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The Myth of Broad Naturalism: The Case of Owen Flanagan

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Abstract

In *The Really Hard Problem*, Owen Flanagan seeks to explain how we can live meaningfully in a material world despite naturalism's supposed scientific reductionism, which more often engenders disenchantment with reality than the "joyful optimism" he believes ought to be produced by the naturalist position. In this paper I argue that Flanagan's theory of *subjective realism*, as well as his faulty identification of consciousness with neurological states, fails to overcome the criticisms he and others have pinned against scientific reductionism, and thus he fails to ever go beyond it. While Flanagan's intentions to make a case for ethical and political normativity are good, his bridging of the chasm between the empirical and the normative is too weak to be a groundwork for our talk of a "meaningful life" as we actually think of it.

Introduction

In *The Really Hard Problem*, Owen Flanagan seeks to explain how we can live meaningfully in a material world despite naturalism's supposed scientific reductionism, which more often engenders disenchantment with reality than the "joyful optimism" he believes ought to be produced by the naturalist position.¹ Both he and I empathize with Jaegwon Kim, who has written:

It is an ironic fact that the felt qualities of conscious experience, perhaps the only things that ultimately matter to us, are often relegated in the rest of philosophy to the status of "secondary qualities," in the shadowy zone between the real and the unreal, or even jettisoned outright as artifacts of confused minds.²

Flanagan's project considers human sociality in its ethical and political domains — covering many of the things that ultimately matter to us — and not just those that are implicated in the debate between science and religion. He tries to bridge the gap between the empirical and the normative, and to develop an ethical science he calls "eudaimonics;"³ through this he aims to show how the blending of the manifest and scientific images of persons⁴ will ultimately be beneficial for our well-being.

This is a lofty task that others working in the philosophy of mind have continually found to be a stumbling block. How should we construct meaning and make informed decisions as to how we should live if when it comes down to it all we can say about what exists is that everything is simply atoms falling through space? Flanagan, it seems, has bitten off more than he can chew. In his argumentation, he too quickly sidesteps problems related to the identification of consciousness with neurological states, the unexplained emergence of consciousness, and the construction of meaning and values in his naturalist framework. I will consider these issues in the discussion that follows.

Counter to Flanagan's naturalist position, Stewart Goetz and Charles Taliaferro, in their book *Naturalism*, advance a dualistic theory of consciousness in which an "immaterial yet spatially located" (N, p. 100) soul produces mental causation in human persons. They argue for a "noncausal pairing relation" between the mental and physical that allows for top-down causation such that the body is "accessible to the soul's exercised causal (mental) power in the sense that it can be causally affected by it" (N, p. 62). Goetz and Taliaferro fundamentally disagree with Flanagan's claim that reality consists of a closed physical system, and propose alternatives to his perhaps unwarranted dismissal of nonphysical substances.⁵ They are not as directly concerned with the larger question of meaning in a material world, but primarily focus on exposing the illegitimate basis of naturalized metaphysics and epistemology — the core of which is the supposed causal closure of lived reality. Their arguments serve as a foil to Flanagan's claims to meaning-making by showing the incoherency of his position of *subjective realism*, his faulty identification of consciousness with neurological states, and consequently, his inability to make normative claims about noncausal, yet seemingly meaningful, relations in a material world.

The Goals of Broad Naturalism

Strict naturalism, according to Goetz and Taliaferro, is the view "that all that exists is a part of nature and something is a part of nature if and only if it is describable and explainable in an ideal, complete science or, more specifically, physics" (N, p. 14). This complete physical science necessarily precludes any reference to psychological events, since they are superseded by nonpsychological accounts sufficient for a full causal explanation.

Flanagan claims not to hold this strict of a view, which he labels scientism. He writes, "The claim that science can, in principle, explain everything we think, say, and do — that it can, in principle, provide a causal account of human being — should be distinguished from the claims that everything can be expressed scientifically" (RHP, p. 22). In other words, scientific language, in its use as one of several types of building blocks in our construction of meaning, cannot adequately describe nor make normative claims regarding the content of ethical or political realms of human thought and behavior. There are simply different types of knowledge accessible to each space of meaning.

Scientific knowledge of the oil and canvas of the Mona Lisa, we might say, does not capture its value as a cultural artifact nor the concern we might have about its imminent destruction. In this case to preserve our aesthetic sensibilities, and in others our ethical and political inclinations, Flanagan must give an account for the existence of what Wilfrid Sellars calls the "logical space of reasons,"⁶ which would preserve his ability to make normative claims regarding human behavior regardless of the reductionism of the scientific image. But without the intellectual hardware of Sellars's *psychological nominalism*,⁷ the onus lies on Flanagan to explain how these distinctions can be made, and on what epistemic grounds he is justified in speaking in terms of abstract entities of the good, the true, and the beautiful without asserting their existence as Platonic Forms.

