

You Ought to Flourish

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ABSTRACT: You ought to flourish. Since you ought to flourish, it will be argued here that your life is the root of an infinitely ramified tree of ever better lives. Your life will be surpassed by successor lives in successor universes. And those lives and universes will in turn be surpassed by their successors. After you die, you will live again. You will be reborn in all your future lives. But lives and universes and laws are natural. Hence naturalists can believe in life after death. On this optimistic naturalism, nature is as it ought to be. Nature is the self-surpassing surpasser of all.

1. Introduction

Many naturalists paint a bleak picture of nature. Nature is a meaningless chaos of atoms swirling in the void. But this pessimistic picture is hard to justify. It certainly does not follow from the natural sciences. An alternative and highly optimistic picture of nature will be painted here. It is consistent with our best science. It is also a deeply religious picture of nature. It is a type of religious or spiritual naturalism. However, it is radically atheistic. The salvific work which theists attribute to God is done instead by deontic and modal logic. But the *logos* which defines nature is not mental.

The picture of nature painted here is *axiarchic*; it asserts that nature is generated by goodness.¹ It will be argued here that nature *ought* to be perfect; it *ought* to be that than which no greater is possible; it *ought* to be the self-surpassing surpasser of all. And it will be argued further that nature *is* as it ought to be. Since nature is the self-surpassing surpasser of all, everything in nature surpasses itself in every way. Since you are a thing in nature, you will surpass yourself in every way. Thus your current earthly life is not your only life. After you die, you will be born again.

2. Persons and Bodies

According to naturalism, which rejects mind-body dualism, every human person is strictly identical with its body. You are identical with your body. As your body changes, you persist. But this persistence is not identity; just as your body changes from moment to moment, so you change too. Your body is a three-dimensional stage of a four-dimensional life. Your life is composed of bodies like a book is composed of pages or a movie is composed of still photos. None of the pages in a book are identical with each other; none of the photos in a movie are identical with each other. Although there is no personal identity through time, there is continuity and dependence. Later stages of your

life depend on earlier stages; earlier stages continue into later stages. More precisely, your life is a stream of information.

All the stages of your body are performing a complex biological computation. They are all running the same biological program. This program is invariant across all the stages of your life. It is your essence. Your essence is an *individual form*. It is the *form of your body*. Following Aristotle, it is your *soul*.² The soul is not an immaterial thinking substance. On the contrary, the soul is a biological pattern. It is an abstract object. But it is a natural object studied by the biological sciences. It is closely tied to (but not identical with) your genotype. It can be defined computationally. It is a biological program which is being run by your body. Since human bodies are only finite complex, our souls are finite state machines.³ Any finite state machine takes a series of inputs.

Depending on its series of inputs, your soul can generate many different lives. Your soul has an *extension* which is its class of possible lives. Every life and your extension shares your essence. It is an alternative possible version of your life. The lives in your extension, in your library of possible lives, can be ranked by their intrinsic values. They can be ranked from dysfunctional to eufunctional. Some are sickly while others are healthy; some are miserable while others are happy. But any life in any extension can be improved in many ways. Any life has many better versions. A life is *surpassed* by its better versions. But better lives can be surpassed by even better lives. So surpassing relation is transitive; it is an order relation on all your possible lives. Every soul defines the surpassing relation on its extension. The lives defined by any soul are ordered by surpassing. This is an ordering by intrinsic value.

3. Self-Surpassing and Counterparts

There are many things you ought to do because you are a person. For example, you ought to keep promises, you ought to be honest, you should not torture innocent people. These are your obligations or duties to other people. They are grounded in the fact that you are a rational social animal. They are grounded in the fact that your nature includes the nature of being a rational social animal. They are grounded in the fact that you instantiate a universal; you participate in rational-social-animality.

There are many things you ought to do because you are a living thing. For example, you should eat right and exercise. And there are many things you ought to have because you are a living thing. You ought to have all the necessities of life, you ought to have good genes, you ought to have loving parents, you ought to have a long life. Likewise, there are many things you ought to be because you are living thing. You ought to be free from parasites, you ought to be healthy. And there are many things you ought to be just because you exist. For example, you ought to be successful and prosperous, you ought to be happy and to flourish, you ought to realize all your positive potentials.

