

## Neville Symington: The Psychoanalyst as Metaphysician or Skeptic?

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Neville Symington had a passion for philosophy. When training for the priesthood – before his distinguished career in psychoanalysis – he attended lectures several times a week on the topic of ontology, the metaphysical theory of Being *qua* Being. These lectures were a revelation: “With [the teacher George’s] help I achieved some insight into existence. I believe it has been the most important realization of my life.”<sup>1</sup> Here and elsewhere Neville presents himself to his readers as devoted to the question of Being, as if, at bottom, he is a metaphysician dedicated to the task of discovering and articulating a theory of the essence or nature of Being. The Neville I knew was almost the exact opposite of that. In the face of considerable evidence to the contrary it will not be easy to explain this but let me try.

As a preliminary step, consider that philosophy comes in two primary forms: 1) the construction of a metaphysical system of *a priori* explanation of the underlying nature of reality (i.e. explanation prior to, or independent of, experience); or 2) endorsing skepticism, the denial of reason’s pretensions, particularly the denial of metaphysical knowledge of the essences of things. I claim that although Neville presented himself as a metaphysician or ontologist he was, in reality, a skeptic through and through. Indeed, when I want an example of a living skeptic, I think of him.

In the present paper I want to briefly present a vision of Neville as a modern incarnation of the humanist essayist and skeptic, Montaigne, embodying a form of skepticism which I will articulate in terms of the three thematically related varieties of skepticism: Socratic skepticism; Pyrrhonian skepticism; and Wittgensteinian skepticism. I should note that although he was a skeptic he remained a man of religious conviction – all be it one free from any commitment to theism.<sup>2</sup> I do not claim that Neville saw himself as a skeptic; only that this is a true vision of him written by someone who loved him.

### **The Skeptical Tradition in Philosophy**

In both ancient and modern philosophy, skepticism is defined in terms of the denial of knowledge and rationally justified beliefs, although each adopts very different methods for achieving their skeptical conclusions. Perhaps the most important difference between ancient and modern skepticism is that in the ancient world skepticism was typically *a way of life*.<sup>3</sup> In this paper I will be focus on this ancient form of skepticism especially as manifested in the Pyrrhonist tradition and, for present purposes, I shall count the modern philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein as an ancient skeptic.<sup>4</sup> So we are putting aside modern Cartesian doubts about the existence of the external world. Our interest turns to forms of *living* skepticism.

### **Socrates: Questioning Claims to Know the Essence of Things (Metaphysics)**

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<sup>1</sup>Thanks to Talia Morag for comments on a draft of this paper.

Symington, N. *The Blind Man Sees*. London: Karnac Books, 2004, 77.

<sup>2</sup> See Neville Symington, *Emotion and Spirit: Questioning the Claims of Psychoanalysis and Religion*. London: Karnac Books, 1994, 88.

<sup>3</sup> For further discussion see Hadot, P. *Philosophy as a Way of Life*. Blackwell, 1995.

<sup>4</sup> This is not as perverse as it may appear. Wittgenstein’s philosophy has often been likened to Pyrrhonian skepticism. See, e.g., Sluga, H. “Wittgenstein and Pyrrhonism.” In *Pyrrhonian Skepticism* ed. W. Sinnott-Armstrong. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, 99-120.

It is worth recalling that the ancient Greek word *scepsis* means *inquirer*, a searcher for truth. Socrates (470–399 BC) is a skeptic in the original sense of one who, whilst engaged in the search for metaphysical knowledge, challenges the false pretence of such knowledge in his fellow Athenians. The Delphic oracle told Socrates that he was the wisest man in all Athens on the grounds that he knew that he didn't know! Since he aspired to metaphysical knowledge of the essences of things especially concerning the good (hence, by implication, the good life) he continued to search for the truth. In his practice of questioning (the *elenchus*), Socrates does not claim to know anything, but he does not deny that there is anything to be known in the area of metaphysics. Rather he bursts others' pretensions to know the essences of things, whether about beauty, or justice, or piety, or knowledge itself.

Neville is a skeptical inquirer of the Socratic kind. Regarding human psychology, which he studied assiduously both in the clinic and beyond, he knew that he didn't know and he knew that others didn't know either. He was a burster of bubbles, particularly the cognitive pretensions of the ego. He did not believe anyone had a philosophy of mind or a theory of human psychology that was remotely adequate to our lived experience. Like Socrates, his unflinching acceptance of this fact meant that he often upset those he came into close contact with, perhaps especially those who look upon psychology or psychoanalysis as a science. Yet it is important to distinguish skepticism from cynicism. Like the sage, Socrates, he had a relentless curiosity for the truth. Even if he accepted no philosophy of mind or theory of psychoanalysis or cognitive science, he assiduously sifted all philosophies and theories for whatever grains of truth they possessed. He would collect these with the same care that a butterfly collector collects butterflies. His mind was a vast storehouse of psychological insights, one after another after another, each catalogued and filed for ease of recall if and when needed.

