10 I Do Not Exist

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It seems utterly obvious that the question 'Do I exist?' may be correctly answered only in the affirmative; of course the answer must be 'Yes.' Descartes, it may be said, made this idea the keystone of his philosophy, he found it so compelling. Hume, however, in his characteristically sceptical style, at least at times questioned the propriety of an affirmative reply. My teacher, Professor Sir Alfred Jules Ayer, to whom this essay is dedicated, customarily expressed himself in a conditional manner, which I find quite congenial:

> The sentence 'I exist', in this usage, may be allowed to express a statement which like other statements is capable of being either true or false. It differs, however, from most other statements in that if it is false it can not actually be made. Consequently, no one who uses these words intelligently and correctly can use them to make a statement which he knows to be false. If he succeeds in making the statement, it must be true.[1]

Of course Ayer is right in pointing to the absurdity of a person's trying to deny his own existence. Prepared to pay this price, in this brief essay I mean to deny my own putative existence, a position which I take to be even more radical than Hume's. This is owing not to a desire to be more perverse than any of my predecessors, but, rather, to certain arguments which have occurred to me, and which seem quite far from any of their thoughts. As may be expected of a student of Ayer's, and as I have indicated, I appreciate the utterly paradoxical position into which these arguments lead me. But I venture to suppose that this does not reflect badly on my reasonings in any relevant regard. Rather, it may show their great scope, thus highlighting obscure defects in prevalent conceptions. With this understanding, I mean to present herein the main lines of reasoning against my own existence.

I offer my arguments as a challenge to any others that there

G. F. Macdonald (ed.), *Perception and Identity*

may be, so that they may dissuade me from the path of extreme nihilism that reason appears to require. Accordingly, I shall present my ideas as forcefully as possible, not to indicate any enormous confidence on my part, but rather to provoke others to reply most promptly and effectively. For my own part, I can find nothing importantly wrong with the uncomfortable thoughts I shall thus boldly put forth. The more I reflect upon them, the more I become convinced of their essential truth or justice, for any errors I ever find are superficial mistakes, requiring at most only minor changes in formulation. As a consequence, there appears to be growing within me an inclination to expend much effort toward developing the required nihilism in great detail, no matter how painfully laborious the attempt may be. Perhaps this growth had best be stopped, but then only by an appropriate rational argument.

To compound my dilemma, I notice that, in general outline, the same view lately has been conjectured by another writer, Samuel Wheeler, or so it appears. In a pioneering paper, 'Reference and Vagueness', Wheeler conjectured that there may not be any people; I should suppose he meant to include himself.[2] While he does not offer a positive argument for the nihilistic surmise, he does disarm prevalent ideas which would point the other way. Appearing to find a similar current in another, but no adequate compelling force in the opposite direction, the situation encourages my thoughts to move, however slowly and painfully, toward their properly destructive denial. Perhaps a response to my challenge may save me from the ultimately fruitless labours I seem required to undertake.

The challenging position is this: I do not exist and neither do you. The scientific perspective, especially as developed over the last few centuries, compels this result. Now, there is nothing especially unfortunate in this as regards the human condition. For, as regards almost everything which is commonly alleged to exist, it may be argued, in like manner, that it in fact does not. There are, then, no tables or chairs, nor rocks or stones or ordinary stars. Neither are there any plants or animals. No finite persons or conscious beings exist, including myself Peter Unger: I do not exist. So much for this challenging position. To the main arguments for it, rather briefly presented, I now turn.

I. THE SORITES OF DECOMPOSITION

Tables, as well as chairs, have often been believed to be paradigms of existing things or entities, but I shall argue that they do not exist at all. They are, if you will, only fictions, though nothing

whatever depends on my use of such a term of convenience. My argument will be in the form of an indirect proof, wherein I reduce to absurdity the supposition of their existence.

According to our modern scientific view, if there are any tables, then each of them is constituted of, or is composed of, or comprises, or consists of, or whatever, many atoms, and still more 'elementary particles', but only a finite number of each. Now, nothing here depends on the expression 'is constituted of', or on any similar expression. Baldly put, the point is this: where and when there are no atoms present, there and then there is no table. This idea is not crucial to the argument; a 'less scientific' analogue will work as well, so far as the purer logical features go. But it is good to have nature appparently so co-operative.

