



Research Article

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Supernormalising Nothing from the Hyperbolic Nihil to the Ordinary Supernothing

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Abstract: This essay connects the mystical concept of “supernothing” with Bergson’s notion of the image of nothingness as a movement in the making. I do this also with respect to the film *The Empty Man* (David Prior, 2020) – which explicitly cites Gorgias’s four-part embargo on nothing (it exists, it cannot be known, communicated, or understood): nothingness is re-rendered as movement, in particular, the transmission and reception of images in the brain. Indeed, this is precisely Bergson’s theory of the brain too – as the receiver and transmitter of images, a communication of movements. This “nihilistic” approach to the brain (it does not store images, it has no positive content) is not a valorisation of the ego as void à la Metzinger, but the real, processual rethinking of what nothingness and nihilism might mean – with a full, moving “supernothing” at its heart. Though there is a mystical and a film-philosophical account referenced in this renewal of nothingness, it will not lead to any exotic or hyperbolic excess (the brain as supernatural agent), but rather a very “ordinary” account that we will describe in terms of “supernormalisation”: an “unlearning” or mundanising of the supernatural: an extraction of the supernatural by natural means.

Keywords: supernormal, hyperbolic, mysticism, *The Empty Man*, Bergson, Nietzsche

Philosophers have paid little attention to the idea of the nought. And yet it is often the hidden spring, the invisible mover of philosophical thinking.¹

1 Prologue

About 30 years ago, in 1992, I had just commenced my academic career teaching a few seminars in “Recent Continental Philosophy,” at the University of Warwick in England. Classes were held in a small tutorial room with about 8–10 students, and most weeks things progressed well enough. One particular week, however, went very differently from all the others. The tutorial was on Nietzsche’s philosophy, and for that week only we were joined by an extra tutee who seemed to take great joy in contradicting anything anyone else said about Nietzsche, especially with regards to his supposedly *nihilist* thinking.

¹ Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 299.

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I can still picture him now: about 20 years old, white, dark haired, around 6 ft tall, and seated in permanent slouch in his chair.

This student's point, his only point in fact, was that, no matter how dark, how nihilistic anyone else understood Nietzsche to be, his thought was even darker than that. That was the message. The student never said what this ultimate nihilism was or involved, only that his thought was more nihilistic than we (philosophical hacks) ever imagined. Obviously, the humanist–existentialist Nietzsche of Walter Kaufmann was dismissed outright as falling well short of the true nihilism. Likewise, the (then) more contemporary Derridean take on Nietzsche as a nihilist of meaning was no less belittled, as was the even more recent affirmative nihilism of Keith Ansell Pearson's reading (and behind that the active forces of Deleuze's Nietzsche). Similarly, taking Nietzsche as an epistemological nihilist, or moral nihilist, or even metaphysical nihilist was never enough. There was always *more* nihilism, a deeper negativity over the horizon, that the rest of us could not grasp.

You can probably tell that I didn't particularly like this student, but more importantly, the prospect of holding the next tutorial with him in attendance filled me with dread. However, he did not return to class and I never saw him again on campus, or anywhere else. He just disappeared. All the same, I have never forgotten that unknown tutee – and have thought of him, on and off, ever since. So, I am happy to dedicate this essay to him in a gesture of reconciliation and possible understanding. If he is still alive.

2 Something or Nothing

It is not uncommon to contrast two traditions of thinking about nothing(ness), one realist, the other anti-realist. One renders nothingness seemingly subjective and therefore unreal, while another thinks of it as real, rational, and therefore ontological (in a manner at least transcending subject and object). Hegel (or rather Alexandre Kojève's Hegel) is the modern representative of the latter school, with roots in mysticism, mathematicism, and Platonism, and contemporary avatars in Jacques Lacan and Alain Badiou. Henri Bergson's critique of nothingness – from *Creative Evolution* (1907) – might indicate that we should place him in the former camp, especially given that the image of nothing is rendered there as a product of consciousness. Nothingness emerges with a psychological act of negation, the negating activity of consciousness (as Jean-Paul Sartre would later put it), becoming an inherently productive *desire* (as Gilles Deleuze redubbed the concept). And yet, in Bergson's metaphysics, the psychological *is* ontological, when both are understood as forms of movement in the making. Neither being nor nothingness are *substantive* – both are processual, forms of making, or images (of) movement. Such a re-imagination (in every sense) of the image of nothingness as a real process of manufacture has implications for nihilism too. It also impacts the mystical idea of a “super-nothing,” which is equally understood as something real and made. This essay will connect the mystics' supernothing with Bergson's notion of the image of nothingness as a movement in the making, a full productivity or more-making. At the same time, it will invoke the pre-Socratic philosopher *Gorgias* (483–375 BCE) and his four-part embargo on nothing (it exists, it cannot be known, communicated, or understood) as a means to think of the nought as multi-layered (in a manner my old tutee might have endorsed).

