

Value In Experience, Thoughts on Radical Empiricism; Reflections on Frankenberg and Stone¹

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Modern philosophy, going back to Descartes and Locke, has given preferred status to the kind of judgments that we find within the mathematical sciences and has made it difficult to support judgments of value and meaning. In Chapter Four of his book, *The Minimalist Vision of Transcendence*, Jerome Stone describes what he calls a "Generous Empiricism." He is building on the tradition of radical empiricism, and presents a transactional understanding of experience that allows him to support empirically grounded value judgments. I argue that a critique from the perspective of Heidegger and others of the continental tradition may present problems to Stone's approach. I then propose a modification of Stone's notion that I think would answer such criticisms. This leads me to the notion that our value judgments have an aesthetic component, and that we can find pragmatic support for the belief that there is an aesthetic tendency in the world of which we are a part. There is something divine and possibly transcendent in that thought.

I. The Value Problem:

One of the factors affecting the moral, ethical, and political climate of our present culture is diversity of judgment on matters of value. Some have said that the presence of so much diversity argues against our ability to resolve questions of truth in these areas. Their positions vary among skepticism, denying that we can know moral truth, nihilism, questioning that there is such a thing as moral truth, or relativism, claiming that moral truth is conditional on social and/or cultural circumstances.

A number of factors have contributed to this situation. The cultural diversity of modern society is surely one source, but the inability of western culture and philosophy to find an answer to this problem has roots well within the western tradition. Modern philosophy, going back to Descartes and Locke, has given preferred status to the kind of judgments that we find within the mathematical sciences and has made it difficult to support judgments of value and meaning.

Rene Descartes recognized that most of the judgments that we make in everyday life were open to error. Clearly these judgments did not yield absolute knowledge and certainty and ever since Plato western thought has held that real knowledge must be certain knowledge. The one place where we did seem to find certainty was in the realm of mathematics. On top of this, Galileo had recently showed that significant progress in some scientific questions could be made if the questions were framed so that they could be addressed through experimental procedures. However, Galileo did not merely turn toward an empirical or experimental approach to answer physical questions, he also changed the form of the questions so that answers could be given in mathematical terms. That had to do with an underlying idea, again influenced by Platonic thinking, that nature is essentially mathematical. The classic formulation of that idea in its modern guise comes in the work of Descartes. In discussing our knowledge of physical objects, he writes:

They are not perhaps exactly as we apprehend them by way of the senses; in many instances they are apprehended only obscurely and confusedly. But we must at least admit that whatever I there clearly and distinctly apprehend, i.e.

generally speaking, everything comprised in the objects of pure mathematics, is to be found in them.²

He is saying that in most respects we should **not** trust immediate experience. A curious statement if the new approach was to be empirical. But Descartes was more concerned with the issue of certainty than with the move toward empiricism.

Descartes statement, "whatever I clearly and distinctly apprehend" might be taken at first reading to refer to empirical apprehension through the senses, but the context of this paragraph makes it clear that is not what he meant. What Descartes meant by clear and distinct apprehension was tied to his notion of intellectual intuition, which he specifically distinguished from sense experience. The ideas in which Descartes felt we could have confidence were those which are clear and distinct. These were such as could be known by intellectual intuition, or by a logical combination of such intuitions. The only things generally accepted in Descartes' notion of clear and distinct ideas were the elements of logic and mathematics. All other ideas were beset by too much ambiguity and obscurity and could not be trusted. They fell into the category of opinion, not knowledge.

Given mathematics, as Descartes knew the subject, all of its ideas were either clear or distinct, or further clarification was felt to be the very essence of progress. At the same time, advances were being made in the study of physics through the application of mathematical techniques (as with Galileo). The intention of Descartes was to justify the use of these methods, and in doing so he came to the conclusion that the whole of reality was made up of two parts. One part was the realm of thought, or conscious experience (*res cogitans*). The other was that of physical reality that he took to be exclusively the realm of mathematical extension (*res extensa*). That made physical reality co-extensive with the subject of Euclidean geometry. (In Descartes' time geometry was the dominant form of mathematics, most mathematical relations were expressed in geometric figures rather than with algebraic formulae.)

(Thought experiment: If physical reality consists of nothing but geometric extension, how do you tell the difference between an object and the space around it? — Answer: You don't. There would be no non-extensive quality to mark the difference. Modern physics has had to add a few ideas (mass, electric charge, etc.) to Descartes original plan.)

John Locke said something very similar to Descartes, though in different words. Locke claimed to be an empiricist, and said that we should use the data of experience to substantiate belief. He put some curious limitations on that data, however. He told us that our experience of the world consists of two types of data. These are what he called **primary** and **secondary** qualities. The primary qualities give us information about the real properties of the physical world. The secondary qualities are impressions that exist only in the realm of our conscious experience or thought. Once again we have the distinction between the physically objective and the mentally subjective.

Locke's primary qualities are essentially mathematical. They are not far from what we might expect to be the qualities associated with Descartes' realm of extension.

These I call original or primary qualities of body, which I think we may observe to produce simple ideas in us, viz. solidity, extension, figure, motion or rest, and number.

Secondly, such qualities which in truth are nothing in the objects themselves but powers to produce various sensations in us by their primary qualities, i.e. by the

bulk, figure, texture, and motion of their insensible parts, as colours, sounds, tastes, &c. These I call secondary qualities.³

Locke's primary qualities are those things that one might hope to measure in a physics laboratory. These were the only things that he held to provide clear evidence of the nature of the physical world.

[If I envision a realm of experience devoid of secondary qualities, I cannot imagine how I would detect any of the so called primary qualities. None of them are separately observable.]

This division of the world into a mathematical realm of physical extension, and a separate realm of conscious experience was fine from the point of view of the church. Once they got the hang of what was going on they could claim that science had only to do with the physical realm and that religion dealt with a *spiritual* reality to which people had access through the mental side of things. That made it possible for the church to insulate itself from the threat of the scientific worldview. We still live with the popular idea that religion and science do not need to conflict so long as they restrict themselves to their appropriate realms.

