

A Preparation for Existentialism, Regarding Human Freedom

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Introduction

One of the central issues for all existentialist thinkers is the fact that, as human beings, we must make choices or decisions. They all believe that each of us must, as a human being, take responsibility for her or his own ways of thinking, acting, and reacting. Furthermore, existentialists always hold that humans are the only beings who find themselves forced to take responsibility for themselves. The human situation is unique; other animals do not have to worry about the things we have to worry about. We are alone.

This existentialist way of looking at humans, however, is controversial at the moment in educated circles. Many educated people now believe that humans are not unique. And there are at least eight reasons for this belief.

§1. Humans Are Not Unique

a. Reasons Based on Human Nature

The reasons for believing that humans are not unique can be divided into two groups. The first group has to do with the what it means to be human (i.e., human nature). The second group has to do with certain problems with the belief that humans *are* unique.

There are at least four reasons for believing that humans are not unique, based on human nature (that is, on what humans are).

i. Humans Are Objects of Scientific
Explanation, Just Like Everything
Else

Many—probably most—educated people, if they stop to think about it, believe that we humans are mammals (just like all other mammals) whose ancestors evolved (as all mammals have) in a specific environment with the structures, abilities, needs, and drives that enabled them to live and reproduce most successfully in that environment. This does not mean that all our structures, abilities, needs, and drives enabled our ancestors to live and reproduce in that environment, however. It could be that some of our structures, abilities, needs, and drives are simply a bi-product, or natural consequence, of the structures, abilities, needs, and drives of that did help our ancestors live and reproduce (i.e., “spandrels,” in the terminology of Gould and Lewontin).

From these considerations, educated people often conclude that our human qualities and capacities are not supernatural, or in any way “higher” than those possessed by other animals. Other animals simply evolved to deal with different, though equally valid, environments and problems than our ancestors did. We humans are nothing special. The story that educated people often tell, in other words, about how modern humans came to have the structures, abilities, needs, and drives that we have is identical to the story they generally tell about how any group of animals came to have the structures, abilities, needs, and drives they have. That is, educated people often think that humans were produced in essentially the same way as all other animals, and therefore are basically the same as all other animals.

Someone might object at this point that even if humans and animals were produced in essentially the same way (even if they have essentially the same history or past) this does not mean that they are equally predictable (that they have essentially the same futures). After all,

scientists may be able to predict when the cherry trees will blossom or when birds will fly south for the winter, but they can't predict every course you're going to take next semester or which movie you're going to choose to watch this weekend. Economists, furthermore, have continually failed to predict the functioning of economies, just as historians, anthropologists, and sociologists have continually failed to predict the course of social and political revolutions. Such human phenomena, someone might claim, are simply not the proper objects of scientific explanation.

To this objection, educated people will often respond that the problem scientists have with explaining human phenomena is not that human phenomena can't be explained by science, but that scientists either don't have enough information available to them at the moment, or else they haven't yet discovered the right theories that would enable them to offer explanations. The fact that economists cannot predict the functioning of economies in the way that astronomers can predict the functioning of solar systems is due to the fact that economists do not currently have access to enough data or to good enough theories, not to the fact that economies, as human phenomena, are simply beyond scientific explanation. The fact that historians, anthropologists, and sociologists cannot predict the course of social and political revolutions is due to the same lack, not to some intrinsically a-scientific nature of human phenomena.

Educated people often believe, in other words, that science can explain everything, at least in principle.

ii. Humans Are Parts of the Causally-Closed Whole That Is the Universe, Just Like Everything Else

Furthermore, educated people often do not believe that humans are unique because they believe that humans are part of nature, and thus must function in the same ways as all the other

parts of nature function. The universe is a watch, as it were—or a computer, for theorists like Seth Lloyd—and humans are simply one part of the machine.

As a machine encompassing all that there is, the universe is causally closed. That is, all events can be traced back to a single causal source. How do we know this? Because science assumes it, and science gives us the ultimate truth about reality. Science, after all, explains things by saying that one thing causes another. And since nothing can cause itself, science traces everything back to a single origin: the Big Bang.

Humans cannot be unique, then, because they are objects of science, and because they are parts of the causally-closed whole that is the universe.

iii. Humans Are Made Up of the Same Basic Building Blocks as Everything Else

A third reason that educated people often do not believe that humans are unique is that they believe that humans are made up of the same stuff as everything else in the universe. The human body is made up of cells, which are made up of molecules, which are made up of atoms, which are made up of subatomic particles (which are—at least in some cases—made up of even smaller subatomic particles), which are simply different states of energy (since Einstein's equation $E = mc^2$ tells us that all mass can be converted into energy, and vice versa). So, when you analyze a human into her or his constituent parts, you find that she or he is made up of the same basic building blocks as everything else in the universe. And since humans are made up of the same parts as everything else, you'd expect them to function in pretty much the same way as everything else.

So, educated people often do not believe that humans are unique because they believe humans to be objects of scientific explanation, just like everything else, to be parts of the

causally-closed universe, just like everything else, and to be made of the same parts as everything else.

iv. All the Attributes and Abilities that Seem to Belong to Humans Alone, Eventually Turn Out to Belong to Other Animals Also

A fourth reason for believing that humans are not unique is that it seems like every time philosophers or theologians come up with something that “only humans have,” or “only humans can do,” scientists eventually show that other animals have the same thing, or the same capability. Rather than attempting to “lower” humans in their own estimations to the level of other mammals, or to the level of other parts of the universe, scientists are often able to “raise” other animals in the estimations of humans to what those humans consider to be the human level. Since educated people often believe this is the way things have always gone, they also often believe that this is the way things always will go. Therefore, they often believe it is useless to try to specify any human attribute or ability as being unique to humans.

