

## **Liar Paradox Monism: A Wildean Solution to the Explanatory Gap Between Materialism and Qualia**

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### **Abstract**

For close to three decades, since Levine (1983), philosophers of mind sensitive to the complexity of explaining phenomenality (experientiality, qualia) from within a materialist or physicalist position have argued that what Chalmers (1995/1997) called the Hard Problem of Consciousness is virtually unsolvable, largely because explaining qualia from within a physicalist position requires that we “stop knowing” what the physical is. This paper offers a rather convoluted solution to the problem, through the version of the liar paradox Oscar Wilde offers in his 1891 philosophical dialogue “The Decay of Lying.” Rather than being merely clever in a wittily iconoclastic but philosophically indefensible way, the position Wilde offers in the dialogue actually models a complex monism that the paper calls “liar paradox monism,” which embraces the rhetorical tensions of the communicative situation in which the Hard Problem of Consciousness is experienced and putatively solved.

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### **1. Introduction: The Explanatory Gap**

One quale, two or more qualia: this philosophical term, originally derived from a Latin word meaning “what sort,” describes mental events, states, or experience that have a certain “quality” or “qualitative feel” to them. The way a quale is usually defined, there is *something it is like* to have one (Nagel, 1974, p.437). Qualia collectively, moment by moment, constitute our feeling that we are alive, that we are the person who bears our name and lives at our address. The “narrative” (coherently sequenced) experience of being or having a self is often attributed to the feeling that all these qualia that pass through my consciousness or awareness are *my* qualia. Obviously the ability to generate such a sense of self depends heavily not just on the ability to build one’s qualia into a coherent story, but on some rough memory for the qualia that have gone before. Psychological disorders like depersonalization are sometimes described as a breakdown in coherentized qualitative experience, in the production out of the steady flow of qualia of a

feeling of being a coherent self: the depersonalized sufferer doesn't feel like a person, doesn't feel alive, or feels trapped in someone else's life. Qualia are sometimes adduced as what differentiates us from computers (or zombies), which, the argument goes, may simulate human cognitive and even affective life uncannily but do not *feel* alive, or anything else.

But qualia also pose a serious philosophical problem. A succession of philosophers of mind, beginning with Levine (1983), have suggested that "the explanatory gap between materialism and qualia" is uncrossable. According to Galen Strawson (1994, p.93), "the existence of experience [qualia] is the only hard part of the mind-body problem for materialists." Or, as he states that more fully: "What is the relation between the reality of experience as we have it from moment to moment and physical reality as we take ourselves to know it in everyday life and science?" (ibid, p.44). He devotes three chapters to a careful untangling of the complexities surrounding this question, including two (3 and 4) on "agnostic materialism" ("belief in the truth of materialism is a matter of faith and needs to be tempered by agnosticism" [ibid, p.43]) and one (5) on "mentalism, idealism, and immaterialism."

As Strawson (ibid, p.47) puts it, the difficulties materialists as physicalist monists have with qualia ("experiential phenomena") stem from the obvious pressure they feel to insist "that experiential phenomena just are physical phenomena. But if they are, then it seems that we must be ignorant of the nature of the physical in some fundamental way, for experiential phenomena ... just do not show up in what we think of as our best account of the nature of the physical: physics (or physics plus the sciences that we take to be reducible to physics)." This suggests, as Nagel (1974, p.176) argues, that we either don't really understand physicality or else "dualism is, after all, the most plausible option when it comes to the mind-body problem" (Strawson, ibid).

Strawson resists this latter temptation, offering in its place two versions of materialist monism that arguably smuggle dualism *into* it. Defining standard materialism conventionally as the belief that "there is a fundamental sense in which reality is only physical" and idealism as the belief

that “there is a fundamental sense in which reality is only mental,” he notes the historical option (championed by William James, for example; see Cooper, 1990, and Crane, 2000) of believing that “there is a fundamental sense in which reality is neither mental nor physical, as we understand those terms”—neutral monism—and yet another option, which Strawson himself cautiously champions, according to which “reality is, in its essential single-substanced nature, both mental and physical, both experiential and physical” (ibid, p.46). This last view he dubs “mental and physical monism,” or M&P monism. The first two he identifies as asymmetry theories—“both tend toward the strong asymmetry of *reductionism*” (ibid, p.57)—and the last two he calls equal-status theories.

While the distinction between asymmetry theories and equal-status theories may seem to implicate standard materialists in the former, Strawson notes further, things are not so simple:

Consider materialists who say, ‘Experiences are fully real, and they are physical phenomena in every respect. That is, even their having the phenomenal or experiential character they do just is a physical phenomenon’. These materialists appear to endorse the claim that was supposed to define M&P monism . . . : the claim that reality is both experiential and physical, while being substantially single in some way we cannot at present understand, although we may take it that there is no asymmetry between the status of claims that reality is physical in character and the status of claims that reality is experiential in character (ibid).

Not all materialists talk this way, of course: Allport (1988), Wilkes (1988), and Dennett (1988, 1991) deny the existence of experience of qualia altogether; and reductive representationalists like Dretske (1995) and Tye (2000) build radical asymmetry into their claims about the physical and the experiential, reducing the latter to the former. But, as Strawson notes, it is not eccentric for philosophers who believe themselves to be standard materialists to ascribe equal status to claims in favor of the physicality and the experientiality of reality. It is perfectly normal. The

mind-body problem from within this viewpoint is *not* that there is some significant difference between the mental/experiential/qualitative and the physical; for a materialist the mental is by default a subordinate category of the physical. The problem is rather that we don't quite know what the physicality of the mental or the experiential or the qualitative *is*. As Strawson puts it, this problem has been around for a few centuries: "Perhaps it only came to seem acute in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when the evolution of a scientific conception of the physical as nothing more than particles in motion made it unclear how experiential phenomena could be physical" (ibid, 58n). And it's still unclear. M&P monism, Strawson's solution to the problem—and, he argues, the fullest statement of the standard materialist position on experience or qualia—doesn't solve it either.

One of the equal-status materialist theories of the material and the experiential that Strawson considers along the way is, surprisingly, panpsychism, which is traditionally considered a form of idealism. His strategy is essentially to split panpsychism in two, into an idealist incarnation that he calls mentalism and a panexperientialist incarnation that he calls panpsychism. "*Strict mentalism*," he writes, "to begin, is the doctrine that absolutely everything is mental, including everything that we ordinarily think of as physical. There are no existents or goings-on that are not entirely mental in every respect" (ibid, p.108). This, in turn, is his M&P monist definition of panpsychism: "Consider the version of panpsychism that holds that there is a material universe, and that a fundamental and universal (and not at all understood) property of all matter, from the smallest portion up, is that it is *experience-realizing* or *experience-involving*" (ibid, p.76). As he proceeds, however, he shows that not all panpsychist theories are equal-status, and that not all equal-status theories are panpsychist: "Equal-status monism is not necessarily a form of panpsychism, although they can go naturally together. In sum, the two positions can be combined, but neither implies the other" (ibid, p.77).

The very next year after Strawson (1994) appeared, Chalmers (1995/1997) published an article arguing a very similar case. There are, he suggested, many consciousness-related problems that seem difficult but are actually fairly easy to resolve:

- the ability to discriminate, categorize, and react to environmental stimuli;
- the integration of information by a cognitive system;
- the reportability of mental states;
- the ability of a system to access its own internal states;
- the focus of attention;
- the deliberate control of behavior;
- the difference between wakefulness and sleep. (ibid., p.10)

There is, however, one Hard Problem of Consciousness, namely, the problem not only of *how* but of *why* certain physical structures give rise to consciousness (or experience, or qualia). The problem, as Chalmers articulates it, is that “causal closure” in physicalism—trying to explain qualia from within the physical—does not work, and cannot work. That leaves two options: a naturalistic or interactive dualism that posits two realms, the physical and the mental, and builds bridges between them, or a panpsychic monism that explains the physical as protoexperiential. After reading the 26 responses other philosophers of mind wrote to his article, especially the defenses of panpsychism offered by Hut and Shepard (1996/1997), Rosenberg (1996/1997), and Seager (1995/1997), Chalmers (1997) cautiously opts for panpsychism.

“Where does this leave us?” Strawson (1994/2010, p.78) asks. Dishearteningly, his reply is still, in the 2010 second edition of his book, that it leaves us “with a better feeling for our ignorance.” In other words, M&P monism doesn’t solve the problem. Nor does all the ink spilled by Chalmers and his respondents on the Hard Problem of Consciousness. It is still the Hard Problem.

