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. 8). 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 “reconstituted Kantian” program for contemporary metaphysics.
The key components of the program are (i) Quietism about fundamental ontology, (ii) Fictionalism about non-fundamental ontology, and (ii) 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:


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 academics; they are the ones whose patience might not be completely taxed by my dense prose. I applaud the current trend in academic philosophy to reach wider audiences, but more technical prose has its place. After all, even James’ readership is more limited than, say, that of Sam Harris 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 here too, the value of the work is not to be judged solely by the size of the readership.
Chapter 9 is a revised version of “I Think; Therefore, I am a Fiction,” in T. Demeter, T. Parent, and A. Toon (eds.), *Mental Fictionalism: Philosophical Explorations* New York: Routledge (forthcoming).

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 is 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

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\(^1\) 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. Remember too Psalm 84 on the “vale of tears,” and of course, Ecclesiastes. Also, Chuang-Tzu: “Whether in conflict or in harmony with things, [the 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?”

\(^3\) An alarmist piece, which caught the attention of many, is Wallace-Wells (2017). Climate change is not the only threat to our existence; indeed, we will go extinct eventually, as is true of 99% of species that have ever lived (Stearns & Stearns 1999, p. x). We may evolve into a different and better species, as Nietzsche suggests. But in the
associated with the matter. Nonetheless, the threat is real. In confronting extinction, the question then arises involuntarily: What was all our suffering, striving, breeding, fighting, living, dying for? An answer seems conspicuously absent from the scientific image.

What should be done? I shall assume, naturally enough, that some philosophy should be done. But I am no longer sure that this is correct. If the aim is to cope, then it is doubtful whether the best means to that 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 shown that hope is rationally respectable, then that may allow the individual to pursue better therapies, ones that can take hope as a given. But this work is limited to making hope rationally respectable.

1.2 Three Kinds of Pragmatism

1.2.1 Tender- versus tough-minded pragmatism

Facing extinction, one cognitive strategy is “tender-minded” pragmatism, borrowing terminology from William James. The basic idea is that, no matter how wonderful epistemic rationality may be, it is ultimately subservient to practical rationality. Thus, scientific thinking is

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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” signals 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 chapter of Parent (2017).

6 This is not to say that the purpose of theism is simply to make life bearable (“tragic optimism”). More than that, religion can enable individuals to be at their best, both psychologically and ethically speaking. Even Dennett (2006) concurs, though he suspects that there are non-religious ways to achieve comparable benefits; see pp. 54ff. (I am unsure about this. Still, I vehemently agree with Dennett that much institutionalized religion is morally and intellectually corrupt.)
governed in the end by what makes good practical sense. Accordingly, when scientific thinking creates anxiety about our ultimate futility, the strategy recommends retreat. (From a practical standpoint, non-futility is seen as non-negotiable).

Yet this 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 might then see “creation science” being 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 problem 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 cosmological argument identifies an

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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.
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:

- **Basis 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 the needy.” (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 unconditionally 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 unconditional value would be intrinsically motivating (as Mackie, op. cit., stressed). Rather, it is that it would be explanatorily brute in a way that is foreign to scientific thinking. After all, if something has *unconditional*

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\(^8\) 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 a non-circular “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.

\(^9\) Thanks to Russ Shafer-Landau for suggesting the term ‘unconditional’.

\(^{10}\) 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, §2). But the regress here does not consist of *justifications*, but rather metaphysically sufficient conditions (cf. note 8). As such, it is 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.