So, educated people often do not believe that humans are unique because they believe humans to be objects of scientific explanation, just like everything else, to be parts of the causally-closed universe, just like everything else, to be made of the same parts as everything else, and to share all their attributes and abilities with other animals.

b. Reasons Based on Problems with the Belief that Humans Are Unique

The previous four reasons for believing that humans are not unique had to do with what educated people often believe that humans are. There are, however, at least four reasons for not believing that humans are unique that have to do with the *belief* that humans are unique. First,

that belief seems historically naïve to many educated people. Second, that belief seems to be evidence of religious ignorance to many educated people. Third, that belief seems to be hubristic to many educated people. And fourth, that belief leads to unacceptable consequences for many educated people.

i. The Belief that Humans Are Unique Is Historically Naïve

One of the main themes in the history of scientific progress is the decentralization of humanity. First, scientists realized that our home, the earth, was not the center of the solar system. Then, they realized that our solar system was not the center of our galaxy, nor our galaxy the center of the universe. The belief in the centrality of our location goes hand in hand with a belief in our own centrality. And just as one belief fell to scientific progress, the other must fall as well. To maintain that humans are unique, therefore, seems—to many educated people—to be part of a larger, outdated view of human beings as the universe's central, uniquely important beings.

ii. The Belief that Humans Are Unique Is Evidence of Religious Ignorance

Furthermore, many educated people believe that humans are not unique because they think that the belief that humans *are* unique is a religious belief, and they think that religious beliefs are a sign of ignorance. Educated people often believe that the history of scientific progress is a history of breaking through the barriers set up by religious beliefs, authorities, and cultures. Educated people often believe that religion has a tendency to hold back science and the acquisition of knowledge. Science, they believe, is about progress and the future, while religion is about tradition and the past. Thus, educated people often do not want to be associated with

religions, and religious beliefs. And since they often think that the idea that humans are unique or central is an idea that comes from religion, they often reject that belief.

iii. The Belief that Humans Are Unique Is Hubristic

Educated people often also think that the belief that humans are unique is a conceited, prideful, or hubristic belief. If democracy and equality are the right way to go for humanity, why shouldn't the same thing be the right way to go for the whole universe? If it would be conceited, prideful, or hubristic for any individual human to claim that he or she was unique, and thus somehow better than everyone else, why shouldn't it also be conceited, prideful, or hubristic for humans to think of themselves as all being unique, and thus somehow better, than everything else?

Since educated people often believe that believing humans to be unique is conceited, prideful, or hubristic, they often also believe it is also morally wrong. And if it is morally wrong to believe something, educated people usually think that belief must be false.

iv. The Belief that Humans Are Unique Has Immoral Consequences

But there is also another reason to think that the belief that humans are unique is morally wrong. If we think of humanity as the universe's unique and central beings, this encourages us to think of ourselves as being higher, or more important, than everything else. And educated people often think the belief that you are higher, or more important, than something else will lead you to damage and exploit that thing. That is, educated people often think that the belief that humans are uniquely central or important in the universe will lead humans to do things that are morally wrong, and thus is itself morally wrong.

Educated people often hold, therefore, that the belief that humans are unique and centrally important is morally wrong in itself (because it is hubristic) and is morally wrong due to its consequences (since it leads to moral wrongs). And educated people also often hold that the belief is factually false for the same reasons. Educated people generally assume that if it is morally wrong to believe something, this is conclusive evidence that the belief in question is false.

c. Conclusion

We have, therefore, the following eight general reasons for believing that humans are not unique:

- a. Reasons Based on Human Nature
 - i. Humans are objects of scientific explanation, just like everything else.
 - ii. Humans are parts of the causally-closed whole that is the universe, just like everything else.
 - iii. Humans are made up of the same basic building blocks as everything else.
 - iv. All the attributes and abilities that seem to belong to humans alone, eventually turn out to belong to other animals also.
- b. Reasons Based on Problems with the *Belief* that Humans Are Unique
 - i. The belief that humans are unique is historically naïve.
 - ii. The belief that humans are unique is evidence of religious ignorance.
 - iii. The belief that humans are unique is hubristic.
 - iv. The belief that humans are unique has immoral consequences.

But now you have a right to ask, “What does all this have to do with existentialism?” The answer is that existentialists generally believe that humans are unique insofar as they must make choices or decisions about their lives and world, rather than simply living out their drives, needs, desires, fears, and instincts. But to say that humans are unique in having to make choices or decisions about their lives and world is—educated people usually believe—to assume that humans are different from everything else in the universe in having free will. How could humans be alone in having to make choices if they weren’t alone in being free?

The problem is that educated people often do not believe that humans have something called “freedom of the will” that makes them unique. Humans, they often believe, do not enter upon (or get caught up in) their thoughts, actions, or reactions in a way that is fundamentally different from the way in which other animals enter upon (or get caught up in) their thoughts, actions, or reactions. Ultimately, they often believe, humans enter upon (or get caught up in) everything they “do” in ways that are essentially the same as the ways in which every other part of the universe enters upon, or gets caught up in, the things that they “do.” Thus, educated people often think that human “choices” or “decisions” cannot be fundamentally different from any other natural events, and must be explainable by science as part of the mechanism of nature.

So, if existentialists are going to claim that humans have to make choices—and thus are free—many educated people will conclude that existentialists must also claim that *everything* in the universe must make choices—and thus be free as well. And that is difficult to believe. After all, educated people usually think that the world is run by natural laws. Even living beings, they often think, are run by forces, drives, instincts, and reflexes which are describable in terms of natural laws. That is, educated people often believe that humans, just like everything else, are objects of scientific explanation, and science explains everything in terms of laws and causes, not in terms of choices and freedom.

Educated people, therefore, will often conclude that since humans are not unique, human choices must be the same as every other natural event, and thus must explicable in terms of natural laws and causes, rather than in terms of freedom of the will. And that means educated people will often have a hard time taking the existentialists seriously when they claim that we humans are in some way uniquely faced with the responsibility of making choices, and that science and natural laws cannot relieve us of this responsibility.

But the existentialists were all well-educated, and were probably much smarter than you and I are. And they knew about science and natural laws. So, why would they believe something that educated people today often disbelieve?

§2. What Is Freedom?

It is ultimately of less importance to the existentialists whether humans are unique than that they must make choices. Thus, the claim that humans are *not* unique primarily concerns them only insofar as it implies that humans are just like everything else in *not* being free. Against the idea that humans are just like everything else in being unfree, a number of arguments can be offered. But first, we must define what it would mean to be free if anything were free.

