ONE ENCHANTED BEING: NEUROEXISTENTIALISM AND MEANING

by Owen Flanagan

Abstract. *The Really Hard Problem: Meaning in a Material World* is my attempt to explain whether and how existential meaning is possible in a material world, and how such meaning is best conceived naturalistically. Neuroexistentialism conceives of our predicament in accordance with Darwin plus neuroscience. The prospects for our kind of being-in-the-world are limited by our natures as smart but fully embodied short-lived animals. Many find this picture disenchanting, even depressing. I respond to four criticisms of my relentless upbeat naturalism: that naturalism can make no room for norms, for values; that I overvalue truth at the expense of happiness; that I underestimate the extent to which supernaturalism has made peace with naturalism; and that I can give no account for why humans as finite animals should want to overcome our given natures and seek impersonal, self-transcendent value.

Keywords: *eudaimonia*; eudaimonics; naturalism; neuroexistentialism; supernaturalism

---

The Really Hard Problem: Meaning in a Material World (2007) is my attempt to explain whether and how meaning—existential meaning—is possible in a material world and how such meaning is best conceived naturalistically. Existential meaning must be conceived naturalistically because supernaturalism, despite whatever consolation it seems to afford, provides answers to questions of meaning that are epistemically irresponsible, that show disrespect for truth. *Neuroexistentialism* conceives of our predicament in accordance with Charles Darwin plus neuroscience. We are animals, our minds are our brains, and when we die we are dead forever.

Owen Flanagan is James B. Duke Professor of Philosophy, Professor of Psychology and Neuroscience, and Professor of Neurobiology at Duke University, Durham NC 27701.

[*Zygon*, vol. 44, no. 1 (March 2009)]
 ISSN 0591-2385

If our situation is as neuroexistentialism says, we have a new, deeper, more truthful place from which to ask Socrates' question: How ought I to live? One answer befitting our natures is hedonistic platonism—seek *eudaimonia* by maximizing the pure and mixed pleasures produced at the fecund intersection of what is true, beautiful, and good. Those who do this will have a shot at having as good and meaningful a life as is in the cards for a human being. Many find the question of meaning as posed neuroexistentially deeply disturbing—it is a question about what sort of meaning befits an animal—and the latter sort of answer unsatisfying, underwhelming, disenchanting, possibly horrifying.

My critics, Ann Taves, Gregory Peterson, and Donald Wiebe, show great respect and patience for the argument of my book. Here I respond in kind to four of their (more than four) deep and insightful criticisms, several of which have worried me also, a couple of which I hear elsewhere and often about my naturalization project.

1. *Eudaimonics* is inquiry into human flourishing, what the Greeks called *eudaimonia*. Eudaimonics is normative, and its norms and ends, its ways and means, can be grounded empirically. But where do norms come from for a naturalist? Surely, they are not given by experience in the way ordinary knowledge about facts or laws of nature are given or discovered. Answer: Wisdom about ends comes from inquiry across all the disciplines (the inquiry must be disciplined, I insist) that pertain to and have relevance for human flourishing, from microbiology to neuroscience to history and anthropology.

2. *Platonism*. Why do I, as a naturalist, privilege truth over, for example, beauty or consolation or simple happiness, when these conflict? Answer: The evidence is that truth reliably contributes to the production of flourishing. Untruth, even in the form of consoling stories about afterlives, has the effect of encouraging disrespect for the truth and generally low epistemic standards that are considered normal—everybody is entitled to his own opinion—and have large and deleterious personal and political consequences.

3. *Transcendence and moral glue*. I claim that a "transcendent urge" may be a psychological universal and that we should grow this urge to create community but that we should not do so by building solidarity on epistemically unwarranted but attractive beliefs even if these beliefs efficiently support such solidarity. Why? The reason is epistemic: Truth respect is basic. Truth disrespect reliably leads to personal and political dysfunction and dis-ease.

