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The Inescapability of Ethics
Gerard Casey

As a philosophical theory, as contrasted with a theological view or an assumption of popular science or an emotional intuition about fate, determinism fails because it is unstateable. However far we impinge (for instance for legal or moral purposes) upon the area of free will we cannot philosophically exhibit a situation in which, instead of shifting, it vanishes. The phenomena of rationality and morality are involved in the very attempt to banish them.¹

Introduction
In the Fawlty Towers episode, ‘Gourmet Night’ we find the hapless hotel owner Basil Fawlty treating his chronically malfunctioning car as if it were yet another person conspiring with the rest of the world to make him fail once again. In what must surely be one of the most achingly funny illustrations of the archetypal love/hate relationship between man and machine, Basil, when the car refuses to start, leaving him stranded with the duck for which his dinner guests are waiting in vain, reacts as follows:

 Come on, start, will you? Start, you vicious bastard! Come on! Oh, my God! I’m warning you—if you don’t start…I’ll count to three: One…two…three! Right! That’s it! I’ve had enough. [Jumps out of the car and addresses the vehicle] You’ve tried it on just once too often! Right! Well, don’t say I haven’t warned you! I’ve laid it on the line to you time and time again! Right! Well…this is it—I’m going to give you a damn good thrashing! [Disappears from shot, reappearing moments later with a branch of tree with which he proceeds, futilely, to beat the car].

It’s difficult, even when appreciating the fundamental absurdity of Fawlty’s action, not to sympathise with him. Who hasn’t been frustrated and rendered semi-paranoid by sundry misbehaving mechanical devices, persuaded, at least momentarily, that they were out to get us? The humour in the Fawlty Towers episode arises, in large part, from our instinctive fellow-feeling with Fawlty’s hostile reaction to the inert machine and, simultaneously, our realisation of the supremely inappropriate nature of that reaction. Emotionally, Basil (and we) regard the malfunctioning mechanical device as malign and evil; rationally, we (perhaps not Basil) understand that it is nothing of the kind.

In a similar way, if bitten by a dog or scratched by a cat, we don’t blame the dog for biting or the cat for scratching, at least once we’ve overcome our momentary annoyance, but we would blame other people if they bit or scratched us and, unless we’re philosophers of a particular persuasion or even when we are philosophers of a particular persuasion ‘after hours’, we believe that our rebuke of the biting or scratching human being is rationally warranted and is not merely an idiosyncratic irritable reaction as it would be in the case of the cat or dog.

Explanatory Pluralism
To regard the non-human animate world or the completely inanimate world as intentional and purposeful and, more often than not, malignant, is a deeply rooted, perhaps even atavistic, human tendency to which the writings of anthropologists abundantly attest. We understand from the ‘inside’, as it were, how the human world

works and we have an innate tendency to export this understanding into regions where it has little (the animal world) or no (the inanimate world) purchase. The intellectual history of mankind bears eloquent testimony to the struggle to expel intentional explanations from the non-human world to make room for physically causal explanations. More recently, the intellectual history of mankind bears witness to a movement to expel such intentional explanations even from the world of human affairs and to provide physicalist explanations and only such explanations for all phenomena.

We find a discussion of a very early example of anti-intentional explanatory schemes in the *Phaedo*, where Socrates reflects on his early life and remarks how excited he became when he heard of Anaxagoras who, it was said, claimed that it is the mind that produces order and is the cause of everything. Eagerly, he obtained Anaxagoras’s writings only to be severely disappointed. When it came to the crunch, Anaxagoras made no use of causation by mind; instead, he “adduced causes like air and aether and water and many other absurdities.” Socrates remarks that it was as if someone were to claim that

The reason why I am lying here now is that my body is composed of bones and sinews, and that the bones are rigid and separated at the joints, but the sinews are capable of contraction and relaxation, and form an envelope for the bones with the help of the flesh and skin, the latter holding all together, and since the bones move freely in their joints the sinews by relaxing and contracting enable me somehow to bend my limbs, and this is the cause of my sitting here in a bent position.  

But, as Socrates points out, while such bodily dispositions are obviously necessary conditions of one’s posture, they are far from being sufficient conditions. The real reason that Socrates is now sitting in prison awaiting execution is not that his bones and sinews are suitably disposed (although they are suitably disposed) but rather that he believes it to be more honourable to submit to the penalty imposed by his city than to run away and is acting accordingly. Socrates does not deny that there can be knowledge of bodily dispositions nor that such dispositions are necessary but, in a passage that contains a rare example of Plato making a joke, he does deny that such knowledge would be such as to render otiose explanations in terms of reasons.

