The Nihilistic Image of the World

Michael Bourke

Abstract

In *The Gay Science* (1882), Nietzsche heralded the problem of nihilism with his famous declaration "God is dead," which signalled the collapse of a transcendent basis for the underpinning morality of European civilization. He associated this collapse with the rise of the natural sciences whose methods and pervasive outlook he was concerned would progressively shape "an essentially mechanistic [and hence meaningless] world." The Russian novelist Turgenev had also associated a scientific outlook with nihilism through the scientism of Yevgeny Bazarov, a character in *Fathers and Sons*. A century or so later, can we correlate relevant scientific results and the nihilistic consequences that worried these and other nineteenth-century authors? The aversion of empirical disciplines to such non-empirical concepts as personhood and agency, and their methodological exclusion of the very idea of value would make this a difficult task. Recent neuroscientific (MRI) investigations into free will might provide a useful starting point for anyone interested in this sociological question, as might the research results of experimental or evolutionary psychologists studying what they take human beings to be. In this paper, I turn instead to a more basic issue of science. I will question the universality of a principle of identity assumed by a scientific understanding of what it means for anything to exist. I will argue that the essential features of human existence present an exception to this principle of identity and thereby fall outside the grasp of scientific inquiry. The basis of this argument will be an explanation of why it is nonetheless rational for us to affirm personhood, agency, moral values, and many more concepts that disappear under the scrutiny of the sciences.

1 – Options for a meaningless world

We are members of a social species, but also individuals whose agency implies a capacity for self-reflective, rational choice. This capacity is essential to our identity, and suggests why it is unjust to treat people merely as members of a species who can be herded into social arrangements without their consent. Such basic features of our civic life as individual rights and the rule of law assume the interrelated concepts of agency and personhood. Yet these concepts are fleeing our conceptual stage before the research results of neuroscientists, experimental psychologists, theorists of information technology, and philosophers who have eliminated concepts integral to the self – e.g., in addition to agency, belief, meaning, value, even consciousness. Daniel Dennett has presented a softer option to those of us who are reluctant to eliminate these concepts outright. He encourages us to view the self and its associated intentional-mental entities as things without *real* ontological status, as part of a pre-scientific inheritance which we maintain for practical purpose while the sciences gradually reveal the inventory of our actual ontology. It seems that if we are to keep faith with the sciences, we must, immediately or through a gradual process of mediating diplomacy, accede to the dramatic conclusion that the concepts underlying our most basic view

of ourselves are illusory. If we recognise that no replacement concepts within the sciences can begin to support anything like persons, free will, meaning, value, and so forth, we then face this paradox: that our capacity for self-reflective, rational agency leads us to see its impossibility. This is not a transitional problem owing to the immaturity of our scientific theories, but a result of extending overly far the methods of exactitude expected by the sciences – more particularly of applying universally a methodological principle of identity based on the aim of precision to all categories of things that we believe might exist. I will argue that the picture of reality left by a totalising application of this principle brings us as close to a vision of nihilism as we can coherently approach. I will then offer an extra-scientific basis for conceiving and justifying our most basic concepts.

Let us first pause to consider whether we should regard nihilism, or the allegedly destructive potential of the sciences, in such a dismal light. We might consider an analogy with Nietzsche in his apparently ambiguous role as harbinger of nihilism and critic of a metaphysical inheritance which he regarded as life-denying and sought to sweep away. Within the evolving phenomenon of the Enlightenment, scientific understanding often has been invoked to encourage us to clear away false or meaningless metaphysical encrustations of our civilisation which interfere with more natural forms of life or human flourishing. Why not embrace nihilism in this sense, as a doctrine used to promote a clearer view of the lifeworld, or a more genuine way of existing as a species – as an existential application of experimental methods? We might then regard the destructive potential of the sciences as a salutary form of nihilism, performing a role similar to Nietzsche's critique of European, post-Christian culture, which was aimed at hastening the demise of life-denying, otherworldly metaphysical values lingering falsely in late-modern secular society.

Nietzsche's critique can reasonably be seen as a reflection of Enlightenment values, though it would be misleading to say that his critique of metaphysics can be reconciled with a similarly directed positivist critique, or that he was an advocate of nihilism. Nietzsche anticipated that a widespread loss of faith among educated Europeans in the metaphysical superstructure of their basic concepts and values eventually would leave European (and hence global) civilization adrift, vulnerable to an ongoing debasement of cultural and civic values, and subsequently prey to the most barbarous or insidious threats to civil society. These concerns begin to explain the urgency of his call for a revaluation of all values, in his view the central task facing practical philosophy, and facing every human being who has an intellectual conscience.[1] While Nietzsche conceived this task in terms of recasting metaphysical concepts in naturalised terms, he strenuously promoted a critique of the mechanistic worldview implied by the methodology of the natural sciences, which had recently been given a special impetus by the publication of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* (1859).[2] He states this critique quite succinctly at one point in *The Gay Science*, when he says that "an essentially mechanistic world would be an essentially meaningless world."[3]

2 – Linguistic analysis and the meaningless of ethical norms

Fewer than fifty years after Nietzsche suggested that the quantitative procedures and formulas of science would reveal a meaningless world, philosophers of the Vienna Circle converged on several versions of the verification principle of meaning, an empiricist, logical-semantic dictum that all (non-analytic) expressions that cannot be empirically verified or confirmed are meaningless, including ethical, aesthetic, and philosophical expressions. Moritz Schlick, the founder of the Vienna Circle, offered an especially stark version of this principle of meaning; but in his treatise *Problems of Ethics*,[4] he nevertheless struggled, unlike other members of the group, with the implications of the meaninglessness of ethics. His treatise aims to produce a scientific account of ethical values which would establish ethics as a sub-discipline of psychology. But it also aims to provide a practical *basis* for ethics. Schlick contrasts this surprising secondary objective with philosophical attempts to justify ethical values, which, from the standpoint of his theory of meaning, would be nonsensical.