The division was also desirable from the scientific side. One of the basic problems was, and is, that the pure mathematics that they claimed to be the stuff of the world was to be found only in human abstract thought. It is no trivial matter to justify the idea that there is a physical realm, distinct from the character of our everyday experience (full of sound, color, taste, beauty, excitement, and such), which consists entirely of the stuff of abstract mental constructs. One of the easier ways to justify the claim that physical reality was based on pure mathematics was to assert that it was created that way by a pure mentality, a divine creator who was also a mathematician.

The success of mathematical physics has sometimes blinded us to the philosophic and theological assumptions that Galileo, Descartes, Locke, *et.al.* used to justify it. It is certainly true that mathematically based theories have been very effective for developing predictive explanations about a wide range of natural phenomena. It is not clear that all of those other background assumptions have to be accepted as a part of the package. If they are accepted, and to a degree they have been accepted implicitly in modern culture, then we get just those problems with regard to value judgments that I outlined at the start.

If we accept some variant of Cartesian dualism then it seems that there is no way to bring the empirical or pragmatic approach to bear on religious and/or philosophic issues. The experience of everyday living is not data for this new 'empirical' method. The only data that we can safely use with reference to the real world are the measurements that come from scientific laboratories, or something similar. These measurements do not pertain to questions of value, truth, beauty, goodness, meaning, or purpose.

Since those questions do involve the realm of conscious experience we could turn to the newer sciences of psychology and psychiatry. The trouble with this approach is that the Cartesian dualism we have inherited gives these realms a rather limited rein. Descartes' mental realm consisted of only two parts. First we have the study of clear and distinct ideas (logic and mathematics). Anything left over in the purely mental realm that is not a part of mathematics or logic was decreed to be a matter of illusion and/or error. Some of these 'errors' might be useful, such as tastes that attract us to nutritious foods, but they do not provide knowledge of reality. That is the primary reason why the term "subjective" has become pejorative in our culture. Given Cartesian foundations, the explaining to be done by psychology and psychiatry is an "explaining away" (as in "It's all in your head"). Issues found only in that realm are deemed unreal, or at least not objectively real.

One of the curious by-products of the Cartesian approach is that it becomes hard to see how the justification of the approach is not part of the realm of illusion and error. Descartes' own way out of this problem is to lean everything on the veracity of God (God wouldn't give us clear and distinct ideas if they were not true [why he/she/it would give us other ideas that are not true is less clear]). The whole structure then leans on his proof of the existence of God, which reads much like any similar argument from medieval theology.⁴ The same scientific worldview that is founded on Descartes' system finds his foundational arguments of doubtful worth.

The modern scientific worldview is a product of these ideas of Descartes and Locke along with others of that transitional period. The arguments that Descartes and Locke presented to justify their positions have been largely forgotten. The hegemony of the scientific viewpoint is now founded on the history of successful discoveries by science, and by the modifications in basic life style that have been brought about by the technology founded on those scientific discoveries.

In a world dominated by television, cell phones, computers, air travel, frightening modern weapons, and life saving modern medicine, it is hard to question the scientific perspective. Our every day activities are tied into the products of that perspective. But when we try to decide how to use the awesome power that science and technology have given us, this same scientific perspective leaves us stranded. It even insinuates that our questions and concerns are of no importance. If it can't be specified in numbers or other mathematical forms it cannot be real.

Thus we find ourselves with a tendency to resort to economic measures as the only measures of value. At least there we can specify relations mathematically. We can tell if the gross national product has gone up or down. We just aren't sure if it is too gross. We know what the unemployment statistics are, even if we are not sure what they mean. 'The bottom line' becomes the modern measure of value.

We all learned in our introductory philosophy course that you cannot deduce an ought from an is, the idea being that facts and values are distinctly separate. The early formulation of that was to be found in the writings of David Hume where Hume builds on Locke's approach. Its more recent and influential presentation was in G.E. Moore's *Principia Ethica*.⁵ Moore argued that we cannot define the term 'good' using any non-evaluative terms without committing what he called the 'naturalistic fallacy'. The key move in his argument was to say that if we attempt any such definition of good, e.g. if we say good designates pleasure, we are left with the question, 'is that really good?' The fact that this remains an open question shows that the attempted definition fails. Moore argued that 'good' designates a simple and indefinable property. There is no more basic term of valuation, and valuation cannot be reduced to anything else.

The separation between facts and values seems clear. How could anyone doubt it? When we want to know what we should do it doesn't really help to know what someone already did. The problem is we want to know if what they did was right or wrong, good or bad. That is a totally different question. And our vaunted scientific method is of no help in addressing questions of value.

If the only empirical judgments that we can be confident of are those in terms of Locke's 'primary qualities' or Descartes' 'clear and distinct' intuitions, and if we accept Moore's argument that value cannot be reduced to any non-evaluative terms, how are we to settle questions of value?

These elements of our modern philosophic tradition would seem to leave no way out except nihilism, skepticism, or relativism.

II. Radical Empiricism:

In Chapter Four of his book, *The Minimalist Vision of Transcendence*, Jerome Stone describes what he calls a "Generous Empiricism." He is building on the "radical empiricism" of William James as that has been developed more recently in the work of William Dean and Nancy Frankenberry.⁶ Radical empiricism presents a larger view of what we can learn from experience as contrasted with the traditional empiricism of Locke and Hume that supports the scientific worldview of western 'modernism.' Radical empiricism claims that relations and values are a part of our experience and that we can turn to empirical grounds when trying to support value judgments.

Stone and Frankenberry do not explicitly address Moore, but implicitly they accept his position that value is non-reducible. They claim an awareness of value as a direct part of experience.