4. *Theological naivete.* My naturalism is anti-supernaturalistic, but modern nonnaturalism as advanced by academic theologians gets insufficient attention in my book. This matters because some academic theologians allegedly have some special insight into the causes and constituents of *eudaimonia.* My reply: I do not engage academic theology because in my

experience when there is talk of *theos,* as opposed to talk about beliefs about *theos*, or texts about *theos,* all good sense and standards leave the room. I'll explain.

Eudaimonics: Naturalism and Normativity

Where do norms and ends come from for a naturalist? There are many kinds of naturalism (Flanagan 2006). My kind says this: The question of existential meaning is a question about the ways and means to flourishing for a certain kind of smart, gregarious social animal. Just as one would look for wisdom about how a certain kind of plant fares in the plant, in the world, and in their interactions, so too we should look for information about human flourishing in persons, in the world, and mainly in the complex places in which we interact.

We start with this: Humans care about flourishing, and such caring can be defended as reasonable and worthy. Next we critically examine the wisdom of the ages for credible ways of conceiving of *eudaimonia* (end) and for knowledge about how to achieve *eudaimonia* so conceived (means). This is all I mean when I speak of eudaimonics as empirical and normative. Speaking of eudaimonics as scientific in any standard sense is as my critics say, and I admit in *RHP*, a reach. Eudaimonics is "systematic philosophical theorizing that is continuous with science." Empirically, there may or may not be shared ends, a shared conception. Even if, as I believe, much knowledge about *eudaimonia* is local, it is still "local *knowledge*." Aristotle famously said that everyone says that *eudaimonia* is the *summum bonum* but that there is disagreement about its causes (money, family, power) and its constituents (wealth, virtue, reason). Like Plato and Aristotle and Confucius and Mill, I suggest that we listen to thoughtful sensitive souls who have studied the matter, the experts. If there are shared ends and there is information about reliable means to achieve them, it will be good to know what they are. If there are non-shared ends, and they are not thought to be worth dying over to gain the victory for only one, it will be good to know how these different of types of *eudaimonia* are achieved, can live together, and so on.

In addition to wisdom literature I propose that we look to relevant work in the human sciences, from evolutionary biology and neuroscience (which are at the root of neuroexistentialist angst but which I claim are part of the solution not the problem) to anthropology and history. We live in an age when advances in the biological and mind sciences especially, and thus the adjacent social sciences, are positioned to deepen our understanding of what such goods as psychological health and well-being and happiness are, what such concepts mean, and how they might be achieved. I used to not like it as a graduate student when W. V. O. Quine would say that ethics is like engineering. I wished for what seemed to be important goods (ones

worth fighting and dying over; ones that could gain you eternal rewards) to be intrinsically good, necessarily good, categorically good, transcendentally good. Now I agree with Quine. Engineering is exactly the right analogy. You want a bridge because you need to get to the other side? Okay, here's how to build one. You want to be happy? Okay, then work on your friendships, your character, and so on.

I also agree with Philippa Foot (who no longer agrees with her earlier self who said) that morality is (contra Kant) a system of hypothetical imperatives. (Peterson seems to suggest that such a morality is no morality at all.) All ends are optional. But some ends are better than others. Once you have settled on a worthy end or set of ends, it pays to know how to achieve it or them. Simple pragmatism. Knowledge, positive knowledge, comes in both for choosing ends and deploying means.

Things are even more complicated than suggested so far because morality is hardly the only end at stake in achieving *eudaimonia*. Finding meaning in a material world seems to involve typically being good, but almost all of the experts say it involves more than that. Eudaimonics is the fallible but systematic inquiry into the causes and constituents of human flourishing. Its ends and oughts are like the ends and oughts of physical health, social health, good sex, good fun, aesthetic pleasure, and so on. It differs from these only in that eudaimonics tries to recover and depict some winning ideas about how to achieve these sorts of goods in a systematic way, by living within the spaces of meaning (art, science, technology, ethics, politics, spirituality) where humans seem to return again and again to uncover value and to live among the values. So a naturalist has no trouble finding norms and ends. The problem is justifying them, and the worry, I take it, is that the ends may be arbitrary and subjective. True, they may be—but it does not appear that they in fact are. But the naturalist, my kind at any rate, who is impressed by human inquiry and thinks that it sometimes yields knowledge, says that if there are defensible ends and means for achieving *eudaimonia* they can be discovered by experience, or else they cannot be discovered at all.