What I propose to argue in this paper is that what makes it the Hard Problem is not so much the puzzlements of reality as it is the job description of philosophers and scientists as professional truth-tellers. Determining the truth and explicating it as accurately and clearly as possible is what they do. Admirable as the results of adherence to this ethos normally are, I suggest, it can also create apparently insoluble difficulties—among them, the Hard Problem of Consciousness—that could easily be solved if, say, modern philosophers were more willing to *lie*, like novelists or playwrights.

I don't mean that as flippantly or as cynically as it sounds. My brief in this paper is rather that there is, or we can identify, a mixed or complex monism along the lines of neutral monism or M&P monism that can (criss-)cross the explanatory gap and solve the hard problem of consciousness. It is, I want to argue, a principled and coherent philosophical position—not mere escapism. I call it “liar paradox monism,” or LP monism for short. Like the classic liar paradoxes, it wants to have things both ways, to have what it claims to be true be a lie and to have what it claims is a lie be true—hence, obviously, the problems attendant on setting it up as a coherent and principled philosophical *position*.

## **2. Wilde's “Decay of Lying”**

Let us start slowly, with (section 2) a summary and then (section 3) a reading of a familiar text—Oscar Wilde's (1891/1961) philosophical dialogue “The Decay of Lying”—by way of setting it up as a model of (sections 4-5) liar paradox monism.

Vivian (the Wilde mouthpiece) is sitting in the library of a house in Nottinghamshire, reading proofs for an article he's written, when Cyril (the foil) steps in through an open window off the terrace and chides him for cooping himself up indoors on such a “perfectly lovely afternoon. The air is exquisite. There is a mist upon the woods, like the purple bloom upon a plum. Let us go and lie on the grass and smoke cigarettes and enjoy Nature” (ibid, p.13). Vivian responds by

saying that he has fortunately lost the ability to enjoy nature: “My own experience is that the more we study Art, the less we care for Nature. What Art really reveals to us is Nature’s lack of design, her curious crudities, her extraordinary monotony, her absolutely unfinished condition. Nature has good intentions, of course, but, as Aristotle once said, she cannot carry them out” (ibid).

This association prompts Vivian to read to Cyril from the article he’s proofreading, entitled “The Decay of Lying: A Protest,” which supplies the main argument of Wilde’s dialogue (itself entitled “The Decay of Lying: An Observation”). The essay begins: “One of the chief causes that can be assigned for the curiously commonplace character of most of the literature of our age is undoubtedly the decay of Lying as an art, a science, and a social pleasure” (ibid, p.16). I want to come back to lying as a science. “The ancient historians,” he adds, “gave us delightful fiction in the form of fact; the modern novelist presents us with dull facts under the guide of fiction” (ibid). Historians and scientists used to lie; now they tediously tell the truth. He doesn’t include philosophers in his nostalgia for a lost heyday of lying, but he invokes Aristotle early on, and after several pages devoted to a round condemnation of contemporary realistic and naturalistic fiction he coyly invokes Kant as well: “The only beautiful things, as somebody once said, are the things that do not concern us. As long as a thing is useful or necessary to us, or affects us in any way, either for pain or for pleasure, or appeals strongly to our sympathies, or is a vital part of the environment in which we live, it is outside the proper sphere of art. To art’s subject-matter we should be more or less indifferent” (ibid, p.22).

Eventually he comes to his main thesis, namely that “Nature is always behind the age” (ibid, p.23), by which he says he means this:

Art begins with abstract decoration, with purely imaginative and pleasurable work dealing with what is unreal and non-existent. This is the first stage. Then Life becomes fascinated with this new wonder, and asks to be admitted into the charmed

circle. Art takes life as part of her rough material, recreates it, and refashions it in fresh forms, is absolutely indifferent to fact, invents, imagines, dreams, and keeps between herself and reality the impenetrable barrier of beautiful style, of decorative or ideal treatment. The third stage is when Life gets the upper hand, and drives Art out into the wilderness. This is the true decadence, and it is from this that we are now suffering. (ibid, pp.23-24)

Or, more pithily: “Life imitates art far more than Art imitates life” (ibid, p.29). More specifically: “A great artist invents a type, and Life tries to copy it, to reproduce it in popular form, like an enterprising publisher” (ibid, p.30). Or, if you’ll indulge me, the most famous (though rather lengthy) passage in the dialogue, which offers a series of examples and paraphrases of Vivian’s central claim:

Where, if not from the Impressionists, do we get those wonderful brown fogs that come creeping down our streets, blurring the gas-lamps and changing the houses into monstrous shadows? To whom, if not to them and their master, do we owe the lovely silver mists that brood over our river, and turn to faint forms of fading grace curved bridge and swaying barge? The extraordinary change that has taken place in the climate of London during the last ten years is entirely due to a particular school of Art. You smile. Consider the matter from a scientific or a metaphysical point of view, and you will find that I am right. For what is Nature? Nature is no great mother who has borne us. She is our creation. It is in our brain that she quickens to life. Things are because we see them, and what we see, and how we see it, depends on the Arts that have influenced us. To look at a thing is very different from seeing a thing. One does not see anything until one sees its beauty. Then, and then only, does it come into existence. At present, people see fogs, not because there are fogs, but because poets and painters have taught them the mysterious loveliness of such effects. There may have been fogs for centuries in London. I dare say there were. But no one saw them, and so we do not know anything about them. They did not exist till Art had invented them. Now, it must be admitted, fogs are carried to excess. They have become the mere mannerism of a clique, and the exaggerated realism of their method gives dull people bronchitis. Where the cultured catch an effect, the uncultured catch cold. And so, let

us be humane, and invite Art to turn her wonderful eyes elsewhere. She has done so already, indeed. That white quivering sunlight that one sees now in France, with its strange blotches of mauve, and its restless violet shadows, is her latest fancy, and, on the whole, Nature reproduces it quite admirably. Where she used to give us Corots and Daubignys, she gives us now exquisite Monets and entrancing Pissaros. Indeed there are moments, rare, it is true, but still to be observed from time to time, when Nature becomes absolutely modern. Of course she is not always to be relied upon. The fact is that she is in this unfortunate position. Art creates an incomparable and unique effect, and, having done so, passes on to other things. Nature, upon the other hand, forgetting that imitation can be made the sincerest form of insult, keeps on repeating this effect until we all become absolutely wearied of it. Nobody of any real culture, for instance, ever talks nowadays about the beauty of a sunset. Sunsets are quite old-fashioned. They belong to the time when Turner was the last note in art. To admire them is a distinct sign of provincialism of temperament. Upon the other hand they go on. Yesterday evening Mrs. Arundel insisted on my going to the window, and looking at the glorious sky, as she called it. Of course I had to look at it. She is one of those absurdly pretty Philistines to whom one can deny nothing. And what was it? It was simply a very second-rate Turner, a Turner of a bad period, with all the painter's worst faults exaggerated and over-emphasised. (1891/1961, pp.34-35)

### **3. Idiot Questions about “The Decay of Lying”**

*The Idiot Questioner's first question:* Are Vivian's claims in this passage literally true? Does he mean literally that fogs “have become the mere mannerism of a clique, and the exaggerated realism of their method gives dull people bronchitis. Where the cultured catch an effect, the uncultured catch cold”? Does he mean literally that “Nature is no great mother who has borne us. She is our creation. It is in our brain that she quickens to life”? Does he mean literally that there are times when “Nature becomes absolutely modern,” but can't be relied on for modernity, given her subordination in matters of creativity to Art? “Art creates an incomparable and unique effect, and, having done so, passes on to other things. Nature, upon the other hand, forgetting that

imitation can be made the sincerest form of insult, keeps on repeating this effect until we all become absolutely wearied of it”: is this intended as a true statement?

*Friendly amendment to the Idiot Questioner’s first question:* Yes, Vivian is a *character*, in a sense a narrator—albeit a very Wildean one. Does he speak for Wilde? Does Wilde intend for these statements that he puts into the mouth of his mouthpiece to be taken as accurate descriptions of reality? Or should we take Vivian’s to be a characterized point of view that we should regard as possessing the veridicality of, say, that of Swift’s eponymous first-person narrator in *Gulliver’s Travels*? (The Idiot Questioner is not such an idiot as to believe that all narrators and characters speak as or for their authors.)

*Answer to the first question, bracketing the friendly amendment:* Surely “truth” is an odd attribute to assign to the words of Vivian, who is, after all, defending *lying* as “an art, a science, and a social pleasure.” He’s lying. He is, to paraphrase his own early remark on art, “inventing, imagining, dreaming, and keeping between himself and reality the impenetrable barrier of beautiful style.”

*The Idiot Questioner’s second question:* Why does Vivian lie in this particular way? What does he hope to gain from his lies?

