

## THE OTHER SIDE: METAPHYSICS AND MEANING

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### 1. I. ETHICAL NIHILISM

#### A. NATURALISM

He said he was a naturalist, that nature is all that is, that terms have meaning by virtue of their description of some aspect of nature.

#### B. MORAL CRITERIA

With this I agreed, and so I sought to speak with him. Early in the conversation I mentioned some evil deed in the day's news. Some man, for his own pleasure, had caused a number of small children to suffer and die. At this point he stopped me and asked why I thought such a deed to be evil. Indeed, I was quite surprised at the question and asked him if he didn't also think the same. He responded, "Whether I think it evil or not in no way indicates why you think it is evil. Again, why do you think this deed evil?"

As he had been kind and patient enough to ask me the same question twice, I decided to answer him in a straight and forward manner. I said, "This deed is evil because it is wrong and immoral." His expression was one of disappointment. "I understand perfectly well that when you say the deed is evil, you mean it is wrong and immoral. But, this does not in the least explain why you think the deed evil, wrong, or immoral. Substituting one or more words for another may clarify the point, but, it does not make it. Again, I ask you, why do you believe this deed to be evil? How is this belief justified?" I catch on quickly, and soon realized that what he wanted to know was the criteria by which I determined the evilness of the deed. Therefore, I prepared to give him a number of justifications.

#### C. INTUITION

The first justification was easy. It is immediately obvious to me that the wanton destruction of small children is wrong. So, I quickly determined that the truth of my position was intuitive. I explained this to him and was quite confident that if he saw things as clearly as I did, this would satisfy the question. Unfortunately, that did not turn out to be the case. He asked me, "By 'intuitive' do you mean you received insights by some mystical spiritual revelation?" I chuckled at this and reminded him that I had already expressed my adherence to a naturalistic worldview. "You will not catch me propounding metaphysical nonsense." I said. He raised an eyebrow and asked, "Then, do you mean to say that this is a belief with which we are born, an innate idea by which all men can know the truth?" I thought for a few moments. With a tentative nod I said, "Yes, I think that is what I mean." He then asked, "Why then, if we are all born with this belief, is it that we don't all have it? I, for one, don't see the truth of it at all. Furthermore, it does not follow that merely because we are born with a belief, that it is true. The truth of a belief is not

established by naming its origin.” He waited a few moments for me to answer. Realizing that I would not soon come up with one, he suggested, “Perhaps, by intuitive, you mean that you quickly and clearly perceive the truth of something for many good reasons that you have not yet made explicitly cognitive and articulated?” “Yes, that is it.” I quickly asserted. “There are many convincing reasons for affirming the truth of this belief, and all good and clear thinkers should be able to see the truth of it, even though these reasons have not all been made explicit.” “However,” he pointed out, “a good and clear thinker should be able to explicate at least one of these reasons when called upon to do so. How else can we know that any of these “convincing reasons” are convincing or even exist?”

#### D. EMOTIVE THEORY

For a brief moment I thought he had me. Then, one of those good reasons came to me. I asked him, “Isn’t it generally agreed that nearly everyone, in all cultures, throughout time, have a natural empathy for their fellow human beings?” “Generally,” he agreed. I continued, “Perhaps this feeling of empathy is genetic, as its evolution would be conducive to the survival of the community in which it developed. Or, perhaps this feeling originates from the fact that we project our own desires and needs, on our fellow man, and so, tend to treat others as we wish to be treated. Either way, wouldn’t this certainly provide a basis on which to establish human value and human ethics?” Upon hearing my own argument I was greatly encouraged and became more confident. I smiled to myself and asked, “Does that satisfy your question?” He responded, “I agree that we tend to have empathetic feelings toward our fellow man, but what justifies the belief that those feelings and that man are valuable? The mere fact that we have feelings on a subject may tell us something about our own emotional disposition, but tells us nothing about the subject itself. A description of one’s emotive state on a subject is just that, a description of one’s emotive state on that subject. Do not mistake this for a description of the subject itself. Do you think that by believing something to be true of a thing, that you impute that property to the thing?” I answered carefully, “No, I do not think that a thing becomes true simply because I, or anyone else, believes it’s true.” As I am one predisposed to seek the truth, even when it seems to have taken a different course than the one I am taking, I determined to drop this line of reasoning. However, to give him a glimpse of my epistemic acumen, I added, “Besides, if the truth of a proposition is not determined by whether or not it describes an actual state of affairs in nature, but rather by whether or not it is believed, then all beliefs would be true, even those that contradict one another.” “Very good.” He answered, “Do you have other criteria with which to justify your belief that some deeds are evil, or on which to base ethical positions in general?”

#### E. PRAGMATIC THEORY

I had already thought of another good reason and had been waiting for the opportunity to deliver it. Judging that he was probably ready to handle more I began, “There are also pragmatic reasons why some behaviors should be deemed right and some deemed wrong,” I said. “The values a society adopts greatly determine if it succeeds or fails. Societies that condemn murder and theft experience a higher degree of trust, cooperation and productivity than their counterparts. Wouldn’t values like these engender lives of greater peace and happiness for all its members? In contrast, a society that does not generally prohibit such behavior would find itself in a destructive cycle of conflict, vengeance and non-productivity. Thus, couldn’t we conclude that those

behaviors that are conducive to the development and stability of a society are good and ethical? Wouldn't those that are destructive to a society be bad and unethical?" He rubbed his chin for a few moments of thought during which I allowed myself a slight smile. (This was going to be too easy.) Then he asked me, "So, you believe that if an action benefits a society it is good?" "Yes, I do," I replied. "And similarly, If an action is detrimental to society it is bad?" "Yes, surely," I replied again. He seemed to be getting it. "Then," he asked me, "what do you do when the society is bad?" I thought for a moment then countered, "How would you know the society was bad?" "Exactly my point," he replied. "Your consequentialist ethics look to the consequence of an action to determine its value. This, however, presupposes the value of the consequence, doesn't it? It may be the case that, if society has value, those actions that benefit society also have value. But, how does your pragmatism help us decide the value of a society?"