Bernard Meland's concept of appreciative awareness is a major source for Stone's notion of sensitive discernment. By appreciative awareness Meland had in mind apprehending a fuller dimension of the world than is usually present in our thinking. A key aspect of this was apprehension of value and meaning. Meland also felt that cognitive thought was limited by comparison to the full range of lived experience. There is always a penumbra of complexity and concreteness that eludes the sharp categories of thought. It involves our emotions and bodily felt experience. We may have to use poetry, imagery, and myth to express such things. Meland also felt that this appreciative awareness could be trained and that it put us in touch with objective aspects of reality. Just as we can learn to broaden and sharpen our appreciation of art so can we learn a more appreciative awareness of our world. Meland also felt that this appreciative awareness involved sensitivity to past valuations within one's culture.

Meland argued that there are different levels of emergence within the world for which different levels of inquiry are appropriate. This fits well with some of the recent notions of emergent qualities and characteristics. Where an analytic approach may be best for mechanical structure, appreciative awareness is required for proper study of persons, cultures, and God.

In discussing Meland's notion that "we live more deeply than we can think," Frankenberry raises the issue of a gap between experience and language.⁷ If there are aspects of our experience that we truly cannot express in language how can we ever hope to address these? If, on the other hand, we can talk about the extra qualities that seem to be part of our experience then perhaps they never did go beyond language.

She is led to the conclusion

...I would argue that radical empiricism should recognize a reciprocal and even codeterminate relation between experience and language...⁸

and a bit later in that section she enlarges on that, saying that it seems necessary to consider a hermeneutical relation between experience and language.

If this is so, then the complex relationship between qualitative experience and linguistic expression plunges us into a hermeneutical circle which can neither be evaded by the simple correspondence model favored by most realisms nor vitiated by the coherence theory of most idealisms.⁹

She goes on to note that the felt qualities of experience are influenced by cultural and linguistic elements in the environment. When we learn a more complex vocabulary in relation to any area of concern we not only become able to express more, we become sensitive to a greater range of experience.

For this reason, the correspondence model is inadequate insofar as it views linguistic expression as a simple description of prepredicative feelings, a way of abstracting forms which would be there without the words.¹⁰

At the same time, language and culture are not the sole determinants of our experience. There is an objective quality in our felt experience that stubbornly demands recognition. Not every interpretation can be accepted. Both individual and cultural interpretation must respond to the world that we encounter. And yet, these interpretations become involved in that encounter.

Yet there seems no way of getting at the structure of felt qualities, in religious or theological inquiry, independently of one's interpretation of them; for one is woven into the other, and language is in human life the primary agency of the very interweaving.¹¹

This issue leads Stone to argue for a transactional understanding of experience. Our experience involves an interaction between our human existence and the environment within which we live. And our individual human existence is always influenced, and in part formed, by the cultural background within which we develop. Stone says that we are clearly in touch with a world beyond cultural interpretations even if we cannot describe that encounter except in a language that is culturally based.

The fact that some interpretation is involved in any attempt to get at an understanding of religious and theological issues forms the basis for an attack on some of the claims of religious empiricism presented by Wayne Proudfoot.¹² He argues that there is no uniquely identifiable religious experience apart from culture. He says that the culturally based language and concepts not only serve to describe our experience but have a formative influence as well. His argument applies to all issues of emotion and value as well. He shows empirical evidence that people report feeling emotions that have clearly been suggested by beliefs and inferences when artificially stimulated by chemical means. Stone argues that Proudfoot's critique fails because it assumes that empiricism requires a separation between pure experience and abstract knowledge. This would fit the traditional empiricist but not the transactional model which Stone is advancing.

In a similar vein, Frankenberry argues that the attack on empiricism offered by Sellars in the 'myth of the given,' does not apply to William James' notion of radical empiricism. Sellars' critique is based on the notion that empiricism finds grounds in experience to support inferences as to the nature of the real. Sellars argues that if experience can be used as a basis for inference then that experience must have a cognitive element already. If that is the case then it is not an independent ground for cognitive claims. Frankenberry argues that James did not make this sort of a claim. She takes James to be pointing toward something more like what Stone describes as a transactional model, even though Frankenberry and James never used that term.

I am basically in sympathy with Frankenberry's and Stone's positions here. Radical empiricism moves us out of the narrow definition of significant empirical data given by Locke and implicitly by Descartes. This approach allows experience to form the basis for judgments of value and meaning that need not be confined to cultural relevance. It tells us that value, meaning, and worth are real qualities in the world. But I suspect this approach remains vulnerable to something similar to Proudfoot's critique although not as Proudfoot presented it. Proudfoot argues from a position which seems to assume scientific naturalism as a given. He does not fully recognize or acknowledge that the issues he is raising about the embedded cultural factors in our experience

throw doubt onto that perspective as well as onto traditional empiricism. He also seems to assume that empiricism requires a sharp division between experience and cognition; radical empiricism does not make such a division.

A more nuanced critique from the perspective of Heidegger and others of the continental tradition might prove more difficult to counter. This may become even more of a problem with the modifications which I have previously urged on Heidegger's notion of the role of interpretation in experience.¹³

III. A Post-Modern Critique:

Heidegger has argued that we are always embedded in a thoroughly interpreted form of experience. We find ourselves always in the mode that Heidegger calls "Being-in-the-World." Human experience is always of a meaningful reality. We find ourselves encountering things and events that involve attitudes and feelings on our part. In that sense our experience is much as William James described:

A conscious field plus its object as felt or thought of plus an attitude towards the object plus a sense of a self to which the attitude belongs — such a concrete bit of personal experience may be a small bit but it is a solid bit as long as it lasts; not hollow, not a mere abstract element of experience, such as the 'object' is when taken alone. It is a full fact...¹⁴

However, James' notion of radical empiricism took the elements of experience as themselves basic realities. James argued that the existence of things in the world consisted of chains of experience that become part of the actual experience of an individual when they appear in the chain of material that makes up that conscious life.

