

A HARD PROBLEM INDEED

by Gregory R. Peterson

Abstract. Owen Flanagan's *The Really Hard Problem* provides a rich source of reflection on the question of meaning and ethics within the context of philosophical naturalism. I affirm the title's claim that the quest to find meaning in a purely physical universe is indeed a hard problem by addressing three issues: Flanagan's claim that there can be a scientific/empirical theory of ethics (eudaimonics), that ethics requires moral glue, and whether, in the end, Flanagan solves the hard problem. I suggest that he does not, although he provides much that is of importance and useful for further reflection along the way.

Keywords: ethics; Owen Flanagan; naturalism

In *The Really Hard Problem* (2007), Owen Flanagan suggests that the quest to find meaning in a purely natural universe shorn of the supernatural is an important challenge. It is not simply a "hard problem," a locution made famous in the philosophy of mind by David Chalmers to indicate the challenges in providing a scientific explanation of consciousness, but one that is even harder. Despite this, one gets the impression that, at least by the end of the text, Flanagan does not consider the problem to be so hard after all; the central claim of the text is that the apparently "really hard problem" can be solved with a bit of clear thinking and with the aid of contemporary moral psychology and neuroscience.

In what follows I affirm the title of the text, that finding meaning in a natural universe *is* a really hard problem, by addressing three central claims put forth in the text: that there can be a science of ethics, that ethics requires moral glue, and whether Flanagan does in fact solve the really hard problem as he claims.

Gregory R. Peterson is Associate Professor of Philosophy and Religion at South Dakota State University and Program Coordinator of the Philosophy and Religion Department, Box 504 Scobey 336, SDSU, Brookings, SD 57007; e-mail greg.peterson@sdstate.edu.

[*Zygon*, vol. 44, no. 1 (March 2009)]

© 2009 by the Joint Publication Board of *Zygon*. ISSN 0591-2385

CAN THERE BE A SCIENCE OF ETHICS?

It is clear from the outset that Flanagan understands the answer to the really hard problem to be deeply entwined with providing a satisfactory and purely naturalistic account of ethics and human flourishing, and the bulk of the text is devoted to providing a broad outline for what Flanagan understands such an account to be. For him, the time is ripe for a science of ethics, a *eudaimonics*, which will provide an objective and authoritative account of human flourishing and how such flourishing may be attained. Although Flanagan embraces “science” as a rhetorical label to describe this endeavor, he uses the term advisedly, claiming not that eudaimonics will be a science in the same sense that physics is but rather that eudaimonics will be empirically based and that the knowledge claims produced by such eudaimonics will have the kind of objective reference that we typically take the sciences to engage in. Although the book is quite brief, Flanagan lays out many of the elements that he thinks such a eudaimonics will include, along the way citing relevant findings in positive psychology, moral psychology, and the neuroscientific study of moral cognition.

My initial inclination is to be skeptical in speaking of a science of ethics. There are a couple of reasons for this. Although Flanagan is careful to indicate that he is using “science” in a more expansive sense and not a narrower, positivistic one, employing the rhetoric of science to label a field can sometimes be counterproductive. Science is as much a rhetorical term, embodying prestige and power, as it is a descriptive one. There are clear political reasons to speak of one’s discipline as a science, and when these reasons drive the discussion they can become problematic.

A second issue has to do with the content of ethics. The study of ethics is distinctive from the kind of study pursued in the natural sciences in that it deals not simply with descriptions but also, and centrally, with recommendations. This is the well-known *is/ought* distinction, famously associated with David Hume. No matter how much we learn about the world, or even about human biology and psychology, science-speak engages in description, not recommendations. Goodness is not a property of physics, however much we believe the good to exist. Flanagan certainly is aware of this issue, and he seeks to address it, noting that many of our concepts are both descriptive and normative in character and that applied fields in the sciences, notably health and engineering, do employ normative concepts (pp. 38–39, 108, 121). Undoubtedly, Flanagan is correct—health is a normative concept if ever there was one—but citing these examples does not render the problem transparent. We may not worry much about it when we are speaking about the desirability of cancer, but it becomes severe in fields such as political science and sociology, which try to be objective in the sense of being descriptive but often cannot help making normative recommendations, and running into problems when they do.

