Transcendence on the Cut-Rate: The Case for "More Metaphysics"

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> "Our memory is our coherence, our reason, our feeling, even our action. Without it we are nothing."—Luis Bunuel[1]

> "[A] man does not consist of memory alone. He has feeling, will, sensibilities, moral being—matters of which neurology cannot speak."—Alexander Luria[2]

A reader might initially fail to notice it, but the neurologist Oliver Sacks's well-known 1984 essay "The Lost Mariner" is a philosophical conversion story which recounts his transfiguration from a begrudging and unhappy advocate of Luis Bunuel's credo "without [memory] we are nothing" to a heartened disciple of Alexander Luria's belief that a person "does not consist of memory alone."

Sacks poignantly describes the mental devastation wrought by alcohol-induced Korsakov's syndrome on 49-year-old Jimmie G, who vividly recollects the first nineteen years of his life but suffers from a dense amnesia concerning the most recent thirty. What's more, his short-term memories are "fugitive in the extreme," generally persisting less than a minute.[3] Initially, Sacks despairs that "memoryless" Jimmie is a "lost soul."[4] But in due time, Sacks changes his mind, both about Jimmie's life prospects and about the relative power and limits of empirical science.

"The Lost Mariner" is delightfully insightful. Yet when it comes to his most momentous philosophical reckonings, Sacks opens himself to the charge of being, well, impetuous. Among his several seemingly hasty inferences, Sacks invests the human psyche with a disposition to transcendent, supersensible experience, but does so, evidentially speaking, on the cheap.

Personally, I happen to agree with certain elements of Sacks's newfound anti-empiricist worldview. But I'm afraid some of his readers, especially any of the tougher-minded empiricists he's publicly jilting, will find it rather easy to dismiss Sacks's reflections upon humanity's prospects for "epiphanies of being or beauty."

My burning question is whether anything can be done to stave off this impulse to spurn the possibility of transcendent experience. It sounds

unpromising and displeasing, but is one answer, inspired by Iris Murdoch, "our culture needs to do more metaphysics"?

Before examining the nature and quality of Sacks's philosophical hypothesizing, let's first get to know Jimmie and Sacks.

1. The Test Case

Consider what it's like to live in the mind of a Korsakov's sufferer.

Middle-aged Jimmie is intelligent, analytical, and affable. His severe memory deficits haven't vitiated these personal strengths. His long-term memory intact, Jimmie recalls his upbringing, especially his high school natural science education and his early years in the Navy, with enthusiasm and striking specificity. Jimmie is excellent at strategy games such as checkers, so long as the game's moves are made quickly. His demeanor is often friendly and chatty, and he's highly observant: "Hiya, Doc…Well, you are a doc, ain't you?"[5]

When met, though, by the ordinary scenes of his present life in the Home for the Aged (where Sacks worked), Jimmie is almost invariably "restless" and "lost."[6] Every morning, Jimmie wakes up unfamiliar with his whereabouts, having yet again forgotten the identity of his long-serving nurses, only occasionally feeling a faint sense of familiarity with them. Every time Jimmie encounters Sacks, it's as if it were their first meeting. Presented with a mirror, Jimmie is horrified and discombobulated: expecting to see a teenager's face, he confronts a lightly graying older man. Jimmie thinks it's 1945 when it's 1975.

Suffering from such cognitive dissonance once would be traumatic. Jimmie experiences disconnection time and again throughout each day, an endless recurrence to which he's mostly—and mercifully?—oblivious.[7]

Jimmie sometimes labors to understand what's happening to him. Context cues provide hints about where he is: a hospital of some kind. But he doesn't feel sick, and so he can't imagine why he's there. To help him understand, Sacks can tell Jimmie a joke about a patient who comes in because of memory lapses but forgets why she's at the doctor. Jimmie is sharp enough to catch the jest's meaning, but his self-awareness is momentary, and his newfound recognition of what ails him—a faulty memory—soon slips out of the back of his mind. He forgets that he forgets.

Of course, it's difficult to know precisely what Jimmie's life feels like from the inside. One suspects he's often exhausted. Jimmie's occasional fits of anxiety suggest he *hungers* to know what's happening to him. Since Jimmie retains the capacity for sensory experience and logical reasoning, every situation, every new, quick-fire torrent of sensory data, potentially becomes a complex puzzle in need of solving: Where am I? Why am I here?

What's happening to me? Who is this person? Can I trust her? Otherwise put, Jimmie can't, like the rest of us, "rest easy" in his memory-based awareness of what's currently happening. As Bunuel would observe, "our memory *is* our coherence." To the degree Jimmie wants things to make sense to him, his mind needs to be in persistent investigation mode, engaged in "involved cogitations,"[8] but with relatively little information to rely upon. What a psychic toll this must take.[9]

Jimmie's ability to feel, or at least to identify *how* he feels, is seriously enervated. On the rare occasions Jimmie sees his brother, whom he recalls from long-term memory, he has genuinely deep emotional experiences, though he can't understand why his brother looks so old. Confusion infects even these positive spells.