*Answer to the Idiot Questioner’s second question:* Vivian’s own answer is that “the aim of the liar is simply to charm, to delight, to give pleasure” (ibid, p.27).

*The Idiot Questioner’s third question:* Is he lying about that too? If so, see question 2.

*Answer to the Idiot Questioner’s third question:* Hmm.

*The Idiot Questioner's fourth question:* Could he be lying on one level and telling the truth on another?

*Answer to the Idiot Questioner's fourth question:* All right. Let's get serious here. There are several possible scenarios:

[1] When I said, in my answer to the Idiot Questioner's first question, that Vivian is lying, I was lying. Vivian is telling the truth, and so is Wilde. Wilde may have created Vivian in order to embellish and exaggerate the truth a little, to make it more charming, delightful, pleasurable—but it's still the truth, and Wilde stands behind it.

[2] Vivian is lying and Wilde is telling the truth. Vivian is a version of the unreliable narrator, whose manifest unreliability leads the reader to posit authorial disagreement, and hence to *accept* the author's implied views precisely because they are taken to be the opposite of the unreliable narrator's obviously false or despicable or ludicrous views.

[3] Vivian is lying and Wilde is lying as well.

[a] Both are lying for the same reason: "the aim of the liar is simply to charm, to delight, to give pleasure." This is obviously a version of the liar paradox: if Vivian (and Wilde behind him) is himself the liar whose aim is simply (exclusively) to charm, etc., then this too is a lie, and the liar's aim is *not* simply to charm, etc. But if Vivian (and Wilde behind him) is telling the truth about the liar's simple (exclusive) aim, then his utterance exceeds the exclusivity implied in "simply" and he is not the liar whose aim is simply to charm, etc.

[b] The answer to the Idiot Questioner's fourth question is a simple *yes*: Vivian (and Wilde behind him) are lying on one level and telling the truth on another.

[c] The liar paradox outlined is itself a model of a different (more complex) kind of truth.

[4] The upshot of (3c) is that (1) and (3) are both true, and (2) is a lie.

I'm not sure I'd go so far as to say that (2) is a lie, there, but (2) does seem like the least likely scenario. Vivian is far too Wildean to be an unreliable character/narrator. The only kind of potential unreliable-narrator scenario I can imagine for the dialogue, in fact, is a campy or tongue-in-cheek (proto-queer) one designed to poke fun at the unreliable-narrator convention in fiction. But that seems unnecessarily baroque for an already quite baroque epistemological structure.

I do believe, in fact, that (3c) and its conclusion (4) are the "true" answers to this multiple-choice test. But before we go there, let's take a moment to explore (3b), which is not, I think, entirely wrong either.

### 3.1 (3b) Vivian/Wilde is lying on one level and telling the truth on another

Vivian's central argument in the dialogue is a "lie" not as petty everyday mendacity, but as a metaphysical *conceit*, a literary device that clearly falls under the purview of that artistic creativity that Wilde identifies as the best and most important kind of lying. Specifically, what Vivian/Wilde offers us in the dialogue is a radical idealist conceit according to which "Art" and "Nature" are great (female) minds working together, though from positions of hierarchical inequality, to create and shape everything that is. Vivian mocks Nature as a bungler—"But Nature is so uncomfortable. Grass is hard and lumpy and damp, and full of dreadful black insects. Why, even Morris's poorest workman could make you a more comfortable seat than the whole of Nature can" (ibid, p.13)—but she is a creating mind nonetheless. Wilde makes Art the teacher and Nature the clumsy and literal-minded pupil who struggles, rather pathetically, to

emulate her teacher, but between them they distribute Creative Mind throughout the known universe.

A metaphysical conceit is an extended hyperbole, or what Helen Gardner (1961, p.xxiii) famously described as “a comparison whose ingenuity is more striking than its justness.” This description seems apt for Wilde’s/Vivian’s conceit about Art and Nature—its hyperbolic ingenuity is indeed striking—but that still leaves open the question of its “justness,” its truth-value. Conceits do not invariably point allegorically beyond themselves to some deeper metaphysical truth-claim, but many do, and it is fairly easy to demonstrate that this one does as well. Vivian’s casual (nameless) invocation of Kant on the purposelessness of beauty is one clue Wilde drops as to the unstated philosophical burden of his dialogue. There are others:

If we take Nature to mean natural simple instinct as opposed to self-conscious culture, the work produced under this influence is always old-fashioned, antiquated, and out of date. One touch of Nature may make the whole world kin, but two touches of Nature will destroy any work of Art. If, on the other hand, we regard Nature as the collection of phenomena external to man, people only discover in her what they bring to her. She has no suggestions of her own. Wordsworth went to the lakes, but he was never a lake poet. He found in stones the sermons he had already hidden there. He went moralizing about the district, but his good work was produced when he returned, not to Nature but to poetry. (ibid, p.23)

It is clear from internal evidence alone, in other words, that Vivian at least—and probably Wilde as well—is a Kantian-style idealist, who believes that we have no access to the *Ding-an-sich*, and that what we take to be reality is therefore a mental construct, a phenomenology, an organized collection of qualia with no reliable “transparency” (Tye, 2000, pp.45-51) to external empirical reality. Unlike Kant, however, whose subjective universalism attributed what he took to be the functional identity of all humans’ subjective construction of reality to God’s unified

creation, Wilde was a post-Kantian aestheticist who attributed the power to create this reality-construct to the imagination—and took each individual’s imagination to be variably shaped by art. “Things are because we see them, and what we see, and how we see it, depends on the Arts that have influenced us”: this statement is arguably intended to be taken literally, as a serious metaphysical (idealist/phenomenalist) truth-claim. “Consider the matter from a scientific or a metaphysical point of view, and you will find that I am right”: if one accepts Kant’s idealist metaphysics but recognizes that his universalism is wishful thinking, then it does indeed follow that Vivian is right. (We will see about science.) “At present,” Vivian quips, “people see fogs, not because there are fogs, but because poets and painters have taught them the mysterious loveliness of such effects. There may have been fogs for centuries in London. I dare say there were. But no one saw them, and so we do not know anything about them. They did not exist till Art had invented them.” In other words, they did not exist *as fogs*. They were not then a part of the reality-construct that Art later created for our imaginations.

The continuation of Vivian’s remarks on fogs, quoted in the Idiot Questioner’s first question, is especially interesting: “Now, it must be admitted, fogs are carried to excess. They have become the mere mannerism of a clique, and the exaggerated realism of their method gives dull people bronchitis. Where the cultured catch an effect, the uncultured catch cold.” How shall we read this? How literally? The notion that fogs are an artistic effect that somehow have the power to give “dull people bronchitis” is the kind of witty exaggeration for which Wilde is best known; should we dismiss it as a clever witticism that is not intended to be taken seriously (1)? Possibly. But let’s consider two other interpretive options (2 and 3) as well:

[1] It is a mere witticism, not intended to be taken seriously.

[2] The effects of fog on the “uncultured” is psychosomatic. Fogs are mere artistic effects, mere art-influenced qualia, but dull people *think* they are material/real enough to give them bronchitis, and their imagined susceptibility to such adverse health effects becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

[3] The actual meteorological conditions that artists have taught us to see as fogs exist in a material world to which we have no reliable access. Our sensory fog-qualia are not accurate simulacra of those meteorological conditions, but they are cobbled together out of bits and pieces of artistic images *and* variably distorted sense-data; and while the meteorologists who have studied fogs scientifically cannot reasonably claim to have discovered the absolute and final truth about them (because they too have direct access only to their qualia), still, their claims about fogs include observations (the condensation of water vapor in the air) that might explain fogs' ability to congest lungs.

I take (2) there to be the radical idealist viewpoint; (3) is more complicated, obviously, as it implies the ultimate powerlessness of Mind (the idealizing artistic imagination) to create the reality-constructs that would enable us to live in an idealist paradise. In the (3) reading, Wilde's dialogue is not about the power of Art so much as it is about the *struggle* between Art and Nature, which is to say, behind the conceit, between Mind (qualia) and Matter, between the creative imagination and the inertial resistance material reality puts up to our imaginative attempts to organize our sensory qualia into a coherent world. Again, following Kant, Wilde insists that we can't know material reality directly, "in itself"; but we are constantly feeling the effects of its existence, in that it is forever thwarting our imaginative desires, our qualia-based predictions: "Sunsets are quite old-fashioned. They belong to the time when Turner was the last note in art. To admire them is a distinct sign of provincialism of temperament. *Upon the other hand they go on*" (emphasis added). Nature, Life, Matter, the External World, Wilde recognizes, has an independent existence that is not (entirely) amenable to our designs. Vivian's complaints about nature—"But Nature is so uncomfortable. Grass is hard and lumpy and damp, and full of dreadful black insects" (ibid, p.13)—reflect this recognition as well. We may not have reliable access to the truth about the material world, but we know that it's there, and we can hazard tentative descriptions of it, because it stubbornly resists assimilation into our qualitative constructs.