I specifically bring up Gorgias with respect to a recent film, *The Empty Man* (David Prior, 2020), which not only offers a very interesting *image* of nothingness, but which also explicitly cites Gorgias' nihilistic approach to thinking and communication. Nothingness, lack, the void, or emptiness is rendered here as movement in a thoroughly Bergsonian manner, in particular, the transmission and reception of messages through the brain. Indeed, this is precisely Bergson's own theory of the brain as well – as a receiver and transmitter, as a communication of movements. As we will see, this “nihilistic” approach to the brain (it does not store images, it has no positive content, it is empty *qua* substance) is not to think of the brain as a static void. That would only be the inverse image (or photographic negative, so to speak) of a thing, equally static and so substantial. Rather, it is the real, processual rethinking of what nothingness and nihilism might mean – with full, moving “supernothings” at its heart. This supernothing is not empty, but full, full of the “*more-making*” that comes with process thought.

Finally, though mystical and film-philosophical accounts are referenced in this renewal of nothingness, we aim to avoid any exotic or hyperbolic excess (the brain as supernatural agent) in favour of a very ordinary account that we will describe in terms of “*supernormalisation*”: a mundanising of the supernatural, that is, an extraction of the supernatural by natural means.

3 On Non-Existence and *The Empty Man*

On one reading, Gorgias’ (lost) work: *On Nature or the Non-Existent* offers a theory that refutes and parodies Parmenides’ thesis of Being as Unchanging or Timeless. We only have paraphrases of this text, which boil down to the following fourfold scepticism:

1. Nothing exists;
2. Even if something exists, nothing can be known about it;
3. Even if something can be known about it, knowledge about it cannot be communicated to others;
4. Even if it can be communicated, it cannot be understood.

There is here, perhaps, an echo of my former student’s message, one constantly upping the ante as regards the negative and our negative incapacities towards it.

In respect to the first tenet, “nothing exists,” we, of course, might parse it as “there is no-thing,” which is also to say that there *is* process or becoming. Foreshadowing Bergson’s own claims about nihil, we can say that *at least* (the very least) we still have an *image* of nothing: our question here, then, is whether this image could be seen in, or *as*, a film-image too.

The Empty Man is a supernatural horror film concerning a cult (the “Pontifex Institute”) that has grown up around a seemingly comatose man named Paul.² His backstory (which we learn in the film’s prelude, set in Bhutan in 1995) involves an encounter with a somewhat demonic-looking alien-like entity that transmitted a strange sound to him. Receiving this transmission left him seemingly passive, inert, and lifeless from then to the present day, and yet he is protected and kept alive in a hospital by the cult members who revere him. They do so in order to receive the message that he, in his turn, is now transmitting (though its contents are never revealed). As members of Pontifex incant by his hospital bedside: “You transmit. We receive. You transmit. We receive.”³

The film also has a current-day subplot involving suicides amongst local youth that eventually brings the story’s main protagonist, former police detective James Lasombra, to the fore. He has been asked to investigate the disappearance of a girl, Amanda, in connection with these suicides. At the end of the film, Amanda is exposed as a leading member of the Pontifex cult, but in his investigations into her whereabouts leading up to that revelation, Lasombra has various other peculiar and chilling encounters that he finds almost impossible to comprehend. For the viewing audience, however, these events gradually reveal the truth that James Lasombra himself is not what he seems to be, nor even understands himself to be. He is a living *tulpa*: a thought-form or imaginary existence made real by the sheer will of others. Lasombra is the film’s eponymous “empty man” (truly, a man with no qualities or rather, no substantial properties), who has been conjured by the members of Pontifex through ritual incantation and something approximating a performative imaginary. Lasombra thinks of himself as a fully-rounded, adult human being with his own life and background (as a husband and a father, as an adulterer, an ex-policeman, an individual with a life filled with memories). Yet, as the film reaches its denouement, he slowly realises that this life has all been

² My thanks to James Dallavalle Mullarkey for bringing this film to my notice. In its engagement with *The Empty Man*, I am afraid that this essay is guilty of one of my own pet-hates concerning film-philosophy: the prioritisation of plot and narrative over non-textual cinematic elements. I hope to rectify this imbalance in future research, for there is much in the film’s broader aesthetics that speak to the themes set out here.