Fear is available to Jimmie.[10] He certainly knows he's agitated and frightened when confronted with a mirror. But in other moments, when Jimmie is asked how he feels—"happy or sad?"—he professes not to know.[11] This stands to reason. To identify many an emotion, contextual information is necessary. If I've lost a loved one, I recognize my present internal feelings of agitation as grief. If someone's recently slighted me, indignation. Cut off from awareness of his proximate past, it's not surprising Jimmie doesn't know what to make of his own internal experience.

To sum up, setting aside fleeting episodes of youthful nostalgia or the occasional meeting with his brother, Jimmie's quotidian experience consists in an ever-sliding, thirty second or so blip of awareness of his immediate physical surroundings, bookended by a haze of almost total unknowing. Sacks relates that when Jimmie isn't in a fit of nostalgia or agitation or restless unease, he's animated by nothing more edifying or exalting than an attitude of "faint amusement and indifference," of "unconcern" with what's happening in and around him.[12]

2. Sacks's Three Attempts to Help

As it becomes increasingly clear that Jimmie has Korsakov's, a syndrome with no cure, Sacks turns his attention from diagnosis and prognosis to mitigating, as best he can, the disease's devastating effects.

Sacks's first plan was to find something Jimmie could take pride in. Jimmie values his own analytical skill. Adeptly solving puzzles and competing in games of strategy permit him to revel in this old talent. Unfortunately, however sharp Jimmie is, endless puzzling leaves him emotionally cold. Puzzles, he seems to sense, are mere child's play.[13]

Meaning can be found in useful work. Hence, Sacks's next plan was to find something purposeful for Jimmie to do. Since Jimmie would struggle to learn new skills, this would need to be purposeful labor for which he

already has an aptitude. Having learned how to "touch type" while in the Navy, Jimmie was put to work transcribing doctor's notes. But this second plan didn't succeed either. Jimmie could do the job, but he couldn't see much meaning in it, whether because the mere tap tapping seemed a rote activity or (as Sacks supposes) because the sentences seemed to come, one after another, without any identifiable coherence.

Sacks's third plan was to have Jimmie keep a diary. We can surmise Sacks's objective: recording his day-to-day activity might help Jimmie recognize what his memory deficits obviate, the narrative arc of his life. However, not only does Jimmie forget he has a diary, when he does occasionally scribble entries, they are utterly trivial: "eating breakfast," "saw kids play ball."[14] Korsakov's eviscerates Jimmie's capacity to see the momentary events he experiences—his thirty second blips—as embedded in any extended life story, so the diary can't help him construct a rich, diachronic picture of his life, as Sacks had so desperately hoped.

Clearly, Sacks yearns to help Jimmie find, episodically if not persistently, a sense of meaning, or a feeling of deep connection to some person or project, or a sketch of the narrative trajectory of his life. Something. Anything. Time and again Sacks's hopes are dashed. Jimmie remains restless and alienated—alienated from others, from the yaw and pitch of social life, from himself.

It's worth noting that certain peculiarities about Jimmie's life situation compound the direct psychological effects of Korsakov's. In a postscript, Sacks describes another such patient, Stephen, who lives with his caring wife in the home they've inhabited since before the onset of his disease. Though occasionally Stephen is set off when something—a new set of drapes, say—doesn't cohere with his long-term memories, he is generally calm. Almost always lurking in old, beloved environs, Stephen usually feels at ease. By contrast, Jimmie is almost entirely cut off from his past. The Connecticut hometown of his youth has changed dramatically, and, in any case, he's living in the unfamiliar Home. Moreover, Jimmie's brother, who lives across the country, seems to be the only family member who remains a part of Jimmie's life. Unlike for Stephen, there's very little in Jimmie's immediate surroundings that roots him to his distantly remembered and cherished past. The upshot is that Jimmie's intermittent fond reminiscences must seem, even to him, mere nostalgia, and not immediate, deep, satisfying, meaningful connections.[15]

3. The Case for Bunuel

These reflections add significant evidentiary heft to Bunuel's despondent remark, "without [memory] we are nothing." Unable to retain

information for more than a minute, Jimmie is incapable of forming and sustaining new friendships or forming intentions and correlated, scaffolded plans he can then execute in time. He is also, it seems, incapable of understanding, and so of deeply relating to, himself.

Sacks himself wonders, "were there depths in this unmemoried man, depths of an abiding feeling, and thinking, or had [Jimmie] been reduced to a sort of Humean drivel, a mere succession of unrelated impressions and events?" At first, following the spirit of Bunuel's remark, Sacks answers "no depths," "mere drivel," and he sorrows for Jimmie.[16]

Strictly speaking, Bunuel's claim that a person "is" her memories is overstated.[17] But even if a person isn't equivalent to her memory, Bunuel's "is his memory" exaggeration is entirely forgivable, for it does capture deep, and deeply sad, truths about Jimmie's interiority. In the very least, our Bunuel-inspired reflections strongly suggest that a decently functioning memory is *a necessary prerequisite* for a richly textured life.