## 3.2 (3c) The liar paradox

As I say, I take the asymmetrical or “allegorical” reading presented in section 3.1 to be an accurate summary, as far as it goes, of Wilde’s metaphysics. There are only two interrelated problems with it.

The first is that it doesn’t take into account the ontological truth-claims Wilde/Vivian makes in the dialogue about the impossibility of making ontological truth-claims. If “Things are because we see them, and what we see, and how we see it, depends on the Arts that have influenced us,” then people who have been influenced by different arts will construct reality in significantly different ways, and it will be impossible (or dishonest) to make claims about reality in general. But, of course, “Things are because we see them, and what we see, and how we see it, depends on the Arts that have influenced us” is itself a claim about reality in general.

One might argue, of course, that “Things are because we see them, and what we see, and how we see it, depends on the Arts that have influenced us” is not so much a truth-claim as it is a theoretically derived *hypothesis* about reality. Wilde, after all, was a writer; he got his ideas from other writers, especially Walter Pater, who taught Kant at Brasenose (Oxford) and channeled Kantian idealism into his wildly influential *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873). Pater-influenced Kantian idealism had been in the air in Britain for several decades when Wilde wrote “The Decay of Lying,” in the Keats-inspired Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, founded by Dante Gabriel Rossetti in 1848, and in the French-Symbolist-inspired decadence of Algernon Swinburne, Arthur Symons, and others.

But then Wilde doesn’t *present* his claim as a hypothesis; he presents it as a true statement. And in any case the radical mutability implied by the claim would preclude any empirical testing of hypotheses.

A queer-theoretical approach to the social practices and philosophies that normatively linked aestheticism, decadence, dandies, effeminacy, and homosexuality from Pater to Wilde (and therefore made poets like Baudelaire and Swinburne *pretend* to be queer; see Sinfield, 1994) might insist that the aestheticist doctrine of intensity and mutability—you are whatever intense artistic and sexual experience makes you—was a queering or camping of the “panicked heterosexuality” (Butler, 1991) that objectified “nature” as something permanent and stable and God-created. In this reading, then, to put it in Austin’s (1962/1975) terms, Wilde’s statement that “Things are because we see them, and what we see, and how we see it, depends on the Arts that have influenced us” is not so much a constative description of reality as it is a performative utterance designed to *make it so*.

Again, however, even if we read Wilde’s wildest claims in “The Decay of Lying” as performatives, they nevertheless remain *implicit* performatives in the explicit outward form of constatives: they pretend, at least, to tell the truth about reality.

And in any case the ouroboric or Möbius-strip nature of Wilde’s (anti-)ontological (anti-)truth-claims is only the first problem with the (3b) “allegorical” reading of the dialogue. The second is that it doesn’t take into account Wilde’s argumentative reliance on (3a/3c) the liar paradox, which tends to transform the tidy asymmetry of symbolism or allegory (the exaggerations of the conceit pointing beyond themselves to some deeper truth) into a much more complex kind of claim.

The tricky thing about the liar paradox is that once you’ve invoked it, you can’t really do a time-out and say “Okay, I was playing the liar-paradox game up till this moment, and will go back to it after this sentence, but when I say ‘Things are because we see them, and what we see, and how we see it, depends on the Arts that have influenced us’ I *really mean it*.” That won’t work. The liar paradox gobbles up that kind of ostensible time-out. It automatically converts any truth-claim into a potential or putative lie and any lie-claim into a potential or putative truth.

It's not just, in other words, that a Wildean-style post-Kantian idealist—someone who believes that reality is variable depending on what art you've been viewing—has no business making ontological truth-claims, or rather, that any ontological truth-claims he makes will be subject to a certain quite reasonable epistemological suspicion. That is part of it. But the specific fact that Wilde's dialogue and Vivian's essay are *defenses* of lying escalates that epistemological suspicion alarmingly; and incidental claims like “the aim of the liar is simply to charm, to delight, to give pleasure,” which as we saw in (3a/3c) mire the purport of the piece in the liar paradox, confirm our suspicions. Why is Wilde (or Vivian) writing his piece? *Simply* to charm, etc.? Then he has nothing to say—no philosophical position, no post-Kantian ontology. The slightest hint that he does have something to say, then, undermines his claim: either he is not the liar he is defending (he's a truth-teller like all the others he has been ridiculing throughout), or the liar's aim is not simply to charm, etc.

What is significant about this apparent impasse in Wilde, I suggest, is that it is a more overt and honest version of a methodological impasse in contemporary neuroscience—hence my hint earlier that there may be some truth to Vivian's apparently reckless (or campy) urging that the reader “Consider the matter from a scientific or a metaphysical point of view, and you will find that I am right.” Antonio Damasio (1999), for example, has offered an entirely reasonable materialistic hypothesis as to how and why consciousness emerges evolutionarily out of the physical: for homeostatic reasons organisms need to monitor both the external world and their own internal states. If they don't know when they are hungry, for example, they will neglect to eat; if they don't notice a predator, they may neglect to take evasive action in its presence. Metalevel awareness of the body state aroused by the predator—noticing one's fear, which Damasio (2004) follows William James (1890/1950, pp.2.449ff) in calling “feeling the emotion”—may not serve useful evolutionary purposes in simpler organisms, but in complex social animals like birds and mammals it serves the important purpose of providing fodder for the organization of a behavioral regime devoted to avoiding the places and the situations where

that fear is typically felt. Feeling the more complicated social emotions, like embarrassment or jealousy, serves similar homeostatic purposes in the social realm. Damasio does not consider Strawson's (1994) argument about our feeling that we are thinking, or understanding, or perceiving, but the same kind of homeostatic explanation may be applied to it as well. In order to monitor their internal states, living organisms need to know what is going on, on the inside and out, and need to be able to review what they know; to that end, their brains show them home movies, or qualia.

The problem with this materialist explanation of qualia, of course, is that neuroscientists also possess a professional recognition and understanding of the ways in which our nervous systems do not so much *register* the world objectively as *construct* it interpretively, by sorting through and organizing qualia. In this sense neuroscientists are by default idealists of a Kantian stripe—or rather, they would be, if they foregrounded this understanding of the nervous system as an epistemological condition for their own work. Instead, of course, they typically recognize that *humans* are by default Kantian-style idealists, while still insisting that they themselves, as *scientists*, are standard materialists.

With this observation we are, it should be clear, somewhere in the neighborhood of Wilde's epistemological impasse in "The Decay of Lying": at once [a] accepting the Kantian idealism that denies us access to the *Ding-an-sich* and [b] rejecting Kant's belief that we all experience the world in functionally identical ways because God shaped our understanding so as to construct the world identically leaves us [c] unable to tell the simple truth about anything. In order to restore the impression or shaky conviction of epistemological reliability to our philosophizing we must fiddle with one or the other side of the post-Kantian world view: either (contra a) we do have reliable access to the *Ding-an-sich* (our qualia are transparent to their material objects: the reductive representationalist view) or (contra b) God did create us capable of constructing the same world (our qualia may be superficially different but function in parallel ways: the functionalist view).

The third way to approach this problem is to have it both ways, which is to say (contra c) to tell the *complex* truth about everything. Neutral monism and M&P monism are versions of this complex truth, but as Strawson ruefully concludes, they don't solve the problem either, because there is no single perspective on the reality both of qualia and of extra-cranial events that will tame them into a single coherent monistic explanation. I submit that LP monism solves the problem at a higher (or at least more rhetorically entangled) level: like the Cretan who insists that all Cretans are liars, the neuroscientist insists that all humans construct out of sensory, affective, and cognitive qualia a reality of their own interpretive making; also like the Cretan, who presents himself or herself as telling the truth about all Cretans always lying, the neuroscientist presents herself or himself as a scientist who has established objectively that all humans construct their own reality out of qualia, and therefore is in some obviously impossible sense *not* among those who construct their own reality out of qualia.

But how is this monism? And how does it solve the Hard Problem of Consciousness?