Let Q be any description which can take you as a subject. Thus Q might be “have good genes”. If you ought to Q, then Q is a *de re* obligation. It is a *de re* axiological necessity. The source of these *de re* obligations is your nature. Your nature demands that you Q. Thus your nature as a person demands some things; your nature as an animal demands other things; your nature as a being demands the deepest things. There are many things you ought to do but fail to do; many things you ought to have but fail to

have; many things you ought to be but fail to be. All those failures to satisfy your obligations provide you with opportunities to surpass yourself. And, if you have some opportunity to surpass yourself in some way, then you ought to surpass yourself in that way. More precisely, to say that you ought to surpass yourself in some way means that there is some Q such that you ought to Q but you do not Q. So, if you ought to Q but you do not Q, then one of the ways you surpass yourself is by Q-ing. For example, if you ought to have loving parents, but you do not have loving parents, then one of the ways you surpass yourself is by having loving parents. Your nature as an existing thing, the very fact that you exist, demands that you surpass yourself in every way.

4. The Salvific Argument

You ought to surpass yourself. And this fact inspires a *Salvific Argument*, which combines ideas from deontic and modal logics. It goes like this: (1) You ought to surpass yourself in some way. This means that there is some Q such that you ought to Q but you do not Q. (2) It is widely thought that ought implies can. To say that you ought to surpass yourself in some way implies that you can surpass yourself in that way. (3) The statement “I can flourish” involves *de re* possibility. (4) The correct way to interpret *de re* possibilities comes from Lewisian counterpart theory.⁴ Thus to say that you *can* surpass yourself in some way implies that you have a counterpart who *does* surpass you in that way. Your counterpart surpasses you by Q-ing. By Q-ing, your counterpart is an improved version of you. (5) Since you do not Q, but your counterpart does Q, you are not this counterpart. (6) But those counterparts who are not identical to you inhabit other universes. (7) Therefore, your improved counterparts inhabit some other universe. They are physical things. And the universes which they inhabit are also physical things. Other universes are just as natural as ours. These universes and counterparts are all natural.

The Salvific Argument implies that you have many improved counterparts. For every way in which you ought to surpass yourself, you have some counterpart who does surpass you in that way.⁵ Since you are your body, you are surpassed by improved versions of your body. But since your body is a three-dimensional stage in a four-dimensional life, all improved versions of your body exist in improved versions of your life. Your life is surpassed by better versions of itself. But every better version of your life depends on your life; it is defined in terms of your life, and it carries information about your life. This dependency entails an order relation on your improvements. The improved versions of your life come after your life; they are *later than* your life. This means that the universes they inhabit are later than our universe. Hence the fact that you ought to surpass yourself in every way entails the existence of an infinitely branching tree of universes. Every path in this tree is ordered in a time-like way.

To say that you ought to surpass yourself in every way means that for every way in which your life ought to be surpassed, you have some counterpart life which surpasses it in that way. This means that your life is surpassed by every possible better version of itself. It entails that your life is the root of an endlessly ramified tree of better lives. This is your *salvific tree*. By the very fact of your existence as a natural thing, you axiologically demand the existence of your tree. You axiologically demand that *nature* contain this tree. This demand is intrinsic or natural. This tree satisfies all your

axiological demands; it is your *salvation*; you are *redeemed* in this tree. If nature contains this tree, then nature saves you. If you ought to flourish, then nature saves you, and you are redeemed in nature by nature. If you ought to flourish, then this tree exists. Since these lives inhabit different universes, your tree of lives implies a tree of universes. Thus, if you ought to flourish, then nature contains a plurality of universes.

5. The Universal Self-Surpassing

This conception of demand is not human-centered. It includes all living things.⁶ For every living thing, there are some Qs which it ought to have, ought to do, or ought to be. For example, plants ought to have light, water, and so on. They ought to be healthy; they ought to flourish. Plants demand have what they need, to be healthy, and to flourish. All these demands are grounded in their natures as plants. The plant-nature which is immanent in any plant makes axiological demands of that plant. Plants have botanical *de re* obligations just because they instantiate plantness.

This conception of demand is not even life-centered. It applies to non-living things. An entirely lifeless machine ought to have oil in order to function well.⁷ This deeper conception of demand is based on degrees of functionality. To say that something is *eutelic* means that its functionality can vary in value from *dysfunctional* to *eufunctional*. It varies from functioning poorly to functioning well. Functioning well is more valuable than functioning poorly. The value involved here is *intrinsic*. This conception of obligation applies to all eutelic things. Anything which can function well ought to function well; and it ought to have everything it needs to function well.⁸ Its eufunctionality is its goal, ideal end, or ideal condition. It ought to realize that end or condition, and it ought to have all the means to that end or condition.