I quickly thought through my argument again, but found nothing that would address this question. I hedged my answer, "I'm not sure." He proceeded, "At best, an action might be said to have the value of its consequent. Actions that produce a moral consequent may have a positive moral value. Actions that produce an immoral consequent may have a negative moral value. But then, actions that produce a non-moral consequent would have no moral value at all. Consequentialism does not, in any way, help us decide the moral value of the consequent, in this case society. Now, if we do not know the value of the consequent, we cannot know the value of the action that brought it about. The question still remains, what is the criteria by which you determine or base an ethical position?"

#### F. ONTOLOGICAL REFERENT

At this point I decided it was time to stop going easy on this guy and start pressing him hard. I figured there had to be some emotional factor that drove him to evade these arguments. I was fully aware that my next question could push him away, but I asked anyway, "I know I asked you a similar question already, but why don't you want to believe it is evil to torment and harm small children?" I listened carefully to his answer. I was looking for the subtle clues that would betray his true motives. Once identified I would quickly extrapolate the genetic basis of his resistance, and the debate would be over. He answered, "Essentially, this is the same question I asked you. You see, the issue is not, 'Do I affirm some value A?' That answer is descriptive and certainly true. The issue is not even the merely prescriptive, 'Should I affirm some value A as opposed to some other value B?' Rather the issue is, 'Is there a value A or B for which I should have any feelings at all,' and, can belief in this value be justified?"

#### G. MORAL PROPERTIES

His answer was clear. The clues I was looking for were a little too subtle, so I decided to be charitable and not use them against him just yet. Instead, I returned to his earlier question. "You asked me how consequentialism helps me decide the value of a society? I will concede that a pragmatic analysis of ethical systems will only indicate which systems are most likely to produce efficient and stable societies. As these systems bring greater peace and stability to a society, the members of that society may have greater feelings of pleasure and happiness. As nature has programmed us to seek pleasure and happiness there is a functional sense in which some ethical systems are better than others. I would call these ethical systems good. Why wouldn't we call

those things that nature, endeavoring to help us survive, causes us to value, values?" I liked my response. It felt good. It sounded good. So, I pressed him a little harder still. "You said you were a naturalist, but aren't you being a little 'nihilistic' with your ethics here?" I find a little pejorative term here and there can go a long way in a debate. Hardly a moment had passed when he began, "Yes, I am. In fact, I think all consistent naturalists would be nihilists. In the natural world we find no properties to which moral concepts correspond. In fact we cannot even imagine what such a natural phenomena would look like. We can describe an event, such as 'A' kills 'B,' as a set of physical movements. We can even describe our feelings on that event. But, though these feelings may say something about our own biochemical states, they say nothing about the event itself." He continued, "I will agree that if the behavior of 'A' killing 'B' becomes normative, it will have a negative effect on social order. I will also agree that if the demise of society is immoral, then 'A's' behavior is immoral and evil. But, just as we had to look at the consequences of 'A's' behavior to determine its morality, so we will have to look at the consequences of the demised society to determine its morality, and so on. No matter how many steps we take, we will not find in nature any property that corresponds to a moral concept. Therefore, moral concepts are grounded either outside nature or not at all." He paused a moment, then said, "If we ground ethics outside nature we are doing metaphysics. I do not know, a priori, what properties a metaphysical reality would possess if it existed. Given a metaphysical Wild card, ethics may be hypothetically possible. But, as a naturalist this is not an option. The naturalist must restrain himself to properties he can sense lest he cease to be a naturalist. Then, giving me an intense look he said, "What I must challenge is your claim to be a naturalist. Each time you moralize or make an ethical affirmation you have gone beyond nature and have engaged in metaphysics."

## H. HUMAN EXPERIENCE

His response startled me for two reasons. First, because no one had ever accused me of being a metaphysician before. Secondly, because I realized he was right. Now that he said it, it was clear that nature cannot account for ethics. However, there were some loose ends that needed tying up. I decided to ask a few more questions. I determined that I would first ask him a question about naturalism and then return to the issue of nihilism. I inquired, "It may be true that if we search through nature we will find no indication of ethics. Yet, why can we not ground our ethics, as many philosophers do, not in nature, but in the human experience?" "I am surprised," he said. "Didn't you feel a rub when asking your last question? You agree, first, that ethics are not to be found in nature, then, propose that we find them in humanity. But, where is humanity? Isn't it also a part of nature? Or, is it outside nature? If it is a part of nature, then, as you agreed, we will not find ethics there. If it is outside nature, then, we are doing metaphysics again and we are no longer naturalists." "No," I responded, "I am not a metaphysician! I am a naturalist! Aren't naturalists allowed the same needs and desires as metaphysicians?" "Allowed by what?" he grinned. "By government? Usually. By God? Not if he doesn't exist. By nature? This is our question isn't it? Nature seems to allow anything that does not break its laws, but the only laws of nature of which I am aware, all have to do with physics not morality. If the natural world has no moral properties, then as a naturalist, you would be more consistent to say so. Regardless of how strongly you, I, or anyone else feels about our own existence, condition, happiness, etc., we cannot impute properties to the universe."