#### **4. Rhetorical analysis of the liar paradox**

The earliest instance of the liar paradox (then called a *pseudomenon*) we have is from ancient Greece, attributed to the fourth-century-BCE Greek philosopher Eubulides of Miletus, who reportedly asked whether, if a man says he's lying, his statement is true or false. Bertrand Russell (1908, p.222) was apparently the first to assimilate a line from a sixth-century-BCE poem by Epimenides of Knossos to the liar paradox: "The oldest contradiction of the kind in question is the Epimenides. Epimenides the Cretan said that all Cretans were liars, and all other statements made by Cretans were certainly lies. Was this a lie?" This famous formulation is actually based on the Apostle Paul's quotation from and commentary on Epimenides' poem in the Epistle to Titus (1:12-13, *RSV*): "One of themselves, a prophet of their own, said: 'Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons.' This testimony is true." Three steps: Epimenides says that all Cretans

are liars; Paul notes not only that it was a Cretan who called all Cretans liars but that what he said was the truth; Russell restates Paul's quotation and commentary as a paradox.

I begin with this backstory, though it is familiar to many, because it offers an illustration of a point that is so obvious that it is often missed. Namely, the liar paradox begins logically with an assumed truth semantics: the assumption that any statement by X about Y is a statement of what X believes to be true about Y.<sup>1</sup> It should be quite evident that without this assumption the mere propositional *form* of the liar paradox could not reliably be taken as paradoxical, or even as apparently containing the kind of logical contradiction or tension that is traditionally read as paradoxical. If, for example, Epimenides is taken to be *deliberately exaggerating*—"all Cretans are liars" as an exaggeration of "most Cretans are liars," or even "all Cretans but me are liars"—the "Epimenides paradox" collapses. In order for it to stand as the famous paradox it has become since Russell, it has to be read as a self-referential and self-contradictory claim, or rather a contradiction between two claims, the explicit "all Cretans are liars" (with the sense that "I'm lying right now") and the implicit "I'm telling the truth." Deliberate exaggeration obviously entails an awareness that one is *not* telling the literal truth.

And indeed in actual language-use contexts we do regularly and knowingly say things we don't mean. We exaggerate. We imply things (such as "I am the only decent and honest Cretan"). We use irony, and other tropes—to trope, after all, is etymologically to *turn away* from the literal statement of truth. Paul Grice's (1975/1989) theory of conversational implicature was such a bombshell in the philosophy of language when it began circulating in mimeograph form after he offered it in the 1967 William James Lectures because Grice suggested outright that the meaning of a sentence may not be spelled out in it, but may instead need to be worked out by its hearers—a fact that is obvious in actual verbal communication but that had been systematically repressed in the philosophy of language. The implicit claim "I'm telling the truth" is not an empirical fact about every utterance, obviously, but neither is it a conversational implicature, something that the hearers of any given instance of the liar paradox work out; it is an *axiom*, derived by

abstraction (decontextualization) and idealization (normativization), out of an assumed semantics according to which the right sort of people *usually* mean what they say (or else really ought to). Every statement implies an assertion of its own truth, in other words, not in actual conversation, but in the notorious “null context”—that logical sleight-of-mind designed to dress negation (*no* context) up as positivity (*the* null context).

Indeed even Grice’s radical rethinking of linguistic meaning rests on a kind of displaced null context, namely the Cooperative Principle and its maxims, which he claims govern all human communication. For Grice it is by *assuming* that all human communicators seek to cooperate with their interlocutors—by hearing behind every utterance the implicit assertion “I am cooperating with you”—and then running every puzzling utterance through an algorithm derived from one or more maxims that listeners work out what the speaker is implicating. But of course not everyone contributes cooperatively to conversation, and we often manage to work out uncooperative speakers’ implicatures nonetheless. And several scholars (Clyne 1981, Thomson 1982, Loveday 1982) have detailed the ways in which Grice’s maxims are the maxims not of all speakers but of a certain sex, class, nationality, and age group—Grice’s own—and yet we do nonetheless, at least sometimes, manage to work out the implicatures of speakers from other groups, who bring different conversational maxims to bear on communication.

One of our primary channels for the successful interpretation of implicatures, in fact, is body language: tone of voice, facial expression, gestures, posture, proximity, etc. Consider the following series, which verbally indicates tonal (emotional) signals of attitude alone:

- [1] “All Cretans are liars,” Epimenides said slyly.
- [2] “All Cretans are liars,” Epimenides said sheepishly.
- [3] “All Cretans are liars,” Epimenides said musingly.
- [4] “All Cretans are liars,” Epimenides said sarcastically.
- [5] “All Cretans are liars,” Epimenides said bitterly.

Surely these iterations of “All Cretans are liars” are *not* all the “same sentence”? Surely each one *means* something very different from all the others? It is of course possible to reduce them all to the same locution, and then to insist that that reduction “is” the basic semantics of the sentence (and that the manifest semantic differences among them are secondary supplementations). But each would unquestionably have its own illocutionary force and intended perlocutionary effect, and each would also be performing its own indirect speech acts, including such indirect speech acts as “I’m telling the truth” or “I’m exaggerating for effect”—and it would only be by *suppressing* such differences (rather than simply assigning them supplementary status) that the logician could continue to assume that “the sentence” implies speaker-belief in its truth.

I submit, for example, that (1) is the only tonalization of the five that would warrant even a tentative paradoxical reading of the utterance; it seems to hint that Epimenides is implying some clever reversal of the face value of his words. In (2), he has probably just been caught lying about something relatively minor, by someone who likes and respects him, and whom he too likes and respects; saying sheepishly that all Cretans are liars is an exaggeration that might be taken to work implicitly (illocutionarily) as an apology. The musing tone in (3) seems to imply something like “There is *some displaced sense* in which all Cretans are liars”—i.e., every Cretan utterance is not 100% mendacious. The anger in (4) and (5) makes the utterance into an exaggerated condemnation of Epimenides’ fellow Cretans, from a position (say) of jaded moral superiority in (4) and from a position of hurt vulnerability in (5).

Nor are we limited in print to direct adverbial representations of the tonal/emotional attitudes with which speech is invariably charged. We could represent other kinesic signals as well:

[1’] “All Cretans are *liars*,” Epimenides said with a sidelong glance, suppressing a wicked smile.

[2’] “All Cretans *are* liars,” Epimenides said, hanging his head and heaving a pathetic little sigh.

[3'] "All Cretans ... are liars," Epimenides said, drawing on his pipe and looking off into the distance for a few beats.

[4'] "*All Cretans are liars*," Epimenides said, rolling his eyes.

[5'] "*All Cretans are liars*," Epimenides said, his eyes flashing.

Each of these versions gives us a different prosodic enactment of the four spoken words, along with verbal descriptions of facial expressions (1', 4', 5'), posture (2', 3'), timing (3'), and meaningful breathing (2'). In spoken conversation, of course, we interpret multiple kinesic signals at once, and certainly would have done so automatically, without noticing our complex processing of those multiple signals, had we been present at the conversation Eubulides of Miletus describes in asking whether, if a man *says* he's lying, his statement is true or false. Eubulides not only neglects to give us the kind of kinesic information we would conversationally need to make that determination; he (or the philosophical tradition that explains him) seems to believe that it would somehow skew the (logical) experiment to provide that information.

It is indicative of the extent to which the linguistic and philosophy of language traditions have suppressed tonality and other forms of body language as significant channels of utterer's meaning and listener's interpretation, in fact, that in his discussion of the uses that have been made of Peirce's terms *type* and *token* in linguistics and philosophy of language Christopher Hutton (1990, p.19) notes that in Peirce it is actually a tone-token-type triad (tone as First, token as Second, type as Third<sup>2</sup>), but that no one quite knows what to do with tone: "The tone or qualisign corresponds to the category of Firstness, but it is by no means clear how the notions of 'qualities' and 'feelings' can be transferred into a discussion of language." Isn't tonality in fact, as Peirce hints (and Bakhtin 1934-35/1981 argues more strenuously), the First constitutive indicator of linguistic meaning? Hutton (1990) is a salutary critique of the twentieth-century tendency among linguists and philosophers of language to assume sameness—to assume that the various tokens of a given linguistic type (say, all the uses of the word "the" in this paper) are all precontextually organized by that type, so that their contextual variants do not need to be taken

into consideration—but even he doesn't have a clear idea how tone could be rendered significant in linguistic communication. Remember that a few paragraphs ago, I described “the null context” sarcastically as “that logical sleight-of-mind designed to dress negation (*no* context) up as positivity (*the* null context)”—italicizing “the” there at the last to signal my sarcastic tonalization, so as rhetorically to undermine the *the-ness* of “the null context”. This sort of meaningful tonalization is endemic in speech, of course, and, as the form of both series of (1-5) attitudinalized “Epimenides paradoxes” above reminds us, that fact is commonly represented in novels as well. It is far less common in philosophical discourse, though the closer academic discourse comes to a representation of speech (think of Wittgenstein 1953, or Austin 1962/1975, or philosophical dialogues from Plato to Wilde) the more overtly tone is indicated, and relied on for meaning, there as well. It seems to me that Peirce is quite right to insist on tone as the qualitative First that is then put into dynamic relationship in a token as Second and habitualized as a type as Third. The First step in abstracting linguistic types out of actual use contexts into “the null context” is precisely the suppression of tone as a meaning-bearing quality of speech; only when that suppression is fully accomplished can the logician proceed to suppress the Secondary variability of tokens.

