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A Critique of Metaphysical Thinking

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“Help us to live as those who are prepared to die.”

– Rev. Ed White

Forward

The title is an obvious allusion to Kant's masterpiece, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, and it will seem like the height of pretention to invoke his book in association with mine. But quite the contrary, the title is meant to signal that I am a mere follower—the present work is only a “translation” of Kant's core insights into a contemporary setting. Such an update seems warranted: If philosophy today seems void of lasting results, it is by neglecting what Kant established long ago. (And is no contrived Idealism I refer to. Instead of ‘Critical Idealism’, the label ‘Critical Realism’ might have better served his purpose.) The timing is also opportune, as Kantianism has more confirmation than ever from the sciences, as I plan to show.

But, just as a translation from the German might obscure some of Kant's meanings, so too a contemporary adaptation may distort his original intent. Indeed, what guided the effort was not a slavish commitment to his views (something Kant himself would have detested). It is rather an attempt on my own behalf to represent the philosophical issues accurately, and to reason well about them. But the point is that the basic orientation is hardly original to me. It is unmistakably Kantian.

Nevertheless, since I am guided by my own epistemic compass, not every conclusion is one Kant would have drawn. That is especially so, given that some contemporary debates are addressed that were non-existent in his time, e.g., concerning content externalism (ch. 9). What's more, many hallmarks of Kant's philosophy are omitted, e.g., the “categories” of the understanding. It is already too ambitious to recapture his basic metaphysics and its metametaphysical backdrop. All things considered, one might thus summarize what follows as a “revised Kantian” program for contemporary metaphysics.

The key components of the program are (i) Quietism about fundamental ontology, (ii) Fictionalism about non-fundamental ontology, and (iii) Fideism (or perhaps “Speroism”) about God. After an introductory chapter, the book divides into three parts, with each part devoted to one of these three components.

Besides Kant’s *Critique*, another influence is William James’ body of work. Unfortunately, James is not always clear—he sometimes chooses a tantalizing metaphor over a precise expression of his view. Concurrently, James strikes me as hit-and-miss, and the misses disincline me to see the book as defending a James-style “pragmatism.” Yet as the reader shall see, there are enough connections with James to obligate special notice of them.¹

My thanks to the following publishers for permission to include material previously appearing in print:

- Chapter 2 contains several excerpts from “Rule Following and Metaontology,” *Journal of Philosophy* 112.5 (2015): 247-265.
- Chapter 3 is a revised version of “Ontic Terms and Metaontology, or: On What There Actually Is,” *Philosophical Studies* 170.2 (2014): 199-214.
- Chapter 5 is a composite of two previous papers: “On the PROVER9 Ontological Argument,” *Philosophia* 43.2 (2015): 475-483, and “The Modal Ontological Argument meets Modal Fictionalism,” *Analytic Philosophy* 57.4 (2016): 338-352.

¹ I do not mean to minimize James, by the way. His work is more accessible, and thus will be more illuminating for most people. I, on the other hand, am writing mainly for eggheads, simply because their patience might not be completely taxed by my dense prose. There is currently a trend in academic philosophy to reach wider audiences, and I sometimes wish my writing was more readable. But I think it has its place. After all, even James’ readership is more limited than, say, that of Christopher Hitchens or Billy Graham. But this hardly shows that James’ work is less valuable. Still, the present monograph will appeal to an even smaller audience than James’, and I am enough of a “pragmatist” to lament that. But as in James’ case, that does not mean the work must be proportionally less valuable.

- Chapter 6 is a revised version of “Theory Dualism and the Metalogic of Mind-Body Problems,” in C. Daly (Ed.), *Palgrave Handbook of Philosophical Methods* (pp. 497-526). Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave, 2015.

N.B., some section-headings are marked with an asterisk (“*”). These sections pursue details which can be skipped by the more casual reader without losing the main plot of the book.

1. Introduction: How is Rational Theism Possible?

1.1 Facing Extinction

Nothing compels metaphysical thinking like death. Humans generally hope to make sense of their world, to discern an order in the cosmos, including a moral order. But, when losing a loved one for instance, the semblance of a moral order starts to wear thin. It is then natural to wax metaphysical, looking to the possibility of a benevolent God, so that life and death do not seem so pointless. More broadly, in the attempt to cope, we speculate that reality may be different from how it tragically seems—that some moral imperative may hold steady “beneath the turmoil of appearances,”¹ giving purpose to our suffering, and affirmation to our persevering.