Now, at the same time, according to our common-sense view of the matter, which for something like a *table* is, of course, all but definitive, one atom, or only a few, removed, or added, quite innocuously, will not make a relevant difference. If you have a table at the start, then, after an atom has been gently ticked off the edge somewhere, there will still be a table present. These simple ideas, when brought into combination, leave nothing for reason but to conclude that there really are no tables. It takes no great acumen to see this, as the reasoning is utterly simple, and most just and suitable to the subject before us.

For, if there is a table there, then it has only a finite number of atoms – say, a billion billion; it does not matter. The net removal of one, then, leaves us with a supposed table of a billion billion minus one atoms; after two are removed, the supposed table has a billion billion minus two; and so on. After a billion billion atoms have been removed, we have a table consisting of no atoms at all. In this simple fashion, I suggest, we have reduced to an absurdity the supposition that the table in question exists, or ever did exist. As this argument may be most readily generalised, we may conclude that there really are no such things as tables.

To advance discussion, it may be helpful if I give the argument just presented something like a formal shape or presentation. We begin with a supposition of existence:

(1) There exists at least one table.

But, from our scientific perspective, we may add this second premiss:

(2) For anything there may be, if it is a table, then it consists of many atoms, but only a finite number.

From these two premisses, we may deduce that there is at least one table which consists of many atoms, but a finite number of them. The crux and bite of my argument, however, may be supposed to come with a third and final premiss:

(3) For anything there may be, if it is a table (which consists of many atoms, but a finite number), then the net removal of one atom, or only a few, in a way which is most innocuous and favourable, will not mean the difference as to whether there is a table in the situation.

These three premisses, I take it, are inconsistent. The assessment of this inconsistency, I submit, leads one to reject, and to deny, the first premiss, whatever one may subsequently think of the remaining two propositions.

Discounting minor matters of formulation, I doubt that many would deny our second premiss. Many more, I imagine, are liable to deny our third and final proposition. It has, I must admit, been stated in a way which leaves matters less than completely clear and evident. Accordingly, I shall try to provide some clarificatory interpretation, to the extent that this seems merited even in a very brief treatment.

I have said that an atom is to be removed in a way which is most innocuous and favourable. What do I mean by such a way? First, I mean for the removal to be *net*, of course, and in the fullest way. The process which removes an atom does not put something else in its place, or in anywhere else; nor does such a thing happen in any other way. And, what is removed is randomly cast aside, so to speak. Secondly, I mean for the net removal to take place with as little disruptive effect as possible on what remains, especially as regards the question, if it really has any substance, as to whether or not any table remains. In other words, we might say, it is most unlikely that an atom will ever be blasted out of a central position; rather, one will be gently dislodged from an outside spot. Additionally, we are to conceive of the most favourable, or least disruptive, conditions, as regards temperature, pressure, electricity, magnetism, and so on. Further, if an occasion arises where, vary conditions as we may, a single atom cannot be removed without substantial relevant disruption, then we remove as few as possible, balanced against a disruptive effect. Finally, I close this interpretation with a remark on the alleged matter of whether an entity may be *as much as possible*, or be *as well off toward being, a table*. I am supposing this matter to have substance, of course, but only on way toward exposing

its absurdity. This is an indirect argument.

Thus clarified, perhaps we may profitably divide what our premiss is saying under two heads. First, it makes a 'causal' claim: there is no relevant breaking point where, no matter what is done to be gentle and to retain things, the whole business, or a substantial portion thereof, collapses, or turns into an apparent donkey, or disappears, or whatever. Rather, things are relevantly quite gradual. To deny this, I believe, is to cast aside science, and even common sense as well. And, secondly, our premiss claims that, in this rather gradual way of things, the difference made by the small removals encountered, by one atom, more or less, is never nearly so much as the difference, merely alleged as it may be, between a table's being there and not being there. To deny this premiss, then, is as much as to affirm that there comes a place where, by taking away an atom or so, presumably *any one or few of millions* still, one makes a table cease to exist. And this, I suggest, is as much as to expect a miracle.

Now, as it is stated, of course, our final premiss points to conditions, and a way, that are quite ideal. That is no fault. It may make one think, however, that the whole argument has an 'airy-fairy' character, and is quite unrealistic. But conditions close enough to those which are most favourable do occur almost all the time. And, very small bits, if not nearly so small as an atom, can be removed in stepwise fashion, for an argument to similar effect. Whatever 'airy-fairy' features are there, then, cannot be basic to the argument.

