Godhika's Razor

Part I

Pseudo-Tiresias

1 On the Slopes of Isigili

I biked this morning through the seaside gloom, the salt and the breeze, whispering briskly through the streets. I settled for coffee at a small cafe, listened to the songs of students and the chatter of birds, pondered how I would approach this essay, how I would broach the subject, but where we are going cannot be reached gently.

Once, there was a monk—one who dwelt on the slopes of the mountain, Isigili. His name was Godhika. He meditated there, diligent, determined, and six times he came close to enlightenment, six times passing within a hair's breadth of freedom. Yet six times he fell away, fell back into suffering. So it was that on the seventh time, he took up his razor and slit his wrists.

The world is empty. There is no reason. We pass through the universe like a wind through the desert; we are leaves falling to the earth, decaying, buried beneath the dying and dead. There is no moral foundation, no footing for the one who wishes to navigate the world. You must stumble blindly unto death.

What is there for us now but to wait?

2 A Thoughtless and Fruitless Whim

> If an unfathomable, insatiable emptiness lay hid beneath everything, what would life be but despair? If it were thus, if there were no sacred bond uniting mankind, if one generation rose up after another like the leaves of the forest, if one generation succeeded the other as the songs of birds in the woods, if the human race passed through the world as a ship through the sea or the wind through the desert, a thoughtless and fruitless whim, if an eternal oblivion always lurked hungrily for its prey and there were no power strong enough to wrest it from its clutches - how empty and devoid of comfort would life be![1]

Meaning is not an emergent property of the universe. Certainly, there exist phenomena for which we lack a suitable scientific model—we have yet to achieve an all-encompassing theory of physics—but I think for most it will suffice to say that there is nothing supernatural in our world, nothing for which there cannot be devised a scientific explanation, even if it currently sits beyond our grasp. Some might take issue with my focus on "science," so in a show of charity, I will allow you to replace it with

1. Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Alastair I. Hannay (Penguin Books, 1985), 15.

any system of knowledge you wish. It suffices to say that the only things about which anything meaningful can be said are those things which can be known in this way.[2]

In other words, the world lies beneath the mind. All things pertaining to the material world, the only world we know, can themselves be known, even if it is unclear *if* we will someday know them. There are no angels dancing on pinheads or demons on our shoulders; the stars do not twist our fates; we are, for all intents and purposes, a sort of automata. Our cognitive processes are entirely determined by our cocktail of neurochemicals and the arrangement of our neurons; our bodies are systems of cells, interlinked; these systems are themselves determined by circumstance and our genetic code. All living things are, in essence, machines—or rather, they are machines composed of machines composed of machines, down to our simplest proteins.

If you do not agree, let's look at it from another angle. We can, to a high degree of accuracy, simulate a human cell. We must accept that, if not now then perhaps at some not too distant time, we will be able to perfectly describe the inner-workings of these building blocks of life. If we combine a great number of these cells into an organ, then it stands to reason that—as we understand how each of them works individually—we may understand with the same mathematical precision the operations of this new whole. There are emergent properties of systems, yes, but these arise from the properties of the system's constituent parts, about which we definitionally know everything. Hopefully you do not disagree that we could, given time, perfectly simulate the digestive system with all its intricacies or perhaps the nervous system. Following this logic, we may say that—again, disregarding limits on time or computational power—we could model the whole of the body. There is but one organ with which you might take issue.

As remarkable as it is, the brain can be described just as any other organ. It is composed of a variety of ingredients, but none of these are beyond understanding. Surely, it will take us quite a while before we can perfectly model the brain, and perhaps we will never reach that point, but it will not be because of the indescribability of the organ but instead our own limits as a species, as discoverers of knowledge. We have no reason to believe that there is anything beyond this body, beyond our material parts, that constitutes our being; therefore, if we say that one can achieve perfect knowledge of a cell, one can achieve perfect knowledge of a person.

Now wait, you might say, a person is more than just a collection of cells, and I would not disagree. But if you are willing to concede that we may one day understand perfectly a cell then I do not think I need to go on an overlong tangent arguing that each of these other constituent parts can themselves be modelled, can be known. Really, if you are willing to concede on the cell then I gather you've already seen where this is going.

Regardless of what physicists discover about the fundamental mechanisms of the universe, about its most essential parts, if they can be modelled mathematically—even statistically, if in the end it is true that God plays dice—or at the very least reduced to parts which are themselves not inherently meaningful, then it follows that the universe as a whole holds no inherent meaning.

2. I will, just here, add that there theoretically is a class of things about which we can know nothing, but definitionally nothing of meaning can be said about such a category. Here is where we would place the unmoved mover or the irreducible fabric of creation.