³ It is notable that “Pontifex,” the Latin for “pontiff,” literally means to make a bridge: presumably, Paul’s communications build a bridge between his followers and some other reality.

an invention. His memories are false memories that are no less invented than he is – a creation that has been invoked for a particular purpose: to replace the dying Paul as the receiver and transmitter of the alien message.

At the end of the story, Lasombra shoots the comatose Paul in the head and so destroys one means of transmission, but in doing so also assumes the new role of transmitter for the cult who will now protect and support him (even as they nonetheless created him, out of nothing). By shooting the messenger, he becomes the new messenger. It is this creativity of or from nothing, *ex nihilo*, that informs the film's sustained engagement with nihilism. This becomes clear when, in one part of his investigation, Lasombra enters a room at the Pontifex Institute where he witnesses cult members listening to a repeated citation of Gorgias' four principles:

Nothing exists.

Even if something exists, nothing can be known about it.

Even if something can be known about it, knowledge about it can't be communicated to others.

Even if it can be communicated, it cannot be understood.

It is also noteworthy that we never hear the content of this all-important “alien” message – as if all that matters is form: its carriage, transmission, and receipt. There is only a *communication*, but one that needs no understanding, one *that contains nothing to be understood*.⁴ As Amanda reveals to Lasombra towards the film's finale, the dying Paul is merely a conduit (as Lasombra too will soon become, or perhaps always has been):

I like to think of him as a carrier.

Because he's like a disease, in a way.

But he's also like a carrier signal, you know?

Modulated by an input signal.

He transmits, we receive.

And his message is contagious.

For Amanda, Paul is not a demon or malign alien, but a kind of angel, a messenger, a transmitter, whose seemingly comatose brain has rendered him a “carrier,” the support for a cult, a contagious “movement” (in every sense of the term).

4 Bergson and the Image of Nothing

Significantly, in Bergson's work on the human brain in *Matter and Memory* (1896), the opinion is offered that “the brain is no more than a kind of central telephonic exchange: its office is to allow communication or to delay it.”⁵ Such would be the carrier model, the brain having no content because *storage* in the brain is impossible, be it the storage of images, memories, or representations. The brain is a communication device, it conducts movement or process.

However, it is Bergson's renowned critique of the idea of nothingness that we need to examine here first. This appears in the final chapter of *Creative Evolution* from 1907 (though it appeared earlier in the journal *Revue philosophique* in November 1906). The motivations behind it go back to Bergson's reading of

⁴ However, going by the sinister elements of the plot, one conjecture might be that its content is simply the instruction to self-annihilate – “kill yourself.” This facet of the story sustains the horror element of the film (young people committing suicide), even though, on its release, it only encouraged critics of the film to make uncomplimentary comparisons with films using similar plot devices such as *Slender Man* (2018) and *The Bye Bye Man* (2017). Nevertheless, read in the light of *The Empty Man*'s deep-nihilism, that message could be read more “positively” as an exhortation to complete annihilation understood as a return to nothingness: Platonist metaphysics as horror.

⁵ Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, 30.

Ancient philosophy. Coming from his own process perspective, he explains how change was then disregarded as a secondary phenomenon that emerges through the addition of nothingness to what is essentially an immutable reality: “in that consists the Platonic ‘non-being,’ the Aristotelian ‘matter’ – a metaphysical zero which, joined to the Idea, like the arithmetical zero to unity, multiplies it in space and time.”⁶ This is why time, *qua* becoming, is secondary for most Classical philosophy. Change or creation emerges as a mere multiplication or repetition “*ex nihilo*.” Being + nothingness = Becoming. Yet, creation *ex nihilo* is precisely the image of creation Bergson will resist in favour of creation *de novo* – process being taken as primary rather than secondary. Moreover, we will see that it is becoming, understood as affective, creative (novel) movement, that creates the *images* of both static being *and* nothingness, for Bergson.

