Transcendent mediocrity is the neutral position

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1 Introduction

When Newton discovered the law of gravitation, he built on the strength of the *Copernican principle*: there is like here. When James Hutton formulated, and William Whewell named, the *principle of uniformity* (then is like now), they paved the way for Sir Charles Lyell to develop scientific geology – and Charles Darwin to develop his theory of common descent.

The p*rinciple of statistical mediocrity* allowed the Allied forces to solve the German tank problem, and science makes good use of the assumption of a *uniform logarithmic prior* to model extreme uncertainty.

All of these are special cases of a more general *principle of mediocrity*, which is also being used in wider contexts – such as the assumption that, if there is a multiverse, we almost certainly inhabit a rather typical universe among those in which intelligent life is possible.[2]

Here we look into another possible generalisation of the principle of mediocrity, one that may inform us about ontology.

2 Worlds

The thing we can be most certain about is that there are **thoughts** (including feelings, wishes, and so on). Without going into the Hume vs. Descartes debate, let us simply define **I** as the total phaneron. There may be thoughts out there that I don't experience, but those may be your thoughts or their thoughts – they are no part of me. Let us call any such bundle of thoughts a **being** – so I am a being.

Among those thoughts I find **dreams** (including daydreams, conceived models, and so on)[3] – thoughts that are worlds. Other thoughts tell me I am in a world myself – my **home world**. In my dreams, there may be other beings, and those other beings may dream other worlds again, and so on recursively. All of those (my dreams, dreams of beings in my dreams, and so on) are **dream worlds**.

If the home world really exists (I.e. I am not a solipse), that home world is special – it seems quite different from all those dream worlds. I have a special relationship to my dream worlds:
- I know everything about them, because in the end they are all my thoughts. I also cannot be wrong about them, because they are precisely what I think about them.
- I have great power over them, too: if I want something in a dream world to be different, I only have to decide so.
- Moreover, I am *transcendent* to them: I have no perspectival relationship to them unless I want to. If my dream contains space and time, I may dream of spatially and temporally widely separate parts of it in direct succession, and I may dream something temporally prior after dreaming something temporally posterior.[4]
- Finally, I am the final explanation, the total ground, of those worlds. They exist because of me, and are what they are because of me. If they contain matter or consciousness or order, or have a temporal beginning, that is because I think they do, and that is sufficient reason.

These worlds form a black-and-white tree, with beings as white nodes and dream worlds as black nodes, me as the root, the transcendence relation for white-to-black edges, and an immanence relation for black-to-white edges. If I dream John in his office conceiving a story about Mary floating on a raft in the ocean, I am the white top node; a transcendence edge goes from me to the black office node, an immanence edge from the office node to the white John node, a transcendence edge from the John node to the black ocean node, and an immanence edge from the ocean node to the white Mary node. If I were to dream of more

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2   This actually provides an argument against Max Tegmark's Mathematical Universe: we live in a universe in which intelligent life is barely possible, and probably absent outside our planet (as he himself argues assuming a *uniform logarithmic prior*), in a level-2 multiverse in which nature constants allowing intelligent life are extremely improbable (the fine tuning argument). The *principle of statistical mediocrity* tells us that if his theory were correct, we'd almost certainly live in some universe teeming with intelligent life, in a level-2 multiverse where all kinds of variations would still allow intelligent life. Assuming all mathematical structures exist, including e.g. variants of John Conway's life game, such universes would exist. Therefore his theory is very unlikely to be correct.
3   It may be best to take conceiving a novel as an example, as we are for the moment ignoring here (1) our own finiteness, which constrains us strongly during sleep dreams, and even daydreams tend to share our time flow, and (2) ingression – the fact that we often appear in our own dreams.
4   In the terms of J. M. E. McTaggart, time (and space) of dream worlds can be a B series for us, but will be an A series for beings inside those worlds.

people in that office, or John of adding an island with natives in the ocean, black nodes would branch. If John also worked on another story, his white node would branch.