4. Forswearing Bunuel for Luria: "Memory Ain't a Prereq"

Despair doesn't have the final word, the amen, in Sacks.

Urged by nuns who worked at the Home to observe Jimmie in Catholic mass, Sacks finds Jimmie to be—in that particular setting—uncharacteristically calm, attentive, and engaged, even exhibiting a serenity that persists hours after he has thoroughly forgotten he took holy communion. Sacks also sees a "different man" when he watches Jimmie toil in the Home's garden, which, Sacks comes to think, Jimmie fashions after gardens recollected from his cherished childhood.[18] In these scenarios, the lost mariner is nowhere to be found. For an hour or so, gone is restless, agitated, unconcerned Jimmie, typical Jimmie.

In the aftermath of these two curious witnessings, Sacks exuberantly reports that he was impelled to change his mind, *volte-face*, about Jimmie's prospects for connection, meaning, and engagement.

In rather florid language, Sacks conjectures that Jimmie was, in the intervals that make up attending mass and gardening, "absorbed in an act, an act of his whole being, which carried feeling and meaning in an organic continuity and unity, a continuity and unity so seamless it could not permit any break."[19] Psychic fragmentation is—fleetingly, but happily—overcome: "Clearly Jimmie found himself, found continuity and reality, in the absoluteness of spiritual attention and act. The sisters were right—[Jimmie] did find his soul there."[20]

Sacks goes on to claim that only "emotional and spiritual attention" through the direct "contemplation" of nature, art, and music made Jimmie "attentive to the beauty and soul of the world."[21]

In this context, Sacks also draws—breathlessly—several striking conclusions about the limits of empirical science. According to Sacks, "empirical science" told him that Jimmie was condemned to be "a sort of Humean froth, a meaningless fluttering on the surface of life," for "empirical science, *empiricism*, takes no account of the soul" and its ability to provide each of us, even "unmemoried" Jimmie, with "the undiminished possibility of reintegration by art, by communion, by touching the human spirit."[22]

Thereafter, Sacks forswears Bunuel's theory of the relationship between memory and meaning and yokes himself to Luria's. Even if a decently functioning memory is required for *many* types of meaning—the sorts of meaning derived from deep engagement with a friend or spouse, or from active pursuit of career ambitions, say—memory isn't absolutely required, Sacks now thinks, for *every* type of meaning. Memory, as it were, "ain't a necessary prereq," at least not for whatever type of deeply meaningful experience he takes Jimmie to be undergoing in church and the garden.

It's natural to pause and wonder what's happening within Sacks's very own soul in these exuberant, life-changing, worldview-altering moments. In particular, beyond Bunuel's theory, what old viewpoint is Sacks discarding? More, what distinct "world and life view" is he newly embracing? And what chain of reasoning leads Sacks from one "way of being and seeing" to the other?

5. What Has Sacks Rejected?

One thing is sufficiently clear: in the process of undergoing his various philosophical transformations, Sacks does not give up his devotion to science. The empirical sciences are—take the following to be a sufficiently useful gloss—disciplined attempts to understand the physical realm through sensory observation, pattern recognition, hypothesis testing, and the accumulation of well-documented, verified results. Before and after Sacks changes his mind about Jimmie's prospects for profoundly meaningful experience, he retains this general commitment. He's always and forever a devoted neurologist.

What Sacks recants is his previous belief in the "adequacy" of the sciences. As he describes himself, Sacks was initially a card-carrying "empiricist,"[23] who supposed, it seems, that *all* knowledge, or at least all information salient to his professional vocation, ultimately derives from sensory observation and standard, commonly accepted empirical methods. The empirical sciences, he had thought, tell him everything he needs to know to operate as a competent, credible, and caring neurologist.

Sacks eschews this idea. Seeing "memoryless" Jimmie in mass leads him to the conclusion there's more in the human psyche, and perhaps more in the totality of reality, than what the sciences are fit to discern.[24] There are such "things" as "the beauty and soul of the world." Apparently, such beauty is not, Sacks comes to believe, the sort of "item" apprehended by the standard mental equipment countenanced by the scientific discipline of neurology—by, say, our sensory apparatus: our eyes and ears and the elements of the human mind that turn visual and auditory data into (often true) beliefs about the material world.

It appears that, in Sacks's parlance, the word "soul" names whatever part of the human psyche completes this task of discerning the supersensible aspects of reality, those which transcend the physical. Calm, absorbed Jimmie is having, Sacks thinks, a powerful *epiphany* of some sort, an epiphany which, though mediated by sensory experience, grants him intuitive access to a deeper, psyche-amalgamating truth.

