

Restoring the Foundations of Human Dignity

Upholding the reality and significance of persons in an era of cynicism

The importance of the person is an endangered idea in today's philosophical thought. Many traditional philosophical views emphasized the freedom, autonomy, and dignity of persons. Today, philosophical doctrines that marginalize personality seem to have gained the upper hand. Among these doctrines are:

- **Scientism**, which teaches that science is the only legitimate form of knowledge. (If taken seriously, this leads to the view that a person is only a mass of chemicals.)
- **Behaviorism** and **eliminative materialism**, which teach, in different ways, that the human mind is unimportant and perhaps even unreal.
- **Determinism** in its **incompatibilist** form, which teaches that persons do not have free will.
- **Postmodernism**, which sometimes teaches that persons are mere fictions of language, and that personal qualities like reason are social constructs invented by "oppressors" (ethnicities or genders that the postmodernists do not favor).

Most of these lines of thought seem scientific at first glance. Postmodernism is the exception; it does not pretend to be scientific, and it tends to be antiscientific. Despite their differences, all these doctrines deny or undermine the reality and dignity of the person.

Forget what you have heard from the overconfident followers of these beliefs. **Science has not confirmed any of these doctrines — and philosophy has not confirmed them either.**

Indeed, some of the more scientific-sounding of these ideas are scientifically untestable, so there is no chance science will confirm them.

The literature of philosophy contains many arguments against doctrines like these. This literature is too extensive to list here, though I would like to do so. Anyone who searches the literature deeply enough will find that **all** of these doctrines are controversial. None of them has found general acceptance by all serious philosophers. There are arguments for and against all of these ideas. Sometimes scientists who are not philosophers come out in favor of these views — but the philosophical literature already contains arguments that refute their pronouncements.

There is no scientific or philosophical "proof" for any of these antipersonal viewpoints. The truth of each of them remains an open question at best. There still is plenty of room for confidence in the opposite views — and for confidence in the importance and dignity of persons.

On this page, I will summarize some of the main points of my own view of persons. In some places I will provide links or citations to relevant points (or at least related points) in my writings.

- **Skepticism about the reality of consciousness is untenable.** To claim that you only seem to be conscious is, in effect, to claim that things don't really seem a certain way — they only *seem to seem* that way. This latter claim leads to inconsistency. The claim that consciousness has no phenomenal or subjective character is untenable for the same reason. ([1]; see also [2])
- **Skepticism about the reality of mental states is untenable.** So-called "folk psychology" — the commonplace set of beliefs that people generally hold about the human mind — has a solid core that is not in danger from science-driven skepticism. Science can cast doubt on some beliefs about the mind, but it cannot show that humans do not have thoughts, feelings, desires, and the like. [3]
- **The conscious subject is a single, unified entity.** Disunifying phenomena, such as self-division and unconscious influences on the will, cannot compromise the basic unity of the subject, though they can seem to do so. [1]
- **Science has not refuted free will.** Many philosophers today are *compatibilists*; they hold that free will could exist even in the presence of *determinism* (the causal determination or predictability of all physical events). I concur with the compatibilist view. Even if determinism were true, there could be free will. (Since I have not yet written a piece about compatibilism, I will not give a link here, but there are plenty of compatibilist arguments already in the literature.) The possibility that our actions are controlled entirely by unconscious neural events is perhaps a greater threat to free will than is simple physical determinism. But even this circumstance would not rule out free will — because even a so-called "unconscious" brain event may actually lie within the scope of personal consciousness, and therefore be one's own doing. ([4]; [1])
- **Reality does not consist of concrete physical objects alone.** It also contains *abstract objects*, such as properties, relations, and sets. These are not concrete objects made of matter or energy. Hence materialism is not a complete view of the universe. (Note that the incompleteness of materialism does not imply supernaturalism. There is nothing "supernatural" about properties, relations and sets.) The idea that abstract objects are fully real is called *ontological realism*. This is a very old idea in philosophy. I argue that ontological realism is not the extravagant doctrine that some say it is. Indeed, ontological realism requires us to believe very little beyond what we already know from everyday experience. [5]
- **The self is real — and no scientific discovery about the mind can prove otherwise.** It is plausible to identify the self with a fully real abstract object of the

kind discussed in the point about abstract objects, above. ([6], [7]) Since abstract objects are genuinely real, a self of this kind would be genuinely real too. Even if neuroscience found no evidence of a self, this abstract object could be the self, and its existence would not be falsifiable by science. Some authors seem to think that if the self were "only" an abstract object, then the self would not be real. This argument fails if we accept that abstract objects are fully and genuinely real. (It is unwise to say that anything is "only" an abstract object.)

