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## Neuroexistentialism

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### Abstract

Existentialism is a concern about the foundation of meaning, morals, and purpose. Existentialisms arise when some foundation for these elements of being is under assault. In the past, first-wave existentialism concerned the increasingly apparent inability of religion, and religious tradition, to provide such a foundation, as typified in the writings of Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky, and Nietzsche. Second-wave existentialism, personified philosophically by Sartre, Camus and de Beauvoir, and in literature by Mann and Hesse, developed in response to the inability of the polity to serve as such a foundation. There is a third-wave existentialism, a new existentialism, developing in response to advances in the neurosciences that threaten the last vestiges of an immaterial soul or self. With the increasing explanatory and therapeutic power of neuroscience, the mind no longer stands apart from the world to serve as a

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foundation of meaning. This produces foundational anxiety. We suggest how the project of eudaimonics, finding meaning in the material world, might proceed to quell this anxiety. We conclude with this concern for naturalistic eudaimonics: there is some evidence that humans prefer positive, consoling illusions to truth.

**Key Words:** Neuroexistentialism, Eudaimonics,  
Positive illusions

The aim of philosophy, abstractly formulated, is to understand how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term. (Sellars, 1963: 2)

## I. Introduction

Existentialism, Jean Paul Sartre said, is a humanism. And it is. Existentialisms are responses to recognizable diminishment in the self-image of persons caused by social or political rearrangements or ruptures, and they typically involve two steps: admission of the anxiety and an analysis of its causes, and some sort of attempt to regain a positive, less anguished, more hopeful image of persons. What we call neuroexistentialism, is a recent expression of existential anxiety over the nature of persons. Unlike previous existentialisms, neuroexistentialism is not caused by a problem with ecclesiastical authority as was the existentialism represented by Dostoevsky, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche, nor by the shock of coming face to face with the moral horror of nation state actors and their citizens, in the mid century existentialism of Sartre and Camus. Rather, neuroexistentialism is caused by the rise of the scientific authority of the human sciences, and a resultant clash between the scientific and the humanistic image of persons. Specifically, neuroexistentialism is 21st century anxiety over the way contemporary neuroscience helps secure in a particularly vivid way the message of Darwin from 150 years ago, that humans are animals; not half animal, not some percentage animal, not just above the animals, but one hundred percent animal, one kind of primate among the two-hundred or so species of primates. A person is one kind of fully material being living in a material world. Neuroexistentialism is what you get when *Geisteswissenschaften* reaches the stage where it finally and self-consciously exorcizes the *geist*, when at least among the cognoscendi, save some literature and divinity professors, no one takes seriously the Cartesian myth

of the ghost in the machine.

In this paper, we first explain what neuroexistentialism is and how it is related to two earlier existentialisms; second, we explain how neuroexistentialism makes particularly vivid the clash between the humanistic and the scientific image of persons; third, we sketch out the case for eudaimonics, the empirical-normative inquiry into the causes and conditions of flourishing for material beings living in a material world, whose self-understanding includes the idea that such a world is the only kind of world that there is and thus that the meaning and significance of their lives, if there is any, must be found in such a world.

## II. Third Wave Existentialism

Neuroexistentialism is the third wave of existentialism, defined here as a zeitgeist that involves a central pre-occupation with human purpose and meaning accompanied by the anxiety that there is none. Aristotle's biological teleology is all about purpose—humankind, like all kinds, has a proper function, Reason and Virtue, which can be seen, articulated, and secured. And when you achieve it or have it you are eudaimon, a person who flourishes. Existentialists in the West are all post-Aristotelians who respond to the idea that eudaimonia is not enough, there should be something more, something deeper and transcendental, but who are honest about the difficulty of finding where or what this deeper, transcendental thing that would make sense of life and provide meaning is or even what it could possibly be.