In his preface, Schlick characterizes his treatise as an effort to "communicate some truths – in [his] opinion not unimportant ones" – which serve as a philosophical *stimulus* and which are intended to change the orientation of ethics.[5] Despite his commitment to the verification theory of meaning, his re-orientation includes a *relative* (non-metaphysical) justification of ethics. Schlick modestly allows that his project might be "an illusion,"[6] and of course it is difficult to imagine how any program to save ethics would not at some point embrace illusion if all non-empirical expressions are meaningless. Schlick's proposal of a re-orientation of ethics nonetheless represents a distinct and subtle alternative to consequentialist efforts to salvage ethics within a scientific understanding of reality, including utilitarianism, which Schlick regards as the most promising *traditional* ethical theory to consider if we are to find an empirical basis for ethics.

Schlick's re-orientation divides the discipline of ethics into two types of inquiry: pseudo inquiries about whether particular ethical values or norms are true or false or can be justified, and a factual, scientific (psychological-sociological) inquiry into the moral values that people actually hold. His critique of the first type of inquiry, unsurprisingly, dismisses ethical discourse per se as cognitively meaningless, i.e. as neither true nor false. But he charitably allows an array of ethical concepts – *value*, *approbation*, *desire, right*, *wrong*, *ought, evil, good, the good*, even *the life of the soul* – to serve as conceptual place holders while he elucidates the perversity of traditional ethical theories which have tried to justify moral values or normative principles. The following remark about J. S. Mill and his critics – directed more at his critics – suggests why he regards the attempt of philosophers to argue over the validity of ethics as perverse, and hints at Schlick's method of analysis:

> Mill believed himself able to deduce what is in itself desirable from what is actually desired; his opponents held that these had nothing to do with one another. But ultimately neither side knew what it said, for both failed to give an absolute meaning to the word "desirable." The question whether something is desirable for its own sake is no question at all, but mere empty words.[7]

Schlick tries to get around the problem of the emptiness of moral language by referring to values in a "relative-hypothetical way."[8] Values described in this way are relative to the pleasure that those who hold them experience. Since the feeling of pleasure is a fact, an expression intended to describe this feeling might be meaningful; as Schlick says, "the sense of every proposition concerning the value of an object consists in the fact that this object, or the idea of it, produces a feeling of pleasure or pain in some subject."[9] In this relative sense, is it possible to attribute meaning to a value expression, such as 'Mary *should* believe X'? An empirically verifiable sense can be given to the expression if the word 'should' refers to the fact that *belief in X* (the object) causes "a feeling of pleasure" in *Mary* (the subject). But does this sense imply the same meaning as the original sentence? And does the statement that 'Belief in X produces a feeling of pleasure in Mary' entail that Mary *should* believe X? It is not obvious how Schlick's procedure can begin to overcome these kinds of problems. Another problem involves the indeterminate relativity of values based in *individual* feelings.

To avoid the open-ended relativity of what he refers to as "ego-centric ethics," Schlick insists that ethics, though grounded in "the feeling of a subject,"[10] must refer ultimately to a society's values, to the norms that societies in various places and times have actually adopted. Utilitarian theory maintains a similar priority of social over individual values, as the principle of utility implies a maximization of *net* pleasure, as opposed to the particular pleasure of individuals. While pleasure obviously can only be experienced by individuals, the qualification of net pleasure implies that ethics is grounded in the good of global society – indeed of all species whose members are capable of experiencing pleasure. Schlick similarly avoids an ego-centric ethics, by stipulating that ethical values are based on an *average* belief among the members of a particular society that their society's ethical norms will increase their extended experience of pleasure. In this way, his proposal narrows the relativity of ethical values to differences of norms between distinct societies.

Schlick's (stipulated) proposal aims to deal with two insuperable problems that face the empiricist aspirations of utilitarians. Utilitarianism purportedly offers a non-metaphysical, empirically respectable ethical theory which positivists, *if* they could coherently support an ethical theory, would presumably find appealing. By interpreting *pleasure* as the good, the theory interprets values as physically based states of affairs; and with this interpretation, ethical justifications appealing to these states may be reduced to a series of empirical calculations. Yet, from an empirical point of view, the theory fails on both counts. The principle of utility, which holds that the good is equivalent to pleasure, is clearly a metaphysical assertion; so, at its core, the theory is non-empirical. Further, the apparently helpful qualification that the principle prescribes a calculation of *net* utility impairs its application; for it is difficult or impossible to verify or confirm ethical judgements based on events which have no definite boundaries to measure and which can continue to unfold indefinitely into the future. The principle's prescription that such *events* should be measured therefore comes to grief on the verification principle, which holds that judgements without a finite justification are meaningless.

Schlick's account of ethics purportedly evades a significant challenge prompted by the second of these weaknesses. His theory's focus on *beliefs*, which have a definite truth value, rather than states of pleasure, which are endlessly variable and hence impossible to specify, avoids the problem of allowing justifications based on indeterminate and unfinishable calculations, but only if the consensus of belief stays fixed. The consensus of many societies around core ethical values tends to remain stable. The problem of indeterminate, incomplete justifications remains, however, since belief consensus or average belief is based on the members of such societies maintaining a stable view of the extended feelings of pleasure that their ethical norms or rules purportedly cause to be felt among them, and presumably these beliefs or views are more variable than the ethical norms or rules themselves.