If being scientific just means being empirical in one's approach, however, Flanagan may have a case. Empirically, human beings do value and impute value, even to the point of perceiving it ("I see that you are being dishonest again," "The cathedral is beautiful—just look!"). If flourishing is characterized by happiness, or some kind of happiness, we can do a lot of empirical work here, figuring out what in fact makes human beings happy and which kinds of happiness generally are preferable to others. Flanagan spends considerable time on this approach. Indeed, it is the heart of his eudaimonics, and he suggests that the kind of joyful tranquility attained by Buddhist adepts is the kind of flourishing to be sought. Arguably, there is a kind of objectivity to this, in the sense that most of us want the same sort of things, and given a choice between greater and lesser forms of happiness we typically will choose the greater. Although the world does admit of moral disagreements, Flanagan suggests in chapter 4 that decision procedures can be put in place to resolve such differences—we can engage in a "wide reflective equilibrium" (a phrase borrowed from John Rawls and elucidated in chapter 4), objectively comparing the alternatives, even across cultures, and come to a rational agreement.

This last point is crucial, as without it the project fails. A hallmark of science as we typically understand it is that its very character of rational inquiry nearly guarantees rational assent, so that Chinese, Indian, and American physicists can work productively together on a common project and arrive at common conclusions, no matter their differences. An ethical science, a eudaimonics, would seem to require something similar to be successful. If there is something called flourishing, we should be able to specify what it is and to give the criteria by which it can be achieved.

Although Flanagan's outline of how wide reflective equilibrium will succeed in practice is left vague, I am willing to bet along with Flanagan that such a project can be engaged in. I may even be willing to call such an enterprise a science, although there is a fair chance it would prove to be an unsuccessful one if it failed to get the kind of agreement that we would expect of a scientific discipline. I am much less sure that such a science would in any way be grounded in philosophical naturalism, for the gap remains. To give an analogy: In biology, it is quite common to speak of function and purpose. The function of the heart is to circulate blood; the evolutionary purpose of the peacock's tail is to advertise fitness. But when pressed, biologists will admit that this is an "as-if" teleology—that nature/biology really does not intend or design anything; it is just a manner of speaking that is convenient but not strictly scientific. Such "as-if" language will not do for ethics, because the whole project would collapse. An "as-if" obligation is no obligation at all. At best it is a preference, language that is used in economics.

I do not know how damaging this point is to Flanagan's project. There are brute facts that one simply lives with, and perhaps the gap between is

and ought is one of them. But I would suggest that it should give more pause for concern than Flanagan currently attributes to it.

DOES ETHICS REQUIRE MORAL GLUE?

A second theme present in the text, especially in the last chapter, is the question of the relation of ethics and meaning. Modern philosophers have not always endorsed the relevance of meaning questions for ethical inquiry. Immanuel Kant argued that moral imperatives should be based solely on rational considerations, while for Hume moral judgments were understood to spring forth from the emotions. Despite this, it is empirically clear that many, perhaps most of us, need some larger sense of meaning or purpose to commit to the kind of actions we conventionally call moral. Historically, religions have filled this void, providing a cosmological framework within which one's actions make sense and providing directions for the living of a fulfilling life. The sacramental system of Roman Catholicism, the commandments of the Torah, and the exhortations of the Bhagavad Gita can be understood to fulfill this function. Philosophical naturalism, rejecting as it does any belief in the supernatural, must look elsewhere.

