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Negative Philosophy

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Is Moral Reality Even Possible?

The general concept of negative philosophy is that we should not take things at face value. This is to say that those who practice negative philosophy tend toward questioning the certainty of empirical and ethical claims. Philosophy is very closely related to the sciences such as math and physics, and for those who understand the sciences it can often simply be a slight change in the way a question is structured that leads them to a more philosophical answer than might be expected. For example, in order for a claim such as “two plus two equals four” to be seen as empirical, there must be some sort of proof based on other empirical evidence that supports the statement. But who is to say that the ocean is not blue? It can be empirically claimed that the ocean is blue because of the reflection of blue light wave lengths, but one person can also define what they see as blue completely differently than another individual. Similarly, the argument of altruism, that humans perform no deed that is truly selfless, is commonplace in conversations like these. These types of ideas that revolve around negative philosophy and questioning things that tend to be seen as a given should be thought about by more common people and should not be taken lightly. Similarly, the cynicism of mankind shown in *The Water Knife* by Paolo Bacigalupi connects directly with the skepticism described by *The Thing Itself* by Adam Roberts, showing that humans tend to create their own personally beneficial reality that is likely to not be entirely real, and by extension, can be argued that no universal reality exists.

In order to argue this, it is important to understand how these words can be defined differently depending on the context. In this case, reality is not referring to the point in time and space like it would be in most empirical sciences, but rather taking a more philosophical approach. Reality here refers a predefined, proper moral and ethical ruleset. With this definition, it implies that there is an absolute right and wrong choice in any situation. As also mentioned before, cynicism is the idea that humans are inherently selfish, motivated through greed, and typically distrust others leading to an overall negative view of the world and others that inhabit it. Most cynics also tend to be pessimists due to their general views being negative thoughts about other human’s actions or personalities and can often think of themselves in a similar manner. Meanwhile skepticism is the thought process of questioning the possibility or validity of knowledge or facts. This often leads to a split in those who are skeptics because of the different categorizations they can fall in to. One group of skeptics deny any possibility of knowledge, while the other group chooses to withhold belief or assumptions due to a lack of evidence. The first group of skeptics also tend to fall into the ideals of solipsism, that anything outside of oneself will always remain an unknown, because of the lack of trust towards themselves and others. In other words, anything outside of that individual’s mind is not able to be proven that it exists, very similar to Schrodinger’s Cat, however now on a mental crisis inducing scale. Most people fall into the second group of skeptics, those that withhold their assumptions until hearing more information. These people tend to be interested in things that involve the scientific method and questioning how or why something works. Similar explanations of these ideas can be explained as such. “Skepticism is about asking questions, being dubious, being wary, not being gullible. Cynicism is about already having the answers — or thinking you do. The skeptic says ‘I don’t think that’s true. I’m going to check it out.’ The cynic says, ‘I know that’s not true. It couldn’t be.’” (Cappalla, Jamieson). Those who fall more into cynicism seem to have the tendency to believe only they could be correct due to the selfish ideologies they subscribe to. A skeptic, in a relatively normal and safe environment, will usually focus all of its energy onto one topic until proven one way or the other, or inevitably driving into insanity.

It seems as though these two thought processes are completely different, however it is not a far stretch to say that they are quite similar. While a cynic is more likely to have a negative overview, they will still be skeptical about the way that things exist. A cynic in this case will attempt to explain these ideas in their own head to themselves based on the concepts they already understand, while a skeptic will very likely reach out to obtain understanding from more sources than just themselves. It is this distinction in thought that leads to a cynic’s selfish tendencies and beliefs, shown in *The Water Knife* by Paolo Bacigalupi as characters exude selfishness as many of them struggle to survive during the drought.