Within fine points of formulation, our third premiss thus fairly compels belief. As a move to escape our just but uncomfortable conclusion, it remains only to deny the reasoning employed. In this vein, some may object that 'the logic' I have used is what is at fault. If some 'alternative logic' is chosen, they may respond, instead of the system of rules and formulae I have employed, the integrity of our tables may be secured. But I do not believe that good reasoning can ever be captured or frozen into any such system, or that the matter is really one of choosing one or another optional pieces of logical apparatus, like so many hammers or wrenches. There is not, I suggest, here a question of this logic or that one. Without my now being less than sceptical, it is a question of whether my reasoning has been sound, and has been just and appropriate to the topic before us. Now, if I have been in error in my reasoning, or unjust to my subject matter, then such an error or injustice should be made manifest. But, excepting small points of formulation, and with a proper sceptical hesitancy, I doubt that this will be done. Of course, I am no mathematician.

But, I think that a fair appraisal of the matter by those more mathematically inclined will find them to view things in much the way that I here recommend.

In a somewhat deeper vein, perhaps, it should be re-emphasised that my argument is not dependent upon the existence of atoms, at least not in any fundamental way. Perhaps there are no atoms, and in 'removing an atom' what really happens is something involving, say, an underlying plenum, which is the only existing (physical) reality. If so, then perhaps the argument presented is acceptable only provisionally; perhaps it operates only on a superficial level. But, whatever changes or profundities may be compellingly envisioned, I hardly think that the reinstatement of tables is among them.

As a related, already anticipated point, while the gradual nature of things is needed for my argument, no deep theories about material reality are important. While it is nice to have ready-made units there to remove – molecules, atoms and particles – the slightest contrivance will work about as well. Thus, from an alleged table, one may remove a tiny chip or splinter, until not a single one remains.

In the manner of G. E. Moore, some will object to my argument along the following lines. First, they will claim to be *more certain* of the existence of tables than of *anything* which I am bringing to bear against such alleged existence. And, then, they will say, with apparent caution and modesty, that, while they are *not sure which* of the things I advance is in error, there *must be at least one* weak link, or fault, in my reasoning. Now, it well may be that this Moorian reply is often, or even usually, a proper answer to a philosophical attack on common sense. But, is it *always* proper, appropriate or correct? Is common sense *always* to be believed, while philosophy, along with science, is *always* to yield? I cannot believe that this is so, and that *no exceptions* can be made to this popular Moorian doctrine. What of the *present case*, then: may not *that* be just such an exception? We have seen, I suggest, that to deny my argument amounts to supposing a miracle: the gentle, innocuous removal of a single atom, or only a few, *which is not even perceptible to the unaided senses*, takes us from a situation where a table is present to one where there is no table at all. Indeed, the removal of *any one*, or *any few*, of *millions* of removable atoms or groups, will be enough to work the trick. This is, after all, where the issue does lie. Can common sense be so powerful as to sustain such a miraculous supposition as this? I do not think so.

In contrast to its employment with tables and chairs, our argument

does not seem nearly so compelling, if at all, against *physical objects.* Intuitively, we have the idea that if we consider a biggish physical object, consisting of many atoms, as we take one away and then another, and so on, what we have left is always a physical object, so long as any object at all remains. The last atom, particle or whatever, it may be supposed, is as well off toward being a physical object as is the biggish thing at the start.

Let us be a bit particular as regards the differences between our sorites against tables, or any other ordinary things, and a similar attempt against physical objects. In the first place, we cannot say, in parallel with (2), that, for anything there may be, if it is a physical object, then it consists of many atoms but only a finite number. For an atom itself is a physical object and it does not consist of atoms, let alone many of them. Nor will matters improve if we look for a finer component than atoms, for what we find may also be regarded, I suppose, as a physical object if it is any proper component at all. Nor can a parallel with (3) be accepted readily. Unlike with a table, if you have a physical object and remove an atom, you may have left no physical object at all. For that atom, now removed, may have been the only physical object there to be removed. Now, none of this is to suppose that physical objects do exist. But, as the present argument does not compellingly disprove their existence, they appear to be a somewhat extraordinary thing, whether truly existent or only alleged for all that.