3 No Narrow Frith

We cannot say anything meaningful about any possible moral reality, and there do not exist any essential moral components of our universe—as they say, you can take the universe, grind it down, run it through a sieve, but you will not find one atom of justice or mercy. No, the universe is without morality, without foundation.

Let's start with an argument you've certainly heard before: "trees" do not exist. That is, what we call a tree is simply a particular arrangement of organic matter which is itself a particular arrangement of physical matter which is itself composed of atoms, composed of elementary particles and so on, down to whatever physicists end up determining the universe is made of, perhaps perturbations of some mathematical fields.[3] In any case, there is nothing in these most basic components of a "tree" that have any inherent "tree-ness," some immutable property that separates them from the physical components of a car or an office building. A tree is a "tree" because we have certain mental categories into which we place some arrangements of matter and not others, and the same goes for morality and meaning. There is nothing inherent to the most basic elements of a thing that determines whether it is moral or not, meaningful or not. Some things are moral because we attach that label to particular mental categories and not others, categories that are shaped by our cultural, historical, and personal contexts, and so, in the same way that a tree does not exist, neither does morality.

To prove that meaning or morality exists, one would have to be able to point to something that cannot be reduced to non-meaningful or amoral elements. Here, we extend the conclusions of (a loose form of) mereological nihilism into plain old nihilism; there exists nothing but some irreducible set with no meaning or morality unto itself. Without the ability for morality or meaning to arise in composition, we are left with an empty world.

4 Eternity in Love

We could conceive of morality or meaning as universally true in the same way that formal logic and mathematics seems to hold universally.[4] There is not, as we know, a region of space in which two plus two equals anything but four; nor can we travel to some far-flung star and make true become false.

If the axioms of such a system may be discovered, we have yet to find them. If there exists some indisputable truth about right action or our collective telos, then we have not stumbled upon it. Lack of evidence is not necessarily evidence of lack; perhaps such a system does pervade reality, but I will not entertain what for now remains entirely conjecture. I would very much like it if we could construct some axiomatic proofs for the value of life or our obligations to our fellow humans. In fact, I will leave this as an exercise for the reader.

3. I won't go into too much detail, here, but I find arguments against mereological nihilism unconvincing. We'll say it is enough that we can decompose reality into mathematical objects of a sort, or at least into "things" (physical or otherwise) that can be modeled mathematically. Be these deterministic, statistical, highly interconnected and distributed across space—it does not matter. Furthermore, it is inconsequential whether we can decompose things finitely or infinitely; so long as we can decompose to a point at which all the "things" in question are themselves without meaning and morality, our point stands, as neither morality nor meaning may arise from composition.

4. I understand that the philosophy of mathematics and logic is a complicated business, but I hope the fact that I do not go into detail here will not ruin my conclusions for you.

5 An Angel of Great and Terrible Light

Regardless of whether you agree with the way that we've arrived at our nihilistic outlook, so long as you are willing to entertain the notion that morality and meaning are entirely subjective—that is, they do not exist in the same way that the laws of physics seem to exist—then we can continue onward. Certainly, I did not set out to provide a rigid logical proof of these claims but only to provide some of the reasons why I find it difficult to believe otherwise. But we should continue onward up the slopes of Isigili.

The universe is and always will be a mystery.

Let us consider the two possibilities regarding the nature of creation: given that the universe exists—or at least something exists which we experience as the universe—then it must either have an origin or be eternal. Either the universe or some cycle involving something like the universe—kalpas, let's say—stretches back into infinity or there exists some Aquinian Unmoved Mover which itself has no cause. Perhaps the universe just popped into existence with the Big Bang and nothing more can be said about it. Perhaps the universe expands and contracts eternally, or perhaps it will simply cease at some arbitrary point. Perhaps the laws of physics operate such that time is fundamentally little different from the spatial dimensions; perhaps the universe is a single, many-dimensional object, only appearing to change from our very limited perspective.[5] It does not matter.

About the Unmoved Mover, we can say very little. Perhaps it still exists, perhaps not. Perhaps it has something resembling our consciousness, probably not. Perhaps it is just a central rule of reality, like the fundamental forces: sometimes universes just come into existence.[6] If there is an Unmoved Mover, it seems difficult to find hard evidence for; at least, we cannot say that its effects may be observed in anything particular. Furthermore, we cannot say anything about it before the moment of its first "move," the first act of creation.

The same can largely be said for an eternal reality. If the universe is eternal or if it is a part of something eternal, we run into the same problem as an Unmoved Mover: both definitionally have no cause, so we cannot come away with any satisfying explanation. The universe is an answer without a question, a question without an answer.