Playing devil’s advocate for the other side, Bergson offers a psycho-genealogy of this image of nothing as follows:

Existence appears to me like a conquest over nought. I say to myself that there might be, that indeed there ought to be, nothing, and I then wonder that there is something. Or I represent all reality extended on nothing as on a carpet: at first was nothing, and being has come by superaddition to it. Or, yet again, if something has always existed, nothing must always have served as its substratum or receptacle, and is therefore eternally prior. A glass may have always been full, but the liquid it contains nevertheless fills a void. In the same way, being may have always been there, but the nought which is filled, and, as it were, stopped up by it, pre-exists for it none the less, if not in fact at least in right. In short, I cannot get rid of the idea that the full is an embroidery on the canvas of the void, that being is superimposed on nothing, and that in the idea of ‘nothing’ there is less than in that of ‘something’.⁷

For Bergson, on the contrary, it is the opposite that holds: there is more in nothing than in something. What is this “more”? At the heart of negation itself there is something else again: the emotions of desire and regret. The startling notion that there might have been or could be nothing rather than something pertains to no more than “what we are seeking, we desire, expect.” In that regard, the “ontological question” is a pseudo-problem formed by a special kind of being:

A being unendowed with memory or prevision would not use the words ‘void’ or ‘nought’; he would express only what is and what is perceived; now, what is, and what is perceived, is the presence of one thing or of another, never the absence of anything. There is absence only for a being capable of remembering and expecting. He remembered an object, and perhaps expected to encounter it again; he finds another, and he expresses the disappointment of his expectation (an expectation sprung from recollection) by saying that he no longer finds anything, that he encounters ‘nothing’.⁸

As a corollary of this, therefore, there will be beings who are endowed with “memory or prevision,” whose “action proceeds thus from ‘nothing’ to ‘something,’ and whose very essence is to embroider ‘something’ on the canvas of ‘nothing’.”⁹ The “more,” consequently, is affect. Indeed, it is us. Our desires lag behind reality and are only interested in what might have been: “our life is thus spent in filling voids, which our intellect conceives under the influence, by no means intellectual, of desire and of regret, under the pressure of vital necessities.”¹⁰ What should be an acceptance of what is becomes instead a desire that this reality be something else: “suppression thus means substitution.”

Hence, also, the repressed significance of the negative for philosophy as such, and the epigraph with which this essay began: “philosophers have paid little attention to the idea of the nought. And yet it is often the hidden spring, the invisible mover of philosophical thinking.”¹¹ Nonetheless, metaphysics falls into absurdity – and an array of subsequent pseudo-problems – when it attempts to universalise nothingness as the idea that there *might not have been anything at all*. If negation is substitution, then a negation of everything would be an absolute substitution, but for what? There is nothing left to substitute for being.

⁶ Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 334.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 300.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 306.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 323.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 299.

5 On Supernothing and Mysticism

The Empty Man's plot device of the *tulpa* – the creation of a quasi-living image *ex nihilo* – is something that we can now put back in its proper context – that of mysticism. Certainly, the tulpa as an imaginary invention of nothing, or from nothing (or what is called a “super-nothing”), has long been crucial to mystical practices. From Annie Besant’s notion of “thought-forms” in *Theosophy* to the “thought pictures” and *tattwas* of hermetic societies like *The Golden Dawn*, the reality of the image and “imaginary” creativity is paramount for many rituals performed by occultists. To look at this more deeply, however, I need to shift gears here to examine the imagery connected with nothingness, and also at a notion of “appearances” that are not opposed to reality. Nevertheless, looking at certain mystical ideas belonging to occult societies should not be mistaken for a spiritual or theological “turn” in the transcendent sense: the spiritual here is entirely immanent. As Vladimir Jankélévitch writes in his essay on “Bergson and Judaism,” the “pluralist immanentism of *Matter and Memory* and *Creative Evolution* doesn’t lend itself well to the idea of a monotheistic transcendence.” Indeed, it is difficult to see how a doctrine that is, as Jankélévitch says, “temporalist, continuationist, immanentist, and on top of all that pluralist [could] have anything in common with Hebrew monotheism.”¹² All the same, Jankélévitch will also add the following:

over the absolute nothingness, Bergson would no doubt have preferred the mystical nothingness of the Kabbalah and Dionysius the Areopagite, because that nothingness is richness and plenitude, inexhaustible infinity (*En-Soph*) or, as Angelus Silesius says, “Super-Nothing”; that nothingness is not the void where the spectacular magic of creation is wrought in a coup de théâtre, but rather like the dynamic schema that is the germ of poetic improvisation: it is the unfathomable abyss and fertile night referred to in negative theology.¹³