...a given undivided portion of experience, taken in one context of associates, play the part of a knower, of a state of mind, of "consciousness;" while in a different context the same undivided bit of experience plays the part of a thing known, of an objective "content." In a word, in one group it figures as a thought, in another group as a thing.¹⁵

Thus for James, once you focused on raw experience and excluded theoretic constructs associated with that, you were at bedrock of the nature of the world. Heidegger's claim, and a claim that seems well founded, is that this cannot possibly be the case. The form of experience among different people turns out to be a function of their cultural settings. I sit down at my desk, turn to the computer, and see the paper I am working on ready for further entry or editing. If Socrates were suddenly put in that same place he would be at a loss to explain what he was looking at. He simply would not have the same experience.

We do not first see 'visual data' and then interpret that data. We see things that fit into our world (or not) in some meaningful way. The 'visual data' is a product of abstractive analysis based on theories about how our physical bodies work.

Thus, Heidegger largely agrees with the first quote from James above, and heartily disagrees with the second. I have to agree with Heidegger here. Even in as simple a matter as color blindness, it is dramatically clear that different people have different experiences, and those

experiences are, at least in part, a function of the people and their nature. The further claim that culture is among the characteristics of the person that affects their experience seems also true.

Heidegger is saying something like what Frankenberg and Stone were describing. He says that our cognitive concepts conveyed in language interpenetrate with our very experience. We see, feel, taste, and hear the world around us, in part as a function of the culture of which we are a part. We do not have any raw experience. As Aron Gurwitsch put it:

Once conceptualization and intellectualization have taken place, these achievements co-determine the structure and organization which the stream of experience will henceforth display. In other words, it is impossible to re-experience the stream again in its "pristine" purity, because the stream ceases to appear, and therefore no longer exists in this form.¹⁶

For Gurwitsch, conceptualization and intellectualization develop with every step of maturation within a cultural milieu. We have no access to uninterpreted experience.

Heidegger turned to some simple examples to make his point about the nature of experience and the things that we encounter. When we see a hammer our awareness does not start with some concept of a hammer. It rather starts with recognition of the use of such a tool. We pay attention to the hammer if we have a specific use for it, and our attention flows through the hammer as a piece of equipment to the actual process of using it. We simply pick up the hammer and get on with the job, with no separable conscious attention to the nature of 'being a hammer.'

Further, the hammer as tool exists in a background of other tools and practical skills. This background of a whole inventory of equipment and array of practical skills is present in our grasp of our world before there is anything like the cognitive contents of consciousness related to an idea like *hammer*. We learn to cope with our world before we engage in any cognitive reflection.

This background awareness of an array of equipment and of practical skills is something that we acquire from our surrounding culture. A person in the modern western world, someone in nineteenth century Japan, and someone in Greece in the 6th century BC, would each have different backgrounds to their experience, and would experience the world differently.

However, it is not just a matter of "conceptualization and intellectualization" as Gurwitsch phrased it, or of language as Heidegger, Gadamer, and Rorty would be likely to say. It goes deeper than that.

I remember an occasion when I was quite young (maybe 5?) and I was out on a hike with my father. We were walking along a path next to a small clearing in a wooded area. He stopped and pointed toward the edge of the clearing and told me to look at the rabbit. All I could see was clearing, trees, and bushes. But I knew there was something there to be seen, so I tried to find it.

What is it we are doing with that sort of trying? It is a lot like looking at one of those trick pictures, like the line drawing of a cube that can be seen in more than one perspective. The problem is not that we can't see what is there to be seen optically. It is that we haven't seen what is there to be seen organizationally.

In the case of trying to see the rabbit, it is much harder than in trying to see the second perspective in the drawing of the cube. I didn't know which set of lines and colors belonged to the thing I was trying to organize. But when I saw it, it was as clear as a bell. At that point there was no way that I could avoid seeing it. I couldn't imagine how it was that I saw that same spot before. How could I have missed it? That rabbit wasn't hidden behind anything, it was right out in the open.

Yet that rabbit was hiding. It was hiding in a way that rabbits have learned to hide over long years of evolution. It was hiding by not moving, and by taking advantage of the fact that for

any animal, humans included, seeing the rabbit that is sitting quite still by the edge of the clearing is not the same as being in position for the light from the rabbit to strike the eye. The observer has to put the picture together in order to see the rabbit. When a rabbit, or anything else, moves against an otherwise still background, our attention is drawn to the right visual cues, and the rabbit becomes easier to see. Seeing what is there is an act of visual organization.

One of the things of interest here is that rabbits hide from foxes and hawks just as much if not more than from humans. That would suggest that foxes and hawks go through the same kind of process in 'seeing' things as we do. The process cannot be dependent on language.

I would argue that all of our conscious experience is interpreted experience. We start interpreting our world before we learn any language. In fact, if we did not already interpret our world we would not be able to learn language. We have to 'see' our world as composed of things and events before nouns and verbs have anything to connect with.¹⁷

The set of things and events that we come to accept as part of our reality is strongly influenced by our surrounding culture. When we recognize the things which others are referring to with language we feel assured that we have got it right. That we could have ended up seeing things somewhat differently is attested to by the fact that there are almost no cases where translation from one language to another is exact. Different cultures pick out different structures of organization from the range of possible structures.

If interpretation starts even before language, and affects experience prior to consciousness, how can we turn to experience as a source of data about the actual world? Is not all of our conscious experience then suspect? Was Descartes right to think that that we should doubt all of the richly nuanced data of experience and trust only those bare abstract measurements that could be fit into the world of clear and distinct mathematically founded ideas?

Like Stone, I am inclined to a naturalist perspective and I do not think we can point to any non-natural or special intuition in these areas. My examination of how we interpret our world leads me to something close to the notions of Antonio Damasio¹⁸ and Erich Harth.¹⁹ I would say that in the process of natural evolution what we call conscious experience is an emergent phenomenon. Our consciousness is the very process of interpreting our world. It involves very complex ways that we put together data from our physical encounter with our environment. Our self-conscious cognitive awareness is a further emergent phenomenon that builds on a more basic consciousness and on language and culture.

