

Philosophy and “A Complete Appreciation of The Usual”

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“Whitehall From Charing Cross” (ca. 1899) by Herbert Menzies Marshall (Leithauser, 2021)

His [Trollope's] great, his inestimable merit was a complete appreciation of the usual... [H]e *felt* all daily and immediate things as well as saw them; felt them in a simple, direct, salubrious way, with their sadness, their gladness, their charm, their comicality, all their obvious and measurable meanings. (James, 1883/1894: pp. 100-101)

1. Introduction

Henry James rightly remarked that Anthony Trollope's “great ... [and] inestimable merit” as a novelist was “a complete appreciation of the usual.” By “the usual,” in this context, I mean pervasive, regularly recurring, or universal events, facts, properties, or structures that are necessary and partially constitutive elements of our essentially embodied rational human condition (Hanna, 2015, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c, 2018d; Hanna and

Maiese, 2009) and the manifestly real world in which we live, and move, and have our being—but which, despite their fundamental nature, are rarely recognized as such, and indeed are generally regarded as banal, obvious, trivial, or unimportant. “The usual” is the constant hum and thrum of our actual everyday existence in the manifestly real world. In my opinion, therefore, philosophy should strive to achieve a complete appreciation of “the usual” in this sense. And as cases in point, I’ll focus on three modes of the usual: (i) sleeping and dreaming, (ii) reading, and (iii) weather. Reading and weather are especially much neglected by philosophers.

2. Sleeping and Dreaming

Human sleep is a naturally recurring, essentially embodied mental state involving a distinctive mode of human consciousness noticeably unlike ordinary waking consciousness, closed eyes, relaxed proprioception, more-or-less prone posture, and minimal movement, for the purposes of resting, restoring, and revitalizing the human animal’s mental powers and biophysical systems. All human beings spend roughly third of their lives sleeping. Most ordinary people nowadays sleep for roughly eight continuous hours at a time, once during every twenty-four hour daily cycle. By contrast, however, most ordinary people in the Middle Ages and other pre-industrial societies, naturally engaged in *multiphasic*, *polyphasic*, or *segmented* restfulness or sleep, usually in a *biphasic* pattern consisting of (i) roughly four hours of continuous sleep (which was often called “the first sleep”), (ii) roughly two hours of contemplative, meditative, or otherwise restful wakefulness in the middle of the night, and (iii) another roughly three or four hours of continuous sleep (which was called “the second sleep”) (Ekirch, 2001, 2005, 2016; Yetish et al., 2015). Many have claimed that there are fundamental similarities between sleep and death. But death entails the cessation or destruction of human consciousness, whereas sleep is in fact a distinctive *mode* of human consciousness. Correspondingly, in the mid-17th century, Blaise Pascal correctly asserted that sleep is inherently organic and vital, not mechanical and deathlike:

Sleep, you say, is the image of death; for my part I say that it is the image of life. (Pascal, 1995: p. 333)

Dreaming is a conscious intentional act and process occurring during human sleep, and only during human sleep, that’s principally actively generated by the imagination, but also by the faculties of memory and thinking, initiated spontaneously and freely but not controlled self-consciously, with more or less vivid representational content. The *Oxford Encyclopedic Dictionary* defines “dream” as “a series of pictures or events in the mind of a sleeping person” (Hawkins and Allen, 1991: p. 434), but this makes it seem like the dreaming subject is mainly a passive viewer of visual images, static or

moving, like someone looking at a series of paintings or photographs, or watching television or a movie, instead of being the active imaginative subject of their own dreaming experiences.

Indeed, that dreaming is a product of the active human imagination is also captured by a secondary sense of “dreaming,” as in Martin Luther King Jr’s “I have a dream,” which means “having an ideal, aspiration, or ambition” (Hawkins and Allen, 1991: p. 435). And even people who have been blind from birth also dream. Moreover, dreams in the primary sense are replete with emotional content of all kinds, especially desires and fears, and can be either deeply satisfying and pleasant or deeply dissatisfying and unpleasant, and amusing or terrifying (as in nightmares), and everything in between those extremes. Generally speaking, dreams are a paradigm case of the fact that human conscious experience and intentionality are inherently *creative*. Just as human artists work creatively on and with physical materials presented to them in their outer lives, which they can display to others publicly, so too human dreamers work creatively on and with the conscious and intentional materials of their own inner lives, which they display to themselves privately. Dreams are private works of art.