Put differently, the question is "Why be good?" At issue here is not simply my personal happiness but whether and to what extent I should be concerned about the happiness and well-being of others. Evolutionary and rational-choice theories do provide some answer to this, and Flanagan relies heavily on these. Evolutionary theory suggests that kin altruism and, less commonly, reciprocal altruism are behavioral traits that nature may select for under the right conditions. More recent work on group selection and punishment suggest that within-group cooperation may also be selected for; from an evolutionary standpoint, fitness may be improved by promoting the welfare of correctly constituted groups even to the point of self-sacrifice, because the group will include kin who will correspondingly thrive and, under appropriate conditions, outcompete other groups (Sober and Wilson 1998; Fehr and Gächter 2000). Willingness to punish cheaters would enhance group function and make the success of group selection in human societies more plausible.

Although such mechanisms may not be genuinely altruistic at the biological level, they would be at the psychological level. We human beings may in fact be programmed by our genes to genuinely care for our kin and members of our group. But this is well short of a universal concern for others. Indeed, group selection theory would seem to suggest that although we might be programmed to act altruistically toward fellow members of our group, we also would be designed to compete, sometimes violently, with members of other groups, and there is plenty of evidence, both psychological and historical, to suggest that we often do precisely this.

This is an uncomfortable limitation for Flanagan, for he argues at length in the last chapter that eudaimonics results in an ethic of universal compassion, not simply in-group consideration. If eudaimonics is a purely empirical science, there would seem to be a gap between what the science implies and what Flanagan claims that eudaimonics endorses. The approach that Flanagan takes is to suggest that human beings have a natural desire for transcendence (pp. 197–201). This certainly seems plausible. Flanagan notes that this desire is present even among the nonreligious, including himself. So the answer to the question of why we should engage in universal compassion is because we have a desire to transcend our own narrow frame of reference and so be motivated to genuinely care for others, even when they are not members of our own group. Transcendence, in a generic, naturalized form, provides the necessary moral glue.

There is much left to the imagination here. Flanagan's argument ultimately is about human flourishing; he is claiming that even though many, perhaps most, of us do not presently engage in such universal compassion, we will need to if we wish to flourish. Much earlier in the work (p. 48), Flanagan cites with approval the Chinese philosopher Mencius' conception of human nature, in particular his notion that all human beings have within themselves the sprouts of goodness to be cultivated, but they must be cultivated, educated, and nurtured in the proper environment, else they will wither. Presumably, Flanagan has this in mind when he talks about universal compassion—that many or most of us do not have it, but that is because we have not had the proper cultivation.

This may be an empirical argument in the sense that it can be shown that we can be so nurtured and that we are happier when we are so nurtured than when we are not, but it is not clear that it is an argument supported specifically by philosophical naturalism; indeed, it may be opposed. Flanagan's empirical support seems to come significantly from the studies of Buddhist meditators. Because there is evidence that Buddhist meditators are happier than the rest of us, and because Buddhism endorses universal compassion, the two may be linked, and the link may still exist even if one jettisons those tenets of Buddhism that clash with philosophical naturalism, as Flanagan suggests Buddhists should do. Even if these connections hold, however, they should be perplexing from the perspective of philosophical naturalism. Even if there is a nearly universal longing for transcendence, why should this be expected from a purely naturalistic perspective? Appeal to recent work in the new field of cognitive science of religion (which Flanagan does in the final chapter) is of little help here, because, to the extent that current cognitive science of religion addresses feelings of transcendence at all, it ties it to group selection, which suggests that feelings of transcendence would result in desires for in-group consideration but not toward members of other groups (Wilson 2002).

Other possibilities exist. Flanagan may argue that universal compassion is a good thing, but purely on prudential grounds. A good argument can be made for this view especially today, in our increasingly connected world, where the benefits of intergroup cooperation are outweighed by the costs. On this account, it is wise for members of more developed countries to aid members of less developed countries not because it is morally required but because it is in our interest—producing greater peace and stability, improved global commerce, less terrorism, and so on. In fact, citizens of more developed countries may find such aid positively unpleasant, but they do it out of enlightened self-interest, if they can bring themselves to do it at all. Moral glue may not be needed in this case.