My relationship to my home world is utterly different: there is much that I don't know, I may discover I am wrong about what I thought I knew, I am largely powerless to shape and change it, I live a here and now – a perspective -, and it demands explanations that I cannot provide – and that actually are deep problems for philosophy: the problems of existence, the one and the many, identity, knowledge, consciousness, freedom, morality, and so on[5].

3 Transcendent mediocrity

Applying the principle of mediocrity to this situation, we see that the situation is not very different from that of Copernicus: in his time, people assumed the sublunar world was qualitatively different from the supralunar one. In fact, it seemed *obviously* so: the perfection of the heavenly spheres was incomparable to the mess down here. Here too, we assume, and believe it obvious, that our home world is qualitatively different from all those dream worlds. We seem to have a special place, being the roots of the dream world trees. This is the position of **transcendent exceptionalism**.

But what if it isn't? It seems a fact that we cannot look upwards along transcendence relations, but if all worlds that we *can* inspect (and there are many of them – we each dream lots of worlds daily) have a transcendent being dreaming them, shouldn't we assume the one we can't – our home world – also has one? That is the position of **transcendent mediocrity**.

Transcendent exceptionalism leaves us with very unpalatable situation of double explanations for everything: one explanation for dream worlds, and a completely different one for our home world. Our reality then is like a centaur – something that seems not implausible, until one starts wondering. Where does his human bladder empty in? How do his horse lungs get air? Did he have two umbilical cords as a fetus?

We have good explanations for dream worlds – we understand consciousness, freedom, laws, and so on on the basis of the transcendent being. We can also freely experiment with transcendence relations, to try out things – they are scientifically accessible (for instance, my creating and causally influencing my dreams gives one model for how a higher mind doing the same with our world). Assuming that our home world isn't dreamt, on the other hand, leaves us with lots of irresolvable problems. Ockham's razor prescribes assuming uniformity, and having all those problems disappear, creating a vastly simpler description of the world.

Solipsism claims I am the top, common naturalism that our home world is.[6] Of course it feels good to be (close to) the root of the tree, to be special – but that gives us no reason to believe it is true.

If we accept transcendental mediocrity, what happens farther up the tree?[7] How many levels exist above us? Is there an end to them? And if there is, is the root a white or a black node? Transcendental mediocrity itself will not tell us – we shall need other means to find that out[8].

Above, to avoid discussions, I defined beings simply as phanera. An argument could be made, however, that a being actually is a *unit* (a **mind**) *experiencing* a phaneron. If that is so, then having a being as the root would solve the problem of the one and the many, whereas having a world as the root would just move the centaur problem upwards. A white root would moreover give an explanation for order (lawfulness) and low entropy, and for intentionality (from which identity, moral laws, and much more could be derived). The question would then be: how simple is a mind *as such*? We shall need a good idealist account – one that takes thought as primary. Given that, explaining matter as dreamt by a mind is trivial.

4 Arguments for transcendent mediocrity

Above I stated that some philosophical problems which are unsolvable under the assumption of transcendent exceptionalism find a solution under transcendent mediocrity. Such problems constitute arguments for transcendent mediocrity. Mind is inherited (doesn't need to form from matter), and as stated, dreaming matter is trivial. The intentionality of the dreaming mind explains such things as the

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5   Much more material, but badly organised and in Dutch, can be found in my Apologetiek.
6   Actually, the tree model may give a more precise definition of those positions in their generality than the labels currently in use. We could define **transcendent naturalism** as the position that there is a black root, and **transcendent idealism** as the position that there is a white root which isn't me.
7   Lots of things may happen: for instance, it may well stop being an alternation of black and white nodes. We ignore that here for brevity. See my Apologetiek for more details.
8   My *How to Speak about a Supreme Being* looks into what, if there is a root and that root is a mind, one can say about that mind.

one and the many, identity, universals, or morals. In subsections I mention two more problems, with a sketch of the path along which transcendent mediocrity can solve them.

4.1 Absolute morality

Hume famously argued that *ought* cannot be derived from *is*. Under transcendent exceptionalism this is correct. However, under transcendent mediocrity, the world is as the transcendent mind thinks it. In other words, there is an unquotation rule (TMT = transcendent mind thinks):

TMT('X') ⇒ X .