Still, my type of explanatory-regress was likely implicit in much work before me. E.g., Mavordes (1986) talks about a “deep ground” for moral obligation. But again, value is a broader topic than morality, and Mavordes is also more concerned to justify rather than explain morality. (I discuss Mavrodes and other theological voluntarists further in the appendix.)
value, what would explain that? Not just anything is unconditionally 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 unconditionally valuable, what makes for the metaphysical difference?¹¹

In truth, the qualifier ‘unconditionally’ suggests that nothing, no condition, explains why a thing would have this kind of value. Suppose that human flourishing is unconditionally valuable, and yet suppose that its value could be explained by some other facet of reality. Then, the value of human flourishing would seem to metaphysically rest on something else. Its value would require on some other condition. But then, in what sense is the value of human flourishing unconditional? Properly understood, unconditional value seems inexplicable.¹²

Could the unconditional value of a thing explain itself? That flouts the general injunction against circular explanation. (And how could unconditional value emerge from itself?) Apart from that, the remaining alternative is for unconditional 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.

¹¹ The unclarity in ‘flourishing’ is deliberate, since I do not want to be prejudged as normatively positive. Granted, on one interpretation, the term is already value-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 (incl. psychological) health. And even here, 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 unconditionally 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 unconditional 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 “unconditional” value can be explained in this way. Still, it means that unconditional value is no longer a regress-stopper in the series of metaethical explanations. Yet that was why the unconditional 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.
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 it is entirely possible that physics will explain spin in some future model. But “unconditional” value *cannot* be explained by anything else. Otherwise, its value would be explained by the obtaining of some other condition, contra the idea of being unconditional. Unconditional 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 \( p \) has value, then some fact \( q \) explains its value.
2. **Adequacy:** \( q \) explains why \( p \) has value only if \( q \) has value.
3. **No Circularity:** An explanation of why \( p \) has value cannot be circular.

Eventually, I shall reject (1) in favor of an axiological “unmoved mover.” (I also am unsure of (3), but ignore that). Yet *prima facie*, each of (1)-(3) has its appeal. But they imply that nothing is unconditionally valuable. Concurrently, they suggest that if \( p \) is valuable, there must be infinitely many valuable, explanatory ancestors—which seems absurd. And this can function as a *reductio ad absurdum* on the claim that something is of value. Nihilism is the result.\(^{14}\)

Proposition (2) 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

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\(^{13}\)*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 = \( \text{H}_2\text{O} \). (If someone insists on asking, we can at most offer a circular answer “that’s just what water is.”) Yet our concern above lies not with inexplicability in general—but rather, with inexplicable *value* in particular. And it is hard to see, e.g., human flourishing as being *necessarily* valuable. (Think of a world where all humans are hardcore Randians.) Still, my view is that there is something whose value *is* necessary and inexplicable in principle. But it is a view 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 nihilism looms merely because of our 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 of nihilism 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.)
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 in the first place. Such was the appeal of (2) at work.

Does (2) beg the question against metaethical naturalism? If facts about value are somehow explainable by wholly natural facts, then it seems that *p* might have its value explained by something wholly free of value. However, I suspect that moral naturalism really wishes to deny (1) rather than (2). For the view typically assumes that some things are “unconditionally valuable” such as happiness or human flourishing—and it does not try to explain *why* anything has such a property in the first place.¹⁵ (Our intuitions might *justify* that some things have unconditional value—but this is not to *explain* that property.) So the view is not so much trying to explain all normativity by something value-neutral—it is rather *refusing* to explain some instances of normativity, instead taking them as explanatorily primitive. I shall say more about metaethical naturalism in section 1.3, but for now, the point is to recognize that moral naturalism seems more opposed to (1) than (2).

More broadly: The regress argument is not just rehashing the (somewhat dubious) idea that “you cannot derive ‘ought’ from ‘is’.” The problem does not depend on the premise that there is a 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

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¹⁵ Foot (2001) seems to be a good example of such a naturalist. I would also see Schroeder (2005; 2007) and Railton (1986) in a similar way. Indeed, Railton self-consciously takes non-moral values as his explanatory basis for moral values, and forgoes the explanatory issue for non-moral value. I suspect Schroeder is similar in focusing just on moral value, except his explanatory basis is an agent’s reasons rather than non-moral values. There, the question would be: What metaphysically *explains* the value of one’s reasons? Schroeder just seems to take their value as primitive, and that is what (1) opposes.
problem gets started. Again, the conditions required to explain this would either be oddly regressive or stop in some metaphysically odd way. Perhaps the argument could be used to conclude that value *should* be seen as fundamentally distinct from the realm of fact. But I am not concerned to do that. My aim is instead to identify an explanatory issue in the (entirely natural) idea that there is such a thing as value, i.e., that values are among the facts. The trouble is that it apparently requires countenancing a property that is metaphysically odd, in a way that would encourage nihilism.