It is fascinating to see Jankélévitch refer to this Kabbalist notion of *En-Soph* and its emanations here. Indeed, if there is a perpetual theme of the Kabbalah, it is its understanding of the world as emanations *within* the divine, and the idea that knowledge of this process of emanation only comes through learned techniques designed to retrace the path of this emanation, by returning to the original infinite. And some of these techniques comprise the occult practices that can create tulpas, or thought images, as if from an absolute, empty nothing.

In fact, within hermetic and esoteric practices of the Kabbalah, the power of the image, and the making of images through special use of the imagination, gains even more power, taking the image well beyond any unreal representation (be it founded on lack, or even the foundation of lack through desire). For practitioners within Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn from the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, for instance, imagination was not a faculty of the non-existent – it has its own reality. As Tanya Luhrmann writes, the doctrine of the Golden Dawn explicitly stated that “imagination was a reality and that it could affect the material world. The different ‘plane’ that these magical writers present is not defined by different rules – that conception emerges somewhat later – but is rather composed of different materials, one apparently unsubstantial, the other substantive, but both ultimately interdependent.” Indeed, one of the Golden Dawn’s teaching texts (“Some Thoughts on the Imagination”), resolutely states the following:

The uninitiated interpret Imagination as something ‘imaginary,’ in the popular sense of the word; i.e. something unreal. But imagination is a reality. When a man imagines he actually creates a form on the Astral or even on some higher plane; and this form is as real and objective to intelligent beings on that plane, as our earthly surroundings are to us.¹⁴

Here is an imaginative creativity, yet not one stemming from an empty *nihilo*, from a pure nothing, but from a full supernothing. Luhrmann helpfully expands on this claim by explaining how these practitioners “use a term like ‘plane’ to confer a separate but equal status upon this imaginative world. They also speak of the ‘inner plane’ and shorten the phrase to ‘the inner.’ ‘Inner’ is a disingenuous term. It does not mean ‘merely’

¹² Jankélévitch, *Bergson*, 228.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 227.

¹⁴ Resurgam, “Some Thoughts on the Imagination,” 47.

imaginative or emotional or internal.”¹⁵ Hence, the “visualisation” of abstract shapes like a hexagram, say, is a crucial initial phase of occult practices such as astral projection. The inner, the imaginative, is *both* *fabulated and real*.

This realism of the imaginary is one of the ways, according to Alison Butler, that the Golden Dawn revolutionised the Victorian practice of magic: it introduced the “dominance of the imagination and the will in the magical process.” Moreover, the magic rituals were now controlled, not only by “the magician’s will and imagination,” but were also directed without intermediary.¹⁶ Imagination, then, or “the faculty of building an image” as Golden Dawn member Moina Mathers puts it, is a creative tool that the occult practitioner uses with trained skill in order to communicate with other realities.

6 The Other Bergson

In her esoteric writings, Mathers describes how Tattwa cards – richly coloured cards with diagrammatic symbols – are crucial to the process of image construction. One card, the “Akas of Apas,” for example, reveals the “spirit of water”: the image for “Akas” is a black or indigo egg, and for “Apas” a silver crescent. This card offers an image that is no mere picture, however – it is an implement to generate a new reality. As Joscelyn Godwin explains in “Esoteric Theories of Color,” the use of flashing colours such as on Tattwa cards employed

a physiological phenomenon, in which the eye projects a color that is not there, to create an imaginal situation. The purpose is to enter a realm where vision operates without a physical substratum. Such things happen in dream and drug experiences, but the object of the Golden Dawn’s, as of most initiatic training, was to enter such states voluntarily and to control them.¹⁷

In the short text “Of Skrying,” Mathers herself writes as follows about the methods used in such training:

in both skrying and astral projection, then, the key to success would appear to be, alternately, to employ intuition and reason, firstly by permitting each thought-picture to impress itself on the brain in the manner comprehended generally by the word ‘inspiration,’ followed by the reason applying its knowledge...to an affirmation or correction of the same.¹⁸

