

# Noumenism

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## Introduction

The death of Empiricism is nigh; soon it shall join its brother, Rationalism, in the graveyard of philosophy. What shall replace them, the next -ism, which I here call Noumenism, is not so much a middle path between two extremes as it is the transcendence of a false dichotomy. But Noumenism is not, as it turns out, something altogether different. Rather, it should subsume the older views. And while it may at first seem closer in spirit to Rationalism, this is not so, for both Rationalism and Empiricism have their extremes; it just so happens that extreme Empiricism is the more popular among contemporary philosophers. This popularity is due, no doubt, in large part to Quine, but it wasn't entirely his fault. Empiricism was already heading in the wrong direction; Quine just grabbed the steering wheel and pulled a bit too hard.

Instead of following a natural progression towards a synthesis, Rationalism and Empiricism have diverged. The split betwixt them has spread wide to form an abyss of ignorance that cannot be bridged; it would be easier to start anew than attempt to reconcile these discordant siblings. This is what I propose: a fresh start. We should take what we have learned and construct a new theory without preconception; my goal is to lay the foundation for this program. The primary difficulty here is that perception is epistemically prior to knowledge about the world, but the world in-itself is logically prior to perception. However, the way the world is, in-itself, has everything to do with the way we, as things-in-the-world, perceive as such. This presents a

Gordian knot, for we must use our perceptions to gather evidence about the world, all the while working backwards to untangle our conceptions of the world in-itself. Yet the way the world is, in-itself, has much to do with our various modes of perception. What we need to understand is how to extract a view of the world in-itself from our perceptions as things-in-the-world.

What is called for is a system of metaphysical theorizing that allows for this, the very kind of metaphysics that Kant thought impossible. Perhaps Kant was right, perhaps such a task is futile. However, just because something hasn't been done yet, doesn't mean that it can't be done at all. And just because a lack of imagination precludes one from conceiving how it can be done, doesn't mean that it can't be conceived by another. To think otherwise would be to commit what I will call the "I can't" fallacy. I have good reason to think that it can be done, but even if it really can't, let us be like Sisyphus, and never give up trying. I should note upfront, however, that any such explanation we offer will wind up sounding circular. This is because we are trying to characterize the world in-itself, and all we have to work with is what the world in-itself gives to us. This, of course, *is* the world in-itself. It is like trying to describe a set of things, using the things themselves. There really is no objective means available, for that would require venturing outside of our world, which is in fact impossible. I readily admit this worry, and hope that in the end, this explanation will be obvious enough to be self-justifying to those who would care to understand it.

## I

In order to begin, I shall require a starting point, for it seems that I am unable to say anything at all unless I make some assumptions. First, whatever we are, we are things-in-the-world; we are not Cartesian souls, peering in at the world through some supernatural connection

with a pineal gland, nor are we cut-off from the world by the impregnable shells of monads. Whatever we are, we are made of the same stuff as everything else. Second, as parts-of-the-world, our modes of perception are functions-of-the-world. This can hardly be denied, for what else could perception be? Third, rational thought, conducted as it were by us things-in-the-world, is a process-of-the-world. As with perception, how else is rationality brought about, other than as some natural product of the world? Fourth, and perhaps from this one assumption we can derive the first three, that anything *in* the world, is *part of* the world. This includes our perceptions, our thought processes, and ourselves. The world, as it is in-itself, includes all these things. To deny this would be to claim that some part of ourselves is not part of the world, and how strange that would be! Finally, we must assume that there is a world. Stranger still would be to doubt this, but how many have been so deluded by bad philosophy!

The above considerations lead immediately to a collapse between what Kant called the "noumenal" and the "phenomenal" worlds. Evidently, the phenomenal world is part of the noumenal world. Furthermore, since the phenomenal world is supposed to result from our application of the "categories", but there can be no "transcendental ego", we can see that the categories are part of the world as well. But rather than refer to "Kantian categories", I will refer instead to *simple concepts*. These simple concepts are atomic concepts; *they are not divisible by rational thought into components or parts*. The simple concepts are not a product of some mysterious transcendental ego, but rather are a part of the world, in the sense of boundary conditions or natural laws. Now we can understand how it is that we are able to grasp these simple concepts: reason is in the world, for this is the way the world works. Our minds can conceive of these simple concepts because they function in that way, and they function in that

way because they are part of the world, and that is the way the world functions. Could it possibly be any simpler?