All in all, it may be said, I hope, that the argument I have employed is a rather *simple* piece of reasoning. I call this sort of argument the *sorites of decomposition.* A parallel argument, going the other way, suggests itself, *the sorites of accumulation*, as well as variations upon, and combinations of, both of these forms of reasoning. In particular, counterfactual variations should be of interest to many contemporary writers.

We employed our argument against tables, which, if they exist at all, have certain more or less special features. They are in some sense functional things; they are typically man-made; and so on. But none of this, it will be easily recognised, has anything to do with the matter at hand. Our argument may be employed equally well to deny the existence of such alleged things as sticks and stones, mountains and lakes, planets, (ordinary) stars and galaxies, ships and carriages, pieces of hair and of money, bodies of horses and of generals, and so on, and so forth. Such things as are not susceptible to decomposition withstand this form of argument: certain sub-atomic particles may provide an example. More importantly, decomposible things which are in a relevant way 'defined

with precision' escape the present reasonings. Accordingly, I shall not now deny the existence of most molecules, even some 'quite large' ones, nor, perhaps, even certain crystal structures. However, something such as a blue 1968 Chevrolet four-door sedan, while according to most accounts not something vaguely described, will fall prey to our sorites. While much of physics and chemistry thus *might* remain relatively unscathed, biological entities, above the molecular level, appear to be nothing but fictions. I deny, then, not only the bodies of animals, including human beings, but also their organs, such as livers, hearts and brains, their tissues, and even individual cells, such as neurons.

Similar decomposition arguments make it clear, as well, that many alleged substances in fact do not exist at all. Unlike water and gold, which may be real, but which do not come in drops or hunks, juice and brass are only fictions. Also among the sorts of stuff that do not exist are, I should think, air and earth, meat and flesh, wood and rock, cloth and paper, and so on.

None of the things so far placed in the range of our reasonings, however, is of nearly so great an interest, I imagine, as we ourselves. Accordingly, I now turn to begin a new section, devoted to this topic, wherein I explicitly reason to deny, not without paradox, but perhaps with success, the very thing that Descartes would have me consider *certain*: my own present existence.

II. A DISPROOF OF MY OWN EXISTENCE

The developing scientific perspective, especially owing to gains in biology and chemistry over the last few centuries, renders it exceedingly likely, at least, that no finite people or beings exist. In particular, and more conservatively, this perspective indicates that I myself do not exist; that I never have and never shall.

To achieve this paradoxical result, I shall again employ the sorites of decomposition. Now, the 'normal growth of the human being from conception' also provides, I believe, a sound sorites of accumulation. That sorites is naturally instanced, we might say, even though, with cellular growth not being clearly arithmetic, a unit of increment may have to be contrived: what happens during the first second; what happens during the next; and so on. But, the very artificiality of a gradual decomposition may better jar the mind. Thus, it may increase the chances for acceptance of the uncomfortable conclusion. Now, the most compelling decompositions are not yet attainable. We cannot remove, for example, one cell at a time, while keeping the remainder alive and functioning impressively. While it is not strictly relevant, I should think that this ability

is not too far off for us, perhaps no more than a few centuries. In any case, if and when it can be done, I hope that it will not be. What is most relevant is that nature allow for the decompositions herein to be imagined.

As I have indicated, the unit of decrement which I shall choose is the cell. It is instructive for us now to argue at this level. As a cell consists of millions of atoms, a sorites of decomposition based on the atom can show that cells do not exist. Thus, the success of an argument against myself, or even my body, based on the cell, makes it quite clear that, in our argument against tables, the reliance on atoms was far from fundamental.

To mirror our previous argument, against tables, I now display the following three premisses:

(1) I exist.

(2) If I exist, then I consist of many cells, but a finite number.

(3) If I exist (and consist of many cells, but a finite number), then the net removal of one cell, or only a few, in a way which is most innocuous and favourable, will not mean the difference as to whether I exist.

As before, these three propositions form an inconsistent set. They have it that I am still there with no cells at all, even while my existence depends on cells. To escape this inconsistency realistically, we must suppose this. Even under conditions most favourable to me, the removal of a single cell, or only a few, *any* one or few of those in the situation, will mean the difference between my existence and no me at all. But, if I do exist, can my existence really be that tenuous? I think not. Therefore, I do not exist.