Whereas astral projection – a form of self-hypnosis invoked by concentrating on a symbol – can begin with figurative images, scrying, as a kind of clairvoyance, more often than not begins with real reflective surfaces. Hence, the Tattwa card acts as a kind of mirror, allowing the practitioner first to perceive

some scene in the universe reflected in the symbol which you hold, this latter being to you as a mirror which shall reflect to you some scenes not within your range of sight. And secondly, you can continue the operation by using the same symbol, and by passing through it project yourself to the scene in question, which before you had only perceived as a reflection.¹⁹

What she calls “thought forms” are not only visual, though, but involve complete “experiences,” that is, “things heard, things felt, as well as things seen, which would prove that the qualities that we are here using are really the sublimated senses.”²⁰

In esoteric practices like Mathers’, then, the image is not “imaginary.” That all said, while such occult thinking on the image is informative, one might nonetheless still wonder why we are spending so much time on these specific theories of the image and the Golden Dawn’s in particular. There are two reasons:

¹⁵ Luhrmann, *Persuasions of the Witch’s Craft*.

¹⁶ Butler, *Victorian Occultism and the Making of Modern Magic*, 155, 157.

¹⁷ Godwin, “Esoteric Theories of Color,” 467.

¹⁸ Bergson, “Of Skrying.”

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

first, because, with their notion of thought forms – a concept partly shared with Theosophy – we have the rough outline of an immanent theory of image-creation that dismantles the subject–object binary, and with that offers the possibility of an object that is a subject, a living image, or *tulpa*, in other words. The second reason (queue drumroll) is that the aforementioned Moina Mathers’ other name was Mina Bergson, Henri Bergson’s younger but (in her own time) no less celebrated sister.

A renowned mystic and performer in her own right, the parallels between her theories of the image, the astral plane, the matter–spirit relationship, and even scrying, and those of her brother Henri – concerning the virtual, matter-memory, and pure perception – are striking.²¹ And it is with the image as immanent creation, not one formed *ex nihilo* from a transcendent, pure nothing, but through the artistic imagination’s engagement with a supernothing, that the correspondences are most interesting. As Mathers/Bergson says:

imagination (*eidolon*) means the faculty of building an image. The imagination of the artist must lie in the power, which he possesses more or less in proportion to his sincerity, and his intuition, of perceiving forces in the macrocosm, and allying or attuning himself thereto, his talents naturally and his artificial training permitting him to formulate images which shall express those forces.²²

Imagination is not merely the (fanciful) representation of reality, but an immanent part of the Real, a microcosm that more or less instantiates the macrocosm.

Significantly, the strangest text of Mathers’ brother, *Matter and Memory* from 1896, also begins with images in its first chapter, with an ontology of images that reflect and refract each other. And, likewise, these were not fanciful representations either. (Henri) Bergson’s position was that his seemingly vague (and ornate) imagery was the clearest way to depict *durée*, the moving real. In an interview with Lydie Adophe, he responded curtly to the suggestion that his ideas were sometimes metaphorical: “I rarely make metaphors, interrupted Bergson sharply. These are images.” Indeed, when it comes to the so-called “spiritual world,” for (Henri) Bergson it is the suggestive power of the image that may allow us a “direct vision.” Moreover, the relationship of the image to the Real is not one of representation, but that of immanent participation: it is a mereological relation of part to whole, microcosm to macrocosm, one of degrees:

Between this perception of matter and matter itself there is but a difference of degree and not of kind... the relation of the part to the whole ... My consciousness of matter is no longer either subjective... or relative... It is not subjective, for it is in things rather than in me. It is not relative, because the relation between ‘phenomenon’ and the ‘thing’ is *not that of appearance to reality*, but merely that of the *part to the whole*.²³

The material world does not stand apart from my consciousness, but nor is it in my consciousness as any kind of correlate like an idea: rather, consciousness (“of” matter) can be understood as really *in* matter (immanence), only not as a reduction of mind but through the supernormalisation of matter.