Though Flanagan clearly gives the scientific image ontological priority as what actually exists, "science" is *also* placed alongside other modes of thinking, such as aesthetics, technology, ethics, politics, and spirituality. Science, however, means something different in each of these usages. When Flanagan says that every phenomenon can be explained or understood scientifically he steps outside the bounds of

science and assumes a materialist metaphysic, but when he explains that the same phenomenon can't be *expressed* scientifically or isn't itself "scientific" his usage of the term "science" shifts from speaking of a grand metaphysical position to speaking less imperiously of one of many ways of constructing meaning that is limited in scope. Flanagan does not clarify this distinction, perhaps because it reveals several difficulties of his position.

Take the decomposition of organic matter as an example of a phenomenon that is able to be *both* understood scientifically *and* expressed scientifically. To describe what is *meaningful* about organic decomposition — that it is the process of the breaking down of cells into their component molecules — is at the same time to refer directly to what the material objects involved in the process *actually are*. Scientific explanation is in this case satisfying in a way that does not seem to be true of an example such as me feeling gratitude toward my family. Yet, for Flanagan's project to be persuasive, he must identify a relation between ethical or political expression and scientific explanation that is equivalent to what one encounters in cases involving both scientific explanations and sufficient scientific expressions. If Flanagan's view of the neurophysical relation of mental states and the emergence of consciousness is compelling, which I will consider next, we have good reason to think this counterintuitive position regarding ontological truth and meaningful expression to be worthy of further consideration. However, Flanagan's failure to sufficiently explain the phenomenon of consciousness, which I will now discuss, has led me to think otherwise.

Neuroscience and Consciousness

Flanagan's misunderstanding of the debate over consciousness is made clear in the following passage, where he argues that the seemingly non-scientific experience of consciousness is related to neurological states similarly to the scientific identification of water. He writes:

Water is H₂O. Water is not explained away; its nature is understood more deeply. Water is a natural element. It is the explanandum. H₂O is the explanans. Is either water or H₂O scientific? The question makes no sense. Water is a natural phenomenon, and science helps us to understand its microstructure, which explains why it in fact possesses such higher-level properties as fluidity. (*RHP*, p. 22)

Flanagan means this explanation to be analogous to the case of subjective consciousness and objective mental states. Goetz and Taliaferro take issue with this, and I agree, because it applies a relationship of physical constitution to the identification of the mental and physical — a move "far more radical" (*N*, p. 33) than the analogy can hold. They explain, "The difference between conscious experience on the one hand and physiology and behavior on the other is not a difference in matters of complexity or scope, but a difference in kind" (*N*, p. 75). More simply, though we can say that *both* water and H₂O are scientific objects, we must say that while neurological brain states and the unseen particles of matter are scientific, consciousness is not. To use an example from Richard Rorty, the reduction of qualia to the neurological states of human patients would make it more *meaningful* to say "'My C-fibers are firing,' instead of saying 'I'm in pain'" (qtd. in *N*, p. 22) — a result that should make us question if what is happening subjectively is actually being identified objectively. Using the terms of Goetz and Taliaferro, making such a move removes the irreducible "ouchiness" of first-personal feel (*N*, p. 47). Thus, Flanagan's

primary explanation of how expressions of non-causal relations can maintain their grip on meaning is shown to be inadequate by his use of a false analogy.

There are two significant problems with Flanagan's account of consciousness. First, his theory of subjective realism, by which he argues that "[i]t is simply a unique but nonmysterious fact about conscious mental states that they essentially possess a phenomenal side" (*RHP*, p. 29), fails to explain the relationship of the mental and physical. To understand the neurophysical reality of consciousness, Flanagan proposes that one must begin from a position of objective realism. From this view one can determine facts about reality regardless of subjective experience. Flanagan then suggests that one can subsequently expand the concept of experience to allow for the subjectivity of the human other. The complete subjective realist view is simply that "[t]he subjective feel [of human persons] is, as it were, no more than the relevant objective state of affairs obtaining in a creature that feels things" (*RHP*, p. 28). Consciousness is unexplained fact. But this leap toward consciousness cannot be made *qua* a claim of neuroscience, but only as a materialist supposition. And as such, it extends beyond the realm of scientific inquiry. It lacks scientific explanation, which Flanagan has made clear is the only true possible explanation. As Goetz and Taliaferro write, "What you are not entitled to conclude on the basis of the correlation alone is that *the subjective conscious states are identical with the anatomy*" (*N*, p. 74). To assume a direct relation between the mental and physical from correlation alone, as it appears Flanagan does,⁸ is to step out of the shoes of scientific observation and into those of materialism.