Perhaps Schlick's belief-consensus method would secure a higher level of justification stability in societies in which the rule of law has been in place for a long while. But stability of justification in this sense is not an epistemic value, and an emphasis on it might be both ethically and cognitively counterproductive. For instance, the stability of the average belief, or consensus, of members of a society that their moral rules produce extended pleasure would tend to be enhanced by an increase in the dogmatism of a majority of members who maintain the consensus and potentially endangered by members who depart from the average belief, e.g., by doubting that belief in the extended *pleasure* of moral values properly works as a justification. While there might be useful reasons for a society to foster stable attitudes in favour of its moral system, dogmatism is an epistemic sin, and it is unclear that an attitude that favours belief stability *per se*, let alone as a deciding principle, has epistemic merit. Yet, for a Schlick-inspired moral apologist, attitudes encouraging belief stability would become epistemically virtuous, and within the timeframe of justification perhaps indispensable. Consider the dilemma of attempting to defend the very idea of moral values in a society populated by mentally energetic, rational, perceptive, imaginative individuals striving to lead examined ethical lives, as opposed to individuals whose attachment to their ethical norms are unreflective, blinkered or dogmatic. As the basis of stable belief in such a society changed, or, as seems more likely, if it never existed, a Schlikean ethicist studying such a society would be forced to concede that its members are committed to nonsense, as a justification of their moral expressions and behaviour based on their beliefs would remain incomplete. By contrast, completeness of justification in the case of a society of whose members cling to belief in their norms for the sake of their expected pleasure, or whose moral beliefs are mindlessly inert, would be readily available using Schlick's consensus standard. This contrast suggests that the standard of belief-consensus epistemically points us in the wrong direction; it cannot in any case provide a meta-standard for analyzing or justifying moral systems or values.

From the standpoint of his empiricism, Schlick's belief-consensus standard faces another, more basic problem; the apparent content of moral beliefs represented by any consensus must be empty if it relies on intentional concepts such as *belief*, *desire*, or *value*, or the subjects who embody these concepts. In *Problems of Ethics*, Schlick never addresses the problematic nature of intentional concepts in general. But as we have seen, he is aware of the

problem of the non-empirical nature of value in the traditional sense, of trying "to deduce what is in itself desirable from what is actually desired."[11] From the standpoint of his theory of meaning, the expression "what is in itself desirable" represents "mere empty words."[12] Of course the verification principle implies that all value terms are meaningless, which would seem to foil any attempt to save ethics. As we have seen, his proposed solution to this problem is remarkably simple. Even if there is nothing in the universe that is a value or "desirable for its own sake," an investigator may still meaningfully refer to "what *actually is* desired for its own sake."[13] But this solution only saves ethics as an object of sociological, psychological, biological, etc. inquiry, not as a source of values that could justify a choice or an action. Investigations into human behaviour are thus limited to empirical descriptions of practices, institutes, rituals, (alleged) acts, and so forth, which are inherently worthless and whose underlying (intentional) concepts are meaningless.

3 – Nietzsche's naturalism

In *The Gay Science,* Nietzsche argues that an alternative, anti-positivist approach to science is needed to address nihilism or "the problem of the *value of existence*." He presents this problem as a long-developing European event which an "astronomer of the soul" might have expected to see arise since "the decline of faith in the Christian god, [and] the triumph of scientific atheism."[14] From this historical viewpoint, he speculates that the underlying question of nihilism – which he construes as approximately the same as the question *"Does existence have any meaning at all?*" – will require centuries before it is even properly heard[15] and so will only gradually become a problem for future thinkers. Nevertheless, Nietzsche approached the problem his entire career, offering diagnoses, insights, hypotheses, and thought experiments intended to illuminate its many facets; and he seemed to settle on, or at least never to revoke, his theory of the will to power, which he viewed as both an existential thought experiment and an explicit hypothesis intended to explain the basic impulse or motivating principle of all life. The will to power thus represents an instance of Nietzsche's anti-positivist method of thinking about the problem of nihilism, and his most resilient attempt at a solution.

But as a solution to the problem Nietzsche's theory faces the same kind of objection that has often been directed against the (ancient and modern) theory that pleasure is the source of all value, which Nietzsche considered adopting before offering his theory. We have seen this objection already: the fact of a desire for pleasure (or power) does not imply its value. We can allow that a specifically directed desire is intentional – it is *about* something, has a content – and so in this sense is at least meaningful. A world with creatures who produce or harbour desires thus might not be an entirely meaningless world. But this implication does not solve the problem of the value of existence; for the world and everything that creatures in the world happen to value could be, though meaningful, utterly worthless, regardless of whether attraction to pleasure is a natural fact general over sentient creatures or the will to power is a universal natural fact about all life forms.

For Nietzsche's thesis of the will to power plausibly to address the problem of value, it would require an independent standard, on the basis of which assertions that particular expressions of power are valuable might be justified; otherwise, an expression of power might be meaningful in the limited sense described above but nevertheless worthless, and claims that the impulse to grow or expand is a value, or that a conscious or unconscious will to life is valuable,[16] would be baseless. Yet the need for an independent value standard or conception of the good would seem to amount to a need for metaphysics which, despite his derision of positivism, Nietzsche evidently disavows:

> Metaphysics is still needed by some; but so is the impetuous *demand for certainty* that today discharges itself among large numbers of people in a scientific-positivistic form.[17]

Nietzsche does not appear to be referring here exclusively, or primarily, to a *"demand for certainty"* among scientists using methods appropriate to their (mechanistic) inquiries but to a general desire "that something should be firm"[18] in the universe. Even though he regarded the mechanistic worldview of positivist science as itself nihilistic, and responsible for hastening the advent of a general recognition of "the problem of the value of existence," he thought that it satisfied a need for a kind of (non-metaphysical) existential-epistemic support among people who are vaguely anticipating but not yet fully aware of the nature of the problem.

