



*Eli Hirsch*

# Diabolical Mysticism, Death, and Skepticism

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One theory has it that dying is bad for the one who dies. “A bad end is in store for us all,” according to Thomas Nagel’s formulation in “Death”.<sup>1</sup> The theoretical price exacted by this position is to explain why and when the decedent suffers from being deceased. That cost seems too steep to some thinkers who therefore defend a second theory that holds that death is not bad for the one who dies, though it may of course be bad for those left behind. A famous ancient expression of the second position comes from Epicurus: “So long as we exist death is not with us; but when death comes, then we do not exist.”<sup>2</sup>

These two positions have been the main ones considered in analytic philosophy. A perspective they share is that “death is part of life,” at least in the sense that one’s death is something one can think about in the same way one thinks about other problems. For Nagel my death is bad for me because of all of the potentially good things I will lose by not continuing to live. It was bad for me that I missed out on going to a high school prom, and when I die I will miss out on many more things. My death is much worse than missing the prom, perhaps in some sense infinitely worse, but we are dealing here with the same intelligible dimension of badness. For Epicurus, on the other hand, my missing the prom was bad for me because I was there to suffer that loss, whereas my death can’t be bad for me because I won’t be there to suffer the loss of everything I can no longer have. Two ordinary philosophical theories, argued out in the standard ways, are on the table.<sup>3</sup>

There is, however, a third radically different kind of perspective, which I will try to explain by adapting a notion from William James’s *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. On this perspective the contemplation of one’s death elicits a peculiar experience of the sort James called “diabolical mysticism.”<sup>4</sup> A mystical experience, as James understands it, has two essential characteristics: it purports to be revelatory of some truth, and that truth is ineffable. In the case of a diabolical mystical experience the truth that seems to be revealed is ineffably horrible. My death does not strike me as bad in anything like the way Nagel tries to depict. It is “bad” in some other way, in a way that can’t be put into words.

To qualify as a diabolical visionary it does not suffice that you have experienced some transcendent horror. The key thing is that you must view that horror as ineffable. Ineffability is not, however, a simple matter. Probably it is best viewed as admitting of degrees and as being relative to the representational resources at one’s disposal. Mystics, whether of the more familiar religious kind or the diabolical kind, can’t say it but can try to whistle it. James actually held that “music gives us ontological messages which non-musical criticism is unable to contradict”<sup>5</sup>;

that seems extreme even for mystics, but it's not the kind of whistling I'm talking about. Mystics, as well as poets and other literati, will often implicitly reject F.P. Ramsey's law that "if you can't say it, you can't whistle it either." Religious mystics are found in the literature to go on prolifically in talking about their experience of God and oneness, while at the same time insisting that, as St. Theresa put it, "if our understanding comprehends, it is in a mode which remains unknown to it, and it can understand nothing of what it comprehends."<sup>6</sup> It may be that the strain of diabolical mysticism, at least amongst the sane, is more likely to get expressed in literature—in poetry, plays, and novels—than in philosophical formulations. In both the religious and the diabolical cases the philosophical formulations cannot be taken quite literally, but they also differ from more ordinary metaphorical talk. They differ in both being further and more problematically removed from the literal and in being elicited by a definite experience or mental state. If I say, "Norman Mailer was a professional prize fighter" this metaphorical utterance is probably not elicited by any specific experience, and, though it can't be straightforwardly paraphrased in literal terms, a good approximation to what is intended can be literally rendered.<sup>7</sup> But if, when I contemplate my death, I utter "Nothing in life makes any sense", this utterance is elicited by something I experience that I can't begin to render in literal terms. I seem to be comparing life to a nonsensical statement, but I can't begin to say literally what that comparison amounts to.

This last utterance is something that diabolical mystics will almost always make. It corresponds to the religious mystic's ubiquitous utterances about the universe's transcendent unity and harmony. James cites Boehme's remark that Primal Love as revealed by his (religious) mystical experience is something "which a man cannot express or utter what it is, there being nothing to which it may be compared."<sup>8</sup> What Boehme says about Primal Love the diabolical mystic may say about life's senselessness. Boehme's remark, even more perhaps than the remark quoted from St. Theresa, seems to suggest that the truth revealed by mystical experience is somehow in principle inaccessible to conceptualization. I will not try to delve into this. I'm appealing here to a rough intuitive sense of the distinction between literal and non-literal discourse, and to the idea of a kind of experience that purports to reveal a truth that cannot be expressed in literal discourse. I make no pretense of being able to go deeper than that into what ineffability and mysticism amount to.