Another way that the problem has been described by philosophers, in this case Georges Rey, is that "[a]ny ultimate explanation of mental phenomena will have to be in *non*-mental terms, or else it won't be an *explanation* of it" (qtd. in *N*, p. 16). Flanagan's theory of subjective realism doesn't succeed in meeting this criteria because his reason for supposing that the human creature undergoing observation has first-person feel is that it is an intuitively clear fact that all humans, including the observer himself, has such a capacity. This intuition is based in the mental experience of the observer. A hypothetical observer who has a severely diminished capacity to realize this, (say, who is unable to have any form of communication with any other subject) and is therefore closer to the objective third-person scientific perspective than one with those capacities, would have greater difficulty seeing how Flanagan's theory of subjective realism is true because he would not understand in the same way how the person under observation actually feels things. This observer might recognize that certain stimuli produce certain effects in the human object, but because he is not fully conscious of his own thought process, would not easily conceive the other to be a subject. The third-personal perspective of objective scientific observation completely removes this realization of the human object's subjectivity. Flanagan's subjective realism is dependent on the mental condition of the observer, and this ultimately makes his theory an inadequate explanation of the relation between consciousness and neurological states. He fails to address the question under consideration — not whether there is some sort of correlation between the mental and physical, which humans intuitively posit, but how such a relationship might be explained or conceived.

Second, Flanagan fails to recognize the contingency of consciousness and the effect this has on his quest for meaning. In his introduction, he writes:

Consciousness is. It happens, it is there ... Meaning, unlike consciousness, is not simply a puzzling feature of the way things are ... Meaning, if there is such a thing, involves more

than what there is. Minimally it involves a truthful assessment of what a finite human life adds up to. (*RHP*, p. xi)

This may make some sense phenomenologically, but Flanagan is primarily looking at the problem scientifically, and one might still want to ask Flanagan *why* consciousness exists and why it is the way it is. His answer, in short, would be that “it probably serves a biological function” (*RHP*, p. xii). But this is a radically inadequate response. Without an explanation of the neurophysical relationship of consciousness, this supposed biological function can never be sufficiently understood. This leaves us “radically in the dark about how consciousness might emerge as something physical from nonconscious nonmental parts” (*N*, p. 76). Without such a relationship, mind and body can only be contingently related. Goetz and Taliaferro argue that only “the laws of nature” that have in actuality produced consciousness provide grounds for the necessary relationship of mind and body, but that we might conceive of a possible world in which similar physical phenomena to what we experience exist, but without any form of consciousness. Without any clue as to how consciousness *works*, and why it works that way and not some other way, we cannot rely on evolutionary arguments. Evolution cannot explain why consciousness exists.

Broad Naturalism Refuted

Why is this a problem? Because in at least the ethical and political realms we tend to make normative claims that, under this closer scrutiny, are shown to be without any basis whatsoever. The way that Flanagan goes about the task of broad naturalism — to “save the appearances” — is unsuccessful, and as much as he would like to conceive of an enchanted world, the reductionism of science wins out. There is no broad naturalism. The contingency of the emergence of consciousness and the lack of scientific explanation for the correlation between neurological states and mental activity do not allow for an explanation of why ethical judgments ought to be the way they are over other possible options. Goetz and Taliaferro state the point very clearly: “[I]n broad or strict naturalism it is not clear how one can establish normative values on the basis of processes that are ultimately thoroughly unconscious, nonnormative, and contingent in nature” (*N*, p. 95). The naturalist has no good reason to trust her consciousness to provide reliable and meaningful judgments that would be able to be applied normatively to all persons.

Torbjörn Fagerström provides an interesting argument regarding this:

[T]here are no independent scales which one can use to estimate the adaptive value that a certain feature has; this value can only be measured on a scale that is given by the actual environment ... Darwinism does not provide us with values about whether [a particular state of affairs] is a better or worse state of affairs. Period! (qtd. in *N*, p. 91)

Our mental experience might occur in a radically different way in another possible environment — we might find barbecuing babies pleasurable, for example. But we would never excuse this kind of behavior and explanation in our actual environment. However, it seems that we have no good reason, if consciousness is contingent, to restrict it.

Flanagan's project of eudaimonics tries to get around this problem, but I believe is only able to do so in a very limited way. He uses the analogy of a group of people building a bridge across a river to explain how the ethical project of seeking eudaimonia must take into account empirical concerns:

Should we build a bridge across the river? Why? Why not? If so, what type? This is (these are) a normative question, and I claim it is inconceivable that we would consider resolving it in any way other than empirically. Of course it is true that at some point we will have to invoke a goal or an end state ... "Where did this need, goal, end, value come from?" ... It came from the people. (*RHP*, p. 38)