Yet this looks like wishful thinking. If we adhere to empirical method, we shall proportion our belief to the evidence, and refrain from the comforting stories. But though this appears more epistemically rational, it can be psychologically intolerable. If life has never forced you to your knees, it seems you have either been mercifully sheltered, or are stoical to an unusual degree.² The rest of us may act as if the commitment to empirical method never falters. But admittedly, this is posturing.

And to the stoics, consider that our species may be facing immanent extinction, owing to climate change.³ This is by no means certain, and I dislike the doomsday sensationalism

¹ Nietzsche’s phrasing. (*Birth of Tragedy*, section 18)

² Facing life can be just as hard as facing death. Thus Benatar (2017) describes powerfully our “predicament” between death and the “living disaster” (as one Schopenhauerian has called it). We might chide Benatar for his bleak perspective, but it is hardly unique to him—besides Schopenhauer, there is the Buddha’s first “Noble Truth” that life is *dukkha*. Also, Chuang-Tzu: “Whether in conflict or in harmony with things, [a human being] always pursues its course like a galloping horse which no one can stop. Is this not pitiful indeed? To toil all one’s life without seeing its success and to be wearied and worn out without knowing where to end—is this not lamentable?”

³ An alarmist piece, which caught the attention of many, is Wallace-Wells (2017). Of course, climate change is not the only threat to our existence, and in fact, we will almost certainly go extinct eventually, as is true of 99% of species that have ever lived (Stearns & Stearns 1999, p. x). Perhaps, following Nietzsche, we may hope to evolve into a different and better species. But in the long term, there is at least the heat death of the universe to put a cap on

associated with the matter. Nonetheless, the threat is real. In confronting extinction, the question then arises almost involuntarily: What was all our suffering, striving, breeding, fighting, living, dying *for*?⁴ An answer seems conspicuously absent from the scientific image.⁵

What should be done? I shall be assuming, naturally enough, that some *philosophy* should be done. But to be frank, I am no longer sure that this assumption is correct. If the aim is to cope, then it is unclear whether the best means to this end is to *cogitate vigorously* about our troubles. However, for some personalities, it may be a necessary step toward something more effective. If the intellectual conscience can be convinced that hope is rationally respectable, then that allow the individual to pursue better therapies, ones that can presume such hope.⁶ Yet this work is limited to making hope rationally respectable.

1.2 Three Kinds of Pragmatism

1.2.1 Tender- versus tough-minded pragmatism

In facing extinction, one philosophical option is “tender-minded” pragmatism, borrowing terminology from William James. The foundational idea is that, no matter how wonderful epistemic rationality may be, it is ultimately subservient to practical rationality. Thus, scientific

things. (Though Michio Kaku 2004 has identified a loophole even here, suggesting that intelligent life might escape via wormhole to an alternate universe. But leave that aside.)

⁴ Extinction makes the question especially urgent, but it would still matter even if the species lived forever. What would be the point of our unending existence? “The temporal immortality of the human soul... will not do for us what we always tried to make it do. Is a riddle solved by the fact that I survive forever? Is this eternal life not as enigmatic as our present one?” (Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 6.4312).

⁵ This reference to the “scientific image” is to indicate that the present work is a “Neo-Sellarsian” project of reconciling science with the “manifest image,” i.e., (roughly) the everyday world as we contemporaries experience it. I detail such Neo-Sellarsianism in the Preamble of Parent (2017).

⁶ This is not to say that the main purpose of theistic religion is simply to make life bearable (“tragic optimism”). It is more important that it often (though not always) enables individuals to *be at their best*, both psychologically and ethically speaking. For further elaboration and defense, see Sheiman (2009), especially chapters 2, 5, and 6.

thinking is governed in the end by what makes good practical sense.⁷ Accordingly, when scientific thinking creates anxiety about our ultimate futility, the view recommends retreat. (From a practical standpoint, non-futility is seen as non-negotiable).