Every existing thing has some *ontic ideals*, which follow from its being an instance of a specific kind of thing. Because every thing falls under some kinds, those kinds make *de re* demands on it; they ensure that it has *de re* obligations; they entail that it ought to be this way or that way. But every existing thing also has some *ontological ideals*. Its ontological ideals spring just from its being. Because every thing is, its existence makes demands on it; its very existence provides it with *de re* obligations; its being entails that it ought to be certain ways. Being-itself, the deepest universal, demands that every thing increase its intrinsic value in every way. Being-itself makes these demands because it is identical with self-surpassing; it is identical with self-transcendence. Since the very existence of every thing demands that it increase its intrinsic value in every way, every existing thing is eutelic. Its function is to increase its intrinsic value. The more ways it increases its value, the better it performs its function. Its goal or ideal end is to perform its function well; its goal is to increase its value in every way. Every thing ought to function well. It ought to increase its intrinsic value in every way.

It is indisputable fact that every thing has some *de re* obligations which it fails to satisfy. All those failures provide it with opportunities to surpass itself. And, if it has some opportunity to surpass itself in some way, then it ought to surpass itself in that way. It follows that the Salvific Argument applies to every thing in every universe. Every thing has a *purpose*; its purpose is to surpass itself in every way; its purpose is to transcend itself in every way. It has this purpose because of its very existence; its natural

or *intrinsic purposiveness* does not require any consciousness or mentality or life. It requires only that being-itself makes *de re* demands on the things which exist. Every thing fulfills its purpose if and only if it has all of its improved counterparts. And, since every living thing has these counterparts, it does fulfill its purpose.

6. The Self-Surpassing Surpasser of All

All things are parts of universes. Any way to improve any part of some whole entails some way to improve that whole. Thus any way to improve any thing in our universe is a way to improve our universe. To say that our universe functions poorly means that it is surpassed by only some better versions of itself. To say that our universe functions well means that it is surpassed by every better version of itself. To say that our universe flourishes means that, for every way it can be improved, it has some successor universe which is improved in that way. Our universe thus has a range of functionalities, from dysfunctional to eufunctional; hence our universe is eutelic. Since our universe is eutelic, it ought to surpass itself. It ought to be at the root of an infinitely ramified tree of better versions of itself. It ought to be saved in nature by nature. But these considerations apply to any universe. Every universe ought to surpass itself.

Our universe might have a predecessor. It might be the successor of some less intrinsically valuable universe. Either that predecessor exists or not. If not, then the surpassing relation is incomplete; but that relation should not be incomplete; on the contrary, it ought to be complete. This entails the downwards or inverse closure of surpassing: if any universe can have a predecessor, then it does have one. But predecessors grow less valuable and hence less complex. Any regression of predecessors eventually bottoms out in some initial simple universe. And since there can be only one such universe, there ought to exist a unique initial simple universe.

The initial simple universe ought to surpass itself in every way. It ought to be the root of a tree of improved versions of itself. Since the initial simple universe is minimal, this tree is maximal. This tree is completely closed under the surpassing relation. Every universe in this tree is surpassed by every superior version of itself. Every thing in every universe in this tree is surpassed by every superior version of itself. Since it is completely closed under the surpassing relation, this tree is unsurpassable. This tree is the self-surpassing surpasser of all; it is that than which no greater is possible. This tree ought to exist. It is what nature ought to be. Thus nature ought to be the self-surpassing surpasser of all;⁹ nature ought to be that than which no greater is possible.¹⁰ Nature ought to be perfect. Of course, it remains that nature might not be what it ought to be.

To say that nature is *holy* means that everything in nature is saved in nature. It means that everything in nature surpasses itself in every possible way. Every universe surpasses itself in every possible way. And everything in every universe surpasses itself in every possible way. Everything in nature ought to be saved in nature. Nature ought to be holy. If nature is the self-surpassing surpasser of all, then nature is holy; nature is as it ought to be. But this means that nature is also eutelic: the ideal end or goal of nature is the salvation of all things. Since all other obligations are satisfied by the holiness of nature, the holiness of nature is the ultimate obligation.

7. The Axiarchic Argument

The *Axiarchic Argument* justifies the claim that nature is as it ought to be; it entails that nature is holy; it entails that everything surpasses itself in every possible way. The argument is based on recent versions of the ontological argument.¹¹

The first premise of the Axiarchic Argument states that propositions exist. Propositions are abstract objects. They can be defended by well-known indispensability arguments. Because of their roles in the natural sciences, propositions are natural objects. The second premise of the Axiarchic Argument states that propositions are ranked by value. Some propositions are better than others. Better propositions entail more surpassing. They entail that more axiological demands are satisfied. They entail that more of what ought to be is. This ranking is easy to construct: every proposition entails some class of satisfied demands; but now these classes are ranked by subclass inclusion. The third premise states that there exists a unique best proposition. It is better than every other proposition. Is that proposition that which no better is possible. By definition, this best proposition asserts that nature is as it ought to be. More precisely, it asserts that, for every proposition P, if there is any universe in nature at which P ought to be true, then there is some universe in nature at which P is true.

