



Consistency's Curse

Bernard Beckett

As a great admirer of modern science, and as a passionate agnostic, I have always struggled to define a personal philosophy that might provide a grounding for our expanding understanding of the physical world, while underpinning my reluctance to commit to particular cultural mythologies. Although at first blush the two appear to lead easily into some form of naturalism, I've never been convinced by this approach. My talk will be an attempt to outline my current position, with regard to both the philosophy of science and those beliefs that sit necessarily beyond its influence. My tentative conclusion is one of what I shall call collective objectivism, and I will attempt to explore the relative merits and pitfalls of my evolving stance.

When two people's beliefs about the world clash, there is a natural curiosity as to the source of this difference. And an even greater urge to discover which is wrong.

One approach is to claim neither is wrong, that in our vastness we contain multitudes. However, at least in some spheres of knowledge, this will to accommodate cannot be sustained. (The person stepping off the cliff, convinced they can fly, is about to discover one can be very wrong indeed.)

When we seek to unpack disagreement, we find clashes stem from a number of distinct sources: Sometimes we have a pure clash of personal aesthetic or value, and quite possibly, in these cases, a truce of understanding is the best that can be hoped for. Other times, we find a difference in core belief that in itself cannot be derived from either evidence or reason, and in these cases, a stand-off might also be the only sane response. In some cases, though, the difference is one of logic, or of evidence, and in such cases, careful and open minds can edge closer to shared understanding.

This is not to argue that some issues are by their nature purely logical/evidential. Indeed, even the most mundane physical beliefs rest necessarily upon metaphysical beliefs that cannot be independently established (see, for instance, Grue world, and the challenge to induction.) Rather, the best we might hope for is the situation where those who disagree, nevertheless can agree upon the fundamental building blocks of their argument. We can think of this not so much as certain knowledge, as shared knowledge.

Once shared knowledge is established, we can then explore the implications of this knowledge. So, for example, if a person accepts that science provides our best descriptions of the physical world (the world is round, nuclear fusion powers the sun etc) and they accept the power of deductive logic, that set of rules by which we appear to be able to reason from true premise to true implication, then it is proper to ask which of their metaphysical beliefs are consistent, in this logical sense, with scientific knowledge.

This project is different from the materialist one, which says let us assume that everything reduces to the physical. Rather than attempt to banish metaphysical belief, it seeks to explore the restrictions our shared scientific beliefs might put upon the metaphysical. To me, as an agnostic, this is the philosophical project I am most interested in. Once I have made my commitment to a particular knowledge base (essentially a commitment to the idea that the past provides our best guide to the future) I am interested in where, in the name of consistency, this commitment might lead me.

To give but one example, I suspect that a commitment to modern science precludes a belief in our having access to objective morality. That is, as best I can tell, it is logically inconsistent to believe both that science provides our best description of the physical world, and to believe humans' moral instincts give them access to higher truths. Here I will sketch out an argument in support of this claim. It's not watertight, but for now I find it more convincing than any argument to the contrary that I can find.

Three important scientific concepts underpin this argument. The first is the notion that the physical world is probabilistically deterministic. That is, the state of the physical world at time T can be thought of as a probability function of the physical world at time T-1. This is the old notion of the physically closed universe, tweaked for the beautiful success of the probability functions of quantum physics. It is fair to say, as best I can tell, that we do not have a better predictive model of physical states than this one.

The second concept is that of natural selection, which we take to be the best explanation of complex design in nature. Complex design in nature emerges because some aspect of that design engenders the greater reproductive success of the replicators. We need not argue that natural selection is the only game in town, but only that it is the best explanation of complex design.

The final concept is the role of the brain in information processing. Science would posit a one to one correspondence between physical activity in the brain, and patterns of thought. Again, we need not dismiss the possibility of the hard problem, or pan-psychism, epiphenomenalism or any other optimistic variant. We need only accept a direct correspondence between mental activity and brain activity.

Now, consider a world in which the human being has innate knowledge of true moral imperatives (this argument does not concern itself with external knowledge, for example truth carved in stone.) The question becomes, is there a mechanism by which this knowledge could be accessed by the brain, without running foul of our scientific concepts. I argue that none of the proposed mechanisms can do this job.

One solution would be that we evolved instincts that are morally true. The problem is that instincts, to the extent that they are selected for, are biased towards pragmatic, rather than objective truth. If we have evolved an instinct to care for our family, for instance, the evolutionary mechanism suggests that this instinct spreads because it is reproductively helpful. So, unless we redefine objectively true as pragmatically true, we are in a bind.

A counter suggests that not all our instincts are useful, that an instinct evolved in one context can re-express itself in quite another. This, I think, should be ceded. Many of our behaviours are responses to environments foreign to our evolutionary past, and furthermore

we have developed a malleable mind that is highly responsive to social norms (thus groups can develop instinctive revulsion at the thought of eating meat.) What is lacking in this argument of re-calibrating evolved instincts is any explanation as to why these new applications should themselves be truth seeking. How might the true moral nature of the universe calibrate with our behavioural patterns? There appears to be no good mechanism.

One hope, put forward by the likes of Roger Penrose, is that Platonic truths themselves direct physical brain processes (his favoured candidate being quantum collapse.) This, as I understand it, asks us to believe that we will one day find, within the brain, quantum processes that do not behave according to our current equations. That is, we are asked to reject current science to allow for the process. I don't argue he is wrong to hold out this hope, I only point out the necessary inconsistency with current models.

Another, popular, answer is that the human mind has evolved the capacity for higher order reasoning, and through reason, we may construct our moral knowledge, in the same way that we construct mathematical knowledge. The problem, for me, is that such a process of reasoning can only take us from one set of accepted truths, or axioms, to its implications. If we can not first grasp some starting moral truths, then reason will be of little help when it comes to establishing more.

Finally, I would consider the mysterian nature of consciousness, the famed hard problem. If we cannot explain how the subjective nature of consciousness emerges from the decidedly non-subjective description of the brain's building blocks, then surely there is room, within this mystery, for the consciousness to be the mechanism by which knowledge of the moral world enters our brain. By this theory, the consciousness emerges as an entity above and beyond the sum of its parts, capable of reading the moral truths upon which the universe is founded. My problem with this, is it requires we violate the model of brain/mind correspondence. If each physical brain state is sufficiently caused by its previous states (any machine thus constructed would reach the same conclusions) then even if consciousness can be properly envisaged as a higher level of organisation, its behaviour must still be consistent with the behaviour of the lower level brain parts.

My conclusion, then, is that I must either drop a belief in our access to objective moral truth, or drop my faith in particular scientific models on the grounds that they do not allow a belief I would like to hold, or I should drop my attachment to consistency. Which of these I might choose to do is not, as far as I can see, itself a matter of argument. Rather, inevitably, taste must intervene (I fact I rather fancy the pragmatist's escape.)

The Author

Bernard Beckett has been a high school teacher for the last twenty five years. During that time he has taught Mathematics, Economics, English, Media Studies, Philosophy and Drama. He is the author of ten novels and a book of non-fiction, *Falling for Science*, which explored the relationship between science and story telling. He lives in Porirua with his wife, Clare, and his four year old boys, Alexander and Sebastian.