To be free is to be able to decide for yourself what you are going to do, rather than being forced to do it. That is, you are free when you are the source of your own actions, rather than being the transmitter of actions whose source lies outside of you. A billiard ball isn't free; it can only "act" if something else acts on it, and forces it to "act." A puppet isn't free; it can only "act" if someone else acts through it, and forces it to "act." A hammer isn't free; it can only "act" if someone else uses it, forcing it to "act." Billiard balls, puppets, and hammers aren't free because their actions are not their own; whenever they seem to act, what is actually happening is that something or someone else is acting on and through them.¹

Humans, in contrast to game pieces, marionettes, and tools, are often the origin of what we do. But they are not always so. If you get into a barroom brawl in the Old West and someone throws you through a saloon window, your "action" of breaking the window is not free. And it is not free because it did not originate with you (even if you started the fight). You were not the

¹ Here, I am drawing—strangely enough—on Aristotle's discussion of voluntary and involuntary action in chapter 1 of Book III of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

source of the specific action of flying through (and therefore breaking) the window. You were merely the tool or means by which your opponent broke the window (just as if he had thrown a chair through it). Since the action did not come from you, it was not properly your action, and thus you could not be said to have been “free” when “you” did it.

“Reflexes” are also not free actions. When the doctor strikes your knee with a rubber hammer, and your leg “kicks” in response, this is not an action that is “free” on your part. The reason for this is that the source of the action lies outside of you. You did not kick; rather, the doctor triggered a reflex in your nervous system, thereby, in essence, “kicking” your leg for you.

Emotional responses are like reflexes. But the difference is that you can—to a great extent—train your emotions. Your emotional reactions to things depend upon your personal character, and your character is shaped by your past choices and actions.² Furthermore, all the actions that follow on your immediate emotional reflex (e.g., getting into a fight in an Old West saloon after being insulted) are your own responses to your immediate emotional reflex, and thus are free. When you punch the person in the face who insulted you, he is not punching himself. You are the source of the action; it originates with you, with your response to your emotional reflex.

So, sometimes humans act freely, and sometimes they act unfreely. What it means to act freely is to be the source or origin of your action. What it means to act unfreely is to not be the source or origin of your action. That is, what it means to act freely is for you yourself to act (i.e., for you to be an agent), while what it means to act unfreely is for something else to act through you. Insofar as *you* act, your act is free. Insofar as you act unfreely, it is not you, but something else, who is acting.

² Here, again, I am drawing on Aristotle. But the point is one made by many thinkers from a variety of traditions.

That's the theory I'll be working with in the rest of the paper. As far as I know, it is closest to Aristotle's theory of voluntary and involuntary action (*Nicomachean Ethics* III.1). Whether any individual existentialist holds it, or instead holds some other theory, is something we'll have to decide as the semester proceeds.

§3. Human Transcendence

Now we must ask what reasons we might have for believing that we are capable of ever acting freely. That is, we must ask what reasons we might have for believing that we are capable of ever being the ultimate source and origin of any of our actions (i.e., of being agents). To answer this question, however, will depend on answering the question of whether humans are unique in transcending the natural world as it is described by science. In this section we'll deal with the question of transcendence. In the next, we'll deal with the question of uniqueness.

a. A Causally-Closed Universe?

If humans are simply parts of the causally-closed whole that is the physical universe, then they can never be the ultimate source or origin of their own actions. If humans could ever be the ultimate source or origin of their own actions, then we could not trace all events back to a single cause, but instead each human would be a new potential origin of "causal chains" of events. And if every human were a new potential origin of chains of events, then the events of which the universe consisted would not form a completely connected system. That is, the universe wouldn't actually be single whole, when viewed from the angle of events or causation. It would be a bunch of different interacting wholes—a kind of confluence of different universes.

But what reason do we have for believing that the universe is a causally-closed system? What reason do we have for believing that all causes can be traced back to a single original

cause? Certainly, modern astrophysics traces all events back to the Big Bang, but quantum mechanics tells us about “quantum fluctuations” and “particle decay,” in which events seem to simply occur without being caused to occur by prior events. And what is to keep other universes—if they existed—from “colliding,” as it were, with ours, and thus setting up new causal chains of events within our universe?

In other words, there is nothing (at least that I know) about modern science that requires the universe to be causally closed, some ideas in quantum mechanics imply (it seems to me) that the universe is *not* causally closed, and ideas from multiverse theory (as far as I understand it) imply that the universe could be causally open to other universes.

b. Good and Evil

Now for a question: if the universe is causally-closed, then nature is a coherent whole. All causes and events are natural consequences of all other natural causes and events. That is, if the universe is causally-closed, then all the events that happen within it are natural. And yet humans are manifestly capable of being unnatural, of harming themselves and nature. Humans are capable of moral evil, both against themselves and other beings.

It is impossible for nature to be unnatural. It is impossible for what is natural to do what is unnatural. Therefore, a thing cannot act unnaturally unless it is in some sense beyond nature. Since evil is unnatural, and to be unnatural you must be extra-natural, or supra-natural, any being capable of doing evil must in some sense transcend nature. The fact of human moral evil, shows that humans are beings that in some sense are beyond, or independent of, nature.

This sounds rather strange, but needn't be. Science measures things in order to describe and predict things. It does this in terms of numbers (and things that are made of numbers, like data tables, formulas, and equations). Whatever, then, can be measured, described, and predicted

using numbers is something that science can tell us about. But why should everything be measurable, describable, and predictable using numbers? Why should it be possible, for instance, to describe, measure, and predict all *qualities* in terms of *quantities*?

Furthermore, science uses numbers to tell us what was, is, and will be. But there is a difference between what was, is, and will be, and what should have been, what should be now, and what should be in the future. Science gives us facts, but cannot tell us whether those facts are good or bad, important or unimportant, valuable or valueless, meaningful or meaningless, worthwhile or worthless. And that's because science has to describe everything in terms of numbers, and numbers don't have anything to say about morality, goodness, worth, value, meaning, importance, etc. Show me a physics equation in which the word "good" or "bad" appears. Show me a chemical reaction that produces "value" as one of its outputs. Tell me what kind of scale a biologist would use to determine how "weighty" or "meaning-full" an event is.

Science, after all, is supposed to be objective and unbiased. It is supposed to be value neutral. Science is not supposed to make value judgments. Science is not supposed to tell us that some things are good, and other things are bad. It's supposed to simply measure, describe, and predict things using numbers. But the world we live in is world that has value, goodness, badness, importance, meaningfulness, meaninglessness, etc. in it. And that's exactly the kind of thing science is supposed to avoid talking about.