Traditionally, religion, specifically monotheism in the West, played the role of supplying the something more, that which would make human life more significant than say Aristotle thought was significance enough. In some respects, now is a time when we are “Back to Aristotle,” back to a time when secularists raise the question of what life means or could mean if there is nothing more than this world, this life. Is a picture of persons as gregarious,

rational, embodied, social animals who seek to flourish enough to supply content and significance to what such flourishing could come to? Can the rational, embodied image of man give man meaning?

### A. The First Two Waves: Foundational Anxiety and Human Nature Angst

Several centuries after the Protestant Reformation began in 1517, after much blood was spilled for religious reasons, Europe entered a secular age. Charles Taylor characterizes what it means to live in a secular age in a useful way: it is to live in an age when atheism is a real and not simply a notional possibility, which it is even Biblically, for example, in the *Psalms*, where we meet “the fool.” The religious wars were all between true believers. Infidels, heretics, and atheists were just monikers applied to theists who held different—but often nearby—views of God and his nature. By the Enlightenment, there were not just some people who were atheists, but some of them were very smart, thoughtful, and morally decent. Hume, Voltaire, Diderot, were such people.

Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard, both religious, and Nietzsche not, lived in this secular age and each explored in his own gripping way the anxiety wrought by entertaining the possibility that there is no God who shores up and makes sense of the human predicament. Either God as traditionally conceived is insufficient to provide grounding for the human project or he is too far away for us to comprehend his being. Nietzsche’s view is of the first sort, and of course he famously predicts that people are too milquetoast to accept this reality and to find meaning on their own, and so as the message gets out, an age of nihilism will commence. Similarly, when Dostoevsky allows Ivan, one of the *Brothers Karamozov* to speak of the possibility of atheism, to speak out loud about his foundational doubts, this causes his brother Dmitri to express the horrifying thought that “if there is no God then everything is permitted.” Meanwhile, Kierkegaard entertains the twin thoughts

that the bureaucratic Church is corrupt, and that in any case the divine is beyond human understanding, and may at its most compelling spiritual moments, as in God's demands on Abraham, ask for actions that are inexplicable in normal ethical terms, and that even require the suspension of both reason and ethics. These twin assaults on religiosity, on the existence or intelligibility of the divine, together constitute the impetus behind the first wave of existentialism.

If first wave existentialism can be characterized as the displacement of ecclesiastical authority and a consequent anxiety over how to justify moral and personal norms, second wave existentialism, occurring in the aftermath of the Second World War, explored the possibility that humans might simply not be up to living morally or purposefully even if the foundations for such a life seemed to be in place. If these foundations are the sole source of morals and meaning, how is it possible that the citizens of a Christian nation led by a democratically elected Nazi demagogue could produce a Holocaust? What reason could there be for any confidence that persons, with or without deep metaphysical foundations, are capable of finding their way to eudaimonia, to personal, moral, and political decency? And why think that there could be a transcendental force of good that cared for persons and their projects? This crisis of being and faith brought on by the inhuman mid-century realities of war and annihilation constitutes the second wave of existentialism.

## B. Third Wave Existentialism

Both first wave and second wave existentialism continue to wash over modern consciousness, even as the precise nature and degree of skepticism over ecclesiastical and political authority fluctuates. The main point is that there is a lot of both kinds of skepticism. The third wave comes from a different source than the first two waves; it comes from science, rather than from questioning that undermines judgments about the honesty,

goodness and authority of religious and political leaders and institutions.