7 Supernormalising Nothing

Elsewhere, I have written about this strategy of supernormalisation that provides an exit from the stark duality of natural and supernatural, matter and spirit, or the normal and the paranormal.²⁴ It offers a paradigm that thinks only in terms of immanent differences of *degree* rather than of *kind*. The category of the supernatural, as found in the arts, culture, philosophy, or even science (“spooky physics”), is re-rendered as *structural*: a projected inconsistency or hyperbolic state of the “natural”; a “place-holder” for any “outside” whatever; or a liminal position that must be occupied by some thing or property. For

²¹ See Ó Maoilearca, *Vestiges of a Philosophy*, for an extended engagement with these parallels.

²² Bergson, “Of Scrying.”

²³ Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, 17, 230. These part-whole relations are not spatial but temporal such that, in Bergsonian hands, mereology is best understood only when temporalised – see Ó Maoilearca, *Vestiges of a Philosophy*.

²⁴ See Ó Maoilearca, “The Defragmenting Image;” and Ó Maoilearca, *Vestiges of a Philosophy*.

instance, (Henri) Bergson held to an ultra-strong realism towards the past, arguing in *Matter and Memory* that the past persists as real, immanent *in* the present and not merely as an outside, transcendent representation of the past. In the same text, he describes how, “when a memory reappears in consciousness, it produces on us the effect of a ghost,” or a “mysterious apparition.”²⁵ The past *as spectre as memory*. Yet this paranormality can be brought down to earth without reduction or elimination through a double manoeuvre: first, there is the seeming naturalistic reduction – the spectre seen as merely a memory (deflation) – but then there is a second refraction whereby this ghost memory itself is inflated as a *real* part of the past. The reduction of the reduction. The part (memory) is not an unreal representation of the past, but an actual fragment of the past surviving in what looks like a hyperbolic state, as an *apparent* exception or inconsistency. The past as “merely” *my* memory, becomes my memory as *the* surviving past (in part). Hence, this *partiality* (and subjectivity with it) is a difference of degree only, not a substantial one of kind.

My usage of “supernormal” has a lot in common with that of the late nineteenth-century writer, Frederic W.H. Myers, who rejected the word “supernatural” altogether as meaningless. He coined this term “supernormal” instead, to apply to phenomena that are merely beyond what usually happens, basing it on an analogy with the term “abnormal.” One study of Myers has described his lifework as an attempt to develop a series that linked the “unknown to the already known,” and so went from “normal to abnormal to supernormal psychological phenomena.”²⁶ As he himself wrote in 1885, “when we speak of an abnormal phenomenon we do not mean one which contravenes natural laws, but one which exhibits them in an unusual or inexplicable form.”²⁷ The supernormal is the abnormal normal, so to speak – and both exist on a “continuum” or “spectrum.”

Where I differ with Myers is as follows: he would think of telepathy or clairvoyance, say, as liminal versions of standard mental representation, that is, as mental states lying along the same spectrum as our normal psychical life, only far from where we ordinarily operate. Alternatively, I simply take the corollary to heart: that there is something *always already* “telepathic,” say, in our ordinary, normal ability to “read minds” (such that, to those who “suffer” so-called “mind-blindness,” even having a neurotypical “theory of mind” is a mystery).²⁸ Similarly, self-representation could be seen as a kind of out-of-body, or astral, experience, with so-called “astral projection” simply being the hyperbolic form of representation (“*hyperbole*” originally meaning “a throwing beyond” – from the Greek, *hyperballein*, “to throw above or beyond”). These states all exist on a *continuum*, as Myers puts it, but for me it is a *heterogeneous* continuity. Whereas Myers focuses on the unseen part of the “spectrum” in order to anchor its liminal status in the normal (going from mundane to extra-mundane), I, instead, would enfold the extra-mundane into the ordinary without qualitatively altering the latter – everyday mental events are always already varied enough or sufficiently heterogeneous (if only we paid closer attention to them).²⁹

In this way, we can think of supernormalisation as pure immanentism: there is a heterogeneous continuity such that the supernormal is always already the so-called normal or ordinary: the ghost is always already a memory. *In that manner one can say that supernormalisation belongs to a post-continental orientation, or at least a post-transcendental shift that re-orientates the hyperbolic – be it in nihilistic or positivistic form – and enfolds it within the ordinary.* In other words, it was Kansas all along, Dorothy.

²⁵ Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, 145.

²⁶ Kelly et al., *Irreducible Mind*, 72.

²⁷ Cited in *ibid.*, 71.