### **Pyrrhonism: Skepticism as a Way of Life**

The ancient Greek philosopher, Pyrrho of Ellis (360-270 BC), inspired a skeptical practice amongst his followers for whom skepticism was a way of life. Through adopting various dialectical strategies of doubt, Pyrrhonians entitled themselves to refuse to accept any philosophical theories including those about how to live well or the nature of the good life. They adopted an attitude of "not-knowing" about all matters of dispute, feeling it was more likely to promote peace of mind than the interminable, often bitter, quarrels of "true believers". Pyrrhonians lived by their own experience and training (e.g. Sextus Empiricus was trained in the art of medicine) whilst employing skeptical strategies to eschew dogma and ideology. Their skepticism differs from that of Socrates in so far as they desired peace of mind (*ataraxia*) rather than the dispute and argument that Socrates is so famed for.

By this reckoning Neville is a kind of Pyrrhonian skeptic. He was a therapist of the human mind for whom skepticism of theory was an important part of his practice.<sup>5</sup> No recognized psychoanalytic school of thought, nor philosophy of mind illuminated the mysteries of self-knowledge; nor the even deeper mysteries of the way one person influences or affects another. In *The Psychology of the Person* (2012) he writes,

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<sup>5</sup> And it could even be said that he desired peace of mind for his patients. A prima facie difficulty here is that Neville denied that psychoanalysis has a goal which it intentionally aims at. So, too, consistent Pyrrhonians have to deny that the point of their skeptical strategies is to bring about *ataraxia* given their renunciation of reason-based beliefs. That is why I say they desire *ataraxia* as opposed to intentionally aiming at it.

If I cannot rely on the assumptions of a particular school of thinking then how am I to know the inner life of another and enter into sympathetic relation with him or her?<sup>6</sup>

It might seem that what creates the problem of knowing another person here is the lack of a theory of mind to rely upon. But to put it this way carries the misleading suggestion that there is a possible theory of mind that might be discovered that would solve the problem of knowing another. From Neville's perspective it would be more accurate to say that only by avoiding the false temptations of a theoretical solution to the problem can we see the real practical and emotional difficulty in the task of knowing others. Only by overcoming the fixed stereotypes and restrictive categories of theory is one able to make oneself receptive to the unknown other and their as-yet-unknown (in)capacity for change and development. Like an insightful art critic, Neville was thrown back upon his own powers of "reading" (and being, in turn, "read" by) another mind. He was widely recognized for his acute capacity to emotionally resonate with others, and to offer astute observations based upon careful reflection of the emotional impact that other person had upon him. A powerful technique he employed was to bring to mind some incident in his own life to illuminate some incident in the patient's life, even if these two incidents in the lives of two separate people were, in an objective sense, not very alike. The two incidents only had to be felt to be analogous.

Neville's use of the concept of *analogy* is deeper and more subtle than that employed in contemporary philosophy. The standard response to the problem of other minds in philosophy is called the argument from analogy. John Stuart Mill is representative of the tradition in arguing that one can know the minds of others, even though they are unobservable, based on an analogy between one's own behaviour and that of others: one simply hypothesizes that the inner causes of one's own behaviour provides a model for the inner causes of the behaviour of others.<sup>7</sup> This argument has numerous shortcomings one of which is that it assumes, without actual or even possible evidence, that all minds are essentially the same. Neville supposed he could understand a given patient, to some extent, by imaginatively identifying with how the patient felt about some important incident in their life. As we have seen there is no claim that the incident in the therapist's life that grounds this understanding is the same or very similar to that of the patient; nor does Neville claim that imaginatively identifying with how the patient felt yields anything more than psychological insight.

Philosophy here gives the false impression of using the scientific method of positing some unobservable cause (say, electrons) for some observable phenomena (say, the behaviour of a cathode ray in a magnetic field). Why false? Because on the skeptical conception of the mind, which the argument from analogy simply takes for granted, there is no possibility of empirically testing the "hypothesis". As Neville sees his own practice, psychoanalysis doesn't presume to yield scientific results. The understanding of another is humanistic, based on the imaginative connection the therapist takes to exist between his own feelings and those of the patient.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Symington, N. *The Psychology of the Person*. London: Karnac Books, 2012, xiii.

<sup>7</sup> Mill, J.S. *An Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy*, London: Longman, Green, 1865, 208.