The fourth premise asserts that propositions are either true or false. The fifth premise asserts that some propositions are true. The sixth premise is the *principle of the superiority of truth*. Truth is a *value* and true propositions are more valuable than false propositions. Any attempt to refute the superiority of truth must rely on valid inference from true premises. Hence any such attempt assumes the very principle which it aims to refute, and thereby contradicts itself. The superiority of truth is analytically true. And a false proposition does not entail that any axiological demands are satisfied. Its class of satisfied demands is empty. Hence any false proposition has no value.

The Axiarchic Argument now proceeds as follows: (1) There are some propositions. (2) These propositions are ordered by value. (3) There exists some unique best proposition. (4) Propositions are either true or false. (5) Some propositions are true. (6) A true proposition is better than any false proposition. (7) Assume for *reductio* that the best proposition is false. If the best proposition is false, then any true proposition is better than it. But then the best proposition is not the best proposition. Since this is a contradiction, the best proposition must be true. (8) Therefore, nature is as it ought to be. But every thing in nature ought to surpass itself in every possible way. Consequently, every thing in nature does surpass itself in every way. This means that nature is the self-surpassing surpasser of all; nature is that than which no better is possible; nature is *holy*.

Since nature is the self-surpassing surpasser of all, nature is not bleak. Since nature models the best proposition, nature is maximally valuable; nature is wholly good. Of course, this does not entail that nature is devoid of evils. The goodness of nature requires a Plotinian theory of evil.¹² Evil emerges from the conflicts among multiple goods. But these conflicts occur only among the parts of nature. And, since conflict drives things to surpass themselves, even this conflict is good. Since every universe is bounded, every universe contains things which are involved in conflicts with each other. But nature surpasses every universe. Evil is in the parts; but the whole is good.

8. Conclusion

If this is correct, then every universe surpasses itself in every way. But this means that every thing in every universe surpasses itself in every way. Every thing in every universe is the root of an absolutely infinite tree of ever better future counterparts. Your life is a thing in our universe; therefore, your life is the root of such a tree. Your life will be improved in every way. You have better future lives in better future universes, and your life will be reborn into those lives. All your positive potentials will be realized. You will flourish. After you die, you will live again. And the same reasoning applies to every eutelic thing. Every eutelic thing will flourish. Every eutelic thing will surpass itself in every way. And nature is the self-surpassing surpasser of all.

Notes

¹Axiarchism asserts that reality is ruled by value. Axiarchism has been developed by Leslie (1979, 2001), Rescher (1984, 2000, 2010), and Steinhart (2014).

²According to Aristotle (*De Anima*, 412a5-414a33), the form of the body is its *soul*. The soul of any organism is a biological program partly encoded in its genome (Barrow & Tipler, 1986: 659; Steinhart, 2014: ch. 3).

³For discussions of persons as implementations of finite state machines or Turing machines, see Putnam (1973), Burks (1973), and Adams (1992).

⁴For counterpart theory, see Lewis (1968, 1986).

⁵Hick (1976:152-61) uses this kind of reasoning to make a moral argument for life after death for people. Since every person ought to flourish, and since we cannot flourish in a single lifetime, we morally require more than one life.

⁶For an account of natural or intrinsic goodness based on the life-forms or species-patterns of living things see Foot (2001: chs. 2 & 3).

⁷Anscombe says that “machinery needs oil, or should or ought to be oiled, in that running without oil is bad for it, or it runs badly without oil” (1958: 5).

⁸This analysis is inspired by Black (1964). To say that some thing ought to be in some condition means either that the condition is an ideal end for that thing, or that the condition is an optimal means to some ideal end for that thing.

⁹Hartshorne said that “God is the self-surpassing surpasser of all” (1948: 20). He means that God consists of a sequence of stages in which each later stage surpasses every earlier stage. But the sequence itself is unsurpassable.

¹⁰The concept of that than which no greater is possible comes from Anselm. To say that nature is that than which no greater is possible means that it is Anselmian. But nature is certainly not the Anselmian God. Nature is not personal.

¹¹The axiarchic argument is inspired by the ontological arguments of Kiteley (1958) and Millican (2004) and the axiological argument of Steinhart (2014: sec. 127).

¹²Plotinus says evil emerges from conflicts among goods (*Enneads*, 4.4.32). And yet, since nature is animated by conflict, even conflict is good (*Enneads*, 2.3.16). Evil is in the parts but the whole of reality is good (*Enneads*, 3.2.3, 3.2.11, 3.2.17, 4.4.32).

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