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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 pretension 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 (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, however, 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

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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 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).

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 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.

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 imminent 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*. 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 and transhumanists

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*?⁴ An answer seems conspicuously absent from the scientific image.⁵

What should be done? I shall assume here, naturally enough, that some philosophy should be done. But I am unsure whether this is right. 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.⁶ But this work is limited to making hope rationally respectable.

1.2 Tender- and 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

suggest. But in the long run, there is at least the heat death of the universe to put a cap on things. (Yet Michio Kaku 2004 has found 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 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 bankrupt.)

governed in the end by what makes good practical sense.⁷ Accordingly, when scientific thinking feeds into anxiety about ultimate meaninglessness, 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 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 pragmatic retreats. But how should such a norm be formulated exactly? It seems dauntingly unclear.

This can 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 psychologically 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

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.

an analogy with the cosmological argument. Briefly, the 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:

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? An infinite 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. Such things are *axiological* “unmoved movers.” Yet (like God in the cosmological argument) these unmoved movers *also* look metaphysically odd.⁹

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

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 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. the previous note). 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., Mavrodes (1986) talks about a “deep ground” for moral obligation. But again, value is a broader topic than morality, and Mavrodes is also more concerned to justify rather than explain morality. (I discuss Mavrodes and other theological voluntarists further in the final chapter.)

brute in a way that is foreign to scientific thinking. After all, if something has *unconditional* value, what would explain that? Not just anything is unconditionally valuable—the flourishing of MRSA bacteria, for instance.¹⁰ (And in a misanthropic mood, we can even doubt the value of human flourishing.) So, if some things are unconditionally valuable, while others are not, what makes for the metaphysical difference?

In truth, the qualifier ‘unconditionally’ suggests that *nothing*, no condition beyond the fact itself, explains why something would have this kind of value. Suppose that human flourishing is unconditionally valuable, and yet suppose that its value can 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 the obtaining of some other condition. But then, in what sense is the value of human flourishing *unconditional*, i.e., depending on no (other) condition? Properly understood, therefore, unconditional value seems inexplicable.¹¹

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 sort of explanation. 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.

¹⁰ On one interpretation, the term ‘flourishing’ is value-laden (where it concerns “moral excellence”). But I do not mean to use it in this way. (Hopefully my example of MRSA bacteria makes that clear). Instead, “flourishing” here just concerns biological health, to put it briefly. And even so, it is not as if sheer numbers demonstrate flourishing—there is such a thing as overpopulation, after all.

¹¹ 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. So unlike spin, unconditional value is inexplicable *in principle*.

Some may protest that “inexplicable in principle” is not foreign to scientific thinking. After all, essential properties seem thus inexplicable: It is at least bizarre to ask *why* (pure) water = H₂O. We can at most reply: That’s just what water *is*. So perhaps unconditional value is like that, viz., a naturalistic essential property.

I concur that unconditional value is an essential property of some things, but I doubt that the property can be likened to a naturalistic essence. Consider that something is essentially water by being a specific sort of *physical complex*—it has that essence in virtue of its chemical structure. But the mind boggles at the question of what physical complex might qualify as the essence of being valuable. It would not seem physically reducible to some biological or chemical or microphysical arrangement. Essences known from natural science thus do not seem like a good model for unconditional value.

Yet perhaps human flourishing *is* the naturalistic realization of unconditional value. (And “naturalistic realization” in this case could be a non-reductionist or strongly emergent phenomenon.) Regardless, it is awkward to regard human flourishing as unconditionally valuable, given that “flourishing” here concerns only biological health (cf. note 10). Imagine a world like ours except where human beings are all incorrigible ethical egoists. At the least, one could meaningfully *ask* whether their flourishing is valuable. Yet if human flourishing is

essentially valuable, this would be like asking whether pure water could ever fail to be H₂O. And while that question seems confused, the question about the “hyper-Randian world” is not, regardless of how we answer it. (Granted, actual-world humans might assume by default that our flourishing is essentially good, and not unreasonably. But it is doubtful whether that is literally true, rather than merely convenient for most purposes.)¹²

We may summarize the foregoing arguments 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.” Yet *prima facie*, each of (1)-(3) has its appeal. However, they suggest that nothing is unconditionally valuable. For they imply 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.¹³

A clarification: The term ‘nihilism’ here is used quite broadly. Others use ‘nihilism’ more narrowly just to deny the meaning or ultimate value of 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, whatever that may be

¹² Pleasure may be seen as a naturalistic realization of unconditional value; however, I reject the unconditional value of pleasure for familiar, Kantian reasons, and for Nietzschean reasons as well.

