

7. Meaninglessness

“Were I - who to my cost already am
one of those strange, prodigious creatures, man -
a spirit free to choose for my own share
what case of flesh and blood I pleased to wear
I'd be a dog, a monkey or a bear,
Or anything but that strange animal who is so proud of being rational
His senses are too gross: and he'll contrive
a sixth to contradict the other five
and before certain instincts will prefer
Reason, which fifty times for one does err”

Lord John Wilmot's *Satire against mankind*, written in the latter half of the 17th century, is a bellicose tirade against the philosophers and their fanciful ramblings. It was written just at the time when empiricism, the idea that reason should be reined in by meticulous observation, was rising to pre-eminence. It was just before the arch-empiricist Newton, who claimed never to hypothesise, instigated a scientific revolution.

Later, even Newton's perfectly rational model of the universe would be shown to be false (or perhaps we should say, limited). This fact can help us grasp how pure observation is actually impossible and the idea that we can observe without assumptions only serves to hide them from ourselves. Reason seems to be both flawed and indispensable, which is an unsettling combination.

In my view, reason is a common and natural human faculty. The first philosophers were over-enamoured with it. They thought of it as the power to apply rules to produce perfectly true and incontestable statements. We have been stuck with this idea ever since. This, I think, is the root of the problem. It is simply the wrong way to think about reason.

Consider instead, the concept of metaphoricity (discussed in *commentary 3*). Put simply, every piece of knowledge of the world is made by analogy from another (or from raw concrete experience). These metaphoricities attribute the qualities of one thing to another, and in so doing inevitably attribute other qualities the second thing does not have. This I have called over-stretching the metaphoric.

All knowledge (and so every proposition) is made this way, so our minds build up as a kind of structure of interdependent metaphoricities, at the foundation of which are raw concrete experiences. Reason, by the familiar critical or Socratic method, takes an idea (a metaphoric) and breaks down its meaning (uncovers the component metaphoricities). I think of this as “unpeeling” the metaphoric.

How far you go is a measure of how much certainty you demand. Peel away enough layers and you will eventually hit the bedrock of raw concrete experience, which is not knowledge, but an indisputable sense of being in the world (see *commentary 5*). Most critical reasoning however, does not go this far. It stops when we reach a point of consensus, that is to say, the degree of certainty that satisfies us.

Some people will be dissatisfied with this idea. They might say that it's just another kind of relativism, that it falls short of the *truth*. Think about this criticism for a while and you'll see that it is wrong. The point of consensus we reach is by definition sufficient. It satisfies our instinct to know. We can step back and observe that this point of consensus is culturally determined, that is to say, relative, and hence not, strictly speaking, true. Yet the very act of stepping back *is* reason.

All human beings have an instinct to know that compels them to ask questions of each other. They ask until they agree. They settle on what they believe to be true. Philosophers just happen to be that subculture that digs deeper than the rest. Should it hit the bedrock of raw concrete experience, then

so be it. We can, like Descartes' Archimedean moment, rebuild from that point. We can't, by the way, rebuild all knowledge as Descartes imagined, for that we would need to start our lives all over again.

Reason, by breaking down assumptions to reach consensus (unpeeling metaphors to satisfy the instinct to know), can be applied to social cohesion. This gives us a clue to why it evolved and points to its value in politics. This is why philosophy and civic virtue often go together. They are not linked by necessity, as many ancient philosophers said, but the process of reason is the same.

In modern politics *elitism* has waned in favour of *constitutionalism* (not “elites”, which are still alive and well). Rejecting the superiority of “Guardians” or “Übermensch” however, and writing rational laws and constitutions is not, in itself, sufficient. The stronger the deeper into society reason penetrates, the better societies thrive. To this end, the value of satirists, journalists and educators is inestimable. This is a virtuous role we can all play, even philosophers.

In these commentaries, I began with the ultimate questions. I have argued that the universe is matter in motion. It can be explained in the language of mathematics, which describes the quantitative relationships between things. There are no limits on what we can know, because knowledge consists of a bundle of qualities I call “metaphors”. that build up indefinitely. Amongst these qualities and at the foundations are raw concrete experiences. We can unpeel metaphors to achieve satisfactory certainty, even to the concrete experiences themselves. That process is called reason.

I have argued that philosophy is not *for* virtue or tranquillity, it is only *for* itself, that is to say, the satisfaction of our instinct to know. It is this motive alone that could reveal a universe of nothing but matter in motion, that is to say, a world without meaning.

Each of us is cast into the world as completely dependent infants. Everything we encounter will either kill or save us. As our minds crystallise we slowly grasp how other people have shaped things to help us, that is to say, we see function and intention. In short, we grow into a world saturated with meaning. I've heard Psychologists say that our minds are like machines for finding meaning in the world around us.

When Thales, the first of the Cosmologists (and by tradition, the first Western philosopher), suggested that water might be the universal substance, he brought something new into the world. Substance is neither function nor intention. By thinking of the universe as substance, subject only to cause and effect, Thales brought meaninglessness into the world.

Philosophy, and science in particular, went on to show the power of material, that is to say, cause and effect, explanations. As it did so, meaning drained from the universe and was caught and decanted into imaginary super minds. It became reducible to the mysterious intentions of the Gods. They however, withered to one, who was finally declared dead by Zarathustra in the 1880s.

The discovery of meaninglessness in the world is the greatest breakthrough of Western philosophy (its equal greatest, see *commentary I*). Existentialism is its moment of self-awareness. At this moment we saw that the universe and everything in it is not *for* anything. We were left with a question: why do we do anything?

The existentialists struggled and misleadingly called it “choice”, explaining that this is a special kind of “choice” without intention or forethought. In my view, it makes more sense to say that our actions have explicable causes. We can both understand and affect them. We are part of nature, so our thoughts about the world can also reveal more about ourselves. We can understand our instincts and so act to shape the world to satisfy them.