Therefore, the fact that we live in a world of good and evil, or right and wrong, already shows us that there is more to reality than the natural world described by science's numbers. And there's nothing spooky about morality and value. We experience such things all the time.

c. Objections and Responses

To this, someone might object: But of course science can describe morality, goodness and badness, value and importance, and so on. Psychologists, evolutionary biologists, anthropologists, and sociologists do this all the time. They can measure the amount and kinds of chemicals released in your brain when you experience something that you find important or good or valuable. They can describe the situations in which valuing such things led our ancestors to be more successful at passing on their genes.

And this is all true. What it amounts to, however, is a claim that scientists can tell us when someone is valuing something, and what effects follow from someone's valuing something or what chemicals are associated with someone's valuing something. But science cannot tell us whether anyone should value something. That is, science has no way of deciding when it is good that someone values something, or when it is bad that someone values something.

Scientists may be able to tell us when Hitler is valuing something, what chemicals are being released in his brain, and why valuing that kind of thing led his ancestors to more successfully pass on their genes. Scientists may also be able to tell us when Gandhi is valuing something, what chemicals are being released in his brain, and why valuing that kind of thing led his ancestors to more successfully pass on their genes. But science has no way of deciding whether Hitler or Gandhi is right in valuing what he values—whether he is valuing what one *should* value—whether it is good that he values what he values. And yet we *have to* have a way of deciding who was right and who was wrong. In fact, we can see that Gandhi valued what he should—he valued things that had genuine value, and were actually good—while Hitler valued what he shouldn't—he valued things that, as it were, were “value-negative” (that were actually bad).

“But,” the objector will respond, “science can tell us when valuing something leads to the death of a thing, and when valuing something leads to greater health and vitality instead. Surely the death of the thing is bad for it, and the greater health and vitality of the thing are good for it. And science can tell us when valuing something leads to the death of a group, and when valuing something leads to the greater health and vitality of the group instead.”

And this, in some sense, is true. But it misses the point. The point is that science cannot tell us whether it is bad that a thing or a group dies, or good that a thing or group obtains greater health and vitality. It is good when the HIV virus, or smallpox, or cancer dies, and bad when it is healthy and vital. It is good when a hateful way of thinking (e.g., a racist “meme”) “dies out” (i.e., when people cease to think in that way, because they are thinking in loving ways instead) and bad when that hateful way of thinking is healthy and vital. It is good when an “invasive species” of bird, fish, rodent, or insect (i.e., one artificially introduced through human stupidity) dies out in the area it is invading, and thus ceases to wipe out the other organisms in that ecosystem, and bad when it is healthily and vitally rampaging around in the ecosystem in which it doesn’t belong. It is bad when the genetic mutation that produces a disease or disability “dies out” (i.e., is replaced by a non-debilitating variant), and bad when it is “healthy and vital” (i.e., causing people or animals damage and distress).

The foregoing, of course, is far from a complete list. The same things can be said of atomic weapons, anthropogenic global warming, sexual abuse, computer viruses, illiteracy, poverty, misery, etc., etc., etc. It is simply not the case that the death or termination of every thing, or every group of things, is bad, nor is it the case that the survival, vitality, and spread of every thing, or every group of things is good. Some things, or groups of things, should be terminated, while other things, or groups of things, should grow and propagate. Science has no

way of distinguishing one type of thing, or group of things, from the other type of thing, or group of things. It can only measure and predict what will happen, not what should happen.

What this means is that there is more to the world than science can reveal to us, and that we humans—without our ability to do both what is good and what is evil—must necessarily be in some ways beyond scientific description. And that means that we must, in some ways, be independent of the natural world as described by science.

d. Incoherences in the System

Furthermore, if the universe were a causally-closed whole, why would it not form a coherent system? How could one part of it act against another part to its detriment? How could one part of a causally-closed system harm, or do what is wrong, to another part of the same, causally-closed system? Since all parts of the system are causally derived from the same source, where would the conflict and disunity come from? The only way the kind of conflict we experience between ourselves and the natural world could occur is through the introduction of influences from outside the natural world.

For instance, if everything we do, think, and feel we as humans is ultimately derived and produced naturally by the same source (a source outside ourselves, in the world as described by science), whence the revulsion we feel at being told that everything we do, think, and feel is ultimately derived and produced naturally by the same source? If everything we do, think, and feel as humans is ultimately derived and produced naturally by some source in the physical world outside us (the world described by science), then whence the age-old, ongoing effort on the part of so many people to prove that everything we do, think, and feel as humans is *not* ultimately so derived? How could the natural source of all we do, think, and feel work against itself in such a way, if it is just the kind of thing that science can describe?

Likewise, if everything we do, think, and feel is produced by some natural source outside us in the world as described by science, whence the ability and activity of imaginatively creating other worlds? Whence the activity of writing phantasy novels, of making phantasy movies? Whence fiction and faerie worlds? Whence the ability to create and live in other universes, and even to have those universes impact the real world?

§4. Human Uniqueness

We have been dealing here with the question of human transcendence. Closely related to it, however, is the question of human uniqueness. The question is, are humans unique in any of their attributes or capacities?

a. Our Attributes and Abilities

The answer to this question is obvious: “Yes.” Humans, for instance, are uniquely capable of wondering whether humans are uniquely capable of anything. Humans are the only animals who have the capacity to wonder whether humans are the only animals that have the capacity to do _____. Humans are the only animals who can get into arguments with each other over whether there is anything special about humans. Humans, in other words, are the only animals capable of philosophical self-reflection.

We are also the only animals capable of making a project of ourselves. Only humans, in other words, can be concerned with what we have made, are making, and will make of ourselves. Only humans are capable of having a “self-improvement” section in their bookstores (not to mention the fact that only humans are capable of conceiving of and creating bookstores, whether physical or virtual). Only humans are capable of complex life goals, of evaluating themselves in

terms of whether they are meeting their goals, and of reproaching or rewarding themselves for having (failed) to meet their goals.

Only humans, furthermore, are capable of telling stories. Only humans are capable of inventing stories. Only humans are capable, therefore, of creating new worlds and evaluating the current world in terms of those invented worlds. In fact, only humans are capable of thinking about the world as a whole, and of wondering about their place in it.