<sup>8</sup> For more discussion of this kind of imaginative identification with the feelings of others in the context of psychoanalysis see Morag, T. "An Imaginative-Associative Account of Affective Empathy." In *Philosophical Perspectives on Empathy*, ed. A. Waldow and D. Matravers. London: Routledge, 2018, 167-184.

### Wittgenstein: Skepticism of Metaphysics as a Way of Life

Let me consider a third model for Neville's skepticism, the philosophy of the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951). Wittgenstein's philosophy consists in skepticism of the pretension of philosophy to explain the mind and world *a priori*: that is, to explain it *as a whole*, and *once and for all*. Wittgenstein's skepticism is an advance over classical Pyrrhonism in so far as he refines its scope to the metaphysical theories of philosophy rather than the claims of everyday life.<sup>9</sup>

The philosophical urge to provide a priori metaphysical explanations, Wittgenstein argues, gets in the way of seeing things as they really are. This is ironic as metaphysicians see themselves as uncovering things as they *REALLY* are behind the misleading appearances of things. Wittgenstein turns this idea on its head. What is hidden lies *in* the appearances themselves rather than in a supposed deeper realm lying "behind" or "beyond" them. He writes,

The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity.<sup>10</sup>

Wittgenstein's idea here applies with particular force to our understanding of other people. Aspects of people that are most important for us are hidden by their "simplicity and familiarity". This does not mean that people are simple nor that we could quite easily list what these aspects are. What Wittgenstein means is that there are obvious truths about people that we miss because they do not fit our preconceived notions about other minds and the nature of the difficulty we have in knowing them.<sup>11</sup> As we have already seen, it is widely supposed that, as one commentator puts it, "in the case of others, all access to what they think or feel is *indirect*, mediated by the other's behaviour."<sup>12</sup> This is an expression of a updated version of Cartesian dualism: the mind of another is *invisible* – because "inner", metaphysically hidden<sup>13</sup> – and all we are confronted with is their "outer" behaviour that is, at best, causally related to it. If minds are invisible the theoretical difficulty that confronts one is to try to find evidence in the behaviour of others for the existence and nature of other minds. In the grip of this way of thinking about other minds, the obvious truth that we overlook is that the mind of another is directly *visible* to us in their behaviour, facial

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<sup>9</sup> Because the claims of everyday life (e.g. "Honey is sweet") are potentially disputable, hence something for which rational justification might be sought, they become unwitting targets of Pyrrhonian skeptical strategies; in addition to the curious speculations of the philosophers. Wittgenstein, alternatively, distinguishes the claims of everyday life from the claims of metaphysics and reserves his skepticism for the latter.

<sup>10</sup> Wittgenstein, L. *Philosophical Investigations*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Trans. G.E.M. Anscombe. Oxford: Blackwell, 1958, §129.

<sup>11</sup> Wittgenstein remarks, "Tolstoy: the meaning (importance) of something lies in its being something everyone can understand. That is both true & false. What makes the object hard to understand – if it's significant, important – is not that you have to be instructed in abstruse matters in order to understand it, but the antithesis between understanding the object & what most people want to see. Because of this precisely what is most obvious may be what is most difficult to understand. It is not a difficulty for the intellect but one for the will that has to be overcome [1931]." Wittgenstein, L. *Culture and Value*, 2<sup>nd</sup>. Ed. Trans. P. Winch. Oxford: Blackwell, 1998, 25.

<sup>12</sup> Hyslop, A. "Other Minds", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Spring 2019 Edition)*, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2019/entries/other-minds/>>.

<sup>13</sup> In its modern form, the mind is not considered immaterial contra Descartes. Despite that, the mind is often thought to be literally inside the head either because it is identified with the brain or because it is characterized in terms of internal functional states which are realized by the brain. Hence an inner/outer distinction originally owed to Descartes is maintained.

expressions, gestures, etc. It is not something “behind” behaviour but, rather, is *expressed* in it.<sup>14</sup> Since the mind is visible, the true difficulty in knowing another mind is not metaphysical but practical as the writer Oscar Wilde saw in this witty dig at philosophy,

It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances. The true mystery of the world is the visible not the invisible.<sup>15</sup>

Stanley Cavell draws these ideas together when he writes,

In making knowledge others a metaphysical difficulty, philosophers deny how real the practical difficulty is of coming to know another person, and how little we can reveal of ourselves to another’s gaze or bear of it.<sup>16</sup>

To which I imagine Neville replying that we may not intentionally reveal ourselves to another’s gaze but we reveal ourselves nonetheless.