A bit more informally, the idea is this. One cell, more or less, will not mean the difference between my being there and not. So, take one away, and I am still there. Take another away; again, no problem. But after a while there are no cells at all. Indeed, as they have been replaced by nothing, in the relevant structures, it is unclear what will be there: perhaps, some salty water. Supposedly, I am still there. But given anything like the developed perspective of science, this is really quite absurd. Thus, the supposition of my existence has been reduced to an absurdity.

As before, it is important to discuss our third and final premiss. Because of the previous parallel discussion, various points may now be safely passed over. But a few new things arise in the present context which, even in a brief essay, are worthy of some consideration.

In the first place, it should be noted that, in the previous reasoning, about tables, we did not become involved in matters of identity, or persistence. There, I argued that *no* table, the same or any other, survived the decremental changes, and so *no* table existed in the first place. In contrast, the present argument does involve identity and, except for its counterfactual form, even persistence through time: I myself must survive. No new problems of importance are, I suggest, thus introduced for us. Indeed, we may abandon questions of identity entirely, and construct a general argument, upon the alleged existence of finite persons or beings, to parallel more completely our argument about tables. To play it safe with respect to such various forms as there may be of 'extra-terrestrial beings', we should then make our unit the atom, or even the particle, instead of the cell. It was to honour Descartes, so to say, and to pack the punch of particularity, that I focused the argument on myself, quite directly, thus becoming involved with identity. But that involvement is not essential.

In the second place, it will be maintained, I suppose, that my argument about tables did not involve considerations of life, or of consciousness. Let us grant this point. But how might such involvements as are now upon us serve to promote my own existence, or that of any finite being? I think there is no realistic way. Let us try to interpret our third premiss quite graphically, now, to clarify its import. On its most relevant interpretation, I suggest, life and consciousness, as well as the 'capacity' for them, will be present for as long as anyone might need to appreciate our argument's point. For it is supposed, in our third premiss, that the 'way' in which a cell is removed is one which is most innocuous and favourable – that is, with respect to me, or to my own identity. How might that happen?

At the present level of reasoning, the following scenario, I suggest, is more or less appropriate. At a certain stage in the decremental process, not very far along, it seems clear, life-support systems will be brought in to keep me going as well as possible. I shall be placed *in vitro*; nourishing fluids will be pumped into me; electrical stimulation will be provided, but not in such a way that any apparatus 'does my experiencing or thinking for me'; and so on. Cell after cell is pulled away. The remaining ones are kept alive, and kept functioning 'at the highest level of achievement of which they are capable'. The added apparatus has not, in the case here described, replaced the removed cells as part of me. In this present case, an electric wire will only be a means of support, much as a cardiac pacemaker serves even now. While *other cases* may be construed as involving the replacement of natural parts by synthetic

ones, this present one is not correctly understood in such terms. Sticking to what might here most plausibly be considered myself, then, at a certain point we are down to a brain in a vat and, then, half a brain. So far, so good; but then we get down to a third of a brain, then a sixteenth. Still later, there are only fifty-three neurons in living combination. Where at the end, there is but one living nerve cell, and then it too is gone. Where will I disappear from the scene? Realistically, now, will the removal of a single cell ever, under such favourable conditions, mean my disappearance from reality? While that may be a 'logical possibility', it does not compel belief. The conclusion of our argument, in contrast, is quite compelling: I do not disappear at any time, because I was never around in the first place.

We may agree that at one time it may have been a very compelling thought that there were souls, or individual essences, one for each person. Many people even now believe in such things, and in minds, a life force, if not entelechies, ghosts, spirits, and so on. Many of these believers, I imagine, think that a person is not only real, but an immaterial, indivisible entity. Thus, I expect, they lay the ground for a hope in survival of bodily death, and perhaps even immortality. At the time of Descartes, for example, it may be that all of these suppositions fairly demanded or compelled credence. But they do not sit well, I suggest, with our developed scientific perspective. For that reason, I believe, they offer no compelling alternative now to the bleak conclusions drawn herein.