Alternatively, Flanagan may decide that universal compassion is not endorsed by philosophical naturalism after all and matters little to human flourishing, in which case moral glue also may not be needed. This would perhaps be impolitic, but there are strands in the ethical literature that suggest this sort of valuing, and Flanagan even discusses some of these concerns (pp. 212–15). Indeed, the possibility that some actually may find universal compassion unpleasant raises a final point concerning the variability in human nature. Flanagan acknowledges this variability in places (the good life is not exactly the same for each of us, and each of us has unique talents and proclivities) but does not take this variability as seriously as he might. Because flourishing is strongly linked to happiness, and because the sources of happiness may vary widely in the human population (perhaps along a normal distribution curve), this could be extremely problematic for any naturalistically based account of eudaimonia that makes a claim to universality. Perhaps such valuing of universal compassion is contingent, or found strongly only in a portion of the population. One may observe that universal compassion is a historical oddity, found in one form in Buddhism and in another form in Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan but not in Confucius or Aristotle. In the end, universal compassion and naturalism may not sit well together.

DOES FLANAGAN SOLVE THE REALLY HARD PROBLEM?

If Flanagan is correct about eudaimonics and moral glue, it would seem that he would be correct about solving the really hard problem. But if he is correct, I would suggest that a cost accompanies it. To illustrate, I quote what may be taken as the classic enunciation of the really hard problem:

“Whither is God?” he cried. “I shall tell you. *We have killed him*—you and I. All of us are his murderers. But how have we done this? How were we able to drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What did we do when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving now? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there any up or down left? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing?” (Nietzsche [1887] 1954)

The problem is not simply that God is dead, the phrase so famously associated with Friedrich Nietzsche, but that without God our spiritual and ethical boat seems set adrift. Indeed, much of the development of existential philosophy can be understood as an effort to develop a response to this implication that in a purely naturalistic universe there can be no standards of right and wrong, no meaning or purpose to life. Naturalism forces us to confront the possibility of ethical and existential nihilism, that our lives are absurd affairs over which we have no control and that will end as pointlessly as they begin.

There is no wallowing in this existential angst in Flanagan's book, partly because he sees himself as providing a solution and partly, I would argue, because the solution implies a reduced set of expectations for satisfying meaning questions. The argument might go something like this: "One could choose to wallow in existential angst; some people do. But there is no particular reason to. After all, it's a brute fact that we live in a purely natural universe. Whatever intuitions you have about ultimate purpose and meaning are misguided, because, ultimately speaking, there isn't any. But we can achieve some brief moments of happiness while on this mortal coil, and that is what we call flourishing. To want anything more than that is simply irrational, because there isn't anything more."

Throughout the book is the running claim that an important element of our human nature is an intrinsic desire to pursue the Platonic categories of the true, the beautiful, and the good. But, Flanagan notes, these are tamed, purely natural categories (p. 56). To be a naturalist is to say that nature, pretty much as we currently understand it, is all there is. Reality is not deep, in the sense that untold ontological mysteries lie beyond the reaches of contemporary science, but shallow, in the sense that reality can be fully understood, indeed is already nearly fully understood, and holds no further secrets of the sort that are going to alter our lives existentially. Even something as momentous as discovering alien life would not significantly change this conclusion, for, as exotic as alien life might turn out to be, it would still be, in a sense, like us—biologically limited organisms that arose through a process of natural selection and physical law. One might *choose* to despair at the utter insignificance of humanity in the cosmos and the brief striving that characterizes one's own life, but one need not do so; there is no compelling reason to do so; the universe is as indifferent to our despair as it is to our hope. And despair is unpleasant.

As long as we keep these reduced expectations in mind, I think Flanagan is correct that we can find a kind of meaning and purpose in our lives, and for a good many people this is enough. One can find awe and wonder in the immensity of the universe and the complexities of the natural world as well as succor and hope in the cares and needs of family life. There are projects to pursue and causes to endorse, some nobler than others, and these are important within the small frame of our lives.