Nietzsche regarded the *"demand for certainty"* as *impetuous* because he recognised that certainty is unavailable in a post-metaphysical, Darwinian world. His anti-positivist naturalism, or *gay science*, involves abandoning metaphysics, certainty, and any basis for existential security. Arguably Nietzsche had acquired an overly wrought, overly generalised view of metaphysics. But his attitude toward his metaphysically oriented predecessors was complicated. In section 357 of *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche brings several metaphysical insights of the leading figures of the German philosophical tradition – Leibniz, Kant, Hegel, and Schopenhauer – into opposition with the metaphysical "need of 'the German soul,'"[19] and offers corresponding examples of how these metaphysical contributions helped prepare the way conceptually for some of the most significant developments of modern science, including the acceptance of "Darwinism."[20] But in the final analysis Nietzsche felt that metaphysics was dead and that a metaphysical conception of human identity therefore was no longer available.

Rejection of a metaphysical conception of ontology, including human ontology, is now widespread, though perhaps, as Nietzsche's says, it will take a very long time before the accompanying question of nihilism "can . . . be heard completely and in its full depth."[21] Of course we have no idea how a hypothetical event involving such recognition might occur, gradually along with all manner of other conceptual and practical changes of a globalized, hyper-technological world, or whether it will occur at all. Recognition of the problem of nihilism might have reached its zenith with thinkers of the early 20th-century (Weber, Husserl, Heidegger, Camus, etc.), and in the prolific literary and artistic output of modernism, much of which drew inspiration from Nietzsche. Perhaps the practical trends of the world will displace *the question* of nihilism, or erode without widespread recognition the concepts and values that

the thesis of nihilism entails are illusory. Would it matter if this last possibility came to pass, or if we turned our back on the problem for some other reason?

4 – Dennett's diplomacy

According to Daniel Dennett, whatever anxiety we might feel concerning our basic values, their practical or cognitive fate literally cannot matter if the thesis of nihilism is correct. Dennett takes this position in *Elbow Room*, where he says that it cannot matter if we carry on and lead our lives as though the thesis were false.[22] One might sympathise with this attitude if we have entered a cul-de-sac in which all reasonable hope of discerning a foundation for our values has disappeared. Yet as widespread as this anti-foundational belief has become, it is based on a few fragile methodological assumptions which seem to trace their origin to the view, shared by Nietzsche and positivists, that naturalism precludes metaphysics, or the slightly more nuanced view that a *metaphysical naturalism* needs to be constrained by a scientific understanding of reality.

We have approached the positivist side of this view from the standpoint a logical empiricism which foreclosed on the possibility of metaphysical inquiry by ruling out in principle metaphysical or philosophical assertions. Despite the well-known failure of the principle of verification to offer a coherent account of meaning, a less explicit commitment to the view that only empirical statements *really* need to be accommodated is alive and flourishing, not only among those scientists, experimental psychologists, information theorists, etc. who are ignorant of the history of ideas, but among many philosophers who understand the failure of logical positivism but have kept alive the *attitude* of positivism, presumably without a definitive view of the logical-semantic status of metaphysical statements, nor a pristine policy concerning which non-empirical concepts should be permitted within the vicinity of legitimate inquiry. Complicating this attitude for Dennett and many philosophers is their rejection of the subject-object distinction.

An assumption of the subject-object distinction which few philosophers find entirely congenial is that of a radically independent or theory-free reality, *a thing-in-itself*. Once we give up this idea, it seems to follow that we need to change our view that science provides the best method for revealing *the underlying features of reality*, to a more modest proposition about *the best method for revealing our extended presence to ourselves*. Nothing changes on the practical level of inquiry. A scientific approach to knowledge acquisition – or data accumulation and elaboration – remains more consistently fruitful and trustworthy than any other means of understanding the world; but if we relinquish the subject-object distinction, instead of yielding *the world-in-itself*, science leaves us with *the scientific image of reality*, which nonetheless still might extend, radically alter, and generally contrasts favourably with, our manifest or common sense image.

This post-dualist outlook suggests one way that we might reconcile the apparent tension between metaphysics and naturalism. We can no longer assume that observation sentences

carry a special epistemic status, or that they *simply* provide information about the world. Our recourse to observation sentences depends on an indeterminately large, critical mass of sentences, concepts, formulas, whatever cognitive resources we cannot do without as we form our image of the world. Within this indeterminate scheme, no sentence confirms pieces of our understanding of the world in isolation; every observation sentence is entangled with statements or beliefs far flung from observation. And many of these far-flung sentences may count as *metaphysical* in some sense.

Dennett's epistemic division of our view of reality follows in this tradition, which we might trace to W. V. Quine's "Two Dogmas of Empiricism."[23] Dennett is prepared to countenance objects such as beliefs, desires, persons, free will, and so on, and so seems to venture well beyond the metaphysical commitments which Quine was prepared to endorse.[24] But his accommodation of these objects is fastidious to a fault, to the point where it is not clear that *cognitively* he really accommodates them at all, i.e. really regards them as part of reality. When he adopts the intentional stance,[25] e.g., he postulates these problematic intentional entities but only as theoretical fictions: he presents them as semi-real surrogates of underlying physical conditions that produce behaviour that we can count on for its predictive value. From the intentional stance, when we refer to instances of behaviour such as a belief, acts, etc., we are merely invoking a conceptual prop, which does not imply the concepts that conventionally we attribute to the behaviour. We should admire Dennett for his aversion to ontological profligacy *and* for gamely trying to maintain highly useful commitments of our common sense image of human reality which cannot entirely be reconciled with a scientific understanding of reality. But notwithstanding its apparent pragmatic value, this kind of accommodation is systematically deceptive, and cognitively perilous. Once the veneer of fictionalised theoretical postulates has been stripped away, we are left with an image of the world bereft of the intentional constituents that permit us to formulate the thoughts that we are presently considering, or any thoughts, including those ultimately presupposed by *any* view of reality. The absurdity of these implications suggests that Dennett's division of reality is unsalvageable. Quine's ontology leaves us with a similarly absurd outcome, but he is more *directly* candid than Dennett about the kinds of things a scientific understanding of the world permits, and hence leaves us a clearer view of the fundamental inadequacy of his eliminative epistemic program.