The way that I interpret human consciousness seems to have strong support in much of the recent work in neuroscience, and it is in at least some agreement with the early work of Heidegger. For our present concerns, however, it would seem to subvert the attempt to support value judgments in a manner that is not relativistic.

Our encounter with the external world is mediated by our physical senses, much as modernism has taught, and the value content of ordinary experience is a product of interpretation. If that is the case, what support can there be for value judgments that are not derived from the cultural component of our structure of interpretation? Heidegger clearly concluded that value was a function of culture and had no objective foundation.

III. A Radical Empiricist Response:

A. A Structured World:

Our cultural history of involvement with and domination by the modernist view has inclined

us to think that a naturalistic view implies something close to the acceptance of the notion that only the extensive physical world is 'really objective,' just as Descartes and Locke claimed. But as Hume argued so clearly, if we were to accept Locke's view of empirical data based on primary qualities, we would not really be able to explain ordinary perception. We would be seeing sense data, not a world.

Yet clearly we do get through an average day depending on our perception of reality, even if our perceived reality is not an independent vision of an external world. What would an 'independent vision' of the external world be? The idea fails to have significant meaning. We encounter our surroundings. The character of that encounter is a product of the character of both those surroundings and ourselves. Could it be otherwise? An independent vision of the external world would be like the sound of one hand clapping, an enigma with no obvious meaning. It stems from the illusion that our sense of sight gives us that we 'see' the world without touching it. But our 'seeing' of the world is a function of how our eyes and neural networks operate. Our experience is, as Stone argues, transactional, and the transactions start well before language and culture enter the scene.

Our interpreted world is 'colored' (I use the visual as example here, but this applies to the whole multi-sensual structure) by the sensitivities of our sensory system. We see the world in the colors offered by our eyes, and we hear the world in the tones offered by our ears. My dog hears and smells things that I am unable to sense, and she seems not to see everything that I can see. Neuroscience tells me that dogs have a brain structure connected to their sense of smell that is similar in complexity to that connected with our sense of sight. That suggests that my dog probably senses the world of smell with a degree of structure and organization of which I have only limited experience. No wonder that on our morning walk she stops to sniff in detail while I stand there bored, wondering what she is doing.

More importantly, our interpreted world is structured. We perceive things and events in an organized reality. As Heidegger said, we find tools and other things within a structure of significance where the objects have uses, and they tie into a larger pattern of other things. A number of thinkers have concluded that we structure our world as a means of perceiving and coping. I am convinced that at a pre-conscious level we give structure to our encounter with the world in an essentially pragmatic manner. We put the world together in a structured manner and try it to see if it works. If things continue to hang together good, if not we try again.

Howard Margolis²⁰ makes the point that most human reasoning does not follow the pattern of formal logical deduction. The model of understanding that most people in our western culture assume when they talk about a system of thought or worldview is the model of formal systems. The classical example is Euclid's system of geometry. But most of us found that was a style of thought we had to learn. It required discipline. The way our ideas function in ordinary experience suggests that some other model should be used to describe what is happening. Margolis concludes that pattern recognition is the key to the process, and I think he is largely correct (Norwood Hanson had earlier expressed similar ideas about scientific theories).²¹

Erich Harth²² presents an interesting hypothesis about how the brain functions in relation to sense perception and goes on to extend that hypothesis to an idea for how to relate our experience of mental consciousness to what we know about brain structure and function. He presents a plausible account of how the brain might process information before it reaches the level of consciousness. His model involves feedback from the higher levels of brain structure back into some of the key centers of sense data processing.

It is Harth's suggestion that what is happening here is related to positive loop feedback. In positive feedback small deviations in a particular direction are amplified or enhanced. He enlarges

on this in relation to the functioning of one of the neural structures involved in processing visual data. Harth describes the LGN (lateral geniculate nucleus) as functioning like a sketchpad for the upper cortex where hypotheses can be tried out and compared against the data passing through from the retina. Harth is introducing Stone's notion of a transactional experience at a pre-conscious level.

I envision the mechanism involved in the control of the LGN to act like a positive feedback. Suppose you are looking for a coin you dropped on a beach. Assume that to aid you in the search the cortex instructs the LGN to suppress the images of pebbles, leaves, shells, and so on, and to enhance anything small, round, flat, and metallic, in short anything that looks like a coin. In this selective positive feedback, a mere suggestion of a coin would be made to look even more coin-like to call attention to itself, until closer scrutiny reveals the search has been successful or that what you were looking at was not a coin after all. Reality will win out in the end because of the persuasiveness of our senses.²³

In this process the suggested image derived from higher levels of processing is re-injected at the input side of the brain process, and is then itself experienced (goes back up the same cortical pathways) in conjunction with, and/or as an enhancement of, the original data. Thus, we see the line drawing of the cube in either one configuration or the other. We do not just see lines and then decide on an interpretation. He suggests that it is in just such a manner that we are able to see various figures and objects in a mere cloud formation.

Regardless of the fate of the details of Harth's hypothesis in the world of neuroscience, I find it to be a good match for much of my actual experience and suggestive of an explanatory model at the philosophic level. There does seem to be a process going on in my experience whereby interpretive enhancements of what is directly given become a part of what I experience. I know from actual occasions that sometimes I seem to experience things which later evidence convinces me could not have been true. Thus I am persuaded that my conscious experience is not a direct presentation of the world. I also know that in the long run there is a tendency for actual experience to act as a corrective with respect to various interpretations. The world has an input, but not the only input.

If the world that we encounter were not structured, if it were merely a jumble of sensory accidents, there is no way our process of projecting structure would work. The fact that human cultures have developed working patterns of interpretation is strong evidence that we are dealing with a structured world.