Necessarily, all dreams occur during sleep, and only during sleep, and are a sub-phenomenon within sleeping experience, unlike hallucinations or other illusions, which occur during waking experience. But even though all dreams occur during sleep, and only during sleep, and although everyone dreams whenever they sleep, during sleep one is not *always* dreaming: as Shakespeare rightly puts it: “to sleep; *perchance* to dream” (Shakespeare, 1641/1963: p. 107, italics added). Similarly, during waking experience, one is not always spontaneously imaginatively creative, hence dreaming is a special and indeed unique mode of human experience. During sleep, the human mind—and more specifically the human imagination—is temporarily liberated from its everyday and workaday concerns and tasks, and becomes spontaneously creative. Dreaming is therefore the spontaneous imaginative creativity of the sleeping human mind.

Sleeping and hence also dreaming remain *conscious* experiences, however, since one can always intelligibly ask oneself or others how they slept, even to some extent independently of dreaming, and thus it’s entirely possible for sleep per se, or sleep + dreaming, to be restful, untroubled, and refreshing, or restless, troubled, and enervating. The common goodnight wish, “sleep well,” is basically interchangeable with “pleasant dreams.”

Machines generally, and digital computers in particular, cannot dream because they are not conscious and they are not creative, and therefore they can never be intelligent in the sense in which we’re intelligent (Hanna, 2024a, 2025: esp. ch. 1).

Correspondingly, we can definitively answer Philip K. Dick's literary or rhetorical question, "do androids dream of electric sheep?" (Dick, 1968) in the negative: no, androids cannot dream of electric sheep, precisely because androids cannot be conscious and thereby have subjective experiences, therefore they cannot have dreaming experiences, and therefore they cannot dream *about* or *of* anything.

Just as, according to Endel Tulving's famous distinction between different fundamental types of memory, memories are either *episodic*, i.e., egocentrically centered and first-personal, expressing an apparent specific subjective point of view, or *semantic*, i.e., allocentric or impersonal, expressing apparent objective facts (Tulving, 1972), so too *dreams* are either episodic or semantic.

Usually, dreaming carries with it a belief in the manifestly real existence of what's being dreamed, although in "lucid" dreams one is also aware that one is dreaming and that what is dreamt is not actually manifestly real. In any case, unlike sense perception and episodic memory, which both have veridical grounding in the actual manifestly real world, as a general rule, what one dreams is *not* actually the case. Nevertheless, it's also common in dreams to mix elements of actual manifest reality with elements of fantasy, so that the whole dream is not the case, although parts of it actually are, or were, the case.

The fact that dreams are generally non-veridical, or at least not wholly veridical, while also usually carrying belief in what's being dreamed, has been exploited by philosophers in general and skeptical epistemologists in particular, to raise doubts about whether at any given time, we're awake or dreaming, and more specifically to raise doubts about the possibility of an infallible criterion for telling the difference between waking and dreaming, and correspondingly raise doubts about the possibility of an infallible criterion for the existence of the actual manifestly real world—for example, and most influentially, Descartes's *Meditations on First Philosophy* (Descartes, 1984-1985d: Meditation 1; see also Hanna, 1992). But if I'm correct that necessarily, all dreams occur during sleep, then there's an obvious infallible criterion for telling the difference between waking and dreaming: when you're awake, then necessarily you're not sleeping, but when you're dreaming, then you must be sleeping. So not-sleeping *versus* sleeping is the infallible criterion of whether you're awake or dreaming. Notice that this is *not* the difference between believing that you're not sleeping and believing that you're sleeping, which are subjective facts; on the contrary, it's the difference between your not being asleep or your being asleep *per se*, which is an objective fact, determinable in actual manifest reality outside subjective facts.

Moreover, sometimes what one dreams is more or less accidentally also true in actual manifest reality. Just because of this fact, it has often been held that some dreams

carry special predictive or prognostic force, as per the claims of seers. But although it's sometimes true that dreams are correct about the future, this isn't always the case. It has also been held that our dreams contain special insights about one's own "real" character or "unconscious" self. But even despite the fact that specific facts about one's own character that are normally repressed during waking experience, are sometimes revealed in dreams, this is not always the case. So the famous Freudian and Jungian claims about dreaming are overstated, or even outright false. Dreams don't always or necessarily tell us *the truth* about ourselves or anything else, but they do always and necessarily tell us *something significant* about ourselves as creative agents.