But that's not the whole of the first act of the story. "New Sacks" seems to disavow a second major commitment: a thesis that has come to be called "exclusive humanism." This is a mindset animated by a desire to find meaning purely in terms of immanent goods, goods such as physical health, personal ambition, feeling the wind through your hair, experiencing novelties while traveling, and spending time with friends and family. There is, in this way of thinking, a self-conscious aim to make no reference to divinity or to transcendence. As James K. A. Smith puts it, exclusive humanism is "a vision of life in which anything beyond the immanent is eclipsed."[25] Charles Taylor has emphasized how novel this mindset was when it emerged in the eighteenth century: "For the first time in history *a purely self-sufficient humanism* came to be a widely available option…a humanism accepting *no* final goods beyond human flourishing, nor *any* allegiance to anything else beyond this flourishing. Of no previous society was this true."[26]

This raises an interpretative question: Does the exclusive humanist mindset animate Old Sacks's thinking? For affirmative evidence, consider what sorts of meaning Sacks initially attempted to find for Jimmie: a skill he could take pride in: winning analytical games; useful work: typing doctor's notes; and a sense of the narrative arc of his life: by way of a diary. All of these are, make note, "here and now" goods. Otherwise put, when Sacks goes beyond the proper jurisdiction of the empirical sciences to attempt to help Jimmie find meaning, connection, and depth of experience, he seeks out—precisely as exclusive humanism would prescribe—purely immanent goods. And when Sacks can't generate such meaning in Jimmie's life, he despairs. The eclipse of the transcendent, indeed.

Of course, there very well might be more to Sacks's pre-conversion world and life view than empiricism and exclusive humanism. For example, we might wonder whether Sacks's empiricism shaded, wittingly or unwittingly, into a naturalistic worldview or into some other metaphysical position, such as materialism. I don't claim to know one way or the other. With respect to his philosophical commitments, both before and after his personal transformations, Sacks's self-descriptions are terse. As is common in conversion experiences, things aren't fully spelled out. Accordingly, we'll have to make do with what we have gleaned so far.

6. A New World and Life View?

To what, then, does Sacks convert?

That turns out to be an even trickier question, and it's especially tricky to answer it succinctly, as needs must. My proposal is that Sacks is acting out a centuries-old, but fairly common cultural *cum* philosophical *cum* existential script, a script in which Jean Jacques Rousseau and the Romanticist movement he inspired played early and dramatic roles.

As Taylor and others argue, the history of the modern world is punctuated by cultural critics who report being left cold—whether slightly chilled or down-to-the-bone frigid—by the ways of seeing and being encouraged by naturalism, materialism, empiricism, and exclusive humanism, as well as by the technological revolutions modern science has inspired. And it's not rare for everyday people—whether they've ever read Rousseau or the Romantics or any of their intellectual heirs—to possess an inchoate intuition that the modern scientific worldview is "missing something." We have, this intuition whispers, "inner depths" modern science doesn't countenance.

In terms of cultural-philosophical-existential movements, Romanticism emerged in the eighteenth century as a cultural reaction against strict empiricism, modern industrialization (and its instrumentalist attitude towards nature), commercialism, growing urbanization, and the barking demands and freedom-limiting impositions of "polite" society. Strict empiricists, following the example (though certainly not the rationalist philosophy) of Rene Descartes, tended to emphasize an ideal of taking responsibility for forming beliefs *for oneself*, and doing so rigorously and self-critically, on the basis of some notion or other of "rationality." If we are to count as "reasonable" people, we should marginalize any prospective beliefs that seem inconsistent with, or perhaps even those that don't seem immediately suggested by, the arc of modern scientific thought.

To Romanticists, these various commitments "flatten" the world and unhappily purge our lives of passion and spontaneity. Further, they

undervalue artistic genius and ignore nature as a source of moral inspiration and depth of feeling. Romanticists sought a new, less rationalized, less instrumental, less materialistic way of being.[27]

In *Sources of the Self*, Taylor speaks of the "old Romantic aspiration to overcome fragmentation," to "restore a lost unity" within the human psyche. Romanticists felt that modern life had left people alienated. In response, Romanticists bore a deep yearning for "recovering contact with a moral source," as well as a strong conviction that art and nature are precisely such sources. As Taylor puts it, the Romantic tradition proclaimed that a "work of art" can be "the locus of a manifestation which brings us into the presence of *something* which is otherwise inaccessible . . . [of] some greater spiritual reality or significance shining through it." An experience of beauty was taken to be a way we become "in touch with the supersensible in us." An "epiphany of being or of beauty" can "make us whole."[28]

As Taylor's sketch of this modern variety of yearning makes immediately clear, Sacks's language, his descriptions of what's happening within Jimmie in church and the garden, is more than slightly reminiscent of Romanticism. Sacks construes Jimmie as experiencing, through the medium of art and nature, the sort of epiphany for which the Romanticists ached.

I don't want to put an overly fine point on this commonality with Romanticism. A sense of fragmentation and an associated desire for "re-integration"—through art, through nature, through "going inward"—became major themes in the modern world. Much of the vocabulary of Romanticism was inherited by its various intellectual heirs.

Consider Transcendentalism, which also sought powerful, soul-altering confrontations with the sublime. It shared many important convictions with Romanticism, especially about the importance of subjectivity, sincerity, the search for depth of feeling, the belief that nature is a "moral source," and the desire for psychological integration. That said, Transcendentalists had differences with Romanticism. Whereas Romanticists often shared with strict empiricists the exclusive humanist's belief that true freedom requires a person to reject custom and traditions—and so, to jettison religious ideas and institutions, Transcendentalists were friendlier, if not to traditional understandings of Christianity, to encouraging followers to have spiritual encounters, not only within nature and within galleries of art or halls of music, but within traditional worship services.

