

The Totality, the Individual, and Their Relation:
A Study of the Nature of Reality and the Significance of Life

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*O Nature, and O soul of man!
How far beyond all utterance
Are your linked analogies!*

Herman Melville

This one's going out to all sentient beings!

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CHAPTER 1

SALUTATION

Welcome, friends. I salute you. I am truly grateful for your participation in this project. May all beings benefit from our endeavor!

William James opens his Gifford Lectures, collected in his *Varieties of Religious Experience*, with the words: “It is with no small amount of trepidation that I take my place behind this desk, and face this learned audience...it begets a certain sense of apology being due for so presumptuous an act.” James is one of the first philosophers that I encountered in my studies, and it has been some time since I first read these words. I remember them now, however, as I sit here feeling much the same sentiment.

Taking my lead from Socrates, what I have in mind to discuss is no small matter, but how we should live. It turns out that answering this question well requires answering many others. Indeed, it turns out that answering this question well requires, in the end, a whole system of philosophy. Or so it seems to me. Ideally, we should base our answer to this primordial question on nothing less than a complete understanding of reality just as it is. Short of this, we should at least do the best that we can, according to our capabilities, to deepen our appreciation of the nature of reality and the significance of life.

The magnitude of the task that we have before us is considerable, and the act of taking it up is, perhaps, more than a little presumptuous. It is, in any event, more than a little daunting. For this reason, I have labored long in preparation for this work. In this way, I am in sympathy

with Descartes, who, in the first paragraph of his First Meditation, says: "...the task looked an enormous one, and I began to wait until I should reach a mature enough age to ensure that no subsequent time of life would be more suitable for tackling such inquiries. This led me to put the project off for so long that I would now be to blame if by pondering over it any further I wasted the time still left for carrying it out." Presumptuous though it may be, it would seem a shame to die without first sharing something of what I have learned.

So, what I have to offer is a system of philosophy. In announcing this, I recall Santayana's opening words to his *Scepticism and Animal Faith*: "Here is one more system of philosophy. If the reader is tempted to smile, I can assure him that I smile with him..." Santayana says that his system differs significantly, in both its pretensions and approach, from what readers are liable to associate with this designation. Need I say more? Later, I shall say more. For now, these words can speak for themselves.

Much of what I have to say has already been said. Of course, this remark, too, has already been said. Santayana insists that his system is neither his, nor new. Royce notes the difficulty of saying anything true in philosophy that has not been said before. This does not worry me much. I seek truth more than novelty. But maybe I shall at least say things in a new way, and in a way that reaches people that have not been reached before. After all, Emerson has taught us that each generation needs its own books.

Why bother with such an undertaking, especially given the laborious and sometimes tedious character of its execution? We just noted the connection between understanding reality and knowing how best to live. But we can say more, for why should we care about knowing how best to live? We care about knowing how best to live because life—at least in its ordinary mode—is difficult. Schopenhauer remarks that were it not for suffering and death, perhaps the

thought of philosophizing would never even occur to us. But we do suffer. And we do face death. It is also true that we can be happy, and find great meaning and significance in life. And all this applies, not only to each of us individually, but to all of us together. In other words, we have not only our own good but also the good of others to consider. The stakes, then, are high; heroic efforts are justified. As Khenpo Tsewang Dongyal, one of my Tibetan teachers, has said: “Without the trouble and difficulties, the title of hero or heroine won’t come.”

Of course, the present fashion in philosophy tends more toward close technical work. I am grateful for this work—my own work depends upon it. But broader, more systematic work is also useful. Indeed, the narrower, more focused work gains meaning and significance from larger contexts. Broad systematic work may be difficult, but *difficult* need not mean *impossible*. In any event, even small successes can be useful. Therefore, let us not be deterred from our task, however monumental it may be.

Perhaps skeptical doubts remain concerning the viability of this project, or indeed, of any such project. Well they should. But they should not unduly constrain us. Hegel speaks well when he indicates that undue fear of error is itself an error. No doubt, Hegel, at times, presumes too much. This too is an error. Kierkegaard, in his *Journals*, captures this latter point nicely: “If Hegel had written the whole of his logic and then said, in the preface, that it was merely an experiment in thought in which he had even begged the question in many places, then he would certainly have been the greatest thinker who had ever lived. As it is he is merely comic.”

Let us not make this latter mistake. But let us go forth boldly, nonetheless. As James further says, in the place with which we began: “The academic career also has its heroic obligations, so I stand here without further deprecatory words.”

Again, my sincere thanks to those who have gone before, most particularly to my own precious teachers, you who read this now.

CHAPTER 2

INTRODUCTION

I have spoken, so far, in very general terms concerning the nature and aim of our project. In his Preface to *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel talks of the inadequacies that attend attempts to preface philosophical works, saying, among other things, “. . .the real issue is not exhausted by stating it as an aim, but by carrying it out, nor is the result the actual whole, but rather the result together with the process through which it came about.”¹ This consideration suggests that I have already said enough, that further preparatory remarks would be superfluous. But Hegel is prone to excess, and although there is surely a good measure of truth in this point, I think that a few further prefatory remarks will be helpful.

What is to be the central topic of our discourse? As announced in the title, it is to be the totality, the individual, and their relation. We say also that this is to be a study of the nature of reality and the significance of life. Why should a work with this latter intention bear the title that it does? Why *the totality, the individual, and their relation*?

Any project must begin with existing materials. This is as true of philosophy as it is of other activities and endeavors. Philosophy is, at least in one of its aspects, a *discursive* practice, whether in dialogue or soliloquy. In this mode, philosophy works with *concepts*. If we are to speak with others—indeed, if we are even to *think*, in the ordinary sense of thinking—we cannot do without at least some of these concepts. The *totality*, the *individual*, and their *relation* are, as

¹ G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Preface.

notions, the landmark concepts of our system; they are signposts from which we begin and to which we recur. Indeed, these notions, after some interpretation and development, retain their usefulness to the end. We identify these as landmark concepts because they are of pivotal significance in our endeavor to understand reality and our place within it. Moreover, they set a frame for other notions that we find useful, both theoretically and practically.

The *totality*, in the most general and abstract sense of the term, is simply the whole of reality, the whole of all that there is. In this sense of the term, there is, so far, no implication concerning the *nature* of the totality—no implication, for instance, as to whether the totality is a simple unity, an organic whole, or an abstract collection merely conceptually united. Why should we take the notion of the totality to be a landmark concept? The totality is the limit in the direction of *inclusiveness*. Among other things, our use of this term signals that we intend to speak of reality in a comprehensive fashion. However, as we develop our understanding of the totality as a concrete reality, implications of a more momentous character will be evident.

The *individual*, in the most general and abstract sense of the term, is anything that is supposed to be at least nominally a unit. In this sense of the term, there is, so far, no implication concerning the *nature* of the individual—no implication, for instance, as to whether the individual is an atomic unit, an organic whole, or a sort of aggregate only nominally unitary. Why should we take the notion of the individual to be a landmark concept? According to atomistic views of individuality, the individual is the limit in the direction of *division*. More broadly, the notion of the individual typically includes supposed particular *things*—both subjects and objects—things that are supposed to be, if not indivisible, at least in some significant sense *unitary*. According to a common interpretation of the nature of reality, it is these things—these *individuals*—that “make up” the world.

The notion of the individual is a very natural—that is to say, *habitual*—element of our thinking. Even so, the notion of the individual is problematic. The individual is, whatever else it may be, a pivotal *category*, a category of great significance both theoretically and practically. In particular, the notion of the *human* individual—or, more broadly, the notion of the *animal* individual—is a crucial ethical and political notion. We say also that the animal individual is, in an important sense, *real*—that is, the animal individual is not a merely conceptual entity. The positive sense in which we affirm the reality of the individual will be revealed in the sequel. For now, let us just say that, for the most part, the true nature and ontological status of the individual is badly misunderstood. This misunderstanding is at least as prevalent among philosophers as it is among ordinary people. Importantly, this misunderstanding yields pernicious consequences, both individually and socially. Therefore, unraveling the difficulties associated with the notion of the individual, and coming to better know the individual as such, are among the principal tasks of this treatise.

A *relation*, in the most general and abstract sense of the term, is any connection existing among supposed things. In this sense of the term, there is, so far, no implication concerning the *nature* of a relation—no implication, for instance, as to whether a relation is internal, external, both, or neither. Why should we take the notion of a relation to be a landmark concept? The notion of a relation ordinarily—some would say necessarily—implies *relata*, things that stand in relation.² It is commonly supposed that relata are, in some important sense, *prior* to their relations (not insofar as they are *relata*, but insofar as they are *things*). That is, relata are supposed to be independent of the relations in which they—thus contingently—stand. On the other side, one might suppose that relations are prior to relata; one might suppose, for instance, that relations are real while supposed relata are simply conceptual constructions. Although this

² Cf. the Buddhist notion of the *three spheres*: subject, object, and the action between them.

side may seem more difficult to sustain, in truth, both sides are defective extremes. Even so, both sides have their truth.³

Evidently, the notion of a relation is just as problematic as the notion of the individual. This should not be surprising, for the two notions are part of the same strategy for describing reality, and are, in this sense, correlative and mutually dependent. For this reason, an understanding of either requires an understanding of the other, requires an understanding of both. Therefore, like the notion of the individual, the notion of a relation is a landmark concept of our system. With respect to the title of our treatise, by *their* relation, we mean, together, the relation of the totality to the individual, the relation of the individual to the totality, and the relation of the various individuals to one another.

* * *

How should the dissertation be structured? Should each of the landmark concepts just adumbrated be afforded its own major division? No, this would not be useful, for there is little that can productively be said of any one of them without reference to the others. The totality, the individual, and their relation cannot be understood in isolation from one another, for they do not exist in isolation from one another. What, then, should be the order of treatment? This is a challenge that afflicts systematic work generally: a plexus of interrelated ideas must somehow be reduced to a linearly arranged text. Here I am reminded of Schopenhauer's insistence that his oeuvre must be read at least twice to be understood. Schopenhauer's supercilious demand notwithstanding, the problem of composition remains.⁴

We will be treating issues that have traditionally been classed under the rubric of *metaphysics*. There are several reasons why the term 'metaphysics' might not be the best

³ I here recall William James' illustration of the man, the squirrel, and the tree. The man goes round the squirrel, and he does not, depending upon which sense of "goes round" is in play.

⁴ Beethoven's 9th Symphony is a fine example of structure, something worthy of emulation.

designation for our work here. For one, metaphysics continues to have something of a bad name in certain circles. For another, and more importantly, this title is liable to give a mistaken impression, to some, of the nature of its content and the character of its execution. By *metaphysics*, I mean something rather broad and systematic, not a mere laundry list of technical difficulties and piecemeal analyses. Shall we call it instead *general science*? For it is the science of reality in its most general aspects. Or we could simply refer to it as *systematic philosophy*, for it is systematic philosophy in one of its aspects. These and other names are possible, and not without their respective merit. I here retain the expression ‘metaphysics’, hoping to recover something of its ancestral meaning and significance. But let it be known that I eschew the perversions with which the practice has come to be associated in the opinions of the analysts. Metaphysics, to the extent to which it is useful, is empirically grounded. It is not empty apriorism. It is concerned with the basis of reality and the nature of reality, and with the application of these things to such practical considerations as ethics, politics, and the meaning of life. Although the term is no longer current, perhaps a better designation would be *natural philosophy*.

What is to be the subject of metaphysics? Reality itself, generally considered. As just explained, the most general concepts (excepting the concept of *reality* itself) that we find useful to apply to reality are the *totality*, the *individual*, and their *relation*. To say much more, on this occasion, would be to say too much. Still, a brief indication of some of the key issues with which we shall be involved does not seem out of place.

In speaking of what he calls *the ancient problem of the one and the many*, William James, in the fourth lecture of his *Pragmatism*, says: “I myself have come, by long brooding over it, to consider it the most central of all philosophical problems, central because so pregnant.” And:

“To believe in the one or in the many, that is the classification with the maximum number of consequences.” James later adds, in the eighth lecture of the same set: “We stand here before the final question of philosophy...the deepest and most pregnant question that our minds can frame.” Much of the spirited and illuminating dialogue between James and his friend and colleague Josiah Royce turns on this very issue, an issue that is indeed of ancient origin. Harking back, in the West, at least as far as Heraclitus and Parmenides, the issue finds expression also in the teachings of the ancient sages of India, China, and Tibet (Nagarjuna, Shankara, and Shantarakshita are of special use to us in this connection). The issue remains a challenge even unto our own time. A couple of years subsequent to the just-quoted remarks, James confesses, in the third lecture of *A Pluralistic Universe*: “...the whole business remains a puzzle, both intellectually and morally.” The resolution of this longstanding and persistent difficulty is one of the results of our work. (Foreshadowing, we reject the exclusive disjunction implicit in James’s second remark above, finding truth in both monism and pluralism, and, in their usual formulations, inadequacies as well.)

A second key issue to which we give attention is *the problem of being and becoming*. This issue is closely related, in both its basis and its ancestry, to the problem of the one and the many, and is of comparable significance (Plato and Aristotle are both noteworthy in this connection). This difficulty, also, finds resolution in our system, one of the pivotal components of which is a new theory of the nature of *time*. Time, like the individual, tends to be badly misunderstood. That there is this correlation is to be expected, for the two notions work in concert, and a mistaken conception of the one tends toward a mistaken conception of the other. Consider, as an illustration of the interplay of these two notions, *the problem of personal identity*. The problem of personal identity is just a special case of the more general problem of *individual*

identity. The problematic character of this problem, in its most acute expression, is a consequence of the difficulty of accounting for supposed individual identity *through time*. An understanding of the animal individual, an understanding of any temporal individual, requires an understanding of the nature of time. Just so, an understanding of the nature of time is required for an understanding of *movement and change*. Therefore, our theory of time is, in a measure, the linchpin of our system: for the person to whom the nature of time is clear, everything becomes clear; for the person to whom the nature of time is not clear, nothing becomes clear. (As I have explained elsewhere, time has no independent reality, but is simply the order of dependence of reality itself. Time is, therefore, a kind of *relation*. The temporal and the eternal are *one*: they are both real, but they are not distinct realms. Both being and becoming have their truth. Why there is something rather than nothing is understood.)

A third key issue to be considered pertains to *the basic nature of the ground of reality*. It is hard even to name this issue without prejudicing the case or evincing a kind of partisanship. There is, in ordinary thought and speech, a common distinction between the mental and the physical. This distinction is apparently useful enough, as evidenced by its widespread use. Nonetheless, it can be a source of delusion. Upon this pedestrian distinction are founded such familiar and influential metaphysical doctrines as idealism, materialism, and dualism. Each of these orientations involves a claim concerning the fundamental character of reality, and each must confront the challenge of explaining the *relation* of the mental and the physical on this basis. Some of the most extraordinary and extravagant theories in the history of philosophy have been framed to this end, including illusionism, eliminativism, and parallelism. In interpreting the mental and the physical as different attributes of one substance, Spinoza comes closer to the truth. With a nod to Spinoza, Royce—although in the main a champion of a version of

idealism—sometimes points to double-aspect theory, and he too is on the right track. (Although we take inspiration from Spinoza with respect to the present issue, we find fault with his handling of the previous two key issues. In particular, we reject Spinoza’s strict determinism and his essentialism with regard to the individual.)

There are other significant issues to be addressed within the scope of metaphysics and natural philosophy, including *causation* or *dependent origination*, as well as a multitude of subordinate issues. Their enumeration and discussion will wait for the treatise itself, however; I presume that I have already said enough to indicate the character and direction of our undertaking. It is likely to be evident by now that ours is a sort of *middle-way* philosophy, a philosophy with practical groundings, practical intentions, and practical results. In speaking of a middle way, however, we do not mean some merely intermediate position. We do not mean a simple compromise. What we accomplish is more on the order of a *synthesis*, but even this notion does not really do justice to our approach and results. Even so, we seek to avoid the defective extremes to which others have fallen in the past.

In the sphere of metaphysics, the extreme view on the side of the totality, or the *one*, is simple monism (Parmenides and Shankara exemplify this position, at least as they are popularly interpreted). The extreme view on the side of the individual, or the *many*, is atomistic pluralism (Democritus, 19th Century physics, and those with an atomic notion of the animal individual exemplify this position). Meanwhile, an extreme view on the side of *being* is eternalism (in its block-universe variety,⁵ and an extreme view on the side of *becoming* is presentism (in its simple expression).⁶ Since these are defective extremes, we reject both simple eternalism and simple presentism. Nevertheless, we retain the truth of both in our middle way. Just so, we affirm the

⁵ Related to the so-called *static* theory of time.

⁶ Related to the so-called *dynamic* theory of time.

reality of both the one and the many, of both being and becoming, of both the mental and the physical. Of course, in merely issuing brief slogans, one cannot reasonably expect to be understood. The meaning of these proclamations remains to be interpreted.

Perhaps, despite all the talk so far of the *individual*, someone still supposes that we do not afford genuine reality to individuals, and that this defect yields pernicious consequences. For have we not already suggested that things commonly taken to be concrete individuals are, in truth, mere abstractions, hypostatized or reified without our notice? And might this suggestion not justify the abuse of individuals, such abuse as is unfortunately already instantiated in fact? Should anyone have this concern with reference to our system, let us attempt, very briefly here, to assuage it, even though a more satisfactory response must await the complete work.

In his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Kierkegaard observes: “Each age has its own characteristic depravity. Ours is perhaps not pleasure or indulgence or sensuality, but rather a dissolute pantheistic contempt for the individual man.”⁷ To Kierkegaard, no one better exemplifies this depravity, this dissolute pantheistic contempt for the individual, than does Hegel. Is this fair? In the concluding paragraph of his Preface to *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel says: “...the share in the total work of Spirit which falls to the individual can only be very small.”⁸ Therefore, thinks Hegel, the individual should expect little in return. In the grand dialectic of Spirit, the individual is more means than end, and is fittingly sacrificed upon the slaughter-bench of history. This assessment of the role and value of the individual does indeed stand in stark contrast to that of Kierkegaard, who accords the individual paramount status. In “The Insignificance of Individuals”, John Lachs identifies the notion of *impersonal subjectivity* as the root cause of the disdain for the individual that pervades much of German idealism,

⁷ Soren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*.

⁸ G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Preface.

especially the work of Fichte and Hegel.⁹ Lachs there contrasts this orientation, not with Kierkegaard, but with several classical figures in American philosophy.

Can Kierkegaard and Hegel be reconciled? Perhaps not. But they do each have a share of truth. If they cannot be reconciled, it is because neither grasps the full truth. Hegel is correct in recognizing the significance of the whole, but fails to realize the true nature and identity of the whole, giving undue weight and emphasis to the state. Kierkegaard is correct in recognizing the significance of the individual, but misconceives the individual and its relation to the whole, erroneously supposing the individual to be atomic and giving undue credence to dualistic theism. They both furnish useful insights, and we learn from their mistakes. Therefore, even if the two cannot be reconciled, we can preserve the truth of both in our middle way.

Does this indication that we preserve the truth of Kierkegaard, or, more broadly, that we recognize and embrace the significance of the individual, go any way toward alleviating the aforementioned worry that our system might not accord genuine reality to individuals? Perhaps not. In any event, let us leave the matter for now with this concluding statement, which is, perhaps, only suggestive: Although we do deny the existence of individuals in the sense of *enduring atomic substances* (Aristotle's primary substances, Indian philosophy's *svabhava*), we nonetheless affirm the reality of individuals, properly understood. Therefore, in showing that what are often supposed to be concrete individuals are, in fact, mere abstractions, the truth of the individual is not denied but revealed. At issue in this connection is a case of what Whitehead calls the *fallacy of misplaced concreteness*.¹⁰ It is not that the individual is not real; it is that what is commonly taken to be concrete is not. Although Whitehead identifies this fallacy and correctly sees it as an important source of difficulty, in endorsing a sort of atomism, he

⁹ John Lachs, "The Insignificance of Individuals".

¹⁰ Whitehead, *Process and Reality*.

nonetheless himself falls victim to it. Such bottom-up approaches are all defective extremes. Again, we chart a middle way.

And what shall we say of the *totality*? Is the totality a simple unity, an organic whole, an abstract collection merely conceptually united, or what? Or should we simply wag our finger?

Perhaps there are totally independent realms of being. If so, then the totality of all such realms is only an abstract collection, for there is, in this case, no actual integration of parts, no actual unity beyond that which one might suppose to attend the conceptual collection itself. This abstract *object*, if so one pleased to call it, is not the target of our investigation. Our concern here is with the totality of *this* realm, the one that we inhabit. If there are other realms of being that are totally independent from this one, they can have no impact on us or anything else in this realm, nor can we have any impact on them. We can only wish them well.

Another point of clarification: In speaking of *the* totality, we mean not merely the totality of everything that one might suppose to exist *at some particular moment of time*, but rather, the whole of all that there is, the whole of reality, for *all* time. For emphasis, I shall sometimes speak of this as the *transtemporal* totality. In truth, however, this appellation is something of a redundancy, for this is the only concrete totality that there can be. Insofar as it makes sense at all to speak of a totality in the former sense (in the sense of the totality of everything that one might suppose to exist at some particular moment of time), what is named in this instance is merely an *abstract notion*. One of the reasons that this is so takes some time to explain, involving, as it does, Einstein's teaching on the relativity of simultaneity. However, in the limited space here, we can say this: If, in supposing a moment of time, one is supposing a *mathematical instant*, then what is involved is a mere hypothetical slice *through* reality, not a concrete portion *of* reality. So, the supposed totality in question is merely an abstract notion. If, instead of this, some non-

infinitesimal spread of time is supposed to be included in the so-called moment, then the duration and boundaries of this spread can only be arbitrarily established. Again, anything supposed to be named in this instance would be a mere abstraction (although it could be said to have concrete content were it not for the matter of the relativity of simultaneity). Therefore, it is, and can only be, the *transtemporal* totality that is concretely real.¹¹ For clarity, I shall hereafter speak of this reality as the *Totality*, with a capital ‘T’.

Such, and related matters, is the major focus of our work. But we are also concerned to give at least a very brief indication of some of the practical implications of these considerations. This is not just the application of theory to practice; it is just as much an elucidation of the meaning and significance of our theory. As we have already indicated, there is no deep divide between metaphysics and these practical concerns. We speak here of ethics, politics, and related matters. Our middle-way approach continues to be useful in this sphere. Our task is to determine the specific character of this middle way.

¹¹ Even this statement must be qualified, however. From our perspective in time, and indeed, from any intertemporal perspective, the Totality does not even exist yet. So it is, in a way, an excess and another extreme view to declare the concrete reality of the Totality.

CHAPTER 3

THE BASIS OF REALITY

The question of being is the darkest in all philosophy.
William James

Preamble

As we enter into an examination of the nature of reality, it is fitting that we begin with a consideration of why there is anything at all. As has been duly remarked,¹² although this is not the first question that we ask in the course of our individual development, it is, in a way, the first question of metaphysics, the first question of first philosophy—indeed, the first question of all inquiry. Although other questions may be asked and at least provisionally answered without engaging this question, this question is primal in the sense that, were there not something, there would be neither questioning nor anything to question.¹³ Moreover, the confrontation of this question, and especially, the discovery of its true answer, is revelatory of the nature of reality in general. It is important, therefore, that one encounter this deep question, recognize its great weight, and come to grips with its special—nay, unique—character.

It is interesting and perhaps instructive to note the various ways that this question has been received. My first experience of this came in my early youth when I asked my father why

¹² Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*.

¹³ This is also in a way the first question in the order of *generality*.

there was anything at all. He told me “there just is,” but this did not satisfy me. This reply seemed to make an issue of great moment, indeed, an issue of *supreme* moment, into a matter of mere chance. Aggravated by my persistence in the face of his inability to answer, my father finally exclaimed, “I don’t know, but there’s nothing I can do about it, so what difference does it make?”

The question concerning the basis of reality can indeed be a frustrating one. The usual manner of explaining things is by appeal to something external to the thing explained (this is so whether the explanation is causal or purposive). But clearly this approach is ruled out here. One might understandably think, therefore, that no explanation of the totality of things is possible. And, in the grip of this belief, one might, with ostensibly greater sophistication, declare that the question itself is ill framed or even meaningless.¹⁴

Such denial of the legitimacy of the question, however common it has been amongst recent analysts, is a great and grave error. Anyone who has truly faced the question knows that it is not only meaningful but profoundly so. It is indeed true, however, that “...a question cannot be regarded as a well-posed challenge merely because the questioner finds it psychologically insistent, experiences a strong feeling of puzzlement, and desires an answer to it.”¹⁵ So we should consider this concern, evaluate it in the present context, and offer a reply.¹⁶ Meanwhile, on the other side, Robert Lawrence Kuhn calls the question *Why is there anything at all?* the

¹⁴ One can find a widely read example of this sort of response in Paul Edwards, “Why”, in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

¹⁵ Adolf Grünbaum, “Creation in Cosmology”, reprinted in John Leslie and Robert Lawrence Kuhn, *The Mystery of Existence: Why Is There Anything At All?* p. 59.