This then forms the basis for an a priori system of metaphysics, the kind that Kant thought impossible, but which is in fact *necessarily* possible. So long as we stick to simple concepts, we can be certain that the world, at some level, does in fact work like that. Now, I have already admitted that any such explanation must turn out circular, and have explained why. But I may be somewhat lacking in clarity, and since clarity is what will show this to be true, I will explain yet again in more familiar terms. Our minds are things-in-the-world, and as such, follow the laws of the world. Therefore, the simplest concepts that can be represented by our minds must somehow be *of* the world. Take, for example, the logical operator "AND". We can conceive of a conjunction of two things because the natural laws of our world allow for our minds to do that. If not, how then could our minds conjoin two things in thought? And so it is with the rest of the logical operators. Carrying this further, we can see the logical operators instantiated in other ways as well. For example, we can build logic gates out of semiconductors. How could a logic gate exist in a world that did not allow for that sort of thing? And if the world allows for that, it must do so specifically, for a world that willy-nilly allowed anything at all would exhibit no regularity whatsoever!

This leads us to another question: "could the world have been any other way in regard to the natural laws?" The short answer is that I don't know; the long answer is that we *can't* know. We can't know because we have no means of representing something outside of what the world gives us, and thus we are unable to represent any alternatives. This case is quite different than a mere lack of imagination, for such imagining is an impossibility. Perhaps some other worlds do

have different natural laws, but we shouldn't worry too much about them. Here we are concerned, strictly, with our world and the things in it.

## II

I do not intend to say here how this translates into conscious experience; that is a subject for a different paper. For now, it will suffice to say that experience is somehow an aspect of the world. There is, however, a strong correlation between what is going on in the world and what the things in it are experiencing. I also do not intend to provide a completed theory of meaning and reference; that too is a future topic. However, in order to segue into more pertinent matters, I shall have to say something about meanings.

When I speak here of "meaning", I refer to the *contents of thought*. As for one's ability to function in a linguistic community, to satisfy one's desires, that is something else. It should be obvious that, on this view, meanings must be part of the world. I hold that meanings are reducible to simple concepts, which in turn are just ways the world can be, and ways the world can be, translated into experience, give rise to an experience of meaning. A neural structure, for example, can function as a logic gate, thereby allowing one to think "AND" thoughts. Now, as I have said, I won't attempt to say much about the reduction of meanings here, only that they are reducible to ways in which the world can be. But it will be helpful to elucidate what is meant by "ways the world can be", and so shed some light on meanings.

If our world were a homogenous whole, then nothing would ever happen. For example, imagine that our world were filled to the brim with nothing but electrons. The electrons would stabilize, each one being equidistant from its neighbors, and it would stay that way forever (ignoring trivial quantum fluctuations). There would be no action, no cause and effect, and

certainly no rational thought would take place. What is required is that the world be heterogeneous, so that there can be differences. These differences allow for a dynamic world wherein events do take place. The localized ways in which these differences are structured is what is meant by "ways the world can be". For example, there can be a hydrogen atom, and there can also be a hydrogen ion. These are two different ways in which some part of the world can be. By being different, we mean that they are not the same, and this is a result of their properties. As simple as this sounds, there is an important lesson to be extracted: a difference is something that makes a difference. This follows from the fact that homogeneity results in stagnation, whereas heterogeneity results in a dynamic. Thus it is differences that make a difference.

With the aforementioned discussion of difference in mind, let us reconsider Ayer's Verification Principle. One should note that Ayer's criterion for meaningfulness is derivable from what I will here call the *Principle of Differences: a difference is something that can make a difference*. If a factual proposition is to be true, then the world is just as it says. If false, then the world is different. This difference between the way the world is, and the way a false proposition claims it to be, is a difference that can be exploited. In fact, scientists use this all the time to devise experiments that are meant to detect minute differences in the world. To illustrate this, imagine that I show you a cup of some liquid that looks like water, but I tell you it is "vawter". I go on to explain that "vawter" has the same properties as water; in fact, it has the same molecular structure. Indeed, there is no noticeable difference between "vawter" and water, such that even an omnipotent deity could not discriminate between them. You would be right to respond that, there being no difference between the two, they must be the same thing. If I continued to insist that they were still different somehow, you would dismiss me as insane, or joking. But let us suppose that there is some difference in the two, but that at our current level of scientific knowledge it is