We wish to have a satisfactory *why* but will never find one. If we follow the chain

5. I have always enjoyed thinking about the world this way: if you imagine that time is essentially another spatial dimension, then the laws of physics become explanations for the shape of reality. If we have a two-dimensional graph of a function and we imagine the x-axis to be time, then the function becomes a sort of physical law explaining the motion of one-dimensional points; yet, we can also imagine the line drawn by this two-dimensional function as its own "thing," an object which from a one-dimensional point of view seems to change through time but which, from a higher perspective, is static, immutable; in the same way, even if our physical laws seem to be probabilistic, this does not necessarily invalidate a pre-deterministic view. Let's imagine I am presented, sequentially, with sets of four cups. In each set, one of the cups has a ball underneath it. The placement of the ball in each set was determined at the beginning of time itself. As I experience the revealing of each ball in each set sequentially, it would seem to me that their placement was probabilistic; however, in reality, it would be pre-determined as the placement of each ball in each set never changes from where they were originally placed at the beginning of time. In the same way, the seemingly probabilistic behaviour of certain systems in our universe may be imagined as pre-determined if viewed from a higher dimension. This model has some benefits: the universe is simplified down to geometry; there is no need to privilege time over other dimensions; and you can do away with the idea of change itself. Of course, this model doesn't explain the "now," the fact that we seem to experience a present moment, but then we don't have a great explanation for that in our traditional understanding of the universe anyways. Hypothetically, one of the only ways to disprove this model would be to show some probabilistic phenomenon yielding different results under the exact same conditions; however, since time itself is one of our conditions, this would require actual time travel. In other words, it is really difficult to disprove. If it is any consolation, this model is basically impossible to prove as well.

6. This would be very much like a sort of kalpic, eternal cycle, in any case.

of causation up to the root of all being, we are faced with eternity or nothingness; the answer is arbitrary or unknowable. Try, for me. Try to imagine a non-arbitrary meaning for existence that is actually satisfying.

There cannot be a reason for everything.

In time, humanity will cease to exist. Our ability to expand our sphere of influence, to exploit natural resources, will lag behind the pace of our consumption; we will stop our seemingly inevitable spread; then, we will contract. Our societies will not collapse but shrink; we will slink back into the dark and then, quietly, disappear.

The great nothingness will swallow us and everything, and in time all indications that we ever existed will be rendered indistinguishable from noise. A soft static flickering across the void.

6 Till Human Voices Wake Us

I awoke—reborn—in an alcove of a great pit stretching down into darkness. Above, along the rim, there glows a halo of light, or perhaps it is only my imagination, the illusion of morning. I can see in the walls around my alcove the scraping of nails, the grooves worn into stone by clawing fingers, but these strangers, those who came before me, have only worn away the footholds, polished the wall to a sheen with all their grasping, all their yearning for the light. To climb would be to paw at nothing, to wedge the pads of my fingers into holds that have long since worn away. To climb would be to struggle in vain a short time, to suffer for nothing. I could cast myself into the dark but for what? And so I sit in my alcove until the loneliness or the yearning for a hope just out of reach becomes too much. I step out. I grasp. I grope along the polished stone. And then my hold gives way and I am lost.

Here, in my hole, I can imagine that the light itself—the morning glimmering—will solidify under my step, carry me up into a world of beauty. I can imagine that another will reach their hand down from above and pull me up into a life worth living. Or perhaps by some feat of faith or reason, I will find the holds none have before and clamber up into a peace beyond understanding. But the light is only light, and I am alone, and the stone will cast me like so many before into the place below, the dry dark where there is not even a memory of light.

There is nothing to be done now but wait.

7 Another Word for Stagnation

There is suicide of the body, and there is suicide of the heart. The latter may prescipitate the former, but one may also go for many years having given up hope, having huddled alone in one's alcove, before some incident or the course of biology takes them. I would rather commit both in one moment than separate the latter from the former by a lifetime. I must either kill myself or find a way to live.

Nothing of what I have discussed here is new. My purpose here is not to outdo Camus or Kierkegaard or any other existentialist; indeed, they are better writers than me, and I cannot hope to arrive at any fundamentally new conclusions, any novel reasons for living that others have not devised before (and which ultimately are unsatisfactory, irrational). I can only arrive at my own peace by my own path.

The obvious solution is to not desire, to cease to seek, to sit *padmāsana* in our alcove until death spirits us out from our cage. *Yet that no—the right no—drags him down all*

his life.

We wish to say Yes. We desire to desire. And so we must learn to hold in one hand the truth—that the world is empty—and, in the other, hope beyond hope.

We must fall into love with the world.

We must fall so that we may love even the emptiness itself.