¹⁶ Often the best way to demonstrate that a question is answerable is simply to answer it.

“magisterial Question”.¹⁷ Kuhn continues: “Why is there Something rather than Nothing? Why Not Nothing? If you don’t get dizzy, you really don’t get it.”¹⁸

Why should one think that the question concerning the basis of reality is not only a reasonable question but also an insistent one? In the work of Leibniz we find a *locus classicus* stating the challenge:

...nothing happens without it being possible for someone who knows enough things to give a reason sufficient to determine why it is so and not otherwise. Assuming this principle, the first question that we have the right to ask will be, *why is there something rather than nothing?* For nothing is simpler and easier than something.¹⁹

The manifest presence of reality, of *something*, commonplace though it be, certainly seems something requiring account. All the more so since existence may seem to impose a burden that non-existence does not. Were the case different, were perfect non-existent the truth rather than existence (ignoring the obvious fact that, were such the case, no one would be around to care), there would be nothing in need of explanation. As Leibniz notes, “nothing is simpler and easier than something”.²⁰ The lack of anything at all would seem to be the default condition, and therefore the fact of existence would seem to require some sufficient reason.

Before we offer our solution, it is important that we appreciate the difficulty of the question and understand its unique character. Otherwise, we might have unreasonable expectations concerning what constitutes a satisfactory and satisfying reply. If we expect

¹⁷ Robert Lawrence Kuhn, “Why Not Nothing?” in John Leslie and Robert Lawrence Kuhn, *The Mystery of Existence: Why Is There Anything At All?* p. 261.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* p. 262. Although Kuhn has not yet found an answer that satisfies him in this connection, he evinces great determination and commitment in his sustained endeavor to discover the truth.

¹⁹ G. W. Leibniz, *Principles of Nature and Grace*, section 7.

²⁰ This remark is ambiguous in way that is ironic in the present context. It could be read as: *there is nothing that is simpler and easier than something.*

something that, given the nature of the case, is simply impossible to provide, we may fail to recognize the true answer when we see it, and fail to be satisfied with what is in fact the true and complete explanation of the existence of reality.

On the Difficulty of the Question

There is *something*. There is no truth concerning which we can be more certain. This is striking, for we know this truth *empirically*. It is peculiar that this most certain truth is, at the same time, the most enigmatic mystery. So, at any rate, it has often been received.

In approaching his discussion of what he calls *the problem of being*, William James says:

...in order not to conceal any of the skeletons in the philosophic closet, I will start with the worst problem possible, the so-called ‘ontological problem,’ or question of how there comes to be anything at all.²¹

Why should this be, or at least be considered, a *difficult* question? What would count as a good answer? Perhaps this problem is not as intractable as it has generally seemed. But let us first indicate the basis for the supposed difficulty.

When I ask my students to respond to the question of why there is anything at all, the most common reply, at least among those who think that they have the answer, is that something exists because God created it. This is no surprise, for this reply has been offered often enough by

²¹ William James, *Some Problems of Philosophy: A Beginning of an Introduction to Philosophy*, Chapter II: “The Problems of Metaphysics”, p. 37.

philosophers and theologians as well as the uninitiated. But this reply does not really address the question, for God is *itself* something. Therefore, the question simply recurs for God.²²

The failure of this reply illustrates the unique character of the question. Any external cause or source calls in turn for its own explanation, and so cannot provide the final answer. So even if it were true that God created the world as we know it, the invocation of God (by itself) serves us not at all in explaining the ultimate basis of reality. At best, it only defers the issue.

If we cannot rely on God, perhaps we can rely on *nothing*. And indeed, another proposal in this connection is that *something* somehow arose from *nothing*. Let us call this proposal the view that reality is *spontaneously arisen*. That this should have happened is, to say the least, *puzzling*.

If...it had a beginning, when was that, and why?

You are up against the previous nothing, and do not see how it ever passed into being. This dilemma, of having to choose between a regress which, although called infinite, has nevertheless come to a termination, and an absolute first, has played a great part in philosophy's history.²³

But this approach at least has the virtue of recognizing that the question is concerned with why there is anything *at all*, and does not just attempt to explain the existence one part of reality in terms of another, as in the God hypothesis.

But the supposition that there was an absolute beginning from nothing seems altogether untenable. In the language of Medieval Western philosophy, *ex nihilo nihil fit*.²⁴ If *nothing* were

²² Recall Kant's expression of God's own query: "I am from eternity to eternity, and outside me there is nothing save what is through my will, *but whence then am I?*" Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, translated by Norman Kemp Smith, A613/B641.

²³ William James, *Some Problems of Philosophy: A Beginning of an Introduction to Philosophy*, Chapter III: The Problem of Being, p. 41.

²⁴ Latin: *From nothing, nothing comes*.

the primal or basic state, *something* would be impossible. This point is nicely expressed by James:

Not only that *anything* should be, but that *this* very thing should be, is mysterious! Philosophy stares, but brings no reasoned solution, for from nothing to being there is no logical bridge.²⁵

Moreover, this “solution” offers no answer to the mystery of existence. The most that we can say on this account is that the arrival of reality was a matter of mere *chance*. Which of course is no explanation at all.

Even so, this is one of the views on the origin of reality that has been maintained. Indeed, many creation myths around the world presume that *nothing* was the primal state.²⁶ But twentieth-century scientific cosmology has also been expressed in these terms. In particular, certain early versions of big-bang cosmogony supposed an absolute beginning to the universe. In recent years, the notion of the “multiverse” has become quite popular among physicists. But this concept is by no means new. Indeed, it has ancient roots in Indian cosmology. Meanwhile, the West, under the influence of Hebraic folklore, has taken a long time to catch up.

Among those who have reflected on the mystery of existence, some have a strong intuition that even if reality did not *arise* from nothing, *nothing* is nonetheless, in some sense, the more *natural* or *expected* case. We already saw an indication of this in Leibniz, but many have felt this intuition (I must say, myself among them). The point is well-expressed by Kuhn:

²⁵ William James, *Some Problems of Philosophy: A Beginning of an Introduction to Philosophy*, Chapter III: The Problem of Being, pp. 39-40.

²⁶ The Vedic *Hymn of Creation* is an illustrative case in point.

...an a priori weighing of Nothing vs. Something (from a timeless, explanatorily earlier perspective) would, for me, tip the balance heavily to Nothing, but for the fact of the matter [which is that there is something].²⁷

Again:

Thus, since I have no choice but to recognize that there is Something, I have no choice but to conclude that there is some deep reason, force, productive principle or type of necessity that brings about the absence of Nothing. I cannot rid myself of the conviction that Nothing would have obtained had not something special somehow superceded or counteracted it.²⁸

Given this intuition, the presence of *something* seems remarkable—indeed, astonishing. I am sympathetic. In fact, I believe that this intuition points to a deep truth: were *nothing* the primal state or original position, it would not be possible that there should ever be *something*. But I also believe that part of the basis for this intuition is the assumption, perhaps unrecognized, that there was once an option between something and nothing. Why then would *something* be chosen, when *nothing* is so much less trouble?

Were it possible that there should be an actual choice between something and nothing, I believe that this intuition would be correct. It is not possible, however, for there to be a “selection”²⁹ between something and nothing from a position that is *neutral* as to something or nothing: any such supposed selection would necessarily occur either from the side of *nothing* or from the side of *something* (and of course from the side of nothing there would be no basis for

²⁷ Robert Lawrence Kuhn, “Why Not Nothing?” in John Leslie and Robert Lawrence Kuhn, *The Mystery of Existence: Why Is There Anything At All?* p. 258.

²⁸ Robert Lawrence Kuhn, “Why Not Nothing?” in John Leslie and Robert Lawrence Kuhn, *The Mystery of Existence: Why Is There Anything At All?* p. 258.

²⁹ For a discussion of *selection* in this context, see Derek Parfit, “Why Anything? Why This? 1998. [Reprinted in John Leslie and Robert Lawrence Kuhn, *The Mystery of Existence: Why Is There Anything At All?* pp. 220-237].

any selection to occur). So the issue is already decided before any decision can even be made. The supposition of a “timeless, explanatorily earlier perspective”³⁰ is a deceptive fiction. Even so, the presence of something *is* remarkable, *is* astonishing, *is* wonderful.³¹

Replies to the mystery of existence often suppose that we must begin with *nothing*. But some have maintained that this is an unwarranted bias.³² However, even if one does not suppose that *nothing* was the primordial condition, or even that it is the more natural or expected state, one might still think that *nothing*—the complete absence of *anything*—is at least *possible*. Schopenhauer can be interpreted in this fashion:

...this world’s non-existence is just as possible as is its existence. Therefore, Spinoza’s view of the world as an absolutely necessary mode of existence, in other words, as something that positively and in every sense ought to and must be, is a false one. Even simple theism in its cosmological proof tacitly starts from the fact that it infers the world’s previous non-existence from its existence; thus, it assumes in advance that the world is something contingent.³³

We shall revisit Schopenhauer’s claim and consider whether in this remark he means reality *generally* or only *this* world in the limited sense. Meanwhile, an important point to register here is that the difficulty of the mystery of existence is exacerbated—nay, rendered insoluble—by the belief that *nothing* was the primal state. But even the supposition that there need not have been anything at all establishes the condition for a truly insoluble problem.

³⁰ Kuhn.

³¹ Or *terrible*, as in Schopenhauer’s reckoning.

³² In this connection, Robert Nozick draws a distinction between what he calls *inegalitarian* and *egalitarian* theories, that is, between theories that privilege nothing, and those that do not. See Robert Nozick in Leslie and Kuhn.

³³ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, Volume II, p. 171.

So why is there something rather than nothing? We have reached an apparent impasse. By now, it should be evident that this is no ordinary question, and why so many, philosophers and ordinary people alike, have found it perplexing. With the immediately foregoing preliminary presentation of proposals in reply to this question, we have illustrated that there may seem to be the following dilemma: either (1) we must, as in ordinary explanation, appeal to something external to the thing to be explained (such as God or some basic ground or source), in which case the question is not even addressed, or (2) we must suppose that reality has no basis and has arisen for no reason at all, in which case the question is not only unanswered but unanswerable. This is the challenge, nicely expressed in these words from an influential contemporary physicist:

Why is there something rather than nothing? I can't imagine anything that would serve as an answer to this question, let alone an answer supported by evidence. Even religion fails here, for if the answer is "God," there was something—God, that is—to begin with. Or, *If time has no beginning, do all causes recede into the infinite past?* Is there no final reason for things? These are real questions, but if they have answers, those are likely to forever remain outside science.³⁴

Given the difficulty (or special—indeed, unique—character) of the question of being, it is not surprising that reactions to it have been various. Among people who have encountered the question, some are profoundly troubled, some are indifferent, and some dismiss the question as altogether illegitimate, even meaningless. Perhaps in this case especially, James' remarks on the role of temperament in philosophical preferences are applicable. But a person's other commitments are also influential in framing their reactions to this question. For instance, a person who already believes in God and a created world will naturally try to situate their reply in

³⁴ Lee Smolin, *Time Reborn*, pp. 265-266.

these terms. Meanwhile, the atheist will dismiss such attempts as groundless. This is actually as it should be, for one should seek to harmonize one's beliefs about the world. Indeed, this is a central task of philosophy.

In his customary condescension, Schopenhauer remarks:

The lower a man is in an intellectual respect, the less puzzling and mysterious existence itself is to him; on the contrary, everything, how it is and that it is, seems to him a matter of course.³⁵

I think that there really is something to this. But I also think that it is only half the story. A person can be indifferent to the question because they do not even understand the issue. But a person can also get past the question once they have found their way to a satisfactory and satisfying answer. Of course, the latter sort of person may still want to engage the question, either for the benefit of others who still find it perplexing, or for illustrating and grounding broader philosophical concerns.

In what is, in a way, the opposite to the response of Schopenhauer, some analysts have dismissed the question. Nicholas Rescher calls this “the rejectionist approach” (to the riddle of existence).³⁶ The reasons for such rejection have been various, but generally can be classed in two categories. Some dismiss the question because they think that it is *unanswerable in principle*. If a question is unanswerable in principle, there may be no further reason to consider it, at least once this fact is discovered. Others dismiss the question because they believe that it is not a genuine question at all, that it is, strictly speaking, *meaningless*.³⁷ This reason for rejecting the question is related to the previous one, for part of the reason for supposing the question

³⁵ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, Volume II, p. 161.

³⁶ Nicholas Rescher, *The Riddle of Existence*, 1984, reprinted in Leslie and Kuhn, pp. 284-288.

³⁷ Paul Edwards asserts this contention in connection with what he calls the “super-ultimate” why question. He allows that certain basic questions, such as *was the world created by God?* are meaningful. See Paul Edwards, “Why”, in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

meaningless is that it is supposed unanswerable in principle. This sort of reply was fashionable during the heyday of logical positivism and the verificationist theory of meaning in the twentieth century.

Before providing reasons for rejecting this rejection, let us acknowledge that this response to the mystery of existence is not without significant motives. Obviously, and as we continue to emphasize, this is no ordinary question. Any appeal to external reasons is ruled out by the very nature of the case. This applies not only to *causal* explanations, but also to supposed *teleological* justifications. In the sense of the term in play here, a purpose is just as much *something* as a cause is. This means that the explanation in terms of *value* that has been proposed by John Leslie and others (with antecedents in Plato and others) is also unworkable.³⁸

It matters not whether this supposed justification is used for the world or for God. Here is an expression of this notion from Ewing:

I must admit that the concept of God for most philosophers who have reflected on it deeply does include necessity in some sense as an ingredient. The existence of God, it is felt, could not be merely a contingent fact.... But, I ask, need the necessity be logical necessity? Might not God be necessary in some sense other than that in which his necessity would mean that there was an internal contradiction in denying his existence? ...we seem to need a reason of such a kind as will give an explanation of existence without making the non-existence of anything logically self-contradictory. There remains only one alternative, as far as can be seen, which might do this, namely an explanation in terms of values. In that case God's existence will be necessary not because there would be any

³⁸ For a defense of the claim, see John Leslie, "A Cosmos Existing through Ethical Necessity", pp. 126-141 in Leslie and Kuhn.

internal self-contradiction in denying it but because it was supremely good that God should exist.³⁹

The trouble is this: If God exists, then whatever value God possesses, or that God's existence possesses, is *posterior* to (or equiprimordial with) the existence of God, *not prior* to it, and thus cannot serve as ground for God's existence, unless of course God already existed, in which case God's existence would *itself* do the trick.

So, in saying that the question is *unanswerable*, the rejectionists are partly right: the question is indeed unanswerable in the manner to which we are accustomed: the external appeal of ordinary explanation.⁴⁰ If this question is to be answered at all, it must be answered in terms of something that is not external to the thing to be explained, for the ample reason that there *is* nothing external to the thing to be explained. We must bear these considerations in mind in evaluating proposed solutions. Otherwise, we might fail to recognize a good answer when we see it, and not be satisfied when we should be satisfied.

The question concerning the basis of reality may be asked—and often is asked—with unrealistic and indeed irrational expectations. It is this that generates much of the resolvable mystery surrounding this issue. Indeed, these unrealistic expectations create a sort of *catch-22*: a traditional sort of explanation may be expected, but no such explanation can address the actual question; meanwhile, the explanation that *does* address the actual question may not meet expectations, and so may not appear to really answer the question. In short, the expectations may be such that the only way deemed satisfactory to answer the question is a way in which the question cannot be answered. One way of responding to this conundrum is to just revert to the claim that the question is unanswerable. Our preferred approach, and the only way to succeed in

³⁹ Ewing, in Leslie and Kuhn, p. 124.

⁴⁰ Cf. Hempel's "covering-law model" of explanation.

this endeavor, is to acquire realistic expectations. But this is decidedly not to endorse *modest* expectations. It is simply to realize the nature of the case, and to recognize the true and complete answer when we see it.

What would count as a good answer to the mystery of existence? Since the question of why there is something rather than nothing is a unique question, it requires a unique answer, an answer that, for ordinary questions, would *not* be satisfactory. We just said that if this question is to be answered at all, it must be answered in terms of something that is not external to the thing to be explained. Is this even possible? Can the existence of reality be explained on its own ground? In this connection, Robert Nozick speaks of what he calls “explanatory self-subsumption”.⁴¹ As Nozick explains, this involves, in some sense, a fact explaining itself:

Since a fact that nothing explains is left dangling, while a fact explained by something else leaves the problem of explaining that something else, only one thing could leave nothing at all unexplained: a fact that explains itself.⁴²

Although Nozick’s examples of this notion are rather different from the solution toward which we are working, I think that our approach might reasonably be placed in this category. Is this just brute fact then, after all? In one sense *yes*, but in another (and important) sense *no*.

If a brute is something that cannot be explained by anything, then a self-subsumable principle isn’t a brute fact; but if a brute fact is something that cannot be explained by anything *else*, such a principle counts as a brute fact...⁴³

The existence of reality in general—the existence of the *Totality*—naturally cannot be explained by anything else, for there is nothing else. But this does not mean that it cannot be explained.

⁴¹ Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations*, chapter 2, 1981, reprinted in Leslie and Kuhn, p. 238-246.

⁴² Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations*, chapter 2, 1981, in Leslie and Kuhn, p. 239.

⁴³ Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations*, chapter 2, 1981, in Leslie and Kuhn, p. 240.

And it does not mean that it is a brute fact in the sense of being *capricious and arbitrary*. It is not something that happens to be the case but might just as well not have been the case.

We seek an answer to the mystery of existence that is both *satisfactory* and *satisfying*. To be *satisfactory*, the answer must truly address the question and it must provide a true and complete explanation of the basis of reality. To be *satisfying*, the answer must be satisfactory, and it must reveal why any residual mystery is beyond both the possibility of, and the need for, further explanation.

Proposed Solutions

It is fitting that we should preface our proposed solution with a brief survey of the theoretical landscape. Our aim in this is to glean whatever insights we can, as well as to learn to recognize and avoid the pitfalls. Moreover, these theories will provide useful contrasts to our preferred position, and will help both to motivate our theory and to reveal its virtues.

The business of classifying these theories is rather complicated, in part because there is overlap and mixed types. On the one hand, there are various replies to the mystery of existence. On the other, there are various theories concerning the nature and origin of reality. These are distinguishable concerns, but there is a close connection between them. In either case, one can identify and list specific instances (which are rather numerous), and one can class them into a set of categories, large or small, depending upon one's purposes. But when it comes to relating the two cases, combinations proliferate, and it becomes quite a mess to try to sort it all out in detail, even though there are obvious correlations between the two concerns. Indeed, one's reply to the

mystery of existence properly depends upon one's view regarding the basis of reality, which in turn is intimately associated with how one understands the nature of reality.

In his comprehensive review piece, Kuhn does a very nice and thorough job identifying and classifying replies to the mystery of existence.⁴⁴ There is no need to rehearse the details of Kuhn's fine analysis here. It will be enough for our present purposes to just identify a few principal categories. One could never be sure that one had exhausted the field in any event.⁴⁵ William James provides a list of theories from Herbert Spenser that has the virtue of brevity, and that is useful enough for us here. James asks:

...how many opinions are possible as to the origin of the world? Spencer says that the world must have been either eternal, or self-created, or created by an outside power. So for him there are only three. Is this correct? If so, which of the three views seems the most reasonable? and why?⁴⁶

We have already discussed the latter two of Spenser's categories, namely:

- 1) Created by an outside power
- 2) Self-created (or what we called "spontaneous arisen")

We found that neither of these approaches is tenable, at least in its crude form. Among other defects, neither is able to offer a satisfactory reply to the mystery of existence.

The third of Spenser's categories is "eternal". With the other two categories ruled out, this category would seem to be the most promising. But this is a complicated category with

⁴⁴ Robert Lawrence Kuhn, "Why Not Nothing?" in John Leslie and Robert Lawrence Kuhn, *The Mystery of Existence: Why Is There Anything At All?* pp. 246-278.

⁴⁵ As will be evident soon enough, our theory does not fit well in any of the familiar categories, although it does contain aspects of some of them.

⁴⁶ William James, *Some Problems of Philosophy: A Beginning of an Introduction to Philosophy*, Chapter II: The Problems of Metaphysics, p. 33.

multiple variants. We can begin to sort this out by indicating the ambiguity in the term *eternal*.

Two interpretations are more-or-less standard:

1) *Timeless* (or *timelessly eternal*)

2) *Everlasting* (or *everlastingly eternal*)⁴⁷

Is anything eternal in either of these senses? Well, God is standardly said to be eternal. And the ambiguity just noted applies in the case of God.

God is sometimes said to be eternal in the *timeless* sense. Of course, this interpretation makes for a big problem concerning the possibility of God's involvement in the world. For this reason, this view is usually associated with *deism*, the notion that God is the ground or basis for the world, or the creator of the laws and original conditions of the world. According to a common version this story, once God, in his infinite wisdom, has established the world, there is no need for any further interference on the part of God. This approach is typically associated with a mechanistic view of reality and strict causal determinism. These presumptions are necessary to ensure that everything will indeed unfold according to God's plan (and thus, presumably, for the best) without further tinkering by God.

More commonly, God is understood to be eternal in the *everlasting* sense (sometimes called *sempiternal*, to distinguish this view from the foregoing). This better accords with the popular view of God as active and involved in the affairs of the world. The supposed efficacy of prayer also seems to depend upon this interpretation, although it can be said in reply that God foreknew the prayer was coming, and made the necessary adjustments in the original fiat that is supposed by the deist to have occurred at the outset.

Problem: If God is in time, why did he create the world when he did?⁴⁸

⁴⁷ We are building toward a *third* interpretation, a middle-way approach, or synthesis. But we'll save that for later.

⁴⁸ Recall Augustine's humorous remark in this connection.

Problem: If God is perfect and unchanging (as God is often said to be), what sense does it make to say that God is in time?

It considerations of this kind that motivate the timeless view of God.

But we are first interested to consider the view that reality in general is eternal. And, as we just noted, this category has two variants. These two variants are actually quite distinct, at least as typically understood. Indeed, as ordinarily understood, they are mutually exclusive. So it is unfortunate, and generative of confusion, that the same term *eternal* is applied to both.

Reality as Timelessly Eternal (Timeless)

Let us begin with a brief account of the theory that reality in general is timelessly eternal (or timeless being). In Western philosophy, the first well-known exponent of this position is Parmenides. We know of Parmenides from some relatively brief surviving writings of a rather mystical character, and from representations of his view in some of Plato's dialogues, one of which bears Parmenides' name. The teaching for which he is most famous is *only being, not becoming, is real*. Parmenides offers various reasons for embracing this view. Meanwhile, his fellow Eleatic, the famous Zeno, provides *reductio* arguments in opposition to the contrasting view that movement and change are real. Much has been written in criticism of these arguments, and in the opinion of some, they have been thoroughly debunked. But many of these criticisms miss the point, and in one way or another beg the question in favor of their opposing side. In truth, the outlook of Parmenides and Zeno remains a powerful challenge to some of our most general and fundamental common-sense views of the nature of reality. The phenomena of

movement and change, so pervasive in our ordinary experience, remain problematic on common-sense assumptions concerning the character of these phenomena.

But the Parmenidean vision is not without its difficulties. Most basically, this view does not seem to accord with reality at all, at least not with our *experience* of reality. For this view to be acceptable, then, requires that we take our ordinary experience to be deeply and pervasively *illusory*. But it is difficult (and I think impossible) to explain, in terms of this doctrine, how there is even the *appearance* of movement and change (that is, the illusion).

The notion that reality is timelessly eternal is not restricted to the early Eleatics. Among modern Western philosophers, Spinoza is properly situated in this category.⁴⁹ Of course, Spinoza is considerably more detailed and sophisticated than Parmenides (or at least what we know of Parmenides). But Spinoza still presents what William James calls a *block universe* view of reality, that is, a strict determinism with no open future. According to Spinoza, even God is subject to strict necessity:

Things could not have been produced by God in any other way or in any other order than is the case.⁵⁰

Indeed, on Spinoza's account, there is no real contingency anywhere:

Since I have here shown more clearly than the midday sun that in things there is absolutely nothing by virtue of which they can be said to be "contingent," I now wish to explain briefly what we should understand by "contingent"; but I must first deal with "necessary" and "impossible." A thing is termed "necessary" either by reason of its essence or by reason of its cause. For a thing's existence necessarily follows either from its essence and definition or from a given efficient

⁴⁹ Although some of his votaries will disagree.