Yet this stance would allow escape from the cold, hard facts whenever they prove sufficiently vexing. Those with a low threshold might then be regularly excused. (And before long, we get “creation science” taught in public schools, etc.) In reply, the tender-minded view might acknowledge that such coddling is impractical, and so, use a practical norm to restrict her pragmatism. But where to draw the line exactly? It seems dauntingly unclear.

This might bolster the alternative, “tough-minded” pragmatism. The idea here is to remain vigilant in our commitment to empirical method, as much as possible. We can of course be forgiving to ourselves when lapses occur. But we should not give much significance to the lapses themselves. Instead, we should maintain the course of austere naturalism, and not deny the apparent futility of life and death. Though we should try to manage any demotivating effects as best we can. (Such is the “pragmatism” in tough-minded pragmatism.)

This commitment to the truth, no matter how psychically destabilizing, is highly admirable in many respects. But, after living inside this worldview for 20 years, it now strikes me as unsustainable, and not just because of the emotional fortitude required. It also creates cognitive dissonance. Let me explain.

The conundrum that arises concerns value, including the value of our lives, for both the individual and the species. Since Mackie (1977), it is a familiar thought that value seems metaphysically odd (or “queer”). But there is one respect in which the oddity has not been appreciated. One might draw an analogy with the cosmological argument. Briefly, the

⁷ This sort of view has enjoyed a surge in popularity recently. See Hazlett (2013), Sharadin (2016), and Rinard (2017). See also Rescher (1987, ch. 1). Though it is unclear whether any of these authors would really jettison scientific thinking when anxiety about futility becomes too acute. They seem to allow for the possibility however.

cosmological argument identifies an infinite series of *causal* explanations as metaphysically odd. Thus, it is rejected in favor of a finite series, in which there is an “unmoved mover.” Regardless of your take on that argument, however, there seems to be a parallel regress of *metaethical* explanations,⁸ once we ontologically commit to value. Consider for instance:

Base Claim: “Donating to Oxfam is valuable.” (But why is that?)

Explanation #1: “Oxfam is an effective charitable organization” (Why is that valuable?)

Explanation #2: “Such organizations help people in need.” (And why is that valuable?)

Explanation #3: “Helping the needy promotes human flourishing” (Yet why is human flourishing valuable?)

Naturally, our activity of *providing* explanations must end—but does reality itself “bottom out” somewhere, when it comes to value? A regress here looks metaphysically odd as well, and so a “bottom” is often invoked, e.g., when it is said that human flourishing is “valuable in itself” or “intrinsically valuable.”⁹ Such things are *axiological* “unmoved movers.” Yet the irony is that (like God in the cosmological argument) these unmoved movers are also metaphysically odd.¹⁰

Despite my talking of “moving,” the oddity is not that intrinsic values would be unconditionally motivating (as Mackie, *op. cit.*, stressed). Rather, it is that they would be *explanatorily brute* in a way that is foreign to scientific thinking. After all, if something has *intrinsic* value, what would explain that? Not just anything is intrinsically valuable—the

⁸ I will be using ‘explanation’ in a purely ontological (and not an epistemic) sense. Where *p* and *q* are states-of-affairs, if *q* explains *p*, then at minimum, *q* is the “actual sufficient condition” for *p*. (Perhaps “*q* suffices for *p*” must also support counterfactuals, but we need not explore such details here.) Explanations in this sense *can* be invoked to justify a claim—but again, that sort of epistemic function is not the essential thing.

⁹ The metaphysics of intrinsic vs. extrinsic properties raises independent puzzles; see Lewis & Langton (1998). But the issues there would not seem to affect the substance of the present ones

¹⁰ My argument resembles the regress of reasons familiar from epistemology, and the regress of moral reasons is a special case going back to Aristotle at least (see *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk 1, sect. 2). But the regress presented here does not consist of *justifications*, but rather metaphysically sufficient conditions (cf. note 7). As a metaphysical regress, it is thus more akin to Nozick’s (1981, pp. 603ff.) regress about meaning in life—yet our problem is how *anything* could have value (though the value of human life is of particular concern). Besides, following other writers, I would distinguish the value of a life from its meaning, for a variety of reasons.

