

Conatus

by
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'Our life is an apprentice to the truth that around every circle another can be drawn; that there is no end to nature, but every end is a new beginning.'

Ralph Waldo Emerson

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'We (the undivided divinity operating within us) have dreamt the world. We have dreamt it as firm, mysterious, visible, ubiquitous in space and durable in time; but in its architecture we have allowed tenuous and eternal crevices of unreason which tell us it is false'.

William Poundstone — Labyrinths of Reason

Preface

Conatus is a Latin word meaning the will to live and the tendency for living things to grow and to flourish. The word is best known for its association with the philosopher Spinoza. The

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essence of Spinoza's work was to suggest that God and nature are two aspects of a single underlying reality — a form of pantheism that has recently come back into favour. His ideas were therefore a challenge to the dualism of Descartes (the sharp separation of 'mind' and 'matter') although the latter came to dominate thinking for centuries to come.

I've chosen to use the word conatus as a title for this book as it seems to summarise the general course that my writing has taken me over the last three decades. The book is not intended to be an introduction to philosophy or some kind of summary of philosophical thought. Instead, a few strands of ideas are followed and a few critical ideas are picked up via a selection of philosophers.

I regard this book as a 'commons' and am happy for it to be shared, in any format, on any platform, provided that an acknowledgement is given to the author and links provided back to where I have posted the manuscript.

Introduction — Truth, Goodness, Beauty

[Philosophy was once divided into three broad categories — truth, goodness and beauty. It was the ancient Greek philosopher Plotinus who

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seems to have been the first to see these things as ends in themselves. Once we have found any one of them — in other words — we have no need to search further. But finding them! That is the issue! A more modern philosopher, Immanuel Kant, said that his philosophy boiled down to three questions: What do I know? What should I do? And: What can I hope? So we can see the three categories repeated again, truth, goodness and, in our hoping, what would make for a 'good life'? Where would we hope to find beauty? The most basic of the three, concerning matters of truth — metaphysics and epistemology — was once referred to as 'first philosophy'. For Aristotle, first philosophy meant the study of being, or being in itself. (We now use the term ontology for this.) For Descartes, first philosophy included scepticism, the existence of God and the nature of the soul.]

Truth has taken on a special pre-eminence in modern times. Despite the onslaught of post-modernism, somehow, there is an inherent belief in an absolute truth in the form of verifiable correspondence with the observable world as being at least theoretically possible. The notion still holds sway even although looking more closely at such truth claims leads inevitably to an ever-receding horizon of possible knowledge about the world. Look close enough at matter, or energy, or force and it simply evaporates. Is there anything absolutely true? Perhaps just the statement, 'something is going on'! But even that might be up for question! Even the difference between something and nothing might not ultimately be real.

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Goodness — or morality — raises further questions. There are those belief systems that would place goodness — along with all judgements of value and quality — in some separate category of existence. Perhaps there is a moral universe, distinct from our everyday experience — a transcendent morality. But there does not appear to be any way to demonstrate this. Even if the existence of a transcendent world or just a subjective world separate but equally real as the material world could somehow be demonstrated, this would not give any validity to the notion of a separate or an absolute morality.

Similar concerns to those raised for morality above could equally be applied to beauty — or aesthetics. Again there are no grounds for believing standards of beauty to have any absolute validity.

So the hope of finding absolute truth, goodness and beauty is, to say the least, optimistic! And the situation is a bit more subtle than just saying yes or no to whether we can have one, two or all three of these as absolutes. For one thing, it is good that we are uncertain. I think we should welcome our doubt as allowing us scope and imagination in the way we meet the world. I think this can give us a measure of genuine tolerance and compassion in dealing with others. But actually, as many of the essays in this work will explore, the way we deal with these matters is a story we seem almost reluctant to admit to!

The book is a collection of essays that starts with the three big topics that are often taken to

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be the main themes of philosophy — truth, goodness and beauty. Getting to grips with these topics allows for further investigations — into values, life journeys and our search for joy. And finally we get to some thoughts on who we might be within ourselves — as distinct from some external purpose to the universe or to a human life.

I've retained many of the essays more or less in their original form. In order to provide something of a narrative to the book, I've added some comments at the end of each essay. Getting a handle on the big themes is one thing. Deciding what we might do in response to what we discover is quite another. It is important to see this, at least in part, as a separate endeavour. We see things in terms of narratives and we very often look for what is described as essentialism — essential truths, essential ideas of right and wrong and even an essential aesthetic sense of what it means to live well. John Locke was one philosopher (along with many of the ancient Greeks) who held the notion of an essence to things. But it is an idea not credited today, but as we will see, still held by ordinary folk. If we were to accept essence then this is also the place of our individual essence, or soul. By contrast, a school of philosophy known as Existentialism claims 'existence precedes essence' — for them there is no pre-determined way for us to be. So, there is a narrative in the topics that are explored in the book. And there is also a narrative to be discovered in our inner essence — in the soul's adventure in the world.