undetectable (although an omnipotent deity could discover the difference). In this case I couldn't possibly know that "vawter" was different from water, and neither could you. In such a case, you would still be right to dismiss me as being insane, or joking, for what could I possibly *mean* in asserting that it was "vawter" rather than water? A precondition for my meaning that some liquid is "vawter" is that I know (or know how to find out) in what ways it is different from other things, especially water. And of course, a precondition for my knowing *that* they are different, is knowing *how* they are different, or knowing that I can find out (from another source) exactly what sets them apart. Therefore we are justified in applying the Verification Principle as a *criterion* for meaning, but not as *giving* meaning.

Meanings still depend on differences, however; for to mean one thing rather than another requires that what is meant be different from those things that are not meant. And a meant difference requires that one knows of the difference somehow, whether firsthand, or by the testimony of "experts". Knowing a difference in turn requires that the mind be able to represent some difference between the two. This difference could be represented as an actual difference, in the way that I know that cats and dogs are different, or in a symbolic way, such that I know that "strange" quarks are different than "charm" quarks. In the first case, where an actual difference is represented in my mind, I must know something of the properties of each. My mind can know this because the relevant properties can be represented as concepts (atomic or molecular) of ways the world can be. In the second case, however, even physicists cannot directly represent the relevant properties of quarks. To give an example, quarks have a property called "spin". But, some quarks have to "spin around" *two full times* before they are facing the same direction again; 360 degrees of "spin" only takes them halfway 'round. No one is able to directly conceive of this, and this property is not quite the same as our everyday concept of spin. Strangely, however,

physicists do know how to devise experiments that differentiate between the various types of quarks. This counts as verification, since we can detect a difference, and we can therefore know that there *is* a difference. We can then mean different things by "strange" quarks and "charm" quarks, because they are different, which means that those are two ways something can be. However, if our minds cannot represent their differences directly, as in the case of "spin", then our minds simply do not work that way. Note the following two propositions:

- (1) Strange quarks are different than charm quarks.
- (2) Vawter is different than water.

The difference between (1) and (2) is that (1) is empirically verifiable, while (2) is not even in principle verifiable. But as noted, we cannot directly conceive of the difference proposed in (1). This leads us to question how much we can know of our world, since there are obviously real differences in properties of which we are unable to conceive.

### III

The world seems to exhibit a unifying phenomenon: that things in the world, being combined in the right way, act on other things in a unified manner. For example, hydrogen and oxygen, combined to form H<sub>2</sub>O, no longer act as they did before. Now, they act like water. From the macro level properties of water alone, one could never deduce the lower-level properties of hydrogen and oxygen, and so it seems that our world is organized into something like layers of graininess. At high levels of unification the world is course-grained; this is the level at which we function, which scientists refer to as the "macro-world". At the lowest levels, we do not yet know exactly how the world functions. In between there are multiple layers that operate in different ways. So, if we wish, we may attempt to reduce our mental states to some lower level of

functioning; say, at the neural level. Then, since mental states are the result of the unification of neural activity, the ways in which a mental state can be are dependant upon the ways in which unified collections of neurons can function. But in the same way that some of the properties of the individual constituents are lost between hydrogen/oxygen and H<sub>2</sub>O, many of the lower-level properties of neurons are lost to mental states. Thus, since there are only certain ways in which mental states can be, there are only certain concepts that can be represented in experience. What this means is that many of the lower-level properties of our world, especially at the quantum level (and lower), may be inconceivable to us. However, insofar as we are able to design experiments that will manifest these differences at a higher level, we can know that there *are* differences.

The upshot of all this is that we have to consider the graininess of what we are trying to conceive. Our ability to represent the properties of something will depend on how far removed it is from the level of mental states. We should note, also, that mental states are not the highest level in the world. On a higher level, we have entities that depend upon mental states, like governments and corporations, societies and social organizations, even angry mobs. And as for so-called "emergent" properties that are not deducible from the lower-level properties, I hold that they are not properties of the things themselves, but are due to their *interactions* with other things. For example, the property of being a "building" is not deducible from the properties of bricks and mortar. But, a building is only a building in that something would want to inhabit it. Thus we are presented with a realistic picture not only of reduction, but construction as well. We are easily able to conceive of phenomena that are at a higher level than mental states, and not always so able with those of lower levels. When trying to understand the world around us, we must always take account of our place in it.