⁵⁰ Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part I, Proposition 33, p. 235.

cause. Again, it is for these same reasons that a thing is termed “impossible”—that is, either because its essence or definition involves a contradiction or because there is no external cause determined to bring it into existence. But a thing is termed “contingent” for no other reason than the deficiency of our knowledge.... So we term it either “contingent” or “possible”.⁵¹

James thinks that absolute idealism is stuck with the block-universe view as well, even the version of this that Josiah Royce calls *objective* idealism. But of course, Royce disagrees, and argues otherwise.⁵² Royce embraces the standard view that God is *omniscient*, and that this means that God has knowledge of the whole temporal extent of reality, including what we call the *future*, but, as Royce insightfully insists, this is “ill-called divine *foreknowledge*.”⁵³

Meanwhile, contemporary physics, in one of its major expressions, seems to entail the view that reality is timelessly eternal. I refer, of course, to Einstein’s theories of relativity. The theory of time generally associated with relativity theory is often called “four-dimensionalism”. According to this view, although time remains as a dimension of reality, there is no real movement or change in the commonsense understanding of these things; everything timelessly exists in its own spacetime location in the spacetime manifold. Many contemporary physicists happily embrace the “block universe” designation for this view. They use this term, not as a pejorative, as did James, but as an ostensibly neutral descriptive title. Insofar as they are operating as physicists and not philosophers, they ignore the problematic implications that this picture of reality has for freedom, ethics, and meaning.

⁵¹ Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part I, Proposition 33, Scholium 1, p. 236.

⁵² Although the view that I am developing here goes a good way beyond Royce, Royce was a significant early influence on my philosophy, and he still has a special place in my heart for the important insights I gleaned from him. He remains worthy of serious study, and I am gladdened that a small but vibrant community has recently come together to promote this.

⁵³ Josiah Royce, *The World and the Individual*, “The Temporal and the Eternal”.

In addition to these practical concerns, the theory that reality is timelessly eternal faces some serious theoretical challenges, at least in its basic or pure form, such as we are treating it here. But it also has some powerful motivations and strong points in its favor. Among these is its ability to provide a reasonable reply to the mystery of existence: if reality is timelessly eternal, then there is no issue of it coming or going, arising or ceasing. There is, therefore, never an issue of it *not* existing.⁵⁴

The theory that reality is timelessly eternal is deficient and one-sided in its basic form, and requires significant emendation if it is to be viable. Even so, it does point to a deep truth.

Reality as Everlasting (Everlastingly Eternal)

Next to consider is the theory that reality in general is *everlasting*. As we indicated, the term *eternal* is often applied to this view as well. I think it best to avoid the term *eternal* for the present theory. But the term *everlasting* is itself not without its shortcomings. Ordinarily, this term designates the view that reality is both beginningless and endless. But the basic significance of the term is such that its ordinary usage is also compatible with the view that reality had a beginning, but, from that beginning, lasts forever. We exclude cases of this kind here, having already included them under Spenser's categories of *self-created* and *created by an outside power*, of which they are compatible variants. Obviously, these cases suppose very different bases of reality than does the case at issue here, and we have already indicated the difficulties respectively associated with each of them.

In Western philosophy, Heraclitus is the first well-known exponent of the view that reality is everlasting (or endless becoming). As with Parmenides, we know of Heraclitus from

⁵⁴ We shall develop this point when we express and defend our preferred position.

some relatively brief surviving writings of a mystical character. Heraclitus' view is also represented in the writings of Aristotle. Heraclitus is generally presented as a partisan of *becoming* in contrast to *being*, even though some authorities on Heraclitus insist that he actually had a more balanced and nuanced view. But this historical issue is beside the point here. Heraclitus' most famous remark is that one cannot step into the same river twice. By this he meant that a river, like everything else, is constantly changing; everything is in a state of flux. According to Aristotle, Heraclitus' associate Cratylus, not to be outdone, contended that one cannot even step into the same river *once*.

Among modern Western philosophers, Hume has defended the position that there is no difficulty in supposing that reality is beginningless and groundless:

...in tracing an eternal succession of objects it seems absurd to inquire for a general cause or first author. How can anything that exists from eternity have a cause, since that relation implies a priority in time and a beginning of existence?

In such a chain, too, or succession of objects, each part is caused by that which preceded it, and causes that which succeeds it. Where then is the difficulty? But the *whole*, you say, wants a cause. I answer that the uniting of these parts into a whole, like the uniting of several distinct countries into one kingdom, or several distinct members into one body, is performed merely by an arbitrary act of the mind, and has no influence on the nature of things. Did I show you the particular causes of each individual in a collection of twenty particles of matter, I should think it very unreasonable should you afterwards ask me what

was the cause of the whole twenty. This is sufficiently explained in explaining the cause of the parts.⁵⁵

The view that reality is constantly changing, a concomitant of the theory that reality is everlasting, accords much better with ordinary experience and common sense than does the view that reality is timeless. But the theory that reality is everlasting and uncreated has some familiar difficulties. Among them is the problem of supposing that an infinite amount of time has *elapsed*. This problem is a consequence of the absurdity of supposing that an actual infinite series has been generated through a process of *successive accumulation*.⁵⁶ It is for this reason that some have thought that *endlessness* (which is a *potential* infinite in the direction of the future) is not problematic in the way that *beginninglessness* (which is an *actual* infinite in the direction of the past) is. But whether the temporal direction makes a difference is dependent upon one's theory of time and temporality. The theory that reality is *everlasting*, as we are treating it here, is associated with the notion of temporal *flow* or *passage*. It is the supposition that time *elapses* that makes the notion of an infinite reach of time in the direction of the past problematic. One might endorse a different theory of time and still maintain that reality is temporally unlimited in the direction of the past (or the future, or both).⁵⁷

Another significant difficulty for the theory that reality is everlasting and uncreated is the problem of (unresolved) contingency. The classic statement of this challenge is found in Leibniz:

...to whatever earlier state you go back, you never find in it the complete reason of things, that is to say, the reason why there exists any world and why this world

⁵⁵ David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, edited by Richard H. Popkin, Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis and Cambridge, second edition, 1998 [1980], Part IX, p. 56.

⁵⁶ Cf. Kant's "successive synthesis".

⁵⁷ A detailed account of time and the temporal character of reality is a key component of our discussion in the succeeding chapter ("The Nature of Reality").

rather than some other.... You may indeed suppose the world eternal; but as you suppose only a succession of states, in none of which do you find the sufficient reason.... From this it is manifest that even by supposing the eternity of the world, we cannot escape the ultimate extramundane reason of things, that is to say, God.⁵⁸

This difficulty is also nicely expressed by Kant:

Everywhere we see a chain of effects and causes, of ends and means, a regularity in origination and dissolution. Nothing has of itself come into the condition in which we find it to exist, but always points to something else as its cause, while this in turn commits us to repetition of the same enquiry. The whole universe must thus sink into the abyss of nothingness, unless, over and above the infinite chain of contingencies, we assume something to support it—something which is original and independently self-subsistent, and which as the cause of the origin of the universe secures also at the same time its continuance.⁵⁹

Copleston reiterates the point in his famous debate with Bertrand Russell:

...what we call the world consists simply of contingent beings. That is, of beings no one of which can account for its own existence.... I say that if there were no necessary being, no being which must exist and cannot not-exist, nothing would exist. The infinity of the series of contingent beings, even if proved, would be

⁵⁸ Leibniz, in Leslie and Kuhn, p. 120.

⁵⁹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, translated by Norman Kemp Smith, A622/B650. The earlier portion of this passage echoes a central theme of Buddhist philosophy, namely, *pratitya-samutpada* (Sanskrit: “dependent origination”).

irrelevant. Something does exist; therefore, there must be something which accounts for this fact, a being which is outside the series of contingent beings.⁶⁰

The problem of contingency is rendered virulent by the same assumption that engenders the problematic character of the notion of an infinite reach of time in the direction of past, namely, the assumption that time *elapses*. But any view that rejects this assumption is not properly included in this category.

A final difficulty that we here mention and emphasize is that the theory that reality is everlasting is unable to provide a satisfactory and satisfying reply to the mystery of existence. This point is closely related to the problem of contingency, and is, indeed, a consequence of it. The best response to the mystery that can be given from this perspective is that reality has *always* existed, and therefore there is no issue of having to explain how it *came into* existence. Each portion of reality is, on this view, *contingent*, but each portion has its ground or sufficient reason in its antecedent cause. As to the series itself, or *the whole of reality*, these are said to be no more than abstract designations for the parts considered collectively.⁶¹ As James says, we consider reality *one* whenever we “fling the term universe at it”, but there may be no good reason to suppose that this “unity” is anything more than a conceptual collection of elements. On this view, it is the *parts* or *elements* that are supposed real, or taken to be the primary reality. This view may endorse some form of *atomism*, or it may decline to take a position concerning the ultimate basis of reality. Many find this view adequate. I do not.

The foregoing considerations, individually and collectively, are fatal to the view that reality is everlastingly eternal, at least in the standard form presented here (that is, the view that reality is a strung-along affair of constant passage). Even so, and despite these shortcomings, the

⁶⁰ Copleston, in Leslie and Kuhn, p. 55.

⁶¹ Refer to the previous quotation from Hume for a classic statement of this orientation. This is the *bottom-up* approach to reality. The truth is very nearly the opposite.

theory that reality is everlasting does have some significant virtues. For one, this theory avoids the absurd alternative of supposing that reality just arose from nothing some finite time ago with no basis whatsoever. Moreover, the notion that reality is *beginningless* may well be true. Finally, this theory embraces a commonsense understanding of time, which, although in certain respects importantly mistaken, nonetheless points to an important feature of the temporal character of reality, a feature that any viable theory of reality must preserve.⁶²

Reality as a Created World and an Eternal Creator (Dualistic Theism)

We have now to consider a more sophisticated version of the theory that the world stands in a relation of dependence to an external source or creator. We earlier dismissed the crude form of this reply to the mystery of existence for the reason that it merely defers the question rather than answering it. But we may seem to be driven back to invoking God by the problem of contingency, if not as an adequate answer to the mystery of existence, at least as a way to account for the apparently contingent world.⁶³ In any event, an exploration of the motives and virtues of this approach may point the way to a solution to the mystery of existence and to a deeper understanding of the nature of reality.

To illustrate the motivation for this approach, I recall a midnight discussion I once had with a coworker while searching for endangered black-footed ferrets with the U. S. Forrest Service on the eastern plains of Wyoming. I was contending that the existence of the world requires some kind of explanation, and that the existence God provides this. “Well, what about God,” my associate asked. My thought at the time was that the existence of God is not puzzling

⁶² As the physicists say, we must “save the phenomenon”.

⁶³ Leibniz famously makes this case.

in the way that the existence of the world is. Although I did not have the words for it then, my supposition was that the world is *contingent* in a way that God is *not*. This is, in essence, the more sophisticated version of the theistic reply. The world is contingent, and thus dependent upon an external ground, God. But God is *not* contingent; God is *necessary* (God *necessarily* exists).⁶⁴

This theory has the significant virtue that it is able to offer a reasonable reply to the mystery of existence: the world exists because God created (or grounds) it, and God exists because God *necessarily* exists. If it is asked why God necessarily exists, the reply is, because God is *eternal*.⁶⁵ But this had better not be interpreted as eternal in the sense of *everlasting*, otherwise the problem of contingency simply recurs for God, and there is no gain over the simpler view that the world itself exists because it is everlasting.

This advantage notwithstanding, the theistic reply has momentous difficulties. We indicated some of these earlier in this section, and we need not rehearse them here. We here mention only the problem of evil. This issue alone is sufficient to pretty well decisively discredit the theistic view, at least in any crudely *dualistic* form.⁶⁶ But it is the *dualistic* form of theism upon which this approach depends. Of course, Leibniz's point that we see but a small portion of reality is an important one, and should be born in mind. But in this instance, I think that we see enough. I here recall Santayana's paraphrase of James:

⁶⁴ For a lucid contemporary expression of this view, see Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, 2004, portions reprinted in Leslie and Kuhn, pp. 147-153. Swinburne's notion of *factually necessary existence* (p. 149) is significant.

⁶⁵ There are actually a variety of ways of interpreting and justifying the supposed necessity of God. But this is beside the point for now.

⁶⁶ By "crudely dualistic", I mean the view that God and world are different realms of reality that stand in a decidedly asymmetric relationship of priority and dependence: the world is supposed to be dependent upon God, while God is supposed to be independent of the world. This view naturally has various correlates that need not be mentioned here.

As William James put it, in his picturesque manner, if at the last day all creation was shouting hallelujah and there remained one cockroach with an unrequited love, *that* would spoil the universal harmony.... The existence of any evil anywhere at any time absolutely ruins a total optimism.⁶⁷

The point in the present context is that we need not presume that evil pervades all time and space for there to be a problem. Perhaps it is localized to our own immediate neighborhood.

Nonetheless, that would be enough, and indeed more than enough, to establish the problem of evil for dualistic theism. In the face of this challenge, I think the only recourse for the dualistic theist is to suppose that we are unable to make any reasonable judgments in this sphere at all.

But if this is so, we may as well take up the way of Diogenes the Cynic, and not trouble ourselves with the struggle and toil of philosophy.

Despite this fatal shortcoming, and despite its other difficulties, the sophisticated version of dualistic theism has some important lessons to teach us. In order to provide a satisfactory reply to the mystery of existence, something must be self-grounded and *necessary*. The sophisticated version of dualistic theism has this feature. Of course, the theory that reality is timelessly eternal has this feature as well, but this latter view, in its standard form, does not adequately account for the *temporal* character of reality; pure timeless being, with no temporal aspect, is untenable. Dualistic theism has the virtue of indicating that reality is *both* temporal *and* eternal in aspect. But it errs in supposing these aspects to be altogether different *realms*: the timelessly eternal uncreated realm of *God*, on the one hand, and the temporal created *world*, on the other. What is needed is a theory that explains both the temporal and the eternal aspects of reality, without resorting to this dualistic maneuver with its attendant difficulties.

⁶⁷ George Santayana, *Character and Opinion in the United States*, p. 107.

Summary and Review

We have now provided what I take to be an adequate review of the major classes of theories concerning the basis of reality, at least for our present purposes. And we have given indication of what each of these can say in response to the mystery of existence. None of these theories, in the form in which I have expressed them here, furnishes a fully satisfactory account of the basis of reality. And yet, we have provided a reasonably comprehensive inventory of the field, at least in broad outline, and we have indicated that some of these do have a reasonable response to the mystery of existence.

Recalling Spenser's very broad tripartite classification, we can now say in summary that two of the three suggestions, namely *self-created* and *created by an outside power*, can be dismissed as unworthy of further consideration (at least in their crude or straightforward forms). Among other defects, neither of these, in its crude form, can provide a proper reply to the mystery of existence. Meanwhile, the sophisticated version of dualistic theism, although able to provide a reasonable response to the mystery of existence, is rejected on other grounds. These grounds include subtle points about the difficulty involved in supposing a connection between realms that are, by hypothesis, radically opposed in character, and the straightforward point regarding the particularly virulent form of the problem of evil to which this view is subject.

This leaves just one category, the claim that the world is *eternal*. This category includes two views that, *prima facie* at least, are quite distinct, and indeed, mutually exclusive. We have indicated good reason to reject the view that reality is *everlasting* in the sense of an *endless becoming* with no external or final ground. Among other defects, this view has no proper reply to the mystery of existence. This just leaves the notion of a *timelessly eternal* reality. This view

can indeed provide a proper reply to the mystery of existence, but this view is altogether incongruous with ordinary experience and common sense, and, in its crude form at least, cannot be harmonized with these things.

So we seem to have reached another impasse. What are our options? Well, maybe there's just no solution at all; maybe "it's a mystery" is the only true thing we can say concerning the ultimate basis of reality. Those who find this conclusion untidy may set about denying the legitimacy of the question. But perhaps Spenser's list is not exhaustive—perhaps there is some *fourth*, hitherto unrecognized, category. Or perhaps what is needed is some new *sub*category, a theory that could reasonably be included under one of the three broad headings, but novel in its specifics.

I think that the theory of reality that I am introducing here is properly-enough classed under Spenser's category of *eternal*. But it is significantly distinct from both of the versions that we have hitherto outlined. Like the account of the *timelessly* eternal, it is able to provide a proper reply to the mystery of existence. Like the account of the *everlastingly* eternal, it insists that reality itself is temporal in character, and that the essential temporal features of reality are not mere illusions.

CHAPTER 4

TIME AND REALITY

Introduction:

The Transtemporal Totality and the Open Future

For some time now, I have maintained that although the universe is properly understood to be a *transtemporal totality*, and is, in this sense, *eternal*, it nonetheless remains true that the future is *open*, that the future is not yet settled as to its specific character.

So I have maintained, and so I continue to maintain, but I am not convinced that I have won any converts yet.

It is objected that my assertions in this connection are *inconsistent*, for—so the charge runs—if it is true that the universe is eternal in the way that I affirm, then the future cannot be open in any significant sense. Or it is supposed that I am simply endorsing a version of some already established theory, usually the so-called *growing-block* theory, with which my view does share certain important features.

My chief aim here is to explain why the notion of a transtemporal totality is consistent with that of an open future.

To this end, I first state, as clearly and persuasively as I can, the basis for the charge of inconsistency just indicated. I then offer a refutation of this charge, endeavoring to reveal the

source of the misunderstanding that generates the charge. Finally, I contrast my view in this connection with some familiar theories, indicating commonalities and differences.

The Charge of Inconsistency

I believe that it will be helpful to begin with a formal statement of the argument for the charge of inconsistency. I know that this sort of analysis can be a bit tedious, but given the difficulty in making things clear in this connection, I think that it will be worth it. It will allow us to show very specifically where certain disagreements lie.

- P₁ The universe is a transtemporal totality.
- P₂ If the universe is a transtemporal totality, then the universe is determinate.
- P₃ If the universe is determinate, then all temporal portions of the universe are determinate.
- P₄ If all temporal portions of the universe are determinate, then the future is determinate.
- P₅ If the future is determinate, then the future is not open.
- C Therefore, the future is not open.

This is obviously a valid deduction. Moreover, the foregoing set of premises also provides a straightforward basis for the further implication that *if the universe is a transtemporal totality, then the future is not open*. Thus, if I am to refute this argument for inconsistency, I must find fault with at least one of the included premises. Let us continue, then, by briefly explicating and evaluating each of these premises in turn.

Premise 1 states that *the universe is a transtemporal totality*. This I assert to be true.

Although I believe that this premise is well justified, let us simply assume it here.

In saying that the universe is a transtemporal totality, I mean to imply that the universe is a spatiotemporally extended unity comprising the whole of reality, or, as it is sometimes called, a *spacetime manifold*, or, as I have dubbed it, a *universal plexus*. Since the universe is not always conceived in this way, I am in the habit (as noted previously) of referring to this reality as *the Totality*, with a capital *T*. The Totality is *eternal*—not, obviously, in the sense of *everlasting* (“sempiternal”), nor in the sense of *timeless* (for the Totality has a temporal dimension)—but rather, in the sense of transcending—because comprising—all (apparent) arising, abiding, and ceasing. The Totality is not itself *in* time; it is closer to the truth to say that time is within *it* (this I signal by speaking of the Totality as a *transtemporal* totality, and as *transtemporally* eternal). These characteristics entail that the Totality is also *necessary*, not in an unqualified sense, but rather, in the sense that, if the Totality *does* exist, it *must* exist (what I call *conditional necessity*). But the Totality does exist (or so I claim). Therefore, it must exist.

Having said all this, I do not think that I should be accused of providing a modest or deflationary account of premise 1.

Premise 2 states that *if the universe is a transtemporal totality, then the universe is determinate*.

Like the term ‘eternal’, the term ‘determinate’ is ambiguous. Sometimes the term ‘determinate’ means *having fixed limits or boundaries*. This is not the sense of the term that I have in mind here, for in saying that the universe is determinate, I do not mean to preclude the possibility that the universe is unlimited in its spatiotemporal extent. Rather, I mean *determinate*

in the sense of *settled* or *definite* or “just so”. Obviously, to be determinate is to *be*; determinacy entails existence. Indeed, determinacy and existence are *mutually* entailing.

As in the case of premise 1, I assert premise 2 to be true; the problem with the argument does not lie here.

Premise 3 states that if the universe is determinate, then all temporal portions of the universe are determinate.

One might suspect that there could be a fallacy of division in play here. For consider a parallel case: *If the universe is necessary, then all temporal portions of the universe are necessary.* Perhaps this assertion too might capture our intuition, but the supposed inference is fallacious. It is a specimen of the *fallacy of division*, for in this case, the attribute (necessity) is not preserved with the division.

Why is it that necessity is not preserved with the division? It is indeed true, as I have already affirmed, that the Totality is necessary. However, no *portion* of the Totality is *in itself* necessary (save the “portion” that is the Totality itself). And why is this? Because *portions of the Totality are dependent upon other portions of the Totality*,⁶⁸ and, existing only in dependence upon that which is beyond themselves, do not *inherently* (which is to say *independently*) exist. Therefore, not inherently existing, they are not *in themselves* necessary.

(This dependence of one portion of reality upon another is *ordered*, and this order of dependence is precisely the spatiotemporal continuum itself. More on this point later.)

⁶⁸ This is not (in the same way) true of those portions of the Totality that have *no limit in the direction of the past* (the earlier). However, to raise this issue in the main text above would unduly complicate the explication, and, since this issue is irrelevant to the point at hand, I there ignore it. Why is this point irrelevant to the point at hand? Because premise 3 makes a *universal* assertion (“*all* temporal portions”), so if *any* portion of the Totality is dependent, then the point stands. As we shall see, it is precisely with reference to the *future* that this detail is significant.

But perhaps it will be thought that I am, in this reply, merely begging the question, so let me say a few words more.

Nothing is *in itself* a portion of the Totality; the Totality is a seamless, although extended, unity. Things are portions of the Totality, then, only by virtue of *abstraction*. In other words, it is not as though an assortment of inherently existing *parts* are heaped together (through whatever process) in a form that we merely *call the Totality*; no, it is rather that the Totality is the only inherently existing thing, the only thing that is *necessary*, while what we call *parts* are merely *abstractions* from this whole. (I typically use the word ‘portion’, rather than ‘part’, to signal the fact that these abstracted portions do not inherently exist [and do not have absolute boundaries].) It is an error, therefore, to suppose that that which is only abstractly divisible from the Totality should have autonomous existence, and be, in this sense, *necessary*.

Of course, if the necessity that is claimed of the portions is not an *autonomous* necessity, but simply the necessity of existing *given that* the Totality exists, then there is no difficulty. Clearly, all portions of the Totality are necessary in *this* sense, for the Totality would not be the precise determinate entity that it is were any portion of it in any way other than as it actually *is*. (This implies, of course, that *we* are necessary, in this sense, to the Totality).⁶⁹

With respect to the case of *determinacy*, then, how does it stand? Is determinacy lost in the division, as is *autonomous* necessity, or is it preserved, as is *dependent* necessity? It is preserved. Why? I have said that I am understanding the term ‘determinate’ to mean something like *settled* or *definite* or “just so”. Given that the Totality exists, and therefore, that each *portion*

⁶⁹ In contrast, traditional (dualistic) theism has it that while man is dependent upon God, God is independent of man.

the Totality exists, then each portion of the Totality is *determinate*. This is a *conditional* determinacy, to be sure, but it is determinacy nonetheless.⁷⁰

Therefore, I take no issue with premise 3; indeed, I endorse it. We still have not found the source of the difficulty.

Premise 4 states that if all temporal portions of the universe are determinate, then the future is determinate.

People understand the future in different ways. Often it is supposed that the future is the future in an *unqualified* or *absolute* sense. This way of thinking is naturally associated with the view that the present is the present in an unqualified or absolute sense. (In this connection, Aristotle inquires about the *now*, asking whether there is a *single* now, or rather, *many* nows, ever and anon succeeding one another. Aristotle finds it difficult to say.)