I don't think that the word "supernatural" has an unambiguous meaning, but the pictures associated with it—angels, demons, God in heaven—have no bearing on what I am talking about. The diabolical mystical experience purports to reveal something about our lives, something about our situation as human beings. The revelation is purely "immanent" (it supervenes on plain facts about our lives). The expression "diabolical poetic vision" might be in some ways less

misleading, but it does not convey the immediacy and impact of the experience I am talking about.

In Sartre's story "The Wall" we have a literary incarnation of the diabolical mystic's revelation in the face of death.<sup>9</sup> Two characters, Tom and Pablo, are waiting to be executed the following morning. Tom says: "Something is going to happen to us that I can't understand. ... It's like a nightmare. You want to think something, you always have the impression that it's all right, that you're going to understand and then it slips, it escapes you and fades away. I tell myself there will be nothing afterwards. But I don't understand what it means. ... I've got to think ... think that I won't see anything anymore and the world will go on for the others. We aren't made to think that, Pablo." Listening to this Pablo agrees. "I could have said everything he said," he thinks. "It isn't *natural* to die." And later he thinks, "I didn't want to think any more about what would happen at dawn, at death. It made no sense. I only found words or emptiness."

What are these characters talking about? Not natural to die? Your heart stops, blood stops going to your brain, blah, blah. Why is that not natural? What is it that Tom and Pablo have a problem *understanding*? First I exist, then I don't. What can be simpler than that? Attempts in some literature to elucidate this problem by appealing either to logical-metaphysical puzzles about existence, or to our inability to imagine (coherently) how things will be for us when we no longer exist, are immediately shown to be off the mark by considering that Tom and Pablo have no problem understanding what it means for them to have not existed before they were born. Why is it a greater problem for them to understand what it means for them to not exist after they die?<sup>10</sup>

We have to see this a bit differently. "I can't understand that I am going to die" means "There is something about the fact that I am going to die that I grasp in some way but that I can't understand in literalistic conceptual or linguistic terms." That I'm an entity that exists up to a certain time and then stops existing seems simple enough. But when I try to face that fact there is something else that comes along with it that I can't understand in ordinary terms, something that propels me outside of my natural conceptual and emotional framework and leaves me with nothing but "words or emptiness." That truth that I can't understand in literalistic terms I do nevertheless grasp to be horrible in some indescribable way and to undermine everything that I have ever cared about in my life. "Nothing makes any sense, nothing is real, nothing matters": those are the root metaphorical-mystical utterances delivered by the diabolical vision. Hence Pablo eventually thinks: "If someone had come and told me I could go home quietly, that they would leave my life whole, it would have left me cold: several hours or several years of waiting is all the same when you have lost the illusion of being eternal."

Pablo's thoughts about the senselessness of life should be contrasted with

Thomas Nagel's thoughts in his paper "The Absurd".<sup>11</sup> Nagel cannot see any definite connection between death and the sense of life's absurdity, and he winds up giving an account that, from the perspective of the diabolical vision, may seem somewhat shallow and wrongly focused. He suggests that our sense of life's absurdity stems from our viewing ourselves *sub specie aeternitatis*, and from that perspective we find our natural energetic and often frenetic comings and goings ridiculous. But, if I am like Pablo and the thought of my death makes me want to utter "Nothing makes any sense," I am not outside looking in, but inside looking out. This utterance seems to arise from the center of my life, not from a remote philosophical outpost where I sit and spy on my life like an ungenerous film critic finding it to be a comedy when it was advertised as a drama. The centrifugal force pushing me outside of my ordinary perspective is the force of a revelation, but a revelation whose content I cannot explain in literal language. Whereas Nagel's absurdism from afar ("from nowhere") need scarcely threaten the inner motives that normally drive our lives, Pablo's vision of senselessness, arising from the center of his life, threatens even his most basic cares and reasons of love.<sup>12</sup>

There is a significant and well-known body of literature debating the epistemic authority of mystical experience to reveal any truth about the world. I will not touch on this topic except to remark that there is no obvious reason why the diabolical kind should be accorded a lesser epistemic standing than the religious kind. Religious mystics will often say outright that they cannot explain themselves in literalistic language. The cited remarks to this effect by St. Theresa and Boehme are typical. Such explicit disavowals of literalistic language seem less common amongst the diabolical mystics. This may be because they fear that their audience will be tempted to dismiss their "ineffable visions" as mere lunacy.<sup>13</sup> Of course the religious mystics are hardly invulnerable to this reaction, but people are naturally more patient with mystification in the service of glorifying life than mystification in the service of undermining it. Since the diabolical mystics generally do not declare themselves as such it is sometimes difficult to tell whether we are dealing with a philosopher's attempt to convey a diabolical vision in metaphorical-mystical terms or dealing simply with philosophical confusion and perversity.