A further clarification: The term ‘nihilism’ here is used quite broadly. In other writers, “nihilism” is more narrowly the denial of meaning or ultimate value to human life. Hence, in that narrower sense, one might affirm “nihilism” and still say that human life has non-ultimate or “terrestrial” meaning, as Baggini (2007) or Benatar (2017) has done. Yet “nihilism” in this context is not just concerned with human life, nor is it concerned just with *ultimate* value. The nihilism suggested by the regress is rather the view that *nothing* has any value of any sort (ultimate or not).

Analogous to Mackie, one might then 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*. If I may be allowed to quote from Parent (2017):

> 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*

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16 This marks a difference with Dworkin (2013). He starts from the “is-ought” gap and then asks whether any fact has value (nihilism). But like many, I worry that simply assuming an is-ought gap begs the question against metaethical naturalism. And I am 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). (Cf. also Parfit 2011; Enoch 2011; Scanlon 2014.) 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 what creates the trouble here. And clearly, the regress argument has more content to it than Reichenbach’s axiom. (For related discussion, see note 22.)
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. (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. The pragmatist may insist she avoids such normative thinking, but that exemplifies the bad faith mentioned above. We all engage earnestly in normative thought, and yet this is where cognitive dissonance arises—for the values it presumes are metaphysically odd. If there is no regress of explanation, values seem to bottom out in an axiological “unmoved mover” which is 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. This does not mean one is excused from scientific thinking whenever the mood strikes. But if value per se is excluded from the scientific image, then let us consider attempts to reclaim it. After all, nothing is more important than value—it the condition on which anything has value.

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17 This 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.)

18 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.)

19 Thus, in a trivial sense, nothing has “unconditional value.” The value of $x$ is always conditional on the existence of $x$ itself. But this just shows that, when we speak of $x$ having unconditional value, we are talking about a condition which does not depend on some other condition.
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 lives as if reality is blanketed with an inexplicable layer of values. Seeing anything as valuable starts to look like mysticism. Does consistency thus force retreat to the tender-minded view?

In fact, there is a third way to reconcile scientific thinking with metaphysical longing. This, unfortunately, has also been called “pragmatism” on occasion. But a more informative term is ‘instrumentalism’ (as long we do not flatly presume that an instrumental theory is more likely to be true). The difference between instrumentalism and the other pragmatisms is that, instead of giving a prescription for scientific thinking, we instead recognize science under a different description. The two afore-mentioned 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’ (1907/1975) statement that “Theories thus become instruments, not answers to enigmas in which we can rest” (p. 32). Yet James is here elaborating on his own brand of “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

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20 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 unconditional 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.

21 ‘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 “reconstituted Kantian” position.
truth. And though a true theory is seen as 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 (better: quietism) on whether a “true” theory is a maximally instrumental theory. Truth may well consist in something else—perhaps even a “correspondence” with reality—even if our theories are best seen as instruments.

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

But an ontologically non-committal stance within science can be puzzling. After all, science certainly seems to dictate ontological commitments. Biology says that genes exist; chemistry says that oxygen exists; physics says that gauge bosons exist, etc. This objection is important enough to devote an entire chapter to it (Chapter 4). For now, however, there is also a question of the positive evidence in instrumentalism’s favor. Why is an instrumentalist attitude toward science a good one to adopt?

[The remainder of the chapter is omitted.]
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