Consistent with what I have already said concerning the character of the Totality, I maintain that the term ‘future’ is a *relational*—and, in this sense, *relative*—term. Strictly speaking, there is no *the* future, no reach of time that is *absolutely* future, nothing that is future *in itself*. What counts as future is always *relative to some given present moment*; in truth, *future* means no more than *after*—or later than—*now* (with any moment of thinking or uttering or acting being equally now to itself). Even so, following custom, I am, in this essay, speaking of *the* future. In this usage, *the future* is simply a general notion meaning *that which is not yet*. But, being a *relational* notion, this notion is meaningless without an implicit *now*—indifferently *any* now—relative to which that, which is to be after, is not yet.

Premise 4 is problematic. What reason is there to suppose premise 4 true? I think it worthwhile to express the argument formally.

⁷⁰ The immediately preceding paragraphs treat of the issue of the *relation* (of the individual to the Totality and of individuals to one another).

Based upon our assessment of premises 1 through 3, we are already in a position to declare that the antecedent of premise 4 is true, namely, that *all temporal portions of the universe are determinate*. Let this then be one of the premises in the argument for premise 4. What, then, is still needed in order to validly deduce premise 4? Only one more premise, namely, that *the future is a temporal portion of the universe*. Making this assumption yields:

P₆ All temporal portions of the universe are determinate.

P₇ The future is a temporal portion of the universe.

C Therefore, the future is determinate.

This argument illustrates the fact that premise 4 can be deduced from its own antecedent by conditional proof, *provided the assumption of premise 7, that the future is a temporal portion of the universe*.

These are valid deductions, and I have already declared that premise 6, that *all temporal portions of the universe are determinate*, is true. Thus, if one is to properly deny the conclusion that *the future is determinate*, then one must find fault with premise 7, that *the future is a temporal portion of the universe*, by showing it to be either false or meaningless. We shall explore this possibility in Section II. Before turning to this task, however, let us round out the present discussion by giving some attention to the final premise of the main argument for inconsistency.

Premise 5 states that if the future is determinate, then the future is not open. Premise 5 is problematic. Here is one way—and a reasonable way—of interpreting this premise and arguing for its truth:

To say that the future is *open* is to say that there is *more than one way* that the future could turn out to be (P₈). But if the future is *determinate*, that is, *settled* or *definite* or “just so”, then there is *only one way* that the future could turn out to be (P₉). Therefore, if the future is determinate, then the future is not open (C). Accordingly, premise 5 is true.

As I say, this is a reasonable way of interpreting and assessing premise 5. But is its not the only way. Indeed, as I shall explain in the next section, there is an interpretation of premise 5, also reasonable, in which premise 5 turns out to be *false*. Before turning to this other interpretation, however, let us consider just briefly some further preparatory matters.

What are the implications of the consequent of premise 5? If the future is not open, does this mean that the future is *fated*? In this connection, Alan Rhoda provides a very helpful and revealing typology of the different bases for fatalism, and some corresponding ways that a fatalistic conclusion could be evaded.⁷¹ As Rhoda explains, a *settled* future (that is, a future that is not open) does not, of itself, entail a *fated* future.

In asserting that the universe is a transtemporal totality, the issue to which my view might be supposed to be subject is what Rhoda calls *ontic* fatalism. According to Rhoda, the road to ontic fatalism begins with the claim that there is “a complete, non-branching series of future events”. The assertion that the universe is a transtemporal totality—without further explanation—may seem to entail this picture. In contrast, there should be no impression that my approach is liable to the other roads to fatalism that Rhoda identifies. For instance, in denying strict causal determinism, my view is not subject to *causal* fatalism, and in denying the *dualistic* view of God and creation, my view is not subject to any sort of *theistic/theological* fatalism (here Rhoda identifies two varieties, the *epistemic* and the *providential*). Therefore, if my view escapes the ontic road to fatalism, then my view escapes fatalism altogether.

⁷¹ Alan Rhoda, “The Roads to Fatalism”.

I suspect that Rhoda and others familiar with his classification scheme may be inclined to class my view under the category of the “settled-future response” (for escaping fatalistic conclusions). I would not be *altogether* unhappy with this assessment, but I do believe that it is closer to the truth to say that my view is a hitherto unidentified (and hence, by Rhoda, unclassified) version of the “open-future response”. In this latter category, Rhoda lists *presentism* and the *growing-block theory*, both of which I reject. Rhoda also lists in this category (citing McCall) the view that *multiple concrete causally possible futures exist*. Although I am sympathetic with the multiple-worlds interpretation of quantum mechanics, I am not, in the present discussion, assuming the reality of multiple concrete temporal branches. I intend what I say here to hold good even if this is not the case.

The difficulty with premise 5 is, in part, a consequence of ambiguity in its key terms (the terms ‘determinate’, ‘open’, and most particularly, ‘future’). This ambiguity is manifest at different levels. For instance, there is a sense of *open* that is properly associated even with what Rhoda calls the *settled-future* response, for in this case the future *is* open in the sense of *not fated*, in the sense of *not determined ahead of time*, in the sense of *not already settled*. I think that, with reference to the way that the term ‘open’ is commonly used in the context of discussions about the future, the foregoing descriptions of the status of the future are sufficiently strong to merit the use of the term. Perhaps this usage is to be discouraged, however, for we do want to avoid blurring the important distinction nicely explicated by Rhoda. Nevertheless, it is sure that the view that I advocate recognizes that the future is open in at least this more modest sense, and perhaps this is enough for practical purposes. But let us see if I cannot defend the

truth also of my claim that the future is open in a stronger sense, in a deeper sense, in a sense that is properly classed as an open-future response in Rhoda's typology.⁷²

I now turn to reveal more explicitly why the argument for inconsistency (between the notion of the Totality and the notion of an open future) fails.

Refutation of the Charge

Of the five premises included in the argument for inconsistency, I have, so far, affirmed three and declared two problematic. In order to defeat the argument for inconsistency, I must find at least one of these premises to be false or meaningless. But which one? As I have already illustrated, valid and apparently sound arguments can be made for both of them.

My response hinges on the issue of *interpretation*. I just noted that there are important ambiguities in the key terms of these premises. Related to this is the issue of the *temporal perspective* from which these premises are understood and assessed. These factors are so significant in this case that they do not merely affect subtle shades of meaning; no, they alter the very truth-values of the premises themselves. Moreover, there is, in this case, a decisive equivocation that generally goes unrecognized.

By *temporal perspective*, I mean the *when* of any locus of observation, action, judgment, *et cetera*. There are two important classes of temporal perspective, the *intratemporal* and the *transtemporal*. There are indefinitely many intratemporal perspectives, but, as I am using the

⁷² Of course, this stronger sense of openness is still not an *unqualified* openness, for reality is *continuous*. This means that the future is—even now—constrained to be continuous with the portion of the spatiotemporal continuum that precedes it, that is, the *past*. However, from this single background, many paths may seamlessly follow. (In this connection, recall William James's point [in "The Dilemma of Determinism"] that either his walking home by way of Oxford Street or his walking home by way of Divinity Avenue would flow continuously out of his present position before the fork, where and when he finds himself contemplating which way it is to be tonight. Both ways seem possible *to him*, and both ways, he believes, really *are* possible.)

term, only *one* transtemporal standpoint. Note that I speak of the transtemporal *standpoint*, for the transtemporal standpoint is not a perspective *per se*. It is not temporally situated, but rather, is inclusive of *all* time. The transtemporal standpoint is the standpoint of the Totality, and I have said enough, for our present purposes, of the nature of the Totality in my discussion of premise 1 (in Section I). Let me just re-emphasize, then, that from the transtemporal standpoint, there is no arising, abiding, or ceasing. Indeed, there is no passage or change of any kind, only *eternal presence*. It should be evident that the terms ‘past’ and ‘future’ have no meaning in this instance. (Accordingly, the Totality has no future. But it is not worried about it.)

Let us now reconsider *premise 4*, that *if all temporal portions of the universe are determinate, then the future is determinate*. With the foregoing background, what are we to make of premise 4?

The first point to note is that the antecedent of premise 4, that *all temporal portions of the universe are determinate*, makes its claim with reference to the transtemporal standpoint. (This is true also of the entirety of the first three premises of the argument for inconsistency.) What about the *consequent* of premise 4, that *the future is determinate*? Well, we just finished noting that, from the transtemporal standpoint, the notion of the future has no meaning. *The future* is a *relative* notion that is meaningful only with reference to some *intratemporal* perspective. So, can we just conclude that premise 4 is *meaningless*, and declare mission accomplished? No, I am sure that careful readers would pronounce this a mere verbal subterfuge. And they would, in the following sense, be right. For can we not say that by *the future*, as we are using the notion in this context, we mean simply *that which is future relative to us*? (or to any intratemporal perspective)? And, in so saying, can we not still intend to refer to a reach of time that is, considered *transtemporally*, simply a temporal portion of the universe? Yes, we can.

But when we do this, what is the significance of what we are saying? From which temporal perspective do we speak? Although the act of speaking is itself always an intratemporal act, in this case this intratemporal act makes reference to *the transtemporal standpoint*. On this interpretation, then, both the antecedent and the consequent of premise 4 are asserted with reference to the transtemporal standpoint. So interpreted, premise 4 is *true*.

But have we really said anything about the *future*? No! It is, rather, as though we had said, not premise 4 (in its more natural interpretation), but instead: “If all temporal portions of the universe are determinate, then *this latter temporal portion of the universe* is determinate.” This claim, although of course true, is entirely aloof to any reference to the future *per se* at all. Let us say that it is about the “future”, where we put the term ‘future’ in quotes. Therefore, any further claims that follow from premise 4, interpreted in this fashion, will not be about the future *per se* either. They will be about the “future”. Let us call this notion of future “the future (TTC)”, for *transtemporally considered*. The contrast to the future (TTC)—what I just called “the future *per se*”—is the future *intratemporally* considered. Let us call this “the future (ITC)”.

Is there a way to interpret premise 4 from an *intratemporal* perspective? Yes, there is. In this instance, the antecedent remains, of course, a transtemporal statement, but the consequent is interpreted intratemporally. And what does this yield? It yields the assertion that *if all temporal portions of the universe are determinate* (same as before), *then the future (ITC) is determinate*. And is this true? No! Indeed, from this perspective, *the future does not even exist yet* and, *a fortiori*, is *not determinate yet*.

So, intratemporally considered, premise 4 is *false*, and so, with premise 4 intratemporally considered, the argument for inconsistency is *not sound*. Therefore, the charge that the notion of the Totality is inconsistent with the notion of an open future is refuted, so long as

by *an open future*, one means *an open future (ITC)*. And, in speaking of the *future*, it is both more natural and more usual to mean the future (*ITC*).

This essentially completes my primary mission articulated at the outset, but maybe just a few words more, by way of explanation, will be useful.

The first question that might be raised against this is: *Why should I give precedence to the latter interpretation, the intratemporal interpretation?* The answer is that *I do not*; I believe that the two perspectives are equally important to understanding reality as it is. Moreover, in declaring at the outset that the universe is a transtemporal totality, I have, by implication, already committed myself to the view that the future (*TTC*) is determinate, and, in this sense, not open. But this is an implication that I in no way spurn; indeed, this is the way that I believe things *are*. However—and this is a key point—the transtemporal standpoint is not a perspective that considers the future *as future*. It is not a *temporally situated* perspective, and only with reference to a temporally situated perspective is there a future at all. Therefore, the intratemporal perspective is important too. And, I maintain, it is the future (*ITC*) that we expect premise 4 to be about. Indeed, I think that, in certain cases, there is an insidious—because unrecognized—*equivocation* between these two senses of *future*. What results is that the validity and soundness of the argument for inconsistency—insofar as it is made with reference to the future (*TTC*)—is mistaken for the validity and soundness of the argument with reference to the future (*ITC*).

I do not think that Rhoda makes this error, so perhaps my point is—*vis-à-vis* Rhoda—in some measure a *verbal* issue. But not entirely.

Although I reject some aspects of the *A*-theory, I do believe that proponents of the *A*-theory are pointing to a critically important truth when they insist upon the special significance of the temporal notions of *past* and *future*. To my view, this special significance falls not to the

terms *themselves*, for I do believe, consonant with the *B*-theory, that these terms are convertible into the *B*-series terms ‘earlier-than’ and ‘later-than’, so long as it is recognized that these terms require an intratemporal reference. The point about which the *A*-theorists are right, however, is that the notions of *the past* and *the future* indicate something of great ontological significance. ***The present is dependent upon the past, but it is not dependent upon the future.*** This can be indicated just as well, and in a way that is more obviously general, by saying that ***the later is dependent upon the earlier, but the earlier is not dependent upon the later.*** In either way of its expression, the essential point remains the same: *there is a crucially important directionality to the spatiotemporal continuum.*⁷³ The basis for this—the basis for the directionality of time—is *this order of dependence.*⁷⁴ This means that, from the perspective of any intratemporal moment, *the past could not be other than it is* (for were the past other than it is, this moment, being *dependent* upon the past, would not exist). The case is very different with respect to the future. Indeed, from the perspective of any intratemporal moment, *the future does not exist.*⁷⁵

This last claim may sound radical, for it implies that the notion of existence is a *relative* notion. Perhaps, however, it will seem less radical when it is remembered that common speech points, in its own way, to this temporal relativity of the notion of existence with such expressions as “does not exist *yet*” and “does not exist *now*, but will exist *later*”. The relativity of the notion of existence that I here assert is just the relativity that is indicated by such expressions; it is simply the relativity of the notion of existence *with reference to temporal perspective*. Of course, common belief understands this, not as *the temporal relativity of the notion of existence*, but rather, as *a supposed alteration of the existential status of things*. Even so, the feature of

⁷³ Of course, not everyone would express this point in terms of a spatiotemporal *continuum*.

⁷⁴ See my “The Basis for the Directionality of Time”, *Chronos*, Volume IX, 2008.

⁷⁵ If it is objected that, by my own admission, there is a sense in which the future *does* exist, my reply is: Yes, from the transtemporal standpoint, the future (TTC) exists, but I am here speaking, from the *intratemporal* perspective, of the future (ITC).

reality that these respective approaches express, in their various ways, is the same. This feature of reality is notoriously difficult to consistently characterize.⁷⁶

Finally, since determinacy goes with existence, determinacy is also, in this way, a *relative* notion. Therefore, there is no ultimate contradiction in asserting that, although the future (*TTC*) is determinate, the future (*ITC*) is *not* determinate.⁷⁷

Let us now, as our last move, reconsider *premise 5*, that *if the future is determinate, then the future is not open*.

In this case, the term ‘future’—and with it, the suggestion of an intratemporal perspective—appears in both the antecedent and the consequent. Even so, as in the case of *premise 4*, we can still render a transtemporal interpretation of the whole of *premise 5*, yielding: *if the future (TTC) is determinate, then the future (TTC) is not open*. So interpreted, *premise 5* is *true*. Along with what has already been said of the first four premises, this means that, transtemporally considered, *all* of the premises of the argument for inconsistency are *true*. Therefore, being valid, the argument for inconsistency, *interpreted transtemporally*, is *sound*. Therefore, if the universe is a transtemporal totality, then the future (*TTC*) is not open.

The foregoing explains the strong intuition of soundness that many of us feel when we encounter the argument for inconsistency. But as should be evident by now, the foregoing demonstration of soundness, such as it is, does not defeat my central contention in this essay.

What if *premise 5* is interpreted, in whole or in part, from an *intratemporal* perspective? In this instance, the situation is a bit complicated, for there are several possible permutations. Even so, I must be brief. In short, if the intratemporal perspective is maintained throughout (and I think that this is the most natural interpretation), then the premise is *true*. But, in this case, the

⁷⁶ Cf. McTaggart. Also, cf. Nagarjuna’s *tetralemma*.

⁷⁷ My thanks to Prof. John Lachs in this connection (as in all things) for helpful discussions regarding the issue of the determinacy of the future.

antecedent, that *the future (ITC) is determinate*, is *false* (this was the reason for the failure of premise 4), so the consequent is not entailed. Meanwhile, if the intratemporal perspective is *not* maintained throughout, if, for instance, the antecedent is interpreted *transtemporally*, then the antecedent is *true*, but, in this case, the premise is *false*: it is *not* the case that *if the future (TTC) is determinate, then the future (ITC) is not open*. The final possible permutation is: *if the future (ITC) is determinate, then the future (TTC) is not open*. In this case, the premise is *true* but the antecedent is *false* (again, this was the reason for the failure of premise 4), so the consequent is not entailed.

In sum, any interpretation of premise 5 made, in whole or in part, from an intratemporal perspective issues in a failure of entailment of the consequent, either through the falsehood of the premise, or through the falsehood of the antecedent. In any case, the argument for inconsistency is defeated.

I have now shown that the argument for inconsistency can be refuted either by way of premise 4 or by way of premise 5, provided that the respective premise is interpreted (even partially) from an intratemporal perspective. I have also indicated why an intratemporal interpretation of these premises is generally the fitting interpretation. Therefore, I have now demonstrated that the argument for inconsistency is no obstacle to my contention that the notion of the transtemporal Totality is consistent with the notion of an open future.

Here is the bottom line:

From the *transtemporal* standpoint, what is future *relative to some intratemporal perspective* is *not open*, but of course, from the transtemporal standpoint, *there is no future*, open or otherwise. Thus, to inquire whether the future is open from the transtemporal standpoint is a misplaced question. Meanwhile, from any perspective for which there *is* a future, and from

which it is therefore meaningful to inquire about the status of the future—that is, from any *intratemporal* perspective—the future is *open*.

CHAPTER 5

DETERMINISM AND FREEDOM

Spinoza and Hume on the Issue of Human Freedom

The issue of human freedom is among the perennial concerns of philosophy. Hume speaks of one aspect of this issue as "...the most contentious question, of metaphysics, the most contentious science..."⁷⁸ Of course, the term 'freedom' is used in a variety of contexts, and has correspondingly different significations. In ordinary discourse, the term 'freedom' frequently appears in political contexts, where it generally refers to the absence of political oppression. In many philosophical discussions of freedom, however, the term 'freedom' is used in a rather different sense, pertaining to what is often called "free will." Here we are concerned with human freedom in both these and other senses.

One of the significant philosophical controversies concerning human freedom is sometimes referred to as the "free will versus determinism" debate. This way of construing the controversy is unfortunate, for it confounds two oppositions that are better kept separate. Let us clearly distinguish, then, the opposition between *determinism* and *indeterminism*, on the one hand, and that between *freedom* and *constraint*, on the other.

The opposition between determinism and indeterminism pertains to the nature of the connection that is supposed to exist between earlier and later portions of the temporal sequence.

⁷⁸ David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Hackett edition, p. 41.

Determinists maintain that the specific character of later portions of the temporal sequence is strictly fixed by the character of earlier portions. Ordinarily, this rigid connection is said to be effected by *causation*. Often cited as an exemplar of this doctrine is Pierre Laplace's famous remark that if a powerful intelligence were informed of the exact position and momentum of every particle in the universe at any given moment, this intelligence would know with certainty the state of things at every other moment, past or future. Indeterminists, in contrast, deny the claim of determinism. Stated positively, indeterminism is the view that the future is "open", that more than one alternative future is genuinely possible. The related term 'fatalism', although sometimes used simply as a synonym of 'determinism', is, more generally, the notion that certain events are destined to occur, regardless of the actions that might be taken prior to their occurrence. In this latter sense, fatalism is compatible with *indeterminism*, for the claim, in this instance, is only that *certain events* will necessarily or inevitably occur, not that the entire temporal sequence is always already a settled fact.

The opposition between freedom and constraint is less clear-cut. This is in part because, as we just indicated, the term 'freedom' is used in different senses in both common and technical discourse. Moreover, as James notes, the term 'freedom' is a *eulogistic* word. It is not surprising, then, that philosophers of quite diverse theoretical orientations proclaim the truth of freedom, and so far agree, at least nominally, on this score.⁷⁹ Any proposed stipulative definition of 'freedom' is, therefore, liable to be prejudicial to one theoretical orientation or another. Of course, freedom and constraint can each be defined as the negation of the other, but this, by itself, does not get us too far. One of our aims in the forthcoming discussion is to elucidate some

⁷⁹ William James, "The Dilemma of Determinism", in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, Dover, p. 149.

of the varying senses in which this familiar but ambiguous opposition has been understood and interpreted. Accordingly, we leave this opposition merely named for now.

Those who speak of the free will versus determinism debate sometimes suppose that determinism *entails* constraint, at least in some relevantly important sense, and that, therefore, the existence of human freedom, in its corresponding sense, requires the truth of *indeterminism*.⁸⁰ Against this view, several prominent philosophers have maintained that freedom and determinism are *compatible*.⁸¹ Although opposed in many ways in both method and doctrine, Spinoza and Hume are both compatibilists in this sense. It is thus interesting and instructive to compare their respective approaches to the issue of human freedom.

In what follows, we briefly review Hume on human freedom, then Spinoza, and then do some comparison and evaluation of these two figures.

Hume's Approach to Human Freedom

Hume is, generally speaking, the most resolutely empirical and skeptical of the principal modern Empiricists. Hume is famous for his insistence that we have no legitimate justification for asserting that there is a *necessary connection* between objects or events in supposed causal relation. In contrast, some of Hume's predecessors and contemporaries understood causation as a kind of *force* or *power*, a force or power that acts of *necessity*. It is this account of causation that Hume denies. Based upon his empiricist principles, and especially, upon his claim that

⁸⁰ Insofar as the term 'freedom' (or 'liberty') is used simply as a *synonym* for 'indeterminism', this is, of course, *analytically* true. There is thus an aspect of the controversy surrounding the issue of freedom that is merely *verbal*, as Hume correctly indicates (Hume states the point rather more strongly than this, as we shall see). Even so, *pace* Hume, those who assert the incompatibility of freedom and determinism generally mean (or at least *think* that they mean) something more significant than this. In any event, there are important practical considerations connected with both personal and political freedom that are by no means merely verbal in character.

⁸¹ This doctrine is, reasonably enough, often entitled "compatibilism", but this term is itself ambiguous, for it sometimes refers instead to the related doctrine that *moral responsibility* and determinism are compatible.

“...all our ideas are nothing but copies of our impressions...”,⁸² Hume maintains that the only idea that we legitimately have of causation is that which we derive from experience. In this connection, Hume says:

When we look about us towards external objects, and consider the operation of causes, we are never able, in a single instance, to discover any power or necessary connexion; any quality, which binds the effect to the cause, and renders the one an infallible consequence of the other. We only find, that the one does actually, in fact, follow the other. The impulse of one billiard-ball is attended with motion in the second. This is the whole that appears to the *outward* senses. The mind feels no sentiment or *inward* impression from this succession of objects: Consequently, there is not, in any single, particular instance of cause and effect, any thing which can suggest the idea of power or necessary connexion.⁸³

Hume concludes that:

...we have no idea of connexion or power at all, and that these words are absolutely without any meaning, when employed either in philosophical reasonings, or common life.⁸⁴

All that we see in experience is a constant conjunction between certain kinds of objects or events, and, based upon this constant conjunction and the force of habit or custom, we conclude that certain antecedent events cause certain consequent events. There is no more to causation than this.

Much of the confusion associated with the notion of causation is an artifact of an *atomistic* view of objects and events, and the associated notion that there is a dichotomy, perhaps

⁸² David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Hackett edition, p. 41.

⁸³ David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Hackett edition, p. 41.

⁸⁴ David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Hackett edition, p. 49.

even a discontinuity, between supposed causes and effects.⁸⁵ It is to bridge this supposed gap that the notion of causation as a kind of force or power is invoked. Hume, although correct insofar as he is dismissing the notion of causation as an occult power, is as much a victim of this misguided way of thinking as are his opponents. Indeed, with reference to his talk of a “succession of *objects*”, one might charge Hume with not taking his empiricism far enough. Hume seems to assume that we have direct access to objects through *experience*. It is closer to the truth to say that supposed objects are merely *theoretical posits*; in any event, objects are not immediately given empirically.⁸⁶

In the context of his discussion of liberty and necessity,⁸⁷ we find certain remarks by Hume that are difficult to reconcile with his foregoing account of causation. In this latter context, Hume says:

It is universally allowed, that matter, in all its operations, is actuated by a necessary force, and that every natural effect is so precisely determined by the energy of its cause, that no other effect, in such particular circumstances, could possibly have resulted from it.⁸⁸

Here Hume speaks of a “necessary force”, the very sort of thing that he asserted, in the previous section, that we have no idea of at all, and that is, therefore, a mere meaningless locution. How are we to take this? Perhaps Hume is not including himself as among those by whom this claim is universally allowed, or perhaps he is merely speaking here after the usual fashion, not finding

⁸⁵ Cf. the Buddhist notion of *pratitya-samutpada* (dependent origination).