## I. BAND WAGON

He was good. I had to give him that. But, philosophically he was out of the main stream and I knew it. I decided to point this out to him and see how tough his ego really was. I said, "I'm sure you're aware that most naturalists are not nihilists, in fact, very few are. Therefore, doesn't it follow that either you have erred in the way you look at ethics, or, nearly all naturalist are lapsing into metaphysics every time they make a moral judgment?" "That is exactly right." He countered. "Indeed, it is difficult to find any naturalist who is a nihilist. I would agree that most view ethics differently than I. But, I suspect this is because they are, as you say, doing metaphysics, whereas I am not. Surely, you're not suggesting that the number of naturalists doing ethics in some way justifies or provides a basis for those ethics do you?" "Of course not," I responded immediately. My philosophical background made the fallacy of such thinking easily transparent to me.

## J. NON-RATIONAL

I decided to return to a modified form of social pragmatism. I said, "But, naturalists do espouse ethical codes that are rationally based on our individual and social predispositions to survive. As we discussed earlier, certain behaviors, when adopted by individuals, will be mutually beneficial to other individuals. This general co-operation of all members of a society will strengthen and increase the survivability of the society. As the society's chances of survival increase, so do the chances of its members' survival increase. Thus, it would be rational to adopt as ethical those behaviors that promote the general welfare of our society and ourselves." My basing morality on the rationality of choosing behavior that promotes survival was brilliant. Certainly he could not argue it was irrational. He began without hesitation, "I agree that humans are predisposed to survive. I agree that, given this end, it is rational for humans to adopt behavior that will serve it. But, what makes the adoption of this end rational? As I stated before, the fact that we are predisposed to survive in no way indicates that we ought to be predisposed to survive. We have already agreed that nothing in nature can indicate this. Thus, such a selection as an end, is not rational. "We may select this end for genetic reasons. We may select it for cultural reasons. But we certainly do not select it for rational reasons. I am not saying that the selection of this end is irrational. Rather, it is non-rational. There are no natural criteria for determining the value of humanity either individually or in society. There are no rational reasons for saying humanity is bad. Again, I am not saying that humanity is bad. Rather, I am saying it is neither good nor bad. Humanity just is, and our selection of it, as an ends, just happened. "Now, if the end is neither good nor bad, and the end determines the value of the means, then the means are neither good nor bad. They may be expedient in terms of the desired end, but they are not good or bad. This means that a given action, such as murder, could be immoral (in the sense that it is detrimental to the survival of humanity), and yet, it would not be bad (in the sense that it has no value). "Most people, such as yourself, have trouble with this. Most people believe that the killing of young children is not just an inefficient way to run society, they believe it is wrong, and therefore are not consistent naturalists. Perhaps, because our survival instinct is so strong, our emotions toward this kind of behavior compel us to project value into these actions in an attempt to absolutise our social prohibitions. Therefore, although we can apply the word 'ethical' to a system of behavior, we can not say it is rational or has value."

## K. COGNITIVE ASPECT

It seemed there was a sense in which he had a point and a sense in which he didn't. "To some extent," I said "you must admit ethics are rational and valuable. Maybe the ends are hard to establish, but once given, we can say whether or not a given behavior is rational and valuable in achieving that end. It is through reason we determine whether or not a given behavior will bring about a desired end. Hence, it is rational for the person trying to achieve a desired end to adopt behavior his reason tells him will bring it about. Similarly, such behavior will be of value to him. So, in some sense at least, you must admit that the terms rational and value can be properly applied to a naturalist ethics." "Yes," he said "it is true there is a cognitive aspect to consequentialist ethics. That is, one rationally evaluates available means to determine which will best achieve the chosen end. And, it is true that a given means may have value in terms of a given end. Namely, those means that we rationally determine will bring about the chosen end will have value in terms of that end. But, it is important to realize that the value and rationality of a means is limited to its utility in bringing about the chosen end. Again, there are no criteria by which we can determine the value or rationality of the end. Therefore, the ethical system as a whole is without value and is non-rational. Can you offer me something, anything, which can establish the rationality and or value of an ethical system?"

## L. NO TRUTH VALUE

I had only a few cards left to play, but I never concede a point until I've played the last one. I came up with a new twist on the argument that I thought would really test his agility. I asked, "Why can't we view ethics like mathematics? Both have starting assumptions and are affirmed, not because they correspond to some Platonic reality, but because of their utility." I'm known for these profound insights. Coupling values with mathematics would put him on the horns of a dilemma. Now he could neither deny values without also denying math, nor could he affirm math without also affirming values. I looked at him as if I really expected him to have an answer. He did. He said, "It is true that mathematical systems have starting assumptions. If the starting assumptions correspond to the real world, then the given mathematical system will also correspond to the real world, giving the system utility. But, if the starting assumptions do not correspond to the real world, the resulting mathematical system will also not correspond. The mathematical system may be a perfect tautology. It may be internally rational, but it will have no rational relationship to the real world. If there is no rational basis for choosing the starting assumption, then the mathematical system as a whole is non-rational. "In an ethical system, the end is the starting assumption. If there is no rational basis for choosing the end, then the system is, at best, a tautology. It may be rational in the sense that it is internally consistent, but it will have no rational relationship to the real world. Its rationality is formal, but such rationality is trivial. It may tell us what behavior coheres to the chosen end, but it tells us nothing that corresponds to the natural world. I agree that mathematics do not correspond to some Platonic reality, rather it has utility, only because it does correspond to the reality in which we live. If there is a Platonic reality to which ethics do correspond, then naturalism is not true. My point is, ethics correspond to neither this reality nor a Platonic reality, and therefore correspond to nothing. They have no truth value."