Conflicts between science and religion are familiar in the West; witness Galileo Galilei and Darwin, each undermining the authority of the Churches, but also even among non-believers, undermining a certain humanistic picture of persons. When one combines the neo-Darwinian picture of persons with advances in neuroscience, what one increasingly sees is the recognition in public consciousness that the mind is the brain—or more likely that some people accept that this is true—and that either way the situation is disquieting. For certain intellectual elites, most philosophers and many scientists, neo-Darwinism—genetics, population genetics—combined with neuroscience—cognitive and affective neuroscience, neurobiology, neurology, etc.—brings the needlepoint of detail to the picture of persons anticipated by and accepted in the physicalist or naturalist view of things, which, as such, has been avowed as the right metaphysical view ever since Darwin. But for most ordinary folk and many members of the non-scientific academy the ideas that humans are animal and thus that the mind is the brain, and in addition, being revealed as such, is destabilizing and disenchanting, quite possibly nauseating, a source of dread, fear and trembling, sickness unto to death even. Darwin's theory, on its own, has caused much dis-ease: witness the continuing debate in the United States about teaching Darwin's theory in schools without at least also teaching the alleged equi-plausible alternative(s), creationism or intelligent design. But neuroscience edges out the little space for the mind, conceived as soul. The official position of the Roman Catholic Church since the 1950's has been to accept Darwin with this caveat: When the speciation event(s) occurred that created *Homo Sapiens*, then God, who had planned the whole thing, started inserting souls. This is considered a mature religious response to Darwin, but it is not. It is preposterous and contemporary neuroscience shows why and how, everyday in everyday, as it removes all serious work that a soul might do, except, that is, the purported afterlife part. This

scientific view results in the same feeling of drift and anchorless search for meaning that is a hallmark of all existentialisms, thereby constituting the third wave of existentialism.

### III. The Scientific and Manifest Images

This paper opened with Wilfrid Sellars's quote on the philosopher's vocation, the picture of the philosopher as a kind of synthesizer, or if not that, one who keeps his eye on the whole so that the *Weltanschauung* of an age is not inconsistent, not fraught with incoherences. There is another image of the philosopher's vocation familiar from Socrates: the philosopher as gadfly. The two vocations can be linked up, especially since Plato's Socrates is all about the role of rational coherence and attention to destabilizing lacunae in the assumptions we make in living a good life overall.

Neuroexistentialism, like earlier existentialisms, is characterized by an anxiety arising from a clash between two or more sets of practices that contain internal to themselves certain commitments about the way things are, about metaphysics and ontology, and which are or at least seem inconsistent. The quickest way to understand the problem that is at the root of the cultural anxiety is to think once again about the conflict between the scientific image of persons and the humanistic image of persons.

The conflict between science and religion is well-known in the West. Galileo was imprisoned twice for his claim to have empirical evidence for Copernicus's heliocentric theory and died under house arrest. Descartes suppressed *Le Monde*, his physics and astronomy, because of the treatment Galileo received. And Descartes own work was put on the *Index* of the Roman Catholic Church thirteen years after his death, despite that fact that his *Meditations* contain two (still) famous proofs for the existence of God and three proofs for mind-body dualism, which he advertises as proofs for the immortality of the soul.

The case of Darwin is the most familiar contemporary zone of this conflict, especially in America, where creationists and intelligent design advocates continue to argue about which theory is scientific and what should be funded by tax dollars and taught in schools. What the advocates of Darwin's theory of descent and modification by natural selection sometimes fail to see is that the opponents of the Darwinian view are right that there is a conflict between their antecedently held picture of persons and the one they ought epistemically to believe if Darwinians are right, if Darwin's theory is true. The stakes are extraordinarily high and pertain to how one understands oneself. The problem becomes understanding, facing directly, the question of whether and how one is to find a conception of meaning and purpose for finite beings, literally animals, smart mammals, living in a material world.

Consider this list of commitments, which are typical of those—most of us—who accept the humanistic picture of persons.