This rule allows us to move from an is (It is the case that the transcendent mind believes A ought to B) to an ought (A ought to B)[9]. Along those lines we can introduce absolute moral rules in our own dream worlds too – an example of the scientific accessibility I mentioned earlier.

4.2 Knowledge[10]

If there is no mind above ours, then we cannot know anything about our home world. For the solipsist this is no problem, as he claims there is no home world independent of his phaneron; common naturalists, however, posit such a world exists – but how could they ever know that? All I can know is my phaneron – by definition of phaneron. If there is a world apart from my phaneron, I have no access to it – and that is true for independent abstracts (such as the rules of logic) as much as for the physical world. Elements of my phaneron claim to inform me about this outside world, but I have no way of verifying that (and given certain naturalistic theories, it is *a priori* very unlikely that my phaneron is in any way representative of the outside world).

This is a form of the diallelus: any indirect information is at most as reliable as its path, and that leads to an infinite regression.

If this world is dreamt by a transcendent mind, however, it consists of (a subset of) his thoughts. I am part of that world, and my phaneron is again (part of) me – which means that my thoughts are actually thoughts of the transcendent mind. And those thoughts can be identically the same as his thoughts thinking the outside world, so that the path is zero and the diallelus doesn't obtain.

5 Arguments for Transcendent exceptionalism

To defend transcendental exceptionalism some good argument seems required, because not only does the burden of proof lay with the party claiming an exception, but accepting transcendental exceptionalism also introduces a large number of aporias, and doubles the size of the description of the world.

5.1 The inverse criterion

Now there may be lots of counterarguments to the assumption of transcendental mediocrity, but in order to succeed, they will have to meet the **inverse criterion**: they should *fail* in dream worlds. Suppose John presents to me an argument purporting to show that our home world is actually the root of the tree. Now if, when I mentally relive his presenting just that argument, the argument seems convincing, then it fails. After all, in the dream I created when reliving it, it would be wrong, for there neither the dreamed us, nor the dream world the relived debate takes place in would be the root.

This is a very strong criterion, but it is not total – it does not automatically refute *all* arguments against transcendental mediocrity. Suppose we find that for some reason any being dreaming our home world would have to be absolutely good, or infinite, or possessed of any other quality that you and I lack. Then an argument addressing just that quality would not be disproven *a priori*.

As an example, suppose John presents a religious argument based upon God's necessary goodness and the evil in our home world. When I imagine him presenting this, I am imagining a world with evil in it – merely for the sake of testing an argument. That would surely make me an evil being in the eyes of the people in that dream world – because of which, John's argument would fail there, as that dream world would not have a good creator. And precisely the fact that that argument would fail means that it is not refuted by the inverse criterion: as far as that criterion is concerned, his argument might succeed in our home world.

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9   My *From "Is" to "Ought" in One Easy Step* describes this in more detail.
10 I very informally discuss the knowledge (diallelus) problem and a few others in my *Fundamentals of Philosophy*. There I sketch a proof of their unsolvability under transcendent exceptionalism and how they disappear under transcendent mediocrity.

5.2 A German Tank argument

The German tank problem could be used to argue for a root, and estimate its distance from us: if we only look vertically, we may assume ourselves to be about halfway up, and since most of our dreams are only one level deep, "about halfway up" may well be all the way up, in which case we would be the root.

If we include the branching factor, however, we are likely to be almost at the bottom, and the tree might rise an arbitrarily high (yet finite) number of levels up. And if we look vertically only, it seems that by far most dreams have two levels: a world with minds in it. A few go deeper (authors working on a story that includes the dreams of their characters) or less deep (mathematicians contemplating the world described by some axiom system). Most people, even if thinking of a world without minds, will still include a visual perspective point – an ingredient self observing that world. So if we are in the middle, we could expect one world above us (the home world), and one mind above that. In either case the argument seems to make transcendent mediocrity more likely than transcendent exceptionalism.