This friendliness to religious practice is a trait Sacks himself displays. His attitude towards Jimmie's experience in Catholic mass is highly positive. He thinks Jimmie's soul experiences beauty then and there. But it's also notable how Sacks, similar to the Transcendentalist tradition,

construes what's happening within Jimmie. It's conceivable Jimmie takes himself to be experiencing God through the worship service. Never mind that possibility, Sacks chooses to interpret Jimmie's alleged spiritual encounters, not as experiences of a personal divinity, but of "transcendence." Transcendentalists were deeply influenced by Plato and his theory of the Forms. I've sometimes wondered whether, when Sacks speaks of the "beauty and soul of the world," he seriously toyed with going full Platonist and capitalizing the 'b' in 'beauty': "Then and there, the face of Beauty Itself shines upon Jimmie, and gives him peace."

I don't know, of course, the precise source of Sacks's existential vocabulary, whether it derives from Romanticism, Transcendentalism, or some related school of thought. Perhaps Sacks simply breathed it in from the cultural air. In any case, Sacks's language echoes Taylor's observation that a certain vagueness permeates Romanticist and post-Romanticist yearning for transcendence. When we experience "the transcendent," what, we might naturally ask, is thereby being revealed to us? When the Sacksian soul is activated, what is it allegedly encountering? Is it, "[T]he world, nature, being, the word of God,"[29] a Platonic form, the mystic's Self (underneath the buzz and din of the empirical self), or something else altogether? Otherwise put, what is the referent of "something more"?

Notably, Sacks incarnates this characteristic ontological vagueness. He emphasizes that Jimmie's (ostensibly) profound experiences within mass and the garden are *not* based on memory and require *more* than sensory experience. But when it comes to describing what Jimmie's soul is coming face to face with, mum's pretty much the word.

Is this deafening silence self-consciously *chosen,* or even philosophically *principled*? Is Sacks quiet about how we should conceive the transcendent because, whatever Jimmie is encountering, it's ineffable? Perhaps, but Sacks is also silent about the grounds for his silence.

To sum up, I'm suggesting one way to interpret Sacks's philosophical conversion story: as a one-man reenactment of a much-rehearsed, modern philosophical dialectic. For better or worse, Sacks is channeling quasi-Romanticist malaise toward modernity's infatuation with modern scientific thought and the ways of being and seeing it encourages. Observing a calm, attentive, focused, and seemingly engaged Jimmie prompts Sacks to infer that Jimmie's soul is swept away by the beauty within the service and within nature. In these settings, Jimmie's having epiphanies of being or of beauty, and this conclusion about Jimmie consequently drives Sacks "to the other side" in this old and immensely complicated cultural debate.

7. Is "The Lost Mariner" a Full-Bore Argument, or a Nudge?

How should we understand Sacks's self-reported philosophical conversions? Is Sacks implicitly claiming that his "Jimmie is having an epiphany" analysis is supported by, say, a sound abductive argument, one which offers a cogent inference to the best explanation? More, is "The Lost Mariner" intended as a vehicle through which Sacks provides (the better part of) a fully-constructed argument for the complex, new, anti-empiricist worldview he adopts?

If not, it could seem nit-picky and philosophically officious to hold Sacks to rigorous argumentative standards he doesn't aspire to. It's not obvious Sacks is in "argument mode" in this clinical tale. As mentioned, conversion reports don't invariably tell the *whole* story. (It's more likely they never do.) Perhaps a case against empiricism and exclusive humanism had long been building up, for many reasons unstated in "The Lost Mariner." Perhaps witnessing atypical Jimmie merely breaks the last straw of his old self's weakening internal resistance—a last drop of new wine in Old Sacks.

But even if our esteemed neurologist isn't in full-bore argument mode, he's certainly nudging his readers. It's hard to believe Sacks isn't encouraging us to agree with his epiphany analysis and his consequent belief in "the undiminished possibility of reintegration by art, by communion, by touching the human spirit." In the very least, Sacks wants us to regard an anti-empiricist worldview as a (highly) credible position.

Well, then, what to make of any such suggestions? How cogitatively potent, how intellectually hefty, are Sacks's particular proddings? In particular, will Sacks's ontological vagueness best serve any argumentative or suasive interests he might have?

For some readers, it likely will. There certainly are people who feel antipathy towards those who "push answers."[30] Not to mention, at least some dear souls who utter the ubiquitous motto "I'm spiritual, but not religious" would prefer, I'm guessing, *not* to be specific about what is hovering over the surface of their vasty deeps.[31] Such readers will applaud Sacks's deafening silence.