All of this, or some version of it, would seem to follow if naturalism is indeed true. But is it?

Throughout the book, the position of naturalism is assumed rather than argued for, and, although one can cover only so much in a book, by the end it becomes clear that this is a weakness, due in large part to the uneven discussion of religion that informs the text. In fact, there are two primary discussions of religion. The first concerns Buddhism, which is treated on the whole with admirable sympathy and nuance, even though in the end Flanagan disagrees with those elements of Buddhism that conflict with philosophical naturalism, such as the doctrine of rebirth and the Dalai Lama's insistence that the mind is more than material. The second discussion concerns theism, which turns out to be not a discussion so much as a series of *ad hominem*s in place of any serious analysis. The monotheistic traditions and the ideas associated with them are said to be "childish" (p. 126), "immature" and "emotionally irresponsible" (p. 138), and "predictably dangerous" (p. 194). Indeed, the impression one gets is that Flanagan's sum knowledge of theism comes from some negative experiences growing up Roman Catholic and a cursory reading of Thomas Aquinas at the mature age of thirteen (pp. 183–85). Some of these comments, brief as they are, contradict Flanagan's chosen approach to Buddhism. In the most obvious instance, although the "predictably dangerous" reference deals with the Abrahamic faith's emphasis on the authority of scripture, he gives a somewhat sympathetic reading of Buddhist appeals to scriptural authority, even comparing it to the role that authority plays in science (pp. 70–71).

Some of these problems could have been addressed by having a theologian or religion scholar familiar with the history of Western religious thought proofread the manuscript. Flanagan might then have learned that the difference between fundamentalists and moderates is not simply whether they read Genesis literally or metaphorically (p. 194), that the "expressive theism" that Flanagan endorses along with an accompanying interpretation of myth have a long history in modern theology (pp. 190–93), and that quite a few contemporary theological ethicists would be perplexed to find themselves being portrayed as opposed to the ethics of Jesus, allegedly because Christians are opposed to Jesus' universal compassion (pp. 206–19).

These points about religion may seem irrelevant, except that they pertain strongly to the question of whether we should hold to naturalism in the first place. Speaking epistemically, I would suggest that the evidence for a purely naturalistic position is ambiguous. If one limits the source of one's epistemology to the methods and the discoveries of the natural sciences, clearly all that the natural sciences have found is natural stuff, and many would say that the natural sciences do so by definition. But there is much more to life than what is discovered in the natural sciences, something that Flanagan himself interestingly acknowledges, at least to some extent, when he argues against a naive scientism and for the insightfulness

of other modes of expression, especially as found in the arts. But that naturalism is not conclusively demonstrated does not imply that some other alternative is better, and I take Flanagan's point that neither the traditional arguments for theism nor the arguments for the richer claims of Buddhism have the conclusiveness that would compel the kind of strong rational consent that is as epistemically satisfying as the best in scientific work. Although personal experiences (religious, aesthetic, intuitive) may be claimed to legitimately play a role in individual cases, the persuasiveness of personal experiences for those who do not have them are necessarily much less. Given this, Ockham's razor may suggest naturalism as the preferred position.

The living of life, however, is not simply about knowledge; it is also about commitment. Meaning questions are important precisely because, in an important sense, they are not abstract at all. We live our lives informed by the pictures of the cosmos that we construct, and these pictures show us what, presumably, is possible to strive for and what is not. As a result, the answers to meaning questions are strongly informed by what we know or appear to know, but they are not determined by them. One may choose to commit to a cause even when, evidentially speaking, the grounds for such commitment seem weak and the hope of success seems correspondingly small. Whether such commitment is rational depends in part on the facts but also on what the viable alternatives are.