Platonism

A criticism that I hear a lot when I lecture on eudaimonics, and that also comes up in all three of my critics' essays as either an uneasy observation or as a complaint, involves my platonism. I claim that we humans have a platonic orientation to try to maximize truth, beauty, and goodness. We see this urge in the spaces of meaning that we now privilege (and rightly so): art, science, technology, ethics, politics, spirituality. I claim that, all else equal, we should try to harmoniously maximize the true, the beautiful, and the good. This is platonic hedonism. But what about when these conflict? What if the truth, or what has the evidence on its side (you are an

animal, and when you die what made you who and what you are disperses, never to be again, gone for all eternity) competes with what is consoling? I (seem to) say that if there is conflict, truth is trump. At a minimum, this will result in what Wiebe calls deflation if not outright disenchantment. What non–question-begging reason, one that doesn't simply say that truth is trump, justifies treating the truth as a trump?

This is a good question and one that worries me. My answer is this. It may be an occupational hazard of being a philosopher and a cognitive scientist that I love truth (too much). But some things can be said in favor of the truth besides that it is true. First, on the defensive side, there is no evidence that any facts about the human predicament, insofar as such facts are relevant to eudaimonics, are intrinsically disturbing or disenchanting. My argument is that any disenchantment associated with naturalism is a product of prior commitment to certain stories (especially soteriological and eschatological ones), which themselves are question-begging in the sense that they depict certain ends (eternal reward) as the best and certain means (being conventionally moral, for example) as the right, only, best ones to achieve that end. Second, the agreement and arguments across wisdom traditions—for example, Chinese, Greek, Buddhist—for the idea that the false is the enemy not only of the true but also of the good are weighty, as is the cross-traditional agreement that in the long run truthfulness produces more rather than less *eudaimonia*. Third, if there is anything cognitively significant to say about what constitutes *eudaimonia* and what produces *eudaimonia*, it must be gathered, acquired, and transmitted by normal epistemic means. If there is nothing cognitively significant to say about the causes and constituents of *eudaimonia*, perhaps the truth does not matter, and if so, this eventually will be revealed as true. Fourth, there is an expressivist reason to endorse living truthfully: Barring evidence that it is unhealthy, it is best to live in accordance with our natures, and one terrifically satisfying capacity we possess is truth-seeking and -finding.

Transcendence and Moral Glue

Transcendence, some psychologists say, is a universal virtue. I say it is obviously *not* a virtue as virtues are defined by virtue theorists. My main worry about it is that most Americans in my experience want to use cultural psychological claims about transcendence to claim that there is a universal psychological urge to posit transcendent being(s). This is false—witness the Confucian and Buddhist traditions. So transcendence for me is actually immanent, it is transcendence-in-this-world (Wiebe).

My interpretation, as Taves says, allows me to decouple a "transcendent urge" for meaning making beyond self from a transcendent urge to posit divine beings. The first is universal and worth encouraging; the latter is not universal and worth discouraging. But even if it were true that the urge

wants to posit a being, this would not be evidence that satisfying the urge yields a truth. I argue that *if* there is a prepotent urge to merge with something that is greater than just me, myself, and I, and *if,* as seems the case, this urge sometimes gives rise to a wide impartial ethics, then the question arises as to how we turn up the motivational settings on this urge to make it very expansive, possibly resulting in universal love. In fact, I am not convinced that it is possible, good, or necessary to turn up the prepotent urge so that it yields universal love. Indeed, I worry about what universal love is or could mean if it is intended as something psychologically real (Flanagan 1991). My exploration here is intended to be tentative and hypothetical (Peterson).