This vagueness will predictably play badly, though, with other readers. No doubt, the strict empiricists Sacks has left behind will judge it rather easy to explain Jimmie's atypical demeanor without making any appeals to the soul or a transcendent reality. (More on that in a moment.) But a person needn't accept a strict principle such as "any natural explanation, no matter how speculative, trumps any and every transcendental explanation, no matter how motivated" to raise hard questions about the quality of the grounds for Sacks's epiphany analysis. Consider, for example, the souls teetering in the breach, undecided between empiricism and anti-empiricism. If Taylor is correct about modern culture,

their name is legion, and many such existential weeble wobblers—such as myself, in some moods—might find Sacks's existential nudge something less than potent or hefty.

Here's what I mean.

8. Hard Questions for Sacks's Epiphany Analysis

It's certainly natural, having encountered Sacks's epiphany analysis, to consider whether there are simpler, more straightforward explanations of Jimmie's atypical demeanor. Is recognizing Jimmie's uncharacteristic calm and focus while attending mass and tending to the garden tantamount to judging that what Jimmie is undergoing is a direct, soulful confrontation with a "supersensible" aspect of reality?

Not so much. In the relevant episodes, Jimmie might simply be, as he is when he's occasionally with his brother, "19-year-old Jimmie" lurking in an old, familiar, even beloved environ.

If Jimmie grew up a mass-goer, the church could provide him with an unusual opportunity for mental rest. In most situations in which Jimmie is yearning to understand what's happening to him, it's cognitively taxing for him to be persistently in "investigation mode." How wonderful for Jimmie, then, if he were able, with knowledge of the order of Catholic mass preserved in his long-term memory, to shut off his searching, analytical faculties for an hour or so.

This eminently immanent "Jimmie is at mental rest" analysis doesn't presume he's having a profoundly *meaningful* experience in the pew. Instead, it simply construes Jimmie as free, at least fleetingly, from the curse of "involved cogitations." But even if Jimmie is deeply engaged—and profoundly moved—when in mass, it doesn't follow that this sort of episode is, as Sacks supposes, a Luria-style, memory-independent experience. In Jimmie's highly emotional episodes with his brother, we can discern he's fully capable of deep feeling when long-term memory permits him to enter into a space of mutually entangled knowing. And so, we might wonder whether Jimmie has a similar untold, long-standing, emotional relationship with the animating spirit of a Catholic worship service.[32] If so, this would seem to be—contrary to the thrust of Sacks's favored analysis—a memory-dependent experience.

These two speculative, alternative explanations raise the question: Did Jimmie grow up Catholic? Sacks doesn't explicitly tell us, though there are textual hints he did.[33]

So, if we do imagine Sacks's report as an act of suasion, how potent is it?

These explanations, once proffered, intimate that Sacks's preferred explanation is undermotivated and intellectually extravagant. To be blunt, Sacks himself doesn't, before his inferential leap, entertain and rule out any such immanent explanations, which might seem to bolster strict empiricism's position in the old debate. One can almost hear Sacks's ditched comrades: "Oliver, you're guilty of a dreaded 'Romanticism of the Gaps' Fallacy, plugging 'our Lord and Savior Beauty Itself did it' into any explanatory hole in your otherwise solidly empirical accounts. That's transcendentalism on the cut-rate. Once you come back fully to your senses, you're welcome to return, in good conscience, to your truer intellectual home."

Punchy? Yes. Might it make a teetering wobbler list back towards the empiricist side? It could. But is this punchy retort best taken as the last word? How might a friend of New Sacks respond? Can anything countervailing be said, at least to those in the breach?

9. Against Ontological Silence, However Principled

> "We live in a scientific and anti-metaphysical age in which the dogmas, images, and precepts of religion have lost much of their power…We are also the heirs of the Enlightenment, Romanticism, and the Liberal tradition. These are the elements of our dilemma: whose chief feature, in my view, is that *we have been left with far too shallow and flimsy an idea of human personality."*—Iris Murdoch[34]

The Enlightenment, through philosophers such as Descartes, Hume, and Kant, has created the modern sense of our "dignity as disengaged, free, reasoning subjects." Alongside this, and partly in reaction to it, the Romantics, the Transcendentalists, and various post-Kantian philosophers (among others) have emphasized a "sense of the creative imagination as a power of epiphany and transfiguration": that there are resources within us for living authentic and deeply connected lives.[35]

In her 1961 essay "Against Dryness," Iris Murdoch complains that "our dilemma"—or, as Taylor might put it, "our modern predicament"—is that,

> We have suffered a general loss of concepts, the loss of a moral and political vocabulary…we no longer see man against a *background* of values, of realities, which transcend him. We picture man as a brave naked will surrounded by an *easily comprehended* empirical world."[36]

The empiricist strains of the Enlightenment have made us suspicious of the very existence of such a background. Romanticism has made us vague about what this background would need to be like. Liberalism tells us all to figure out for ourselves what our own, personal "concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of the human life" is going to be.[37] (Quite an ask.[38]) And so, with many of us lacking any decently articulated sense of such a "background," we don't know what to make of our intuited but insufficiently cognized "deep self" or the "something more" modern science doesn't "speak of."