## M. ETHICS MYTH

It was time to play my last card. I didn't have a lot of confidence in it, but tossed it on the table just the same. "Can't each individual choose his own value and create his own meaning in life? Can't society adopt those values on which there is a consensus?" He raised his eyebrows in surprise and asked, "Are you suggesting that each individual should create his own ethics myth with which to give himself the illusion of meaning and value? Are you proposing we affirm as a core element of our lives something that we know isn't true? As for society adopting and codifying those myths on which there is a consensus, wouldn't we have created essentially the same thing as organized religion? Not a consistent position for a naturalist to advocate is it?" I am astute enough to know I lost the argument. But, I had a feeling I had lost much more. As before, I could still see that murder, theft and deception were not in my best interest. They were inefficient, socially destructive, disruptive to my life and the lives of others, but they were not wrong, not really wrong. I looked forward to seeing where these new realizations would take me. I had always assumed that life somehow, in some way, had meaning and value. Now, I would have to look at the world from the other side.

## II. EPISTEMOLOGICAL NIHILISM

### A. NIHILISM AND REASON

I looked at my mentor and said, "OK so life has no meaning or value. I suppose it is best to know that." "We don't know that," he replied. "What?" I stared at him. "I said we don't know that life has no meaning or value," he answered. I furrowed my brow and focused intently on him, "What are you talking about? We've been arguing this all afternoon. How can you say you don't know ethical nihilism is true? You said you were a nihilist!" "I don't know ethical nihilism is true," he said. "I don't know anything. No one does." "Ah! You're an epistemological nihilist too I suppose?" I asked. "That's right. I am. I don't know nihilism is true. I don't even know reason is true." I was flabbergasted, "But, you've been using reason all afternoon." "I believe I have," he said, "but, I never said I believed it was true." How can you use reason if you don't believe it?" I asked. "Because, it's the only way you and I can communicate." He answered. "Since you speak the language of reason, I decided to speak it too. Since you affirm both reason and naturalism, I decided to demonstrate that the affirmation of reason and naturalism includes the denial of values." "But what do you mean when you say you don't believe in reason? What sense does that make?" I asked. He answered, "It makes no sense at all, but that is hardly a criticism of a position that denies sense." "Well," I asked, "how does a nihilist think about the world?" "He doesn't" He continued, "all thinking assumes reason and knowledge. Therefore, all thinking, even thinking about nihilism must be done as a non-nihilist." "Think of nihilism as a black hole. Reason stops at the event horizon. Inside the event horizon is non-rationality. There is no knowledge there. There can be no rational thinking about the world. Outside the event horizon we can think about nihilism, but only as a negation of reason. There can be no positive contemplation, because all contemplation is rational and this is exactly the thing we are denying of nihilism. Yet, it would be irrational to criticize a nihilist, a non-rationalist, for not being rational. You see, the nihilist may not be able to defend himself, but there is no need for him to do so, for no rational argument can be made against him. The event horizon cannot be crossed." Now I was not only flabbergasted, I was concerned. This guy really was on the other side. If I hadn't just finished the argument on ethics with him, I would have dismissed him as a kook. "How did you come to this?" I asked. "The same way I got to ethical nihilism. If you start

with naturalism outside of the event horizon, reason will bring you to the horizon, self stultify, and deposit you on the other side. Hence, nihilism!”