Only humans, furthermore, are capable of distinguishing between true stories and fiction, and between fiction and falsehood. Only humans can argue about the difference between myth, legend, and history. Only humans can distinguish between a scientific paper and a novella.

Likewise, only humans write. Only humans are capable of wondering whether e-books will replace physical books. Only humans are capable of conceiving of—and working toward—a “paperless society.” Only humans are capable of taking advantage of a library.

And only humans can translate between languages. Only humans can say the same thing in different ways. Only humans, therefore, are capable of distinguishing between the meaning of a sign and the sign itself, by being able to recognize that *different* (sets of) signs mean the *same* thing.

And only humans make musical instruments. Only humans write and record music. Only humans can worry about whether illegally downloading a song is a violation of intellectual property, or whether intellectual property is actually a false concept. Only humans are capable of conceptualizing (e.g., defining and argument about) concepts.

Humans, furthermore, are the only animals that have religions. Only humans can wonder about future and past lives. Only humans can worry about souls, whether they have them, and what happens to them after physical death. Only humans, in fact, are capable of describing the

difference between physical and spiritual (or physical and mental), whether or not there actually is such a distinction. Only humans could worry about whether there is such a distinction.

Likewise, only humans are capable of condemning themselves for hubristically thinking that they're somehow special because they're the only ones who can do so many things. Only humans are capable of fearing the consequences for the natural world of believing certain things about their unique status in the natural world. Only humans, therefore, are capable of choosing between worldviews.

And only humans go to universities, worry about grades, confer and obtain degrees, work for investment banks, film studios, and insurance companies. Only humans can comprehend what universities are, what grades mean, and why degrees are important. Only humans can describe what investments are, what the difference between films and real life is, and what insurance is (and why anyone would want it). Only humans can get into arguments over whether any of these things have any real value.

And only humans are capable of contemplating their socio-political structures, critiquing them, purposely trying to tear them down or support them, or imaginatively trying to design new ones. Only humans are capable of arguing about whether democracy or monarchy is more just. Only humans are capable of arguing about the definition of justice. Only humans are capable of offering and debating definitions.

Etc., etc., etc.

b. Differences of Degree or Kind?

Humans, in other words, are clearly unique. That is, they are clearly different from all other animals. The question then becomes whether this difference is a difference of degree or a difference of kind. That is, do humans share all their attributes and abilities with other animals,

while simply having more of each attribute or ability (i.e., having each attribute or ability to a greater degree)?

The answer to this question differs with different cases. For example, one might say that the human ability to write—to make meaningful markings on a page—is the same as a dog’s ability to “mark its territory.” It’s just that the human’s ability is much more complex and versatile. Marking one’s territory, however, is like branding a cow. And the difference between using a sign to brand a cow as yours, and writing a novel about political intrigue amongst aliens in a distant galaxy, is radical. It is similar to the radical difference between writing a novel and writing a computer program, or between writing a screenplay and writing a symphony.

Furthermore, the ability to describe the difference between sign and meaning is unique to humans. It is not that humans can describe the difference between signs and meanings to a greater degree than animals can. It is that humans can, and animals can’t.

The same goes for storytelling, in the sense of imaginative world-, character-, and story-creation. It is not that animals have the ability to tell imaginative, fictional stories to a lesser extent than humans. It’s that humans have the ability, and animals do not.

And among the stories that humans tell, only humans can distinguish between fact, fiction, and lies. It’s not that animals are somewhat capable of making this distinction, while humans are much more capable. It’s that animals simply can’t do this, and humans can.

So, while it is clear that animals other than humans play games, and humans are simply capable of playing a much greater variety of radically more complex games, it is not the case that all human attributes and abilities are like this. Some human attributes and abilities differ in kind from the attributes and abilities found in any other animal (they do not all simply differ by degree). Furthermore, even with those attributes and abilities in which the difference can be

understood as one of degree, the difference is often so drastic as lead one to suspect that behind it there lies is a difference of kind.

There are good reasons, therefore, for believing not only that humans—while being in part natural beings describable by science—transcend the natural world describable by science, but also that amongst animals, humans unique in a host unavoidably obvious ways. We have good reason to believe, therefore, that even if science can use numeric/mathematical measurements and laws to describe and predict the functioning of the natural world in general, and animals in particular, that such descriptions and predictions will only ever be partially successful when it comes to humans.

This, then, brings us to the question of freedom. What reasons do we have for believing that humans are free?

§5. Human Freedom

a. Causes vs. Occasions

I think the belief amongst many educated people that humans *can't* be free is due to at least in part to a failure to distinguish between causes and occasions. One billiard ball's striking another, for example, is the cause of the second ball's rolling across the table. Likewise, the sun's shining on your skin for an extended period of time is the cause of your sunburn. Similarly, your "friend's" sticking his foot into your path is the cause of your tripping. A doctor's striking your knee with a rubber hammer is the cause of your leg's kicking. A table's reflecting light onto your retina is part of the cause of your seeing the table. Etc.

A hurricane doesn't cause your donation to Doctors Without Borders, however. Rather, it occasions your making a donation (if that is how you respond to the hurricane). St. Patrick's Day doesn't cause you to wear green, but it does occasion your wearing of green (if that is how you

respond to the holiday). Your boyfriend's proposing to you does not cause you to say, "Yes," but it does occasion your responding in that way. A stranger's insult doesn't cause you to punch him in the face, but it might occasion your doing so (if that is how you respond to the insult).

Both occasions and causes can function as explanations for actions. "Why did Bobby-Frank give \$10 to Doctors Without Borders?" "Because of the hurricane." "Why did Timmy-John fall down the stairs?" "Because Sally-Sue tripped him." It is simply not the case that all explanations need be *causal* explanations.

To this someone might object, "But all *complete* explanations are causal explanations, and therefore all explanations can ultimately be reduced to causal explanations." For example, Bobby-Frank gave \$10 to Doctors Without Borders, because the hurricane caused him to feel certain emotions, which caused him to want to give money to Doctors Without Borders, which caused him to give money to Doctors Without Borders. Thus, the hurricane does not just occasion Bobby-Frank's donation; it causes his donation.