Moreover, as I've argued elsewhere, it is generally not immoral to think immoral thoughts in dreams, which is what I call *the no-fault dreaming thesis* (Hanna, 2024b: pp. 1-2). Nevertheless, dreaming can have an impact on our moral characters, and as a consequence, an impact on our moral lives:

if one were constantly to experience spontaneous, non-outwardly-expressed immoral thoughts in waking life, this would surely have a morally deleterious effect on one's moral character; similarly, if one were constantly to experience immoral thoughts in dreams, surely one's moral character would also be adversely affected. Thus a relatively large number of spontaneous, non-outwardly-expressed immoral thoughts in either waking life or dreams can be a cause or an indicator of the viciousness of one's moral character, and the relative absence of such thoughts in either waking life or dreams can be a cause or an indicator of the virtuousness of one's moral character. (Hanna, 2024b: p. 2)

In the same way that being asleep and being awake are not strictly on-off or binary, but instead allow for many intermediate degrees of shading between the two extremes—for example, dozing, day-dreaming, spacing out, meditating, and so-on—so too dreaming and not dreaming allow for many intermediate degrees of shading between the two extremes.

3. Reading

For us it is *the circumstances* under which he had such an experience that justify him in saying in such a case that he understands, that he knows how to go on.... This will become clearer if we interpolate the consideration of another word, namely "reading." ... The use of this word in the ordinary circumstances of our life is of course extremely familiar to us. But the part the word plays in our life, therewith the language-game in which we employ it, would be difficult to describe even in rough outline. (Wittgenstein, 1953: p. 61e, §§155-156)

Since it's self-evidently true that you, the reader of this very sentence, are consciously reading this very sentence from left to right here and now, then we can safely assume that you already *know how* to read and also *what* reading is—at least, as the later Wittgenstein rightly puts it in the text quoted as the epigraph of this section, in a way that suffices for “the ordinary circumstances of our life,” even if the fact or phenomenon of reading is *philosophically* “difficult to describe even in rough outline.” But now let's try to describe it philosophically, and I'll begin by isolating a slightly revised version of the first sentence of this section as a target for philosophical reflection:

(*) You, the reader of this very sentence, are consciously reading this very sentence from left to right here and now.

Dear Reader, please now read sentence (*) again, this time (even) more slowly and carefully. Obviously, insofar as you read it, it's true. Moreover, your belief in its truth is sufficiently justified by the intrinsically compelling evidence yielded by the phenomenology—i.e., the conscious, or subjectively experienced, intentional performance, intentional content, and specific qualitative characters—of your act or process of reading it. Sentence (*) cannot read itself, because it's not conscious; and nobody else but you consciously read that very sentence in the same way, at the same time, and in the same place, that you did. On the contrary to both of those, because (*) is in English you consciously read it from left to right, and you also consciously read it right here and now, just as (*). Even if nothing *else* in the world had existed but that sentence and your consciously reading it from left to right here and now; even if you had consciously read that sentence in a *dream*; or even if an evil scientist had somehow produced in you a *hallucination* of your consciously reading that sentence: it would still be true, and your belief in its truth would still be sufficiently justified by the intrinsically compelling evidence yielded by the phenomenology of your conscious act or process of reading it. There are no epistemic gaps between you, the reader of the first sentence of this section, and your consciously reading that very sentence. So you have *skepticism-proof, non-empirical or a priori knowledge* of it (see also Hanna, 2015). Or in Descartes's technical terminology, you have *clear, distinct, and certain intuitive knowledge* of it (Descartes, 1984-1985b, 1984-1985c, 1984-1985d, 1984-1985e).