Like Wittgenstein, Neville rejected the Cartesian conception of mind as metaphysically hidden or private. Minds are on display in the clinic or on the street even if we make efforts to hide them: on display (often unknowingly) in word, gesture and deed. Neville writes,

My field of exploration lies in the psychological processes that we meet in the consulting room.<sup>17</sup>

The mind of the other is there to be confronted in the consulting room if only one has eyes to see it or ears to hear it. To borrow an analogy from the philosopher Talia Morag, like poker players we all have our “tells” whether we know them or not; and whether we try to hide them or not.<sup>18</sup>

Neville made efforts to be open and responsive to the unique particularity of another person and to the quality of the encounter between himself and this other. He was alert to the potential of any genuine human contact or encounter to lead to insights about oneself or about that particular other. Perhaps that is why he was so suspicious of all grand theories or systems that claim to have THE ONE TRUE THEORY of the human psyche. He recognized that from the perspective of psychoanalysis there are significant problems in attempting to describe the mind especially if we employ the general terms and objective categories that science demands. In psychoanalysis what is crucially important is to understand a specific (pattern of) emotion in the psychology of the patient as a whole – a psychology which ranges over their entire past history. The application of a general term such as “anger”, even if correct, fails to individuate the emotion in question and trace its history in the life of the

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<sup>14</sup> Two notions of ‘mediation’ are in question here. The traditional view is that the body mediates our relation to the mind by being caused to say and do things by it. The alternative view which I am sketching claims that the mind is visible in behaviour. In this case mediation is a matter of bodily expressions rather than bodily symptoms (i.e. causal evidence).

<sup>15</sup> Wilde, O. *The Collected Works of Oscar Wilde*. Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth, 2007, 19.

<sup>16</sup> Cavell, S. *The Claim of Reason*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979, 90.

<sup>17</sup> Symington, N. *The Growth of Mind*. London: Karnac Books, 2018, abstract.

<sup>18</sup> Morag, T. “The Foundations of Psychoanalysis and Liberal Naturalism: The Freudian Unconscious and the Manifest Image.” In *The Handbook of Liberal Naturalism*. Ed. Mario De Caro & David Macarthur. London: Routledge, 2022, 391.

patient.<sup>19</sup> Description in words becomes less important than finding some kindred-feeling that could serve to better understand the psychological plight of the patient. One of the most memorable traits of Neville was his ability to narrate the psychological situation of a patient in the clinic or elsewhere and the climactic moment when he achieved some striking illumination about them, perhaps days or weeks later when they were no longer present.

Does metaphysics play a role in such psychological insight? On Wittgenstein's view metaphysics is tempting because it seems to offer the promise of explaining things in general in the way that the natural sciences do, but without the need for empirical research or experiment. Metaphysical explanations of the essences (or necessary features) of things are creations of the armchair. But this is a confusion:

Philosophers constantly see the method of science before their eyes and are irresistibly tempted to ask and answer questions in the way that science does. This tendency is the real source of metaphysics and leads the philosopher into complete darkness.<sup>20</sup>

In the darkness of metaphysical theory we accept dogmas as realities without any genuine empirical constraints. In that way we become blind to the aspect of things and people that are most important to us. Neville follows Wittgenstein in seeing skepticism of philosophical theories of mind and self as a necessary step in restoring our sight; the aim being to make available a genuine responsiveness to a particular other in the ordinary world of everyday experience. He writes:

What [I am] concerned to elucidate is a knowledge not of general principles but of each individual person. No two people look exactly the same; no two people's minds are exactly the same. Psychoanalysis is crammed with theories, with generalizations, and, as the Greek philosopher, Stilpo, said, "*Those who speak of men in general; speak of nobody.*"<sup>21</sup>

From Neville's psychoanalytic perspective, a person is not usefully understandable in general or fixed terms, being a *wholly unique individual engaged in the task of forming themselves*. As such, persons are incapable of being fully comprehended in terms of the causal patterns or laws described by the natural or social sciences; nor in terms of the a priori systems of transcendent metaphysics. This leads to one of Neville's deepest and most provocative insights: *a person is a non-scientific being*. In our age of science to say such is heresy. But if he is right then psychoanalysis is not a science – repudiating a widespread trend in the profession's self-conception. Neville preferred to call psychoanalysis "a mature natural religion"<sup>22</sup>; and, elsewhere, that it is fundamentally "the aim to know myself".<sup>23</sup> In this last remark Neville self-consciously identifies the goal of psychoanalysis with the goal of ancient philosophy. And it is hard not to hear him speaking for himself here: psychoanalysis was his philosophy, his skeptical way of life. His idea seems to be that knowing oneself is achieved

<sup>19</sup> The philosopher R.G. Collingwood argues for a similar position when defending his theory of art as the expression of emotion. Collingwood, R.G. *The Principles of Art*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1938, 111-114.

