

The Beauty of Philosophy

Bryan Frances

Research Professor of Theoretical Philosophy

University of Tartu, Estonia

NONPHIL: So, what research topics are you thinking about these days?

PHIL: I'm working on impossibilia.

NONPHIL: Really? I don't think I've ever even heard of it (or them; whatever). Where do they show up?

PHIL: Well, there aren't any.

NONPHIL: Huh?

PHIL: There are no impossibilia. Zero.

NONPHIL: Oh, I'm so sorry. It must be frustrating to start out trying to study something and then discover they don't exist.

PHIL: No, no. I knew all along that there weren't any impossibilia. By 'impossibilia' I mean things like round squares and the like.

NONPHIL: What?! Why on earth would you try to study something you already know doesn't even exist?

PHIL: Because they are fascinating!

NONPHIL: I'm having a bit of trouble understanding you. Are you just saying that even though there are no impossibilia, there could have been such things, and that *possibility* is fascinating? I guess I could understand that . . . maybe.

PHIL: Sorry. no. I've known all along that it was literally impossible for there to be any impossibilia at all.

NONPHIL: You're messed up.

PHIL: Yeah, that's what my mom said. And for the record, I didn't really "know" there are no impossibilia.

NONPHIL: Then why'd you say so for goodness sake?!

PHIL: Well, sometimes it's a lot more convenient, so conversation goes better.

NONPHIL: Oh, right: like this conversation is going so well. So, why don't you know there are no impossibilia? Do you think there's a chance some exist? So you've got some doubts about the matter?

PHIL: Hell no. It's perfectly obvious that there are no impossibilia: just look at the freakin' *name*. I'm saying that I don't know there are no impossibilia because I'm saying that I don't know *anything*.

NONPHIL: So . . . you're admitting that you're a know-nothing loser.

PHIL: Yes, but so are you and everyone else. Knowledge is an illusion. The concept of knowledge is akin to the concept of a naked person with a shirt on. The arguments for radical scepticism are correct: there is no knowledge, of impossibilia or anything else.

NONPHIL: I'll just ignore that. Let me try again to figure out why you think it's fascinating to study something you say couldn't even exist. Are you saying that even though there are no impossibilia, it's fascinating to study the *beliefs* people have about them? Even without knowing what impossibilia are supposed to be, I can kinda understand why someone might be interested in our attitudes about them. After all, there are no witches, but it's cool to study how people have thought about them over the centuries. Please tell me I'm on the right track.

PHIL: Definitely not; my apologies. I couldn't care less what people think about them. In fact, I don't think anyone has any beliefs about them anyway.

NONPHIL: Oh. Do people not have beliefs about them because they haven't heard of them? Like quarks or dark matter? That makes sense; I hadn't heard about them until you mentioned them.

PHIL: Not exactly. I hold that no one has any beliefs about anything.

NONPHIL: Huh? What do you mean no one has any beliefs? I believe lots of things!

PHIL: Nope. On my view, beliefs are no more real than witches and fairies—or impossibilia or knowledge. There are loads of interesting cognitive processes and states, but none of them are beliefs. I've had this conviction for years now upon reading Willard Quine, Paul Feyerabend, and the two Churchlands, Paul and Patricia.

NONPHIL: Wait! *Conviction*, you say? Do you mean *belief*? Surely you must! 'Conviction' and 'belief' are just about synonymous. You just contradicted yourself! You're saying that you believe there are no beliefs!

PHIL: No again. When I say things like 'I believe', I am just speaking with the vulgar. I don't really mean it, any more than I mean it when I say that people know things.

NONPHIL: Oh, I see. So when you say things like 'I believe', you are putting a kind of skewed interpretation on those words.

PHIL: Well, almost but not quite. I don't think there are any interpretations (or impossibilia, knowledge, witches, fairies, or beliefs). Saul Kripke's interpretation of Wittgenstein's work convinced me of the non-existence of interpretations. And yes, I realize that I just said that Kripke had an *interpretation*; it's tough to not speak with the vulgar.

NONPHIL: No interpretations! You mean we don't interpret . . . anything? Like *ever*?

PHIL: Right. There is no interpretation or meaning. Live with it.

NONPHIL: You really are nuts.

PHIL: That's what my sister said.

NONPHIL: I'll bet almost all people think you're nuts.

PHIL: Sure. If there were people.

NONPHIL: Excuse me?

PHIL: Strictly speaking, there are no people.

NONPHIL: I have no idea what you're saying.

PHIL: That's about right since ideas require interpretations. Ha ha.

NONPHIL: You're saying you don't exist. Seriously.

PHIL: Yep. Ever since I thought hard about parthood, vagueness, and the paradoxes of material composition, I came to the view that there are no composite objects, including people.

NONPHIL: You're quite the character. I have to admit that you're pretty brave in your philosophizing.

PHIL: Thanks, but strictly speaking I wouldn't be brave even if I existed.

NONPHIL: Oh really? Are you saying that most other philosophers are braver than you?

PHIL: No, no. No philosopher is brave. In fact, no non-philosophers are brave either.

NONPHIL: (Sigh.) Please explain.

PHIL: Well, when predicated of a person, bravery is a character trait, right? But there are no character traits. John Doris and others in both philosophy and social psychology convinced me.

NONPHIL: Never mind any of that rubbish. What else are you ("you") working on these days?

PHIL: Holes, cracks, shadows, absences, and omissions. You know: other things that don't exist.