*The humanistic image* involves commitment to these beliefs:

- Free Will
- Not Animals
- Soul
- Afterlife
- Made in God's Image
- Morality is Transcendental
- Meaning is Transcendental

*The scientific image* is a substantive one, not simply the negation of the humanistic image—one could read Darwin, Freud, contemporary naturalistic social science, philosophy and neuroscience to get a feel for the positive picture—and as such it is an alternative to the humanistic image. But for present contrastive purposes, it can be understood as denying the tenets that are constitutive of the humanistic image, and thus *the scientific image* asserts:

- No Metaphysical Free Will
- Animal = Smart Mammal

- No Soul
- No Afterlife
- Not God's Image
- Morality is Not Transcendental
- Meaning is Not Transcendental

The scientific image is disenchanting and destabilizing for a number of familiar reasons. It denies that the mind is *res cogitans*, thinking stuff, and it denies that the mind conceived as brain could have any other fate than other smart mammals have, namely death and decomposition. It rejects familiar conceptions of free will, such as these, the first from René Descartes in the 17th century, the second from an important 20th century philosopher, both expressing the libertarian view of free will:

But the will is so free, that it can never be constrained . . . And the whole action of the soul consists in this, that solely because it desires something, it causes a little gland to which it is closely united to move in a way requisite to produce the effect which relates to this desire. (Descartes)

If we are responsible . . . then we have a prerogative which some would attribute only to God: each of us when we act, is a prime mover unmoved. In doing what we do, we cause certain things to happen, and nothing—or no one—causes us to cause those events to happen. (Chisholm, 2002, p. 55-56)

If, given that, the mind is the brain, that humans are animals, that how things seem is not how they are, that introspection is a poor instrument for revealing how the mind works, that the physical universe is the only universe that there is, which is causally closed, then it is the end of the world as we know it, or knew it under the humanistic regime or image. Neuroexistentialism is one way of expressing whatever anxiety comes from accepting the picture of myself as an animal (the Darwin part) and that my mind is my brain, my mental states are brain states (the neuro- part). Taken

together the message is that humans are 100% animal. One might think that that message was already available in Darwin. What does neuroscience add? It adds evidence, we might say, that Darwin's idea is true, and that it is, as Daniel Dennett says "a dangerous idea." Most people in the West still hold on to the idea that they have a non-physical soul or mind. But as neuroscience advances it becomes increasingly clear that there is no place in the brain for res cogitans to be nor any work for it to do. The universe is causally closed and the mind is the brain.

The next step, a consequence of the general undermining of the idea there is any non-physical, non-natural, furniture in the universe, is the vertigo caused by the denial that morality, well-being, and life's meaning have anything outside the natural world to shore them up. Relinquishing the last reserve of an extra-bodily foundation for meaning and morality is the culmination of a process which started in the 19th century with the recognition of the inability of ecclesiastical authority to provide such a foundation, and continued in the middle of the 20th century with the rejection of the polity as such a source. If the soul does not exist, and it does not, then where do we derive our morals, our meaning, and our well-being? This problem is the "really hard problem," the special problem for those of us living in the age of brain science, of making sense of the nature, meaning, and purpose of our lives given that we are material beings living in a material world.

#### IV. The Hard Problem and the Really Hard Problem

The hard problem is ancient and turns on intuitions that for centuries, and across many different traditions, support dualism. Mind seems non-physical, so it is. It is simply too hard to explain how agency, as it seems 1st personally, could be analyzed as, or reduced to, physical processes. Here the idea is that it is too hard to imagine how we could reduce mind to brain, so we can't. Thus

we need metaphysical dualism.