This point affects the overall assessment of Paul Edwards's brilliant demolition job in *Heidegger on Death: A Critical Evaluation*.<sup>14</sup> I should say immediately that I consider it hopeless to try to defend Heidegger's twisted verbiage and incomprehensible arguments. But there are certain central famous pronouncements he made that may resonate within us as expressing poetically or metaphorically truths that cannot be expressed otherwise.<sup>15</sup>

Here are two very famous Heideggerian pronouncements on death:

(1) All human beings die alone.<sup>16</sup>

(2) When we face death we experience a special kind of Angst (anxiety) in which we confront the Nothing.<sup>17</sup>

Edwards demonstrates that there is no remotely ordinary sense in which (1) is true. People often die in the presence of other people who are not dying and sometimes together with other people who are dying. It is not even true that people always *feel alone* when they die; Edward informs us that Hume, for example, “never felt closer to his friends than during this period [when he was facing death]” (*Heidegger and Death*, p. 8). As regards (2) Edwards agrees that there seems to be a special kind of “mood that comes over thoughtful people when they fully realize the finality of death,” and this mood is by no means “stupid” (*Heidegger and Death*, p.58), but there is no reason to think that this mood reveals some extraordinary fact about some item called “the Nothing.”

In the course of Pablo’s ruminations about death in “The Wall” he thinks about his lover Concha: “Now I had no more desire to see her, I had nothing more to say to her. ... I thought of her soft beautiful eyes. ... But I knew it was over: if she looked at me *now* the look would stay in her eyes, it wouldn’t reach me. I was alone.” Given that Pablo found only “words or emptiness” in the face of death it seems not surprising that he has lost the basis to relate to another person. In that sense he certainly is alone, phenomenologically alone, locked indeed in a kind of unfathomable solitude. But Hume was different, according to Edwards. Is this because Hume did not experience that special kind of “mood” that Edwards says comes over thoughtful people when they fully realize the finality of death? Or is it that one can experience that “mood” and still feel close to one’s friends?

What is the “mood” that Edwards is talking about? He says that he does not think that “the words ‘fear’ or ‘anxiety’ or any other term taken from the fear-family are appropriate names for the mood.” But a few sentences later he seems to try to explain this special “mood” by saying that “it is difficult to bear the thought that, after I have died, I will be unable—for all eternity—to do any of the things that made life interesting and enjoyable ... .” That sounds like Nagel’s explanation of why we all come to a bad end. But that doesn’t seem to explain the special “mood” we experience when we try to face that bad end. It is often said that the worst thing that can happen to a person is the death of one’s child. If I were faced with a situation in which I had to choose between my own death and the death of my child, I am quite certain I would choose the former. In that sense the thought of my child’s death is for me *more* “difficult to bear” than the thought of my own death. But it is only the latter that is likely to elicit the special “mood” that Edwards talks about.<sup>18</sup>

Edwards, it appears, does not explain the nature of the special “mood” or why we have it. And there is a further difficulty. Edwards implies that it is required of

thoughtful people to experience this “mood”. Why is this? Indeed, if the “mood” is as painful as Edwards says it is, why isn’t it “stupid” to experience it?

It seems to me that Edwards comes close to something that he then wants to brush aside. There seems to be only one relevant requirement on thoughtful people and that is to not evade the truth they are faced with. The “mood” Edwards is talking about is implicitly conceived by him as being representational, as purporting to reveal some truth that it is hard to face. Is this not the ineffably horrible truth Pablo tried to face and that cut him off from other people? If so, thoughtful people cannot die the way Hume reportedly did. This, at any rate, is Heidegger’s position, and it seems to me that Edwards comes very close to embracing it.

Let’s suppose that “Angst” is Heidegger’s name for the mental state of facing that truth. Angst is the diabolical mystical experience in the face of death. In the grip of Angst there can be only “words or emptiness.” We have no way to conceptualize what the truth is that Angst reveals. A poetic shorthand for it might be “the Nothing” (or “the Abyss”). Heidegger’s (1) and (2) may therefore not be quite as bad as Edwards makes out.<sup>19</sup>

From the diabolical perspective death and solipsism go together. There is the idea just discussed that in the face of death one experiences a special kind of feeling of being alone. But there is another connection that I want to discuss.