Our place in the world, what I will call our *level of unification*, has everything to do with how we conceive of the world. The sort of unification of which I speak is plainly evident in the world around us. For example, in so far as a water molecule is a single entity, it is a unification of two hydrogen atoms and one oxygen atom. They enter into a relationship with one another, such that they form a unified whole. We can also see this in automobiles; all of a car's several hundred parts, operating in unison, make up a single entity. These unified entities can also form further relationships, thereby resulting in higher degrees of unification. If two entities are at (or very close to) the same level of unification, let us call them *peers*. Our peers include other people, but also things like automobiles and computers. We tend to interact with our peers in one-on-one relationships. Interaction with non-peers is quite different, however. For the most part, direct interaction is not possible. We simply rely on our knowledge of the lower/higher level-properties, and then manipulate things at our peer level. This is the case, for example, in chemistry (lower-level) and economics (higher-level). We are no more able to directly manipulate "the economy" than we are able to directly manipulate the structure of a water molecule. But we can affect the rate at which we loan money, and we can also pass an electric current through the water, thereby breaking the bonds between the hydrogen and oxygen.

We can now bring to light the relationship between the interactions of things in the world and our ability to conceive of those interactions. For things in our peer level, we have the requisite concepts intuitively, since we function at that same level. For everything else, we must develop theories, whether high-level (i.e. economics) or low-level (i.e. physics). But these theories must always be framed in terms that we can understand, which depend upon our level of unification, and so our ability to conceive of what is going on at these other levels is limited.

## IV

Implicit in the discussion thus far is a theory of meaning which rests entirely on the way the world is. The way in which our minds work is simply the way the world works at a certain degree of unification. The simplest concepts, being irreducible in thought, are exactly the way the world works at our level of unification. But this includes not only logical and mathematical concepts, but others as well. I won't attempt to provide a full accounting of them here, although they are, of course, necessarily open to discovery by yourself. But simple concepts, being atomic, aren't the only sorts of things that can be thought. Through a process of unification, we can also think molecular thoughts, and these are of great interest to us here. There is a large gap between knowing how the world works at our peer level, and knowing what is actually going on at our peer level. Furthermore, it is something altogether different for us to conceive of how the world works at other levels. I shall deal with both of these in turn.

Certain molecular constructs of simple concepts can be known with the same certainty that the simple concepts themselves can be known. Hypothetical syllogisms are a perfect example: three concepts are joined together in the same way that they can be in the world. But certain other molecular constructs are not so certain; for example, that Brendan Lalor (BL) will like this paper. I know, a priori, what it would be for BL to like this paper, although I don't know *why* he would like it. The first part is intrinsic to my peer level, while the second part depends on the lower-level properties of both BL and this paper. But I don't interact with this paper or BL at the relevant lower level. Of course, I could write a paper based on my peer-level knowledge of BL, but that would be patronizing, and poor scholarship. The fact is, in this case, I have no ability to conceive of the link between this paper and BL's liking this paper, although I do have some peer-level indications that he *may* like it. The difference between a molecular construct of

simple concepts that can be known a priori, and a molecular construct that cannot, lies in the way in which they are constructed. In the a priori case, it is always a necessary connection. If I were to write a patronizing paper, I could think that BL likes x, and my paper supports x, and therefore BL will like my paper. But in the case where no such connection is available, I may think that either BL will like my paper, or he will not. My favoring one over the other must be based on some other criteria, like the desire for a good grade, or simply the need for recognition.

In the second case, knowing how the world works at non-peer levels, there are two directions to consider: higher or lower. Conceiving of lower-levels is a difficulty because, as explained previously, although our ability to conceive relies on those lower-levels, many lower-level properties are not explicit in the higher-level properties (e.g. you can't infer the properties of hydrogen or oxygen from those of water). We can attempt to frame our understanding in terms of peer-level concepts, and perhaps some of our concepts are explicit representations of lower-level properties, but there will be a great deal of lower-level properties that cannot be represented at all. One example, which I have already mentioned, is quantum "spin". We will never be able to directly conceive of this strangeness.