flourishing of MRSA bacteria, for instance. (And in a misanthropic mood, we might even doubt the value of human flourishing.) So, if some things are intrinsically valuable, what makes for the metaphysical difference?¹¹

In truth, the qualifier ‘intrinsically’ suggests that *nothing* explains why a thing would have this kind of value, beyond itself. Suppose that human flourishing is intrinsically valuable, and yet suppose that its value could be explained by some *other* facet of reality. Then, the value of human flourishing would not seem “self-contained” in human flourishing per se. Its value would depend on an *extrinsic* relation to some other thing. But then, in what sense is the value of human flourishing *intrinsic*? Properly understood, intrinsic value starts to seem inexplicable.¹²

Could the intrinsic value of a thing explain itself? That flouts the general injunction against circular explanation. (And how could intrinsic value emerge from itself?) Apart from that, the remaining alternative is for intrinsic value to be metaphysically primitive, without any explanation, circular or otherwise. It is then seen as a fundamental property of reality, akin to spin for gauge bosons. It would be as if the foundations of the scientific image needed help from the manifest image; the standard model of particle physics would require a metaethical addendum.

In fact, it is worse than that. Spin is not *metaphysically* primitive—spin is unexplained only relative to the current model of particle physics. It is merely a *theoretical* primitive in that

¹¹ The unclarity in ‘flourishing’ is deliberate, since I do not want to prejudge moral matters. Granted, on one interpretation, the term is already morality-laden (where it concerns “moral excellence”), but I do not mean to use it in this way. (Hopefully my talk of “flourishing” MRSA bacteria makes that clear.) If anything, “flourishing” here just concerns biological and psychological health. But it is not as if sheer numbers demonstrate flourishing—there is such a thing as overpopulation, after all.

¹² It may be argued that human flourishing is intrinsically valuable yet is explained by the value of its proper parts. For instance, suppose human flourishing has world peace as a proper part. Then, the intrinsic value of human flourishing could be explained by the value of world peace (along with the value of its other parts). Let me grant that there may be these kinds of “aggregates,” where their “intrinsic” value can be explained in this way. Still, it means that intrinsic value is no longer a regress-stopper in the series of metaethical explanations. Yet that was why the intrinsic value of human flourishing was suggested in the first place. So either one needs to contend with the regress again, or accept that the value of human flourishing has no further explanation.

model, and there is the real possibility that physics will explain spin in some future model. But “intrinsic” value *cannot* be explained by anything else. Otherwise, its value would be explained by its relation to something else, contra the idea of being intrinsic. Intrinsic value is thus inexplicable *in principle*.¹³

We can summarize the issue as follows. Assume that the variables range over possible states-of-affairs. Then, the following three premises generate a vicious regress:

- (1) *No Metaphysical Brutes*: If *p* is valuable, then some fact *q* explains its value.
- (2) *No Circularity*: Explanation cannot be circular.
- (3) *Adequacy*: *q* explains why *p* is valuable only if *q* is itself valuable.

Eventually, I shall go on to reject (1). But prima facie at least, each of (1)-(3) seem plausible—yet they imply that nothing is intrinsically valuable. And since circular explanation is discounted, they also imply that for *p* to be valuable, there must be infinitely many valuable, explanatory ancestors—which seems absurd. This accordingly can function as a *reductio ad absurdum* on the claim that something is of value. Nihilism is the result.¹⁴

Proposition (3) was not explicitly invoked earlier, but we were guided by it implicitly — e.g., when explaining the value of donating to Oxfam. There, it was clear enough that to explain the value of the act, one needed to cite something *valuable* about that act. The explanation was that it promoted an effective humanitarian organization—but then the question arose why *that*

¹³ Some may protest that “inexplicable in principle” is not foreign to scientific thinking. Necessary properties seem thus inexplicable: It is at least bizarre to ask *why* bachelors are men, or *why* (pure) water = dihydrogen oxide. (If someone insists on asking, we can at most offer a circular answer “that’s just what water *is*.”) Yet the present concern is not inexplicable elements in general—it is inexplicable *value* in particular. And it is hard to see, e.g., human flourishing as being necessarily valuable. (Think of a possible world where all humans are morally depraved, Hitler-clones.) Now in fact, my own view is that the value of at least one thing *is* necessary and inexplicable in principle. But that is a claim that I am trying to argue *to*. And I want to be candid that an axiological “unmoved mover” is metaphysically odd, to say the least.