## B. THE SELF STULTIFICATION OF REASON

I had to hear this. “How does reason self stultify?” “Well, reason doesn’t stultify all by itself. Naturalism, when extrapolated through reason, undermines the possibility of knowing, of knowing anything, including reason. In effect, it is naturalism that undermines reason.” I said, “Naturalism undermines reason? That is preposterous! How?” “How is nature connected?” he asked. “Do planets and particles move according to their own whim without regard to the rest of nature? Or, is their motion dependent on the laws of mechanics and the antecedent state of the rest of nature.” “The laws of mechanics and antecedent states, of course,” I responded, off handedly, making it clear I was no duffer on the hard sciences. “Is there anything else that might effect their behavior?” He prompted. “No, of course not.” I saw the trap. “The rest of nature pretty much includes the entire universe. What else is there to affect them? If there was anything else we wouldn’t be naturalists, would we?” “No we wouldn’t,” he agreed. “Couldn’t we say then, that since the state of everything in nature is dependent, and only dependent, on the antecedent state of the rest of nature as determined by the laws of mechanics, that everything in nature is determined? True, it is determined by the rest of nature, but determined none the less.” Giving up morality is one thing. That was difficult enough. Giving up reason is all together different. I was not about to let him win again. Not on this one. “OK, so the given state of some thing is determined by the state of everything else. I can see that, but what has this to do with reason?” He gave me that look in the eye again. “Is your reason, your mind, your thoughts, your ideas, your beliefs, your brain a part of nature?” I tried to speak, but could not open my mouth. He was doing it again. It was obvious where he was going. I did not want to go there. But, I did not know how to stop it. His logic was seamless. Yet, I knew he must be wrong. After all, here I was reasoning with him, wasn’t I? I answered, “of course it is. As you have pointed out so many times already today, if they were not, I would not be a naturalist.” “Then they must all be determined, aren’t they?” He affirmed. And there it was. It was too easy. The point was succinct. There are few terms. There was very little room for error. But, I wasn’t about to help him. If he wanted the point, he would have to make it. “So, they are determined.” I said. “What has that to do with reason?” “I would think that is quite clear.” He began. “If all your beliefs are determined, then any particular belief is determined, isn’t it?” “Now you’re stating the obvious.” I replied. “You’re taking awfully small steps aren’t you?” “Would you prefer I skip a step?” he countered smiling, “Since any particular belief is determined, you have no choice but to believe it. It is held, not on the basis of good reason, but because it is the consequent of antecedent causes. You do not choose your beliefs. You hold the beliefs you do, because of the antecedent state of the universe, whether that belief is true or not.”

## C. REASON AND CAUSE

Objections were finally coming to me. I asked, “What if the antecedent causes are the reasons. Wouldn’t it be the case then that we are caused to believe something because it is true?” He didn’t even flinch. He simply responded, “That makes no difference. If all beliefs are determined, so is your belief in naturalism. There are a couple of problems here. First, it does no good to cite your reasons for holding a position. If the position you hold is determined, you would hold it regardless of the reasons given. Furthermore, the reasons you give are every bit as

determined as the belief they are intended to justify. Thus, you would offer those reasons even if they are not valid. Remember, as a determinist, it is not just your conclusions that are determined, but every notion, justification, and thought you have. “The second problem has to do with the fact that there are those who disagree with you. As a naturalist you believe that the beliefs of the supernaturalist are also determined. In fact, they are determined by the same antecedent state of the universe as your naturalistic belief is. How, therefore, could we possibly discriminate between the two beliefs? If all caused beliefs are true, and all beliefs are caused, then all beliefs are true, even the belief that it is not the case that all beliefs are true.”

#### D. CHANCE

“The universe is not that simple,” I countered. “Nothing is absolutely determined. There is always a small amount of chance, a modicum of randomness. Therefore, it is not the case that all beliefs are determined. There is an element of randomness to every belief. Since beliefs are not fully determined, perhaps it is the case that we are not compelled to our beliefs by antecedent causes.” He asked, “When you speak of randomness in nature do you mean to indicate there is an aspect of our experience that is transcendent rather than natural? Or, do you mean to indicate that there is in nature a limit to the degree of accuracy by which any aspect of nature can be measured? The two are very different you know. As a naturalist you can only take the second interpretation.” “Yes, I take the second interpretation. That is what I meant.” I said. “How then, does that account for reason?” He said. “I don’t know.” I admitted. “I thought it might provide some possibility.” “I think that maybe you took the second interpretation, but, hoped it might have the effect of the first.” He countered. I shrugged, “Maybe.” “Let’s look then at this second understanding of randomness,” he proposed. “We believe that within nature any given energy, position or momentum cannot be exactly ascertained. That all measurements have an exceedingly small amount of indeterminacy inherent to them. Therefore, you are correct in saying that a belief is not precisely determined by its antecedent states. It exhibits an infinitesimal variance. But, does this provide the possibility of reason? No, randomness is not the same thing as reason. Rather, it introduces chaos to our beliefs, not reason. In fact, this is exactly what indeterminacy does to all complex physical systems. As randomness is introduced at each causal connection in the system it is compounded and magnified over time, thereby bringing chaos to the system and rendering long term projections impossible. So, though a belief is not entirely determined by antecedent states, it is primarily determined by them, while a small portion of the belief is determined by chance. Whether by antecedent states or by chance, beliefs are determined still.”

#### E. EVOLUTION AND REASON

I may have already told you that I too am not unread in the sciences. I have a rough familiarity with learning theory, neural networks, feed back systems, contextualization problems and the like. Consequently, I was able to concoct a naturalistic paradigm for the evolution of reason and thereby reasonable belief. I proceeded to explain it to him. “Would you agree that a creature’s chances for survival are enhanced by its ability to accurately identify its environment and make appropriate responses to it?” “Of course,” he said, “that’s essential to evolutionary theory.” “Then,” I asked, “wouldn’t it be the case that those creatures that formed more precise mental models of the world and were capable of constructing the most accurate analysis of those