In order to make a claim as such, it is important to know the context in which this applies. The common saying that “perspective is everything” is incredibly relevant here, especially as populations continue to disagree. Someone who has never truly known starvation is likely not going to understand the lengths of which another is willing to go through in order to end that struggle. This is shown in *The Water Knife* excellently through the use of cynicism and how the basic human reliance on water demonstrates that many people who are struggling are only capable of having their own self interest as a priority. This is shown clearly through Maria after shooting Angel. “She thought maybe she was supposed to feel worse that this woman was suffering, but she didn’t, and it made her wonder about herself. She wondered if something was broken inside her now, with all the things she’d seen and done, but in the end she couldn’t make herself care about that, either. All she could think about was that she was going to cross the river, and she’d see the fountains in Las Vegas where anyone could dip a cup in” (Bacigalupi). The lack of guilt that Maria feels here accentuates how selfish someone can be, while the reader can still sympathize with her as they go through the struggles of survival together. Similarly, those who are more fortunate often tend to continue their ways of greed to further their advantages. A great example of this is shown at the end of the story as Maria, Lucy, Angel, and the Water Knife talked. “Live by the gun, die by the gun, right, mijo? You make a living cutting people’s water, at some point, the scales got to balance you out. Symmetry. Clear symmetry. Some people had to bleed so other people could drink. Simple as that. It was just his turn.” (Bacigalupi). This passage speaks largely to what it is to understand, without experiencing. The reference to scales balancing out shows that while each of them have been through different struggles, they have all struggled as a result of other people’s actions, as a result of other’s selfishness. Both quotes strongly hint towards the idea that people can alter their morals to justify their own struggles and the solutions to avoid the continuation of them. When someone’s back is against the wall, it is common to only have one way out of the situation. Despite the morals involved, they can tend to be pushed to the side in lieu of survival.

In a different sense, the idea of altruism, that there is no such deed that is truly selfless also supports the concept of not having a true reality. A common justification for one’s actions is that it was motivated by the fact that it was to help someone. For example, those who volunteer at soup kitchens. They often claim that they volunteer their time because it makes them feel good about helping those who are in need, or that they can “make a difference” to others. While it is very important to note that these acts of service are almost entirely beneficial for all parties involved, the motivation for doing such acts is what is at question here. When applying the assumption that people are good and want to help others, this argument about the existence of altruism seems to fall apart. Meanwhile if the lens that humans are selfish is applied, whether they be consciously or subconsciously selfish, the argument gets significantly stronger. Ultimately the difference here is the separation between interior and exterior motives. The denial of altruism is typically based on whether people do things based on their feelings and emotions rather than solely based on exterior motives such as social status. These interior motives are a very tricky thing to quantify since they do not have a tangible value. The lack of tangible value here leads those who are not motivated in similar ways to believe that it does not necessarily exist. This further aids in the argument that a universal reality, an agreed upon set of morals and truths, does not exist. These ideas can even be extended to things such as life goals, politics, and even things as trivial as washing the dishes. For anyone who has ever lived with roommates, it is almost guaranteed that they have had an argument over when to wash the dishes. One roommate likely sees it best practice to do them directly after using them and the other simply puts them in the sink until they need to be used next time. While one thinks their view is correct, so does the other. Neither roommate is necessarily wrong in this situation, as it can remain true to both sides that their procedure is the only proper way to do the dishes. Similarly, in life goals and politics, one man’s trash is another man’s treasure. These arguments are even commonplace in politics, whether it be the democratic left versus right, or the conversation of whether democracy even works in general. Some people believe that democracy and capitalism is the only viable governmental system, while others wholeheartedly believe that there has to be another system that can benefit everyone such as socialism or even Marx’s communism.