If [Anaxagoras] tried to account in the same way for my conversing with you, adducing causes such as sound and air and hearing, and a thousand others, and never troubled to mention the real reasons, which are that since Athens has thought it better to condemn me, therefore I for my part have thought it better to sit here, and more right to stay and submit to whatever penalty she orders. Because, by dog, I fancy that these sinews and bones would have been in the neighbourhood of Megara or Boeotia long ago—impelled by a conviction of what is best!—if I did not think that it was more right and honourable to submit to whatever penalty my country orders rather than to take to my heels and run away. But to call things like that causes is too absurd. If it were said that without such bones and sinews and all the rest of them I should not be able to do what I think is right, it would be true. But to say that it is because of them that I do what I am doing, and not through choice of what is best—although my actions are controlled by mind—would be a very lax and inaccurate form of

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expression. Fancy being unable to distinguish between the cause of a thing and the conditions without which it could not be a cause.³

It is a necessary condition of Socrates’ body being in its prison cell (assuming him not to have been carried there by force) that his muscles contracted and his brain cells fired in the appropriate way. Some two and half thousand years later, Ludwig Wittgenstein essentially addressed the same point raised by Plato in the *Phaedo* when he asked the question “…what is left over if I subtract the fact that my arm goes up from the fact that I raise my arm?”⁴ If my arm is to go from a position of repose to one of being raised, the appropriate physiological events have to take place. Such physiological events are necessary conditions of one’s arm’s going up but they are not sufficient inasmuch as, prescinding from pathological conditions in which one’s limbs operate more or less independently of one’s desires, in order for one’s hand to go up, one must do something—one must raise one’s arm.⁵ This human action is not necessarily the result of long hours of deliberation (though it may be); it may in fact be simple, spontaneous and unreflective. Nonetheless, it is an action. Contrast that with the situation in which your friend, let us imagine, to embarrass you at an auction, catches your arm and lifts it up high into the air. Here, one’s arm is up but one hasn’t done anything, as one will subsequently have to explain to the irate auctioneer.

In the matter of explanations, then, we seem to be committed by our practices to an explanatory pluralism. There is a dimension of reality to which physical causal explanations alone are relevant, which explanations delineate the conditions that are both necessary and sufficient to account for that dimension; and there is a dimension of reality in which such physically causal explanations are, at best, indicative of necessary conditions—the sufficient conditions being given by reference to irreducibly intentional concepts such as beliefs, desires and actions.

Monistic accounts are inherently intellectually attractive and, other things being equal and with Ockham’s razor to hand, are to be preferred to more complex accounts; but while explanations should be as simple as they can be, they should be as complex as they have to be in order not to distort or ignore the data they purport to explain. It is a prejudice simply to assume that there can be one and only one kind of explanation, a point made by Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics*.

Our discussion will be adequate if it has as much clearness as the subject-matter admits of, for precision is not to be sought for alike in all discussions….We must be content, then, in speaking of such subjects and with such premisses to indicate the truth roughly and in outline, and in speaking of things which are only for the most part true and with premisses of the same kind to reach conclusions that are no better. In the same spirit, therefore, should each type of statement be received; for it is the mark of an educated man to look for precision in each class of things just so far as the nature of the subject admits; it is evidently equally foolish to accept probable reasoning from a mathematician and to demand from a rhetorician scientific proofs.⁷

⁷ Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* Book 1, Ch. 3 1094b12-28. (trans. W. D. Ross)
As already mentioned, it is now generally accepted that it is not appropriate to seek an intentionalistic explanatory monism across the range of explananda—what is not generally considered inappropriate is the corresponding attempt to establish a physicalistic explanatory monism even though such an attempt, if successful, makes the very process of offering and receiving explanations problematic.

**Starting from where we are—where else?**

The ineliminable starting point of every inquiry cannot but be the very act of inquiry itself. Furthermore, the conditions of the act of enquiry and whatever follows ineluctably from the act of inquiry cannot, without performative contradiction, be gainsaid. A rejection of the starting points of Aristotle and Descartes involves the rejeter in a performative contradiction. The difference between their respective positions was that while Descartes’ *cogito* represents a retreat to subjectivity, from which position escape seems impossible, Aristotle’s principle of non-contradiction, involving as it does a commitment to language and communication, is implicitly social. The Cartesian *cogito* leads to the solipsistic self but the act of inquiry, which is impossible without language, leads not to a single individual but to a whole community of language users. Language is the repository of our common ‘intentions’ and is the property of the entire speech community, not the idiosyncratic plaything of individual speakers. “Human beings are essentially language-using animals, an idea shared by Aristotelianism and hermeneutics.”