⁸⁶ Cf. the Buddhist notion of *emptiness* (*shunyata*). William James seems to have something similar in mind in his “radical empiricism” and “philosophy of pure experience”.

⁸⁷ Hume treats of this issue most especially in his *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Book 2, Part 3, Section 1: “Of liberty and necessity”, Section 2: “The same subject continu’d”, and Section 3: “Of the influencing motives of the will”, and again in his *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Section 8: “Of Liberty and Necessity”. Given Hume’s remark that he would prefer to be interpreted based upon his *Enquiry*, we draw most extensively from this latter work.

⁸⁸ David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Hackett edition, p. 54.

it important in this context to be so careful with his terminology. The remark comes on the heels of what seems to be Hume's central thesis of the section, to wit:

I hope...to make it appear, that all men have ever agreed in the doctrine both of necessity and of liberty, according to any reasonable sense, which can be put on these terms; and that the whole controversy has hitherto turned merely upon words.⁸⁹

Hume does straightaway reiterate his considered doctrine on causation, saying:

Our idea...of necessity and causation arises entirely from the uniformity, observable in the operations of nature; where similar objects are constantly conjoined together, and the mind is determined by custom to infer the one from the appearance of the other. These two circumstances form the whole of that necessity, which we ascribe to matter. Beyond the constant *conjunction* of similar objects, and the consequent *inference* from one to the other, we have no notion of any necessity, or connexion.⁹⁰

In any event, Hume does seem in this context to claim that we are properly sure of the *perfect regularity* of causal relations (or “the constant conjunction of similar objects”), even though we are not sure of this by virtue of any *a priori* justification, but simply through *experience*. This is a remarkable claim for an empiricist to make, given that we never find such perfect regularity in experience. Hume acknowledges this fact (“such a uniformity in every particular, is found in no part of nature”),⁹¹ but explains it in terms of confounding factors. The bottom line seems to be that although Hume endorses a rather deflated sense of *necessity*, he nonetheless believes that

⁸⁹ David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Hackett edition, p. 54.

⁹⁰ David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Hackett edition, pp. 54-55.

⁹¹ David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Hackett edition, p. 57.

later events are strictly determined by earlier conditions, which precludes the possibility of an open future.

Hume next moves to claim that this regularity in *matter* is paralleled in *human action*, saying: "...we acknowledge a uniformity in human motives and actions as well as in the operations of body."⁹² Moreover:

...were there no uniformity in human actions, and were every experiment, which we could form of this kind, irregular and anomalous, it were impossible to collect any general observations concerning mankind; and no experience, however accurately digested by reflection, would ever serve to any purpose.⁹³

Hume speaks as though the determination of human actions were an all-or-nothing affair: either *strict determination* or *utter chaos*. This surely seems to be a false dilemma. Might there not be *general trends*, despite the lack of strict and unqualified determination? Moreover, all that is required for *probable inference* (and, on his own principles, Hume can expect nothing more with regard to matters of fact) is that there be such general trends. A certain ambivalence concerning this point appears in the text, as when Hume speaks of "a *degree* of uniformity and regularity"⁹⁴ and again of "a certain *degree* of uniformity".⁹⁵ However, it is evident in the context of these expressions that Hume is again simply acknowledging that confounding factors are often present, and that such factors can impede our ability to detect the strict determination. The appearance of irregularity is thus, for Hume, simply a consequence of our ignorance; strict determination, he seems to insist, is nonetheless operative.

⁹² David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Hackett edition, p. 56.

⁹³ David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Hackett edition, p. 56.

⁹⁴ David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Hackett edition, p. 57. [Italics added]

⁹⁵ David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Hackett edition, p. 63. [Italics added]

Having affirmed the truth of determinism, human freedom or liberty, according to Hume, is simply the ability to do what we will. Hume says:

By liberty, then, we can only mean *a power of acting or not acting, according to the determinations of the will*; that is, if we choose to remain at rest, we may; if we choose to move, we also may. Now this hypothetical liberty is universally allowed to belong to every one, who is not a prisoner and in chains.⁹⁶

Clearly, freedom conceived in *this* sense is compatible with strict determinism. Indeed, in Hume's view, it is *dependent* upon it. Moreover, Hume also claims that, despite philosophical and popular opinion to the contrary, strict determination in the sphere of human action is requisite for authentic moral culpability, and hence also for legitimate praise and blame. Did human actions not arise invariably as a consequence of character, says Hume, punishment would be neither practically efficacious nor morally sound, for the recipient of the punishment would be in no wise responsible for the actions of the perpetrator, although he be conventionally considered the same person.

A libertarian critic of Hume's conclusions in this connection would distinguish between *freedom of will*, on the one hand, and *freedom to act in accordance with will*, on the other. In his defense of the compatibility of liberty and necessity, Hume is considering liberty, that is, freedom, in the *latter* sense, not the former. From a libertarian perspective, however, this is to miss the point entirely. The libertarian is concerned with something more than Hume's *hypothetical* liberty. We consider this point further in the final section of this chapter.

⁹⁶ David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Hackett edition, p. 63.

Spinoza's Approach to Human Freedom

Spinoza's philosophical work is impressively comprehensive, systematic, and unifying. In contrast to his Rationalist predecessor Descartes, Spinoza is a monist with respect to *substance*. According to Spinoza, "there can be, or be conceived, no other substance but God."⁹⁷ Spinoza famously equates *God* and *Nature*, two notions that Western scholastic philosophy had considered quite distinct. Meanwhile, *mind* and *body*, although different *attributes*, are both attributes of the one substance *God or Nature*. *Individuals* are *modes* of this substance. Accordingly, human beings are not merely *in Nature* but are (a part) *of Nature*.⁹⁸ Spinoza derides those who believe otherwise, saying:

They appear to go so far as to conceive man in Nature as a kingdom within a kingdom. They believe that he disturbs rather than follows Nature's order, and has absolute power over his actions, and is determined by no other source than himself.⁹⁹

Moreover, since Nature is God, it is just as true to say that human beings are a part of God. This means that human perceptions and other ideas are not other than God's ideas, as follows:

...the human mind is part of the infinite intellect of God; and therefore when we say that the human mind perceives this or that, we are saying nothing else but this: that God—not insofar as he is infinite but insofar as he is explicated through the

⁹⁷ Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part I, Proposition 14, translated by Samuel Shirley, Hackett edition, p. 224.

⁹⁸ This recognition has endeared Spinoza to many environmental philosophers.

⁹⁹ Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part III, Preface, translated by Samuel Shirley, Hackett edition, p. 277. Cf. Spinoza, *Political Treatise*, Chapter 2, Section 6, translated by Samuel Shirley, Hackett edition, p. 684.

nature of the human mind, that is, insofar as he constitutes the essence of the human mind—has this or that idea.¹⁰⁰

Even so, this does not mean that supposed finite individuals are, in truth, simply *identical* to God, as is claimed, for instance, by the Upanishadic *mahavakya* (great utterance) *Tat tvam asi* (That art thou), at least as it is interpreted by Advaita (non-dual) Vedantins. Thus, although Spinoza is *monist* with respect to substance, he is a *pluralist* with respect to modes. In this way, Spinoza reconciles his monistic philosophy with the world as we know it, and provides a solution to the ancient problem of the one and the many.

According to Spinoza, although modes are dependent upon God for their being, they are nonetheless *discrete* and *concretely real*. A useful contrast to draw out the sense of this view is the Buddhist notion of *anatman* (no-abiding-self). Buddhists refer to views of Spinoza's type regarding the individual as *svabhava* doctrines (usually translated, in English, by the term 'essentialism'). It is in this sense that Spinoza, in affirming the concrete reality of individuals, is properly regarded an *essentialist*, although it should be added in the same breath that he is decidedly *not* an essentialist in one of the usual senses of this term as it is used in medieval Western philosophy. That is, Spinoza is not an essentialist in the sense of endorsing *fixed, unchanging essences* as the basis of individual identity through change. In Spinoza, this latter form of essentialism is replaced by his notion of *conatus*, the endeavor of each individual to preserve its own being.¹⁰¹ This is a decidedly different notion, in that *conatus* is *dynamic* and subject to change, while, according to the usual Western medieval notions of essence, essence is *static* and fixed. (We belabor this point here because this understanding will be important when we turn to speak more directly of Spinoza on human freedom.)

¹⁰⁰ Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part II, Proposition 11, Corollary, translated by Samuel Shirley, Hackett edition, p. 250.

¹⁰¹ Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part III, Proposition 7, translated by Samuel Shirley, Hackett edition, p. 283.

Spinoza is a strict determinist. According to Spinoza, there is no unqualified contingency: “Nothing in nature is contingent, but all things are from the necessity of the divine nature determined to exist and to act in a definite way.”¹⁰² Spinoza emphatically restates this point as follows:

...I have here shown more clearly than the midday sun that in things there is absolutely nothing by virtue of which they can be said to be “contingent”...a thing is termed “contingent” for no other reason than the deficiency of our knowledge.¹⁰³

Therefore, nothing exists except that which *necessarily* exists. Furthermore, nothing is possible except that which actually exists. There is thus, in Spinoza’s system, a collapse of the traditional modalities, in that, for Spinoza, nothing is *possible* that is not *actual*, and nothing is *actual* that is not *necessary*.

Despite the apparently unconditional and even strident denial of contingency expressed in the foregoing quoted passages and elsewhere, there are places where Spinoza seems to affirm contingency, as here: “...all particular things are contingent and perishable.”¹⁰⁴ However, Spinoza straightaway explains, in this same passage, “what is to be understood by contingency and perishability”, namely, that “we can have no adequate knowledge of their [particular things] duration”. Spinoza here references the Scholium from which we quote above, where he concludes that “...a thing is termed ‘contingent’ for no other reason than the deficiency of our knowledge.” We term a thing “contingent” or “possible”, then, simply because *we do not know*

¹⁰² Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part I, Proposition 29, translated by Samuel Shirley, Hackett edition, p. 234.

¹⁰³ Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part I, Proposition 33, Scholium 1, translated by Samuel Shirley, Hackett edition, p. 236.

¹⁰⁴ Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part II, Proposition 31, Corollary, translated by Samuel Shirley, Hackett edition, p. 263. See also Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part IV, Definitions 3 and 4, translated by Samuel Shirley, Hackett edition, p. 322.

whether it exists (and is hence necessary), on the one hand, or is impossible, on the other.¹⁰⁵

Spinoza says: "...apart from this there is no other kind of contingency."¹⁰⁶ It is this uncompromising necessitarianism that provokes writers such as William James to charge Spinoza with endorsing a "block-universe" account of reality. This attribution is controversial, however, so we shall revisit it in the final section of this chapter.

Based upon his strictly deterministic view of reality, one might suppose that Spinoza rejects the notion of human freedom,¹⁰⁷ and in a sense, he does. Spinoza says:

...men believe that they are free, precisely because they are conscious of their volitions and desires; yet concerning the causes that have determined them to desire and will they do not think, not even dream about, because they are ignorant of them.¹⁰⁸

If we believe that we are free in the sense that our volitions and desires are undetermined by anything beyond themselves, we are mistaken. Likewise, if we believe that we are free in the sense that we could do otherwise than we actually do, we are mistaken. Freedom in these and related senses is *illusory*. The illusion is a consequence of our ignorance of the "chain of causes"¹⁰⁹ that determine our volitions and desires, and that determine, likewise, our actions.

Despite Spinoza's rejection of freedom in the senses just adumbrated, however, it would be a serious error to suppose that he denies freedom outright. On the contrary, Spinoza endorses the notion of human freedom as he understands it, and gives considerable attention to its explication. Insofar as freedom is understood as the contrary of *necessity*, freedom is indeed

¹⁰⁵ Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part I, Proposition 33, Scholium 1, translated by Samuel Shirley, Hackett edition, p. 236.

¹⁰⁶ Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part II, Proposition 31, Corollary, translated by Samuel Shirley, Hackett edition, p. 263.

¹⁰⁷ Incompatibilists, at any rate, might suppose this, whether they be libertarians or hard determinists.

¹⁰⁸ Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part I, Appendix, translated by Samuel Shirley, Hackett edition, p. 239.

¹⁰⁹ Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part I, Proposition 33, Scholium 1, translated by Samuel Shirley, Hackett edition, p. 236.

impossible. However, freedom in its true and proper sense, according to Spinoza, is the contrary not of necessity but of *bondage*. Of bondage, in this sense, Spinoza says:

I assign the term “bondage” to man’s lack of power to control and check the emotions. For a man at the mercy of his emotions is not his own master but is subject to fortune, in whose power he so lies that he is often compelled, although he sees it better course, to pursue the worse.¹¹⁰

To be in bondage, then, is to lack control of one’s emotions, particularly one’s disturbing and destructive emotions. On the contrary, “...a free man is he who is guided solely by reason.”¹¹¹ This kind of freedom, according to Spinoza, is both possible and highly valuable. Accordingly, Spinoza is properly classed as a *compatibilist* with reference to determinism and human freedom, so long as it is recognized that it is freedom in this latter sense only in which they are correctly understood to be compatible.

Spinoza’s reference to the notion that a person can be “at the mercy of his emotions” and hence be “compelled, although he sees the better course, to pursue the worse” is reminiscent of the ancient Greek notion of *akrasia* (weakness of will). In this way, Spinoza is closer to Aristotle than to Plato in his assessment of the human condition vis-à-vis the relation of knowledge and action. For Spinoza, true freedom, in the sense that it is possible, is not a birthright, but a difficult achievement. It is to be achieved by mastering the passions through a deeper and more complete kind of knowledge wherein *inadequate ideas* are replaced by *adequate ideas*. However, Spinoza does not maintain that all emotions are bad; on the contrary, some emotions are good. In this connection, Spinoza distinguishes between *passive* and *active* emotions:

¹¹⁰ Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part IV, Preface, translated by Samuel Shirley, Hackett edition, p. 320.

¹¹¹ Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part IV, Proposition 68, Proof, translated by Samuel Shirley, Hackett edition, p. 355.

Desires that follow from our nature in such a way that they can be understood through it alone are those that are related to the mind insofar as the mind is conceived as consisting of adequate ideas. The other desires are related to the mind only insofar as it conceives things inadequately; and their force and increase must be defined not by human power but by the power of things external to us. So the former are rightly called active emotions, the latter passive emotions. For the former always indicate our power, the latter our weakness and fragmentary knowledge.¹¹²

This is a dense paragraph, summarizing much that is explicated in detail in preceding propositions and associated text. For our present purposes, we are concerned most to note that while passive emotions *thwart* human freedom, active emotions can be *supportive* of it. Active emotions are consonant with reason and arise wholly from our own nature, while passive emotions are often dissonant with reason and do not arise wholly from our own nature.

In none of this is it Spinoza's aim to excoriate human individuals, or even to disparage human actions. This point is evident throughout the latter parts of the *Ethics*, and is summarized nicely here in his *Political Treatise*:

...I have taken great care not to deride, bewail, or execrate human actions, but to understand them. So I have regarded human emotions such as love, hatred, anger, envy, pride, pity, and other agitations of the mind not as vices of human nature but as properties pertaining to it...¹¹³

¹¹² Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part IV, Appendix, Paragraph 2, translated by Samuel Shirley, Hackett edition, p. 358.

¹¹³ Spinoza, *Political Treatise*, Chapter 1, Section 4, translated by Samuel Shirley, Hackett edition, p. 681.

Even so, some things are *good* in the sense that they are “useful to us”, and some things are *bad* in the sense that they are “an obstacle to our attainment of some good”.¹¹⁴ The intent of these ascriptions, however, is not to praise or blame. They are simply useful labels for whatever assists us in, or thwarts us from, “our approaching nearer to the model of human nature that we set before ourselves”.¹¹⁵ For example, unhappiness and related emotions are bad in this sense, in addition to being disagreeable. It is useful, then, to diagnose the *cause* of such passive emotions, that we might more easily find a *remedy*. For instance:

...it should be noted that emotional distress and unhappiness have their origin especially in excessive love toward a thing subject to considerable instability, a thing which we can never completely possess.¹¹⁶

It is interesting to note the parallels between this remark and the basic Buddhist assessment of the human condition wherein *dukkha* (distress and discontent) is attributed to *attachment* to what is *impermanent*, and wherein *liberation* from this *dukkha* is said to require *wisdom* and the consequent quelling of this attachment. Moreover, according to both the Buddhists and Spinoza, this path to freedom or salvation, although difficult, is nonetheless possible to traverse. We should not expect it to be easy, for, as Spinoza concludes his *Ethics*: “All things excellent are as difficult as they are rare.”¹¹⁷

A key feature of Spinoza’s approach to human flourishing is his *developmental* account of human freedom. For Spinoza, freedom is *an active and dynamic undertaking*, mirroring the active and dynamic character of *conatus*. True freedom, then, is not simply a lack of obstacles to one’s existing inclinations. Spinoza says:

¹¹⁴ Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part IV, Definitions 1 and 2, translated by Samuel Shirley, Hackett editions, p. 322.

¹¹⁵ Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part IV, Preface, translated by Samuel Shirley, Hackett editions, p. 322.

¹¹⁶ Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part V, Proposition 20, Scholium, translated by Samuel Shirley, Hackett edition, p. 373.

¹¹⁷ Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part V, Proposition 42, Scholium, translated by Samuel Shirley, Hackett edition, p. 382.

...the majority appear to think that they are free to the extent that they can indulge their lusts, and that they are giving up their rights to the extent that they are required to live under the commandments of the divine law.¹¹⁸

Spinoza here speaks in the idiom of Hebraic theology, but the reference to living “under the commandments of the divine law” is, for Spinoza, just another way of saying “in harmony with the order of the whole of Nature”.¹¹⁹ This latter manner of speaking is consonant with Taoist language, through which it is said that human flourishing is achieved by living in harmony with the Tao or Nature. In keeping with the biblical language, however, true freedom, far from being simply the indulgence of one’s lusts, is the harmonizing of one’s inclinations with the divine law, and this we achieve, ultimately, through the *intellectual love of God*. This intellectual love of God is just as much God’s love toward us as it is our love toward God; indeed, these are in truth one and the same:

From this we clearly understand in what our salvation or blessedness or freedom consists, namely, in the constant and eternal love toward God, that is, in God’s love toward men.¹²⁰

In the final analysis, then, our love of God is God’s love of himself through a part of himself, and it is in this that true *freedom*, which is the same as *salvation* or *blessedness*, consists.

Spinoza provides an admirable account of human freedom within the context of his strictly deterministic view of reality. Spinoza’s account makes it clear that even if determinism were true, there would still be a significant sense in which humans could be said to be free.

From a libertarian perspective, however, there is an important kind of freedom that is altogether

¹¹⁸ Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part V, Proposition 41, Scholium, translated by Samuel Shirley, Hackett edition, p. 381.

¹¹⁹ Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part IV, Appendix, Paragraph 32, translated by Samuel Shirley, Hackett edition, p. 362.

¹²⁰ Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part V, Proposition 36, Scholium, translated by Samuel Shirley, Hackett edition, p. 378.

lacking in Spinoza's system. We say more about this point in the next section, after we make a few explicit comparisons between Spinoza and Hume on the issue of human freedom.

Comparison and Evaluation

Despite their rather different methods and assumptions, Spinoza and Hume agree on several important points concerning human freedom. First, they both endorse strict determinism. Even so, second, they both acknowledge the possibility of human freedom. Thus, third, they are both, each in his own way, compatibilists with reference to the issue of human freedom. Fourth, neither believes in freedom of will, at least in an unqualified sense. Fifth, they both believe in freedom to act in accordance with will. Thus, sixth, they both, each in his own way, understand freedom to mean self-determination. Seventh, they both believe that freedom to act in accordance with will is necessary for individual responsibility. Moreover, eighth, they both believe that freedom to act in accordance with will is *sufficient* for individual responsibility. Hence, ninth, they both believe that lack of freedom in the other sense, unqualified freedom of will, is nothing to bemoan. Indeed, tenth, they both believe that the supposed freedom involved in unqualified freedom of will is really the opposite of freedom, *viz.*, mere *chance*.

The foregoing is an impressive list of commonalities between Spinoza and Hume. Nonetheless, there are important differences between them as well. For instance, although they both believe that freedom to act in accordance with will is sufficient for individual responsibility, Hume takes this to mean that freedom to act in accordance with will is sufficient also for legitimate praise and blame. Meanwhile, Spinoza, in seeking to *understand* rather than to

“deride, bewail, or execrate” human actions,¹²¹ generally abjures moralistic notions such as praise and blame in favor of a program of consciously directed self-improvement grounded in an understanding of the causal bases of the passive emotions. Through this understanding, inadequate ideas are replaced with adequate ideas, and passive emotions are replaced with active emotions.

Much of the divergence between Spinoza and Hume concerning the issue of human freedom appears to be a consequence of their different respective understandings of the roll of reason in the economy of human volition and action. Hume, for his part, operates with a rather attenuated sense of the term ‘reason’. Thus, according to Hume, reason alone has no motive power; it neither produces action nor gives rise to volition. In a famous remark, Hume says: “Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them.”¹²² Spinoza’s view in this connection is quite different from that of Hume. In contrast to Hume’s assertion that reason can only function as the *slave* of the passions, Spinoza emphasizes “...how effective against the emotions is clear and distinct knowledge...”¹²³ In this way, Spinoza, contra Hume, expresses a view concerning the role of reason and knowledge in the harmony of the soul that is reminiscent of that which Plato develops in his *Republic*.

What is the impact of the foregoing difference between Spinoza and Hume on their respective notions of freedom? Although, in the last analysis, neither Spinoza nor Hume can properly claim *freedom of will*, but only *freedom to act in accordance with will*, Spinoza is considerably more sophisticated and subtle in his treatment of this issue. In Hume’s account, freedom to act in accordance with will does not seem to be distinguished from *freedom as the*

¹²¹ Spinoza, *Political Treatise*, Chapter 1, Section 4, translated by Samuel Shirley, Hackett edition, p. 681.

¹²² David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Oxford edition, p. 266.

¹²³ Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part V, Proposition 20, Scholium, translated by Samuel Shirley, Hackett edition, p. 373.

ability to indulge one's inclinations, regardless of whether these inclinations are *worthy* of indulgence. As far as *reason* is concerned, the inclinations are simply given. In contrast, Spinoza emphasizes a *constructive and developmental* account of the individual (as we indicated in our earlier discussion of Spinoza's notion of individual essence, *conatus*). According to Spinoza, we can intentionally modify our character such that our *will itself* is changed. In this sense, then, there is for Spinoza a sort of *freedom of will* as such. Hume, meanwhile, in regarding reason as the mere slave of inclination, lacks the resources of Spinoza in this connection. Therefore, there is in Spinoza a sort of freedom of will that is apparently absent in Hume. Even so, this is decidedly not freedom of will in the *libertarian's* sense, as we discuss in more detail below, and as Spinoza himself insists:

In the mind there is no absolute, or free, will. The mind is determined to this or that volition by a cause, which is likewise determined by another cause, and this again by another, and so ad infinitum.¹²⁴

And again:

...it is on this account only that men believe themselves to be free, that they are conscious of their actions and ignorant of the causes by which they are determined...¹²⁵

Nonetheless, Spinoza's account of human freedom is supportive of personal growth and self-improvement in a way that Hume's is not.

So much for our explicit comparison of Spinoza and Hume on the issue of human freedom. Let us round out the discussion with a few points of evaluation, beginning with Hume. As we indicated in Section I, Hume criticizes the notion, popular among his predecessors and

¹²⁴ Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part II, Proposition 48, translated by Samuel Shirley, Hackett Edition, p. 272.

¹²⁵ Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part III, Proposition 2, Scholium, translated by Samuel Shirley, Hackett Edition, p. 281.

contemporaries, that causation involves a *necessary connection* between objects or events. It is more than a little curious, then, that Hume is nevertheless a strict determinist. It is especially curious given his commitments to empiricism and skepticism, for although we notice all manner of regularities in the operation of nature, including ourselves, strict determinism cannot be established empirically, for even if strict determinism were true, measurement errors and confounding factors would prevent us from ever observing it directly.¹²⁶ Based simply upon empirical results, then, strict determinism can never be more than a posit.¹²⁷ Therefore, given his empiricist principles, Hume should have at least remained uncommitted on the matter of determinism. That he did not calls for some explanation, although no explanation internal to his philosophy is evident. Perhaps Hume was inclined to determinism by the mechanistic view that prevailed in his time. Hume lived before certain developments in modern physics cast doubt upon strict determinism by suggesting that there may be an irreducibly stochastic aspect to natural processes, even at the level of simple physical dynamics.