So, and in line with the structure of this book,

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we will try to explore these big topics of truth, goodness and beauty in some kind of logical order. Perhaps we can discern a pattern to our investigations, starting with observation, moving on to establish explanations and from there making the leap from 'how questions' to 'why questions'. A meaning is a step beyond an explanation. A purpose is a step beyond a meaning. And as I've suggested in the preceding paragraph, this is still only half the story! There is something about the way we humans deal with the questions of truth, goodness, beauty, meaning and purpose that will lead us to further conclusions. Are we perhaps obliged to think the way we do? Perhaps our brains are hard-wired to process the world in particular ways. Or perhaps something about the way the world is in itself leads us inevitably to see it in the way that we do.

Truth

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1. Is there an external world?

Beliefs regarding the existence or otherwise of an external world can be summarised as follows:

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1. There is an external world which we experience very much as it is and in a similar manner to other people. This might be described as the common-sense view of reality. ('Realism')
2. An external reality may exist, but it can never be known or experienced as it really is. ('Scepticism', 'nihilism'.)
3. Reality is just an illusion. Only mind exists and the mind imagines the external world. ('Idealism'.) It may be that my own mind is the only mind that exists. Other minds are themselves figments of my imagination. (This later view is known as 'solipsism'.)
4. Reality is an idea in God's mind.

It can never be proved that anything really exists. Descartes started with the belief in his own mind (I think, therefore I am) and from there argued that, reality was not an illusion because of the existence of a benevolent God who would not deliberately deceive his creation. But this argument relies on the existence of God for the existence of objective reality. Also the process of thinking does not necessarily prove the existence of mind. It could just as easily be said, 'thought is going on'.

The experience of reality is for us always mediated through the senses. Objective things were once described as having qualities. Some of the qualities were understood to be inherent, such as size or extension in space, shape, number and duration in time. Other qualities were described as emergent, that is not

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qualities belonging to objects themselves but rather qualities that resulted from our experience of those objects. Amongst these would be colour, taste and smell. (This leads to the problem of subjectivity in experience. I may see something as red — someone else may see the same object and also describe it as red, but how do we really know that we are both seeing the same thing?)

The division of qualities into intrinsic and emergent has largely been abandoned as the nature of the physical world has been explored by science. Even in the atomic theory, the idea of saying an object is solid and extended in space is rather misleading. We understand objects now to be mostly empty space. A quality of solidity and extension is therefore more of an emergent quality. As the nature of physical matter has been further examined it is very difficult to perceive it as in any way solid or 'real' in the way in which the common-sense view of reality understands and perceives it. We have a picture of matter as forms of energy and existing in fields, whilst time itself is relative to an observer. The scientific view of matter therefore leads us to the second option described above — namely that there is an objective reality but it can never be experienced as it really is.

The third option — the view that reality is just an illusion — has several problems. Chief among these is that reality has a way of impinging itself upon us, and does not respond to our wishes. If there is no objective reality then where do all these illusions spring from? If we are just imagining reality then why can't

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we — by force of will — make it change in dramatic ways? A similar problem is the existence of other people who seem to be having the same or similar illusion to myself. They too must be figments of my imagination, but how is it that I am able to conceive of people cleverer than ourselves? If we can imagine them then why can we not control them, or at least understand them?

A partial solution to this is to accept that other minds exist as well as our own. They also are having an illusion of reality. They can communicate with our mind (via our illusory voices) and hence the problem of cleverer people and people beyond our control and understanding is solved. The problem however arises of how we come to share the same illusion that makes communication possible. One solution to this is to say that God arranges things so that the illusions of all individual minds correlate exactly. Again this presents difficulties. If God puts an illusion of reality into everyone's minds then in a sense God forces reality upon us. In what way are we free to determine our own actions? Anything that I choose to do in terms of changing things in the world must simply be an illusion from God.

This leads to the fourth view, which is that all of reality — including our own minds — is just an idea in the mind of God. In this sense we do not own ourselves at all. Once again we have no free will — everything we do is just God's thought.

The current scientific view of nature has lead some to speculate that thought and 'matter'

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