In recent decades as the physicalist view of the universe extends its reach to persons, and, despite dualist intuitions, mind-science advances under the guidance of the regulative idea that the mind is the brain, the intuition returns in two guises. First, there is the old intuition that mental events don't seem like brain events, followed by disbelief at the idea that some think they might be or in fact are brain events. So we are asked to wonder: How is consciousness possible in a material world? How could subjective experience arise/emerge from brain tissue? How could subjectivity arise from objective physical states of affairs? The questions are supposed to strike the audience as eternally bewildering and thus as questions that show that physicalism is not a view that we can really comprehend. Second, there is the intuition that even if mental events are brain events, our concepts of the mental cannot be mapped onto or reduced to physical concepts, and this perhaps because mental concepts carry connotations of non-physicality. Fair enough, but this conceptual problem is not a metaphysical problem. The Morning star is the Evening star and it is not a star but, in fact, is Venus. All three concepts refer to the same heavenly body, but they mean different things. If my poem says that your eyes are like the morning star, I cannot replace those words with "evening star" and get the same meaning. So what? This explanatory or conceptual gap problem is commonplace when we are learning a new way of speaking. The various difficulties associated with treating the hard problem are to be expected when major conceptual change is called for, as it is by the scientific image of persons. Our view is that the question of how subjectivity is realized in persons with brains is a problem for the human sciences, most especially neuroscience.

Assuming that the details of the answer to the question of how consciousness is realized is to be given, and is already being given, by neuroscience, a second problem remains, the really hard problem. It can be stated in these more or less equivalent forms: How—given that we are natural beings living in a material world

and given that consciousness is a natural phenomenon—does human life mean anything? What significance, if any, does living our kind of conscious life have?

The really hard problem can be put more forcefully, in a way that enhances the already felt anxiety: is there anything upbeat and truthful we can say in this post Darwinian age about the meaning of life or about the meaning(s) of lives given that

- We are short-lived animals.
- When we are gone we are gone for good, i.e., forever.
- Even our species is likely to be short-lived, certainly not eternal.

One difference between the hard problem of consciousness and the really hard problem of meaning in a material world is that the first is a problem in science, whereas the second is a problem about how we humans can best understand our situation. Given that we are material beings living in material world and given that we have every reason to believe that there is only this one life and then we are gone, gone for good, gone for all eternity, why and how does anything matter? This is a question that we are asked to answer with only the resources available given a materialistic picture of things, but it is not itself a purely scientific question. It asks us what attitude, what philosophical attitude, we ought to adopt given what we think to be the true facts about our situation, our predicament.

## V. The Naturalists' Response to the Neuroexistentialist Predicament

Historically, answers to questions of value and meaning were answered metaphysically and/or theologically. The humanistic image insists that humans are not animals, the mind is not the brain and that meaning and morals need to be grounded—propped up—transcendentally. The scientific image says that humans are animals, the mind is the brain, and that there are no transcendental sources

for meaning and morals. What there is and all there is, is the natural world.

One begins to see in the enlightenment the beginning of a movement towards naturalism, according to which morals and meaning are to be analyzed and understood psychologically—really in terms of history and the other human sciences more broadly, not metaphysically or theologically. Famously, utilitarian philosophers offer analyzes of moral value in terms of pleasure, an idea that many wise Hellenistic philosophers had tried to work out before the rise of Christianity.

If mind, morals, and the meaning of life are to be understood as problems inside the naturalistic view of things, not problems that require transcendental sources, then this three-part question arises: 1. How do we combine and harness the growing knowledge and insights of the human sciences with 2. the universal existential concern with meaning and flourishing in order to yield 3. a truthful, liberating, enlightened picture of our problems and our prospects as meaning-finders and meaning-makers.

## VI. Eudaimonics

One promising idea is to pursue a kind of descriptive-normative inquiry we call eudaimonics (Flanagan, 2007). Aristotle famously said that when he asked his fellow Greeks what they want (if anything) for its own sake, not for the sake of anything else, they all answered eudaimonia. Eudaimonia is best translated as flourishing or fulfillment, not as happiness, although it is probably true that most everyone wants to flourish and live a fulfilling life and be happy. So it would be good if living as eudaimon brought as a normal and reliable outcome subjective happiness. Most every theory of eudaimonia has this structure: either happiness of the sort that is partly constituted by a sense of meaning and purpose is the main non-transcendental aim of humans, or flourishing which typically produces happiness is the main

non-transcendental aim of humans.

