

Emptiness is Not Necessity, Whatever, if Anything, the Latter Might Be

In my book, *Empty Ideas*, I choose to use the expression “concretely empty idea” – and I define it like this: An idea (or a thought, or a hypothesis, or a proposition, etc.) is a concretely empty one if, and only if, whether the thought is correct makes no difference for (how things are with) concrete reality. The motivation is mainly this: The correctness or incorrectness of such ideas will be *empty of import for* (how things are with concrete reality) – so it is natural to call them concretely empty ideas. And, given that, it is natural to have the book be titled *Empty Ideas*.

I go on to say that, by the standards of its history and its current main practitioners, a body of philosophical ideas will be adequate, or ok, only if, within that body, are quite a few ideas, or thoughts, or whatever, that are NOT concretely empty ideas, but, rather, are thoughts whose correctness, or whose incorrectness, means a difference for (how things are with) concrete reality. And, further, they should include concretely substantial ideas – the contrast here – that are far from being just parochial thoughts. So, EVEN IF that body of ideas should have many virtues, or advantages, it follows that it will be, all told, an inadequate body of ideas. I go on to claim that, during the last 50 years or so, the leading lights of mainstream philosophy, saliently including Saul Kripke and David Lewis, have NOT offered many ideas other than concretely empty ones, except 1) Lewis’s idea of many mutually isolated concrete worlds and 2) quite a few merely parochial ideas.

Instead of talking in that way, I could have just as well talked in this way. Let us notice ideas (and thoughts, etc.) that are concretely *irrelevant* ideas. These will be ideas (or thoughts, etc.) whose correctness, or whose incorrectness, is *irrelevant to* (how things are with) concrete reality. The motivation here is quite closely parallel: The correctness or incorrectness of such ideas will be *irrelevant to* (how things are with) concrete reality. And, given that, it should be natural to have the book be titled *Irrelevant Ideas*.

In such a relevantly parallel circumstance, I should go to say that, by the standards of its history and its current main practitioners, a body of philosophical ideas will be adequate, or ok, only if, within that body, are quite a few ideas, or thoughts, or whatever, that are NOT concretely irrelevant ideas, but, rather, are thoughts whose correctness, or whose incorrectness, means a difference for (how things are with) concrete reality. And, further, they should include concretely relevant ideas – the contrast *here* – that are far from being just parochial thoughts. So, EVEN that body of ideas should have many virtues, or advantages, it then follows that it will

be an inadequate body of ideas. I go on to claim that, during the last 50 years or so, the leading lights of mainstream philosophy, saliently including Kripke and Lewis, have NOT offered many ideas other than concretely irrelevant ones, except 1) Lewis's idea of many mutually isolated concrete worlds and 2) quite a few merely parochial ideas.

Neither usage looks anything much like what philosophers say when they talk of certain thoughts as being necessarily true, what Timothy Williamson calls necessary thoughts, or they talk of other thoughts as being necessarily false, what Williamson calls impossible thoughts.

In his review of my book, Williamson says that on my usage of “(concretely) empty ideas”, this following traditional religious thought will count as an empty idea: There is a being who necessarily exists and has, of necessity, the attributes of omniscience, omnipotence, omnibenevolence and concreteness. If this thought is true - very dubious for both me and also Williamson, then it is, in the standard old terms of philosophy, necessarily true.

But is it an idea that is empty of import for how things are with concrete reality? Is it an idea whose correctness, or whose incorrectness, is irrelevant to how things are with concrete reality? As all appearances conspire to indicate, the answer is NO. One way for concrete reality to be is for it to include, or comprise, just such a necessarily existent and concrete being. That is how many religious people take concrete reality to be. Another way for concrete to be, rather unspecific, is for it not to include, or to comprise, such a being. Not only is that how atheists take concrete reality to be, but it may also be how certain other religious people think of concrete reality. Some of these religious others may think that concrete reality contains a being with the attributes of omniscience, omnipotence, omnibenevolence and concreteness, but that this wonderful being is not something that necessarily exists, perhaps because they think that nothing that is concrete is ever anything that necessarily exists.

Some confused folks may think that what's just above is all merely epistemic. But, taking a small leaf out of David Lewis's big book, we may notice these apparently very different ways for concrete reality to be: *First*, all of concrete reality may always comprise exactly THREE mutually isolated worlds; A) in one of these worlds there is a powerful concrete being who creates all of the other concreta in that world, and this being exists necessarily; B) in another, there is a prolifically powerful creator of all the other many concreta of the world but this

omnipotent being does NOT exist necessarily; and, C) in a third world, even while there are very many concrete entities, they are not produced by any single individual, let alone any omnipotent being. *Second*, all of concrete reality may always comprise exactly TWO mutually isolated worlds; A) in one of these worlds there is a powerful concrete being who creates all of the other concreta in that world, and this being exists necessarily; B) in another, there is a prolifically powerful creator of all the other many concreta of the world but this omnipotent being does NOT exist necessarily. *Third*, all of concrete reality may always comprise exactly TWO mutually isolated worlds; B) in one of these worlds, there is a prolifically powerful creator of all the other many concreta of the world but this omnipotent being does NOT exist necessarily; in the other world, even while there are very many concrete entities, they are not produced by any single individual, let alone any omnipotent being. And, of course, I have barely begun to warm up, here – though I shall not try your patience by delineating any further ways, pertaining to the present matters, for concrete reality to be.

Consider, now, the idea that all concrete reality comprises only one concrete, and not any plurality of such worlds. And let us specify that, in this one and only world, there is a being who necessarily exists and has, of necessity, the attributes of omniscience, omnipotence, omnibenevolence and concreteness. Is this situation one that holds with absolute or metaphysical necessity. Since I have little idea as to what such necessity really amounts to, I cannot say with any great confidence.

Once again consider the idea that the actual situation is just as in the paragraph above. Well, is this idea empty of import for how things are with concrete reality? Is it an idea whose correctness, or whose incorrectness, is irrelevant to how things are with concrete reality? As all appearances conspire to indicate, and as we have apparently shown with our Lewisian exercise, the answer is NO.

At all events, it should now be clear that both the notion of a concretely empty idea and the apparently equivalent notion of a concretely irrelevant idea are terribly different notions from any conception of an idea being strictly and absolutely necessarily true – whatever this last might amount to - or anything else in the woebegone traditional philosophical lexicon or toolkit.