models might have a survival advantage over those that don't?" "Yes he said, continue." "Wouldn't those creatures who survive then pass on their traits and dispositions more frequently than those whose senses and mental capacities are less capable of constructing accurate models and analysis? Also, wouldn't those genetic mutations which enhance these capabilities survive and become a part of the gene pool?" I asked. "Undoubtedly," he answered. "Then, wouldn't there be a tendency for a species to develop a concentration of those attributes that enable it to accurately identify and evaluate its environment?" I asked him. He could only give one answer, and when he did, I would have him. "Yes, that is clear." He said. "Then," I said, "if the mental models of a thing correspond to knowledge and the assessment of those models correspond to reason, we would have a paradigm for the evolution of knowledge and reason. We already have mechanical representations of this in artificial intelligence systems. We have robots that identify objects in a room from video input and make a sufficient analysis of these models to navigate around the room. If we set up an experiment where robots that ran into objects disappeared while those that successfully avoided objects reproduced with minor changes in their programming, we would eventually evolve a collection of robots with an astute knowledge of their environment and ability to assess and navigate it. In like manner, man has evolved the ability to form extremely detailed and accurate models of his sensory input of the world and to make sophisticated analysis of that data. Hence, man has evolved knowledge and reason. True, this system is still deterministic, and man is still a part of the natural system he has come to know. But, he knows it none the less. It is a case of nature knowing itself. A sort of feed back loop, or self-diagnostic routine." I was on a roll. This sounded as compelling to me as anything he had said so far. I was eager to hear his response. He gave it. "I agree, this is exactly what we experience as knowledge and reason. But, this is superficial and does not address the epistemological problem at all. Would it be fair to say I believe nihilism follows from determinism whereas you do not?" "Yes I think that would be an accurate statement," I replied. "I don't think it's accurate at all." He surprised me. "The language is not naturalistic. It originates from a time when the predominant metaphysical position was dualism. People thought reality consisted of matter much as we do, but they also believed reality consisted of mind. They believed man was essentially transcendental and could act independent of, and on, the material world. Man himself was not determined. But as a naturalist you have already agreed that mind, ideas, thoughts, and beliefs are all phenomena of nature haven't you?" I thought a moment, "Sure," I said. He continued, "It would follow then, that we do not do anything. We do not act on nature. We are actions of nature. Our thoughts, beliefs and reasons do not come from us, they come to us. My belief that determinism leads to nihilism is not my idea, it is an idea that nature has in me. The "idea" is an event in nature that occurs in association with the event in nature called "me." Do you agree with this?"

## F. KNOWLEDGE AND NATURE

"I suppose I would have to. I do not believe we transcend nature." I answered. "But this is in keeping with my robot paradigm. Their sensory apparatus and their programs were all put into them. Yet, the ones that avoid the obstacles survive. Obviously, they knew something the others didn't." He countered, "The robots know nothing. Simply, the ones set up to avoid obstacles, avoid obstacles, the ones that don't, don't. Can we say that water flows to the ocean because it knows the way? Does water that finds its way to the ocean know something that other water doesn't? You see, water simply does what nature would have it do. So the robots do what their

environment, sensory apparatus, and programs would have them do. Their actions are caused. They cause nothing. In like manner we believe what nature would have us believe. We do nothing. We are the repository of certain thoughts. I do not create my beliefs. I am simply a repository of belief. All of it, my beliefs, my thoughts, my reasons, even the language by which I try to explain them, are simply acts of nature.”

## G. PRIVILEGED POSITION

“OK,” I said. “I already agreed everything is determined, and I’ll agree that our language has traces of transcendentalism in it. But still, if I am nothing more than a nexus of nature where the phenomena of thought, belief, and reason are expressed, then that is what I am. I can live with that, and that is not nihilism.” “Are not both of us aspects or events of the same natural world?” he asked. “Certainly,” I answered, “No one would question that.” “Does the nature of the universe differ in regard to you than it does for me?” he asked. “No, of course not,” I replied. “Is there a qualitative or quantitative difference in the natural world that causes your beliefs and the natural world that causes my beliefs?” he asked. “No, you know I believe there is only one natural world. Please stop trying to lead me,” I responded. “Then,” he asked, “how is it that you and I disagree?” I believe that determinism leads logically to nihilism and you do not. Yet, both our beliefs are grounded in the same cause, the antecedent state of the universe. Granted, we differ in our spatial and temporal relations to the universe, but how do I know which relationship is privileged to know the truth? I have only those beliefs, reasons, and thoughts that nature has given me. I can not get behind nature, look at it, compare it to my beliefs, evaluate my reasons, and find out if they are valid. I can think you are wrong only by assuming that my relationship is privileged, that it has caused in me truth and caused in you error. But, since you believe as you do, and believe you are right, you too, must make the same assumption of privilege. And everyone who thinks, must make this assumption of privilege for every opinion they hold. In the end we must admit that nature holds a myriad of contrary positions on every subject. And on every subject all contrary opinions but one must be wrong. If one is true, it is by accident, but we can never know which it is, for we can only hold the opinion we are given. We can know the truth of nothing, hence nihilism.”

## H. BELIEF AND KNOWLEDGE

I felt as though the last door were closing. I didn’t have much confidence left but thought I better ask any questions I still had. “How can you be a nihilist then? You obviously believe in naturalism and reason.” “I said I believe in naturalism and nihilism. I said I use reason. I did not say I knew them to be true. More accurately, I would say that in me nature holds a belief in naturalism and nihilism. It may even hold in me the belief that this is true, but I can never know it. As a nihilist, I believe that everyone is a nihilist, for everyone holds those beliefs nature has given him, even their beliefs in God and in truth. They cannot believe otherwise.”

## I. SURVIVAL AND TRUTH

“But how about the robots that survive? Doesn’t that indicate the truth of their models and programming?” I asked. “Why?” he asked. “Any view of the world that does not destroy the viewer could be perpetuated regardless of its truth value. Religious systems that bring order to a

society greatly strengthen it and increase its survivability, but that does not make these religions true does it? If survivability is the test for truth, then we would have to admit the truth of every belief held by a survivor.”