And there is a lot to this response. First, it is true that the hurricane made him feel certain emotions. Well, actually, if he didn't experience the hurricane itself, it was reports about the hurricane that made him feel those emotions. But the emotions he feels depend on his character, which he is, in large part, responsible for shaping. Furthermore, his emotions may even cause him to want to give money to Doctors Without Borders. But his desire to give money to Doctors Without Borders does not cause him to make a donation. Rather, he fulfills his desire by giving money. He responds to his desire by making a donation. His desire is the occasion for his action, not the cause of his action.

But maybe Bobby-Frank is the kind of guy about whom you would say, "He's such a sweetheart. He couldn't do anything *but* make a donation in that kind of situation. It's just the

kind of guy he is.” Or, maybe you would say, “Bobby-Frank would’ve been miserable if he hadn’t made that donation. He would’ve felt so guilty.” And all of this might be true. However, it all misses the point.

The first claim says nothing more than that making a donation was the only path open to Bobby-Frank that was consistent with his character, and that he always acts in a way that is consistent with his character. And all this says is that Bobby can be counted on to respond to the occasions that life throws his way in certain ways. Nevertheless, these responses remain responses, and not reflexes, and thus the occasions remain occasions and not causes.

The second claim says nothing more than that Bobby-Frank has a certain character (which, again, he is largely responsible for shaping) such that not acting in a certain way would make him feel guilty. But his response to this potential guilt by making the donation is nevertheless a response to that guilt, not an effect of that guilt. The guilt is an occasion, not a cause.

How, then, are we to tell the difference between occasions and causes, or between responses and reflexes? In some cases, we can tell just from the nature of the occasion/cause and response/reflex in question. Events can cause emotions. Emotions can cause other emotions. But emotions never cause actions. Emotions (even desire) only occasion actions.

Other times, we might have to ask the person in question whether the event in question is a response or a reflex. Seeing one thing (e.g., smoke) may immediately make you think of another (e.g., fire), and thus it may cause you to come to some conclusion. (I’m not sure that “causation” is the proper notion here, but let’s assume it is, for the sake of argument.) However, you may come to the conclusion that there is a fire by considering the smoke for a while, and finally deciding that it must be due to a fire (rather than simply being steam, for example). In this

cause, the smoke occasions your conclusion that there is a fire, rather than causing it.

And this brings us to our second topic.

b. The Experience of Choice and Action

Every person has, at least occasionally, the experience of making a choice or a decision. Every person also has, at least occasionally, the experience of purposefully or deliberately acting. In such experiences, the person in question experiences him- or herself as the origin of the choice, decision, or action. The person does not experience the choice, decision, or action, as something that was merely the overflow or tail-end of some action by something outside him or her. Rather, he or she experiences it as originating with him- or herself.

One of the primary motivations for modern science was the desire to get away from abstract speculation, and to get down to actual, concrete experience. It was an attempt to no longer simply take things on the authority of the Church and Aristotle, and to begin trying to confirm things for ourselves. If Missouri is the “Show-Me State,” the modern, scientific era is the “Show-Me Era.” That’s why modern science (as distinct from classical and medieval science) is based upon experiments—actual, repeatable, experiences. There’s a reason why “experience” and “experiment” are the same word, just with different endings.

We need no abstract, theoretical proof that humans are free, therefore. All we have to do is to pay attention to our own experiences. We can see for ourselves that we make choices, and that we act. We don’t need anyone else to prove it for us. And if an authority tries to tell us that we can’t be free, because some abstract theory says we aren’t, all we have to say is, “I refuse to go back to that prescientific way of deciding questions. You say I cannot be free. I, however, have an untold number of experiments—repeated experiences—that falsify your hypothesis. I have experienced for myself, firsthand, the making of choices and the performing of actions.

That is, I have experienced myself as an originator of causal chains, not just a transmitting link in causal chains. And if your theory says that I am not, then I have the data to prove it wrong.”

And not only do we experience ourselves as originators, we cannot help experiencing ourselves as originators. That is, not only do we experience ourselves as making choices and performing actions, we cannot help but experiencing ourselves as making choices and performing actions.³ If this is correct, I would propose that it would be irrational to believe that such experiences are delusive—just as irrational as it would be to believe that we are in *The Matrix* or *Inception*—only more so (since our experience of our own decisions and actions is even more intimate, or intuitive, than our experience of the physical world around us).

Given the choice, then, between our own experiences and a physicist’s theories, I propose it is both more rational and more scientific to go with our own experiences and wait for the physicists to come up with a theory that explains our experience, rather than explaining it away. Furthermore, I propose that we have a very strong moral reason for siding with our own experience.

c. Freedom and Human Dignity

The job of morality is to protect human dignity from violation, and to promote human dignity towards greater actualization. Murder, rape, and theft are wrong, for example, because they are violations of the human dignity of the person killed, raped, or stolen from. Generosity, honesty, and hard work are good, on the other hand, because they are realizations, or actualizations, of human dignity, and tend toward the encouragement or promotion of greater human dignity.

³ Here I draw on the arguments of Kant (*Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals* III) and John Searle (who follows Kant).

Contrast the beating of a person with the “fax machine smashing scene” from *Office Space*. The former is wrong, because it involves the violation of the beaten-person’s human dignity. The latter is not wrong, because fax machines have no dignity that can be violated. The reason you can unplug a computer, or remove its CPU, when you cannot cut out a person’s stomach, or remove his brain, is that computers do not have dignity, and humans do. Unplugging a computer, or removing its CPU, does not violate its dignity. It has none to violate. Removing a person’s stomach or brain, however, *does* violate his dignity.

Now, of course, if the fax machine or computer you are disassembling or smashing belongs to someone else, and you do not have her or his permission to do so, then your disassembling or smashing the machine is a violation of its owner’s human dignity. The same thing goes for tools and puppets. We are only morally obligated to “treat them with respect” to the extent that we are obligated to treat their owners—if they have any—with respect. It is not they that have dignity, but their owners. Morality does not protect them *per se*, it protects their owners, and thus protects them *per accidens*.

Now, there must be an ontological distinction to back up this moral distinction. There must be something about the nature of human beings that gives them dignity, when the nature of machines does not give them dignity. The following seem to be the traditional candidates for this distinction: (1) humans are alive, while machines are not; (2) humans are natural and organic, while machines are synthetic and mechanical; (3) humans are “sentient” or “conscious” while machines are not; (4) humans have reason and machines do not; (5) humans are moral beings, while machines are not; (6) humans have souls, while machines do not; (7) humans experience pleasure and pain, while machines do not; (8) humans are free agents and machines are not.