5 – Quine's principle of identity and the scientific image of reality

Quine's elimination of concepts basic to our manifest view of reality is based on an ontological constraint which in some version or other many philosophers and scientists regard as obvious, namely that in order *justifiably* to postulate an object's existence we must be able to specify its criteria of identity. This constraint is expressed by Quine's famous dictum "No entity without identity."[26] The prolific and singularly reliable results of the natural sciences, whose postulated entities are expected to be confirmed by staggeringly high degrees of precision, provides a pragmatic justification for such a dictum, and a compelling motive for insisting that its application extends over all categories of existence. Quine seems to have been

motivated by these pragmatic reasons, but perhaps also by an apprehension over his holism, his rejection of the subject-object distinction, which implies the impossibility of describing the world purely, without implicating the language and concepts of the *subjects* who ask about and harbour beliefs about its reality.

Dennett evinces a similar apprehension when he describes intentional objects – e.g. beliefs, desires, values, and persons – as *sort of real* but not real in the sense that the entities of particle physics are real, or *as* real as the assemblages of neurons which underlie intentional objects, which are more real than these subject-based objects by the standard of Quine's identity-criteria dictum because their identity can be specified, confirmed, and predicted with greater precision. We might wonder why Dennett does not simply take Quine's candid approach and banish intentional objects from his ontology. His more diplomatic stance instead establishes careful protocols for preserving talk of intentional objects. In turn, these protocols permit us to talk derivatively of moral values, institutes and practices which we take to be essential for civil society, or to refer to dispositions such as agency which we ordinarily regard as essential to our understanding of human identity. As citizens or members of just, even barely tolerable, societies we should perhaps appreciate Dennett's diplomatic stance; its protocols entail an easing of the principle of identity which permits us to maintain our otherwise (apparently) empty talk of persons, freedom, and morality, the cornerstone concepts of a just society. But in reality Dennett's scheme has massively switched the topic concerning these elusive objects; his apparent motive for relaxing Quine's identity dictum misses their nature, which in principle is not transparent and which can never wholly be subsumed by procedures of quasi-empirical identification, by confirmation and predictability procedures analogous with those constraining productive inquiry in the sciences.

A problem with Dennett's easing of this principle of identity beyond scientific inquiry is that he has actually already wished away – *sort of* wished away? – the subjects implicated by the intentional stance which he thinks supports subject-related inquiries into the world. For the most basic (physical) stance from which we view the world eliminates things like subjects. Dennett's hierarchy of stances aside,[27] what would it mean for such a wish to come to pass? The essential motive for rejecting the subject-object distinction was recognition of the inextricability of the subject and its associated concepts and conceptual practices from the world of objects? From the start – which for narrative convenience we traced to Quine "Two Dogmas of Empiricism" (1951) – this motive was crossed with competing interests, which have yielded a half-hearted result, revealing a more thoroughly meaningless world than the positivist worldview it replaced. For now the world of objects no longer has a basis in reality, but instead amounts to an *image* of reality, and the subjects who are meant to manage this image can never hope to satisfy the identity conditions of their own existence. Instead of reality, we are left with a ghostly theoretical representation, managed by non-existent entities, a physicalism indistinguishable from idealism and yet mysteriously bereft of subjects.

Understanding and applying the ontological principle which underwrites the scientific image of reality *presupposes* what the demands of its methods almost certainly preclude – *viz*., all the intentional concepts that will never find safe haven in a thoroughly scientific understanding of reality. Without these concepts, thought itself becomes impossible, which leaves entities like us stuck in the conundrum that motivated rejection of the subject-object distinction in the first place – of postulating a pure world, cut off from thought. As I suggest above, a view of reality presupposes thought, and thought presupposes various scarcely specifiable intentional and related concepts. Even a scientific view of reality? What kind of new science might we be imagining? The problems and revisions of science are generated primarily by discoveries *within* science. In saying that the intentional concepts of thought are presupposed by a scientific view of reality we are not claiming that these concepts play an inside role in the operations that expand our empirical knowledge of the world. Accordingly, we are not proposing a particular view or modification of science. Intentional concepts and concepts integral to these – e.g., meaning and truth – form an essential background, or meta-context, of thought and inquiry which we subjects sometimes artificially bracket, e.g. when we try to discern precisely quantifiable features of the world. Science operates with far greater efficiency and clarity when methodologically it excludes our role – which is to acknowledge that Quine's principle of identity, insofar as it brackets intentional concepts, has a far-reaching pragmatic significance and importance.

6 – Restoring the (intentional cum physical) world from its image

Kant's critical philosophy arrives at the conclusion that concepts basic to thought are non-empirical and yet forced on us as presuppositions without which empirical inquiry or experience, or our knowledge of the objects of experience, would be impossible. Yet it would be misleading to acknowledge Kant's presuppositional deduction as the origin of the presuppositional argument that I sketched above; for our discussion incurs none of the complications involving the inaccessible reality (*noumena*) assumed by Kant's analogous (transcendental) argument. The more modest version of the argument that we considered is based on a remark of Donald Davidson's that defends the reality of intentional concepts – beliefs, desires, values, etc. – and concepts inseparable from the intentional – truth and meaning: "*All* these concepts (and more) are essential to thought, and cannot be reduced to anything simpler and more fundamental."[28]

This assertion signals a radical departure from Quine's ontology, perhaps even more radical than Davidson imagined. Davidson has at least *tacitly* given up on Quine's principle of identity while leaving his commitment to a naturalist ontology untouched. Davidson's claim that we must retain intentional concepts can, in any case, be supported by a few related observations that provide further motivation for rejecting Quine's principle. First, the concepts presupposed by thought that are not reducible "to anything simpler and more fundamental" are *irreducibly complex*.[29] These concepts are irreducibly complex because they, like the selves they comprise, exist developmentally and indeterminately over time, and because they are

essentially interrelated and thus interdependent. As we have seen, an incomplete list includes the concepts of belief, desire, value, meaning, truth, and consciousness. The claim that these concepts are irreducibly complex because of what it means for them to be essentially temporal and interdependent is supported by this additional claim: that none of these concepts, insofar as they are realised in thought, can be separated from an actual, physical thinker, which is a concrete consequence of abandoning the subject-object distinction; they are constituent features of an *embodied* self.