It is not clear to what extent Flanagan recognizes this. In the final chapter he attempts to engage the relevance of religion and spirituality from a naturalistic perspective, and the result is a mixed bag. On the one hand, he suggests that there are indeed a few important questions that remain epistemically open, questions of ultimate origins and fate, and that if one feels compelled to make religious claims, there is some small room to do so. On the other hand, he continues that any such claims must not be understood literally, and then he lists (in a way that comes across somewhat arrogantly) the things that religious people are not allowed to believe, which amounts to anything that contradicts or goes beyond contemporary scientific knowledge. So, there are open questions that naturalism does not address, but we are not allowed to consider that there might be alternative answers to these open questions, but if we do consider them, they had better match up with current knowledge. The question arises: If there are such alternatives and they are consistent (or at least largely consistent) with contemporary science, why not consider them?

Speaking solely on epistemic grounds, these considerations may remain considerations only, but speaking existentially, the situation may well be different, for the question now becomes "What is worth hoping for?" Interestingly enough, Flanagan himself brings up the relation of hope and belief in a quite different context—when discussing the question of positive illusions in chapter 5. The issue arises because there appears to be a

positive correlation with modest self-deception and happiness; we are prone to be milder in our judgments of ourselves than of others, and persons who are so prone are happier than those who are more realistic in their self-perceptions. Flanagan notes some issues with this literature. I am most intrigued by his suggestion that the literature interprets the data wrongly, that individuals who appear self-deceived really are not so, that these people do not *believe* that they are better than others but rather *hope* that they are. Flanagan goes on:

... the fact that predictions correlate with hopes and social norms governing desirable outcomes allows the interpretation that it is best to understand such predictions exactly that way, that is, as expressive of hopes not as expressive of beliefs. The epistemic standards for hoping and believing are sufficiently different that no mistake needs to be imputed unless the hope is really wild. (p. 175)

This tangled intersection of hope and belief, I would suggest, is at the heart of trying to understand the relevance of religious traditions today and, further, how we assess whether we should commit to naturalism's modest solution to the really hard problem of meaning and flourishing. There are both wild and less wild versions of nonnaturalistic commitment. Considerations of rational implication and consistency with experience (including the sciences) are still relevant. Furthermore, these nonnaturalistic views need not be understood as illusions; they could be true. But because they are expressions not only of fact but also of hope, we must be self-conscious in how we express them. Fundamentalisms are still ruled out.

Although I doubt that these considerations will move Flanagan's position much, they indicate some of the complexity in thinking through the really hard problem of meaning and to what extent naturalism provides a satisfying answer. In this book, Flanagan has sketched a best case, or something close to it.

CONCLUSION

I want to emphasize the value of Flanagan's contribution as a whole, despite the concerns I have laid out. As he suggests, the question of meaning is indeed important. It is tied intimately with how we understand flourishing. Although this work touches only tangentially on the practical issues of flourishing facing us—rising biotechnologies, global poverty, integration of global economies—it is clear that the basic considerations that Flanagan addresses must inform the practical ones. And, as he suggests, the insights we are gleaning from the sciences can and should play an important role in how we think about these questions. Any approach to ethics that does not take these findings into account and mesh them with the best of our wisdom traditions will be severely deficient, missing much that is of value. But engaging the sciences reveals how much work there yet has to be done. We are at the beginning of the journey rather than the endpoint. The

questions Flanagan asks and the philosophical and scientific material he engages point us significantly in the right direction.

REFERENCES

- Fehr, Ernst, and Simon Gächter. 2000. "Cooperation and Punishment in Public Goods Experiments." *The American Economic Review* 90 (4): 980–94.
- Flanagan, Owen. 2007. *The Really Hard Problem: Meaning in a Material World*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. [1887] 1954. "The Gay Science." *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. Walter Kaufmann, chap. 125. New York: Viking.
- Sober, Elliott, and David Sloan Wilson. 1998. *Unto Others: The Evolution and Psychology of Unselfish Behavior*. Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press.
- Wilson, David Sloan. 2002. *Darwin's Cathedral: Evolution, Religion, and the Nature of Society*. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press.