¹⁴ It is important that the nihilism threat results just from the drive to explain why things are the way they are, and specifically, why some things have value. So, contra some existentialists (e.g. Nishitani 1949/1990), the threat is not simply a historically contingent, ideological or cultural phenomenon. That is so, unless one sees the drive for explanation as a mere cultural phenomenon. I see it as more universal.

had any value. And the sense was that this *must* be valuable, if it was to adequately explain why donating to Oxfam was valuable in the first place. Such was the appeal of (3) at work.

It is important that here that the term ‘nihilism’ is being used in a quite a wide-ranging way. Elsewhere, “nihilism” is more narrowly the denial of meaning or ultimate value to human life. And there, it is possible to affirm “nihilism” and still say that human life has non-ultimate or “terrestrial” meaning, as in Benatar (2017). Such a “nihilism” could even affirm the ultimate value of things other than human life. But nihilism in this context is not just targeting human life, nor is it concerned only with *ultimate* value. The nihilism suggested by the regress is that *nothing* has *any* value of *any* sort (ultimate or not).

A further clarification: The regress argument is not just rehashing the (somewhat tired) idea that “you cannot derive ‘ought’ from ‘is’.” The problem does not depend on the premise that there is some fundamental division between fact and value. Quite the contrary. The regress arises from the assumption that *values are among the facts*. After all, the issue concerns a putative *ontological fact*, viz., that there *is* such a thing as value, and that is where the explanatory problem gets started. Again, the metaphysical conditions required to explain this would either be oddly regressive, or stop in some metaphysically odd way. Perhaps the argument could be used to advocate that value *should* be seen as fundamentally distinct from the realm of fact. But I am not concerned to do that. My aim is merely to identify an explanatory issue in the (entirely natural) assumption that there is such a thing as value, i.e., that values are among the facts.¹⁵

¹⁵ This marks a difference between the present approach and that of Dworkin (2013). He starts from the “is-ought” gap and then asks whether any fact has intrinsic value (nihilism). But like many, I worry that simply assuming an is-ought gap begs the question against metaethical naturalism. Indeed, I am ultimately not committed to an is-ought gap at all, much less by assumption.

Similarly, I am not just echoing Reichenbach’s (1951) dictum that “Science tells us what is, but not what should be” (p. 287). Again, my argument assumes that values are among the facts—and if a completed science described all the facts, then a completed science *would* tell us what has value. But the assumption that values are among the facts is enough to create the trouble. Moreover, the regress argument patently has more content to it than Reichenbach’s axiom. (For related discussion, see note 19.)

Analogous to Mackie, one might reject the existence of values on the basis of the regress argument. But without qualification, I submit that such a view is *not a view we can really believe*. As I put it elsewhere:

even the most die-hard moral anti-realist is inescapably committed to answers regarding “What should I do?” And with these answers comes an ontological commitment to norms. The anti-realist may explicitly deny that any of her answers are “normatively charged.” But in the end, *this is a species of bad faith*. At the most basic level, the individual engages reality in a way that makes “What should I do?” a distinctly *normative* question... [where the] answers come with the unavoidable ontological commitment to norms. This is not to say that there really are norms. It is rather to illustrate that an ontological commitment to norms is inescapable. (2017, p. 18)

Indeed, when the tough-minded pragmatist adopts her stance, she herself adopts it with the idea that one *should* be a tough-minded pragmatist, that there is something *wrong* with adopting any other sort of stance.¹⁶ But the values she presumes in this are metaphysically odd. If there is no regress of explanation, they seem to bottom out in “unmoved movers” which are quite foreign to scientific thinking.