Now obviously logicians are free to delimit their intellectual interests any way they want; and the fact that the liar paradox has primarily been subjected to analysis in terms of decontextualized semantic logic suggests that there is a critical mass of philosophers who do find this sort of analysis rewarding. But it is misleading, to put it mildly, that the liar paradox is typically posed in ordinary conversational language, which would seem to encourage us to draw on the full range of knowledge we use in conversation to work out what people are saying—but then the methodological net is tightened, and contextual/rhetorical considerations are disallowed. Thus for example when Eubulides of Miletus asks whether, if a man says he's lying, his statement is true or false, the conversational form of the question—presumably the man *tells someone* that he's lying, in a specific speech context—would lead the unsuspecting nonlogician to expect a full answer to depend heavily on rhetorical situation: who the man is talking to, and where, and

when, and why, and what the history of their relationship is, and what he's feeling about the situation, and what impression he's trying to make on the other(s), etc. Certainly the nonlogician would expect to be able to draw inferences from the man's tone of voice, and more generally from what is collectively known about the man's personal tonalization habits: if he says "Yeah, I'm lying" *cheerfully*, does that really indicate, as it seems to, that he is light-heartedly insouciant about it all, or do we in fact know that he often uses a cheerful tone to mask bitter irony? If the nonlogician in question were an ethnographer of speech, s/he would want to analyze not just the vocal tonalities but the body language (facial expressions, gestures, postures, proximity, eye contact, timing, etc.) of everyone present, preferably for the entire conversation, ideally for every conversation everyone present has ever been in. Conversational tonalities and other kinesic signals are subtly interactive forms of communicational directedness; in an important sense, the whole group participates in every tonalization, indeed every attitudinalization. Eubulides of Miletus—like the philosophers who have weighed in on the liar paradox ever since—seems to be asking us to suppress all that information that we rely on so heavily in ordinary linguistic communication, and *just answer the question*, in the abstract, in the null context: quick, true or false? To the nonlogician, who is interested more in the complexity of communication than in abstract intellectual puzzles, that seems like a mug's game—like being asked to admire great paintings through a welder's helmet, or to run a marathon with both legs splinted at the knee.

So what about tonalizations in Wilde's dialogue? What do they tell us about its status as a liar paradox? Vivian, like all of Wilde's most attractive heroes, and like Wilde himself, is a wit, for whom making witty remarks is a competitive sport—specifically, a competitive form of theatricality, with a heightened meta-awareness (campy self-consciousness) of the interaction between himself as actor and his audience. His wit is everywhere designed to impress, to make an impression, and specifically to make Cyril and the future readers of his essay laugh admiringly at the outlandish, over-the-top cleverness of his formulations. Unlike Epimenides in (1), above, however, he does not utter his witticisms slyly; if anything he affects an ingenuous sincerity, so that, when Cyril protests at his wilder remarks, he protests that he is *right*. He never

says explicitly that he is lying; indeed his (or Wilde's) strategy is typically to say apparently absurd things with every verbal and nonverbal assurance that he is speaking the honest-to-God truth.

[VIVIAN.] "The crude commercialism of America, its materialising spirit, its indifference to the poetical side of things, and its lack of imagination and of high unattainable ideals, are entirely due to that country having adopted for its national hero a man, who according to his own confession, was incapable of telling a lie, and it is not too much to say that the story of George Washington and the cherry-tree has done more harm, and in a shorter space of time, than any other moral tale in the whole of literature."

CYRIL. My dear boy!

VIVIAN. I assure you it is the case, and the amusing part of the whole thing is that the story of the cherry-tree is an absolute myth. (ibid, p.27)

[VIVIAN.] "They will call upon Shakespeare—they always do—and will quote that hackneyed passage forgetting that this unfortunate aphorism about Art holding the mirror up to Nature, is deliberately said by Hamlet in order to convince the bystanders of his absolute insanity in all art-matters."

CYRIL. Ahem! Another cigarette, please.

VIVIAN. My dear fellow, whatever you may say, it is merely a dramatic utterance, and no more represents Shakespeare's real views upon art than the speeches of Iago represent his real views upon morals. (ibid, p.28)

The tensions in the dialogue that would appear to justify a liar-paradox reading of it, then, are somewhat different from the classic versions of the liar paradox, in which the speaker *claims* to be lying: Vivian claims to be telling the truth, but the truth that he claims to be telling is that lying is far more admirable and important than truth-telling; and his arguments in favor of lying are expressly designed to fly in the face of common sense and common morality, and thus to curry condemnation as *bad* lies, "bad" in both the qualitative sense (so unconvincing that no one

would ever believe them) and the moral sense (flouting every decent value society holds dear).<sup>3</sup> Like the classic liar paradox, in other words, Wilde's in "The Decay of Lying" rests on two claims, one explicit, one implicit; unlike the classic liar paradox, however, where the explicit claim is "I'm lying" and the implicit claim is "I'm telling the truth," in Wilde's dialogue the explicit claim is "I'm telling the truth" and the implicit claim is "I'm lying." Also like the classic liar paradox, Wilde's in "The Decay of Lying" rests very uneasily on the implicit claim; unlike the implicit claim in the classic liar paradox, however, which is normatively assumed or posited, Wilde's, like Gricean implicatures, has to be (and can be) "worked out" rhetorically.

Does Vivian's celebration of lying, combined with the deliberate outlandishness of his truth-claims—an attribute he specifically associates with lying in the highest (artistically creative) sense<sup>4</sup>—warrant an interpretation in which he is implicitly claiming to be lying as well? Does his apparent determination to provoke Philistine censure as a "bad" (unconvincing and immoral) liar enhance or detract from the plausibility of a reading in which he is implicitly saying "I'm lying"? The very fact that we have in "The Decay of Lying" a rhetorical situation that is sufficiently fleshed out for us to be able to ask such questions, and weigh the textual evidence for the various interpretive answers to them, significantly distinguishes Wilde's dialogue from the classic liar paradox, where rhetorical situation is either pared down to the bare minimum—a man says he's lying—or eliminated entirely, as the paradox is first reduced to pure logical structure and then restated using logical notation.

This does not, obviously, exhaust the possibilities for rhetorical analysis of the dialogue. The question "Does his apparent determination to provoke Philistine censure as a 'bad' (unconvincing and immoral) liar enhance or detract from the plausibility of a reading in which he is implicitly saying 'I'm lying'?" in particular seems to demand further rhetorical unpacking. How is Vivian's snobbish sneering at Philistines rhetorically significant to a liar-paradox reading? At work in the dialogue is a double-readership strategy akin to that posited in theories of irony: Vivian/Wilde motivates one audience to "get it," to figure out that his apparently absurd

(though ostensibly “true”) explicit argument conveys a seriously intended (though presumably “lying”) implicit message as well, and ideally to agree with his implicatures, by contrasting them favorably with a scapegoat lower-class Philistine audience that doesn’t get it—that, as he says, catches from fogs not an effect but a cold. That latter audience does empirically exist, but their importance to Vivian/Wilde is more rhetorical than empirical: they serve as an implicit *threat* or *goad* to the audience he wants to woo. Agree with me, “get it,” and think of yourself as smart, witty, cultured like me; find me shocking, absurd, unfathomable, and think of yourself as dull, a Philistine like Mrs. Arundel.

In Aristotle’s terms, this constitutes a strategic doubling of the *ethos/pathos* relationship. For the audience Vivian courts, beginning with Cyril, his ethical appeal constructs a character for himself that is smart, aesthetically sophisticated, witty, and truth-telling, and his pathetic (emotionally charged) appeal urges his audience to enhance self-esteem by joining him in that character. For the audience Vivian scapegoats, his ethical appeal is actually a dis appeal, a blocking or thwarting of appeal, setting up a negative character for himself as a snob and a dandy (a “queer”) who is only interested in shocking the bourgeoisie (this would be his pathetic dis appeal) with idle and overblown lies and fantasies, without the slightest concern for morality or the truth. *Logos* in this doubling is doubled as well: the very fact that his Philistine readers would associate his logical appeal with lies as immoral mendacity is mobilized to encourage his cultured readers to associate his logical appeal with lies as a higher artistic creativity, and thus a higher aesthetic truth. The risk Vivian/Wilde runs, obviously, is that he will alienate actual readers who identify with the cast-off Philistine audience and respond negatively to his snobbish, dandyish, iconoclastic liar-*ethos*, dismissing the entire dialogue as the worst kind of lies; but that is obviously a rhetorical risk he considers worth running. If in fact he alienates *all* his readers, he can at least feel superior to them; but if, as has obviously proven the case, some readers are inclined to admire and agree with him, the threat of being lumped with the Lumpenproletariat adds a dash of *pathos* to that inclination.