Let's call any sentence that is (i) specifically about the act or process of *reading*, and that is also (ii) *self-referring* by means of the 2nd-person indexical description “you, the reader,” and the indexical description “this very sentence,” a *caveat lector sentence*. Such sentences are so-named by me after the Latin phrase “caveat lector,” meaning *let the reader beware*; but I'm interpreting that phrase broadly enough so as *also* to include the meaning *let the reader be self-consciously aware*. Since self-consciousness is the consciousness of consciousness, then self-consciousness entails consciousness. Moreover, because of its

explicitly self-referential and self-orienting spatiotemporal properties, I'll call (*) more specifically *a self-locating caveat lector sentence*. Moreover, for the purposes of my argument, it won't matter whether (*) is a universal *sentence-type* or a particular *sentence-token*.

Given the fact that you have skepticism-proof, non-empirical or a priori knowledge of self-locating caveat lector sentences like (*), Dear Reader, then at least twelve other truths also follow self-evidently from it:

1. Therefore, you exist.
2. Therefore, you are conscious.
3. Since you can tell the difference between your left and your right, between now and elsewhen, and also between here and elsewhere, therefore you are an egocentrically-centered, conscious subject locally embedded in orientable spacetime.
4. Therefore, you are also embodied.
5. Therefore, your embodied consciousness exists as locally embedded in orientable spacetime.
6. Therefore, your embodied conscious act or process of reading (*) also exists.
7. Therefore, you also possess a capacity for consciously reading legible sentences like (*).
8. Therefore, legible sentences also exist, both as types and also as tokens of those types instantiated in actual spacetime.
9. Therefore, legible texts exist, both as types and also as tokens of those types instantiated in actual spacetime.
10. Therefore, the manifestly real external spacetime world that contains both types and also tokens of legible texts exists.
11. Therefore not only you, an egocentrically-centered, embodied conscious subject locally embedded in orientable spacetime, possessing the capacity for

reading, exist, but also the manifestly real external spacetime world that contains both types and also tokens of legible texts, exists.

12. Because *I*, R.H., consciously wrote (*), but *you*, Dear Reader, who are *not* R.H., consciously read the first sentence of this section, therefore *at least two* conscious subjects, who are communicating intersubjectively by means of writing and reading, exist in the manifestly real spacetime world that contains both types and tokens of legible texts.

Now I'm going to argue that self-locating caveat lector sentences like (*) are more epistemically fundamental than the classical Cartesian Cogito, and that therefore the philosophy of reading, and not the philosophy of thinking and existence, is truly "first philosophy" in the Cartesian sense.

What is the Cogito? Descartes formulates it in three slightly different ways:

Observing that this truth "I am thinking, therefore I exist" was so firm and sure that all the most extravagant suppositions of the skeptics were incapable of shaking it, I decided that I could accept it without scruple as the first principle of the philosophy I was seeking. (Descartes, 1984-1985c: p. 127, AT VI: 32)

But I have convinced myself that there is absolutely nothing in the world, no sky, no earth, no minds, no bodies. Does it now follow that I too do not exist? No: if I convinced myself of something then I certainly existed. But there is a deceiver of supreme power and cunning who who is deliverately and constantly deceiving me; and let him deceive me as much as he can, he will never bring it about that I am nothing as long as I am something. So after considering everything very thoroughly, I must finally conclude that this proposition, *I am, I exist*, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind. (Descartes, 1984-1985d: pp. 16-17, AT VIII: 25)

For it is a contradiction to suppose that what thinks does not, at the very same time when it is thinking, exist. Accordingly, this piece of knowledge—*I am thinking, therefore I exist*—is the first and most certain of all to occur to anyone who philosophizes in an orderly way. (Descartes, 1984-1985e: p. 195, AT VIIIA: 7)

No matter which formulation we consider, it's essential to notice that the Cogito *itself* is nothing more and nothing less than *a certain legible text* that's embedded *within a larger legible text*—indeed, also a published text—in philosophy, whether the *Discourse on the Method*, the *Meditations on First Philosophy*, or the *Principles of Philosophy*. To be sure, Descartes's three formulations of the Cogito are all *about* thinking and existence, but even so, he's very explicit that the Cogito itself is just "this truth 'I am thinking, therefore I

exist’,” “this proposition, *I am, I exist*,” and “this piece of knowledge—*I am thinking, therefore I exist*” (underlinings added).