¹³ 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.)

exactly. The nihilism implied by the regress suggests rather that *nothing* has *any* value of *any* sort. For the argument purports to work no matter what kind of value is at issue in the premises.

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 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. But as indicated, metaethical naturalism seems instead to deny (1). The view holds that some things are unconditionally or essentially valuable, such as human flourishing, and it does not try to explain *why* anything has such value in the first place, much less explain it by something entirely value-neutral.¹⁴

In general, 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 problem gets started. Again, the conditions required to explain this would either be oddly regressive, or stop in

¹⁴ 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.

some metaphysically strange 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.¹⁵ The trouble is that it apparently requires countenancing a property that is metaphysically odd, in a way that would encourage nihilism.

Analogous to Mackie, one might then reject the existence of value 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 earlier work:

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)¹⁶

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.¹⁷ But the values implied by this response 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.

¹⁵ This marks a difference with Dworkin (2013). He starts from the “is-ought” gap and then asks whether any fact has value. 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.

¹⁶ Enoch (2011) expresses a similar idea in claiming that values are “indispensable.” However, my point is not so much that values are utile (although that may often be true). It is rather that values are *unavoidably assumed*, even when they *interfere* with the satisfaction of one’s desires.

Besides this, I must also return to the more humanitarian point. Tough-minded nihilism has us face extinction without recourse. Can we philosophers really do no better? Even if the human endeavor is without value, to see it thus is no way to live, if it can be at all reasonably avoided.¹⁸ After all, nothing is more important than value—it is the condition on which anything has value.

*1.3 *Further arguments on tough-mindedness*

In reply, the tough-minded pragmatist may deny that she assigns some kind of value to her view. Granted, she prefers the tough-minded view over its competitors. 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 tough-minded pragmatist admits that she is prone to assume the value of her view, 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

¹⁷ 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.)

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.)

unfortunately, this generalizes in an intolerable 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 real. 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 18). 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 emphatically reassure you that effective treatment is available.¹⁹ Nevertheless, there remains a *philosophical* problem: If the pragmatist follows the consequences of her view up to the nihilism at (5), then she is left

¹⁹ For the non-religious, one helpful framework may be the “secular Buddhism” of, e.g., Wright (2017). Yet though Wright identifies as a “naturalist,” it is unclear whether he is an atheist, strictly speaking. Regardless, his book affords naturalists a sort of “everyday therapy” bundled with an “everyday ethics.” (Though I cannot quite rest content with it myself, as Wright’s naturalism still creates cognitive dissonance in assuming existence of values.)

without a good reason to do anything. That, of course, includes upholding tough-mindedness. Yet the present point is that it also includes doing anything else.

A Nietzschean Übermensch might still 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 prove reliably dispiriting.

It may seem like overkill to threaten the tough-minded pragmatist with an immobilizing nihilism. Theists are sometimes too polite to put things in such stark terms. But I have the advantage of only lately being a theist. And when it comes to matters of *ultimate concern*, wincing honesty seems necessary. It has been too easy for tough-minded atheists to dismiss the calamitous implications of their view. *Talk about wishful thinking*. But they are obliged—by their own tough-minded commitment to truth—to face how bad their situation is. In particular, if one still insists on tough-mindedness across the board, I want to ask in all earnestness: *Why* exactly? What is driving your tough-mindedness, if (per the regress argument) your view implies there is ultimately no good reason for anything?