But: even if we do lump for a liar-paradox reading of the dialogue, how is the LP metaphysics thereby associated with it a form of monism? And how does it solve the Hard Problem of Consciousness?

### **5. LP monism**

The notion that Vivian's logical appeal to his cultured audience might encourage them to associate his outlandish truth-claims with lies as a higher artistic creativity, and thus a higher aesthetic truth, begins to move the liar paradox beyond sheer iconoclastic illogic to the monistic philosophical position I promised to outline in section 1.

Let's begin with the outlandishness of those truth-claims—"witty remarks." Vivian/Wilde's key strategy in making them is to reverse commonsensical assumptions about lying and telling the truth:

Many a young man starts in life with a natural gift for exaggeration which, if nurtured in congenial and sympathetic surroundings, or by the imitation of the best models, might grow into something really great and wonderful. But, as a rule, he comes to nothing. ... He either falls into careless habits of accuracy, or takes to frequenting the society of the aged and the well-informed. Both things are equally fatal to his imagination, as indeed they would be fatal to the imagination of anybody, and in a short time he develops a morbid and unhealthy faculty of truth-telling, begins to verify all statements made in his presence, has no hesitation in contradicting people who are much younger than himself, and often ends by writing novels which are so lifelike that no one can possibly believe in their probability. (ibid, p.17)

Wilde calls this young man's habits of accuracy "careless," which might be taken to imply that such habits develop randomly; but the rest of the passage suggests that it is so easy to fall carelessly into habits of accuracy precisely because "decent" "moral" society everywhere encourages such habits—because accuracy is a cultural norm. Presumably the young man

“begins to verify all statements made in his presence” by asking “the aged and the well-informed,” or by reading books and journal articles, or even by becoming a scientist, probably doing what Kuhn (1962/1970) calls “normal” science, working to discover empirical evidence in support of a widely accepted paradigm—in all these ways “verifying” (as Wilde would see it) that “truth” is indeed whatever conforms to group norms.

We might in fact allegorize this passage as a model for the debate between the two prevailing monist positions, idealism and materialism: the young man with the “natural gift for exaggeration” is a budding idealist, committed not to matter but to mind, and specifically to the hyperbolic enhancement of qualia as art (higher lying); the counterpressures he succumbs to in the end are the normative pressures of materialism, which has dominated scientific thought for the last several centuries, and, as Wilde argues at length, has dominated English fiction for the several decades previous to his writing. The fact that the verification of “statements” tends to involve appeals to authorities suggests the extent to which even materialism involves the collective hierarchical organization of qualia, a different kind of enhancement from the one Art perpetrates; but then that organization of qualia succeeds no more perfectly than Art does. Not all empirical science is “normal,” after all—some is “revolutionary”—and normal science itself, as Kuhn insists, tends to produce anomalies that eventually lead to the breakdown of the existing paradigm. And, of course, science inescapably channels its findings through the “human element,” namely qualia. The touchstone for this materialist enhancement of qualia is matter, and countless methodological workarounds have been developed to escape the experiential (empirical) primacy of qualia, to make it seem as if science were a simple registering of material reality; but of course the awareness, everywhere present in the protocols of scientific method, that these are *workarounds* (hedging against “the human factor”) reminds us that the primacy of qualia is inescapable.

Kuhn (1962/1970) is, needless to say, an idealist critique of materialism. His insistence that science is driven by paradigms, and by the revolutionary scientists who develop them, and not by

the normal scientists who painstakingly verify them (and ultimately undo them, simply because no paradigm can ever encompass the complexity of the *Ding-an-sich*), is fundamentally an insistence that science is driven by mind, not matter. Matter is the Martian chained to the wall down in the basement, the alien being that no one can understand; the succession of paradigms revolutionary scientists invent to explain that Martian are more akin to Wilde's "natural gift for exaggeration," or hyperbolic enhancement of qualia.

Wilde and Kuhn both recognize, however, that matter exists, and has the inertial capacity to resist assimilation to idealist explanatory paradigms. And, unlike most monists, idealist and materialist alike, Wilde and Kuhn both offer *rhetorical* models of reality: it's not that reality *is* this way or that way, but rather that people work interactively with other people and with nonhuman objects to *negotiate* explanations of reality. For Kuhn, these negotiations involve the interactive tensions between the revolutionary scientists who invent the reigning paradigms and the normal scientists who seek to verify them, and, in so doing, discover anomalies that erode and ultimately unseat them; for Wilde, they take the rhetorical form of the liar paradox. This is the core of my suggestion that the liar paradox constitutes a model for a monist metaphysics.

As we saw in section 4, Wilde's liar paradox is saturated in rhetorical situation, and thus in interactive social *perceptions* of truths and lies. For Wilde the liar paradox is not so much a logical conundrum as it is a philosophical attempt to negotiate these interactive perceptions. And the propositional form his liar paradox takes—

(outlandish) truth-claims = creative (higher) lying = (higher) truth

—depends for its philosophical engagement with reality on the experiential reaction from his readers (modeled for them in the dialogue by Cyril) that his truth-claims are outlandish.

As we also saw in section 4, this rhetorical dependency is complexly hierarchized and emotionally mobilized. Vivian quips, for example: “If a man is sufficiently unimaginative to produce evidence in support of a lie, he might just as well speak the truth at once” (ibid, p.15). This overturns our implicit assumptions or maxims [a] that telling the truth is preferable to lying, [b] that producing evidence in support of the truth is preferable to making unsupported truth-claims, and [c] that imagination in support of a truth is somewhat suspect, but imagination in support of a lie is to be condemned outright. The high value we place on truth-telling Wilde shifts to lying; the high value we place on providing evidence for our truth-claims Wilde continues to associate with truth-telling but devalues, and, recognizing that some people try to disguise a lie as the truth by providing evidence for it, treats lying-as-misrepresentation as an imitation of truth-telling. Both, after all, are designed to convince listeners that *X is Y*. Since we tend to associate our commonsensical assumptions with “the truth,” these iconoclastic reversals of our commonsensical assumptions seem at first—and for some readers always—to be a perverse kind of game-playing with the truth, a *dissoi logoi* for purposes of sheer entertainment. We would not initially associate them with lying, since as Vivian points out lying is commonsensically associated with prevarication for immoral purposes, like cheating, or escaping punishment for bad deeds, and Vivian is clearly not trying to get away with anything here. He’s just having fun—but then having fun, and spreading that fun around, is how he redefines lying, in the passage quoted earlier: “For the aim of the liar is simply to charm, to delight, to give pleasure” (ibid, p.27). And then, once we’ve granted him this premise, he goes on to insist that true artistic lying does not merely charm, delight, give pleasure, but actually shapes reality. At each stage of Wilde’s argument, in other words, the liar paradox works by setting up cognitive and affective (emotional, motivational, attitudinal) dissonance in the reader, creating in us a tension between opposing views:

[1] His insistence that lying is a good thing conflicts with our conditioned preference for the truth;

[2] His insistence that (higher) lying is motivated only by the desire to charm and delight conflicts with our conditioned assumption that lying is motivated by dissembling (pretend truth-telling) for immoral purposes;

[3] His insistence that (higher) lying has the power to transform our perception of reality conflicts with our willingness to accept (2).

And I suggest that it is this multilayered interactive tension, this complexly recursive interpersonal cognitive and affective dissonance, that makes Wilde's liar paradox an effective model for a monist metaphysics. That dissonance is, after all, at the sharp edges of our attempts to understand ourselves and our world. We [a] start with our qualia, inevitably, and [b] want to be able to trust them, to rely on them to model the world for us more or less accurately. But [c] that reliance is frustrated by two forces outside ourselves: [d] other people and [e] things. To minimize our frustration, we [f] seek to master those forces. Our desire/need to master (d) other people leads to [g] group dynamics (shared qualia); our desire/need to master (e) things leads to [h] empiricism (triangulating our qualia with other people's, and with the readings off various measuring instruments). But both (g) and (h) repeatedly fail to eliminate (c) our frustrations, generating [i] cognitive and affective dissonance between (a-b) the qualia-based world inside our own heads, which we are inclined to take as a reliable representation of the world outside it, and (d-e) the signals coming to us from outside our heads.

