

Reply to Adam Balmer

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‘Adam Balmer’ may well be a name to watch as this century’s philosophy unfolds, I am inclined to think, and this gem of a paper adds to my inclination. He does not take the approach of criticising a variety of my claims, but rather devotes his energy to providing one sophisticated argument against the transcendent hypothesis; which is of course absolutely central to the book. If you can do it, as Balmer can, then this is the way to go – if you want to progress a philosophical discussion.

Before I get to that argument, however, there is a point in his exposition which I will comment on, since it sets the scene by revealing Balmer’s train of thought. What he says is that our epistemic limitations as regards transcendent reality – that we cannot say anything positive about it, except that it exists – are what allow me to gain so much metaphysical mileage. To put it more bluntly than he ever would, I am thinking, ‘the objective world cannot explain phenomenon X, so I’ll let transcendent reality do the job – since nobody can say anything about transcendent reality, they can’t prove me wrong’. If that were my tactic, then I would not really be explaining anything; I would be cheating, somewhat. As Balmer puts it,

The epistemic limitation of the transcendent hypothesis is thus precisely what lends its strength to the idea of transcendent reality; this reality may be capable of performing a wide variety of roles for which we struggle in our philosophical theories to find another viable candidate as a result of the fact that our ontology seems not to include the sort of things that can account in any clear way for certain phenomena, such as meaning and consciousness. The trade-off is that by accepting transcendence we open the door to the possibility that life has meaning but we also sacrifice any hope of being able to provide either a positive or negative answer to that question. We simply must accept that we cannot know. (p. 4)

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He then goes on to say that this might well work with the question of the meaning of life, where given that reality is transcendent, we cannot say whether it is meaningless or not. For in this case, it does not matter to my position whether or not that reality is capable of providing the metaphysical basis of meaningful lives. But the situation is different with consciousness, however, because if consciousness is transcendent, then I am committed to the view that transcendent reality can, and in fact does, provide its metaphysical basis.

Now it cannot have escaped Balmer's attention that the first sentence of the first chapter of *Meaningless* is: 'There is no overall point to human life.' And that thereafter, I frequently refer to the 'truth of nihilism'. As such, it is not looking as if I actually did take the cautious, non-committal stance on the meaning of life which he attributes to me. What I think he is really saying, with characteristic drollness, is that I *should* have said that we cannot know whether or not reality is meaningful, given my commitment to the transcendence of reality. So let us explore why I did not say that.

I think we can make claims to knowledge, and consequently state truths without excessive circumspection, in full awareness that we might be wrong. If it turns out that we are wrong, then we did not really know what we thought we knew; and what we took to be truths were not. But nevertheless, unless we think the prospects of our being wrong are worth taking seriously, we have no good reason to hold back on knowledge and committed truth claims; if we exercised a neurotic level of caution, these concepts would lose their role within our lives. I might be dreaming, in which case I do not know I have hands, and, as I said in the book, Heidegger might live on as the world's oldest man. But I know I have hands and that Heidegger is dead; to deny this would be to redefine 'knowledge' as something very rarely attainable, leaving us in need of a new word to do the old job. As such, I do not exercise the caution Balmer recommends, and claim that nihilism is true, while also claiming that life might have a meaning. This is because I think it might have a meaning only in the idle sense that I think Heidegger might be alive. Objective thought persuades me that belief in a meaning of life is widespread, not because of its sensitivity to truth, but because of social and historical factors. And metaphysics persuades me that we have no reason to think our notion of meaningfulness has applicability to transcendent reality; and that incomplete as it is, objective thought provides our best guide to the nature of that reality. As such I recognise the possibility because, as Balmer

says, if reality is transcendent then we know nothing which could rule it out – but I dismiss it as idle. With this in mind, let us now turn to the argument.

The argument is that although I deny that we can have positive knowledge of transcendent reality, my argument for its existence actually commits me to specific negative claims about it, which inadvertently rule out its ability to provide the metaphysical basis for conscious experience. So my manner of arguing for a transcendent reality ultimately leaves that reality just as lacking in resources for solving the problem of consciousness as the objective world is, thereby landing us back at square one; except with the distinct disadvantage of an ontologically extravagant transcendent reality on our hands. Arguments rarely come neater.

The two key negative claims in question are firstly, that the transcendent world cannot be objective, and secondly, that it cannot be experiential. The first must be right if the transcendent world in question provides the final context. If experience, as we conceive it, cannot exist in this objective world, then it cannot exist in any objective world, and so its final ontological destination cannot be an objective transcendent world. No analogue of Trendelenburg's Neglected Alternative exists for the transcendent hypothesis, then.