By the *possibility of radical deception* I mean the metaphysical (and perhaps physical) possibility of there being a situation in which I am phenomenologically just as I have been throughout my life but I am completely deluded about everything that matters to me. My being a brain in a vat is one familiar example of such a possible situation. Many people who reflect seriously on the possibility of radical deception find themselves distressed in a certain way. I will call this form of distress *epistemic uneasiness*. I have in mind the sort of distress Hume famously described as the “philosophical melancholy and delirium” that he could only escape by not thinking about philosophy.<sup>20</sup> I want to try to understand what the nature is of this epistemic uneasiness. What I want to suggest is that there is an analogy to be drawn between the way the diabolical vision relates to the thought of death and the way epistemic uneasiness relates to the thought of the possibility of radical deception.<sup>21</sup>

This analogy will be immediately dismissed by those philosophers who either deny that there is the possibility of radical deception or who deny that there is any epistemic uneasiness elicited by reflecting on that possibility. Putnam is the most prominent representative of the first denial.<sup>22</sup> It seems to me that there are a number of things wrong with Putnam’s position, but I will not be able to argue for this here.<sup>23</sup> I am simply going to assume that there is the possibility of radical deception. (As a solution to the problem of skepticism Putnam’s proposal strikes me as akin to trying to solve the problem of death by proving the immortality of

the soul.)

Many more philosophers, while granting the possibility of radical deception, will deny that reflecting on this possibility need elicit any form of epistemic uneasiness. Why, they will ask, should it? One of G.E. Moore's important achievements in epistemology was to clearly distinguish between two senses of saying, "It's possible that I'm completely deceived."<sup>24</sup> In one sense this means that it is metaphysically (or physically) possible for me to be deceived; this is what I have called the possibility of radical deception. In a second sense it means that I *may actually* be deceived, where this implies that I have reason to worry that I am deceived. Asserting the sentence in the first sense does not by any means require me to assert it in the second sense. And if I do not assert it in the second sense then I have no reason to feel at all distressed.

Despite this correct and pertinent distinction it seems that when thoughtful people reflect seriously on the possibility of radical deception they often *do* feel a peculiar kind of epistemic uneasiness, and that they continue to feel this even after they have fully understood Moore's distinction.

Suppose we agree for the moment that there is the possibility of radical deception, and also that reflecting on this possibility may elicit epistemic uneasiness. The suggested analogy to the case of death may still seem completely farfetched. On the diabolical perspective under consideration the idea was that our reaction to facing the fact of our death brings in something ineffable and mysterious. But, it will be said, there is nothing ineffable or mysterious in our reaction to facing the possibility of radical deception. The epistemic uneasiness that we experience is simply a matter of our having doubts, of our feeling that we may actually be deceived. Don't we indeed have a well-known model of this in the case of Hume? Wasn't his "philosophical melancholy and delirium" derived from his doubts? There seems to be nothing ineffable or mysterious about this.

I do not question that Hume experienced the distress he describes. But I do not think that it came from doubt. I think, indeed, that it is not possible for a sane human being to doubt that he is living a human life and is not completely deceived.

Many philosophers have held that skeptical reflections can never lead to genuinely doubting the existence of an external world. At the end of the *Synopsis of the Meditations* Descartes says that the fact "that there is a world, that men have bodies, and other similar things ... have never been doubted by any man of sound mind."<sup>25</sup> I assume that philosophers are in the relevant sense people of sound mind, even during those periods when they philosophize. If Descartes was right, Hume never doubted external reality. G.E. Moore suggests that even great skeptics like Russell "have constantly felt no doubt at all" about the propositions of which they professed skepticism.<sup>26</sup> More recently Peter Strawson says that "whatever arguments may be produced on one side or the other of the question

[about external reality], we simply *cannot help* believing in the existence of body.”<sup>27</sup> And Hume himself seemed to agree with this, at least at times. His somewhat meandering discussion of skepticism towards the end of Book I of the *Treatise* is not always easy to follow, but there are passages where he seems clear that his philosophizing cannot possibly lead him to radical doubt. He says: “[Nature] has sometimes such an influence [in making us believe in an external reality] ... that ‘tis impossible ever to eradicate it, nor will any strained metaphysical conviction .... be sufficient for that purpose.”<sup>28</sup>

I will assume, without pursuing this point further here (though of course it does need further defense), that philosophizing did not lead Hume, and cannot lead anyone, to sincerely doubt external reality.<sup>29</sup> If that is so, what caused Hume’s distress? If philosophical reflection does not lead to doubt, why should it lead to epistemic uneasiness?