If we adopt the first distinction—that humans are alive and machines are not—as the

ground for the distinction between human dignity and machine dignitylessness, we would be unable to explain the similar distinction between humans and plants. It is okay, for example, to eat plants (as all herbivores and omnivores do), while it is not okay to eat humans. And yet humans and plants are both alive. This is not to say that plants have no dignity at all. Perhaps they have some low level of dignity. But the difference in levels of dignity between plants and humans cannot be explained by the simple distinction between living and not living. It would have to correspond to something like levels of living (with humans living in a higher or fuller sense than plants), and this would force us to explain what the difference is between these levels. And this, then, would force us to appeal to one of the other potential distinctions list above as the ontological basis behind the distinction between levels of life.

Appealing to the second distinction—that between what is natural and organic, and what is synthetic and mechanical—also could not explain the difference in levels of dignity between humans and plants. Both humans and plants are natural and organic, and yet humans have a significantly higher level of dignity than do plants (if plants have any at all). The third distinction—between being “sentient” or “conscious,” and not being sentient or conscious—however, *would* be able to explain the fact that humans have a much higher level of dignity than do plants. And yet even plants have some basic level senses, of a sort—that is, they are sentient at some very low level. Furthermore, engineers have built robots that, at least in some sense, can see, hear, and touch (and perhaps even taste and smell). Thus, what genuinely seems to separate humans from machines and plants is that machines and plants lack consciousness.

However, to be conscious, one must be able to direct one’s attention toward different objects or subjects or issues in a way that is purposeful, rather than merely reflexive. That is, one must be the ultimate source or origin of at least some of one’s mental acts. And thus the third

potential distinction (between being conscious and not being conscious) is simply a special case of the eighth (between being a free agent and not).

The same is true of the fourth distinction—between having reason and not. To have reason, one must be able to think. That is, one must be able to deliberately or purposely perform certain mental acts of “reckoning,” “derivation,” “inference,” etc. That is, one must be the ultimate source or origin of at least some of one’s thoughts, and thus one must be a free agent.

And the same is true of the fifth distinction—between being moral beings and not. To be a moral being, one must be able to act in moral ways. And this means that one must be capable of being the ultimate source or origin of good and bad actions. Thus, the fifth distinction is simply a special case of the eighth (between being a free agent and not).

Thus, we are left with the sixth, seventh, and eighth potential distinctions. A soul, in addition to being a spiritual thing, would be a thing that functioned as the original source or origin of actions. Thus, the sixth distinction likewise entails the eighth. So, what of the seventh? It is clear that humans experience pain and pleasure, while machines do not. It also seems clear that humans experience pain and pleasure, while plants do not. Might it then be the case that what gives humans dignity is our pleasures and pains?

We have come, therefore, to the traditional debate between utilitarians and deontologists: between those who base morality on pleasure and pain, and those who base it on human freedom. It is not likely that we will be able to settle that dispute in this paper. However, the following considerations are in order.

First, the claim that being able to experience pleasures and pains gives a being dignity is, at the very least, not obvious. In fact, it seems to, in an important sense, be exactly backward. The reason a being’s pleasures and pains matter is that it has dignity. The being doesn’t matter

simply because it has pleasures and pains. A human being who lacked the ability to feel pleasure and pain would still have human dignity. In fact, an alien race which in every other way was like humans, but lacked emotions or feelings of any kind, would still have at least human-level dignity. Thus, the capacity for experiencing pleasures and pains is not a necessary condition of dignity.

Neither is the capacity to feel pleasures and pains a sufficient condition of dignity. Hitler, for instance, lost his human dignity (or at least he lost significant amounts of it),⁴ even as he retained his capacity for feeling pleasure and pain. That is, one's level of dignity varies independently of one's capacity for feeling pleasure and pain. The more dignity one has, the more one's pleasures and pains should be taken into account. However, it is not the case that the greater a being's capacity for experiencing pleasure and pain, the more dignity it has.

In any event, the capacity for experiencing pleasure and pain is not enough to explain the difference in dignity between animals and humans. It might be that animals have dignity (some—e.g., primates—more than others—e.g., worms). However, when forced to choose between feeding a person and feeding a pet, it would be immoral to feed the pet and let the person starve (assuming the person in question is not Hitler). Similarly, given the choice between saving an animal from a burning building, and saving a human from the same burning building, we would have a moral obligation to save the human.

Thus, not only is the capacity for experiencing pleasure and pain a necessary condition of having human dignity, it is not a sufficient condition for having human dignity, since it cannot explain the extra level of dignity that belongs to humans, but not to animals. And this means that if any animals have human-level dignity, this cannot be because they have a greater capacity for

⁴ Here, I draw on the work of John Locke in *Second Treatise of Civil Government*.

experiencing pleasures and pains. It must mean that they share with humans whatever fundamental ontological nature it is that gives humans their level of dignity.

What is it, then, that gives humans (and perhaps some other animals) the properly human level of dignity? All the plausible explanations we have discussed—i.e., having consciousness, reason, or a soul, or being moral—entail being, at least to some extent, a free agent. In fact, I would like to argue that being a free agent would be enough, whether the free agent in question had consciousness, reason, a soul, or was a moral being.

As a free agent, a being is fundamentally an originator of causal chains. A being that is a free agent is not simply a cog in a larger machine, but is, fundamentally, a “machine operator” (as it were). To try to control an agent is to try to control something whose nature is to be a controller, not a controlled. To treat a free agent as a mere tool or puppet, then, would be to dissimulate and violate the agent’s nature.⁵

Therefore, since we have a moral obligation to treat our fellow human beings as beings that have human dignity, we are morally obligated to believe that our fellow human beings are free agents. And if we are morally obligated to believe something, that belief must be true. At the very least, it would be irrational to simultaneously believe that one should hold a belief and that that belief is false.