My sorites of decomposition, against my own existence, has, to be sure, required some speculative effort. But such speculation as there may be is, I submit, far from wild. Further, it does jar the mind, and lets us look anew at the process of cellular development. We may reason justly, then, about the embryo growing from a fertilised egg, and we may conclude again, less speculatively, that, just like you, I do not exist. Against this more 'natural' argument, some would object, I suppose, that I myself was once nothing but a fertilised egg. Now, while I admire attempts to be consistent, I think that, in the present case, the attempt has little to recommend it, and is in any case erroneous. If someone persists in such a thought, however, I should bid him consider whether even a sperm, or an egg, was any existing entity, much less a fertilised egg. Accumulation and decomposition arguments, it seems, may also be used to refute the supposed existence of any of them.

III. THE SUBSTANCE OF THE ARGUMENT AND THE IRRELEVANCE OF LOGICAL INVENTIONS

The main thrust of this argument is, in light of our scientific perspective, the same in my own case and in those of a table, a stone and, for that matter, even of a yo-yo. Let us reconsider the matter, then, with respect to alleged yo-yos, for they give us an example which is refreshingly light and calmly unemotional. Again the main issues seem to turn on a suitable third premiss:

> For anything there may be, if it is a yo-yo (which consists of many atoms, but a finite number), then the net removal of one atom, or only a few, in a way which is most innocuous and favorable, will not mean the difference as to whether there is a yo-yo in the situation.

Now, how could such a premiss as this be false, and untrue, and inaccurate and unacceptable? Apart from minor matters of formulation, there are, it seems clear, only two ways in which things might go wrong for it.

First, and more on 'the side of things in the world', it might be that nature protected yo-yos, or at least one of them, by giving it a place of its own in the world, set apart from other things, an essence if you please. But how might anything like this actually obtain? The matter is, I think, very important, so, even if we repeat some of our previous words, let us try to outline the possibilities. First, yo-yos would be protected if, either at the start or at some later point, we just could not take out any atoms from them. Or, being realistic, and supposing that that way is not available, they might still be saved if new atoms were to rush in whenever crucial old ones were extracted. Or if that is out, as it surely appears to be, it might be that at some point, even under the most favourable conditions for relevant gradualness, a spontaneous explosion should take place, a yo-yo's previous existence thus being preserved by such sudden destruction. Or, failing that, which does seem more in line with any actual experience of the world, a god on high, or a suitable natural law, might turn an endangered dwindling yo-yo into a sousaphone, perhaps upon the removal of the four million and twelfth atom, so that our concepts themselves would never have to be tested on its behalf. And so on; and so forth. There are, then, many logical possibilities for nature to conspire, as it were, so that things would fit our term 'yo-yo'. But we are confident that none of them actually obtain. To think otherwise, I should say, is to expect a miracle: if you will, a *miracle of metaphysical illusion.*

With the world being so unfavourable for them, as it surely seems to be, the only chance for yo-yos lies on 'the side of our terms and concepts'. But what can be expected here? At the very least, we need the concept of a yo-yo to be atomically precise. Certain concepts of molecules seem to be thus precise: when you snip a hydrogen atom off the end somewhere, and do not replace it, you no longer have in the situation a molecule of that original kind. But is the concept of a yo-yo relevantly like that? I think we ask too much of ourselves if we expect ourselves to be working here in such a precise manner. Accordingly, to suppose this much for ourselves and 'yo-yo' is to expect another miracle, perhaps a *miracle of conceptual comprehension.* On either hand, then, yo-yos require a miracle; for any who do not believe in miracles, there is no rational belief in yo-yos.

Our reasonings turn up for us an implicit contradiction in our beliefs. To strive to be reasonable we must give up one at least. To deny a suitable second premiss is to have yo-yos floating around with no atoms at all, nor any matter in the situation, and that is yet more miraculous than the two apparent wonders we have just considered. The only path to consistency, then, which is even remotely reasonable or realistic is to deny existence for alleged yo-yos, for we have just covered the whole story as to what wonders a commitment to them means. If this is appreciated we may see the irrelevance of remarks about clear cases, paradigms, family resemblances, and other soothing remedies, lately influential but now happily well on the wane. Perhaps more importantly, in these more technical times, we may also thus see the emptiness in the suggestion, currently favoured by certain philosophers, that we escape the argument by assigning to relevant sentences truth values other than truth and falsity.[3] For, whatever these values may be, they do not reduce one bit the miracles that yo-yos require; at most they occasion only a mildly different description of them.