Conceiving of higher-level properties is difficult for another reason: complexity. In this case we must frame our understanding of higher-level properties based on peer-level properties, but the sheer number of individual factors involved can quickly become overwhelming. The best we can do is formulate high-level theories based on generalizations, and not worry too much about specific cases. This is explicit in fields such as economics, for who can say what the stock market will do tomorrow? There is yet another ambiguity that obfuscates our ability to conceive of higher-level entities. Necessarily, we must understand higher-level entities in terms of peer-level entities. But who can say, for example, just exactly what peer-level entities compose the

"economy" at any given point in time? Again we must resort to generalizations about the "population", "supply and demand", etc. When we generalize in this way, we can offer no a priori assessment of higher-level goings on unless we can specify the relevant peer-level factors involved. The verification of any predictions we make will always depend, to some extent, upon factors that we are unable to account for.

The fact that there are factors that we are unable to account for leads to an interesting conclusion. In regard to higher levels of unification, while we may be able to stipulate what counts as being part of, e.g., the "economy", and make predictions based upon generalizations, our inability to account for all the relevant factors means that any of our predictions may turn out to be false. And regarding lower levels of unification, since many of the lower-level properties are not explicitly represented in our peer level, and thus that they cannot be explicitly represented in our minds, we must discover them in accordance with the differences that they *can* make in our peer level. This means that, in order to attempt to represent the lower-level properties in terms of higher-level properties, we must devise experiments designed to elicit an "amplification" of some difference, thereby making a difference at our peer-level. This is the case, for example, when physicists detect individual photons with the aid of a phosphorus screen. Such peer-level differences are things that we can represent, and so we represent them in that way. Think: how do you represent, in your mind, the concept of an individual photon? You do it, necessarily, of course, through some peer-level concept.

## V

It should now be clear that the meanings of our words and statements are based upon unifications of simple concepts. These unifications can be conjunctions, disjunctions,

containment (as in Venn diagrams), and perhaps others. Our minds can do that because that is the way the world works, and insofar as our minds work that way too, we can conceive of them a priori. Now, it may be that, the way in which I unify my concepts is due to my interactions with the world. Thus, empirical observation has much to do with meanings. Likewise, my interaction with others causes me to develop constructs that approximate those of others, such that interpersonal communication is possible. Certainly, individual usage of words and statements varies. But given the vast complexity of the mind, and the corresponding complexity of molecular concepts, this shouldn't surprise us. And just because meaning is indeterminate language-wide (i.e. over the entire group of speakers), doesn't mean that *individual* usage is indeterminate. It should be fairly evident that you and I can mean slightly different things by the same word, but this is just due to the way we construct our individual molecular concepts. Language is idiosyncratic, but it isn't individually indeterminate, and it certainly isn't meaningless (even at the level of individual words).

Since the aforementioned notion of containment is of mathematical certainty, and since our minds can work like that because the world works like that, we find that we have the sort of containment that Kant could not make explicit; the sort of containment that Quine thought couldn't be given (cf. 20 f). If in fact the meaning of a word (as a molecular concept) can contain other meanings in it, which I think is plainly evident, we find that meanings (which Quine thought didn't exist) account for the analytic/synthetic distinction (which Quine thought couldn't be so). And if someone were to argue that I have presupposed the analytic/synthetic distinction somewhere in this essay, I would respond that I am justified in doing so, because the world works that way, and therefore our minds work that way, and therefore the meanings of our words

are that way. And we can know this, a priori, because our minds work that way, and as things-in-the-world, the world must work that way too.

### Conclusion

In understanding the world, we must make some assumptions. The clearest assumption that we can make is that we are part of the world, and as part of the world we must follow the same natural laws as everything else in the world. This includes our minds, which leads us to conclude that the operation of our minds is based on the simple properties of our level of functioning (i.e. our peer level). These are what I call simple concepts, and they are necessarily innate.

Meanings, as reducible to the simple concepts, are fully capable of sustaining the analytic/synthetic distinction. We can know the truths of logic with absolute certainty because the world works that way, and our minds, as things-in-the-world, work that way as well. And we can hold these truths, *come what may*, simply because the natural laws of the world aren't about to change. So it is with all the simple concepts, although I have yet to catalog them. Combined in various ways to form meanings, we can easily formulate analytic statements. These too may be held *come what may*, and can be known a priori. And so, from an a priori system of metaphysics, we have constructed an a priori Epistemology. I call this view, both in recognition of Kant, and despite him, Noumenism.

### References

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