Of course, we do find problems with our interpretation of the world. That is one of the reasons that science has developed as an alternative to our common sense interpretation. Science has claimed to give us a window onto the 'real' world, but recent criticism of scientific claims has raised questions about just what it is that science does. Scientific theories (worldviews within the physical sciences) succeed one another. One of the interesting things about that is that once a new theory has taken control of the field, the texts that explained things in terms of the old theory lose value within the science. That stands in curious contrast to what happens in the humanities. No one studying biology today spends much time reading the works of Aristotle (except when explicitly studying the history of the science), even less so in the field of physics. Yet Aristotle's politics, while dated in some respects, still offers valid insights and significant arguments.

Thomas Kuhn has argued²⁴ that a new scientific theory arises out of a revolution in thought. The new system of understanding is constructed around a new paradigm, and there is no adequate way of translating the statements of one system into the language of the next. The very

meaning of the terms and constructs is different. In that frame of reference there is no way to take the statements of Newton's *Principia* and translate them into the language of Einstein's general relativity. The very meaning of such terms as 'time', 'distance', and 'mass' is different in the two systems, and there are no terms in either system that would allow the precise translation of one into the other.

In one sense Kuhn seems to be right. When I accept the self-imposed notions of clear and distinct ideas, and exact definitions in the systems of science, then it is true that the physics of Newton and the physics of Einstein are incommensurable systems. They are two very different systems of looking at the world, and it is in that sense that the older texts cease to be viable. They are written, in what amounts to, different and incommensurate languages.

Yet it is clear to anyone who has even a modest understanding of the two systems and their differences, that we do regularly translate between them. Even beginning students in physics have little trouble in describing which terms of the two systems are aimed at the same basic features of our ordinary experience. When we stand outside of the theoretical structures of the two systems we can describe them both as attempts at explaining the same general class of features in the world. They differ more as evolutionary steps in understanding than by a revolution in systems of thought.²⁵

Through all of the various revolutions in scientific thought, technology continues to evolve. We do not pay a lot of attention to the physical theories of the classical Greek period, but Archimedes' tools and engines still work. Engineering handbooks based on Newtonian physics are still in regular use. Most modern mechanical and civil engineers pay no attention to Einstein's relativity in their professional work. Some modern navigation charts reflect the astronomy of Ptolemy and you can navigate by them with great accuracy. The applied technology developed from the various stages of science does not fall away with the old theories. And if I bring a modern computer into a culture where none of the theory needed in its creation is to be found, the computer still works (if I also bring a generator).

The post-modern critique of knowledge is off the mark when it comes to both everyday living and engineering technology. It doesn't work very well when applied to the historical development of the sciences. Perhaps there is something wrong with it at the core.

I suspect that the problem lies with the conception of the nature and role of language that has informed post-modern thinking coupled with the assumption that interpretation is based solely on language. It is, at base, a conception that came out of modernism. It comes from Descartes' notion of clear and distinct ideas. It is tied to the history and development of mathematical theory.

The idea that two disparate languages would be incommensurate is an inference from the example of the artificial languages created in mathematical theories or systems of formal logic. The reason that some scientific theories become effectively incommensurate is that they are written in artificial, frequently mathematical languages. They always have ordinary language translations in parallel (even when no one mentions this) else we (and the scientists) would not know what they were talking about. The fact of the matter is that the world, and our common human natures, always serve to mediate the realm of language and make both learning and translation possible.

The very notion that there could be incommensurable systems of interpretation is a mistake.²⁶ The distortions introduced by Descartes' demand for mathematical (clear and distinct) language, and Locke's elevation of so called 'primary qualities' were driven by a mistaken idea. Mathematical systems have proven very useful, but their usefulness is their only warrant. They should not be turned to as some sort of ultimate truth. And, the post-modern critique of language and understanding has become distorted by the assumption that ordinary language is like formal logical systems and by the failure to recognize that interpretation precedes language and refers to

the world.

The mathematical sciences are an abstract interpretation of our cognitively interpreted everyday world, our every day world is a cognitively enriched interpretation of experience, and our experience is an interpretation by our organism of its encounter with its environment. The preceding sentence is also an abstract interpretation of our everyday world, and one that I believe has substantial pragmatic warrant. I further believe that pragmatic warrant is one of only two criteria by which we can judge our concepts and beliefs. The other criterion is that of structure. A concept or belief is not worth much if it is not well formed such that we can understand it and if it is not part of a consistent set of concepts and beliefs which are also pragmatically warranted. The structural criterion is not so much about the world as it is about our manner of interpreting and coping. The fact that our manner of interpreting and coping works as well as it does gives evidence that the world is also structured. Since we are a part of the world that is not so surprising.

Heidegger's basic notion that we (our self-conscious selves) always exist in a world (an already structured reality) makes sense, but only if we assume that there is some common world that we encounter. Without some commonality of world and of type of encounter with that world we would never succeed in developing language and culture.²⁷

We never do achieve a final interpretation of the world. In part that has to do with the nature of interpretation and meaning (meaning is not deterministic). In part it has to do with the fact that the world is not a structure of conscious meaning (idealism is false). Our systems of understanding are not 'mirrors of reality.' I will leave expansion on those thoughts for another paper (or two).

B. A World of Value:

The term 'value' has to do with various kinds of feelings, judgments and attitudes. When we have a positive feeling that we attribute to a particular object or event we tend to assign positive value to that thing. Similarly, when we have a negative feeling that we attribute to a particular object or event we assign negative value. Value, in that sense, is an emotional attitude objectified.

Our encounter with the world involves values, relations, and meanings just as much as it involves trees and cars and other people. Those values, relations, and meanings are products of our interpretive encounter with our surroundings. As such they may be in error. But those trees, cars and other people are equally products of our interpretive encounter with our surroundings. They too may be in error and sometimes they are. But we come to trust those of our interpretations that prove themselves in ongoing experience. There is no good reason for this not to apply to the realms of value and meaning just as it applies to physical objects.

Those felt reactions are indicators that lead us to make value judgments. Stone mentions Dewey's point that there is a difference between a feeling of value and a value judgment. A value judgment is a reasoned conclusion, whereas a feeling of value may be datum for such a judgement. When we judge something to be of value we are claiming that we would expect that something to stimulate feelings of value when encountered in appropriate circumstances.