In any case, supposing we wanted people to have very expansive moral attitudes, could natural reasons suffice to turn up the system or, as I say, superglue its components together so as to yield a motivationally effective structure, or do we need supernaturalistic reasons? I argue that although in the West many claim that people (often not they themselves) need supernaturalistic reasons, they do not. Furthermore, encouraging nonnatural reasons encourages low epistemic standards, which ramify in bad ways across personal and interpersonal space and lead to less *eudaimonia*. What may be true is a Dostoevskean-Nietzschean point: Once people have been taught, as a matter of their cultural history, that they need supernatural reasons to be moral, they do—for a while. But there is no psychosocial necessity.

Theological Naivete

Peterson and Taves make this criticism kindly but directly: I am accused of a certain arrogance and/or condescension in the way I speak (down) to believers. I plead guilty, but it seems worth noting that we atheists are the ones who are asked to abide all the conventions of politeness, being sweet and tender to believers, and thus that we are asked to be patronizing. If we are honest we are arrogant and condescending. In any case, if it matters, my atheism is of this form: Tell me your conception of *theos* and why you believe in that *theos*, I'll show you why that conception is unwarranted, typically preposterous. Because I have never heard a good argument for why it makes sense to believe in any conception, and because folk have been trying forever to do so, atheism is more rational than agnosticism. In any case, the criticism is that my view of religion is theologically underinformed and that this is consequential because theologians, some at least, do not make the mistakes or create the problems I claim they do.

Suppose it is true that I am theologically underinformed. What mistakes or problems do I claim religion typically causes or engenders? There are two problems: first, ontological commitment to nonnatural or supernatural posits for which there is no evidence for and much evidence against, and second, as a necessity for protecting the first, an implicit or explicit

defense of an epistemology that is question-begging, self-reinforcing, and not endorsed by the discipline of epistemology.

Regarding ontological commitment to *theos*, this looks to members of my tribe suspiciously like commitment to phlogiston. A course on phlogiston could be part of a university, or its curriculum, if there were enough interest in people's beliefs about phlogiston, how that belief had influenced the research of scientists, how the belief affected scientific funding, the status and fate of "true" believers versus nonbelievers (those heretics who believed in oxygen), and so on. All of this is worth studying without being ontologically committed to phlogiston, which would be absurd because there is no such thing. Religion as a historical, sociological, art-historical discipline is intellectually respectable. Theology, insofar as it claims to study *theos* as opposed to belief in *theos,* is not intellectually respectable.

When I am told that I, like my even less polite friends and colleagues Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett, and Richard Dawkins, do not engage theology or do not know enough about theology, and depend too much on ordinary knowledge about religion, I am left unimpressed for two reasons. First, last time I looked, the theologians were training the religious leaders who preach about *theos*. If those of us who make inferences about what religious people believe from what they say they believe are wrong that these religious people don't believe in *theos*, the theologians should explain how we misread ordinary beliefs so badly or, alternatively, should teach the ministers they train to straighten their charges out to not believe in silly or unsophisticated things. The suggestion (and I get it all the time, but not from my three critics here) is creepy, and Dostoevskean. The claim is that theologians have esoteric knowledge that ordinary religious folks don't understand, possibly that they are not told.

Second, when I do speak to world-class theologians (including my colleagues at Duke) I am impressed by their moral seriousness, their knowledge of texts (or art or music) that are historically influential, and their wisdom about religious movements, but I am unimpressed by their epistemology; they invariably speak gibberish if they say anything about *theos*. John Haught (2006), for example, a Roman Catholic theologian at Georgetown and a critic of mine, says that Pierre Teilhard de Chardin relegitimized final-cause talk and thus that it makes sense to put God after the universe rather than before it, which works out nicely since those first-cause arguments turned out to be very bad. Uh-huh. I asked him what the Vatican thinks of this move, and he said basically that their job isn't theology. Paul Griffiths, another distinguished Catholic theologian who recently moved from Chicago to Duke, writes in a review of *RHP* in *Commonweal* (2008) that I have an old-fashioned view of causation and am not up on all the new exciting final-cause talk, which (I take it) would make the world safe again for *theos.* In fact I am up on it, and there is none—except among theologians. Some of the biologists and physicists who work on complex

adaptive systems and complexity theory are friends of mine, and they have not rehabilitated this part of Aristotle or Teilhard. I asked Griffiths to please send me one article on the topic written by a respectable nontheologian. His silence is deafening.