What this means is that we not only have extensive, direct experience of being free agents (in experiencing our own choices and actions), we have a moral obligation to believe that humans are free agents. When we put these together with my arguments above that humans transcend the natural world as described by science, and that humans are unique, I believe (1) that replies to the arguments in §1 will be easy to produce, and (2) we can conclude that it is at

⁵ Here, I draw on the work of Emmanuel Levinas in *Totality and Infinity*.

least rational to believe, with the existentialists, that humans are agents (i.e., that they must make choices, and thus that they are free).

Appendix 1

At MTV's Video Music Awards ("VMAs") in 2002, Robert Smigel, through his puppet, Triumph the Insult Comic Dog, got into a minor altercation with rapper Eminem (Marshall Mathers).⁶ The "altercation" essentially involved Smigel asking Eminem questions through the puppet, and Eminem pushing the puppet down with one hand while telling Smigel to leave him alone. The incident became a bit of a sensation in popular culture, with word spreading that Eminem had attacked a puppet. The impression that was given was that Eminem was an idiot, because he had attacked the puppet, rather than the puppeteer.

In the video for his song, "A** Like That,"⁷ from 2005's *Encore*, Eminem reenacts the incident in a bit of self-parody. This time, Triumph approaches him on a red carpet and hurls a few insults. Eminem then strikes the puppet and tackles it. After the ensuing scrum, Eminem comes up with the puppet on his own hand, now controlling the puppet that had been insulting him. The portrayal of the incident in the video was much closer to the gossip about the original incident than the original incident itself was.

Let us examine the incident as it was reported, and as it is portrayed in the music video, rather than as it actually occurred. The embarrassing thing⁸ about the event for Eminem is that, by attacking the puppet, he showed himself to be incapable of distinguishing between fantasy and reality. He attacked the thing that Smigel pretends is insulting him, rather than Smigel, who

⁶ "Triumph, the Insult Comic Dog vs. Eminem at MTV Music Awards," stanosijek's channel on YouTube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q6tD_rGGJPY>.

⁷ Eminem, "A** Like That," EminemVevo's Channel on YouTube, <<http://www.youtube.com/user/EminemVEVO#p/u/14/um4-d7VzZiE>>.

⁸ See, e.g., the report on Eminem's book, *The Way I Am* (Eminem, *The Way I Am*, with Sacha Jenkins [Dutton Adult, 2008]), Ceilidh, "Eminem feels stupid for fighting with a hand puppet," Celebitchy, <http://www.celebitchy.com/16740/eminem_feels_stupid_for_fighting_with_a_hand_puppet/>.

actually is insulting him. He showed himself to have been taken in by Smigel's illusion.

His attack was a clear misattribution of source or origin, furthermore. Instead of looking past the puppet's face and along the arm protruding from it, to the human being who was actually speaking—from whose mouth the insulting words were actually coming—he revenged himself upon a mere puppet. He mistook the means through which he was being insulted for the source of the insult (the being who was actually insulting him).

If humans are not free—that is, if they are not agents (that is, if they are not capable of being the ultimate source or origin of many of their actions)—then our conversations with each other should be just as embarrassing to us as Eminem's encounter with Triumph the Insult Comic Dog was to him. If we are not the ultimate origin of the words we say and the thoughts we think, then we should address ourselves to whatever is that origin, just as Eminem should have addressed himself to Smigel rather than Triumph. If the ultimate origin or source of our actions and words is our drives or emotions, then we should speak to them. If it is the chemicals in our brains, then we should speak to them. If it is larger forces at work in society or the physical universe, we should speak to them.

Doing any of these things, however, would be absurd. Drives, emotions, chemicals, and forces are not the kinds of things with which one can have a conversation. They cannot hear, understand, or talk back. To address ourselves to them, therefore, would be irrational.

The human world would collapse if conversation was impossible. If we ceased to address ourselves to each other, we could no longer function. Even the possibility of reading, as you are doing now, depends upon taking another person as an interlocutor: as someone to whom one can communicate and who can communicate to one.

What separates us from puppets, furthermore, is not that we are conscious and that

puppets are not. Even if Triumph were conscious, Eminem's reaction to him would have been just as absurd—unless Triumph were also the source of the insults. A conscious puppet is still a puppet, as would be an emotional or feeling puppet. If the persons with whom we are continually interacting are not the ultimate sources or origins of their responses to us, we are—and every human throughout history has been—fundamentally irrational.

We cannot argue in favor of determinism, therefore, or against agency, without presupposing the very position we are arguing against. To argue, after all, we must address ourselves to someone else. And this is irrational if the person we are addressing is the equivalent of a puppet, controlled by internal or external forces. The very attempt to prove to another person that he or she is not free is evidence that the person attempting the proof believes in freedom.

Not only, then, do we have ample “internal” or “personal” evidence of our own agency from our experience of choosing and acting, our “external” or “interpersonal” lives show that we continually assume the agency of others.

Against this, it might be argued that we are subject to an illusion, since science, or some other authority, tells us that we are determined. If it is an illusion, however, it is a necessary illusion. We cannot live without addressing ourselves to each other as interlocutors. That is, we cannot live without acting as if we are interlocutors, and taking each other to be (understanding each other as) interlocutors. Thus, the only way we can be authentic—the only way we can be faithful to ourselves—is to live as if the illusion were the truth. Furthermore, I would submit that it is more rational to hold that a belief and practice we cannot avoid is genuine or truthful, than it is to hold that it is deceitful (all the while continuing to implicitly believe it and live it).

Finally, it might be argued that when we address ourselves to each other as interlocutors, it is not we who are doing it. It is whatever is controlling us (e.g., our emotions, or the laws of

the universe). What I should have said, therefore, is not that we should address ourselves to whatever is controlling our apparent interlocutors—if determinism is true—but rather that whatever is controlling us should address itself to whatever is controlling our apparent interlocutors. The puppet masters should engage each other. Our emotions should address themselves (or us?) to their emotions. Or the laws of nature should address themselves (or us?) to the laws of nature. Or the chemicals in our bodies should address themselves (or us?) to the chemicals in their bodies.

Such claims, however, are so far from what is manifestly going on in conversation, and from whatever *could* go on in conversation, that it is impossible to take them seriously. Chemicals don't talk to chemicals, nor laws to laws or emotions to emotions. Nor could they. We—human beings—talk to each other. And we cannot help but do so. We are, to modify Sartre's phrase, condemned to treat each other as free, and it would be irrational of us to disagree with ourselves on this point.