There are, however, what amount to value judgments that are a part of our pre-conscious interpretation of our reality, just as there are judgments of fact. We do not experience value sensations and then make value judgments any more than we experience sense data and then judge that these refer to objects. We experience a world with qualitative aspects already associated with both objects and events. Reflective judgment is a secondary process that serves to amend a process already taking place. There is pragmatic warrant to believe that both levels of that process are pragmatically affected by ongoing experience, and that the products of that

process are always corrigible.

A central part of our experience is the possibility and necessity of making choices. We are active agents, and how we will move into the next moment of our lives is always a matter of some degree of choice. Our feelings and judgments of value have to do with how we will choose. Within the range of options as we perceive them, we will choose directions that have positive value for us in one way or another, and we will seek to avoid directions that we judge to have negative value. Our judgments may turn out to be in error, and our options may involve conflicting values, but values are motivators of our choices.

There seem to be a number of types of value judgment. We find some things good as they contribute to immediately good feelings with respect to the state of our organic being. It feels good to come in out of the cold. It feels bad to be struck a hard blow. We feel good when we can satisfy our various bodily needs. We feel bad when things go wrong with our body.

Our sense of artistic quality or beauty starts with things that are very close to simple bodily sensations and perceptions but goes on to things that are much more complex, less immediate, and sometimes abstract and cognitive. Our sense of right and wrong is another kind of value. This seems somewhat divorced from our organic responses, and sometimes at variance with them. Ethical demand can move us to suffer serious discomfort and even to place our lives at risk. At least one dimension of ethical judgment seems to be tied to considering how a situation would affect the organic feeling response of other persons. We generally feel that it would be wrong to cause pain or injury to another person. 'Do onto others as you would have them do onto you' is a projection onto others of our own first person reactions. It is also a generalization that shows up in one form or another in multiple cultures.

Truth seems to be still another kind of value judgment. This is a judgment about our beliefs and opinions. We sometimes find that we must acknowledge as true statements that we would rather were not true. Here, as in the case of ethics, what is of positive value is not tied to our bodily good feelings.

Yet, there is a good feeling associated with discovering what is true or ethically right. Even where judgments of truth, or right may go against our immediate self interest, we commonly react with a positive feeling to discovery of what appears to us to be right or true. In these situations this positive feeling is mixed with other not so positive feelings, and the overall sense of things may be far from positive.

If we judge something to be right we are abstracting from other considerations that we do not find to be related to the question of right, and similarly for judgments of truth. Artistic judgments can also run counter to our immediate organic responses. A situation can be beautiful and painful at the same time.

I think Moore was right and we cannot reduce value judgments to something simpler or more basic. We can, however, try to explore how our sense of value works.

A number of thinkers including Whitehead, Dewey, and Neville, have concluded that aesthetic judgment is basic to all forms of value judgment. I am inclined to suggest that aesthetic value is found in complex structure, but the judgment as to what constitutes well formed complex structure is aesthetic judgment. The idea can be explored and explicated, but not reduced to something else.

IV. Value Judgments:

How do we make value judgments?

Some people have said that we have problems with ethical judgments because there are so many different criteria for making such judgments. We might look to the greatest good for the greatest number. We might try to fit a set of religious rules. We might try to achieve the greatest overall consistency in our behavior. We might seek to act such that the principle of our action could be made into a general rule.

In reality, most of us don't make ethical judgments by starting from some rule or criteria of judgment and then deriving the answer of what is right. What we generally do is look at the situation and the alternatives for action. We find that the various alternatives have some felt value quality for us as we understand them. If the felt sense of what is right is not clear, or if we find various alternatives seem to be in competition as regards their ethical value, then we try to analyze the kinds of value involved. Sometimes we simply step back from our immediate felt reactions and make an attempt to analyze our own values.

It is on these occasions that we bring up some of the various criteria that we are familiar with. But generally we are looking at alternatives for which we already have a felt sense of ethical value, good or bad.

If the criteria that we consider do not support our felt assessment the criteria are as much in question as the conclusions. If the criteria are not supported by our felt assessment on a significant fraction of cases, the criteria are in serious trouble. There are no criteria that have an independent warrant. The support for such criteria, just like the support for scientific theories, come from the occasions of experience that fit the criteria, not the other way around.

However, just as with scientific theories, when we consider ethical criteria that have significant support in the general culture, we should be wary of individual experiences of our own that seem to run counter. An ethical criteria seldom develops significant support unless many people on many occasions have found it to be in accord with their sense of right and wrong. When our immediate experience runs counter to such criteria we ought to look carefully at the circumstances to ensure that we are not being blinded by factors which are not immediately obvious. Other competing values can have a strong impact on our felt judgment.

We also find that our sense of value in any and all of its various forms is educable. This may be most obvious in matters of art. Repeated exposure to increasingly complex structures accompanied by some reflection on our reactions and the nature of the objects involved frequently has the effect of increasing our sensitivity to particular types of artwork. When we are first exposed to highly complex structures we may be unable to grasp the structures involved. For myself, this was very much the case with much complex music. We can learn to recognize increasingly complex structures and find that we then sense the positive value in such works in an intuitive manner.

The notion of complex structure is itself complex. As I said above, I do not believe there are any rules that would allow us to pick out good aesthetic structure. It is always a judgment. There are some factors that seem to play. We like order, but not pure order. The simplest forms of order are boring. We prefer order coupled with contrast and change.²⁸ The fugues of Bach are a good example of complexity coupled with a kind of simplicity.

One of the reasons that we have more competing criteria in the realm of ethical judgment than we do in the realm of scientific theories is that ethical problems are inherently more complex than are physical problems. Ethics deals with the structure of human relationships, and the understandings that we reach about these structures are themselves factors in changing the character of these structures.