In the last paragraph of Section I, we intimated that, from a libertarian perspective, Hume's proposed reconciliation between freedom ("liberty") and determinism ("necessity") fails to address what, to the libertarian, is really the central issue: whether the *will itself* is free. We have already made use of the distinction that we there introduced between *freedom of will*, on the one hand, and *freedom to act in accordance with will*, on the other. It is only freedom in the *latter* sense, what Hume calls *hypothetical* liberty, that Hume has in mind when he argues for the compatibility of liberty and necessity. Meanwhile, most champions of freedom of will ("libertarians") assert, and most Humean-style compatibilists concede, that freedom of will (or

¹²⁶ Since such deviations from strict regularity are to be expected, they are not treated as falsifiers of the hypothesis of strict determinism.

¹²⁷ Cf. James: "...evidence of an external kind to decide between determinism and indeterminism is...strictly impossible to find." William James, "The Dilemma of Determinism", in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, Dover, p. 150.

freedom in the libertarian sense) is *not* compatible with determinism. It is for this reason that the term ‘libertarianism’, with its obvious etymological association with ‘liberty’, often serves merely as a synonym for ‘indeterminism’.¹²⁸ As we just noted in the preceding paragraph, Hume simply endorses determinism without substantial defense. From a libertarian perspective, then, Hume, in arguing for the compatibility of *hypothetical liberty* and determinism, is dodging what is actually a crucial question in regard to human freedom: whether determinism itself is true. We have now to consider this and related questions more deeply.

There are three pivotal questions in connection with the issue of freedom of will:

- (1) Is the thesis of determinism true?
- (2) Is freedom of will compatible with determinism?
- (3) Is freedom of will compatible with indeterminism?

We addressed one aspect of the second question three paragraphs back, where we explained the sort of freedom of will that is compatible with Spinoza’s philosophy. Another aspect of the second question is whether freedom of will in the *libertarian’s* sense (what we mean when we use the term ‘freedom of will’ without qualification) is compatible with determinism. We have suggested in several places that it is not, and generally, both determinists and indeterminists agree on this point. However, before we turn to the other questions, a few more words on this point are appropriate here.

What is freedom of will? Naturally, the answer to this question depends, in part, upon what is meant by the ambiguous term ‘freedom’ in this context. According to one familiar

¹²⁸ This can be misleading, for insofar as the term ‘libertarianism’ serves merely as a *synonym* for ‘indeterminism’, the assertion that libertarianism is incompatible with determinism, although true, is trivially so. However, libertarianism is, more expressly, the doctrine that there is freedom of will. If libertarianism in this express sense is incompatible with determinism, it is because *freedom of will* is incompatible with determinism, and not merely because libertarianism is defined as the contrary of determinism.

account, an act is free just in case the agent¹²⁹ *could have done otherwise*.¹³⁰ But this formulation still contains an ambiguity, since it is unclear how one should take the expression ‘could have done otherwise’. On one interpretation, ‘could have done otherwise’ is rendered as “would have done otherwise, *if the agent had willed otherwise*”. This is, of course, just freedom to act in accordance with will, or Hume’s hypothetical liberty, all over again. Freedom in this sense is compatible with determinism, but this is not freedom of will. Furthermore, from a libertarian perspective, the foregoing approach does not even allow real *freedom of action*, for if determinism is true, the antecedent of the foregoing interpretation’s counterfactual conditional is not only false, it is *impossible* (that is, if determinism is true, *the agent could not have willed otherwise*). Therefore, freedom of will is *not* compatible with determinism.

In light of the foregoing considerations advanced from the libertarian side, it appears that the notion of freedom of will, as conceived by the libertarian, is just the notion that *the will is not strictly determined*. If this is true, then the claim that freedom of will and determinism are incompatible is simply a *logical* truth. The important factual question with reference to the issue of freedom of will, then, is whether the thesis of determinism is true. Given this analysis, it is no surprise that Hume, being a strict determinist, takes the libertarian notion of freedom to be *incoherent*, and therefore takes *hypothetical* liberty to be the only thing that we can reasonably mean by liberty. According to Hume, we are free, figuratively speaking, so long as we are “not a prisoner and in chains”.¹³¹ Does determinism involve our being in chains? Hume apparently

¹²⁹ We here use the term ‘agent’ in a vague and general sense, naming not necessarily an *individual* in the conventional sense, but perhaps a mere moment of decision. In a way, we are using the term ‘agent’ simply as a placeholder for a deeper, but lengthier, account of the matter.

¹³⁰ See, for example, Roy C. Weatherford, “freedom and determinism”, in *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, edited by Ted Honderich, Oxford University Press, 1995, p. 292, where this general formulation, expressed in different words, is attributed to G. E. Moore. For a critical discussion of the notion of alternate possibilities, see Harry G. Frankfurt, “Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility”, reprinted in *Arguing About Metaphysics*, edited by Michael C. Rea, Routledge, New York, 2009, pp. 428-434.

¹³¹ David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Hackett edition, p. 63.

thinks not. However, if determinism is true, we are, in a sense, constrained by what Spinoza calls the “chain of causes”,¹³² for we cannot, in any given instance, will otherwise than we actually will, or do otherwise than we actually do.

Many of the libertarian concerns and criticisms that we have hitherto been discussing in the context of our evaluation of Hume’s approach to human freedom apply just as much to Spinoza or, for that matter, to any strict determinist. However, as we have already indicated, Spinoza’s account of freedom is significantly more subtle and sophisticated than is that of most other determinists, including Hume. Therefore, we shall focus our evaluation henceforth upon Spinoza, on the analogy of defeating the chief wrestler.¹³³ We just noted that the important factual question with respect to freedom of will is whether determinism is true. Of the three questions that we list above, there remains also the issue as to whether freedom of will is compatible with *indeterminism*.

In Section II of this chapter, we enunciate Spinoza’s commitment to strict determinism, and indicate that the sort of contingency that Spinoza does allow is in no wise inconsistent with his determinism. The passages that we there quote in illustration of these points are all drawn from his *Ethics*. It is instructive to note, by way of comparison, a later remark that Spinoza makes with respect to the issue of contingency. In his *Theological-Political Treatise*, Spinoza says:

We ought to define and explain things through their proximate causes.

Generalisations about fate and the interconnection of causes can be of no service to us in forming and ordering our thoughts concerning particular things.

Furthermore, we plainly have no knowledge as to the actual co-ordination and

¹³² Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part I, Proposition 33, Scholium 1, translated by Samuel Shirley, Hackett edition, p. 236.

¹³³ This figure is found in Shankara’s *Brahma Sutra Bhasya*.

interconnection of things—that is, the way in which things are in actual fact ordered and connected—so that *for practical purposes it is better, indeed, it is essential, to consider things as contingent.*¹³⁴

This is a very interesting and telling remark, for so to consider things is, according to Spinoza's earlier work in the *Ethics*, to consider them *falsely*. Furthermore, it is not as though Spinoza has changed his position on this point. Indeed, in the selfsame discourse from which this passage is extracted, Spinoza reaffirms his commitment to strict determinism, saying:

...I grant that, in an absolute sense, all things are determined by the universal laws of Nature to exist and to act in a definite and determinate way...¹³⁵

It is unusual for any philosopher speaking to philosophers to recommend treating an opinion that is held to be false as though it were true. It is particularly uncharacteristic of Spinoza, who, after all, strongly emphasizes the great benefit that accrues to those who believe what is true and who act in accordance with true belief. Therefore, Spinoza's insistence that, for practical purposes, it is not only better, but more, *essential*, that we consider things as contingent—despite his presumption that things, in truth, are *not* contingent, but only *seem* contingent to us in our ignorance—indicates his recognition of the profound tension that exists between the affirmation of strict determinism, on the one hand, and the suppositions and demands of our volitional and active economy, on the other.¹³⁶

¹³⁴ Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, Chapter 4: "Of the Divine Law", translated by Samuel Shirley, Hackett edition, pp. 426-427. [Italics added]

¹³⁵ Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, Chapter 4: "Of the Divine Law", translated by Samuel Shirley, Hackett edition, p. 426.

¹³⁶ Some relief from this tension could perhaps be achieved through the Buddhist device of the "two truths" (*satya-dvaya*), wherein absolute or ultimate truth is contrasted with relative or conventional truth. However, in Buddhist contexts, this distinction is deployed for teaching purposes as a "skillful means" (*upaya-kausalya*) of leading the student to deeper understanding. The device is dropped once true understanding is achieved (according to Nagarjuna's account, the two truths are ultimately non-different). Spinoza himself, at least, does not seem to interpret his teachings in this way.

Naturally, this tension can be resolved by renouncing the claim of strict determinism, or, what is the same, accepting the truth of some measure of genuine contingency.¹³⁷ Is anything approximating this approach available to Spinoza? In this connection, Goodman says:

Spinoza's calls to reflection and self-mastery suggest that his own stridency about contingency might need to be mitigated somewhat...invoking the Aristotelian distinction between the specious notion of alternative pasts and the legitimate notion of alternative futures.¹³⁸

If this talk of mitigating stridency about contingency were intended as an *interpretation* of Spinoza, it would be rather difficult to sustain. However, insofar as it is intended as an *emendation* of Spinoza, it is right on the mark. Despite its virtues, this approach is not open to Spinoza himself without a rather substantial and significant remaking of his system. The acceptance of contingency would itself be a significant alteration, and, given the tight logical structure of Spinoza's system, this alteration would require others as well. Even so, much of value in Spinoza's philosophy could be retained by an indeterminist.

This brings us at last back to the "block-universe" charge that we mentioned in the middle of Section II, and promised to revisit here. Although the notion itself is a general libertarian concern, the appellation is due to James. With reference to determinism, James says:

It professes that those parts of the universe already laid down absolutely appoint and decree what the other parts shall be. The future has no ambiguous possibilities hidden in its womb: the part we call the present is compatible with only one totality. Any other future complement than the one fixed from eternity

¹³⁷ Of course, there is another sense of the term 'contingency' that means something like *dependence*, but that is not what we are talking about here.

¹³⁸ Lenn E. Goodman, *Jewish and Islamic Philosophy: Crosspollinations in the Classic Age*, Chapter 6: "Determinism and freedom in Spinoza, Maimonides, and Aristotle", Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1999, p. 169.

is impossible. The whole is in each and every part, and welds it with the rest into an absolute unity, an iron block, in which there can be no equivocation or shadow of turning.¹³⁹

James does not mention Spinoza by name in connection with the block-universe charge. However, James would surely identify Spinoza as a determinist, and it is to determinism generally that James intends the charge to apply. We have now to consider the justice of this allegation with respect to Spinoza.

In relation to this issue, Goodman considers the question of whether Spinoza accepts alternative futures.¹⁴⁰ Goodman first acknowledges that talk of alternative futures is “certainly not the sort of language he [Spinoza] approves”. Still, like Aristotle, Goodman recommends that a distinction be drawn in this context between “futures whose determinants are given” and “futures whose determinants have not yet emerged”. Goodman asserts that this distinction is consistent with Spinoza’s account of the “dynamic and reflexive character of *conatus*”. Moreover, this account “allows a Bergsonian rather than Laplacean account of determination”. According to Goodman, this means:

...things on Spinoza’s account must act in accordance with what they are; but they have not always been what they are, and they do contribute, through their own actions, to the making of what they are.

Thus, according to Goodman, Bergson’s notion of an *open future* is more consonant with Spinoza’s philosophy than is the “linear and static” determinism of Laplace, which does not

¹³⁹ William James, “The Dilemma of Determinism”, in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, Dover, p. 150. The term ‘block-universe’ itself appears in a footnote on p. 181 of the same essay, and ‘solid block’ appears on p. 158.

¹⁴⁰ Lenn E. Goodman, *Jewish and Islamic Philosophy: Crosspollinations in the Classic Age*, Chapter 6: “Determinism and freedom in Spinoza, Maimonides, and Aristotle”, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1999, pp. 168-169. The subsequent references to and quotations of Goodman in this and the next two paragraphs are all from this same site.

allow “feedback, reflexivity or recursion”. Goodman illustrates this claim with a reference to Maimonides’ response to the problem of human freedom and divine omniscience. According to Maimonides, God’s foreknowledge that a particular possibility will be realized does not militate against the contingent character of this possibility, and therefore does not interfere with human freedom of will. Goodman concludes:

Spinoza’s commitment to universal causality, I would argue, is no more compromised by an open future than is the biblical commitment to God’s universal agency.... What we must remember in Spinoza’s case is that the dynamism of the *conatus*, to act at all, must make a difference—not between what is and what must be but between what is and what otherwise (that is, in abstraction from its agency) might have been.

Evidently, Goodman would reject James’s block-universe charge with reference to Spinoza. But how far is Goodman’s reading here sustainable as an *interpretation*, rather than *emendation*, of Spinoza? It is certainly true that “things on Spinoza’s account...do contribute, through their own actions, to the making of what they are”, and that this is allowed by the “dynamic and reflexive character of *conatus*”. (We briefly considered the implications of this point *vis-à-vis* human freedom in the fourth paragraph of this section.) Is this point sufficient for genuine contingency and an open future?¹⁴¹ The answer to this question depends upon whether, or in what sense, Spinoza is entitled to the distinction between “futures whose determinants are given” and “futures whose determinants have not yet emerged”. In this connection, Spinoza says:

¹⁴¹ We say *genuine* contingency, as opposed to the *qualified* sort of contingency that Spinoza does allow, in which a thing is called contingent just because we are ignorant of its actual modal status (which can only be *necessary* or *impossible*).

Every individual thing, i.e., anything whatever which is finite and has a determinate existence, cannot exist or be determined to act unless it be determined to exist and to act by another cause which is also finite and has a determinate existence, and this cause again cannot exist or be determined to act unless it be determined to exist and to act by another cause, which is also finite and has a determinate existence, and so ad infinitum.¹⁴²

The point that is expressed here by Spinoza in terms of *causes* can also be expressed in terms of *determinants*, for, in Spinoza, these amount to essentially the same thing. Accordingly, insofar as by the term ‘determinants’, as used in the distinction above, one means “*proximate determinants*”, Spinoza could consistently speak of futures whose determinants have not yet emerged. Even so, according to Spinoza, these (proximate) determinants that have not yet emerged will likewise have *their* (proximate) determinants, and so on, clear back to those (proximate) determinants that are present *now* (and that are, in this sense, “given”) and, indeed, on back without end into the past. Furthermore, nowhere along this continuum of determination can there be any deviation from the one fixed path.¹⁴³ Therefore, unless one means the term ‘determinants’ in the restricted sense of “*proximate determinants*”, there are, for Spinoza, no futures whose determinants have not yet emerged, for—given the necessary connections that exist among determinants—the more remote determinants, just as much as the proximate determinants, are *sufficient to render necessary the one and only future that is possible*.

Therefore, the distinction between futures whose determinants are given and futures whose

¹⁴² Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part I, Proposition 28, translated by Samuel Shirley, Hackett edition, p. 233.

¹⁴³ Our use of the term ‘path’ here may suggest a simple linear sequence. Of course, to suppose that determination is a simple linear process would be a gross oversimplification. Spinoza, as we have already noted a couple of times now, does speak of a “chain of causes”, but his use of this expression is not intended to suggest a simple linear sequence either. However, that determination is complex and not adequately expressed by terms such as ‘path’ and ‘chain’ does not alter the nature of the case with respect to the issue at hand.

determinants have not yet emerged that Goodman invokes, on behalf of Spinoza, in support of contingency and an open future—although sustainable in the sense that we just indicated, and although more broadly sustainable if indeterminism is granted—is simply not available in the sense required to support contingency and an open future, so long as one abides the deterministic principles of Spinoza’s philosophical system.

The significance of the foregoing conclusions in connection with the issue of the freedom of the individual is this. Spinoza can consistently maintain, and indeed *does* maintain, that the individual itself plays a role in its own making. This is no small thing, and supports, as we noted earlier, a sort of freedom for the individual that many other determinists cannot claim. Even so, all the actions that the individual undertakes that contribute to its own making (which, in truth, include *all* of its actions)—just as much as all the extrinsic factors that impinge upon the individual, and also contribute to its making—are necessitated by determinants that exist *before this supposed individual itself even comes on the scene*, and, *a fortiori*, before it makes any choices or undertakes any actions at all. Therefore, observe or posit all the “feedback, reflexivity or recursion” that you please, the complexity of the course of determination is irrelevant to the question of whether the individual—in a *real* and not merely *hypothetical* sense—can do otherwise than it actually does, and irrelevant also to the question of whether the individual *per se* is ultimately responsible for its actions and character. Therefore, the freedom that is properly ascribed to the individual under Spinoza’s system is a decidedly *qualified* freedom; it is certainly not genuine freedom of will.

Does this mean that James is correct in charging Spinoza, along with all strict determinists, with endorsing a block-universe account of reality? Insofar as this rather opprobrious-sounding ascription is intended simply as a synonym for strict determinism, then of

course Spinoza, as a strict determinist, does endorse a block-universe account of reality. However, the expression may call to mind a universe with no movement or change at all—just fixed immutable being. Parmenides may have held this view of the cosmos, but Spinoza, certainly, does not. Indeed, Spinoza devotes most of his efforts to issues of *becoming*, as evidenced by his notion of the *developmental* character of individual essence (*conatus*), and by his special concern with self-development and improvement. Nor is any of this inconsistent with his strict determinism, for strict determinism does not entail the absence of change and development. Therefore, to the extent that the expression ‘block-universe’ is understood to imply universal *stasis*, Spinoza certainly does not endorse a block-universe account of reality.

A related point upon which I am not entirely clear, and upon which I have heard conflicting interpretations, is whether Spinoza understands what he calls “the whole of Nature” as *itself* dynamic and changing. That is, does Spinoza understand the whole of Nature, as such, as an *immutable totality*, beyond change because itself inclusive of all change, and transcending duration because itself *inclusive of* all duration, or rather, does Spinoza understand the whole of Nature in the same fashion that he understands individual essence (*conatus*), that is, as *constant in its essence* but *involved in* duration and subject to change? More succinctly put, does Spinoza understand the whole of Nature as *transtemporal*, or as *intratemporal*? (Of course, Spinoza understands time as such to be a purely *abstract* notion, “a product of the imagination”.¹⁴⁴ Very well—let the contrast then be between *transdurational* and *intradurational*.) In this connection, Spinoza says:

We thus see how a composite individual can be affected in many ways and yet preserve its nature.... [Such composite individuals can go on to compose further individual things, and so on.] If we thus continue to infinity, we shall readily

¹⁴⁴ Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part II, Proposition 44, Scholium, translated by Samuel Shirley, Hackett Edition, pp. 269-270.

conceive the whole of Nature as one individual whose parts—that is, all the constituent bodies—vary in infinite ways without any change in the individual as a whole.¹⁴⁵

Goodman evidently interprets Spinoza’s notion of the whole of Nature, or “the universe as a whole”, as *intratemporal* (or *intradurational*) in nature:

Spinoza has refined Aristotle’s essentialism to allow temporal variation within nature at large without changing the essential face of nature, just as he has refined Parmenides’ monism to allow unity in nature without compromising the variety of existents.¹⁴⁶

In the vocabulary of the contemporary Western philosophy of time, this would make Spinoza a *presentist* as opposed to an *eternalist*. Most philosophers in this tradition view Spinoza as an eternalist. However, if Goodman is right regarding this point, then he is also correct to see some concurrence between Spinoza and Bergson, despite the latter’s unequivocal rejection of strict determinism. As I say, I am not sure where Spinoza himself stands on this issue. I do think it true, however, that taking Spinoza (or any strict determinist) as a presentist is the only way to “save the phenomenon” of motion and change within the context of his determinism, and accordingly, the only way for this (or any) strictly deterministic philosophy to avoid entailing a block universe in the stronger sense that we distinguish above.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁵ Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part II, Proposition 13, Lemma 7, Scholium, translated by Samuel Shirley, Hackett Edition, pp. 254-255.

¹⁴⁶ Lenn E. Goodman, *Jewish and Islamic Philosophy: Crosspollinations in the Classic Age*, Chapter 6: “Determinism and freedom in Spinoza, Maimonides, and Aristotle”, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1999, p. 155.

¹⁴⁷ In this assessment, we ignore the question of whether presentism and determinism are *consistent*. In the contemporary Western philosophy of time, some philosophers reject presentism because they believe that if a reach of the temporal dimension is *determinate* (as at least the *past* surely is), then the doctrine of presentism is not sustainable. Such philosophers, if they are indeterminists, may then endorse what is sometimes called the “growing-block” theory. If a philosopher with this same worry is also a *determinist*, then they are pushed to some version of eternalism (of course, eternalism does not *entail* determinism). Presentists could respond to this criticism by

Nonetheless, because of the difficulties involved in presentism, this approach takes Spinoza's philosophy in a precarious direction. Among other difficulties, it is widely held, and to my view, correctly held, that presentism is inconsistent with Einstein's special theory of relativity.¹⁴⁸ Moreover, if presentism is endorsed, the only way to consistently speak of "one individual whose parts...vary in infinite ways without any change in the individual as a whole" is by recourse to the notion of *essence* as the real identity of the supposed individual in question (otherwise, clearly, the whole *does* change with a change in its parts). However, for those who believe, as I do, that to take the notion of essence as referring to something concretely real is tantamount to *hypostatizing a mere concept*, this approach is unavailable. This means that the only way to make good sense of the passage from Spinoza just quoted above is by understanding the individual (*any* individual, although we are here considering the whole of Nature) as a *transtemporal* entity. In this way, the variation to which Spinoza refers is recognized as an *internal* matter that, *sub specie aeternitatis*, involves no change in the whole *as such*, but rather, is simply the variation along the temporal dimension of the eternal whole. Naturally, to James's view, chary as he is of anything that smacks of an absolute, this approach will seem just another avenue to a block-universe account of reality. However, *pace* James, if this approach is coupled with the rejection of strict causal determinism (and here, of course, we part company with Spinoza), then, from any perspective to which there is a future at all, the future is *open*. Therefore, in this sense, this approach is *not* properly subject to the block-universe charge, and does allow genuine freedom of will.

claiming that, in speaking of a "reach of the temporal dimension", their critics are simply begging the question, for according to presentism, there is no temporal dimension *per se* at all. This approach, however, renders much of common sense and scientific theory untenable.

¹⁴⁸ Naturally, this inconsistency could be resolved by rejecting Einstein's special theory of relativity, but there are very strong independent grounds for believing that the special theory of relativity is true.

We have not yet directly answered the questions of whether the thesis of determinism is true, and whether freedom of will is compatible with indeterminism. Although a few parting words on these issues seem appropriate here, we must be brief. First, in connection with the question of whether the thesis of determinism is true, I have an indirect proof that it is *not* true. One of the particularly problematic issues in the philosophy of time is the *directionality* (often misleadingly called the *asymmetry*) of temporality. None of the so-called laws of physics provides a basis for this directionality.¹⁴⁹ Moreover, on the assumption of strict determinism, no explanation is possible. However, if indeterminism is granted, then the basis for the directionality of temporality can be readily explained.¹⁵⁰

Second, with reference to the question of whether freedom of will is compatible with indeterminism, the standard concern is that indeterminism, far from providing a basis for freedom, instead reduces so-called choice to mere *chance*. James boldly grasps the thistle of chance, but many others feel that chance is antithetical to freedom, or, at any rate, is not compatible with the kind of freedom that anyone would want. To respond to this challenge in detail would require more space than is appropriately spent here. Let us provide just a hint, then. We have emphasized throughout this study that the term ‘freedom’ is ambiguous. In one sense of the term (“freedom of will”), freedom is *not* compatible with determinism. In another sense of the term (“freedom to act in accordance with will”), some believe, as we have seen, that freedom is *only* compatible with determinism. If this latter is true, then obviously these two sorts of freedom are not mutually compatible. Even so, there is sometimes an expectation, or at least a desire, that we should be free in *both* of these senses, and this fosters what appears to be an

¹⁴⁹ It is sometimes claimed that the second law of thermodynamics provides a basis for the directionality of temporality, but this is not so. The explanation of this point is a bit lengthy, however, and would be out of place here.

¹⁵⁰ Kenneth Faber, “The Basis for the Directionality of Time”, *Chronos*, Volume IX, 2008.

insoluble mystery.¹⁵¹ I think it a mistake, however, to believe that freedom to act in accordance with will, or any other important kind of freedom, is only compatible with determinism. It is surely a false dichotomy to suppose that if we are not *fully* determinative of our own choices, or if our choices do not arise *necessarily* out of our own nature, then we are not determinative of our choices at all. Therefore, even though there is a sense in which indeterminism *does* mean chance—or, more eulogistically, *spontaneity*—this does not mean that our choices do not arise out of our own nature. It only means that multiple choices are consistent with our nature.¹⁵²

¹⁵¹ This result is nicely portrayed, albeit perhaps unintentionally, in Peter van Inwagen, “The Mystery of Metaphysical Freedom”, reprinted in *Arguing About Metaphysics*, edited by Michael C. Rea, Routledge, New York, 2009, pp. 420-427. With respect to the issue at hand, there is sometimes also a subtle *equivocation* on the term ‘freedom’, and this exacerbates the confusion.