This issue is exceedingly important, but I stand on the claim that the ordinary religious beliefs that are socially endorsed and encouraged are themselves epistemically unwarranted and engender exactly the low nonnaturalistic epistemic standards that are needed to warrant them. The strength, depth, and presumptiveness of theism is so ingrained in America that the psychiatric literature typically defines *delusion* in such a way that delusions are delusions unless they are socially endorsed religious ones. So, although I have no doubt that many academic theologians are doing interesting work that is about something, it just isn't about *theos*, and if it is I won't listen to them, and I certainly do not think any decent university should pay them to sell their snake oil. It would be like paying phlogistonologists for saying clever, interesting things about phlogiston.

My three critics are wonderfully charitable. They have given me a chance not so much to defend my project as to restate what I think makes eudaimonics worth doing and to explain how a broad naturalism is the right procedure to gain traction on what *eudaimonia* is and how to achieve it for animals like us. Is this a bitter pill? My critics are very kind. Wiebe says that my project is "deflationary but not disenchanting." Taves writes:

> Both [William] James and Flanagan are concerned to refute the popular perception that the sciences of the mind pose a threat to meaning and particularly to meaningful processes of human growth and transformation. By highlighting research on the subconscious, research that scientists could interpret as generating impressions that felt *as if* they arose from beyond the self and believers could interpret as *actually* arising from beyond the self, James hoped to entice both scientists and religious believers into an appreciation of "the More." In a parallel fashion, Flanagan wants to talk about flourishing in terms amenable to scientists and at the same time meaningful to believers. Indeed, he wants to cast psychological research on flourishing in terms sufficiently compelling to believers that they will willingly abandon "the More" for what we might call "the Less." In short, while James wanted to "bewitch" his readers into believing in More (as his colleague James Leuba put it), Flanagan wants to enchant his readers into believing in Less. (2009, 12)

I do not disagree with either way of putting the aim of my project when I wrote *RHP*. But in the spirit of reminding us that attitude is everything, I do think it possible that the view that I already personally find enchanting, exciting, and truthful might be eventually more widely experienced that way. I said in the Preface to *RHP* that whether a philosophical view is perceived as disenchanting or deflationary or as requiring the lowering of expectations is largely a matter of histories of cultural learning, which claim for themselves the imprimatur that certain stories, the ones that are endorsed, are upbeat and uplifting and endow sense and meaning, and that

alternative stories are not and do not. The twenty-first century will give us naturalists our best chance so far at explaining what it means to be a human animal and how we might go forward guided by wisdom as we explore some of the promising futures among the multifarious psychopoetic spaces open to us. It is a gift, a matter of great cosmic contingency, that we are self-understanding animals, enchanted beings, who can understand and guide our lives to places and ways of being that are more truthful, beautiful, and good.

References

Flanagan, Owen. 1991. *Varieties of Moral Personality: Ethics and Psychological Realism*. Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press.

———. 2006. "Varieties of Naturalism." *Oxford Handbook of Religion and Philosophy*, ed. P. Clayton and Z. Simpson, 430–51. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press.

———. 2007. *The Really Hard Problem: Meaning in a Material World*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Griffiths, Paul J. 2008. "Material Guy." *Commonweal* CXXXV:7 (April 11).

Haught, John F. 2006. *Is Nature Enough? Meaning and Truth in the Age of Science*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press.

Peterson, Gregory R. 2009. "A Hard Problem Indeed." *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 44:19–29.

Taves, Ann. 2009. "Bridging Science and Religion: 'The More' and 'the Less' in William James and Owen Flanagan." *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 44:9–17.

Wiebe, Donald. 2009. "A Scientific Account of Meaning: Deflationary but Not Disenchanting." *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 44:31–40.