

**Stephen Mumford.** *Glimpse of Light: New Meditations on First Philosophy*. Bloomsbury 2017. 184 pp. \$54.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781474279529); \$14.95 USD (Paperback ISBN 9781474279482).

In the years between 1913 and 1951 Ludwig Wittgenstein often went to the isolated Norwegian village of Skjolden to write and think in the absence of disturbances by his family and friends, and the other distractions of academic life. It is also to Norway, to the remote settlement of Bakkan, inside the Arctic Circle, where philosopher Benedict Chilwell, the protagonist in this first novel by Durham University philosopher Stephen Mumford, finds recluse to overcome his doubts about his work. Or, in his own words, ‘to find some certainty ... some clarity ... for what I believe in’ (6). If he doesn’t succeed ‘there is nothing to go on for’ (6), and he says ‘then there would really be nothing more for philosophy to say. So be it. I would spend my remaining days making pottery or weaving baskets’ (12).

He will spend the last six days of January in a small cabin that is owned by a friend and fellow philosopher. The last day of his stay, the first of February, happens to coincide with Soldag, the day the sun returns after a period of two months of darkness in which it remained absent all day long. During his solitary confinement in this cabin Chilwell will also meet with the other inhabitants of Bakkan. Since in such a small settlement nothing remains a secret for long, the other villagers have already heard about the reasons for his stay and Chilwell finds himself more or less forced to discuss his ideas and doubts with them.

The subtitle of the book is of course a reference to Descartes’ *Meditations on First Philosophy*. The book consists of seven chapters, one chapter for each day Chilwell is in Bakkan. The first six of these chapters, just as we find in Descartes’ *Meditations*, have the title ‘Meditation One’ to ‘Meditation Six’ and are the reflections of his thinking, his discoverings and the discussions he has during these days. The seventh chapter, entitled ‘Objections and Replies’ tells us about Soldag, Chilwell’s last day in Bakkan, where during a meal with all the inhabitants of the village present, he finds himself once more defending, with his newly gained confidence, his belief in a realist philosophy against the skeptical remarks of the other villagers.

We get to know Chilwell as a philosopher who has ‘in many articles and books over the years, developed a philosophy of realism’ (8), based on the firm belief that ‘there was a world outside of our minds’ (8), and ‘that we could know and understand a substantial portion of it’ (8). This is a view that probably is unproblematic to a lot of philosophers and to most non-philosophers, but over the years the number of skeptical challenges to his view has increased. The most worrisome of these challenges came from the corner of philosophers who claimed that ‘virtually everything is socially constructed, even tables and chairs, cats, planets, plants, rivers and mountains’ (10), and ‘that there is nothing of which we can know the objective existence’ (29).

On the second day of his stay, his Second Meditation, Chilwell finds a breakthrough in his thinking, and at the end of that day he picks up his pencil to write down the words *Cogito ergo causaltas*, ‘There is thinking, therefore there is causation’ (44). If, as his opponents believe, all objective facts are no more than constructions opposed upon them by society, then it must also be the case that society causes these objective facts. And if this is right than surely causation exists and has to be real instead of itself being a social construction. Furthermore, Chilwell reasons that ‘If there was any social construction—indeed if there was to be any society—then there had to be causation. And if there was to be any language, then there had to be a society... If there was to be thinking, then there had to be language. So it seemed that thought implied language, language implied society, and society implied causation’ (44) And so it looks like that already on his second day of his stay in

Bakkan he achieved what he came for, to save his philosophy of realism, and to renew his faith in himself as a philosopher.

The next day Chilwell is visited by one of his neighbours in Bakkan who happens to be a physicist and a fierce opponent of philosophy, suggesting that philosophy lacks progress and that philosophers have never said anything that was true. Explaining his newly discovered insights to his guest Chilwell soon finds out that his opponent isn't so easily convinced. Instead he replies to Chilwell that '[s]cience cannot be told by philosophy that causation is real, Ben. That's for science to settle. I think we already know enough about fundamental physics to say that there is no such thing as causation' (54).

After he has recovered from the shock Chilwell thinks things over and comes to the conclusion that without causation science would be nothing but a lame duck telling us nothing substantial about the world. Scientists perform experiments which are causal interventions in the world. In doing so they make observations, observation being in itself already a causal notion, of the outcome of those experiments. And after doing that they look for applications of these outcomes by which, in a sense, they change the world. So Chilwell concludes that his arguments clearly show us 'that almost all of which science does is built upon a presupposition of the reality of causation. Causation is the foundation of science' (64).

And so his days in Bakkan go by meeting and discussing his newly gained insights with more neighbours, among them the Sami girl Birit with whom he spends an evening which lasts so long that 'there was no doubt that we were relaxed enough in each other's presence to continue this into the early hours of Soldag' (110).

In the end, after meeting and arguing with a retired pastor who also lives in Bakkan, he even establishes the existence of God. It will come as no surprise that God is causation. Chilwell's argument for this is that 'the very first thing to exist must be causation itself. Causation must be the first uncaused thing. It must be, then, that God is causation: they are identical, for nothing in the world would deserve the name of God more than the uncaused cause' (127).

Then finally the sun reappears after being away for two months, and Chilwell returns home with a newly found confidence in his realist philosophy based on causation.

It is up to the reader to decide whether or not the arguments for Chilwell's theses are convincing enough to stand up in a court of specialized philosophers. But of course, *Glimpse of Light* isn't a work of philosophy but a novel, and that is also how we have to judge it. It is a book full of inspiring ideas and thoughts, sometimes so engaging that as a reader you are invited to participate in the discussions Chilwell has with his neighbours in Bakkan. Add to this the setting of the cold and dark Norwegian winter with Chilwell trying to keep the stove going and you have a very nice book to read. To write a novel so rich in philosophical ideas that is appealing to an audience of fellow-philosophers is by no means easy. To do the same and also appeal to an audience of non-philosophers is an even greater achievement. I for one enjoyed reading Mumford's book. It captures you and causes you to think.

**Jan Arreman**, Independent Scholar