¹⁵² This is, so far, a rather superficial account, couched in our ordinary way of speaking about such matters. A deeper account requires a criticism of our ordinary understanding of the nature of the *individual* (along the lines of the Buddhist notion of *anatman*), along with a criticism of our ordinary understanding of the nature of *volition*. Spinoza provides some useful insights in connection with this latter issue.

CHAPTER 6

PRAGMATICS

A Prolegomenon to Pragmatics

As a first approximation, let us define *pragmatics* as philosophical theory that is directly concerned with practice. It is not enough, of course, to stop short with pragmatics; we seek not merely the union of theory and practice in *theory*, but also the union of theory and practice in *practice*.¹⁵³ It is for this very reason, however, that pragmatics is a crucial part of philosophical theory. Pragmatics is the mediating link between theory, on the one hand, and the application of theory, on the other. The value and import of this linkage is not restricted to the side of application. A metaphysical theory finds its whole meaning and significance only in conjunction with an articulated pragmatics, a pragmatics that is both based upon, and more fully expresses, the metaphysical theory.

Pragmatics subsumes several familiar and well-established spheres of concern, including ethics, politics (political philosophy), and soteriology (broadly conceived). Collectively, these spheres of concern encompass a wide array of inquiries and endeavors. A broad view is, of course, liable to be superficial. However, such a view, even if superficial, is not without its value. A map of the continent, although it tells us nothing of our immediate neighborhood, is nonetheless of service for certain ends. Our immediate neighborhood finds its place within the

¹⁵³ I owe this turn of phrase to Prof. John Lachs.

map of the continent. Furthermore, ethics, politics, and soteriology are not altogether distinct studies and practices—they grade into one another in significant ways.

In this introductory and propaedeutical work on pragmatics, we consider some foundational issues in ethics, politics, and soteriology, and offer some concluding remarks regarding the integration of these respective fields.

Ethics

There is a way of conceiving ethics in which ethics is understood to be concerned with *actively promoting good and thwarting bad*. There is another way of conceiving ethics in which ethics is understood to be concerned with *identifying, creating, and following rules*. The latter approach we can call *ethical legalism*. Ethical legalism is often largely *negative* in character, proscribing acts that we must *not* do (“thou shalt not...”), although it can also be *positive* in the sense of demanding acts that we *must* do.¹⁵⁴ Meanwhile, the other approach, for which it is not easy to find a suitable identifying term, we can call *ethical directism*, for this approach is not based upon rules and the imposition of strictures, but upon immediately seeking the good.¹⁵⁵ Kantian deontology is a good exemplar of ethical legalism, while Buddhist ethics is a good exemplar of ethical directism.

It would be overly simplistic to suppose that these two approaches to ethics are altogether incompatible, for mixed systems are possible. Moreover, each side has innumerable variations.

¹⁵⁴ To some extent, this distinction between positive and negative rules is a function of expression. For instance, the negative proscription *do not lie* can also be expressed, although not quite equivalently, as the positive pronouncement *tell the truth*.

¹⁵⁵ In certain systems based upon ethical directism, there may be rules in the sense of precepts or generally recommended principles, but these are not supposed to be fundamental, nor are they understood to be absolutely binding. They are intended primarily for those who have not yet developed the sophistication and sensitivity to act for the best without their aid.

Nonetheless, there are these two contrasting tendencies in ethical thought. Ethical legalism, for its part, is concerned primarily with the *limits* of behavior. Certain acts are prohibited, and perhaps also certain acts are required, but within these bounds, there is no further exhortation. Egoism, an approach to life based principally upon self-interest, may even be encouraged, or at least not actively discouraged, so long as the established boundaries are not transgressed. Meanwhile, ethical directism is more *pervasive* in its application. Although this approach promulgates no strict and invariant rules or laws, all acts and behavior, and indeed, all speech and thought, are properly subject to ethical evaluation. Even so, there is with ethical directism a greater *openness* and freedom, for there are no ultimate commandments or demands. One simply does what one sees to be best for all concerned.

Modern Western moral philosophy has been dominated by a *legalistic* approach to ethics, concerning itself with such notions as rights and obligations. Not surprisingly, many attempts to extend the scope of ethics beyond the human domain have themselves been based upon this kind of legalism. This way of thinking generally assumes that rights are an all-or-nothing sort of affair, and that some beings have rights and some do not. These assumptions generate the issue of “where to draw the line” with regard to proper moral concern.¹⁵⁶

The legalistic approach to ethics faces the difficulty of explaining the basis for the supposed rights and obligations. Unless one falls back upon some sort of divine-command theory, one is left with “laws without a lawgiver”.¹⁵⁷ Further, the all-or-nothing assumption of the legalistic approach does not conform to the more continuous gradations of sentience, and

¹⁵⁶ The issue of “where to draw the line” appears both *inter*-specifically, in debates concerning the propriety of including other animals within the scope of moral concern, and *intra*-specifically, in debates concerning the proper moral status of human beings at different stages of development (such as occur in connection with the issues of abortion and euthanasia).

¹⁵⁷ Cf. G. E. M. Abscombe, “Modern Moral Philosophy”. Cf. also the founding documents of the government of the United States (e.g., “endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights”). Although we reject the divine command theory, this does not mean that rights can have no basis, for they can be grounded in human law.

other morally relevant features, that we find in nature. For these reasons, we maintain that although a legalistic approach has its place in human legal systems, it fails as a foundational moral theory and as an ultimate ground of ethics.

In opposition to a legalistic approach to ethics, we recommend an ethics founded upon deliberately cultivated *altruism*. Such altruism is generated through compassion and the recognition of the ultimate non-difference of the supposed self and other. In developing this ethics, we draw upon resources found in Mahayana Buddhism, Vedanta, Schopenhauer, Sidgwick, Hume, Spinoza, and other sources. This ethics provides a sound basis not only for including non-human animals within the scope of proper moral concern, but also for giving due consideration to other commonly recognized levels of organization such as communities and ecosystems.

In the absence of available recourse to the divine-command theory of ethics (either because God does not exist, or because God is not the sort of being that makes laws of the kind at issue), the question arises concerning the *status* and *basis* of the supposed moral laws. How can there be such laws without a *lawgiver*? In response to this question, there arises, in the history of Western philosophy, an effort to establish these supposed laws on *rational* grounds. This is the project of Kantian deontology most obviously, but is also an objective of the other dominant modern moral theories, insofar as they take a legalistic approach. Although we maintain that these theories fail to provide a defensible basis for ethical legalism, we shall not pause to defend this point here.

Even if one grants that one or more of these legalistic moral theories succeeds in establishing a rational basis for moral law, the question remains: Why obey the moral law? It is not as though we are *forced* to obey the supposed moral laws in the same way that we are forced

to obey the supposed physical laws. Although each of the major ethical theories has its own story to tell in response to this question, these responses are not generally convincing without the supposed sanction of divine authority.¹⁵⁸

Some have concluded, as a consequence of this difficulty, that morality is subjective, relative, or not ultimately binding.¹⁵⁹ If morality is held to be a function of *external authority*, and if the supposed external authority is not operative (as when one's fellows or God are not looking, or are not believed to exist), one may suppose that the reasonable thing is to pursue one's own private interests, whatever one takes these to be. In addition to this attitude being taken up as a practical maxim, ethical egoism arises as a *theory*.¹⁶⁰ All of this is the result of conceiving morality as a matter of *external, alien authority*, of being *forced* to do what is not really in one's own interests to do. When this is the operative assumption, one may conclude that the interests of others may and should be disregarded when it is practically expedient to do so. Some have concluded this, with disastrous consequences.¹⁶¹

An early alternative to the legalistic approach to ethics is articulated in Plato's *Republic*. There, Plato develops the idea that justice is in the interest of the individual itself. Just as justice

¹⁵⁸ Cf. Louis P. Pojman, "Religion Gives Meaning to Life". The notion of *natural law* has been advanced as a substitute for divine law. However, usually, as in Aquinas (and as in Locke with regard to natural *rights*), God is still appealed to as the guarantor of natural law. Without such a guarantor, there are a number of questions that are difficult if not impossible for the natural-law theorist to answer. These questions include: (1) What is the *basis* for such natural law? (2) What is its *ontological status*? For instance, where, and in what, does natural law exist? (3) How do we know what the natural law is? (4) What are the *contents* of natural law? (5) How is natural law *enforced*? (6) What are the consequences of violating natural law? In the absence of adequate answers to these and related questions, natural law theory reveals itself to be a hollow attempt to retain the *function* of supposed divine law without the *ground* that divine command theory provides for this supposed law. In such case, popular appeals to natural law are reduced, as Prof. Lachs has said, to vacuous rhetorical flourish.

¹⁵⁹ As we shall see, such ascriptions are appropriate only when morality is understood in *legalistic* terms.

¹⁶⁰ Cf. Ayn Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness*.

¹⁶¹ The case of Jeffrey Dahmer, a late twentieth-century serial killer in the United States, illustrates this point well. In a television interview, Dahmer reported that although he had long had murderous impulses, he had for a time restrained himself from acting upon these impulses because he believed that murder was forbidden by God, and that God would punish him if he acted upon these impulses. However, when he came to believe that God did not exist, he concluded that there was no reason to refrain from acting upon his urges, for without God, there was no authority or basis for any prohibitions except human authority, and he figured that he could dodge that.

at the level of the state consists in a harmonious relationship amongst the individuals composing the state, with each individual doing its proper part and working for the common good of all, so does justice at the level of the individual consist in a harmonious relationship amongst the parts of the soul, with each part doing its proper part in working for the common good of the individual. Therefore, justice is in one's own deeper self-interest.¹⁶² Even if we had Gyges' ring—that is, even if we were free of the constraints of external authority—the reason for acting justly, the reason for ethical behavior, would still exist.

Plato is on the right track in this connection. However, Plato understands the *individual* in a rather conventional way, and ethical action is not always in the interest of the individual conceived in this way; behaving ethically does sometimes require that we sacrifice our own private good as conventionally understood. Thus, Plato's approach is not sufficient to serve as the basis for a full-fledged ethical theory. What we need is an ethics that goes beyond Plato, without appealing to external authority, or otherwise taking a legalistic approach. To be truly ethical is to sometimes do what is not in one's immediate ordinary self-interest. However, so long as one behaves ethically for a worldly reward—or for an otherworldly reward—one has not really gone beyond mere self-interest (with the self still conceived in an ordinary sense).

We are often willing to forsake present good for future good, even though we do not experience the future good *now*. Why is this so? One answer that can be given to this question is that it is because we *identify* with the supposed future individual that is expected to be the recipient of the good. Why do we identify with that supposed individual? Common sense—and much of philosophy—responds that it is because the supposed future individual will still be the *same* individual as the individual making the choice. Meanwhile, the biological explanation for this behavior is that it is because the supposed future individual will carry the same genetic

¹⁶² Of course, I am leaving out some of the steps of the argument.

type,¹⁶³ and therefore this behavior has evolved through natural selection.¹⁶⁴ Moreover, the favoring of one's own progeny and other close kin can be explained on a similar basis.

Nonetheless, this is all still ordinary "selfishness" at the level of the gene.¹⁶⁵

Some would leave it at this. Can we go further? So far, we have only offered some *explanations* of why individuals are willing to forsake present good for future good. There remains the question of whether this tendency is ethically *justified*. This question is raised by Sidgwick in the context of a discussion of utilitarianism and its justification:

If the Utilitarian has to answer the question 'Why should I sacrifice my own happiness for the greater happiness of another?' it must surely be admissible to ask the Egoist, 'Why should I sacrifice a present pleasure for a greater one in the future? Why should I concern myself about my own future feelings any more than about the feelings of other persons?'¹⁶⁶

Again, Sidgwick asks:

Grant that the Ego is merely a system of coherent phenomena, that the permanent identical 'I' is not a fact but a fiction, as Hume and his followers maintain; why, then, should one part of the series of feelings into which the Ego is resolved be concerned with another part of the same series, any more than with any other series?¹⁶⁷

¹⁶³ Not the same genetic *token*, but it will have roughly the same *meaning* or *interpretation*, for it will consist of the same sequence of nucleotide bases.

¹⁶⁴ Again, I leave out some steps here.

¹⁶⁵ Cf. Richard Dawkins, E. O. Wilson and others. So-called "reciprocal altruism", which is really just *apparent* altruism, can also be explained in evolutionary terms.

¹⁶⁶ Henry Sidgwick, *Methods of Ethics*, p. 418. [In Ayer and O'Grady, p. 422.]

¹⁶⁷ Henry Sidgwick, *Methods of Ethics*, p. 419. [In Ayer and O'Grady, p. 424.]

The question included in this latter passage is essentially the same as the final question included in the foregoing passage, and calls for a *justification* (why *should* I?) rather than an explanation (why *do* I?).

How shall we answer? Why should one be more concerned for the good of a future self in one's own lineage than for the good of any other self, present or future? The answer is that, generally speaking, one should not—*there is no general ethical justification for this tendency*. One part of a series should not be more concerned with another part of the same series than it is with the parts of any other series, for all experiences are experiences of the one concrete reality. *The recognition of this truth is the proper foundation of ethics.*

Even so, there are often reasons why *seemingly* favoring “our own” series is justified. For instance, we often have a more precise sense of what is in the specific interests of later parts of our own series than we do with respect to the parts other series. Moreover, certain kinds of projects are best furthered by paying special heed to our own series. However, these and other such considerations do not mean that our actual *concern* should be greater; although we must act locally, we should think globally.

On what basis do we hold this view regarding the proper foundation of ethics? As background, let us recall Schopenhauer's notion of *eternal justice*, the notion that, at root, the tormentor and the tormented are the *one* (“nature sinks its fangs into its own flesh”). Let us recall also the Upanishadic notion of *Tat tvam asi* (That thou art), and the Mahayana Buddhist notion of *bodhichitta* (enlightened mind). In light of these understandings of reality, there is a sense in which ethics, understood as altruism, “falls to the ground”. That is, it turns out that what appears to be *altruism* from the perspective of an ordinary understanding of personal identity is actually *self-interest* from the perspective of a deeper understanding of personal identity. In this

way, we are able to answer the question: “Why be moral?”¹⁶⁸ We should be moral because *it is in our own more expansive interest to be*. In a sense, then, altruism drops out of the account. Even so, altruism, now properly understood, is restored, for the individual, as commonly conceived, should *not* always act in its own limited interest. Thus, although our theory does not depend upon *ultimate* altruism, it nonetheless advocates altruism from the perspective of the ordinary understanding of the individual self.¹⁶⁹ In this way, we go beyond the limits of Plato’s theory while retaining something of its spirit, namely, the affirmation that it is indeed in our own interests to behave ethically when we understand what our true nature and interests are.

Although we ordinarily identify most strongly with our *conventional* sense of self, we can learn to recognize our deeper alliance with others. This is one of the proximate aims of the cultivation of *compassion* in Mahayana Buddhism. Such compassion is not to be confused with *pity*, understood in the sense that Nietzsche finds objectionable and criticizes. To have compassion (in the Mahayana Buddhist sense) for another is not to hold oneself to be *superior* to the other, much less is it to hold the other in contempt. It is, rather, to recognize that the problem of “the other” is not other than one’s *own* problem. That is, while *relative bodhichitta* does still suppose that the other is not oneself, *absolute bodhichitta* recognizes that the supposed other is ultimately non-different from oneself. This recognition, tantamount to *enlightenment*, is simultaneously the culmination of ethics, and the achievement of the final soteriological goal.

Objection: “You say that ‘all experiences are experiences of the one concrete reality’. But if I hit my neighbor’s arm, *she* feels it, not me. So this business of us all sharing a common identity proves to be an idle suggestion after all.”

¹⁶⁸ This is a traditional expression of a question that is better expressed, in the context of our theory, as: “Why should we be concerned for, and make sacrifices for, the welfare of others in addition to ourselves?”

¹⁶⁹ Cf. Nagarjuna’s notion of the “two truths”.

Reply: What you say points to an important truth. In assessing the claim that we all share a common identity, we must understand correctly what this means. Understood correctly, this claim does not deny any facts of the kind that you just illustrated. In fact, it acknowledges them, and, at the same time, deepens our understanding of them. Take the example of you hitting your neighbor's arm. You say that it is not *you* that feels it. If by 'you', you mean *your immediate subjective awareness*, this is true. But it is also true that neither the pain that you suffered yesterday nor the pain that you will suffer tomorrow is part of your immediate subjective awareness. "Yes," you reply, "but the difference is that those earlier and later awarenesses were had, or will be had, by *me*, while her awareness was not, and never will be." Now, if it is not, solely, your *immediate* awareness with which you are identifying in the context of your remark, we can ask why it is that you identify with a certain portion of awareness outside of this immediacy, but not the rest. In other words, what is this thing that you take to be *you*, and what is its basis and nature?

We do not hesitate to believe that it will be *we* who suffer the hangover consequent upon our excessive drinking tonight, or that it was *we* who suffered the hangover some ten years hence. But clearly we do not *now* suffer these hangovers; it is not we as *this present awareness* that suffers. But this (our present) awareness is *identifying* with these past and future suffering awarenesses. And we do this in part because we are *continuous* with them: the awareness that suffered in the past has grown into my present awareness, and my present awareness will grow into my future awareness.

Now, these past and future awarenesses can be more or less remote, and we do tend to identify more strongly with those awarenesses that are more proximate (consider the remark that is sometimes made that a person is no longer the same person who they were at some earlier

date). When one's identification extends beyond one's immediate awareness, however, it is generally due in part to this supposed continuity with the other awarenesses that come earlier or later in the sequence. But in truth, there is a continuity among *all* awareness, for all awareness is awareness of the one concrete reality. So, for precisely the same reason that we have for identifying with our earlier and later awarenesses, namely, *continuity*, we have reason to identify with the *whole* of awareness. Of course, we can, and usually do, identify with a mere portion of this whole, but when we do this, we are identifying with an abstraction. If we reify such conceptual abstractions, we delude ourselves concerning what is actually concretely real.

Objection: "Your ethical theory, which you have characterized as a form of 'ethical directism', is really nothing but ethical *subjectivism* (or ethical *relativism*)."

Reply: Not so. The opposition between subjectivism and objectivism in ethics, as usually conceived, only arises in the context of moral *legalism*; when legalism is rejected, this opposition itself falls to the ground. Even so, from the perspective of a traditional ethical objectivist, our theory will undoubtedly appear to be a rejection of ethical objectivism, traditionally understood. That it is, for we do deny that there are any objective fundamental moral laws. This is obvious, for we deny that there are any fundamental moral laws at all. However, our theory is quite different from traditional subjectivism or ethical relativism, for we not only reject the legalism through which these views get their sense, but, more importantly, we affirm that certain attitudes, courses of action, ways of being in the world, etc., are *objectively better* than others. In this way, our view is actually more like *objectivism* than subjectivism.

The lack of any ultimate commands, obligations, or duties in our approach to ethics will be disconcerting to many accustomed to the legalistic approach. The worry is that our approach amounts to an "anything goes" philosophy, that if people are not constrained, they will simply do

as they will—as they are inclined to do by their baser impulses—and, as a consequence, much harm will result that is avoided with a legalistic approach.

A number of things can be said in response to this concern. First, even if it were true that our ethics has these negative consequences, this would not be evidence that legalistic ethics has a rationally defensible basis. Second, while it is true that some (and perhaps, in our time, even many) people will not behave well without the threat of external sanctions, nothing we are saying is intended to imply that all external sanctions should be eliminated. Human law, social pressure, and other means of modifying recalcitrant human behavior still have their place, and probably will for some time to come. Our denial of legalism is primarily a denial of a certain kind of theoretical view concerning the fundamental ground of ethics. Even so, third, it is often true that people are made better not by commands to do what they are themselves opposed to doing, but rather by instruction and guidance in what is really in their own deeper self-interest. This means that it is a consequence of our theory that a shift of resources from “criminal justice” (the reactive, punitive, and often vindictive approach) to education (the proactive, cultivating, and forgiving approach) is recommended. The goal is a harmony between what individuals desire to do and what is best for all concerned. Therefore, instead of understanding *inclination* as the antithesis of ethical behavior, as does Kant, inclination is used as an instrument of ethical behavior. This is achieved by cultivating the inclination and deliberately fostering good habits, and by developing a deeper understanding of the nature of our situation.

We have spoken here mostly with respect to *foundational* issues in ethics, and this may have given a mistaken impression. Therefore, let us reiterate that nothing that we have said should be taken to imply that we deny or depreciate the value of establishing rules and

cultivating good habits.¹⁷⁰ On the contrary, we encourage these things, and they find their basis in the very ground that we have suggested.¹⁷¹ For some among us, and maybe most of us, these things remain useful. Therefore, nothing of value is lost in terms of regulating behavior by abandoning ethical legalism, and one need not fear that chaos will reign. Indeed, as we illustrated with the Jeffrey Dahmer case, it is ethical legalism that is on shaky theoretical ground. By encouraging the belief that the reason to behave ethically is that there is an enforceable command to do so, ethical legalism prepares the way for the abandonment of ethics altogether. To the one who loses faith in a divine enforcer, and who finds no compulsion in the abstract arguments of the moral philosophers, and who contrives to avoid human authority, supposed moral rules or laws can come to seem whole arbitrary and without motive power. For such a person, ethics is reduced, if it survives at all, to the prudent management of self-interest.

A consequence of our fundamental ethical theory is that many of the debates among the standard ethical theories are superseded. One need not decide whether utilitarianism or deontology provides a better foundation for ethics, for instance, for neither of these theories provides the foundation for ethics. This opens the way for a *pluralist* approach to the standard theories. It also lessens our surprise and our worry that these theories each have anomalies, disturbing counter-examples, and other defects. Despite these shortcomings, each of the major ethical theories contains valuable insights and provides useful guidance. When it is recognized that none of these theories provides a *foundation* for ethics, the rivalry between them is diminished, and the virtues of each can find their place within a new integrated system.

There is a further advantage to ethical directism. For the most part, people do not like being subject to demands. The motive force and emotional connection of ethical directism is not

¹⁷⁰ Including formal legal systems enforced with sanctions, although these sanctions should not be punitive in a retributive sense.

¹⁷¹ A detailed account of this grounding belongs in another place.

fear, as it is with ethical legalism, but *loving-kindness* and *compassion*. This is not only the more *pleasant* emotional connection, but also ultimately the more *powerful*. While fear at best only motivates compliance with enforced requirements, loving-kindness and compassion motivate pervasively. Moreover, by cultivating the immediate will to do whatever is actually best, ethical action becomes a matter of *joyful effort* rather than begrudging acquiescence.¹⁷²

Politics

Whether politics is understood as an *extension* of ethics or as an *aspect* of ethics is a conceptual matter, a matter of how expansively we use the respective terms. I think it most convenient to consider politics as an extension of ethics, and then indicate their close connection by subsuming both under the rubric of pragmatics. In this way, issues that apply to both can be discussed under one head, and for any specific differences, there remain the separate names. In any event, politics is intimately associated with ethics, and, like ethics, finds its basis or ground in metaphysics.

When we say that reality is *one continuous whole*, we point to an important truth. This statement, however, can be easily misunderstood. On the one hand, in hearing it said that reality is a *whole*, someone might infer that reality is *composed of parts*. Based upon this view, it might be supposed that the parts are in some measure *autonomous*, or, at any rate, are at least *logically prior* to the whole. This is not true, and to believe this is to fall to one defective extreme, the extreme of *atomism*. On the other hand, in hearing it said that reality is *one*, someone might

¹⁷² For Kant, the apparent coincidence of inclination and duty is to be regarded with suspicion, for in such cases, one cannot be sure whether one is acting from duty or merely from inclination. Therefore, one cannot be sure that one is doing one's duty at all, for one may simply be beguiled by inclination. In contrast, we put inclination in the service of ethical action, and see the highest ethical end to be the harmonization of what one is most inclination to do and what is actually best to do for all concerned.

infer that reality is *a simple unity or singularity*. Based upon this view, it might be supposed that *no opposition or conflict*—indeed, no action of any kind—is possible (for these things depend upon differentiation and plurality). This is not true, and to believe this is to fall to another defective extreme, the extreme of *simple monism*. The truth lies not so much *between* these two extremes as *beyond* them.¹⁷³

The term ‘organic unity’ is sometimes used to characterize a system in which neither the whole nor the supposed parts are prior to the other, but each is dependent upon the other. To say that reality itself is an organic unity again points to an important truth, but this, too, can be misunderstood. It is true that reality is not a *simple* unity—reality is spatiotemporally spread, and is spread in a non-uniform fashion. Even so, there are, in truth, no parts *per se* at all; the so-called parts are really only conceptual divisions of the continuum.¹⁷⁴

In Section I, we said that all experiences are experiences of the one concrete reality (and are in this sense equal), and indicated that the recognition of this truth is the proper foundation of ethics. To say that all experiences are experiences of the one concrete reality implies that reality is one continuous whole. As we just indicated, however, properly understood this does not mean that no opposition or conflict is possible. A snake is a sort of continuous whole, but this does not prevent it from biting its own tail.

