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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 questions will be addressed that were not explicit 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.

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- 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.
- 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.

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 of our persevering.

Yet this looks like wishful thinking. If we stringently 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.

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, [the human agent] 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?”

And to the stoics, consider that the human species may be facing immanent extinction, owing to climate change.³ This is by no means certain, and I dislike the doomsday sensationalism associated with the matter. Nonetheless, the threat is real. In considering 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

1.2 Three Kinds of Pragmatism

1.2.1 Tender- versus tough-minded pragmatism

What should be done? One option is a kind of “tender-minded” pragmatism, borrowing terminology from William James. On this tack, epistemic rationality is seen as subservient to practical rationality—accordingly, scientific practice is ultimately governed by what makes good practical sense.⁶ Thus, whenever scientific thinking creates anxiety about our ultimate futility,

³ An alarmist piece, which caught the attention of many, is Wallace-Wells (2017). And climate change is not the only threat to our species’ existence. Indeed, we will almost certainly go extinct eventually, as all species do (though perhaps we will evolve into a different species). In the long term, there is at least the heat death of the universe to put a cap on things. (Yet Michio Kaku 2004 has identified a loophole even here, suggesting that intelligent life might escape via wormhole to an alternate universe. But let us leave that aside.)

⁴ Extinction makes the question especially urgent, but it would still be pressing even if we were to live forever. What purpose would our continuing struggles serve? Cf. Wittgenstein: “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?” (*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 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.

the view recommends retreat. It insists that, from a practical perspective, non-futility is 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 pragmatist might acknowledge that coddling is impractical, and hence, use a practical norm to restrict her pragmatism. But where to draw the line exactly? It seems dauntingly unclear.

The impracticality of such pragmatism might inspire an alternative, “tough-minded” pragmatism. The idea would be 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 perhaps should not assign much philosophical significance to the lapses themselves. Instead, we should maintain the course of austere naturalism, and not deny the apparent futility of life and death—while mitigating any demotivating effect.

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. Allow me to explain.

In prior work,⁷ I argued that human beings are “inescapably” committed to metaphysical oddities like moral and logical norms, autonomous agency, and so forth. Strict naturalists have often rejected such commitments within the “philosopher’s study,” as it were. But these sorts of things are invariably taken seriously in our day-to-day dealings (or so I argued). And at bottom,

⁷ Parent *op. cit.*

the concern of this book is with one such oddity: Value, and especially the value of our lives (for both the individual and the species).

Since Mackie (1977), it is a familiar idea that value seems metaphysically odd (or “queer”). But there is one respect in which the oddity has not been fully appreciated.⁸ We might make an analogy with the cosmological argument. Briefly, the cosmological argument regards an infinite series of *causal* explanations as a metaphysically odd. Thus, it is rejected in favor of a finite series, in which there is an “unmoved mover.” Now regardless of your take on that argument, there seems to be a parallel regress of *metaethical* explanations, 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 people in need 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?⁹ A regress in this case seems metaphysically odd as well,

⁸ My argument will be reminiscent of the regress of reasons familiar in epistemology, and the regress of moral reasons is a special case which goes back at least to Aristotle (see *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk 1, sect. 2). But the regress presented here is not a regress of justifications but more a regress of causes, or at least, metaphysically sufficient conditions. It is closer to Nozick’s (1981, pp. 603ff.) regress problem about meaning in life, although, the problem here is how *anything* could have value (even though the value of human life is a particular concern). And following other writers, I would also distinguish the value of a life from its meaning, for a variety of reasons.

⁹ Hopefully at this point it is clear that I am using ‘explanation’ in a purely ontological (and not an epistemic) sense. Where *p* and *q* are states-of-affairs, if *q* explains *p*, then *q* is the “actual sufficient condition” for *p*. Explanations in the purely metaphysical sense *can* sometimes be invoked to justify a claim, but again, that sort of epistemic function is not essential here. (Yet for *q* to be the “explanation” of *p*, perhaps the conditional “if *q* then *p*” also must support counterfactuals. But such additional details will not be needed for the discussion above.)

and so a “bottom” often appears invoked, e.g., when it is said that human flourishing is “valuable in itself” or “intrinsically valuable.” Such things are *axiological* “unmoved movers.” Yet the irony is that (like God in the cosmological argument) these unmoved movers are also metaphysically odd.

Despite my talking of “moving,” the oddity is not that intrinsic values would be categorically motivating (as Mackie, *op. cit.*, argued). 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 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?¹⁰

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 itself. Its value would depend on an *extrinsic* relation to some other thing. But then, in what sense is the value of human flourishing *intrinsic*?¹¹

¹⁰ The metaphysics of intrinsic versus extrinsic properties raises independent puzzles; see, e.g., Lewis & Langton (1998). But the issues there would not seem to affect the substance of the present discussion.

¹¹ It may be argued that human flourishing is intrinsically valuable yet is explained by the value of its (intrinsic) 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 intrinsic 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.

Could the intrinsic value of a thing explain itself? That contravenes the general injunction against circular explanation. (And how could intrinsic value emerge from itself?) Apart from that, the only alternative left 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 input 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 model, and plausibly, 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*.

We can recap the issue above 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, different interpretations of (1) will be identified, and it will be accordingly rejected on some readings. Yet without such a check, (1) and (2) indicate that there cannot be anything intrinsically valuable. Moreover, thanks to (2) and (3), the value of p must be explained by the value of something else (and these explanatory chains cannot circle back on themselves). Hence, in order for p to be valuable, there must be infinitely many valuable, explanatory ancestors—

which seems absurd. The regress thus can function as a *reductio ad absurdum* on the claim that something is of value. Nihilism is the result.

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

Like Mackie, one might reject the existence of values on the basis of such an argument. But without qualification, I submit that Mackie's 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. But the values she presumes in this are metaphysically odd. If there is no regress of explanation, they bottom out in in-principle “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.¹² This is not to say that we 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.

1.2.2 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 its vigorous commitment to empirical method, it is a worldview that comes with unobservable layer of values, blanketing the entirety of our world and everything in it. Must it be so?

There is yet another 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).¹³ 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...

¹² Kahane (2014, 2016, 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 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 just 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.)

¹³ ‘Instrumentalism’ is a good term for getting introduced to the basic idea—but later I will prefer the term ‘fictionalism’ (though the latter 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.