Most forms of metaphysical monism (and for that matter dualism) attempt to sort these tensions and dissonances out into stable states: in idealism, into the belief that mind generates and conditions matter; in materialism, into the belief that matter generates and conditions mind; in dualism, into the belief that there are these two separate worlds, of mind and of matter, and each operates according to its own stable laws. Because stable states are the default destination of metaphysical modeling, any tensions or dissonances left churning up the stable states are taken to be flaws in the modeling process; and the fact that those tensions and dissonances *are never*

purified out of the modeling process—they are endemic to it—leads to complaints about an “explanatory gap” and “the Hard Problem of Consciousness.” What LP monism does, I suggest, is to embrace the cognitive and affective dissonances, embrace the rhetoricity of our engagement with the world, and so offer a truer account of the world as we experience it.

What is it about the “strange loops” and “tangled hierarchies” (Hofstadter, 1979) of LP monism that makes it a *monistic* philosophical position? Quite simply, it is the fact that the primacy of qualia in our relationship with the world seems to condemn or confine us to those loops and tangles. Our qualia condition us to both certainty—we *know* we are right about something, and will cling to our feeling of rightness even in the face of overwhelming empirical evidence to the contrary (Burton, 2008)—and to uncertainty, the awareness that our qualia often let us down, lead us astray. The loopy strangeness that results is not simply a product of consciousness, however—not merely an idealism, say. It is, rather, a product of the tensional relationality between consciousness and the external world. We know that there is something wrong with our qualia of certainty when they produce unexpected and unfortunate outcomes. It is the *interaction* between qualia and world that is strangely loopy. And that interaction is one thing, one (kind of) stuff.

LP monism would thus be a highly principled response to the complexity of human consciousness—to our simultaneous awareness (a-b) that we rely on our qualia as guides to reality and (c-g) that they let us down often enough that we know we can’t (entirely) rely on them as guides to reality. Because of (c-g), we have to be a bit cautious about (a-b); but also because of (c-g), we can’t be sure when caution about (a-b) is indicated. So we play it by ear, sometimes staking our reputations on a truth-claim about reality and hoping for the best, other times playing it safe and hedging.<sup>5</sup>

Or, well ... so it seems to me now.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> A.N. Prior (1976, p.139) notes approvingly that John Buridan (ca. 1300-ca. 1360) built an argument *against* the paradoxicality of the liar paradox on the assumption that “every proposition, whatever else it may signify or assert, signifies or asserts, by its very form as a proposition, that it is itself true. Any proposition, therefore, which asserts or implies its own falsehood asserts both its falsehood and its truth, and is bound to be in fact false, since at least *something* that it asserts to be the case is not so.” If the liar paradox is false, it is not paradoxical. Prior goes on to discuss Buridan’s later objection that “propositions do *not* in general signify in virtue of their very form that they are themselves true” (ibid), because there is

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a difference between signifying something “formally” (linguistically) and signifying something “virtually” (metalinguistically). Prior rebuts this later theory and, citing Peirce’s (1934, sec.340, emphasis in original: “*every proposition asserts its own truth*”) discussion of the liar paradox in support of his view, reinstates Buridan’s earlier theory: “In other words, a language *can* contain its own semantics, that is to say its own theory of meaning, provided that this semantics contains the law that for any sentence *x*, *x* means that *x* is true” (ibid, p.141).

It should be noted, of course, that these implicit self-referential truth-claims *do* apply to all propositions, which are artificial logical reductions of spoken or written utterances that have whatever characteristics logicians assign to them. The confusion arises through logicians’ assumption that actual spoken or written utterances are propositions too, propositions in the rough, so to speak, which, once they have been pruned of all their contextual/communicative/interactive complexity, can be treated as propositions. When Eubulides of Miletus asks whether a man *saying* “I’m lying” is lying or telling the truth, the hypothetical man’s utterance is obviously not a proposition until logicians agree to treat it (and purify it) as one; but this is a nicety that is often forgotten by logicians.

<sup>2</sup> Peirce writes in “Prolegomena to an Apology for Pragmaticism” (1906):

A common mode of estimating the amount of matter in a MS. or printed book is to count the number of words. There will ordinarily be about twenty *the*’s on a page, and of course they will count as twenty words. In another sense of the word “word,” however, there is but one word “the” in the English language; and it is impossible that this word should lie visibly on a page or be heard in any voice, for the reason that it is not a Single thing or Single event. It does not exist; it only determines things that do exist. Such a definitely significant Form, I propose to term a *Type*. A Single event which happens once and whose identity is limited to that one happening or a Single object or thing which is in some single place at any one instant of time, such event or thing being significant only as occurring just when and where it does, such as this or that word on a single line of a single page of a single copy of a book, I will venture to call a *Token*. An indefinite significant character such as a tone of voice can neither be called a Type nor a Token. I propose to call such a Sign a *Tone*. (1933, sec.537)

Note that Peirce does not specifically assign tones, tokens, and types to his three Universes. It is clear that a tone must be a First, a token must be a Second, and a type must be a Third, and the editors of the

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*Collected Papers* (ibid, sec.537n‡) note that “The type, token and tone are the legisigns, sinsigns and qualisigns discussed in 2.243f and form division (1) in the note to 536,” which does make the association of tone with Firstness, token with Secondness, and type with Thirdness clear; but Peirce doesn’t explicitly state those triadic associations. It’s also significant that he begins by theorizing the type, the Third, then moves to the token, the Second, and, after very briefly theorizing the tone, the First, returns to a discussion of type and token: “In order that a Type may be used, it has to be embodied in a Token which shall be a sign of the Type, and thereby of the object the Type signifies. I propose to call such a Token of a Type an *Instance* of the Type” (ibid). It is possible that he had not worked out the full triadic implications of this formulation, and never quite got around to theorizing the tone properly; and it does seem as if he were far more interested in tokens as instances of types than in the full triad.

Accordingly, Hutton (1990) typically refers to the full triad not as “the tone-token-type triad” but as “the type-token-tone relation” (ibid, pp.17, 21), “the type-token-tone distinction” (ibid, p.20), or “the type-token(-tone) distinction” (ibid, p.11). And in his first chapter, an exposition of Peirce’s use of the terms, after complaining that “Most expositions of the type-token distinction fail to mention the category of tone” (ibid, p.21), he too most often refers to “the type-token relation” (ibid, pp.8, 9, 10, 16, 19, 28, 30; this collocation also appears in the subtitle of his book) or “type-token distinction” (ibid, pp.3, 21), dropping tone from the triad, reversing the order of token and type, and converting Peirce’s triad into a “relation.”

While this nomenclature does seem to reflect the unfinished state in which Peirce left the triad, a full thinking of the triad’s entelechy would certainly need to reframe the token not as an *instance* of the type but as a dynamic interactive object that eventually *gives rise* to mediatory conceptions of the type as an habitualization of tone and token. Note also that “The category of Secondness is essentially one of relation” (Hutton, 1990, p.13), and a token is a Second—but Secondness in this particular triad would involve not a “type-token relation” but a “tone-token relation.” Peirce’s Third will by definition bring the First and the Second into relation—but while Peirce can imagine a triad that falls short of Thirdness, leaving in this case tone and token in dynamic interaction without moving into the finality of type, there is no triad without Firstness.

<sup>3</sup> See for example Carpenter’s (1891, p.572) remarks the same year as Wilde’s dialogue was originally published: quoting the passage from Vivian’s first monologue to the effect that “What Art reveals to us is Nature’s lack of design, her curious crudities, her extraordinary monotony, her absolutely unfinished condition,” Carpenter notes that “A statement at first thought so astonishing and almost revolting as this is shortly followed by others scarcely less surprising.” Quoting Wilde’s line to the effect that action “is the last resource of those who do not know how to dream,” he opines that “Statements like these, seemingly so flippant, prejudice the casual reader against Mr. Wilde” (ibid).

<sup>4</sup> “Who he was who first, without ever having gone out to the rude chase, told the wondering cavemen at sunset how he had dragged the Megatherium from the purple darkness of its jasper cave, or slain the

Mammoth in single combat and brought back its gilded tusks, we cannot tell, and not one of our modern anthropologists, for all their much-boasted science, has had the ordinary courage to tell us. Whatever was his name or race, he certainly was the true founder of social intercourse” (Wilde, 1891/1961, p.27).

<sup>5</sup> I say “we,” implying that this is folk psychology, though of course there are people who believe they are always right, and have no sense of (c-g) whatsoever; but I submit that even always-righters must know, lying in bed at night, that they aren’t always right, that reality doesn’t quite conform to their views of it, that their predictions about reality don’t always come true, and so on.

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