Beliefs, for example, are not mere abstractions, reducible to their propositional content. Without physical persons or creatures capable of holding beliefs, there would be no beliefs. Beliefs also represent a disposition, an embodied desire (What else could a desire be but embodied?). Yet, while beliefs are not reducible to propositional content, to meaning, they obviously incorporate meaning, which is to say that beliefs are intentional, are about something. As such, since *meaning* is a constituent of belief, it too, *in one use of the word*, is not a mere abstraction. Nor is truth (no doubt a difficult thought for many philosophers to abide), which is a requirement of meaning, merely an abstraction. All these elements have a real existence insofar as they are embodied; and since they are an indispensable part of us, embodied subjects who are not separable from the world of objects which gave us birth, they are as much a part of a general ontology as the elementary particles or wave functions (or ?) of the physical universe, only they are not the kind of entities that can be captured entirely by the quantitative criteria of identity required by a scientific understanding of what it means to be something.

That our identity is embodied dispels the spectre of an image world, a worldview which inadvertently suggests the doctrine of idealism. We would not be conscious of anything had we not first been formed by unconscious physical processes which continue to support our consciousness. That non-conscious physical events long preceded the existence of conscious beings, and reflect physical laws which were applicable before they were formulated by such beings indicates the baselessness of idealism. The processes that formed us are inherently perceivable, or conjecturable, to whatever extent we are in a position to postulate their reality and formulate the laws that accurately capture their behaviour; beyond this susceptibility to our perceptions and thought questions of ontology are baseless – unless we could meaningfully assert the paradoxical concept of an incomprehensible noumenal reality.

If we have exorcised the tenacious subject-object distinction in all its forms, the sceptical claim that our best theories bind us to an image of reality that separates us from, or systematically distorts, reality becomes unintelligible; so too does the epistemic habit of referring to an *image of reality*, construed as something ghostly, a mere abstraction or virtual, "semi-real" thing. However we care to characterize our outlook on things, the physical-logical reality of nature created us and the forms of reality incorporated into our actual, embodied views of the world; and through the perceptual, theoretical, and *evaluative* activities of the worldviews on the basis of which we act, think, inquire, etc., we create aspects of nature which

otherwise would remain a dead possibility. We are thus thoroughly joined to nature as both a product and source of its creative physical *cum* intentional energies and surprising forms of existence

7 – Expanding the problem of the value of existence

It is hard to imagine that the problem of the value of existence ever occurred to a member of *Homo sapiens* prior to the development of transfiguring social structures and cultural traditions. In addition to biological evolution, a cultural evolution of some kind was in any event needed to produce philosophical thought from the creative intentional energies we share with other sentient species whose members perceive, feel, or in some analogous sense think. The capacity of the intentional sphere of existence was thus dramatically enhanced;[30] there were now self-reflective, theorizing agents in the world, whose intentional energies represented a novel source of creativity. This human capacity for self-reflective, theoretical thought entails the power to create *explicit* meaning, which is a unique ontological capacity if meaning is not a mere abstraction but is realised in actual thought, and if this capacity begins radically altering the world and bringing into it new varieties of – e.g. technological, economic, legal, political, aesthetic – meaning-embedded phenomena. But in what sense can we say that such phenomena are meaningful, and why characterize their meaning as an essential part of their existence?

Aesthetic phenomena in particular raise a basic concern for an ontology of meaning. Many philosophers in the analytic tradition dismiss the idea of aesthetic (fictional, imaginal, mimetic) meaning out of hand; and no doubt many who countenance the idea believe that it counts against the proposal that meaning has an ontology, that there are meaning-dependent entities – e.g. smiles or musical movements[31] – which, inseparably from their unfolding, indeterminate meaning, really exist. Beyond the empiricist scruples of this tradition, we commonly perceive smiles and music as events embodying a significance that distortions of facial muscles and collections of sounds lack; we perceive their *embodied meaning* as actually existing, as objective events of our subjective experience, and not as ghostly phenomena, as we do when recovering them in memory or conjuring them in imagination. But if these meanings, unlike abstract propositional meaning, are, though embodied, dependent on our perceptions and interpretations, their identity conditions can never in principle be settled; they are essentially indeterminate. If this is our conclusion, can we then coherently accept the idea of aesthetic meaning?