There are many kinds of resources for eudaimonics in the human sciences that might be useful to the philosopher who is trying to quell the neuroexistentialist anxiety, while utilizing only naturalistic resources. We mention three:

First, one strategy is to read great wisdom literature, looking away from supernatural and transcendental, to see what if any human traits are mentioned across this literature as necessary for flourishing. These four virtues are widely mentioned as such universals, either partly constitutive of a meaningful, possibly a happy, human life or necessary conditions of one.

- Humaneness
- Temperance
- Wisdom
- Courage

Second, there is work that directly focuses on something in the vicinity of the causes and constituents of eudaimonia. Subjective Well-Being (SWB) research asks people how they assess their own “happiness” and analyzes what features of life—family, work, money, recreation, and so on—in fact enhance or detract from assessments that one is happy. A consistent finding is that money has diminishing marginal utility above a certain threshold. Third, there are measures of Objective Well-Being: draw up a objective list of goods any rational person should want, e.g., good drinking water, medical care, education and assess how well people are doing against these standards.<sup>1</sup> The present point is just to sketch the possibility proof for a naturalistic view of flourishing that does not invoke metaphysical or supernaturalistic stories.

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<sup>1</sup> For discussion of whether and how such work really does answer questions about mind, morals, meaning and purpose naturalistically see Flanagan (2007).

## VII. Positive Illusions

We posed the problem as this: Are there naturalistic resources that can quell the anxiety produced by the ascendancy of the scientific image generally, and specifically, the picture that comes from combining neo-Darwinism with neuroscience, which produces the new and nerve-wracking anxiety associated with neuroexistentialism?

There is a literature in psychology that says that most people, pretty much everyone except moderately depressed people, stably believe falsehoods that are self-serving, for example, about what percentile they rank in terms of intelligence, looks, admiration of others, chances of various illnesses befalling them and so on. These are known as positive illusions (Flanagan, 1991, 2007).

The worry, the rub, for the naturalist is this: We philosophers, beginning in Epistemology 101, teach that “One ought not have false beliefs.” But in Psychology 101 the students learn: “If you want to be happy for the rest of your life—have false beliefs!”

This research creates a problem for the naturalist in the following straightforward way: we reject theological and metaphysical solutions to matters that pertain to mind, morals, and the meaning of life out of respect for the truth. But if the positive illusion literature is right, happiness, a credible component of most conceptions of eudaimonia, is partly secured by false positive beliefs. This raises the possibility that nonnaturalists might have been right about one thing all along: humans may need theories that reduce existential anxiety by telling enchanting far-fetched stories about the grounding of human life, or consoling stories about our fates, noble lies of a sort to keep the dread at the truth, the fear and trembling that comes from seeing our situation honestly, at bay. We hope this is a historical phenomenon, not intrinsic to human nature. It is a delicious question, one we leave the reader with.

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## 神經存在主義

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### 摘要

存在主義興起於意義、道德和目的這些固有價值的基礎遭受詰難之際。過去，第一波存在主義關注的是宗教力量及其傳統日漸無力保存這些基礎，指標性作家有祈克果、杜斯妥也夫斯基和尼采。第二波存在主義，哲學上有沙特、卡繆、西蒙波娃，文學有托馬斯·曼和赫曼·赫塞的著作，則針對政治體系之無力保障價值之基礎。新的存在主義，也就是第三波存在主義的崛起，是為了回應新進神經科學對一絲僅存的靈魂或自我不朽的概念所造成的威脅。隨著神經科學日益精進的闡釋與治癒效用，心靈已無法脫離物質世界而僅為意義的基礎存在，此一趨勢不免令人焦慮。然而，我們認為透過「幸福論」的模式，在物質世界中尋找意義，可有助於平息這股焦慮。藉此自然主義式幸福論，我們可以發現人類偏好正向舒緩的幻覺更勝於真理。

**關鍵詞：**神經存在主義、幸福論、正向幻覺