Post-modern theorists sometimes claim that there is an effect of this kind within the structure of physical science, but this is not the same thing. Our understanding of the physical

world, and the structure of our understanding in the form of scientific theories, does affect what sort of experiments we can construct and what sort of interpretations we may give to the results. However, these things do not change the underlying structure of the physical realm with which we are dealing. In matters having to do with self understanding and with understanding and judgment about human relationships and communities we are directly affecting the structure of what we are looking at.

We have strong concerns with the ethics of political campaigns and the way that people may influence other peoples voting decisions. However, the system of political campaigns and voting is a social construct that is altered by our judgments on these very issues. On the other hand, our experiments in the realm of physics may affect the parameters being measured but they do not alter the character of physical material.

I would propose the following hypothesis:²⁹

Some of our value judgments are based on the feeling of and/or expectation of bodily responses that we find directly positive or negative. There is a broad range of other value judgments, all of which have an aesthetic component.

Truly aesthetic judgments have to do with a particular sensitivity to complex structure. When I judge something to be aesthetically positive I am judging it to be an aesthetically worthy complex structure or a part of such a structure.

When I judge something to be factually true I am judging it to be an aesthetically worthy complex structure or a part of such a structure that fits with and describes, in some sense, some aspect or aspects of experience.

When I judge something to be logically or mathematically true I am judging it to be an aesthetically worthy complex structure or part of a structure of abstract cognitive symbol systems.

When I judge something to be ethically right I am judging it to be an aesthetically worthy complex structure or a part of a structure which includes judgments of personal response that could include myself, and that applies to persons actual or possible behavior taking into account their social and physical environment.

When I judge something to be socially or politically right I am judging it to be an aesthetically worthy complex structure or a part of such a structure that applies to social and/or political structures, taking into account their inter-communal setting and physical environment.

To the extent that our ongoing experience supports our judgment that well formed structures are to be found in the world, value as we experience and judge it is objectively well founded. The progressive success of practical skills and technology give strong evidence for the objective value of our judgments of factual truth. The functional success of human systems of social life gives evidence for the objective value of ethical and political judgments. The comparison of ethical and political systems is possible relative to the long-term quality of life that they support, but is complicated by the hermeneutic structure of all such systems.

Orlanda Brugnola made an interesting observation after reading an earlier version of this paper. She noted that the Fibonacci series³⁰ gives mathematical ratio's that show up in aesthetic structures in many cultures (the 'golden triangle' etc.) and these same ratio's are to be found in the physical structure of our own bodies and in the structure of many other living things. This suggests that we choose aesthetically forms that reflect our biological nature. An alternate thought would be that there is something deeper in nature that contributes to both biological structure and aesthetic sensitivity.

The emergence of life, and of human consciousness, out of the natural processes of this world suggests that there is an impetus towards complex structure in the world of which we are a part.³¹ There is something divine and possibly transcendent in that thought.

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- ¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented at Collegium, San Juan Bautista, CA, October, 2003.
- ² Rene Descartes, *Descartes Philosophical Writings*, ed. and trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: Random House, Inc., 1958), 238. This is from *First Philosophy*, Meditation IV.
- ³ John Locke, *Vol. I: An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Alexander Campbell Fraser (New York: Dover, 1959), 170.
- ⁴ Descartes, Rene; op.cit. see especially Meditations I & II.
- ⁵ George Edward Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903).
- ⁶ William Dean, *American Religious Empiricism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986); William Dean, *History Making History: The Historicism in American Religious Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988); Nancy Frankenberry, *Religion and Radical Empiricism*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987).
- ⁷ Frankenberry, *Religion and Radical Empiricism*, 136 ff.
- ⁸ *Ibid*, 143.
- ⁹ *Ibid*, 144.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid*, 144.
- ¹¹ *Ibid*, 144.
- ¹² Wayne Proudfoot, *Religious Experience* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985).
- ¹³ David Tarbell, "Language, Reality, and the World: Reflections on Heidegger," Collegium Paper, October 1997.
- ¹⁴ William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*; as quoted by J.E. Smith in *Am. Jour. of Theol. and Phil.* vol 14, No. 2, p. 122).
- ¹⁵ William James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism and a Pluralistic Universe*, ed. R. B. Perry (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., 1971), 8.
- ¹⁶ Aron Gurwitsch, *The Field of Consciousness* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1964), 104.
- ¹⁷ I develop this argument in greater detail in my paper "Who we Are: Reflections on Human Self Being," given at Collegium 2001 and subsequently published in the *Journal of Liberal Religion*, Vol.3 No.1 (Winter 2002).
- ¹⁸ Antonio Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1999).
- ¹⁹ Erich Harth, *The Creative Loop: How the Brain Makes a Mind* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1993).
- ²⁰ Howard Margolis, *Patterns, Thinking, and Cognition, A Theory of Judgment* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1987).
- ²¹ Norwood Russell Hanson, *Patterns of Discovery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958).
- ²² Erich Harth, *The Creative Loop*.
- ²³ *Ibid*, 68.
- ²⁴ Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1962; second edition, 1970).
- ²⁵ Stephen Toulmin, *Human Understanding, The Collective Use and Evolution of Concepts* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972).
- ²⁶ See Donald Davidson, "On The Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme" along with some of the other papers in his *Inquiries Into Truth and Interpretation*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984).
- ²⁷ This idea is developed more fully in Part II (Language) of my 2001 Collegium paper "Who We Are: Reflections on Human Self Being."
- ²⁸ Whitehead talked about contrast and intensity where intensity is enhanced by repetition.
- ²⁹ See Introduction and Section III, "Quality of Self Conscious Being," David Tarbell, given at Collegium 1999 for another expression of this hypothesis.
- ³⁰ The Fibonacci series is defined as that series of numbers, starting with 0 and 1, where each succeeding number is the sum of the two preceding; thus we have 0, 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, ... etc.
- ³¹ David Tarbell, "Who We Are: Reflections on Human Self Being," given at Collegium 2001; *Journal of Liberal Theology*, Vol.3 No.1 (Winter 2002).