Besides this, I must also return to the more humanistic point. Mackie’s view implies a nihilism that has us face extinction without recourse. Even if the human endeavor is futile, to see it thus is no way to live, if it can be at all reasonably avoided.¹⁷ This is not to say that one may be excused from scientific thinking whenever the mood strikes. But if value *per se* is excluded from the scientific image, then in this one instance, let us try exploring other options. Nothing is more

¹⁶ This sentence is really just generalizing a point from Sayre-McCord (1988), section 5. Sayre-McCord observes that scientifically-minded nihilists explain human behavior without appeal to values, on the grounds that this is a *better* explanation. And such explanatory values are contra nihilism. Above, I extend this so that *any* claim to the effect that nihilism is “better” is at odds with nihilism. (Sayre-McCord and I are also similar in focusing on value and explanation, but his *explanandum* is specific behaviors, whereas mine is value itself.)

Let me add my apologies for unintentionally neglecting to cite Sayre-McCord (1988) in the Preamble of Parent (2017). His piece is a forceful expression of the clash between the scientific image and morality (*qua* part of the manifest image), and though I read it years ago, I have no doubt that it influenced my thinking greatly.

¹⁷ Kahane (2014, 2017, etc.) rightly observes that if nothing really matters, then it doesn’t really matter that nothing really matters. There would be no real reason to be upset over the truth of nihilism. Even so, one hopes for some *positive reason to affirm life*, and not just lack of a principled reason to reject it. There is a palpable need for affirmation, moreover, when life bears down hard. It is perverse, at a time of crisis, to rehearse that one’s suffering doesn’t really matter, given that nothing really matters. (In fact, it can make things worse; it naturally leads to the idea that whether one commits suicide doesn’t really matter.)

important than value—it is the condition on which anything has value. (And in fact, the exception to our scientific scruples is not really so, once we better understand what those scruples rest on.)

**1.2.2 Further remarks on tough-mindedness*

Before continuing, there is a loose end. A tough-minded pragmatist may try to deny that she ultimately assumes the value of her own view. Granted, she prefers the tough-minded view over its competitor views. But she may regard her preference as somewhat hedged. Her preference just reflects that *if we assume* that human flourishing has value (as we are naturally inclined to do), then tough-mindedness also has value. That is so, insofar as it is the view that best comports with scientific thinking (which in turn, promotes our flourishing). So naturally enough, she accepts the value of tough-minded pragmatism. But, she may add, this is not to say that anything *really* has a value.

There is something strange in this, however, for the pragmatist admits that she is prone to assume the value of her pragmatism, even though she also asserts that there are no values. So according to her own position, she is prone to indulge in assumptions that she believes to be false. Now this may not be too damning—everyone succumbs to pretense now and then. But unfortunately, this gaffe of practical rationality generalizes in a disastrous way. The problem is that, on the assumption that there are no values, *no* choice ultimately has a rationale—not just concerning what to believe, but also concerning what to do (including a choice to do anything at all). The tough-minded pragmatist implies that she often *assumes* her choices have a rationale. But she also sees herself as knowing better, or at least, as believing truly that her choices do *not* have a rationale. For she sees the world as containing no values by which a rationale could be given. So, there is ultimately no reason for any action of any sort.

The point is momentous enough to repeat more carefully. Where S is a subject, and Φ is any act whatsoever (whether it be an act of believing, or a more prototypical “bodily” action):

(4) S has a good reason to Φ only if Φ has a value. [Assume]

(5) There are no values. [As per the regress argument above]

(6) So, it is not the case that S has a good reason to Φ . [From (4), (5)]

Since S and Φ are arbitrary, it thus follows that no one has a good reason to do anything. To be clear, this does not demonstrate that S has a good reason *not* to Φ , for any given Φ . To lack a pro-rationale is not the same as possessing a con-rationale (cf. note 15). But it is left to non-rational forces whether one Φ s. And what if one is gripped by mood where no Φ appeals?

Clinical psychology has made impressive advances in the past 20 years, even apart from advances in psychopharmacology. So if one is gripped by a mood, let me provide reassurances that effective treatment is available.¹⁸ Nevertheless, there at least remains a *philosophical* problem: If the tough-minded pragmatist follows the consequences of her view up to the nihilism at (5), then she is left without a good reason to do anything. And that, of course, includes being a tough-minded pragmatist.

A Nietzschean Übermensch might nonetheless find the will to act in an otherwise valueless world. But if the pragmatist is human, all too human, the fire in her soul may not always burn so bright. The vicissitudes of life sometimes prove too challenging.