<sup>20</sup> Wittgenstein, L. *The Blue and the Brown Book*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Oxford: Blackwell, 1969, 18.

<sup>21</sup> Symington, *The Growth of Mind*, Introduction.

<sup>22</sup> Symington, N. *Emotion and Spirit: Questioning the Claims of Psychoanalysis and Religion*. London: Karnac Books, 1994, 192.

<sup>23</sup> Symington, *The Growth of Mind*, 13.

through moments of genuine communication and communion with other souls – a denial of the solipsism of the Cartesian ego that says “I think therefore I am”.

### **Practicing Psychoanalysis as a Skeptical Way of Life**

A key tenet of Neville’s skeptical way of life is to resist simply absorbing and repeating the “truths” of others, whether in the form of popular opinion, personality stereotypes, cultural norms, church or state dogmas, and so on. On all important matters one must make up one’s mind for oneself. That is part of the task of forming one’s own personality. Skepticism of popular, convenient or conventional “truths” is a difficult stance to adopt given the powerful social, professional and religious forces of conformity in the world. A moral of the story of Socrates, in which he was tried and put to death for supposedly corrupting the youth of Athens, is that free unfettered inquiry is both difficult and dangerous. Neville, too, provoked the ire of people who demand like-mindedness or allegiance. But his resistance to absorbing the beliefs of others was a necessary condition for his therapeutic openness and sympathetic responsiveness to the emotional life of others. By clearing away the preconceptions or stereotypes we commonly use to categorize people, Neville was free to respond without theoretical presuppositions to the unique personhood of each person he encountered. This helps to explain a certain innocence or child-like quality that he manifested even if he was, at the same time, a man of great culture and learning and world-renown in his chosen profession.

What of the quest for Being that Neville revered and towards which he professed a lifelong devotion?<sup>24</sup> Does that undermine the skeptical vision of him that I have been painting? In answering this question it is worth paying careful attention to exactly how Neville interprets the revelation into the nature of Being taught to him in theological college by George X. In the first place, Neville says that he was moved by George’s teaching primarily because “he spoke from his soul.”<sup>25</sup> In other words, Neville received this teaching with particular force because it was transmitted to him authentically from the depths of another soul. What was this teaching? Neville says he achieved a glimpse into the reality of what he calls “participated being”, the centre of one’s personality which he elsewhere calls a person’s “creative core”. He explains its fundamental importance as follows,

The obliteration of *participated being* is the source of all mental disturbance... [and] the establishment of *participated being* as the fountainhead of emotional life in the personality is the guarantor of mental health and sound emotional development.<sup>26</sup>

What Neville glimpses in the teaching of ontology is an insight into “the locus of what is most me within my personality, and yet it is not mine.”<sup>27</sup> Somewhat surprisingly, then, the key insight Neville gained from the lectures on ontology has nothing to do with a priori metaphysics. It has everything to do with Neville’s own picture of the self or soul as containing as its most important component an inner “creative core” that is not simply given

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<sup>24</sup> This question was pressed upon me with particular force by the thoughtful and affable psychoanalyst Mike Brearley at the 2022 conference organized by Louise Glycer to honour Neville and his achievements.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, ch. 8.

<sup>26</sup> Symington, *The Blind Man Sees*, 78.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 80. The idea seems to be that one wholly identifies with one’s creative core only when it is fully formed but when undeveloped the creative core is not oneself, but various potentialities of oneself.

to us fully formed but something undeveloped which it is each person's vital task to creatively form, nurture and maintain.<sup>28</sup>

To sum up, the first "ontological" insight concerns the mysterious and life-affirming way in which one soul can authentically communicate with another soul; and the second "ontological" insight concerns Neville's picture of the self as containing within itself the fundamental source of mental illness and emotional well-being. As Wittgenstein taught us, a *picture* is an imaginative schema at the base of our thinking, not a metaphysical doctrine or theory. Even if expressed in words, Neville's imaginative "picture" of the self as unformed and in need of creative formation it is like a painting or drawing or architectural model in so far as it is neither true nor false. It is better thought of as something that we can use to think fruitfully about the highly complex and shifting character of the self. Ontology inspired Neville not towards metaphysical theory (say, of the essence of the self) but a powerful and productive imaginative vision of human psychology.

Let me close with this quote from Montaigne, Neville's patron-saint: "As for me, I love life and cultivate it as God has been pleased to grant it to us." Amen.

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<sup>28</sup> I heard Neville use the term "creative core" in conversation.