Nota bene: Some may scorn the idea that a debilitating depression may, in fact, have a formidable rationale behind it. But I certainly am not trying to dignify anyone's clinical depression as "rational." Quite the contrary: I am attempting to combat a deceptive yet powerful argument that might make it seem rational. To be sure, the factors leading to depression are multifactorial, and dismantling the nihilist argument is certainly not an easy cure. But at least in the United States, suicide is an epidemic: In the new millennium up to 2018, the suicide-rate has increased almost 30% (Stone, Simon, Fowler, et al., 2018). During the pandemic, moreover, the so called "deaths of despair" (suicide, drug and alcohol overdose) have increased 10% to 60% (Mulligan 2020). Meanwhile in my own country of residence, Kazakhstan, the 2009 suicide rate

among adolescent girls is the highest in the world (and the rate for boys is the second highest after Russia) (Telebarisov 2011). Anything that could help reverse these trends should be embraced, not shunned. And, as is well-known from cognitive-behavioral therapy, critiquing reasons that support a depressed outlook has good clinical outcomes. Accordingly, taking these reasons seriously is not meant to promote that outlook, but rather to help counter it.

Aside: It is of course offensive to suggest that diseases of despair are caused primarily by tough-minded pragmatism or any other philosophical thesis. Much more important are economic disadvantages or social marginalization (Belle & Doucet 2003, Knapp et al. 2019, Hoffmann et al. 2020, etc.). Nonetheless, a nihilistic worldview is plausibly a contributing factor, and as philosophers, all we can do is address nihilism in constructive ways.

1.4 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 treats the world as blanketed with an inexplicable layer of values.²⁰ Treating anything as valuable starts to look like mysticism. Must it be this way?

There is a third way to reconcile scientific thinking with metaphysical longing. This, unfortunately, has also been called “pragmatism” on occasion. However, a more informative term is ‘instrumentalism’. The difference between instrumentalism and the other “pragmatisms”

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 10 for details.

is that, instead 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 theory of *truth*. But the claim that theories are instruments is separable from the claim that a maximally instrumental theory is *ipso facto* true. Indeed, my own position is to affirm the former while maintaining neutrality (better: quietism) on the latter.

Yet if we accept the instrumentalist view of theories, then scientific theories would not preclude 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 a tool for predicting and explaining the flux of the perceptual field—not a rationally mandated "book of the world" on what really exists.

At this point, a host of questions arise. Even if instrumentalism does not forbid belief in an unmoved mover, why should we think the belief is "rationally respectable?" Further, why should we believe the mover to be *God*?²¹ And would this not run straight into the Euthyphro dilemma? These questions are right and proper but will be delayed until the final two chapters. The prior matter is whether the instrumentalist premise in all this is correct.

²¹ In fact, I positively do *not* believe that the unmoved mover is God, according to the Judeo-Christian understanding of God. A better term might be 'Brahman.' See chapter 11 for details.

There are two theses whose conjunction constitute “instrumentalism” on its official formulation; these two are defended and elaborated in Part I and Part II of the book, respectively. The first is *quietism*, the claim that the most fundamental ontological questions are not answered by any theory. Very briefly, quietism is motivated by an in-principle limit on specifying the ontology underling our (linguistic and mental) representations, given that such a specification must use those very representations. The consequence is that our theories can only describe what exists relative to a “background language,” a language used to answer ontological questions whose own ontology is left unspecified.

Quietism is a view about how *not* to regard the objects of our theories. The second part of instrumentalism is a view on how such objects *are* to be regarded. This is the *fictionalist* thesis: Objects as represented in our theories are useful posits, introduced to facilitate prediction and explanation. However, if I refer to such posits as “ficta,” this is to be understood in a non-commisive rather than an anti-commisive sense. To say that x is a fictum, in the present context, is *not* to say that x is positively unreal. It is rather an expression of neutrality on the reality of x . (This sort of thing occurs, e.g., when we talk of Mary Magdalene as “character” in the Gospels, even knowing that she may have been a real person, and that the account of her may be literally correct.) I confess that ‘fictum’ sounds more anti-commisive than non-commisive, but remember that quietism forbids talk about which objects are ultimately real or unreal. Yet while those questions are left open, fictionalism nonetheless suggests we can describe objects in our theories as useful posits for predicting-explaining the barrage of sensory experience.

Admittedly, this is only the briefest overview of the quietist and fictionalist contentions.

[A more detailed, chapter-by-chapter summary will appear here]

The cumulative effect of these chapters, again, is to make rationally respectable the hope in unconditional value, a hope which (to use the Kantian slogan) is a necessary postulate of practical reason, which has more urgency than ever in our facing the threat of extinction.

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