Let me say that a “mystical skeptic” is someone who holds the following three things:

- (1) I do not have any doubts whatsoever that there is an external world containing the people and events that matter the most to me.
- (2) Nevertheless, when I reflect on the possibility of radical deception I seem to become aware of something that makes me feel a peculiar form of uneasiness, a peculiar form of disorientation and anxiety.
- (3) I cannot express in plain literal language what it is that I become aware of that makes me feel this uneasiness.

Philosophers since antiquity have said that there is a problem of answering doubts about external reality. If we are mystical skeptics we hold that there is indeed a deep problem that philosophers have been trying to get at, but “doubt” cannot be the right word to describe it. There are no right words to describe it, at least not in literal language. The deepest legacy of philosophical skepticism is a disturbing realization about ourselves and how we relate to the world that is essentially ineffable. I want to concentrate here on (3), assuming that both (1) and (2) are accepted.

If we are mystical skeptics we may try to express non-literally (to whistle) what the ineffable revelation is that skeptical reflection engenders. Here are some examples:

- “Ultimately each of us is alone.”
- “Here I am, a creature of flesh and bone,<sup>30</sup> thrown into<sup>31</sup> the circle of the plain,<sup>32</sup> a fugitive from the uncanniness<sup>33</sup> that comes with the realization that nothing lies between me and radical deception except the bare fact that (as I say) I am not deceived.”

- “All is entirely unintelligible to me.”<sup>34</sup>
- “That shape am I!”, said with respect to my imagined epistemic counterpart who is a brain in a vat.<sup>35</sup>
- “Tell [Godot] you saw us. You did see us, didn’t you?”<sup>36</sup>

These utterances, taken literally, are either false, nonsensical, or platitudinous. As such they cannot explain my epistemic uneasiness. They may nevertheless seem to express in some non-literal manner the distressing revelation engendered by reflecting on the possibility of radical deception. For example, I am fortunately not alone in any obvious sense. Perhaps I can be said platitudinously to be alone in the sense that I have only my own experiences and not anyone else’s experiences, but that platitude cannot be what causes my epistemic uneasiness. Nevertheless, when I reflect on the possibility of radical deception I may find myself wanting to utter, “I am alone”, as if those words somehow convey the revelation that distresses me.

If we are whistling, it may be asked, why not simply whistle some more standard skeptical utterance, such as, “I can’t really be sure that my children exist”? Epistemological reflection may initially tempt us to assert such sentences literally, and when we realize that this is a mistake, that we cannot assert them literally, it seems to invite confusion to immediately turn around and try to employ them non-literally. Nevertheless, mystical skeptics need not object to someone who wishes to do this. Nor need they object to a “contextualist” formulation that implies that in the context of the philosophy room skeptical utterances are to be taken in the spirit of poetry and metaphor.<sup>37</sup>

The mystical skeptic’s insistence that the deepest revelation of epistemology is something that cannot be expressed in literal language is not likely to please many analytic philosophers. As I have already said I am ignoring here those philosophers who claim that epistemological reflection leads them to (literally) doubt the existence of their children. I am also ignoring those healthy-minded philosophers who claim that, since epistemological reflection does not lead them to doubt, it does not generate any epistemic uneasiness in them. (“Healthy-mindedness” is another expression from James’s *Varieties*, the healthy-minded temperament dealing “with the more evil aspects of the universe by systematically declining to lay them to heart or make much of them.”<sup>38</sup>) The question that I am focused on is whether, if we do not doubt but do experience epistemic uneasiness, we can, contrary to what the mystical skeptic claims, explain this in literal language.

A move that I would immediately dismiss as unresponsive to the question is to start talking about “knowledge.” The following is a stance taken by some philosophers: “I believe without any doubt that there is an external reality, but I think that this belief does not (or may not) qualify as knowledge.”<sup>39</sup> I think it is questionable whether one can coherently claim to believe something (without

any doubt) while claiming to (perhaps) not know it, but I will put that aside.<sup>40</sup> Even if the stance is coherent it cannot generate the relevant kind of epistemic uneasiness. The nature of this uneasiness is our puzzle, but its target is clear. The target of the uneasiness is *whether the world exists*. It is not something else, such as *whether I know that the world exists* (or *whether I have reason to believe that the world exists*). The puzzle is that I seem to be in some sense worried about whether the world exists although I have no doubt that the world exists. That my children are real people and not just figments of my experience is something of which I am certain to a degree than which none greater can be conceived. Nevertheless, when I seriously and vividly bring to my mind the metaphysical possibility of radical deception—when I focus on my deluded epistemic replica who exists as a brain-in-a-vat and is as certain as I am that he has children—I experience a peculiar kind of uneasiness. The puzzle is to explain why this is. Insofar as I have no doubt that my children exist, if I could coherently wind up claiming that I do not know that they exist, while retaining my certainty that they exist, I may possibly feel a bit intellectually deflated, or I may perhaps feel lucky and thankful to *have* a truth that I did not earn through knowledge. But none of that can begin to explain why I experience a kind of “melancholy and delirium” that forces me to stop thinking about philosophy.