This question raises an obvious concern, but it also assumes an over-generalizing view of identity if it turns out that parts of our reality are by nature irreducibly mixed and variable in the way that we have been suggesting intentional entities are. The view coincides with Quine's dictum that only entities that can be definitely picked out are real, which requires us to state, or aim to achieve, a specific and finite set of identity criteria for every object of our ontology. Without this constraint, we seem to deprive ourselves of a semantic basis for making statements about the things of the world, for thinking about or communicating the truth or

content of these statements. As important as this concern is, it over-dramatizes the ontological problem, by equivocating between the nature of objects and the status of the descriptions that we give of those objects. The meaning of a *description or statement* must be fixed if it is to communicate precisely something or anything about an entity. But there is always more to be said about even the most ordinary objects if we, or we and others, are curious and resourceful enough, and have time enough, e.g. over a tradition, to satisfy our curiosity. Objects exist in time, and their contexts and inter-relationships with other objects vary without end, or until our traditions collapse. Unless we treat objects as abstractions, we can never specify and exhaust the meaning of things, however simple and stable we imagine they are, nor reduce their role in our ontology to simpler things as we attempt to lay bare the shared or universal features of the world. The case of aesthetic objects amplifies this problem insofar as there are far fewer constraints on the meanings that potentially could expand their identity. But then once we permit the meaning of things to count as part of their identity, the problem is general over all objects, so that we might come to see the world in any particular object, however insignificant it may seem to us at first glance or from the methodological standpoint that we adopt when narrowing the objectives of our inquiry. Of course a dramatic implication of this suggestion is that objects are ultimately unbounded by any specific description that we can provide, or perception we share.

Another concern about meaning-dependent aesthetic objects is that their meaning directs us away from the real world towards a fictional, created world. This concern comes from the view of many analytic philosophers that meaning is reducible to propositional truth, which looks like a promising position if we accept, as we should, that only propositions (statements) explicitly represent truths about reality. We should accept this constraint on meaning and truth and yet challenge its reach by distinguishing between indeterminate expressions which *suggest* truths and *statements* which fix truth and meaning. With this contrast in place, we can make more sense than we would otherwise of Aristotle's famous claim in *The Poetics* that "Poetry is more philosophical and nobler than history."[32] Poetry, though it deals in fiction, is capable of expressing (not stating) philosophical and universal truths more readily than history (conceived as a series of chronological descriptions), since it deals in hypothetical events which concentrate and expand our understanding of human nature. Aristotle's contrast may be used to qualify the analytic principle that meaning depends on specifiable truth conditions, or explicit statements whose meaning can in principle be fully elucidated. For while only the meaning of *statements* can be elucidated, aesthetic expression is sometimes far more, if not uniquely, adept at bringing its viewer, reader or listener into intimate communion with elusive aspects of human reality than a single statement or voluminous series of statements, however precise and discerning their author may be. What kind of aspects? Intentional aspects – e.g., a stream of interrelated beliefs, perceptions, anxieties, terror, pity, aspirations, and so forth, experienced through the interplay of music and drama in a tragedy – which illuminate the bridge between our inner world and actions of an external world that we share with others. An objection that mimetically induced intentional

entities (streams of entities) which connect our inner world to the external world of others are fictional and therefore unreal ignores the frequently seamless relation of these beliefs and perceptions elicited by aesthetic objects to the beliefs and perceptions that form our objective, shared experience of reality; and it misses the sense of Aristotle's insight that aesthetic expressions tend to induce a richer, more penetrating understanding of our shared human reality than do factual descriptions.

8 – Dissolving the problem of nihilism

In the posthumous notes of *The Will to Power*, Nietzsche proposed an experimental model of philosophy which centered on a "quest for even the most detested and notorious sides of existence."[33] This model, according to Nietzsche, underwrites "the *hidden* history of philosophy" whose exemplars may be discovered by asking "How much truth can a spirit *endure*, how much truth does a spirit *dare*?" Evidently, a thinker's capacity to affirm reality in the face nihilism provides the most demanding standard for deciding these related questions:

> Such an experimental philosophy as I live anticipates experimentally even the possibilities of the most fundamental nihilism; but this does not mean that it must halt at a negation, a No, a will to negation. It wants rather to cross over to the opposite of this – to a Dionysian affirmation of the world as it is, without subtraction, exception, or selection . . . my formula for this is *amor fati*.[34]

Nietzsche's "Dionysian" formula for overcoming the problem of nihilism may seem to represent a promising attitude if, believing the world to be valueless, one wishes to cope psychologically. His insistence that this "affirmation of the world" should eschew every falsification of reality is certainly commendable. But the formula is utterly empty if the world *is* valueless, or if there are no cognitive grounds for asserting values. A meaningful application of *amor fati* depends on a world replete with values which are fragile and uncertain, not non-existent. If, for example, we (mistakenly) assume that the world is valueless and contains only empirical facts, we cannot coherently entertain a prescription to *affirm* "the world as it is." Such an affirmation would amount tacitly to endorsing a deception that implies a falsification of reality after all, indeed, if fully explicated, a self-contradictory statement.

This empiricist assumption, which Nietzsche found alluring despite his long-sustained criticism of empiricism, is mistaken. Values occupy roughly the same global position in our cognitive life as facts. In the face of a sceptical challenge to our belief in empirical reality, one would be in error strenuously or mildly to assert the existence of empirical truths as a category which *must be affirmed*. From a holistic view of things, the sceptical challenge against which one might be tempted to make such a peculiar assertion is the source of this error. Empirical truths cannot be disentangled from the language, theories, thoughts, beliefs, concepts, perceptions, values, etc. that would let us make sense of this singular objection. The sceptic would thus need to widen the scope of her challenge, to the point of depriving herself of a basis for making or even conceiving it. Likewise, as the foregoing list of intentional commitments

suggests, a sceptical challenge intended to undermine the category of evaluative truths draws us into a similarly mistaken view of our cognitive life and its inherent obligations. We could no more doubt the existence of values in the world than we could doubt the world, or eliminate the thought that brings the world continuously into view and encourages us frequently to revise the view of reality it leaves us with. That we *should* often revise our view is a value which is often immediately compelling, and sometimes the result of agency and reflection. Value or the good (conceived as widely dispersed) is thus a *cognitive* obligation which arrives naturally *and* as a presupposition of our extended methods of thought; it is an obligation in which the value of truth and the cognitive indispensability of value can scarcely be distinguished. The embodied concepts or intentional entities which inhabit us and bring the world into our soul and our soul into the world, though they dissolve with astonishing rapidity in their ever passing existence, lie beneath sceptical challenge; they cannot coherently be reduced to the stuff of a mere dream, or virtual reality, whether constituted by our scientific or our prescientific imagination. As Quine once said, in a wondrously lucid concession, "[the] idioms of propositional attitude – belief, hope, regret, and the rest – are not to be lightly dismissed. It is not clear how we could do without them."[35] It is not clear; for without the intentional entities underlying these idioms we would be incapable of thought. Only by paying such an unreachable cognitive price can we start to keep the nihilistic image of reality intact.