²⁸ A passage of dialogue from the biopic of the animal scientist Temple Grandin, who is not neurotypical, runs as follows: Temple: “[People] keep on giving each other looks and I don’t know what they mean.”

Eustacia (Temple’s mother): “People tell each other things with their eyes.”

Temple: “I will never learn how to do that” (*Temple Grandin*, Dir. Mick Jackson, 2010).

What appears mysterious, or even magical, clearly lies in the neural connections of the beholder.

²⁹ Delivering a phenomenon from the category of the supernatural, understood as a projected hyperbolic discontinuity, into the supernormal, understood as many *different* or heterogeneous continuities, is also bound up with a conversion from only seeing a phenomenon associatively (going from the parts to the whole) to seeing it *dissociatively* (running from wholes to parts). At heart, then, these are two different orientations in mereology when it is understood as a process.

Such “Kansas metaphysics” is immanentist and pluralist in the post-continental manner, and always concerns levels, degrees, or planes. And so also the supernothing, for example, is not transcendent, an absolute nihil or empty void. It is simply an image, at another level or plane, out of which particular nothings are immanently created and hyperbolically projected as new absolutes.

8 Epilogue

Let me finish by offering a little more detail as regards these levels, degrees, or planes. For (Henri) Bergson, pseudo-problems emerge through the phenomena of *interference* – an interference of different types. For instance, Bergson’s re-rendering of the problem of disorder is as an image produced through the *interference* between different types of orders – vital and geometric. Likewise, nothing, as we heard, is an interference between two images – of what is, and what is desired. Affect again. Indeed, this interference is our affect (and *vice versa*). As he writes:

all that is expressed negatively by such words as ‘nought’ or the ‘void,’ is not so much thought as feeling, or, to speak more exactly, it is the tinge that feeling gives to thought. The idea of annihilation or of partial nothingness is therefore formed here in the course of the substitution of one thing for another, whenever this substitution is thought by a mind that would prefer to keep the old thing in the place of the new or at least conceives this preference as possible. The idea implies on the subjective side a preference, on the objective side a substitution, and is nothing else but a combination of, or *rather an interference between*, this feeling of preference and this idea of substitution.³⁰

We can also think of two images – the thing and the thing desired – through the concept of interference even more literally, namely as signals or messages on two levels that *destructively* interfere to produce a negative, like two waves annihilating each other. Two inverse movements (vital and material) collide and out of that encounter the negative emerges. In which case, the brain itself can then be read not simply as either a thing or a void but rather a non-substantive process, a fluid conduit. Movement images (communication, signal, message) are indeed images and becomings rather than the static poles of being and nothingness. Images in communication and “exchange” (as Bergson once described the brain): messages communicated through a brain that is itself understood as a messenger.

The esoteric practices of occult societies like the Golden Dawn, Mina Bergson among them, also involved messenger angels, and produced techniques for image construction that would help them communicate with such realities. Like the fictional Pontifex Institute in *The Empty Man* – which goes so far as to create a living image or tulpa to serve the purpose of such communication – the immanent, partial reality of the image is used as a powerful tool for visualising the supernatural through natural means.³¹

Which brings us back to our own beginning. Nietzsche himself, to some *the* grand annihilator, thought of his own physiology, in all its sickness and unhealth, as a carrier, a transmitter of atmospheric pressures and electricity.³² Messengers, of course, can sometimes appear as demons as well as angels, or as both. One of those demons, my personal one, may well have been that damned student in my Nietzsche tutorial – the one who disappeared 30 years ago. Perhaps he was and is a figment of my imagination: If I made him up (deflation), then, to a degree, he is my own tulpa-in-the-making (that I did *make up* – inflation). My recollection is not an entirely false memory, however, but a partial, constructed, image-being whose incessant message was that there is always *more* to the nihil, to nihilism, always something more to be produced from nothing – or rather, perhaps, a supernothing. Not the hyperbolic nihil that stands beyond, but the ordinary and the supernormal at once, that stands immanently and alongside.

³⁰ Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 306–7, emphasis mine.

³¹ In *The Empty Man* we never see in full the tulpa being created, though we get glimpses, caught on video-tape, of its manifestation.

³² This is Marsden’s reading of Nietzsche’s philosophy of the body (and hypochondria). My thanks go to the anonymous reader who suggested this connection.

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