Suppose someone says: “But that’s just the problem: that I *can’t* doubt. As one travels down the skeptical path one’s final destination must be madness rather than skepticism.” So what is troubling about that? A road that leads to madness ought not to be traveled. “But the problem is that what stops me from doubting is not *reason*, but merely that such doubts would constitute losing my mind.” And what is troubling about *that*? You may have to give up some pretensions about the extent to which your life is controlled by (what you call) reason. So what? “No, the point is that, since it’s not reason that supports my belief in an external reality, maybe the whole thing is just a delusion.” *Maybe the whole thing is just a delusion*. That is the bottom line; that is the only formulation that seems capable of expressing in literal terms the nature of our epistemic uneasiness. But that bottom line is what cannot be reached, since it expresses a doubt that we cannot have. The sentence “Maybe the whole thing is just a delusion” is a peculiar form of nonsense, in that (taken literally) it is a sentence that no one can sincerely assert.

It seems to me that if we keep in clear focus the distinction between “what might possibly have been” and “what may actually be”, and we also keep in clear focus the fact (as I am assuming) that we cannot possibly doubt that we are human beings engaged in human lives, then we must appreciate the force of the mystical skeptic’s claim that our epistemic uneasiness cannot be explained in literal terms.

As regards the connection I am drawing between death and skepticism someone might (mockingly) raise the following question: “So, then, how many

different Nothings are there? Is the Nothing that Pablo confronted when facing death the same Nothing, or a different one than Hume confronted when facing the possibility of radical deception? And what about the Nothing Pascal confronted when he looked up at the heavens?<sup>41</sup> Does that make three, or is it the same one? And let's not forget Mrs. Moore's diabolical vision in the cave.<sup>42</sup> Does that give us a fourth one?" This interlocutor expects principles of individuation to be applicable within poetical-mystical discourse. What can be said, perhaps, is that there is a salient commonality in the utterances typically elicited by any form of diabolical mystical experience. But it scarcely needs saying that many people will find it easy to dismiss the purported revelation of the diabolical experience as merely a concoction of pathological pessimism and grandiosity.

For some minds, however, the diabolical revelation will remain as insistent as the laws of arithmetic. In behalf of those minds Hume has given what is probably the deepest and most honest response to the diabolical vision: carelessness and inattention. This was Hume's famous method for coping with the epistemic uneasiness, the "melancholy and delirium", induced by his epistemological reflections. If we are mystical skeptics we regard this uneasiness as deriving, not from doubt, but from a diabolical vision. Carelessness and inattention may also be the response to the diabolical vision in the face of death, or in any other context. At the end of "The Wall" Pablo is virtually mad. We expect that he will probably recover. He will try to resume some form of ordinary life by ignoring what he seemed to see when he faced death. But he may never be quite the same. Perhaps he can never again be a "serious person." There may be a kind of irony to his step, a sense that he is not quite of this world. His irony would not derive, as does Thomas Nagel's in "The Absurd", from a conflict between two intelligible perspectives, the inner (subjective) perspective and the outer (objective) one. It would derive from a conflict between the intelligible and the unintelligible, between his awareness of the circle of the plain within which he must live his life and his peripheral sense of something incomprehensibly outside the plain that undermines everything in his life.<sup>43</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Nagel, "Death" in *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge University Press, London, 1979).

<sup>2</sup> Epicurus, "Letter to Menoeceus," 31, in W.J. Oates, ed., *The Stoic and Epicurean Philosophers* (New York: The Modern Library, 1940).

<sup>3</sup> Variations of these two positions, which are from my present point of view minor, are found in Walter Kaufman, "Existentialism and Death" in H. Feifel, ed., *The Meaning of Death* (McGraw-Hill, N.Y., 1959), and Bernard Williams, "The Makropulus Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality" in *Problems of the Self* (Cambridge University Press, London, 1973).

<sup>4</sup> William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, Mentor Edition (The New American Library of World Literature, N.Y., 1958), p. 326; originally published 1902.