- **The qualia, or subjective qualities of conscious experience, are real.** Qualia are the subjectively felt features of personal experience — for example, the "feel" of the color red, of a particular pain, or of the musical note middle C. Qualia are abstract objects. As I said earlier, abstract objects are real entities. If we identify qualia with suitable abstract objects, we find that the existence of qualia is not falsifiable by science. The possibility that neuroscience has no need for qualia cannot weigh against the reality of qualia. [8]
- **Language really can refer to reality; this reference is not merely a social construct or a political fiction.** Once one understands how language is related to the way things seem, one finds that language can refer to an objective reality. Hence, postmodern critiques of the referentiality of language must fall apart at some point. ([1]; also see [2] and [9])
- **The existence of different cultural perspectives does not rule out the reality of objective truth.** Although there are many different cultural perspectives, there still is such a thing as objective truth — a truth which, in a sense, encompasses all the perspectives. Hence, postmodern dismissals of objective reality and truth are extravagant and pointless. [1] If one wants to respect all cultures, one should assert that there is objective truth, instead of denying this as so many postmodernists do. (If there were no objective truth, the claim that different cultures deserve respect could not be true.)
- **Conscious subjects play important roles in physical reality.** The physical universe is objectively real, is not a mental construct, and is vast compared to humanity. Nevertheless, the physical universe is deeply intertwined with consciousness. All physical facts have logical ties to the actual and possible experiences of observers. Physical facts are dependent — not causally, but in a certain logical manner — upon facts about experience. Thus, conscious observers are not mere trifles. Consciousness plays a key part in the physical universe. [1]
- **Science is a valuable source of knowledge, but it is not the only legitimate knowledge.** The view that science is the only legitimate form of knowledge is called *scientism*. Scientism, if taken seriously, would imply that philosophical knowledge is impossible. A follower of scientism cannot consistently adopt any philosophical positions — including scientism itself. There are other forms of legitimate knowledge besides science; philosophy is one of these forms. Also, the notion of truth is too rich to be exhausted by any single methodology, including that of science. [1] The statement that scientism is false is not a criticism of science itself, and does not alter the facts that science "works" and that truth is objective. (I should mention in passing that the fashionable postmodern critiques of science are

hopelessly off track. Among its other faults, postmodern antiscience demeans people whose lives have been saved by modern scientific medicine.)

These philosophical points, taken as a whole, point to a new view of the person — a view that leaves abundant room for freedom, dignity and autonomy. This new view is based on reason and is fully compatible with science. It is not a finished philosophical system, but is open-ended and exploratory in character. Nevertheless, this view clearly overlaps with two enduring philosophical traditions: **humanism** and **personalism**. (By "humanism" I mean humanism in its original sense, not the scientism-based movement called "secular humanism.") Personalism and humanism both recognize the importance of persons. I suggest that the philosophical ideas presented here could serve as the seeds for a restoration of a truly humanistic and personalistic outlook in the twenty-first century.

— Mark F. Sharlow

References

1. *From Brain to Cosmos*
2. "Notes on *From Brain to Cosmos*: Questions and Answers about Subjective Fact"
3. "As True as 'You Think': Preserving the Core of Folk Psychology"
4. "Yes, We Have Conscious Will"
5. "Getting Realistic about Nominalism"
6. "I Am An Abstraction, Therefore I Am"
7. "Platonizing the Abstract Self"
8. "Qualia and the Problem of Universals"
9. "How Subjective Fact Ties Language to Reality"

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