This, Flanagan thinks, is enough to do away with irreducibly teleological explanations for human behavior. His point is that we don't build the bridge across the river, or live in accordance with certain values and principles, because it is a "good thing to do," but because it is what people generally want, and have judged to be good for them. The group's judgment is a product of liberal democracy at work. But Flanagan fails to see that the process of gathering the judgments of individual persons regarding their own synthesis of reason and experience is, from his naturalist perspective, also not a justifiable basis for making normative claims. As he says in the analogy, at some point an end goal will have to be invoked. For ethics, it is happiness, or eudaimonia. For his project to work, consistency in judgment among all human persons of what is good for them is required, and it must be true that everyone *is* in fact seeking eudaimonia. This is what his eudaimonic science inherently assumes, and it is where his argument from a naturalist metaphysic falls down. Because of the contingency of our conscious experience, we simply cannot know whether the other human person is seeking the same thing. We cannot know even if they *feel* the same things we do. Their conscious experience is inaccessible to us. To return to the metaphor, rather than build a bridge together, our fellow humans might rather go play — or drown — in the rushing river.

This weakness in Flanagan's argument makes his application of John Rawls's "Aristotelian Principle,"⁹ as well as his endorsement of Nussbaum and Sen's "capabilities approach," seem like wishful thinking. One quickly recognizes the vacuity of Flanagan's statements such as, "[We ought to] live well, in a way that makes meaning and sense in a manner that alleviates suffering and equips others to pursue what our common humanity makes us seek" (*RHP*, p. 61), or, "[E]ach human life has intrinsic worth and that each person deserves equal chance to live a good life" (*RHP*, p. 58). While these are clearly universal human concerns, and are similar and related to those for which I originally entered into philosophical inquiry, Flanagan simply cannot uphold conceptions of common humanity and intrinsic worth. These are unexplained ethical principles that it seems he has assumed for the sake of making an attractive ethical argument. But as Alasdair MacIntyre has said, "one of the things we ought to have learned from the history of moral philosophy is that the introduction of the word 'intuition' by a moral philosopher is always a signal that something has gone badly wrong with an argument."¹⁰ And when a philosopher hides or fails to recognize the dependence of his argument on moral intuition, as Flanagan does, he is simply doing bad philosophy.

¹ Flanagan, Owen. *The Really Hard Problem: Meaning in a Material World* (Hereafter *RHP*). Cambridge, Ma.: MIT Press, 2007, p. xiii.

² Quoted in Goetz, Stewart and Charles Taliaferro. *Naturalism* (Hereafter *N*). Grand Rapids, Mi.: Eerdmans, 2008, p. 86.

³ Flanagan writes, “If one adopts the perspective of the philosophical naturalist and engages in realistic empirical appraisal of our natures and prospects, we have chances for learning what methods might reliably contribute to human flourishing. This is eudaimonics” (*RHP*, p. 4).

⁴ “The clash between the manifest and scientific images pertains to certain *prima facie* conflicts between the world as perceptibly manifest to and conceived by sophisticated common sense, in contrast to the conception of the world developed in modern scientific theories from the seventeenth century to the present,” from O’Shea, James R. *Wilfrid Sellars: Naturalism With a Normative Turn* (Hereafter *WS*). Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2007, p. 2-3.

⁵ I will not go into detail regarding Goetz and Taliaferro’s arguments for dualism and causation from non-physical substances. Their main argument is that the supposedly determined causality of spatial objects (Newtonian physics) has been established through experiments that must assume the causal closure of the physical world. Such experiments “cannot show the non-physical closure, but only that certain actions produced certain effects” (*N*, p. 35). Coupled with the “brute indeterminacy” of quantum physics, they argue that there is at least “room” for mental causation, and reasons to argue for it (to explain libertarian free will and divine action), though there is no driving argument for its rational persuasiveness. The choice to go with either the theistic or naturalist explanation seems to not be rationally decidable. We might just as reasonably put our trust in the possibility of a materialist explanation of consciousness as go with the theistic account of Goetz and Taliaferro.

⁶ O’Shea, *WS*, p. 2.

⁷ According to his theory, “[A]ll awareness of *sorts, resemblances, facts*, etc., in short, all awareness of abstract entities — indeed, all awareness even of particulars — is a linguistic affair” (*WS*, p. 116). Thus, non-causal relationships in the human sphere ultimately have no ontological significance.

⁸ Correlation, in fact, is precisely what Flanagan uses to claim the extension of identity from objective neural states to subjective consciousness. He writes, “The objective states of affairs in brains that *are* conscious mental events are unique in producing first-personal feel—*phenomenality*. If certain objective states of affairs obtain, then so do first-person feels, and if there are first-person feels, then the relevant objective states of affairs obtain” (*RHP*, 28).

⁹ The concept that “other things equal, human beings enjoy the exercise of their realized capacities (their innate and trained abilities), and this enjoyment increases the more the capacity is realized, or the greater its complexity” (*RHP*, p. 57)

¹⁰ MacIntyre, Alasdair. *After Virtue*. Notre Dame, Ind.: U of Notre Dame P, 1984, p. 69.