Let us suppose we have before us a yo-yo. As atoms are removed one at a time, without replacement, we keep considering singular propositions each to the effect that at the appropriate new time a yo-yo is before us. We begin, as in any *reductio*, by assigning truth. As things progress, at some particular point, atomically counted, we are for the first time no longer to assign truth! Instead, when some peripheral atom is gently removed, and there would appear to be at least virtually no significant difference in what is before us, we are for the first time to depart from our initial kind of assignment, and to assign *some other* value. Perhaps the new value will not be falsity; it may be indefiniteness, or some numerical value just a shade less than unity, say 0.999, or some

other newly invented candidate. But whatever else it is, there will be just as much of a miracle for us to expect. For, given that we have no miracle of metaphysical illusion to help us – that is, the world is indeed relevantly gradual – it will take a miraculous sensitivity on the part of 'yo-yo' to generate the difference, however we should choose to label such a wonderful discrimination. So sensitive is our concept of a yo-yo that, as a single atom goes away at the periphery, truth or unity or whatever is suddenly left behind! To expect that is, I submit, still to expect a miracle of conceptual comprehension. Hence, any new values, as well as the logical inventiveness they may occasion, are utterly irrelevant to the issues here.

Nor will it help matters to invoke a distinction between propositions and sentences, which may express or fail to express relevant propositions. Let us focus on the sentence 'There is a yo-yo before us now.' We may begin as before, with a putative paradigm yo-yo, and may then judge that our sentence expresses a proposition which is true. We then take off peripheral atoms, one at a time, and ask whether the sentence does something else, for the first time, with the removal of each single one. The supposition that with a single atom something else is for the first time done appears quite incredible, as well it should; it is but another form of our miracle of conceptual comprehension. But if this miracle may not be expected, then, if the sentence is not to express a truth with no atoms before us, we must conclude that our sentence never expresses a truth.[4]

Concerning the question of our putative yo-yos, then, it appears that only two responses are relevant: a belief in the miraculous or else an acceptance of nihilism. And the same choice, I submit, is there with alleged tables, and stones, and even my very own self. No matter how it is looked at, there is not much of a choice here. Habit and emotion appear on one side, while reason seems to be on quite the other.

IV. THE SCOPE OF THESE PROBLEMS

The argument I have employed derives, of course, from 'the paradox of the heap', an ancient problem devised by Eubulides, the great Megarian thinker. In way of reconstruction, we might say that Eubulides showed that there were and are no heaps. First, we may suppose the existence of heaps. Secondly, we note that, if any heap exists, it consists of various other entities – of grains of sand, or of beans, for example. Finally, we note that, if one bean is removed without replacement, and this is done most favour-

ably and innocuously, what remains will be a heap. Thus, given anything like our view of reality, heaps, which many suppose to be ordinary existing things, are only fictions: there are no heaps.

I shall not here bother to detail the differences and similarities between Eubulides's original argument and my own variations upon it. So far as the compelling force goes, though, suffice it to say that our modern scientific perspective means that there is little difference between a heap and almost anything else, so to say, including myself. As far as repercussions or consequences are concerned, however, my own arguments are of course enormously more effective than the original version. While this is rather obvious, the details may be worth some presentation.

First, virtually all of our common-sense beliefs are untrue, and even as to nothing. Moreover, most of our learned studies are similarly unfortunate, at least in anything like their present formulations. Samuel Wheeler begins to put the point in a manner which is conjectural, and perhaps somewhat ironic: 'If there is no objective difference between possible persons and possible non-persons, much of what we believe about morality, psychology, etc., is in trouble.'[5] We may say, now, that the matter is not very conjectural, and that all of moral reasoning, as well as psychological understanding, looks to be in deep trouble indeed. This holds as well, of course, for the other studies concerning man. History, law and medicine are all a tissue of fictions, as are economics, linguistics and politics. Various related areas of philosophy, such as epistemology, the philosophy of language and the philosophy of mind, can contain nothing sound and true. Unless mathematics is clearly severed from connections with human beings, it too must fall prey to our sorites. Various other studies look to fare poorly. Biology, for example, is a tissue of nonentities and untruth, except as it becomes biochemistry perhaps, or something much of that sort. Astronomy too, except as it becomes astrophysics, or something similar, looks to be about anything but our universe.