<sup>5</sup> Op. cit., 323.

<sup>6</sup> Op. cit., p. 316.

<sup>7</sup> Even Davidsonians will agree, I take it, that in this sort of example one can plausibly attempt an approximation in literal terms to what is most saliently conveyed by the metaphor. My rough remarks here about metaphors are intended to remain neutral on the large controversial issues. Donald Davidson, "What Metaphors Mean" in S. Sacks, ed., *On Metaphor* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1979).

<sup>8</sup> Varieties, p. 320.

<sup>9</sup> Jean Paul Sartre, "The Wall" in W. Kaufmann, ed., *Existentialisms from Dostoevsky to Sartre* (Penguin Books, N.Y., 1975).

<sup>10</sup> An extended attempt to elucidate the puzzle, perhaps combining both approaches, is found in Thomas Nagel's, *A View From Nowhere* (Oxford University Press, N.Y., 1986), pp. 223-231. Nagel admits that he cannot explain why non-existence after death seems more puzzling than non-existence before death (p. 228). He does not, however, draw any "mystical" conclusions from this admission (though his use of words like "uncanny," "mysterious", and "eerie" on pp. 212-213 certainly suggest an affinity to the diabolical perspective I am exploring).

<sup>11</sup> In *Mortal Questions*.

<sup>12</sup> Harry Frankfurt, *Reasons of Love* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J., 2004).

<sup>13</sup> James, whom I would judge to have been at times himself one of the greatest diabolical visionaries (see note 35 below), seems almost to indulge this temptation when he introduces the notion of diabolical mysticism in *Varieties*, p. 326. I should add that, while I adapt this notion from James, I make no claim to employ it just as he would.

<sup>14</sup> *Monist Monograph*, number 1, 1979.

<sup>15</sup> At one point Edwards cites Karl Rahner, identified as a distinguished Catholic Heideggerian, who praises Heidegger for showing us how to find the “ineffable secret” in things; *Heidegger and Death*, p. 61, note 4. I’m interested in exploring that perspective on Heidegger.

<sup>16</sup> *Heidegger and Death*, pp. 5-10. Heidegger is quoted as saying that when we face death “all Being-alongside the things with which we concern ourselves, and all Being-with-Others, will fail us,” “all [our] relations to any other Dasein have been undone,” facing death “individualizes Dasein down to itself,” and “wrenches [Dasein] away from the ‘they’”, quoted from *Being and Time*, London, 1962, pp. 308, 294, 308, 307.

<sup>17</sup> *Heidegger and Death*, pp. 46-59. Heidegger is quoted as referring to “the Nothing with which Angst brings us face-to-face,” quoted from *Being and Time*, p. 356. The word “Angst” in Heidegger is sometimes translated “anxiety” and sometimes “dread.” I think it is helpful to retain the capitalized German “Angst” for this allegedly special mental state.

<sup>18</sup> Matters are really more ambiguous than my brief remark in the text may suggest. In the case of my child, or someone else I love, the thought of that person’s death might elicit the mood, but I think this would be probably be derivative of the first-person case, my close identification with the person leading me to see her death from her point of view. There is of course also the fact that anyone’s death might vividly remind me of my own mortality. And, finally, there is the fact, as I will soon suggest, that the “mood”, or something closely akin to it, can in principle be elicited by things other than death. My point in the text is that the mood Edwards is talking about cannot be explained simply in terms of how unbearable something seems.

<sup>19</sup> Let me emphasize again that I'm interested only in trying to salvage something of possible value from some of Heidegger's central pronouncements. The baggage surrounding these pronouncements, most especially Heidegger's remarks about the Nothing's activity of "nihilating", seem to me at present beyond any hope of redemption.

<sup>20</sup> David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Book I, Part IV (p. 269 in L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2d edition [Oxford University Press, Oxford], 1978). A few pages earlier Hume describes his "despair", "melancholy", and feelings of being "affrighted," in "forlorn solitude" and "abandoned". Although some of this seems to be related (bizarrely) to his sense of professional frustration and isolation, I think that the underlying source of his described malaise is his skeptical reflections.

<sup>21</sup> A famous juxtaposition between mysticism and solipsism is in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. Although there is no definite connection between Wittgenstein's position and the idea I'm aiming at, it certainly does not seem difficult to picture Wittgenstein as a diabolical visionary. Bertrand Russell has a few suggestive lines relating mysticism and skepticism in *Mysticism and Logic* (Doubleday, N.Y., 1918), p. 8.