In this essay, I've accused Sacks of appearing to be philosophically impetuous, of seemingly leaping to exhilarating, though only partially articulated, philosophical and existential conclusions without having ruled out several somewhat obvious, less exciting explanations that are deeply consistent with the empiricist outlook he's rejecting.[39]

Could Sacks do better? More importantly, can those of us who are, or who are tempted to become, anti-empiricists do better?

We can start to forefront in our intellectual and cultural conversations "richer moral and political vocabularies," and sufficiently thick conceptions of reality, so that we can begin to understand what we might be experiencing when we sense "something more" in ourselves or "something more" in the baffling world in which we reside.

In the final analysis, I see Sacks as a serious and thoughtful collaborator. In all fairness, he does *gesture at* a way to ground his talk of the soul and the alleged power of nature and art—as "moral sources"—to integrate the (often) fragmented human psyche. He briefly invokes the early 20th century French philosopher Henri Bergson, who shared the Romanticist and Transcendentalist desire to go beyond strict empiricism and to discover, through an inward turn and a new philosophical approach, a metaphysics that will overcome psychological fragmentation and "restore a lost unity."

Reflection upon this dialectic between empiricism and non-, and upon Old Sacks's leap to New Sacks, could serve as a call—for those of us who are deeply sympathetic with the idea that there is "more in heaven and earth" than is contained in Sacks's old worldview—as a powerful reason to heed Murdoch's call to seek out a richer ontology and a richer, corresponding anthropology: otherwise put, to take up "more metaphysics."

This would also be a call, then, to dust off some old books, those that intelligently and shamelessly—if not breathlessly—attempt to provide thick, substantive, possible answers. Which books? Bergson's *Creative Evolution*, sure. (Why not throw good ol' New Sacks a bone?) Perhaps the 20th century epistemological text *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious*

Experience by William Alston.[40] Plato's *Republic*. Pascal's *Pensees*. Taylor's *Sources of the Self* and *A Secular Age*.[41] Thomas Nagel's *Mind and Cosmos*.[42]

Well, there are so many such books, really. But we also can, with help from Iris Murdoch and Charles Taylor, approach "all these books" with a sharper question: what sort of world and life view is best able to ground our inchoate but powerful sense that there are "untold depths" in the human psyche?

There are, of course, powerful reasons, both philosophical and moral, to doubt we can fully grasp the deepest Reality. But there are also, I've been saying, powerful reasons not to succumb, overly much, to ontological vagueness or silence.

Whether or not a Nothing is better than a Something About Which Nothing Can Be Said,[43] isn't a Something Humbly But Rigorously Debated better yet?

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[1] Luis Bunuel, *My Last Breath*, trans. Abigail Israel (London: Flamingo, 1985 [1982]), 4–5. In this passage, Bunuel is reflecting upon the ravages of his mother's dementia.

[2] Oliver Sacks, "The Lost Mariner," *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat: And Other Clinical Tales* (Chicago: Touchstone, 1998), 23–42, 34.

[3] Ibid., 27.

[4] Ibid., 23, 29, 37.

[5] Ibid., 25–26.

[6] Ibid., 29.

[7] At some level, Jimmie is aware of his lack of memory, though it's befuddling how this awareness exists simultaneously with his incorrigible habit of forgetting that he forgets.

[8] Sacks, "The Lost Mariner," 27.

[9] In Christopher Nolan's 2000 film *Memento*, this same exhaustion plagues the audience. The movie is structured, in terms of scenes, in reverse chronological order, which has the effect of putting the viewer in a discombobulating epistemic position akin to that of the main character, Leonard, who, like Jimmie, suffers from anterograde amnesia. Thus, the audience never knows the precipitating conditions that precede the present movie scene. For 113 minutes, the discerning viewer's mind is compelled to be in persistent "investigation mode," with little information to rely upon. Clever.

[10] Sacks, "The Lost Mariner," 26.

[11] Ibid., 36.

[12] Ibid., 27.

[13] Ibid., 37.
[14] Ibid., 35.
[15] For a reflection upon nursing homes that create—similar to what Stephen had—nostalgic, "real life" environs for dementia patients, see Larissa MacFarquhar, "The Comforting Fictions of Dementia Care," *The New Yorker*, October 1, 2018.
[16] Sacks, "The Lost Mariner," 35.
[17] It's overstated, at least if we want to be *scrupulously, rigorously* accurate. Among many other mental capacities, Jimmie retains his perceptual abilities, his logical reasoning ability, latent emotional capacity, personal traits (such as analytical acuity and affability), and important psychological needs. But without short-term memory beliefs, Jimmie can't identify any but the crudest occurrent emotional experiences within himself or set himself to accomplish any but the quickest and generally trivial goals.
[18] Sacks, "The Lost Mariner," 38.
[19] Ibid., 38.
[20] Ibid., 38. Is it worth noting that sometimes Sacks speaks of Jimmie "finding" his soul in mass, sometimes of his soul doing the work of "discovering" transcendent beauty. Finding one's *soul* and finding *beauty* by means of one's soul seem to be discoveries of two *distinct* "items."
[21] Ibid., 39.
[22] Ibid., 39, emphasis mine.
[23] Ibid., 39.
[24] Yes, yes, the allusion is to the oft-quoted passage from Act 1, Scene 5 of *Hamlet*, where the titular character famously says, "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio/Than are dreamt of in your philosophy." *Hamlet: the 3rd Series*, eds. Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor (Arden Shakespeare: 2016).
[25] James K. A. Smith, *How Not to Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2014), 23.
[26] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Harvard: Belknap, 2007), 18, emphasis mine. For a profound but highly readable discussion of whether immanent goods are sufficient for human happiness and flourishing, see Benjamin Story and Jenna Silber Storey, *Why We Are Restless: On the Modern Quest for Contentment* (Princeton University Press, 2021).
[27] The English indie folk rocker Passenger provides one example—from a vast, cultural array—of a Romanticist-style rallying cry against modernity in his 2014 song "Scare Away the Dark," whose lyrics are worth a peek.
[28] The various quotations in this paragraph are from the chapters "Visions of the Post-Romantic Age" and "Epiphanies of Modernism" in Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Harvard University Press, 1992), 419-493, emphasis mine. See, in particular, pages 419, 422–425, and 470.
[29] Ibid., 427.
[30] There is a not uncommon tendency in our culture to prefer people who "ask questions" to people who "give answers." Once in a while, I've had a student