Karl Marx’s idea of communism is one that is often disregarded based on the sour taste left in the world’s mouth about it after World War II, however some of the aspects have quite some merits to them. To Marx, his vision of a utopian society revolved around communism and a powerful government that looks after the wellbeing of all of its citizens. Marx intentionally omits any exact outline of how this utopian society functions, as he believes that it should be up to each person to function in the ways that they see fit. He believes that society suffers from turning humans into being just cogs in the machine that is society, and in order to escape that evolution we must be able to define our own ideal life where the freedom to work or play is ours to make. Rather than requiring the individual to provide for themselves and their family, the basic necessities should be supplied in order to allow the individual to do as they please. “The worker finds work a torment, suffers poverty, overwork and lack of fulfilment and freedom. People do not relate to each other as humans should. Does this amount to a moral criticism of capitalism or not? In the absence of any special reason to argue otherwise, it simply seems obvious that Marx’s critique is a moral one” (Wolff). Shown here, one of Marx’s largest critiques is that capitalism strips away the individuality of the worker in the chase of creating a larger product that they will never tangibly see. Meanwhile supporters of capitalism see it as a way that an individual can make a difference in their own lives by giving their product, or labor, to society. Neither of these ideals are inherently incorrect, as each of them have merits attached to them where the other falls short of expectations. Furthermore, under Marx’s utopian society, each different person would have their own definition of what their average day breaks down to, which connects directly back to the idea that there is no true moral reality.

One of the largest factors of communism is the assumption that people will not be selfish as they already have their basic human needs taken care of. This selfishness ultimately ties into the argument of altruism and whether it exists or not. An externally motivated individual will likely not produce anything for the betterment of society, while an internally motivated individual will likely produce plenty. However, Marx would likely argue this is not the case due to the shift in mindset of the people under his utopian society. He argues that people are not naturally externally motivated, but rather are internally motivated to do the things that they please and are forced to work as a result of survival, rather than drive for the betterment of society. This drastic shift in ideals is likely possible, however it is unlikely to happen within only a couple generations. Society as a whole is an ever-evolving thing, where different standards are set into place, words have different meanings, etc.… Thus, it is incredibly difficult to say that one individual will agree upon the same exact moral reality as another individual coming from a different situation. Life circumstances can lead individuals to being separated from the majority which is not necessarily a negative outcome. For example, it is very likely that someone from a wealthier family will have quite different views on society than someone from a less fortunate background. While some morals may line up between them such as everyone having the right to make their own decisions, it is impossible to say they will both agree on everything. Neither individual in this case is incorrect either, as they each have their own experiences that have shaped their ideals into what they are. Society does not necessarily require agreement, rather it needs compliance.

A true moral reality makes the assumption that there is a predefined right and wrong option in any given situation. In order for this to be true, it would ultimately make every individual’s situations to function like a math equation, where there are a given set of inputs with a directly correlated output. While this works in some cases, other cases simply have too much variance to them. Not everything can exist in a finite state as that would prove massively inefficient in everything down to the biological level. There are reasons that everyone’s bodies handle the same circumstances differently, some may choose to fight while others may choose flight without any second thought possible. This is not saying that either option is correct or incorrect, but rather that previous experiences shape the way that the mind rationalizes past and present events. As Marx says that capitalism makes the worker just a cog in the machine, it seems more fitting that an absolute moral reality would cause this much more. This case requires the world to exist under a finite number of variables and when taking into account the free will of each individual, the list becomes infinite.

It becomes clear that a true moral reality would be a net negative for society as a result of lack of diversity. While this is not a completely positive idea since it enforces the suffering of some individuals as shown most drastically through *The Water Knife*’s characters Maria and the Water Knife. Maria goes through great struggle in order to achieve her goals while the Water Knife goes through struggle as a result of his actions. Both character’s experiences are valid and will impact their future choices. Similarly, it is this slight difference in thoughts that allow humans as a species to thrive. Without the level of different thought required to create such a sustainable lifestyle for our species, we would likely not have advanced much beyond monkeys. These different levels of thought lead to conversations such as this one, where it is not just about survival, but rather the question of why we survive in the manner that we do. Whether it would be more beneficial to maintain the current social structure or to reform it, as Marx argues, or whether an absolute moral reality would be beneficial or not. In the end, no one will have an answer to this question, but as described it does not seem to result in a negative or positive manner.

Works Cited

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