

Die Zwischenwelt: The World as It Is and as It Is Not

by strannikov

This flash essay constitutes my response in taking up fellow Fictionaut David Ackley's challenge in the Fictionaut Forum to address a composition to the theme "The World as It Is". (Readers therefore cannot blame David for anything that follows.)

I find this a tempting theme not because I am a philosopher, because I am no philosopher. My formal training in philosophy consisted of fifteen undergraduate hours (I skipped the first half of the history of philosophy in the lazy fall semester of my senior year, thus fell three semester hours short of a second minor): and I did not excel in symbolic logic or in philosophy of language, I recall.

Yet I continue to admire Edgar Allan Poe's treatment of speculative physics in "Eureka" (his essay still esteemed for addressing Olbers's Paradox), so an approach to ontology from the perspective of a fiction writer is allowable, even though it may not be welcome among professional philosophers or readers of fiction.

The philosopher whose works I did first examine after undergraduate days turned out to be Nikolai Berdyaev, before I ever got to the fictions of Pushkin, Lermontov, Gogol, Dostoevsky, Leskov, Chekhov, Bely, Zamyatin, Tynyanov, Bulgakov, Kharms, or Platonov (I had read some Solzhenitsyn before getting to Berdyaev). I lived in Fort Worth, Texas, at the time and was frankly astounded to find that the Tarrant County Public Library had one shelf mostly full of Berdyaev's translated works and one biography.

One of the few things I recall picking up from Berdyaev was his consideration of "meonic existence" (apologies to Berdyaev if even here I mis-recall how his translators handled their jobs: I have far fewer Berdyaev titles on my shelf than the Tarrant County Public

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Library possessed). I then had to consult a few dictionaries to track down the term “meonic”, and once I did Berdyaev's arguments began to make a bit more sense (itself a lesson in cause-and-effect).

The term “meonic” comes from Greek, a language I have since discovered often has more than a single word to denote a given concept: e. g., “death” can be “nekros” or “thanatos”, “life” can be “zoe” or “bios”, which offer distinctions to the native speaker and to the apt student of Greek that continue to elude yours truly. “Ontology”, the philosophical consideration of being and states of being, at least in Berdyaev's approach, is thus said to be subject to certain constraints, certain limits, certain deviations, some few of which can emerge distinctly in human actions.

For Berdyaev to've said anything about “meonic existence”, I here am obliged to translate, means to step or to veer into a state of “un-being”, a state of deficient being or defective being or partial being, or pathologic being, sick or diseased being. This state “me on” (see the 1604 A-Text of Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, I.i), I later learned from sources other than Berdyaev, can be distinguished helpfully (courtesy of Greek vocabulary) from “ouk ontos”, which I translate in the more thoroughgoing sense of “non-being”, more like total annihilation and utter non-existence.

These philosophic notions floated in my head for years and eventually helped inspire my pursuit of basic information in contemporary physics, astrophysics, astronomy, and cosmology when I was not reading or writing fiction or verse.

Where might any of this leave “the world”? (The “rules of philosophy” often entail observing or making distinctions among the terms being used, and so: while with “planet” or “Earth” we may signify this planet among the billions of others swirling within our galaxy, “world” itself is the term conventionally encompassing more than or other than simply the physical and chemical constituency of our planet and its resources and perhaps meaning “the global environment of human action and activity” which would include “the world of ideas”, “the world of consciousness”, “the world of imagination”, et cetera.)

The name for the world's ontological state or condition that I finally came across that works for me comes from another language, German this time (another language I cannot speak or read): and don't ask me where I came across it, someone might be able to tell me, but the German term is "die Zwischenwelt", a term I've used in only a few pieces of fiction and verse. "Die Zwischenwelt" means "the in-between world" or "the interim world", and in terms of states of being, unbeing, and non-being, that is about the most accurate assessment I have learned to make concerning both our planet's and our world's ontological states, considering the leads I've taken from ruminative philosophy, from contemporary sciences, and from fiction and imagination.

We live on a planet between existence and non-existence (or, to hear the cosmologists tell the tale, perhaps more accurately our planet occupies only this brief existence between two states of non-being, "ouk on").

We live in a world prone to meonic states of deficient being, defective being, partial being, pathologic being, which while there may be physics underlying these states of un-being are defective or deficient states proper to our worlds of ideas and imaginations, our sciences and our arts, our languages and maths, our mental worlds and worlds of discourse, et cetera.

Cosmologists and astrophysicists today tell us that this universe our planet wobbles in is comprised of a scant and bare five percent (5%) of baryonic matter and the leptons and particles that assist in composing baryonic matter (as illustrated in our periodic table of chemical elements). Until further notice, some twenty-two percent (22%) or so of everything we think we know to exist is said to consist of "dark matter" and the remaining seventy-three percent (73%) or so is said to consist of "dark energy": and about dark matter and dark energy cosmologists and astrophysicists know very little (though about them both they obligingly say much more).

Physics still has much to do, and so this depiction is subject to refinement if not wholesale rejection one fine day. The cosmologists and astrophysicists suggest, however, that the proportions just cited

for baryonic matter compared to dark energy and dark matter are not the proportions the universe has observed since the fabled “Big Bang”. It seems baryonic matter once constituted twelve or fourteen percent of all the mass, matter, and energy the universe is said to be or hold or consist of: the further suggestion is that baryonic matter continues to lose proportional status compared to the realms of dark energy and dark matter (no matter how either one relates to gravity, itself always another force to reckon with) and that one fine day the conditions for baryonic matter will no longer hold, and so all that is us and that is familiar to us will in truth and in fact cease to be, no matter how our realm of baryonic matter performs or behaves in the meanwhile with hypernovas or supernovas, black holes or white dwarves, gravity sinks or cosmic voids, whatever: all galaxies and stars and planets and “stuff” will lose baryonic constituency, bound for parts completely unknown.

Our world and our planet, for as long as any species has lived and for as long as any species manages to live, has been, is, and continues to be until further notice “die Zwischenwelt”, this in-between world, this world between existences or this world existing briefly between non-existences, its frail states of being framed by states of un-being and non-being, just as we individually exist between the non-existence preceding our respective conceptions and the non-existence that will surely accompany and follow us each into death, perhaps regardless of anything that might follow thereafter. (I do not bother with notions of “multiverses” myself, since I doubt severely we'll get far enough ever to catch sight of one.)

TENTATIVE OR PRELIMINARY END (because the foregoing also can suggest that we are constitutionally incapable of distinguishing “the liminal” from “the terminal”)