complain, "I don't like this author because she thinks she's right" or "because he's trying to convince me to agree with him." If Sacks were to indicate he's avidly championing a particular school of thought, he would come to be seen, by such people, as a "dreaded giver of answers."

[31] What to think of this ubiquitous utterance? No doubt, in many cases, the claim "I'm spiritual, but not religious" is a sincere and accurate utterance: the speaker is a true spiritual seeker. But in some cases, it seems to serve the goal of making the utterer *seem* deep, but on the cheap. In such cases, "I'm not religious" signals freedom from intellectual lemminghood: no traditional teachings have been uncritically followed; and "I'm spiritual" is meant to signal personal depth. (In such an instance, have you ever been tempted to impishly ask, "Ah, I don't doubt you are very, very deep! So, what particular *spiritual* disciplines do you follow?")

[32] There are several related objections. First, if we hope to discern whether memory truly is a *necessary prerequisite* for meaning or connection, Jimmie isn't the *optimal* test case. Sacks persistently, and somewhat loosely, describes Jimmie as "unmemoried" or "memoryless." But Jimmie's memory isn't truly blank. When Jimmie experiences connection, a critical observer can sensibly wonder whether his long-term memory is, perhaps subtly, a crucial factor in the meaning-generation. Second, not only are long-term memories preserved in Jimmie, there are also intimations of an *inarticulable* recognition of new information, akin to what is sometimes popularly called "muscle memory." Jimmie isn't able to positively *recount* meeting his nurses, but he does reveal a vague familiarity with at least one of them. Also, Jimmie does learn to move about the Home, though I doubt he could draw a map of it. (Similarly, the documentary "Prisoner of Consciousness" relates the story of Clive Wearing, who suffers severe memory deficits but whose behavior indicates the operations of memory.)

[33] There is textual evidence that Jimmie was raised Catholic. As a Protestant, I myself generally use the word "religious" only as an adjective: "that is a religious doctrine," "this is a religious institution." In good, Catholic fashion, Jimmie also uses the word "religious" as a noun: "I'd never have guessed you'd become a religious, Sister!" (Sacks, "The Lost Mariner," 34). Not to mention, while living in the Home for the Aged, Jimmie is given holy communion. Would he have been granted the rite, it's at least sensible to ask, if he were not Catholic?

[34] Iris Murdoch, "Against Dryness," *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, ed. Peter Conradi (New York: Penguin Random House, 1997), 287–95, 287, emphasis mine. Murdoch's phrase "easily comprehended" does capture the attitude of the strict empiricist who quickly dismisses Sacks's reflections, doesn't it?

[35] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 454.

[36] Ibid., 290.

[37] A famous quotation from U.S. Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy, Planned Parenthood v. Casey, 1992.

[38] For an argument not to try to construct your own world and life view ("[u]nless your name is Nietzsche"), see David Brooks, "How to Fight the Man," *New York Times*, February 2, 2012.

[39] How does an empiricist or naturalist scorned react? Occasionally, not very well. Witness the vitriolic reaction—by some "tough-minded naturalists"—when the esteemed philosopher Thomas Nagel left the bivouac for an anti-empiricist, anti-materialist, non-theistic, teleological worldview in his book *Mind and Cosmos*. For a discussion of this topic, see Regan Lance Reitsma, "The Peculiar Flavor of Nagel's Metaethics," *Expositions* 8, no. 2 (2014), 11–25.

[40] William Alston, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1991).

[41] We could also read the Christian author, Marilyn Robinson, who has become the prophet of transcendent experiences—especially within ordinary life—to the religiously allergic. For an example, see the February 18, 2024 *New York Times Magazine* interview of Robinson by David Marchese: https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2024/02/18/magazine/marilynne-robinson-interview.html.

[42] Thomas Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature is Almost Certainly False* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

[43] See Investigation 304, Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), 102.