For Wittgenstein, belief, and the expression of belief in propositions, is as much a matter of the natural history of man as is his physical constitution. “As if the giving of grounds did not come to an end sometime. But the end is not an ungrounded presupposition; it is an ungrounded way of acting,” and “Giving grounds, however justifying the evidence, comes to an end; - but the end is not certain propositions’ striking us immediately as true, i.e. it is not a kind of seeing on our part; it is our *acting*, which lies at the bottom of the language-game.”

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8 Some of the ideas in the following section first appeared in my “Metaphysics and Certainty: Beyond Justification”, in David Murray (ed.), *Proceedings: Metaphysics* (Rome, 2006).
10 Descartes, *Meditations*.
15 Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, para. 475
As children, we move from functioning originally more or less purely on the stimulus-response level to a situation in which the characteristically human capacity to ask and answer questions begins to emerge. When a child begins to interact verbally with its mother, on the child’s side we are dealing first with random noises and then, very quickly, with at most a rudimentary kind of signalling that, considered just as such, is not significantly different in kind from animal communication. On the mother’s side, however, the child’s actions, movements, sounds, noises, are all interpreted as being the actions of a communicative human being. To use the language of Walker Percy, the distinguished American novelist, physician and philosopher, the child’s initial verbal activity is dyadic, which is to say that it is a purely natural event, yet it is interpreted triadically (intentionally) by those in the child’s environment and the child’s speech eventually becomes genuinely triadic.16

Wittgenstein writes: “The child, I should like to say, learns to react in such-and-such a way; and in so reacting it doesn’t so far know anything. Knowing only begins at a later level.”17 This socially interactive yet pre-semantic (on the child’s side) situation is the vital context within which genuine language use will begin, including the characteristically human activity of asking and answering questions. That context of social interaction, however, is not merely a starting point to be left behind as the child matures; it is the continuing environment, the ground that keeps our language rooted to reality, however recondite and sophisticated our knowledge may become.

The Argument distinguished from some of its near relations
The argument which I have adumbrated as relevant to the defeat of the deterministic and irrationalist underminers of freedom and rationality needs to be distinguished from several related but distinct arguments. The argument is not a pure logical contradiction. Take two propositions, such as —“Dublin is the capital of Ireland” and “Dublin is not the capital of Ireland”. Provided all the words in both propositions have the same sense and reference, these propositions are strictly contradictory: they do not need to be asserted by anyone. We have here two distinct (albeit related) propositions. It is just a logical truth that a proposition and its contradictory cannot both be true: the truth of one excludes the truth of the other. Even if all rational beings ceased to exist, these two propositions would still be contradictory. Of course, no one would know or care about the contradiction but that is another matter.

The argument is not a matter of pure self-referential incoherence. A single proposition is self-referentially incoherent if it is such that if it is true then it is also false and if it is false, then it is also true. The classic example of self-referential incoherence is S—“This sentence is false”. If S is true, then S is false; if S is false, then S is true. The incoherence of S is purely logical, that is, it is incoherent regardless of who asserts S or, indeed, whether S is in fact asserted by anyone. The ‘self’ in ‘self-referentially incoherent’ refers to the proposition in question and not to any utterer, proposer, articulator or enunciator of this proposition.

Nor is the argument a matter of behavioural inconsistency or hypocrisy. We have behavioural inconsistency in the situation where A professes to reject actions of type X while engaging in X; so, for example, when Algernon says he hates country music but spends a significant amount of time listening to it when not required to do so either by coercion or by other extenuating circumstances and spends much of his

17 Wittgenstein, On Certainty, para. 538.
disposable income on country music CDs and downloads. Changes of mind, of course, must be distinguished from inconsistency. One may be subject to rapid changes of mind and so would be properly described as inconstant; one is only inconsistent if the acceptance and rejection of X occur at the same time and in the same respect.

The Argument
We can draw a reasonably clear distinction between the purely logically contradictory arguments (such as pure logical contradiction and pure self-referential incoherence) and all the other types. The former are what they are independently of any human action—in a world in which there were no rational agents, such propositions would still be what they are and have the character that they have. The latter require some action or the existence of something. An agent must speak or write or there must exist some theory with consequences or some state of affairs that requires explanation.