NONPHIL: Well, of course. I should have known (or "known"). So you're saying that although there is a chunk of Swiss cheese with lots of holes and cracks in it, and the Sun is making it cast a shadow on the table, strictly speaking the holes, cracks, and shadow don't exist. I will omit any comment on omissions; and my remarks will similarly be absent of any remarks on absences. I can joke too.

PHIL: Funny! But I have to correct you a bit, since I don't think the cheese, Sun, or table exist either.

NONPHIL: Oh, right. How silly of me to forget that you reject normal objects. Umm . . . "you" reject normal objects.

PHIL: Yeah. And by the way, even if the Sun existed, it wouldn't be yellow.

NONPHIL: Wait. The Sun isn't yellow? Is it like orange or something?

PHIL: No. It's no colour at all. But that's not because the sun is weird or our photos are screwed up. Bananas aren't yellow either. Nothing is coloured.

NONPHIL: Oh please. I open my eyes and see colour. That's just a fact. You mean that colour is just in our minds, right? Now *that* I can understand!

PHIL: Sorry, but no. Colour is nowhere, either in the world or in our minds. Colours are like witches, fairies, beliefs, impossibilia, knowledge, interpretations, composite objects, character traits, holes, cracks, shadows, absences, and omissions. And keep in mind that there are no minds, as minds would be brains and there are no brains.

NONPHIL: Idiot.

PHIL: That's what my kids say.

NONPHIL: Any other new research topics?

PHIL: Mere possibililia.

NONPHIL: Sigh. Okay. Please tell me that some of them exist.

PHIL: Well, about zero percent of them exist. Or maybe 100%. Or maybe it's undefined. Kinda hard to say.

NONPHIL: Oh man. I don't understand but I'm getting used to this state of confusion.

PHIL: In one sense there are infinitely many of them but none exist; so, zero percent exist. In another sense, there are infinitely many of them and they all exist; so, 100% exist. In yet another sense, there are none of them and none of them exist; so the percentage is undefined (zero divided by zero is undefined). Like I said, the logic is confusing. And don't forget that there are no "senses" (interpretations), despite what I just said.

NONPHIL: I never suspected you would be so bad with numbers.

PHIL: Thanks for that. But in any case, there are no numbers. I'm a total eliminativist about them.

NONPHIL: Of course! All of mathematics is bullshit! Why the hell not?!

PHIL: Not quite. Math is fine the way it is, used instrumentally. It's just that there are no numbers, strictly speaking.

NONPHIL: I'm not sure I get you. Are you saying math claims are true but don't need numbers to exist in order to be true? I think I might be able to understand that! Thank God! We're making progress!

PHIL: Almost, but not quite! I understand the idea you're articulating, but my position is that no math claims are true.

NONPHIL: Oh please. Twice two is four, in case you don't know. Moron.

PHIL: After I studied the semantic paradoxes I realized that there is no truth: truth is an inconsistent concept. That's why no math claims are true.

NONPHIL: Hang on: no truths at all? So you're saying that your own beliefs aren't true?

PHIL: That's just about right. If I had beliefs, that is. And if I existed in the first place. And if there were interpretations. Then yeah. But when I say 'yeah' I am not saying 'yeah, it's *true*'.

NONPHIL: So you're admitting that your own view (which you don't believe, but whatever) isn't true.

PHIL: Yes. But like I said, that's true of everything: no claim at all is true. Well, it's not *true* of everything, but you know what I mean (if there were meaning, that is).

NONPHIL: My God. So what do you do research on that definitely, totally exists?

PHIL: Harry Potter.

NONPHIL: Uh, I got news for you: those books were fiction.

PHIL: Oh, I know that: the books were fiction, of course. I mean: if there were any books. And if there were any interpretations. And if there was any knowledge. And if I existed.

NONPHIL: You're saying Harry Potter exists. Truly.

PHIL: Well, not *truly* of course, as there are no truths. But sure: he exists. Now, don't get me wrong. He's not flesh and blood or located in England. He exists nowhere and nowhen. And he was not created by J.K. Rowling either, since she doesn't exist. He's like a number, if there were any numbers.

NONPHIL: You make no sense.

PHIL: Well of course! The only way I could *make sense* is if there were senses, which are interpretations. But as I said earlier, there are no interpretations. But of course I really *said* no such thing, as I don't exist and there are no sayings. You see how difficult it is to not speak with the vulgar. Language is designed for the four 'F's: fighting, fleeing, feeding, and . . . you know. It's ill-equipped for truth, if there were any truths.

NONPHIL: You know, it's not right to mess with someone's mind like this. It's immoral.

PHIL: No it's not. Nothing is immoral.

NONPHIL: Excuse me? So torturing cute kittens for fun isn't wrong? Seriously?

PHIL: Yep. John Mackie and the other error theorists about morality convinced me: roughly put, there are no positive moral truths (even if there were truths). Pretending that those philosophers existed, that is. And I existed. And I had beliefs. And there were interpretations. Etc.

NONPHIL: You are just plain evil.

PHIL: No I'm not. In fact, no one is evil. Evil is just a certain kind of lack or absence, so it doesn't really exist either. Yes, even Hitler and Stalin weren't evil, not literally (and of course there is no literal anything, as that would require interpretations).

NONPHIL: Screw you.

PHIL: Yeah, that's what God said. If there was a god. And if there were interpretations.