Works Cited

Aristotle. *Poetics*, quoted in *Tragedy and Philosophy* (New Jersey: Princeton, 1979), trans. Walter Kaufmann.

Dennett, Daniel. *Elbow Room: The Varieties of Free Will Worth Wanting* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2015).

Davidson, Donald. "Truth Rehabilitated," *Rorty and His Critics* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000), ed. Robert B. Brandom.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Gay Science* (New York: Vintage, 1974), trans. Walter Kaufmann.

-----. *On the Genealogy of Morals* (New York: Vintage, 1969), trans. Walter Kaufmann.

-----. *The Will to Power* (New York: Vintage, 1968), trans. Walter Kaufmann.

Quine, W. V. "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," *From a Logical Point of View* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1980).

----. "On What There Is," *From a Logical Point of View* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1980).

----. Dagfinn Føllesdal's Preface to the New Edition, *Word and Object* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013).

Schlick, Moritiz. *Problems of Ethics* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1939), trans. David Rynin.

Scruton, Roger. *The Soul of the World* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2014).

----. *Understanding Music: Philosophy and Interpretation* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016).

[1] See *The Gay Science*, section 2, pages 76-7.
[2] As Walter Kaufmann says, Nietzsche was "aroused from his dogmatic slumber by Darwin . . . [and] sought to counter the positivistic challenge from across the Channel (which seemed nihilistic to him) by developing a new picture of human dignity" (*Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, xiii-iv).
[3] *The Gay Science*, section 373, pages 335-6. In this passage, Nietzsche invokes the experience of music as an example: "Assuming that one estimated the value of a piece of music according to how much of it could be counted, calculated, and expressed in formulas: how absurd would such a 'scientific' estimation of music be! What would one have comprehended, understood, grasped of it? Nothing, really nothing of what is 'music' in it!"
[4] Schlick also wrote an article entitled "On the Meaning of Life," in which he offered a theory of the meaning of existence inspired by Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra*.
[5] Moritiz Schlick, *Problems of Ethics*, page xiv-v.
[6] *Ibid.*
[7] *Ibid.*, page 19.
[8] *Ibid.,* page 17.
[9] *Ibid.*, page 120.
[10] *Ibid.*
[11] *Ibid*., page 19.
[12] *Ibid*.
[13] *Ibid*.
[14] *Ibid.*, page 306.
[15] *The Gay Science*, section 357, page 308.
[16] This is the kind of language that Nietzsche used to characterize the will to power in section 349 of *The Gay Science*, which in that work had yet to be turned into an explicit thesis.
[17] *Ibid.*, section 348, page 288.
[18] *Ibid.*
[19] Ibid., section 357, page 305.
[20] In section 357, Nietzsche offers this fascinating interpretation: "Hegel . . . struck right through all our logical habits and bad habits when he dared to teach that species concepts develop *out of each other*. With this proposition the minds of Europe were preformed for the last great scientific movement, Darwinism – for without Hegel there could have been no Darwin."
[21] *Ibid.*, section 357, page 308.
[22] Daniel Dennett, *Elbow Room*, page 170.
[23] "Two Dogmas of Empiricism" offered a critique of empiricism based on the kind of holistic conception of knowledge and language assumed in the preceding paragraph.
[24] E.g., in "On What There Is."
[25] The intentional stance implies that for certain ordinary purposes we can act as though there really are beliefs, desires, persons, free will, and so forth, in the world, and that by doing so we can better predict and negotiate events in the environment with which we are most familiar. By taking the intentional stance, we view these events from a pre-scientific standpoint.

[26] The sense of this slogan is suggested by this question in Quine's paper "On What There Is," the first essay of *From a Logical Point of View* (1953): "[W]hat sense can be found in talking of entities which cannot meaningfully be said to be identical with themselves and distinct from one another?"
[27] These include the intentional stand, the design stance, and the physical stance. Only the physical stance really satisfies Quine's principle of identity.
[28] Davidson, "Truth Rehabilitated," *Rorty and His Critics* (Blackwell, 2000), ed. Robert B. Brandom, p. 73.
[29] I present this view in "Freedom and Thought," *Modern Horizons Journal* (June 2016).
[30] Nietzsche gives a vivid speculative account of this upgrade of our intentional capacities in section 16 of *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Second Essay, page 521: "The entire inner world, originally as thin as if stretched between two membranes, expanded and extended itself, acquired depth, breadth, and height . . . "
[31] I've take the example of smiles from Roger Scruton's *The Soul of the World*, where he speaks of smiles as part of the phenomenology of the face and the soul (pages 98 and 101), and as "a moment of self-revelation" (101). In *Understanding Music*, Scruton refers to music, as opposed to sounds, as "a virtual world, with special, causal and dynamic characteristics that are detached from things and causes of physical space" (47), which tends away from my characterization of intentional entities but not as far as the phrase "a virtual world" suggests.
[32] Walter Kaufmann's translation from his *Tragedy and Philosophy* (1969), page 42.
[33] *The Will to Power*, section 1041, page 536.
[34] *Ibid*.
[35] Dagfinn Føllesdal quotes this passage from Quine's *Confessions* in his preface to the new edition of Quine's *Word and Object* (2013), page xxvii.