Under a second head, we may notice that, while they may in some respects involve language importantly, our sorites arguments undermine all natural languages, while the argument of Eubulides hardly begins to do anything here. In the first place, as there are no human beings, there is no human language or thought. Waiving that basic point, and supposing the opposite, we shall notice that our existing expressions, at least by and large, fail to make any contact with whatever is there. For example, the proper names so far given do not refer to anything real. We may confirm this by a sorites argument directly involving such famous nonentities as Cicero, Descartes, Venus, Everest, and so on. Should

someone name an individual atom 'Adam', things might be different on this score. The personal pronouns, we have seen, fare little better. Except for atoms, and so on, none of our referential devices look to be of much distinction.

But then, too, the picture looks bleak for the question of whether atoms exist, and so for any other things. For we cannot, in good faith, long waive the point that there is no human language or thought, nor even any human or other finite beings. And from such a standpoint even simple arithmetic looks to be beyond comprehension, there being none of us to grasp any realities or truth which might be there. Finally, the existence of any sorites arguments themselves cannot be relevantly affirmed, there being not a one of us ever to consider any such piece of reasoning. The chain of nihilistic propositions appears to come full circle.

This undeniable absurdity is, I suggest, no blameworthy fault of our Eubulidean reasonings. On the contrary, by such means, our sorites arguments allow us to perceive the truly thoroughgoing inconsistencies in our available language and thought. Continuing to speak in the paradoxical manner they expose, we might say this. For anything like truth's sake, these arguments counsel us to begin a radical reconstruction of our means of thought and expression. No available earthly means, which is sufficiently rich for many of our purposes, fares any better than does English. I have been disclosing no peculiar subtleties of our language which may be absent in Chinese, or in ancient Greek. But what steps should we take to make things better?

With something like a heap, and sticking to Eubulides's original level of argument, moderately good steps can be taken quickly and easily. For, if there are no heaps, we can define the word 'hoap', for example, so that a hoap may consist, minimally, of two items: for example, beans or grains of sand, touching each other. But, if there are no tables, trees or cats, what are we supposed to define, and, even very roughly, what is to be the definition of it? If I do not exist, then what does exist in which, so to speak, I should have an appropriate and rather intense interest? If you do not exist, as is here argued, what does exist over there which must not be inappropriately interfered with, or harmed? I am truly in darkness on these momentous matters, with no light at all to guide me.

These problems are, I believe, of the first importance for any who value philosophy and the traditional quest after truth. But I am far from sanguine that my challenge, from which they flow, will be met with an attempt to reply which is properly serious, let alone rationally effective. For it is easiest to shun the most

pervasive difficulties in philosophy, to leave it to others, in times long to come, to explain their solutions. It is easiest to presume we know in advance, without knowing the details, which way the answer *must* go, letting the social acceptance of others serve as our assurance and even foundation, rather than anything like the light of one's own reason. But I am hopeful that one or two thoughtful souls may break the common easy pattern. Perhaps they will allow me to avoid the labours, apparently painful and fruitless, involved in developing an adequate philosophy of nihilism, which it now appears is the only adequate philosophy there can be. Or perhaps, on the contrary, they will provide me with further reason for thinking that this challenge is too powerful to be met adequately, and that there is no rational hope at all for the thought that anyone might be real. That might not be cheerful, but at least it would be something. Either way, I doubt that Eubulides ever had it so good.[6]

NOTES

1. A. J. Ayer, *The Problem of Knowledge* (London: Macmillan, 1956) p.50.
2. Samuel C. Wheeler III, 'Reference and Vagueness', *Synthèse*, XXX (1967) no. 3–4 367–79.
3. A recent example of a philosopher who would treat of vagueness by means of exotic truth values is David H. Sanford in his 'Borderline Logic', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, XII, (1975) no. 1, 29–39. Sanford provides references to other writers of a similar persuasion.
4. On these matters, I am indebted to discussion with David Sanford.
5. Wheeler, in *Synthese*, XXX, no. 3–4, 371.
6. I have been helped in writing this paper by discussion with various people; Ralph Silverman and Samuel Wheeler deserve special thanks.

For a discussion of related matters, I refer the reader to my paper, 'There are No Ordinary Things'. Forthcoming in *Synthese*. For a detailed analysis of sorites arguments, see my 'Why There are No People', forthcoming in *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, vol. IV: *Studies in Metaphysics*. And, for a discussion of relations between the nihilistic approach of this present paper and the sceptical approach in epistemology, see my 'Skepticism and Nihilism', forthcoming in *Nous*.