On the second negative claim, Balmer says,

Since consciousness is always transcendent, the “final context” can never be within consciousness and as such the independent reality that forms the ontological basis of experience cannot be experience itself. (p. 11)

He is right that the final context cannot be *within* consciousness; if it were, then it would not be the final context. Consciousness creates a differential context of existence, according to which experience is found and misconceived at one level (that is how things are *within* consciousness), but independently exists at the higher one. As such, anything found and misconceived by a conscious being will not be the final context of existence. But it does not follow that experience does not exist in the final context. On the contrary, it must do, given that experience is real and reality is transcendent. Experiences are what we find within consciousness. We get the idea of what an experience is, along with the idea that experiences are centred at a particular temporal and spatial location, from objective thought. Since this idea is incoherent (subjective and objective), we cannot suppose that it characterises what experiences are in the final context; and if this context is transcendence, we have no reason to suppose that any of our ideas

are applicable to it anyway. But nevertheless, what we are calling ‘experiences’ must have transcendent existence, given that they exist, that they cannot exist in the objective world, and that consciousness ontologically defers whatever we find within it to a transcendent context.

Balmer says that,

under the transcendent hypothesis, I still have to attempt to make sense of the idea of a centre of experience fitting into a world consisting of things that are not themselves centred. Once again, we seem to have arrived at something that seems like almost a trivial re-wording of the original problem of consciousness and as such we seem to have travelled a great distance with no perceptible gain (pp. 14-5)

But ‘centred’ is only what experiences would have to be if they existed in the objective world; they would have to be centred within a world which has no centres. When we leave behind the misrepresentation by which we think of them as centred, however, then there is no longer any problem of fitting centres into a centreless reality. We have no reason to think of the transcendent reality as containing centred experiences, or of that reality as being either centred or centreless. Think of the radical ignorance that someone who has only dreamed has of the waking world. They have no basis to assert that their experiences must be centred in the waking world, just as they are in the dream. But they know those experiences exist, and they have no other way of thinking of them, when they try to elevate them to what they take to be the ontological level of waking reality, except as ‘experiences’ taking place ‘now’.

To return to our earlier discussion, it is now possible to see why Balmer is mistaken in thinking that the epistemic barrier provided by a commitment to transcendence counts against me in the case of consciousness, in a way which it does not with the meaning of life. He is thinking that I need a positive claim in the case of consciousness, but that I do not with the meaning of life; a positive explanation of the kind physicalists would love to provide, starting with the fundamental reality (physical, in their view) and leading inexorably to something which fits our natural conception of experience. Within their metaphysic, however, there simply cannot be any experience; despite the fact that experience is what their metaphysic is designed to explain, in terms of what it presents to us. I, on the other hand, need no such explanation, because I think our natural conception

of experience derives from objective thought, and hence will be inapplicable to transcendent reality. Similarly, I think our notion of a meaningful life is bound to be inapplicable to transcendent reality. Nevertheless, human life and conscious experience exists. So I claim that life is meaningless and that consciousness is transcendent. I am more reticent about calling the latter a 'truth', because I have to rely on dreams providing a model of how experience works in general; but I think it is true.

In the final count, any explanation of a phenomenon will have to end with, 'that's just what it is'. Dualism provides that kind of answer for consciousness by saying that minds have their own kind of reality; but people were not satisfied because they knew about another kind, the physical, and wondered how the two got on. Physicalism wants to provide a final 'that's what it is' too; but whenever it tries, people keep saying, 'that just can't be what it is'. It should come as no surprise, then, that the transcendent hypothesis ultimately says: 'consciousness is transcendent ... that's just what it is.' If you were expecting an amazing, surprising answer, then that could only come from physicalists, since objective thought is where our detailed understanding resides. But I bet that if Balmer looks back on this passage on his eightieth birthday, he will have never encountered such an answer. Still, the transcendent hypothesis does offer a fairly surprising answer, as befits the question. And it provides new insight into consciousness, with its split-level and misrepresentation theses. It explains where the debate came from; what drives it on; many traditional distinctions and lines of opposition; connects it up with the subject-matter of our discipline and natural sources of interest; ties it in with time and universals. What more did I need to do? At the end of his essay, Balmer refers to 'the mysterious transcendent reality'. But it is *our* reality; the familiar one we know and love. I was just offering a metaphysical interpretation of it.