<sup>22</sup> Hilary Putnam, *Reason, Truth, and History* (Cambridge University Press, London, 1981), ch.1.

<sup>23</sup> I think one thing wrong with it is that it ignores Kripke's notion of "picking something out essentially," a notion I discuss in "Kripke's Argument Against Materialism" in G. Bealer and R. C. Koons, eds. *The Waning of Materialism*, forthcoming. Cf. Nagel, *A View from Nowhere*, p. 73.

<sup>24</sup> G. E. Moore, "A Defense of Common Sense", and "Four Forms of Skepticism" in *Philosophical Papers* (George Allen and Unwin, Ltd., N.Y., 1959).

<sup>25</sup> René Descartes, *Meditations On First Philosophy* (Hackett Publishing Co., Indianapolis 1979); originally published in 1641.

<sup>26</sup> "Four Forms of Skepticism," p. 195.

<sup>27</sup> P. F. Strawson, *Skepticism and Naturalism: Some Varieties* (Columbia University Press, N.Y., 1985), p. 11.

<sup>28</sup> *Treatise*, p.214.

<sup>29</sup> This position is defended in my “Is It Possible For Me To Doubt That My Children Exist?” (manuscript)

<sup>30</sup> Miguel D’Unamuno, *The Tragic Sense of Life* (Macmillan, London, 1921), pp. 50-51, in the course of ridiculing Descartes’ “stove excogitated doubts” (unfairly perhaps given what Descartes says in the Synopsis).

<sup>31</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, pp. 219-24.

<sup>32</sup> Thomson Clarke, “The Legacy of Skepticism”, *The Journal of Philosophy* 69: 20 (1972), 654-769.

<sup>33</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, pp. 233-34.

<sup>34</sup> Soren Kierkegaard, *Journal*, May 12, 1839.

<sup>35</sup> The phrase comes from a well-known passage in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* that is a kind of banner narrative for what James calls “sick souls”. (Biographers have said that the narrator was actually James himself as a young man.) “... suddenly there fell upon me without any warning ... a horrible fear of my own existence. Simultaneously there arose in my mind the image of an epileptic patient whom I had seen in the asylum, a black-haired youth with greenish skin, completely idiotic, who used to sit all day on one of the benches ... moving nothing but his black eyes ... This image and my fear entered into a species of combination with each other. *That shape am I*, I felt, potentially. ... After this the universe was changed for me altogether. I awoke morning after morning with a horrible dread ... It was like a revelation ...” I would count this as a diabolical mystical experience, though James does not cite it as such.

<sup>36</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, end of Act I.

<sup>37</sup> As I stated at the outset I rely throughout this paper on our intuitive feel for the distinction between the literal and the non-literal. Imagine someone who says that poems express *literal* substantive truths in the context of the poetry-room. That, I think, is like claiming that such sentences as “I cannot be sure that my children exist” express *literal* substantive truths in the context of the philosophy-room. Obviously there are large issues here that I am not exploring, but can it be agreed that the burden is on someone who makes the latter claim to explain how we are supposed to understand “literal philosophy-room English”? The challenge is to provide an explanation that makes the sentence “I cannot be sure that my children exist” not just literally true in this alleged “context of

utterance”, but (most importantly) makes it substantively true in a way that can explain our epistemic uneasiness.

<sup>38</sup> James, *Varieties*, p. 112.

<sup>39</sup> This seems to be the stance in Barry Stroud, *The Significance of Philosophical Skepticism* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1984). It is also the stance that Moore attributes to Russell in “Four Forms of Skepticism.”

<sup>40</sup> It is questionable because of the arguments in the extensive literature following Timothy Williamson, *Knowledge and its Limits* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2000), 243, in which there is said to be either normative or necessary connections between assertion, belief, knowledge, and certainty.

<sup>41</sup> Pascal said, “The eternal silence of these infinite spaces terrifies me.”

<sup>42</sup> In E.M. Forster’s *A Passage to India* an elderly woman, Mrs. Moore, enters one of the Marabar Caves and hears an echo: “[T]he echo began in some indescribable way to undermine her hold on life. ... [I]t had managed to murmur, ‘Pathos, piety, courage—they exist, but are identical, and so is filth. Everything exists, nothing has value.’ ... What had spoken to her in that scoured-out cavity of granite? ... Something very old and very small. Before time, it was before space also. ... Visions are supposed to entail profundity, but—Wait till you get one, dear reader! The abyss also may be petty ...” (pp. 165 and 231)

<sup>43</sup> For helpful comments my thanks to Beri Marusic, Jerry Samet, and Palle Yourgrau.