Some philosophical arguments have a unique ability to polarise scholarly opinion. Anselm’s argument is one such. From the moment of its first appearance in the 11th century, this argument has divided philosophers into two camps, the inhabitants of one camp being content to accept that there is something special about the starting point and subject matter of the argument that generates an incontrovertible conclusion, while the inhabitants of the other camp, suspecting that non-logical rabbits are being pulled out of logical hats, remaining resolutely unpersuaded of its merits. The self-stultifying argument which I have sketched is just such another polarising intellectual device. Lynne Rudder Baker makes the point with which it is hard to disagree that “arguments about the allegedly self-defeating character of anything are, I think, frustrating to people on both sides of the issue. People on each side think that those on the other side miss the point. From my side, it seems that I ask straightforward questions….which require answers but receive none.”

The argument is based on the notion of existential self-refutation. The proposition “I am not speaking”, as spoken aloud by someone is existentially self-refuting. This is not purely self-referentially incoherent; after all, the remark could be made (as here) in writing. Neither is it a pure logical contradiction. If the pronoun were changed to ‘You’ and then I said it while you were silent, it would be true. Its truth or falsity depends upon the action described and whether or not the agent alleged to be performing this action is or isn’t actually performing it.

Getting serious
Philosophers and the accounts they give must be serious. Being serious doesn’t mean that one has to be solemn or portentous—one can be serious and humorous, just as one can be frivolous and pedantic—but a condition of holding a belief, really holding that belief, not just notionally adhering to it, is that one’s actions should, as far as possible, conform to it. At the very least, if one is serious, there should be no

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19 Sometimes you can learn a phrase, such as ‘Non parlo italiano.’ or ‘Ich spreche kein Deutsch.’ to say in response to someone who attempts to speak to you in Italian or German. This would seem to be existentially self-refuting but when properly understood, it isn’t. What it really means is “Please don’t expect me to speak Italian or German to you; this is all I have. Help!”
gratuitous contradiction between what one claims to believe and the actions one performs. We might put this in the form of the following maxim, M:

\[ M: \text{No theory can be seriously maintained such that, if it were to be true, its maintenance would become impossible, meaningless, contradictory or self-refuting.} \]

Apart from the formal constraints on theories of the necessity for consistency and coherence, and the material constraints of explanatory adequacy and coverage, there is also a self-referential constraint on theories, namely, that theories must not render impossible the conditions of their own statement or the conditions of their being maintained. If they do so, they are theoretically self-stultifying. So, to repeat the central point of this paper, unless human beings are fundamentally free in their choices and decisions, it is not possible for statements to be meaningfully asserted: that includes the statement of a radical determinism or a radical irrationalism. The statement of a radical determinism is undermined by its own content’s rendering pointless the act of its assertion or by its assertion’s rendering meaningless the content of that assertion; likewise for the statement of a radical irrationalism. As the headline citation from Iris Murdoch makes clear, determinism falls foul of the maxim since, of necessity, the very attempt to argue for determinism is itself a free act by the arguer which commends itself to the rational judgement of its intended audience; irrationalism, on the other hand, while not quite as neatly self-destructive as determinism, is nonetheless obviously rationally unsustainable.

In fact, the argument embodied in the maxim can be marshalled against all forms of eliminative materialism or, more generally, all forms of reductive naturalism. Once again, it is hard to disagree with Lynne Rudder Baker when she says that, “To deny the common-sense conception of the mental is to abandon all our familiar resources for making sense of any claim, including the denial of the common-sense conception.” She continues, “If the thesis denying the common-sense conception is true, then the concepts of rational acceptability, of assertion, of cognitive error, even of truth and falsity are called into question.”

Does scientific naturalism, which is currently the dominant and fashionable philosophical orthodox, fail to meet the self-referential constraint of the maxim? I believe so. Scientific naturalism derives much of its plausibility from the progressive and inexorable elimination of folk physics by the advances of modern science. From its legitimate application to the physical sciences, the eliminative method is extended to other areas such as psychology where the theory holds that so-called folk psychology, the complex of inter-related concepts in which we describe and explain our everyday behaviour, is similarly eliminable by the development of a scientific psychology. Now, it is clear that there has been, and to some extent still is, a folk physics that purports to explain people’s everyday experience of the physical world. Such a folk-physics is eliminable. What is not, however, eliminable is people’s experience of weight, resistance to movement and so on. These are facts of human experience that are not subject to scientific dissolution. Similarly, there could indeed be a folk psychology (indeed, the quasi-substantialist notion of the mind characteristic of much modern philosophy is a thesis of just such a refined folk psychology) but

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however wrong or misguided particular beliefs, thoughts, and judgements may be, beliefs, thoughts and judgements just as such are scientifically ineliminable. Unlike the elimination of folk physics in favour of scientific physics, the very attempt to assert the eliminability of our ordinary psychological descriptions and explanations cannot be done without making use of that which is denied. Scientific naturalism is just one philosophical theory among others. It originates from within our human experience and so cannot, coherently, radically contradict that experience.