Threatening the pragmatist with an immobilizing nihilism may seem like overkill, but I wish to stress how bad off she is. So if she still insists on tough-mindedness, I wish to ask in

¹⁸ I am by no means a therapist, but for the non-religious, one helpful framework is the “secular Buddhism” of, e.g., Robert Wright (2017). Yet though Wright identifies as a “naturalist,” it is unclear whether he is truly an atheist, strictly speaking. Regardless, his book can provide the atheist a sort of “everyday therapy” bundled with an “everyday ethics.” (Though I cannot quite rest content with it myself, as his naturalism still breeds a cognitive dissonance by assuming existence of “values,” as per the regress argument below.)

all earnestness: *Why* exactly? What is driving your tough-mindedness, if your view implies there is ultimately no reason for anything?

1.2.3 Instrumentalism

Metaphysics—can't live with it, can't live without it. That might be the mantra of tough-minded pragmatism, or rather, an expression of the discord it creates. Despite the commitment to empirical method, the tough-minded pragmatist still finds the world blanketed with an inexplicable layer of values.¹⁹ Must it be this way?

There is a different way to adjudicate scientific thinking with metaphysical urges. This, unfortunately, has also been called “pragmatism” on occasion. However, a more informative term is ‘instrumentalism’ (as long we do not flatly presume that an instrumental theory is more likely to be true).²⁰ The difference between instrumentalism and the other “pragmatisms” is that, instead giving a *prescription* for scientific thinking, we instead recognize science under a different *description*. The earlier pragmatisms were prescriptive: They advised for (or against) a restriction on scientific thinking, because of (or despite) the fragile human psyche. Yet perhaps our troubles stem from a wrong-headed *description* of what science amounts to in the first place.

Instrumentalism finds expression in James’ statement that “*Theories thus become instruments, not answers to enigmas in which we can rest.*” Yet James is here characterizing the view he calls “pragmatism,” and he does not always do this clearly. Indeed, in the same region of text, he also describes pragmatism as a method conjoined with a theory of truth. And though a

¹⁹ Some may be impressed by the *unobservable* status of values, as something at odds with scientific thinking. But as noted by Sayre-McCord (op. cit.), among others, science also deals with unobservables, such as gauge bosons. And I agree with those who say that the theory-ladenness of observation, plus the technological contingencies in what counts as “observable,” undermine a principled observable-unobservable distinction.

Others may reject the existence of values by appeal to Occam’s razor (a.k.a. parsimony). Such an appeal may seem compelling, even if intrinsic values were explicable in principle. But my view is that the justificatory force of Occam’s razor has been exaggerated. See chapter 11 for details.

²⁰ ‘Instrumentalism’ is a good term for getting introduced to the basic idea—but later I will prefer the term ‘fictionalism’ (though this has misleading connotations at this stage). Eventually, the view will be supplemented in various ways, resulting in a successor I refer to as the “revised Kantian” position.

true theory is seen as a maximally instrumental theory, none of this implies, nor is it implied by, the view that all theory is ultimately a (more or less effective) instrument. Indeed, my own position is to affirm the latter—while maintaining neutrality on whether a “true” theory is the same as a maximally instrumental theory. Truth might well consist in something else (even a “correspondence” with reality), even if our theorizing pursuits are better explained by the instrumental value of our theories.

This general view—that our theories are instruments for predicting and explaining—is what I wish to call “instrumentalism,” a view that should be kept separate from James’ other “pragmatist” doctrines. If we accept instrumentalism, then it should be clear why scientific thinking does not legislate against an ontological commitment to an axiological “unmoved mover.” The reason is that science would not dictate ontological commitments, strictly speaking. It would just be an instrument for prediction and explanation—not be a rationally mandated “book of the world” on what really exists.

But an ontologically non-committal stance in science can be puzzling. After all, science certainly *seems* to impute ontological commitments to its practitioners. Biology says that genes exists; chemistry says that oxygen exists; physics says that protons exist, etc. What’s more, even if this objection can be neutralized, it is not clear what positive reasons exist in instrumentalism’s favor...

[The remainder of the chapter is omitted]

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