foil to the young woman's (genetic?) readiness to accept the teachings of the MMK. Kṛṣṇa's personality is quite in keeping with my characterization (he is, in fact, the only 'real' character in the story, that is, the only one having existence outside of the story). As in Hindu tradition, he is both a playful pastoral god and a mature divine teacher.

P.S. Quodlibet (L.): 1.a. a topic for philosophical or theological discussion; b. an exercise of this; 2. a light-hearted medley of well-known tunes.

Is the only sound philosophy a form of no-philosophy? So far as I can tell, nothing quite comparable to this idea has appeared in the West. The ancient skeptics, who exemplified something verbally similar, did not share the further insight that is essential to this idea in its Buddhist guise; nor does Ludwig Wittgenstein, who in his famous *Tractatus* holds that all one can really do in relation to other philosophers is to wait till they say something and then show them that they have actually said nothing. And so far as I can tell also, this idea was not definitely adopted by Gautama Himself. In Him we meet an approach to it in the silence that He sometimes maintained in the presence of metaphysical questionings—at least when the meaning of that silence is considered in relation to His readiness to deal with all inquirers on their own ground. This readiness betokened a remarkable capacity to probe their perplexities in full awareness of individual differences and thus in a way most likely to be helpfully clarifying to each person. This idea comes before us full grown and articulate in the *Madhyamika* Philosophy of Nagarjuna and his great successors.

– K. N. Jayatilleke

Contrariwise, if it was so, it must be; and if it were so, it would be; but as it isn't it ain't. That's logic.

– Tweedledum

We're all mad(hyamika) here. I'm mad(hyamika). You're mad(hyamika).

– Garfieline

Bibliography

Primary Source Texts:

- “Bhagavad-gītā.” 1957. In *A Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy*. Ed. S. Radhakrishnan and C. Moore. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press.
- Carroll, Lewis. 1970. “Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland.” In *The Annotated Alice*. Ed. Martin Gardner. London: Penguin Books.
- Carroll, Lewis. 1970. “Through the Looking Glass.” In *The Annotated Alice*. Ed. Martin Gardner. London: Penguin Books.
- Nāgārjuna. 1995. *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*. Trans. with commentary by Jay L. Garfield. New York: Oxford University Press. (MMK)
- Smullyan, Raymond. 1978. *What is the Name of this Book?* London: Penguin.

Other Works Cited:

- Camus, Albert. 1955. *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Fenner, Peter. 1990. *The Ontology of the Middle Way*. London: Kluwer.
- Gardner, Martin. 1970. Commentary to *The Annotated Alice*. Ed. Martin Gardner. London: Penguin Books.
- Hofstadter, Douglas R. 1979. *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Jayatilke, K. N. 1971. “Knowledge and Conduct.” In *Pathways of Buddhist Thought: Essays from The Wheel*. Ed. Nyanaponkika. London: Allen & Unwin.
- Lopez, Donald S. 1987. *A Study of Svātantrika*. Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion.
- Radhakrishnan, Sarvepalli, and Charles E. Moore, eds. 1957. *A Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Staten, Henry. 1984. *Wittgenstein and Derrida*. London: University of Nebraska Press.
- Streng, Frederick J. 1967. *Emptiness: A Study in Religious Meaning*. New York: Abingdon Press.
- Williams, Paul. 1989. *Mahāyāna Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations*. New York: Routledge.
- Wood, Thomas E. 1994. *Nāgārjunian Disputations*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.