Unless we are content to exhibit Dissociative Identity Disorder, our lives as philosophers cannot be radically divorced from what we do when we are not doing philosophy. In a normal day, we go to work, read and answer our mail, teach our students, work on papers or books, go to meetings, have lunch, make small talk with acquaintances, discuss last night’s football game and so on, all of which actions are shot through with purpose and intentionality. In our non-philosophical dealings with our families, friends and colleagues, we treat them as rational moral agents, as people responsible for their actions, sometimes praising them, more often blaming them, but always morally evaluating their actions. We assume, without any difficulty, the reality of the ethical dimension of our lives and the lives of others and the appropriateness of moral judgement. But moral judgements make sense only if human actions are, in some significant way, free. Freedom, in turn, if it is possible at all, is co-implicative with rationality such that only the free can be rational and only the rational can be free.

Some attempt to deny the apparently undeniable. Susan Blackmore holds that “It is possible to live happily and morally without believing in free will.”

According to her, once we learn to let go of the illusory feeling that we act with free will “…decisions just happen with no sense of anyone making them.” She admits that giving up a sense of self is much more difficult, remarking that “I just keep on seeming to exist.” In a somewhat similar vein, Nicholas Humphrey believes that “human consciousness is a conjuring trick, designed to fool us into thinking we are in the presence of an inexplicable mystery.” He is of the opinion that those, such as Colin McGinn, who think that it is impossible to explain how consciousness can arise from the material operations of the central nervous system are apparently the butts of a practical joke played by Natural Selection which has, for its own inscrutable reasons, “succeeded in putting consciousness beyond the reach of rational explanation” and by so doing, has “undermined the very possibility of showing that this is what it has done.”

It is interesting to note that while Blackmore denies the reality of the human agent, she is unable to avoid substituting another agent—“this body and its genes and memes and the whole universe”—and while Humphrey rejects the reality of human consciousness, he happily posits (and presumably is conscious of) a quasi-anthropomorphic Natural Selection which can intend things and be successful. Agency and consciousness, like nature, when expelled through the front door, somehow always manage to sneak back into the house.

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26 *Naturam expelles furca, tamen usque recurret*, Horace *Epistles* i. x. 24.
At this point, some readers may echo the sentiment of the bystander in My Fair Lady, who objects to Professor Higgins’ choice of Eliza as a subject for linguistic analysis with “Come Sir, I think you’ve picked a poor example!” Perhaps I have, but when one strips away the veneer of sophistication surrounding reductionist accounts, though the details differ, they all suffer from the same principled problem: it is not possible to reconcile the intentionalistic, purposive, meaningful act of stating the account with the fact that such accounts undermine purpose, meaning and intention.

Determinism, whether psychological, theological or metaphysical, undermines freedom and makes morality otiose. Those who preach determinism, if they are to be taken seriously, must be prepared to live by that doctrine. But determinism is practically impossible, and so, I hold, determinism is not a serious philosophical position. Illness, disease, passion, exhaustion may make inroads into the area of our freedom but they cannot totally eliminate it, or could do so only at the cost of making us cease to be human. In a similar way, fundamental attacks on human rationality are similarly destructive of morality. If they are to be taken seriously, those who preach irrationalism—whether in the form of deconstructionism, perspectivalism, postmodernism, or polylogism—must live by those doctrines. Irrationalism, though not impossible in quite the same way as determinism, cannot be consistently maintained (although some irrationalists make an impressive effort) and so, I maintain, that irrationalism is not a serious philosophical position. There is little point in discussing the respective merits of deontology, say, as against utilitarianism or virtue ethics if at any moment someone can pull the rug out from under the entire discussion by questioning the very possibility of ethics in the first place. We need to demonstrate the non-viability of determinism and irrationalism and the best way to do this, perhaps the only way, is via the self-stultifying argument.

After the publication of Alasdair MacIntyre’s ground-breaking trilogy, normative ethics has re-established itself in the Anglophone world as a respectable philosophical discipline. A glance at the catalogues of the publishers of philosophy books will reveal an astonishing plethora of studies in various aspects of the discipline. Whatever position one takes in the various disputes around the many topics in this area, one presupposition is common to all positions, namely, that ethics, in any of its forms, is possible. But ethics makes no sense and has no point unless human action is capable of moral evaluation; and for human action to be susceptible of moral evaluation it must be free and rational. Any philosophical theory that radically denies freedom or radically undermines rationality ipso facto undermines the very possibility of ethics but, since ethics is inescapable, determinism and irrationalism are fundamentally incoherent.