## J. NIHILISM AND MEANING

The door closed. I was on the other side. I no longer believed in truth. I believed in nihilism. I knew nothing. I now realized that nihilism is not a world view one arrives at by reason. You are sort of dropped off there by a rational world view. Then you leave reason behind. I was excited to hold a position for which so many good arguments could be marshaled. However, I was disturbed by the fact that once the arguments brought me there I could make no arguments at all. I was also disturbed by the lack of values. I no longer had need to be concerned about being right or wrong. The problem was that, as a nihilist, I had nothing to be concerned about at all. As time went on, I found nihilism unsatisfying. It offered no meaning. No meaning at all. No meaning to life. No meaning to my actions. No meaning to words or thoughts. No reason. And worst of all no philosophy. I began philosophy as a quest. A quest for meaning. A quest for truth. But my journey had led me to a dead end. No, not a dead end, a dark hole. What I found is that there is nothing to find. My quest was over. Not because it was completed. Not even because I was distracted and side tracked. I didn't even get lost. I died. I went looking for truth, but, ethically and intellectually I found nothing. I tried to get out but the hole was deep. Over and over again I would make a hypothetical leap back to reason and nature, but each time it brought me back to the same place, Nihilism. I sought to falsify nihilism itself, but as my mentor had made so clear, no argument can be made against positions on the other side of reason. Nihilism can not be falsified. Yet, an emptier truth can not be imagined. I had always assumed, perhaps naively, that when I found the truth it would be meaningful. If there was a world view that could be both true and meaningful it would certainly be worth investigating.

## K. METAPHYSICAL WILD CARDS

Then a possibility occurred to me. Not an attractive possibility, but a possibility none the less. My mentor had mentioned a metaphysical wild card. I found the metaphysical aspect repulsive, but I decided to take it out for an intellectual test drive anyway. It seems that most of the difficulties came from my fidelity to naturalism. Once I was open to metaphysical possibilities beyond nature, a number of options opened up. What if there are non-physical properties in the universe. What if there are properties that do correspond to moral qualities. Then, there would be a reality to which moral language would correspond. What if the dualists are right and there is a non-physical aspect to mind. Then the thoughts and beliefs of man would not necessarily be determined. He could stand independent of nature as an objective evaluator and form opinions of it. I have no idea how to decide if such metaphysical realities exist. Nor do I know how belief and reason would work in such a framework. But, at least hypothetically, morality, reason and knowledge would be possible. This would be worth exploring.

## III. THE WILD CARD

I sat around for weeks in an epistemic frump. I spent my time flipping through magazines and popularized treatments on modern physics. You know, Schrodinger cat stuff. Every once in a

while I would get a surge of confidence and blurt, "Of course I know some things." Then I would remember that as the chemical tide of my brain ebbs and flows, I would think such things whether they are true or not. Tide in, "I believe such and such to be the case because I have good reason to believe it." Tide out, "I believe the universe is acting out in me the belief that such and such is the case and that I have good reasons to believe it, whether or not such and such is true."

In one of the pop-physics books, I read how electrons, positrons, and other subatomic particles are made up of quarks. Then something snapped. A philosophical thread broke. I just sat and thought about it awhile, then, very slowly, I began to pull on that thread. We seem to know so much about quarks. Whole books are written on them. But, has anyone ever seen one? No, they are a hypothetical construct that we believe to exist because it accounts for certain phenomena that need to be explained. Namely, particles such as electrons and protons. But, has anyone ever seen an electron or proton? No, these too are hypothetical constructs in which we believe because they too explain certain phenomena.

I found this interesting. I continued to ponder. I thought about theories, not about particular theories, but theories in general. I thought about world views, sufficient reasons, preconditions, necessary conditions, sufficient conditions, epistemology, metaphysics. My mind raced back and forth over a sea of philosophical options. I'd flip a switch, extrapolate the ramifications, flip it the other way, then think again. Time and again I would come back to the hypothetical nature by which I accounted for my every experience. Then, suddenly, it hit me, like a brick, and the light went on.

It was so simple. I saw it clearly. I saw how to play the metaphysical wild card. I was back in the game. I called my Nihilist friend and told him to get over to my place immediately. I began to pace excitedly as the idea unfolded in my mind. Yes, I said, "my mind." I had reason to believe I had one again. When he arrived, I was ready. My mind was clear. I was relaxed. My mind was nimble. This time things would be different.

The door bell rang. I opened it and invited him in. I may have felt confident, but he didn't look like he had a care in the world. We both took a seat. He casually advanced the first question, "So, you have some new insights to talk about?" "Yes, I do." I chose my words cautiously. "Would you agree, that it is the purpose of philosophy and science to explain the world in which we find ourselves, to give an accounting of our experience, to describe this experience and explain what it is and how it could be what it is?"

"Without question," he replied. "It is certainly the intention of science and philosophy to describe the world in which we live. If not, all their propositions are mere fictions." "Would you agree then, that an essential aspect of any world view that provides a basis for science and philosophy, is that it provides the grounds for knowledge itself. That is, the first fact we must explain is how do we account for facts at all? How do we account for knowledge of anything?"