Now, in order for Descartes to have *written* the Cogito, he must already have been able to *read* the Cogito—otherwise, he wouldn’t have known what he was writing. Therefore, Descartes must have already possessed *the capacity for reading*, including the capacity for reading *self-locating caveat lector sentences* like (*). But reading the Cogito does *not* epistemically or logically guarantee *either* the existence of the body of the thinking subject *or* the existence of the external world beyond the body of the thinking subject, *or* the existence of many thinking subjects—aka “other minds”—and not only one solipsistic thinking subject, without various other premises and subsidiary reasoning, including an appeal to the existence of a non-deceiving God. All of these Cartesian claims are—famously and/or notoriously—epistemically questionable in various ways (see, e.g., Beyssade, 1992; Loeb, 1992; Markie, 1992). By a diametric contrast, however, reading self-locating caveat lector sentences does indeed epistemically or logically guarantee not only that you, an egocentrically-centered, embodied conscious subject locally embedded in orientable spacetime, possessing the capacity for reading, exist, but also that the manifestly real external spacetime world that contains both types and tokens of legible texts, exists, and *also* that at least two intersubjectively communicating conscious subjects exist in that manifestly real spacetime world—as per entailments 11. and 12. of (*). As a consequence, self-locating caveat lector sentences are *more* epistemically fundamental than the Cogito, and therefore the philosophy of reading, and *not* the philosophy of thinking and existence, is truly *first philosophy* in the Cartesian sense.

4. Weather

What could be more “usual” than weather? Weather is defined as “the state of the atmosphere at any one time, or over a short period of time (a day or week)” (File, 1990), or as “the state of the atmosphere at a place and time as regards heat, cloudiness, dryness, sunshine, wind, and rain etc.” (Hawkins and Allen, 1991: p. 1637). More existentially formulated, however, without weather, we could not physically survive; indeed, our survival is largely the result of an ongoing set of causal negotiations between us and weather. More generally, weather constantly surrounds us whenever we go outside; and in fact, the very idea of “an inside” needed for human life, is the idea of a private, protected space used for sheltering us from bad or uncomfortable weather, while at the same time co-existing with good or comfortable weather.

Weather is importantly and intimately bound up with all our active projects, our movements in space and time, and our travel. In good weather, all these projects,

movements, and travel are enabled and sustained; in bad weather, they're made difficult or frustrating, and even dangerous or deadly.

Relatedly, but more globally, weather is the paradigmatic example of a *large-scale non-organismic organic system*, i.e., a large-scale purposive and self-organizing complex system that, like the rest of the natural universe, inherently “flows, grows, reposes, and repurposes” (Hanna and Paans, 2020: p. 33). Given the existence of weather and its inherent organicity, how could what I call *the mechanistic worldview* even possibly be true (Hanna, 2024c: esp. chs. 2 and 12-16)?

Weather is also importantly and intimately bound up with our emotional states, in that our emotions very often mirror the weather: light and happy on mild sunny days, and dark and sad on cold or excessively hot cloudy days, and so-on. And not infrequently, we regard the weather as *sublime*—blazing sunsets, torrential rain, blinding snowstorms, destructive hurricanes, and the like—and therefore as mirrors of our most powerful passions.

Weather is also importantly and intimately bound with our conversational practices and our sociality. Weather is a topic of constant, universal interest and relevance to us, and no topic is less controversial or more likely to mediate friendly, polite interaction between people. In this sense, politics and weather are at opposite ends of the sociability spectrum. Nevertheless, exploring our common interest in weather, and exploiting the common personal and social relevance of weather, is a communicative bridge and conversational *lingua franca* across differences among rational human animals and their pursuits. Indeed, if all politics could begin and end with weather, and with our respect for weather, as an external expression and symbol of human dignity and our respect for human dignity (Hanna, 2023a, 2023b), then morality and social-institutional life would be infinitely better than it actually is.

5. Conclusion

I conclude, **first**, that the more accurately and fully a philosophical view attends to and captures the nature and specific character of the usual—for example, sleeping and dreaming, reading, and weather—then the more adequate and true that philosophical view is, and **second**, that the less a philosophical view attends to and captures the nature and specific character of the usual, then the less adequate and true it is. Indeed, *knowing ourselves* in the sense urged by Socrates's Delphic oracle, is essentially a matter of coming to learn and navigate the contents, contours, limits, and nature and specific character of of the usual, to the greatest possible extent.

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