A role and task of politics is to adjudicate opposition and conflict, with the aim of achieving the best possible result. Opposition is not inherently bad; indeed, the dynamic character of reality is dependent upon it. Nonetheless, certain kinds of opposition and conflict are productive of suffering and unhappiness, which, in themselves, are *bad* things. Meanwhile, certain kinds of concord and cooperation are productive of joy and happiness, which, in

¹⁷³ It remains true that the two sides, although contradictory, do each point to an important part of the truth. Therefore, the full truth is in a sense both, in a sense neither. Cf. Nagarjuna’s tetralemma.

¹⁷⁴ For this reason, we generally speak of “portions” rather than “parts” of reality.

themselves, are *good* things. We need not suppose that these categories exhaust the sphere of good and bad things, nor need we suppose that they are the only *fundamentally* good and bad things;¹⁷⁵ in any event, they themselves are good and bad things, and are thus worthy of being fostered and thwarted, respectively. Meanwhile, various projects also are advanced through concord and cooperation, and hampered by opposition and conflict, and perhaps some of these projects have value that is not reducible to, or fully explainable in terms of, the joy and happiness that they produce. Finally, it should be acknowledged that sometimes opposition and conflict are productive of good. In its aim to achieve the best possible result, politics must take all of these considerations into account.

A question for pragmatics generally, the answer to which being applicable to politics, is that of what kind of things have a good of their own. We are generally inclined to think most especially of human individuals as having a good of their own. Perhaps other sorts of animals also have a good of their own. There are, however, other levels of organization, both more and less inclusive, such as organs, cells, and organelles, on the one hand, and families, towns, and nations, on the other. Do any of these have a good of their own? Does the whole of reality have a good of its own? Moreover, what kind, or kinds, of “good of one’s own” are ethically and politically significant? An automobile, for instance, has a good of its own, in that it can be in good repair or bad, and in that certain things are helpful to it and other things are harmful, relative to its intended function. Even so, we do not ordinarily suppose that an automobile has preferences or experiences in the way that we suppose that human beings do. The answers to these sorts of questions are relevant to politics, for politics must know what goods it is seeking, and to whom or what these goods fall.

¹⁷⁵ Indeed, we need not suppose that there are any *fundamentally* good and bad things at all.

If a human life is fortunately situated and well ordered, it will be productive of good experiences. Similarly, if a community is fortunately situated and well ordered, it will be productive of good experiences. Neither the human individual nor the community substantially exists as such; in this sense, neither has a good of its own, for both are merely *conceptual categories*.¹⁷⁶ However, both the human individual and the community are conceptual categories that subsume good and bad *experiences*. Therefore, these conceptual categories subsume something that *does* have a good of its own.¹⁷⁷ In saying so, we are not supposing an atomism of individual experiences, with these individual experiences being the true and final recipients or repositories of the good. It is a matter, instead, of there being a *continuum* of experience that can be overlaid with various categories of different extent. Therefore, it makes sense to speak of the welfare of the community *as such*, for example, just as much—and in precisely the same way—as it makes sense to speak of the welfare of the ordinary human individual as such.

The foregoing entails that the ordinary human individual is not properly conceived to be a uniquely privileged category. This is highly significant. It is sometimes said that the individual (or the family, or some other such category) is the fundamental unit of society. According to our analysis, there is no fundamental unit of society (indeed, there is no fundamental unit at all, unless it be the whole of reality itself). Obviously, this has profound implications for politics, for it means that politics should not be concerned only with maximizing the good of individuals as such; politics properly concerns itself with the good of *all* of the various levels of organization, and not merely as a means to the good of individuals. This should rightly raise some concerns.

¹⁷⁶ Cf. the Buddhist notion of *shunyata* (“emptiness”), which we have discussed elsewhere. Often, the ordinary human individual is considered to be an example *par excellence* of a *particular*; what we are saying here is that the ordinary human individual is better understood as a kind of *universal*.

¹⁷⁷ This is properly said of any conceptual category in which experience is included.

There has been no shortage of philosophies that have denied the significance individuals,¹⁷⁸ and the application, or at least the ostensible application, of some of these philosophies has had some undeniably pernicious consequences. Let us make clear, then, that it is by no means our intent to denigrate individuals, nor is it our intent to suggest that the category of ordinary individuality does not have special significance. Even so, our philosophy does militate against radical forms of individualism, which we take to be in its favor, and it is exposed to some of the same concerns regarding individual autonomy that fall to utilitarianism.¹⁷⁹

Soteriology

We intimated something of the character of the soteriological goal toward the end of Section I, and indicated its involvement with ethics. As we averred at the outset of this essay, the various aspects of pragmatics are closely connected. Here we shall discuss soteriology more directly and in a little more detail.

The first point to note is that although both the term ‘soteriology’ and the related term ‘salvation’ are of Western origin (and thus, especially in their early usage, tend to be associated with Christian, or at least Abrahamic, doctrines), we intend these terms in a much more general sense. The term ‘soteriology’ does not show up much in contemporary philosophical discussions, but it is a common term in theology and religious studies, where it is now most often

¹⁷⁸ We have in mind here Fichte, Hegel, and some of their followers, among others. For a nice account of this matter, see John Lachs, “The Insignificance of Individuals”, reprinted in John Lachs, *A Community of Individuals*, Routledge, 2003.

¹⁷⁹ Traditional utilitarianism is associated with an *atomistic* view of the individual, making some of these difficulties more intractable and recalcitrant than they are on our approach. Nevertheless, we must answer these concerns, although this is not the place to do so in detail. Our response invokes the naturalness and primacy of the category of ordinary individuality. Even though there are no *substantial* individuals, the assumption that there are is pervasive, and to this we should pay due heed. Moreover, the notion of the individual person is central, or at least apparently central, to many kinds of projects. Accordingly, the specific interests of the ordinary individual are properly accorded more weight than they would be, based upon abstract considerations alone.

used in a broad sense. Related notions in the Asian traditions include *moksha* (“liberation”), *bodhi* (“enlightenment”), and nirvana. However, in saying that we intend the terms “soteriology” and ‘salvation’ in a general sense, we do not merely mean in a culturally inclusive sense. For instance, we certainly do not intend the term ‘salvation’ to apply only with reference to some supposed afterlife or eschatology,¹⁸⁰ although assuaging the fear of death, and understanding the sense in which there is no death or passage, are among the aims of soteriology. Under the head of soteriology, we mean to include a wide array of issues connected with achieving a well-lived, effective, and rewarding life, as well as issues concerned with matters that are popularly called *spiritual*. The topic of the meaning of life will also be treated under this head. Perhaps soteriology is not the best term for this purpose, but I have not so far thought of a better one for this array of closely connected concerns. I am open to suggestions.

I do not expect to achieve much more here than to announce my intention to take up the subject of soteriology in greater depth, developing its connections with metaphysics and the rest of pragmatics. One of the characterizations of pragmatics that we provided at the outset of this essay is that pragmatics is philosophical theory that is directly concerned with practice. One of the reasons why, in the history of Western philosophy, metaphysics came to be considered a very dry and abstract, and eventually a largely irrelevant or even meaningless study, is that the metaphysicians themselves often did not adequately emphasize the practical implications and applications of their metaphysical theories.¹⁸¹ In truth, metaphysics has profound practical import, and pragmatics, as the mediating link between theory and practice, has the role and task

¹⁸⁰ Popular Christianity tends to strongly, if not exclusively, associate salvation with its consequences for a supposed afterlife, and thus insists that salvation depends upon the survival of death. Of course, some Christian theologians resist this tendency. Meanwhile, early Buddhist writings often give the impression that full liberation is only achieved with bodily death. In contrast, most Mahayana Buddhist sources insist that nirvana is not an otherworldly matter, but rather something that can be achieved here and now.

¹⁸¹ There are, of course, a few notable exceptions.

not only of making this practical import known, but also of drawing out the practical implications of particular metaphysical theories. The specific portion of this role and task that falls to soteriology deals with issues of the sort that we just mentioned.

Metaphysics is valuable in part because of the direct salutary consequences of metaphysical understanding. The development of this understanding is thus one of the practical applications of metaphysics, and, in Indian philosophy, is one of the principal ways to salvation.¹⁸² Right understanding of the nature of reality brings us happiness and peace, while misunderstanding and ignorance of the nature of reality can bring us sorrow and disquietude. One of the most insidious misunderstandings involves the nature of individuality; it is the failure to recognize our own true nature and identity. We are naturally inclined to identify with constructed images of ourselves. But these images, as we have suggested here, and have discussed more at length elsewhere, are only concepts; they are not our concrete reality. However, we tend to reify these conceptual images of ourselves and mistakenly identify with them. This error ushers in a number of other mistaken views, including *legalism* in the ethical sphere and *vicious individualism* in the political sphere. In the soteriological sphere, this error is the source of such maladies as the fear of death¹⁸³ and annihilation, the belief that life is ultimately meaningless, and the uneasy (perhaps even terrorizing) feeling of being oppressed by a vast, alien, and indifferent universe. Since these maladies, and the other mistaken views, are all rooted in the same source, they stand or fall together.

¹⁸² In the Hindu traditions, this path to salvation is called *jnana yoga*.

¹⁸³ There is a natural “fear of death” that helps us and other animals avoid hazardous situations (we place the appellation in shudder quotes, for most such animals probably lack a concept of death, and hence do not fear death *per se*). We speak here of the fear of death in the sense that it can plague people even in situations of relative safety.

Let us consider an example that illustrates our point concerning how right understanding of the nature of reality brings us happiness and peace.¹⁸⁴ People are often disturbed when they contemplate what they take to be their insignificant role in the “grand scheme of things”. In a discussion of German idealism and the sense in which individuals are not of ultimate significance, Lachs illustrates a point regarding the relation between the individual and the work of spirit or the state with the help of an analogy:

Friends of Hegel can readily, and rightly, argue that the work of spirit is impossible without concrete empirical persons. But that is like maintaining the essentiality of cells for the body. Of course cells are necessary constituents of the organism. Nevertheless, no particular cell is necessary, and hence any cell is dispensable.¹⁸⁵

So too, individuals, although necessary *en masse* to the work of spirit or the state, are individually each an “insignificantly small fragment”¹⁸⁶ of the larger whole. Individuals can come and go like the drunken members of Hegel’s Bacchanalian revel¹⁸⁷ without seeming to make any significant difference to the whole. There is a sense, surely, in which this is true. Insofar as we conceive the whole *abstractly* and as *passing through time*, we do not have to consider relatively small internal additions and subtractions as altering the “essential identity” of the whole.

The situation is quite different, however, with respect to the relation between the individual and the transtemporal totality (“the Totality”) as a *concrete reality*. It is only if we are

¹⁸⁴ This example falls under the head of the role of knowledge and understanding in salvation. Other factors are also conducive to salvation, and we do not want to leave the false impression that discursive knowledge is the only way.

¹⁸⁵ John Lachs, *ibid.*, p. 141. In the same article, Lachs discusses how “...the Americans [meaning the majority of the major figures of the classical period of American philosophy], by contrast, view individuality as of paramount significance for morality and for social life.”

¹⁸⁶ John Lachs, *ibid.*, p. 142.

¹⁸⁷ Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Preface, translated by A. V. Miller, p. 27.

speaking of a whole as an *abstract category* that we can properly say that the whole retains its identity as constituent individuals come and go. In truth, did it lack a jot or tittle of what it actually comprises, the Totality would not be what it concretely *is*. Therefore, the Totality is just as dependent upon each individual as each individual is dependent upon the Totality. I think that this important truth should comfort those who misbelieve that their lives are not significant.¹⁸⁸ Reality itself—one could say God—is absolutely dependent upon each and every one of us.

Concluding Remarks

We have said that metaphysics is the discipline that deals with the most fundamental theoretical issues. But we also said, in the preamble of this chapter, that a metaphysical theory finds its whole meaning and significance only in the context of an articulated pragmatics. Neither metaphysics nor pragmatics, then, can be adequately treated or understood in isolation from the other. The distinction between the fundamental and the derivative is sometimes a useful one, but always a relative one, and we should be suspicious of any naïve foundationalism, of any view that claims that there are ultimately basic truths, or that claims that the relation of dependence among ideas only runs one way. Metaphysics is, indeed—in a sense—the most fundamental theoretical discipline, and is, in this sense, the ultimate foundation of all theory. But this statement becomes a pernicious falsehood if it is interpreted to mean that the truths of metaphysics are altogether independent of other considerations.¹⁸⁹ It is precisely this

¹⁸⁸ I also think that this important truth should inspire people to noble and joyful effort. For a related discussion, see Nietzsche on the “greatest weight” (discussed in connection with his notion of the “eternal recurrence”).

¹⁸⁹ Wondering which is prior, metaphysics or pragmatics, is a little like wondering which organ of the body is more important, the heart or the liver. In truth, we cannot get by for long without either one of them, or some substitute thereof. The heart is afforded greater honor, and perhaps rightly so, since heart failure has more immediate consequences. Even so, both are necessary for life. Similarly, in recognizing the correlative relation between

perniciously false way of thinking—and the metaphysical apriorism with which it tends to be associated—that pushes metaphysics in the direction of irrelevancy and even meaninglessness.

We have emphasized throughout this work the close connections among ethics, politics, and soteriology.¹⁹⁰ But how exactly should we conceive their relationship? One way to understand their relationship is in terms of a *hierarchy* of primacy or fundamentality. One could say with some justice, for instance, that ethics is properly grounded in metaphysics, and politics is properly grounded in ethics. We have already illustrated, however, the ways in which politics is directly grounded in metaphysics. Moreover, one could make a case for politics being more fundamental than ethics.¹⁹¹ And what of soteriology? Should we say that soteriology must find its place in the hierarchy including ethics and politics, or is it better to say that soteriology must find its place in a different hierarchal line altogether?

Some progress could be made in resolving these questions by carefully defining the specific purview of each of the respective spheres of concern. However, the boundaries of all of these spheres are naturally quite vague. Stipulating realistic definitions with precise boundaries would be difficult if not impossible for any of these disciplines, and, in any event, the more progress that we made in the direction of precision, the more artificial and contrived our definitions would become. The vagueness of the boundary between ethics and soteriology, for instance, is not a mark of insufficiently precise definitions or sloppy thinking; on the contrary, it

metaphysics and pragmatics, we are not recommending an *inversion* of the usually supposed order of dependence, with pragmatics assuming the fundamental role, although, for certain purposes, this too may have its utility.

¹⁹⁰ Although we have highlighted these three fields because of their obvious importance and centrality, we do not suppose that they collectively exhaust the purview of pragmatics. Environmental philosophy, economic philosophy, social philosophy, feminism, queer studies, and many other traditional and contemporary fields of philosophy and applied ethics are properly included as well, as least in their practical aspects. Although at least some of these, in at least some of their aspects, could be subsumed under some one or combination of our principal three, this may not be the most convenient arrangement for all of them.

¹⁹¹ One way of doing this would be to emphasize the fact that ordinary individuals, so called, are not substantial, and thus are not really atomic units at all. One might then understand ordinary individuals as *societies* or *communities of moments of experience*, to which traditional political concerns apply.

registers an important truth, the truth that these spheres of concern grade into one another and even interdigitate. The soteriological goal *is* an ethical goal (or at least includes ethical considerations), and vice versa. Indeed, at a deep level, the distinction between these two spheres of concern tends to break down entirely. The same can be rightly said of the other relationships among the different aspects of pragmatics.

It is for reasons of this kind that having a general category—the category that we call *pragmatics*—is useful.¹⁹² The usefulness of the notion of pragmatics is not limited to that of a mere verbal convenience. Part of the point of gathering these spheres of concern under one head is to foster greater alliance and integration among these fields of study and practice. Meanwhile, the other, more specific categories and terms subsumed by pragmatics retain their usefulness, for despite the considerations that we just adumbrated, there remain important differences among the various aspects or fields of pragmatics as well. Collectively—as I suppose goes without saying—the fields of pragmatics comprise extremely important and relevant concerns for our time, and for any time in which there are intelligent but not yet fully enlightened beings struggling to know themselves and each other.

¹⁹² I am not attached to this particular *word*. Perhaps another would serve better for this purpose, and again, I am open to suggestions.

CHAPTER 7

THE MEANING OF LIFE

Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* is, among other things, an investigation and study of the meaning of life. The story presents us with the person of Ahab, captain of the ship and, one might say, the central figure of the work. Ahab has been personally affronted through the agency of the great whale Moby Dick. His chief aim in life has become the exacting of vengeance upon the sinister brute. Ahab projects upon Moby Dick all the evils of the world, such that to slay Moby Dick would be to purge at least a local concentration of this evil. Melville makes much of the *whiteness* of the whale, saying that this whiteness makes the evil that comes in the guise of it all the more repugnant and terrifying.

Can we slay evil? And if so, how can we do it? Are anger and hatred of service to us in this endeavor? Or is passive acceptance the best approach? Is there a *middle way*?¹⁹³ How, when, and in what way do we do battle with evil?

Melville has Ahab perish as a consequence of his quest, and in the process he brings most of the crew down with him. Only one, Ishmael, the forsaken one, lives to tell the tale. Is Melville suggesting that the path of revenge is self-destructive? And yet he makes of Ahab something of a *noble* character.¹⁹⁴ Ahab's nobility comes through his relentless striving to

¹⁹³ The sense of 'middle way' in play here is not a mere *mean*: it is not the middle in the sense of *halfway passive* and *halfway angry*. Rather, it is the dropping of the defective aspects of both extremes, while retaining their respective virtues. I think that Lachs has something like is in mind with his notion of *Stoic Pragmatism*.

¹⁹⁴ Schopenhauer speaks in defense of vengeance in certain extreme cases. Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*.

destroy the cause of suffering. His failure comes through his use of mistaken methods and his mistaken understanding of the nature of the case. He unduly focused upon only *his own* mishap. He is thus a tragic figure.

The notion of the meaning of life is a complex notion, or an array of notions. In one way, the meaning of life is a very individual and idiosyncratic thing. In another way, the meaning of life is universal. In the sense in which it is universal, the meaning of life is its cosmic *significance*. And what is its cosmic significance? As we have indicated, the Totality itself would not be what it is, were any portion of it not exactly what it is. So the Totality itself would not be what it is if any individual were absent or altered. Each individual is, therefore, absolutely *necessary*.¹⁹⁵ It is absolutely necessary in the sense that the Totality as it is could not exist without it. And the Totality itself is necessary, in that, given its reality, it cannot not exist. What is the significance of this significance? What does the knowledge of it do for us?

The recognition of this deep truth reveals that we are *at home* in reality. And it indicates that we can and do make a difference to how things turn out. The consequences of all our activities radiate influence onwards without cessation. The recognition of this might be received as a burden, for this influence cannot be escaped—it does and must fall on each of us.¹⁹⁶ But it is, in truth, a tremendous opportunity. Our mark will be left, and it is for us to make it a good one, according to our capabilities, in the recognition that there is much that is not in our immediate control. Therefore we can go in peace, with joyful effort.

Within the scope of this *universal* meaning of life, then, it is for each of us to find our own *individual* meaning of life. This is an ongoing project, but there are important guiding principles. Our lives are most meaningful on a personal level when we recognize their universal

¹⁹⁵ Contrast this insight with Hegel's remarks on the insignificance of individuals.

¹⁹⁶ Cf. Nietzsche's *greatest weight*.

meaning and consciously live in fulfillment of it. This means that we recognize that everything we do has significance, since everything we do forever influences the whole future development of reality. Moreover, everything we do is an eternal aspect of the Totality itself.

There is a traditional Mahayana Buddhist story that may be of interest in this connection.¹⁹⁷ The story features Asanga, one of the most important and influential of Mahayana Buddhist philosophers, who is credited with founding the *Yogachara* or *Chittamatra* (Mind-Only) School.

Before realizing the Mind-Only philosophy, Asanga went into retreat to seek wisdom. He did practice and made prayers to Buddha Maitreya (said to be the next earthly historical Buddha, subsequent to Buddha Shayamuni). Asanga practiced diligently for six years, but in this time he had no vision of Maitreya. Discouraged, he resigned his efforts, abandoned his practice, and broke his retreat. He hiked down from his retreat cave to the nearest village. Upon entering the village, he espied an old man polishing a large iron bar with a ragged cloth. He inquired of the man what he was doing, and the man replied that he needed a needle to stitch his clothing, and was making one out of this iron bar.

Asanga was impressed by the man's dedication and commitment, and humbled that he had not shown the same in his spiritual practice. "Here is this ordinary man, willing to devote himself wholeheartedly to a task of no particularly great value, and here am I, Asanga, unwilling to devote even a fraction of this effort to my own noble aspiration." Asanga determined to return to retreat.

Another three years past, still with no sign of accomplishment. Again Asanga, discouraged, gave up and broke retreat. Again he descended from his retreat cabin, and hiked to

¹⁹⁷ A version of this story is recounted in Patrul Rinpoche, *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, Shambhala. Also see Chagdud Tulku, *Gates to Buddhist Practice*, Padma Publishing.

a village. This time, as he entered the village, he encountered a man rubbing a cliff face with his bare hand. “What are you doing?” Asanga asked. “Oh, this cliff is obscuring the sun in the morning, and my house is so cold. I am removing part of it by brushing it away with my hand.”

Again Asanga was impressed and humbled, and determined to return to retreat. He practiced for another three years, still with no signs of accomplishment. Discouraged, he broke retreat, descended, and returned to the village. Upon entering the village, Asanga observed an old mother dog, severely wounded in her hindquarters, with her rear legs no longer functioning. The old dog was fain to drag herself along with her front legs. Her wounds were festering and gangrenous, and loaded with writhing maggots. Asanga was filled with compassion for the dog, and moved to comfort her. The dog, in her fear and pain, snapped and snarled at Asanga. Asanga knew that he had to clean the wound if the dog were to have any chance of survival.

Asanga first had to remove the maggots from the wound. But he did not want to harm the maggots, and was at a loss for a time as to how to proceed. He at last determined to cut off a piece of his own flesh as food for the maggots, and then to lick the maggots out of the wound with his tongue, so as not to injure them. Asanga cut off the piece of his flesh, and held it near the wounded dog’s hindquarters. The thought of licking the festering wound repulsed him. He closed his eyes and held his breath, and lowered his head. Feeling his tongue touch the earth, he opened his eyes.

The dog was gone, and instead, sitting to the side, was Maitreya. Overcome with astonishment and joy, Asanga prostrated before him. He then addressed Maitreya: “Why did you wait so long to come to me? For twelve years I dedicated my practice to you, and never did you show yourself.”

Maitreya replied: “I have been with you all the time. I was there with you in your retreat cave, but you did not see me. I was the old man polishing the large iron bar with a ragged cloth. I was the man rubbing the cliff face with my bare hand. However, it was only when I appeared to you as this poor wretched dog and you were spontaneously moved to action by pure compassion and love that you were able to see me.”

Asanga was skeptical. “Put me on your shoulder,” Maitreya replied, “and carry me around and show me to others.” Asanga did as he was instructed. With each person he met, the result was the same: puzzled, they all replied that they could see nothing on his shoulder.

Finally, Asanga encountered an old woman renowned for her compassion, and said to have some realization. “Do you see anything on my shoulder?” Asanga asked.

“Yes,” she said. “You are carrying the corpse of an old mother dog.”¹⁹⁸

The point, in the present context, or one of the points, is that often our efforts take some time to show fruit. Moreover, they will not always be recognized and appreciated by others. Even so, progress is made. Indeed, we cannot help but to make an impact on the world. This impact becomes an eternal feature of reality. It also continues to ripple forward without end. Let it be in rings of benefit.

¹⁹⁸ On the mythic (or teaching) significance of stories of this kind, see Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth*.

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