"Certainly," he confirmed. "If we cannot justify knowledge in general, then we certainly cannot justify knowledge of any particular thing." "And would you also agree that a theory or hypothesis is to be accepted or rejected on the basis of whether or not it comports with your experience, with what we know?" I held my breath and waited for his answer. "Yes," he seemed

to have again anticipated my move. “In fact, that is how we came to know the truth of naturalism early on. It comported with all our experience. Once we had figured out enough of how nature works, we could manipulate it. We could extrapolate its mechanical principles and develop all the toys of modern science. It gave us the ability to predict and thereby conduct experiments and test this theory. And thus, in the laboratory and in daily life, naturalism has become the best attested, and most corroborated hypothesis in the history of philosophy.”

“But there’s more,” he continued. “Once this theory was known to be true, just as we could rationally extrapolate microwaves and moon launches, we could also extrapolate and learn more about our theory of knowledge. Specifically, we came to realize that we, like everything else that exists, are part of the big machine. What we thought was knowledge, is actually an event, and we know nothing at all.”

Oh, he may be good, but I had him now. I continued to choose my words carefully. “So please explain, if a theory is judged by its ability to explain the world and account for our knowledge of it, and if naturalism destroys the possibility of explaining anything, why don’t you take naturalism to be the most thoroughly falsified theory in the history of philosophy.” I was amazed. This was the first time I had seen him hesitate. He opened his mouth to speak, then closed it and rubbed his forehead. “Hum,” he finally said.

“Think about it,” I said. “If naturalism renders knowledge of every fact unknowable, then every fact falsifies naturalism. Normally, a theory is in crises when it fails to answer any questions or can’t account for even a single fact. But, here is a theory that answers no questions and accounts for no facts. We should have thrown out the theory and continued to look for the answers to our questions, instead we have embraced the theory and thrown out the questions.” “Well, are you going to deny that your experience comports with the natural order.” He challenged. “After all, if nature is not ordered and uniform, then science and knowledge become impossible as well.” “No, I won’t deny natural order,” I responded. “But, I do deny that I am locked into that natural order. Other non-naturalistic world views believe in a uniform and ordered nature as well. Our experience comports as well with them as it does with naturalism. Furthermore, it seems our awareness of knowledge itself and our ethical experiences don’t comport with naturalism at all.”

“I would be careful about how you define ‘non-natural’, you might inadvertently imply some sort of supernaturalism,” he cautioned me. I steadied myself. I had learned before how his little probes could quickly penetrate to the heart. I responded, “Supernaturalism is exactly what I intended to imply. It is, after all the antithesis of naturalism. Since we were having difficulties with naturalism it seemed reasonable to consider supernaturalism.” He raised an eyebrow in surprise. He gave me a condescending look and said, “Now, now, my dear fellow, it is a little rash to start bringing in such notions as that isn’t it. Before we start invoking the gods wouldn’t you agree their existence should be established first?”

“Yes, but I think we’ve already done that,” I answered. “If naturalism is false, then its antithesis, supernaturalism must be true!” This time both of his eye brows went up. He looked surprised. I continued, “In fact I think you have proven that supernaturalism is a necessary pre-condition to all intelligible world views by virtue of the fact that the contrary, naturalism, is epistemologically

impossible.” “Well,” he began. “You will still have to show how supernaturalism provides for the possibility of knowledge and ethics. And I don’t see how you will do that.”

“I will answer this two ways,” I said. “First, even if I fail to articulate the details as to how knowledge and ethics can be accounted for in a supernatural paradigm, you still cannot deny that it is possible. Supernaturalism does not fall prey to those criticisms particular to naturalism. If you have other criticisms to make, you will have to make them.”

“Secondly, I would like to try my hand at a supernatural hypothesis. What if there did exist an eternal being who’s very character was what we call moral and rational? What if he conceived and planned a created order? What if he then executed that plan and extended his rational and moral attributes to it? What if he then created other minds who, like his, were not mechanistically locked into the created order, but able to transcend and observe it? And what if he gave these minds the rational operational apparatus to evaluate their observations, to weigh them, compare them, and rationally extrapolate? Wouldn’t they then be able to learn and know?” “Wouldn’t knowledge then be possible? Wouldn’t the fact that nature was created as a rational system explain why it corresponds to rationality and why science is possible? Wouldn’t this solve the problems associated with determinism? Wouldn’t this allow us to say something is true for reasons rather than causes? Wouldn’t we be free to choose to believe the truth, rather than determined to believe what ever we are determined to believe? Wouldn’t this freedom make us morally accountable? That is, since we are ourselves the final determiners of our behavior, wouldn’t the final responsibility for our decisions lie with us? Wouldn’t this being’s character give us an absolute non-arbitrary standard for morality? If this being could never compromise His moral character, not even for our sakes, wouldn’t our moral decisions have real consequences?”

Everything fell into place. I was on a roll. I seemed to have answered all the major questions. He stared at me without expression. Hesitantly, he said, “Well, this completely contradicts your naturalism.” “Exactly,” I responded. “That’s why we know it is true. Your argument from naturalism to nihilism did not prove nihilism. It refuted naturalism, and proved supernaturalism.”

He rubbed his chin. “Yea, well, maybe so, I will have to think about it.” He got up and walked to the door and opened it. He turned around. Rubbing his chin, he said, “Now I suppose you are going to identify all these epistemological insights with some religion, aren’t you?” “I’ll have to think about that too.” I said. “Perhaps that will be the topic of our next conversation.”